

A NEW DEATH:
THE ST. PETER PRINCIPLE AT WORK

by

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FADE IN:

INT. HARLAN'S ROOM - MORNING

The alarm clock rings and the hand of HARLAN HOWE slaps at it without looking.

INT. BATHROOM

HARLAN enters in flannel pajamas. He is 40, tall, skinny, and has thinning hair. His hair is a mess, he cannot see without glasses. He enters the shower.

INT. BATHROOM

Harlan has put on his glasses, which are thick with black frames. With only a towel wrapped around his waist, we see just how thin and awkward he is. His shaving ritual is slow and methodical.

INT. KITCHEN

Harlan enters a small kitchen with a cheap round metal table. He is dressed in a suit that is too large for him, carrying a worn leather attaché case and wearing an old fedora.

MOTHER is sitting at the table eating a slice of burnt toast with butter. She is 70, but looks older. She always wears a simple dress and an apron. The apron holds more random items than seems reasonable.

Harlan retrieves a glass, pours himself some orange juice, and drinks quickly. He leaves the glass on the table and starts towards the door. He pauses, returns to kiss Mother good-bye, and then exits.

EXT. AUTO DEALERSHIP - MORNING

Harlan is talking to a couple about a car. He shakes his head and offers them honest advice. They smile and shake his hand. Nodding to each other, the couple leaves the dealership lot.

Harlan turns and walks right into the DEALERSHIP MANAGER. The Manager frowns, shakes his head, and points away from the lot.

EXT. BUS STOP - LATER

Harlan, clutching his attaché, slumps onto the bus heading home. He pulls the hat down with one hand, wanting to hide.

There is a newspaper coin rack exposed as the bus leaves. The headline reads, "Window Washer Survives Fall, Bounces off Canvas Awnings."

INT. APPLIANCE STORE - AFTERNOON

Harlan is talking to a customer. He shakes his head and guides the customer from a large, nearly-commercial laundry set to a smaller washer and dryer combo marked "On Sale!" The customer smiles.

INT. APPLIANCE STORE - LATER

The STORE MANAGER approaches Harlan. He berates Harlan and points towards the door.

EXT. BUS STOP - LATER

At a different stop, Harlan waits for the bus. As it pulls up, he secures his hat against the breeze. Harlan slumps onto the bus heading home.

The newspaper rack reveals the headline, "Family Survives Fondue Explosion, Lobster Less Fortunate" along with a picture of the damaged house.

EXT. BIG JOHN'S CARPET BARN - MORNING

Harlan is entering Big John's. We see a picture of BIG JOHN on the sign.

INT. FLOORING STORE

A couple with two little children are looking at carpeting. Harlan approaches. They are considering expensive shag carpet. Harlan shakes his head and looks at the children. He points towards a sign that reads, "Stain Resistant! Wear Rated for Pets and Kids!" The couple notices an "On Sale! Clearance!" sign.

INT. FLOORING STORE - LATER

Big John stomps up to Harlan. He points at the expensive carpet and then to the clearance display. Big John points to the door and walks away, talking to himself.

EXT. BUS STOP - LATER

Harlan is standing at the bus stop in a downpour. Water runs from his hat. The bus pulls up and Harlan slumps onto the bus, once again heading home unemployed.

The newspaper rack revealed as the bus departs features the headline, "Golf Pro Survives Lightning Strike, Shoots 68"

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Harlan and Mother are sitting at the small metal table, which barely accommodates the pair. Their plates and glasses cover most of the surface. They are eating some form of meat in gravy with mashed potatoes. Each has a cloth napkin, with Harlan's tucked into his shirt.

MOTHER

Oh, dear, don't you worry. I'm sure you'll find something.

HARLAN

There are no jobs left to lose, Mother. I've lost them all. I'm a complete, total, utter, failure.

Mother reaches into her apron and retrieves a folded newspaper section. She places it on the table, with the edge rubbing against Harlan's potatoes.

Harlan picks up the paper and wipes it off with his napkin. He then reads the advertisement.

MOTHER

It's a placement service. All you need is a little guidance.

HARLAN

(reading)

We place special individuals into the most important jobs on earth. Call anytime to speak to a placement specialist. Peter and Company: We Know Where You're Going.

MOTHER
You'll call them right after
dinner.

HARLAN
It can't hurt.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - MORNING

The RECEPTIONIST is sitting at a desk, reading a magazine.

Harlan enters the waiting room, carrying a coat. He removes his hat, and tentatively approaches the receptionist.

HARLAN
Excuse me.

Receptionist continues to read. Harlan tilts his head, cautiously studies her.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
Madam? Hello?

Receptionist looks up without lifting her head.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
I believe I have an appointment. My
name is...

RECEPTIONIST
Take a seat.

HARLAN
Don't you need to know...

RECEPTIONIST
Take a seat.

HARLAN
I'll just take a seat and wait.

Receptionist returns to reading. Harlan surveys the room and then selects a seat and approaches it.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

In the dimmed office we see a desk and the back of an executive chair. A hand takes a manila folder from the desk. It appears an executive or senior manager is reading the contents.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY

Harlan sits nervously, playing with his hat and tapping a foot. He looks around, anxious.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

The hand places the folder back onto the desk. An intercom buzzer is pressed.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY

There is a short buzz.

RECEPTIONIST
(not looking up)
The boss will see you now.

HARLAN
(rising, waiting to be
escorted into the office)
Thank you.

RECEPTIONIST
(exasperated)
Well? Go in.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

The door opens and Harlan peers into the dimly lit office. He does not enter completely.

HARLAN
Hello?

The chair is facing away from the desk, now, towards a window. A city is visible through the window. We do not see the chair's occupant.

REGIONAL DEATH (O.C.)
Come in.

Harlan enters the room, slowly approaching the desk and the one chair for guests.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
Please, Mr. Jone--

The chair spins slowly to reveal REGIONAL DEATH. Regional Death wears is dressed in a perfectly fitted monochromatic black suit. He appears to be a "young" 40-ish and conveys a sense of style, confidence, and energy.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 (confused)
 Howe?

HARLAN
 I'm sorry, sir. Did I get the appointment wrong?

REGIONAL DEATH
 (motions to chair)
 I'm sure the receptionist simply gave me the wrong file for this interview.

HARLAN
 (still standing)
 I can come back.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Harlan -- you don't mind if I call you Harlan? -- Please, take a seat.

Harlan finally sits, tense.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 (to self)
 That suit will have to go.
 (to Harlan)
 Do try to relax.
 (standing)
 Tell me, what brings you to us?

Harlan looks up at Regional Death, who is substantially taller than Harlan. With the light from the window, Regional Death is almost a silhouette. Harlan scrunches down in his chair, intimidated.

HARLAN
 I registered with Peter and Company two weeks ago. I saw their ad -- well, actually Mother did. You see, she lives with me--

REGIONAL DEATH
 (in a slow, deep tone)
 The truth, Harlan. We can be very understanding.

HARLAN

Actually, I live with her -- my mother, that is. I lost my job -- jobs -- as a salesman. I've spent a lot of years as a salesman.

Regional Death is showing signs of frustration, but Harlan fails to notice. Harlan talks over Regional Death.

REGIONAL DEATH

Fine. Fine.

HARLAN

(quickly, at dizzying speed)

I've sold just about everything there is to sell. Clothing, cars, computers, office equipment. I can't remember everything I've sold.

REGIONAL DEATH

Okay, fine. Let's--

HARLAN

My last job was in a furniture store, one of those large warehouse stores. I have a gift for selling things. Well, maybe not, or I'd be able to keep a job. Last year I had to move in with Mother--

REGIONAL DEATH

(slamming hands down on table)

--Enough, Harlan!

There is a moment of silence. Regional Death breathes slowly, calming himself. He closes his eyes and looks towards the ceiling. He opens his eyes and sits in his chair.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Why do you want this job?

HARLAN

(too quickly, again)

I need a job. I've never been a great salesman. I'm always nervous and a bit unsure of myself.

(slowing down)

I'm not doing very well in this interview.

(dejected)

Why can't I shut up?

REGIONAL DEATH

It's my fault. I asked for the truth.

HARLAN

I'm a bit unsure of myself, which makes it hard to close a sale. I'm a bit too polite, afraid of being pushy. Too honest.

REGIONAL DEATH

(not speaking to Harlan)

Customers like you. They trust you, no matter what you are selling on any given day.

HARLAN

How do you know--

Regional Death turns away from Harlan and looks out the window. He's troubled.

REGIONAL DEATH

(to self)

I don't know if you have what it takes.

HARLAN

At least give me a chance.

Regional Death turns around again, facing Harlan. There is an eerie light on his face and a grave expression.

REGIONAL DEATH

Thank you for coming in today.

HARLAN

I didn't do well, did I?

REGIONAL DEATH

My superiors must think highly of you to schedule this interview.

HARLAN

Really?

REGIONAL DEATH

They selected the candidates to be interviewed. Why don't you come back tomorrow? Ten a.m.? I have to check some things.

HARLAN
 That's... that's fine.
 (rising, offers hand)
 I look forward to it, Mr--

REGIONAL DEATH
 Yes, I'm sure you do. Please see
 yourself out.

HARLAN
 I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your
 name. Do you have a card?

REGIONAL DEATH
 It was a.... It was interesting to
 meet you.

Harlan, backing up, trips over the chair and falls to the floor. Regional Death rushes around the desk to see if Harlan is all right.

HARLAN
 Oh, dear. I'm sure that didn't make
 a great impression.

Harlan starts to rise, trips again.

Regional Death shakes his head and leans over Harlan. Death has approached a bit too closely. Harlan suddenly reaches for Regional Death's hand. Death, startled, steps back, but Harlan grabs his hand. Harlan pulls himself up to his feet.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
 Thank you sir.
 (bowing)
 I am very sorry. Tomorrow, then.

Harlan heads out of the office, placing his hat on his head. He closes the door on his coat, opens the door wide, smiles waves, closes the door and exits.

EXT. BUILDING

Harlan exits the building, somewhat smiling. He is overjoyed to have a second interview, but still unsure of himself.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Regional Death is frozen, staring at the spot where Harlan had fallen.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (stares at his hand)
 No. This can't be.
 (shakes his head)
 This just can't be.

Regional Death returns to his seat and collapses. Slowly returns to proper posture.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 Upstairs must know what they are doing.

Regional Death turns the chair away from the desk and stares out the window.

INT. HEADQUARTERS

Headquarters is all white, in all directions. It is complete nothingness, but brightly lit. Regional Death walks into view and approaches GABRIEL.

GABRIEL is dressed in a monochromatic white suit, the cut is identical to Regional Death's. Gabriel wears dark sunglasses, to shield his eyes.

In the headquarters, Regional Death isn't intimidating. He seems on edge and less confident than when we first met him.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Excuse me, Gabriel.
 (pause)
 Grimmy is in his office, but I have a question about the people selected by the two of you for interviews.

Gabriel raises his left arm, palm up as if to accept the question. Gabriel attempts to convey his authority initially.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 I don't understand why you selected Harlan.

Gabriel scratches his head, confused.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 Harlan who? Oh, no. Tell me you're kidding. This better be a joke.

Gabriel raises both arms, hunches shoulders in absolute confusion.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

The temporary receptionist we hired was given the names, with marks by the people to call for interviews.

Gabriel nods, slowly.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

I was supposed to go to the office and interview those selected for positions. Harlan shows up, I assume he's on the list

(paces, facing away from Gabriel)

This had better be one of your practical jokes.

GABRIEL

(very deep voice)

I don't recall any Harlan on the interview list.

REGIONAL DEATH

(tossing hands into the air)

The Archangel speaks!

(pauses, paces, turns to Gabriel)

Wait, you're serious. You don't recall Harlan?

Gabriel shakes his head. Regional Death paces again. He talks while pacing in front of Gabriel.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

I should have known. We hired a temp. She didn't even ask his name. She must have assumed he was the 10 o'clock appointment.

GABRIEL

(concerned)

You did not tell him...?

REGIONAL DEATH

You know, being your assistant was part of the problem here. I know people the moment I meet them, so I didn't bother to have a complete list of the appointments on my desk.

GABRIEL

You assumed he was on the list?

REGIONAL DEATH

Oh, no! Don't go blaming me. I still think we could have found a better way to recruit. But did anyone up here read my suggestions? Nooooo.

Gabriel seems amused, watching Regional Death pace. To Gabriel, nothing is beyond a solution.

GABRIEL

Just... fix it.

REGIONAL DEATH

Fix it?

(increasingly upset)

Maybe you forgot the Laws of Natural Order? He's met me, which is bad enough, but I also took his hand. I tried not to, but he -- I touched him! Harlan Howe has been touched by Death! Either we send him on his way or we hire him.

GABRIEL

He is not going to be happy about this.

(long pause)

Does Harlan have anyone who would miss him?

REGIONAL DEATH

Only his mother--

The headquarters grows increasingly bright. Regional Death retrieves sunglasses from an inside suit pocket. The glasses are insufficient, though. Death and Gabriel avert their eyes.

GABRIEL

Yes, Sir?

(nods)

There does seem to be a little problem.

REGIONAL DEATH

It seems the wrong person showed up for an appointment.

(shocked)

Hire him? I don't think you understand.

The headquarters flashes, like lightning. Thunder sounds.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

(cowering)

I just meant that... I don't think--

(long pause)

Yes, I should have been more careful. Still, you can't just take anyone and give them--

There is yet more flashing and thunder.

GABRIEL

Train him?

(exchanges concerned looks
with Regional Death)

We don't know--

Single jolting thunder clap.

REGIONAL DEATH

But--

(pause)

Yes, Sir, I'll let him know he has the job.

(trying to avoid the
obvious)

Do I tell him what the job is? I mean--

A slight flash of light, but no thunder.

GABRIEL

Of course, Sir.

(pause)

What else would we do?

(pause)

But I wasn't serious about it.

A strong wind nearly blows over the two men, who grab each other for support. Then, there is perfect calm. The two separate and try to be nonchalant.

REGIONAL DEATH

Well, that went well.

Gabriel walks away.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

(shouting to Gabriel)

It could have gone worse!

INT. HOWE LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Mother is sitting on a couch, crocheting. She loves quilting and crocheting, as the furniture is covered in afghans, quilts, and handmade pillows. She is watching the nightly news on a small television. The images give her face a strange glow.

There is a coffee table between Mother and the television. On it sits a beer can.

MALE ANCHOR (O.S.)

We have another miraculous story of survival tonight. There were no serious injuries after the team bus of the minor league Brackston Bandits rolled over twice.

We see the BUS DRIVER on the television.

BUS DRIVER

I swerved when I seen that deer jump in the road, but there's a raccoon rights there so I hit the brakes and we just rolled and rolled.

Mother shakes her head.

The door can be heard as Harlan enters the house. Mother hides the beer can under her current project.

FEMALE ANCHOR (O.S.)

There's no word on the deer or raccoon. We hope they're all right, as well.

Harlan enters the room, looking defeated. He places the attaché on the coffee table, removes a pillow from a rocking chair, and sits. Harlan places his hat on a small end table.

Mother turns off the television.

MOTHER

What's wrong, dear?

HARLAN

The more I think about, the more I realize the interview didn't go well. You might say I fell flat.

MOTHER

Oh, now, Harlan, it can't be that bad.

HARLAN

Yes, it can be. I'll never get another real job.

MOTHER

You're just like your father. Cheer up! You need a positive outlook!

HARLAN

Father died demonstrating a leather recliner.

MOTHER

(shaking head)

If only he had known they were recalled for tight springs...

(to Harlan)

There's always tomorrow!

HARLAN

True. I was asked to come back for a second interview.

MOTHER

That's great! I'm sure you'll knock 'em dead.

HARLAN

Let's hope so.

Harlan rises and walks out of the room.

Mother turns on the television and stares at it blankly while crocheting.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - MORNING

The receptionist is doing her nails and talking to someone on the phone, clearly not work-related.

Harlan enters the office and approaches the desk.

HARLAN

Hello?

(pause)

Excuse me?

(pause)

I'm here for my second interview.

Harlan, Harlan Howe.

RECEPTIONIST

Uh, huh.

(to phone)

(MORE)

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
 Oh, tell me about it. Some people
 are just plain clueless.

HARLAN
 I'll just take a seat.

RECEPTIONIST
 (covering phone mouthpiece)
 You do that.
 (uncovering phone)
 Did you tell him to pay more
 attention to your needs?

Harlan takes a seat, placing his jacket and fedora on his
 lap. He waits.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Regional Death is on the phone. We only hear one side of the
 conversation.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Gabe told you what happened?
 (pause)
 Yes. He just arrived.
 (pause)
 No, Grimmy, I don't plan on telling
 him... at least not yet. I sure
 hope you and Gabe can get this
 worked out with The Boss.
 (pause)
 Yes, I know I hired the temp. She's
 who the agency sent.
 (pause)
 The Boss said hire him, so I had
 better at least get through this
 interview.
 (long pause)
 If you think you can get The Boss
 to change his mind, I'll take care
 of the rest.

Regional Death hangs up the phone and buzzes for Harlan.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY

RECEPTIONIST
 (without looking up)
 He'll see you now.

HARLAN
 (rising)
 I'll just show myself in.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Harlan slowly opens the door and peers into the office.
 Regional Death is once again intimidating.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (gregariously)
 Hello, Harlan.
 (rises, motions to chair)
 Please, take a seat.

HARLAN
 Thank you sir.
 (starts to sit, pauses)
 I still don't know your name.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Yes, yes. Please, take a seat.

Harlan sits, placing his jacket in his lap, along with his hat. Regional Death takes the items and hangs them on a coat rack near the office door.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 We have a few standard questions we ask applicants.
 (retrieves a legal pad and pen from desk)
 Now, then, shall we get started?

Harlan nods.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 Good. Good. Now then, don't worry about the questions too much. They are meant to tell us about who you are.

HARLAN
 (to self)
 I don't even know who you are...

REGIONAL DEATH
 Why do you think you would be a good messenger?

HARLAN
 A salesman is sort of a messenger.

Regional Death starts taking notes, making Harlan more nervous than he was. Harlan rambles, gaining speed the longer he talks.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

I always hoped that my job would be to deliver great news from a supplier to an eager customer. Or, if I worked for a really great company, I'd listen to what my customers wanted and takes those messages to my superiors.

(hangs head)

I never quite found that match.

(perking up, too eager)

Of course, I still have a lot of experience communicating -- especially bad news. "Our product doesn't do that, but you don't really need that feature anyway."

(nervous laugh)

Regional Death stops writing and stares at Harlan in stunned silence. He gathers his composure and forces himself to ask the next question, not sure he wants to hear the answer.

REGIONAL DEATH

What is key to your rapport with customers?

HARLAN

Information. I can keep it all up here.

(taps his head)

One reason I have loyal customers, no matter what I am selling, is that I know them better than their best friends. I can tell you their kids' birthdays, anniversaries... anything a good salesman should remember.

REGIONAL DEATH

We have computers.

HARLAN

Nothing beats memory. You never know when you might run into someone.

Regional Death writes quite a bit.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (to self, while writing)
 You have no idea.

Regional Death stops writing. He looks up at Harlan with a deadly serious expression.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 Can you keep confidential
 information to yourself?

HARLAN
 I suppose, so. No one tells me
 secrets.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Friends don't trust you?

Harlan doesn't answer, since he has no friends. Death taps his pen on the pad. Harlan tilts his head, thinking.

HARLAN
 If I were keeping a secret, I
 couldn't tell you.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (to self)
 Darn.
 (to Harlan)
 A lot of people aren't so quick to
 realize the question should not be
 answered.

Regional Death writes some notes. Harlan fidgets.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 What's the most difficult news you
 have had to deliver to someone, and
 how did you handle the situation?

HARLAN
 There was this time when I was
 changing a lamp, one of those that
 hangs over a kitchen table, and I
 fell. Right into my mother's
 collection of porcelain animal
 figures. Her little zoo--

REGIONAL DEATH
 That's really the most difficult
 news you have delivered, ever?

HARLAN
 You don't know my mother.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (exasperated sigh)
 Why don't we just skip to the next
 question?
 (reading from pad)
 Do you believe in a Creator?

HARLAN
 I don't think you can ask that
 question.

Regional Death is stunned. He looks up and around, wondering
 if something is wrong with his Heavenly powers.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (deliberately, but some
 doubt)
 I can ask anything, and you will
 answer honestly.

HARLAN
 I don't know about that.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (shocked)
 Excuse me?

HARLAN
 I don't know about those deep
 metaphysical things.

Regional Death is relieved, having thought he had lost his
 job-related abilities.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
 When I ponder too much, I begin to
 think the universe must dislike me.
 And a Creator? Why would He create
 all of this? What was the point? It
 is pointless. Those questions give
 me a headache. I turn on the
 television when I start thinking
 too much. I watch a lot of
 television.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (shaking head, writing)
 I bet you do.
 (to Harlan)
 What about religion? Do you follow
 one? A basic faith?

HARLAN
 I guess so.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (frustrated)
 You guess so?

HARLAN
 We did all of the major holidays --
 dressed up, went to services --
 when I was growing up... Christmas,
 Easter... There are others, aren't
 there? Or maybe those were funerals
 and weddings I'm remembering.

Regional Death does all he can to avoid screaming. He must finish the interview, though, because The Boss said. He writes on the pad with increasing force.

Regional Death pauses and takes a breath. He resumes the interview question list.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Have you read any religious texts?
 The Koran? The Bible?

HARLAN
 I read "Paradise Lost" in high
 school. Oh, and I've seen all those
 really long films with Charlton
 Heston.

Regional Death puts his head in his hands, raises his head slowly. He's near the breaking point.

REGIONAL DEATH
 What do you think happens when
 someone dies?

HARLAN
 That's another one of those
 metaphysical questions.
 (scrunches face)
 I'm getting a headache.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (to self)
 You're not the only one.

HARLAN
 (to self)
 I wonder if "Matlock" reruns are
 on...

REGIONAL DEATH
 Harlan? Answer the question.

HARLAN
I have no idea.

REGIONAL DEATH
(rising suddenly)
I think that's enough questions.

Regional Death walks around the desk to nudge Harlan out of the office as quickly as possible.

HARLAN
(rising to exit)
Thank you, again, sir.

REGIONAL DEATH
We'll be in touch. Thank you,
Harlan.
(motions for Harlan to
leave)
Have a good day.

Harlan turns to exit. His coat knocks several items off Regional Death's desk, such as a pencil holder and other small items. Harlan retrieves the items from the floor and places the items haphazardly back on the desk.

HARLAN
I'm terribly sorry.

REGIONAL DEATH
Yes, yes. Good day, Harlan.

HARLAN
(rushing)
I'll be on my way...
(rushing to door, to
escape)
I'm really sorry...
(opens the door too
quickly, hits self)

Harlan finally makes his way out of the office.

Death sits, covers face with his hands, leans over, and rests on the desk.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY

Harlan is entering from Death's office. He's walking straight for the exit, rapidly.

RECEPTIONIST
We'll be seeing you.

HARLAN
 (looking straight ahead)
 I really doubt that.

Harlan exits.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Regional Death picks up the phone handset and presses one digit. He waits, drumming his fingers.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Yes, Azrael's office, please.
 (beat) Yes, I'll hold.
 (pause)
 (to self)
 As if anyone says "No, I'd rather
 not wait for the Grim Reaper."
 (pause)
 Thank you.
 (pause)
 Hello, boss. RD 143 here. We have a
 problem....

INT. HEADQUARTERS

The white nothingness, somewhere in the Heavens.

GRIM REAPER walks into view and stops. An "anti-spotlight" of darkness seems to follow him. The Grim Reaper is in a robe, face hidden by a hood. He carries a scythe, as expected.

Gabriel approaches from another direction.

GABRIEL
 Hello, sir.

Grim Reaper nods, dips scythe. In the reflection of Gabriel's sunglasses, we can see there is nothing under the Grim Reaper's hood.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Can we talk about the problem in
 Region 143?

Grim Reaper shakes his hooded head and then looks down, still shaking his head. He's displeased.

There are lightning flashes and thunder claps. The pair look upwards.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 (looking up, then averting
 eyes)
 Yes, Harlan.
 (pause, lightning)
 I know you are busy sir, but--
 (pause, lightning and
 thunder)
 Yes, I realize you made a decision,
 but--

GRIM REAPER
 (slow, echoing voice)
 Can't he just die?

Lights flash, thunder sounds, Gabriel shields his eyes and cowers slightly. The Grim Reaper's voice and The Boss's response are awesome. Grim Reaper says little, often speaking in fragments.

GABRIEL
 (to Grim Reaper)
 You didn't have to sound so
 enthusiastic about taking his soul.

Grim Reaper looks to Gabriel, and then back towards the source of light. He shrugs.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Sir, I realize you are The Boss,
 but please, hear us out.

The surrounding light dims slightly. There is silence.

Gabriel paces and starts talking. He is arguing his case, methodically.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 When you consolidated Azrael's
 department with mine we understood
 that there would be challenges....

INT. ENDLESS CUBICLES - DAYS AGO

There is the sound of typing coming from electric typewriters. It is an early 1980s office, except for the overwhelming amount of white, cream, yellow, and gold.

Gabriel enters the office space and pauses. He clears his throat.

GABRIEL

Excuse me, could I have everyone's attention?

The typing slowly fades. A filing cabinet can be heard closing.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

The Boss has decided we might be more efficient if Tidings merged with Partings.

There are audible groans.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

It'll be an adjustment, but I'm sure we can make this work. Azrael will oversee the new division.

INT. ENDLESS CUBICLES - LATER

Gabriel is sitting at a desk, in an open space, dealing with employee complaints.

PARTINGS WORKER is dressed in black. She looks like she is prepared to attend a funeral.

GABRIEL

It was an easy job ticket. They were finally going to conceive a child.

PARTINGS WORKER

(slow, depressed voice)

She screamed and locked herself in the bathroom when I said, "You will bring a life into this world."

GABRIEL

Screamed. Gee, I wonder why.

PARTINGS WORKER

It was supposed to be a good omen.

GABRIEL

Oh, I'm sure she thought of The Omen, alright.

The Partings Worker moves along and a TIDINGS MESSENGER approaches the desk. The Tidings Messenger is overly perky, annoyingly happy.

TIDINGS MESSENGER

I told them this was the start of a great eternity together -- and they laughed.

GABRIEL

They died laughing? I suppose there are worse things.

TIDINGS MESSENGER

Die? (beat) Die? Oh, no. I just couldn't do that.

Gabriel covers his face. It is impossible to tell if he is sobbing, crying, or both.

INT. HEADQUARTERS - PRESENT

Gabriel is still addressing The Boss.

GABRIEL

You know what a mess things are.

Azrael nods.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

There are some better at one task than others.

(slowly circles the Grim Reaper, motioning)

Look at Azrael. The guy just screams "Death." I wouldn't be caught dead in a get up like this.

(takes scythe, points it to the light)

Harlan Howe just isn't a Messenger of Death.

(hands scythe back to Grim Reaper)

Maybe we file a job ticket and move Harlan along. A bump on head, some amnesia, nothing serious.

GRIM REAPER

(nodding, slowly)

I would handle his case... personally.

GABRIEL

(stops, stares at Grim Reaper)

Would you stop trying to help?

(to The Boss)

(MORE)

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Still, Grimmy has a point. He could
 gather Harlan's soul and we could
 place him in another division...

Lightning flashes, thunder claps, and Gabriel shields his
 eyes, despite the sunglasses.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Your final decision? Yes, sir.

GRIM REAPER
 Nothing good can come of this!

All light fades, complete darkness except for an eerie glow
 from the celestial beings.

GABRIEL
 Great. He walked away. You know,
 Grimmy, I'm amazed anyone talks to
 you at all. Grim Reaper. You sure
 didn't reap any goodwill with The
 Boss.

GRIM REAPER
 I am Azrael!

GABRIEL
 Whatever. Your name's going to be
 mud if you and Death 143 can't get
 Harlan trained.

INT. HOWE LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Harlan and Mother are watching television. Faint sounds of a
 game show. Mother is crocheting and staring blankly at the
 screen.

There is a old phone on a wall near the kitchen.

MOTHER
 Where do they find these people?
 Obviously they just choose the cute
 bouncy ones.

HARLAN
 I don't think so, Mother. Look at
 contestant number two.

MOTHER
 (leaning towards the
 television)
 Oh, yes. I see what you mean.

TV ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
We'll be back after these messages.

MOTHER
You never told me how your
interview went.

HARLAN
I'd rather not talk about it.

MOTHER
You know what your problem is?

HARLAN
No.
(to self)
But I'm sure you're going to tell
me.

MOTHER
No drive. You're just like your
father, may he rest in peace. He
was a good man, but--

HARLAN
Yes, Mother.

MOTHER
Thirty-five years selling whatever
the department store asked. No
matter which department, no matter
how lousy the products, he did what
they asked. He should have been
managing the store...

HARLAN
Yes, Mother.

Mother places her crochet project in her lap and looks at
Harlan. He tries to avoid eye contact.

MOTHER
What did you do wrong at this
interview?

HARLAN
The questions were very strange.

MOTHER
It was one of those psychology
tests. I read about those in
Reader's Digest. They want to know
if you're a thief or some kind of
pervert.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Wouldn't want some kind of pervert delivering messages, now, would they?

HARLAN

Yes... I mean... No, Mother. I'm sure they wouldn't want a pervert delivering messages.

MOTHER

All you have to do is watch TV to know the world is full of perverts. Did I ever tell you about the one who kept calling?

HARLAN

Yes, Mother.

MOTHER

Why, that twerp called a dozen times before I--

The phone rings.

HARLAN

I'll get it.

Harlan rises and walked to the phone. He picks up the phone on the third ring. Mother listens in, straining to hear every word.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

Hello? Yes, this is Harlan Howe.

(covers phone mouthpiece)

Mother! It's the company I told you about!

(uncovers the phone)

Yes...

(pause)

Tomorrow? That should be fine. Yes.

(pause)

Thank you. Goodbye.

Harlan hangs up the phone and walks back to his chair. Mother waits for him to speak, eagerly. Harlan sits and tilts his head.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

I can't believe it. They hired me.

Tomorrow at 9 a.m. is orientation.

MOTHER

I knew you'd find work eventually.

You always have.

HARLAN

Thank you, Mother. It's nice to know you have faith in me.

MOTHER

You haven't been on the job yet. Let's see how long this company stays in business.

HARLAN

This messenger service has been in business for a very long time. They're not closing anytime soon.

MOTHER

I hope you're right.
(stands)
Give me a hug for luck.

Harlan stands and hugs Mother. She stumbles, starts to fall. Harlan catches her, sets her down on the couch.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

(weakly)
I don't feel so well. Get me some water.

HARLAN

I'll call 911.

MOTHER

Harlan, get me some water, please.

HARLAN

Yes, Mother.

Harlan exits to the kitchen.

Grim Reaper seems to fall from above, stumbling as he catches himself. He looks around and shakes his head, as if to regain his senses. The Grim Reaper looks at Harlan's mother. Mother closes her eyes.

Harlan enters with water. He does not notice the Grim Reaper.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

Here's your water, Mother. Mother?
(taps her shoulder)
Mother? No!

Harlan runs to phone and dials 911.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

Hello? Yes, it's my mother. I think she's had a heart attack!

Grim Reaper approaches Harlan's mother, who is still on the couch. He extends an arm. She rises, with a faint grin.

Harlan turns to see the Grim Reaper and his mother. They slowly fade. Harlan is confused and uneasy. Looking to the couch, Mother's body is seated.

INT. HEADQUARTERS

Gabriel and Grim Reaper enter, walking together. They pause to talk. The Grim Reaper's voice remains deep, dark, gravely, but less reverb.

GABRIEL

I warned you and The Boss that something like this would happen. Does The Boss know?

GRIM REAPER

He knows all.
(pause)
Hmmm, I should tell Him...

GABRIEL

Whatever you do, don't say "We told you so" to The Boss.

Grim Reaper nods.

GRIM REAPER

(shivers)
The last time... My robe... paisley... for five years.

GABRIEL

So, what happened last night?

GRIM REAPER

Death 18 and I... earthquake.

GABRIEL

That was the 7.2, wasn't it?

A small group of employees walks past the pair. One employee wears a toga, has small wings, and is carrying a harp. The others are in business attire. Gabriel stifles a snicker. Once they are alone, Gabriel resumes the conversation.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
Everyone lived. Quite the--

GRIM REAPER
(groans, shakes head)
I'm on my way... yanked out of the
ether... dumped... into the Howe
living room.

GABRIEL
Nice place?

GRIM REAPER
Kind of dreary...

A coffee cart comes into view. The pair approach the cart.
The BARISTA is dressed in white and green.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)
(observing barista)
They are everywhere.

GABRIEL
Double mocha, please.

GRIM REAPER
Single espresso. (beat) No...
double shot.

GABRIEL
You asked me to tell Harlan he had
the job.

GRIM REAPER
(exasperated)
You... You... called him at home.

GABRIEL
(realizing mistake)
Oh, no.

The barista hands Grim Reaper his espresso. We see a skeletal
hand holding the espresso cup.

GRIM REAPER
He was official.

Grim Reaper consumes the espresso in one swift gulp,
conflicting with his normally slow and deliberate nature.

GABRIEL
(gasps, to self)
A Messenger of Death the moment he
heard "you're hired."
(MORE)

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 (to Grim Reaper)
 We really have to get those
 regulations changed.

The barista hands a paper cup to Gabriel. Gabriel takes a no-spill lid and seals the cup while talking.

GRIM REAPER
 Spent a hundred years trying. Many
 problems during the Dark Ages.
 (shrugs)
 Revised training program.

The Grim Reaper places his empty espresso cup on the counter. The pair resume walking while talking.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)
 Lines at the gates... Peter
 overworked... An eternity for those
 in line.

GABRIEL
 So what exactly did Harlan do?

GRIM REAPER
 Was excited... hugged mother.

GABRIEL
 No.

Grim Reaper nods and shrugs. He's being more talkative than normal for him.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Where is she now?

GRIM REAPER
 Telling Israfil... his suit makes
 him look too thin. Complained the
 entire trip...
 (shakes head, slouches)
 Longest trip of my life.

GABRIEL
 That's saying something.

GRIM REAPER
 Wanted to call myself... realized
 not possible. Saw Israfil chatting
 with angel corps... revised flight
 plans. Mrs. Howe complained to
 Israfil.

GABRIEL
Doesn't she know where she is?

GRIM REAPER
Thought wings... airline promotion.

GABRIEL
I bet Harlan doesn't last six months without The Boss signing off on a termination.

GRIM REAPER
Six? Four and you're on.

GABRIEL
In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence. Charm beats skill.

GRIM REAPER
(nods)
The Peter Principle.

GABRIEL
In Heaven, the Book of Life tends to determine who rises and who... doesn't. Goodness beats skill.

GRIM REAPER
The St. Peter Principle.

GABRIEL
I guess we'll find out which one Harlan proves.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - MORNING

Harlan enters the lobby area and approaches the receptionist.

RECEPTIONIST
(looking up)
You again?
(looks down at papers)
There must be some kind of mistake.
(buzzes Regional Death)
Sir?

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Regional Death is at his desk, finishing his coffee.

REGIONAL DEATH
 (pushing intercom button)
 Yes?

RECEPTIONIST (O.S.)
 Sir, Mr. Howe is here.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Send him in.

RECEPTIONIST
 But, Sir. (beat) You're scheduled
 to begin a new employee orientation
 today.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Yes. Send him in.

RECEPTIONIST
 (disbelief)
 He's your appointment?

REGIONAL DEATH
 (releases intercom button,
 to self)
 Don't remind me.
 (pushes intercom)
 Send him in.

Regional Death finishes his coffee and disposes of the cup.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 (to self)
 If only it were wine. Or tequila.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY

Harlan has been listening, feeling rejected.

RECEPTIONIST
 I guess he'll see you now.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Harlan enters Regional Death's office.

Death sighs, accepting a heavy burden reluctantly.

Regional Death motions to the chair and Harlan sits. Both men
 look down at the floor in silence.

REGIONAL DEATH

I am sorry about your mother.

HARLAN

How did you know?

REGIONAL DEATH

(ignores question)

I really am sorry. Still, your mother's passing made it essential that you come in today. We can't afford another incident -- this is already a mess.

HARLAN

I wanted to be alone today. I have things to take care of for my mother.

(pondering)

But, when you called, I just couldn't say no.

REGIONAL DEATH

We will take care of arrangements for you. We have always considered ourselves a big family.

HARLAN

(sudden, though mistaken, realization)

Oh, my...

Harlan stares, stunned. He's certain he knows who Regional Death is -- a deadly mobster. Harlan is worried for his life.

REGIONAL DEATH

The work we do is personally demanding. It requires a great deal of loyalty to each other.

Regional death rises and turns away from Harlan. Death looks out the window, marveling at the view.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

We have made a few mistakes in the last few days. Now, we need to set them right.

(turns to face Harlan)

Once you were hired, that was it. Now you're with us.

HARLAN

(frightened)

I've been hired by the Mafia.

REGIONAL DEATH

(laughs)

No, no. We're not the Mafia.

(thinks)

Our competitors often play a role in Mafia business. We're more powerful than the Mafia. We're the most powerful organization this side of the cosmos. We are the cosmos.

HARLAN

The Trilateral Commission?

REGIONAL DEATH

You listen to too much talk radio, Harlan.

(returns to chair, sits)

Harlan, listen carefully.

(leaning forward)

You are now a Messenger of Death.

HARLAN

The CIA! I knew it. Who would ever suspect a simple salesman as an assassin?

REGIONAL DEATH

Assassin?

(shakes head, shrugs)

What an incredible imagination. I would have never thought of that. The CIA couldn't deliver a message to.... Never mind, that's another topic.

HARLAN

Who do I work for?

REGIONAL DEATH

Technically? This division currently reports to Gabriel, but in a few months Grimmy -- the Grim Reaper, that is -- takes over again. I'll tell you the whole story during the orientation.

HARLAN

(slowly, skeptically)

The Grim Reaper?

(wondering if Death is insane or kidding)

Uh, huh.

REGIONAL DEATH

Yes. His given name is Azrael.

HARLAN

Seriously. For whom do I work?

REGIONAL DEATH

The Division of Death. The DOD, as we like to call it. Soon to be the Department of Death, so at least our softball T-shirts won't have to be reprinted.

HARLAN

I don't find this funny at all.

REGIONAL DEATH

It isn't. You are a Messenger of Death. That's not funny.

(pause, to self)

Well, it might be in this case.

HARLAN

(rising)

I'm leaving.

REGIONAL DEATH

You can't do that. Sit down, please.

An invisible force pushes Harlan back into his seat. He struggles. Stops. His eyes widen.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Listen carefully. A few days ago there was a mistake. We placed a help wanted ad in the local paper. I called a temp agency and hired a receptionist. Anyway, she accidentally called you in for an interview. She was supposed to send you a "thank you for your interest" letter.

HARLAN

So, I didn't really earn an interview? It was a clerical error?

REGIONAL DEATH

(shrugs)

After the first interview, I was going to call you and thank you for your time -- end of story. Unfortunately, you fell.

(MORE)

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

The moment you touched me, I was obligated...

(pause)

It was either collect your soul or offer you the job.

HARLAN

You would have killed me? Just for touching you?

REGIONAL DEATH

(defensively)

I don't make the rules. Touched by the hand of Death and all...

(relaxing)

Anyway, The Boss said we had to hire you.

HARLAN

You didn't want me?

REGIONAL DEATH

What can I say? I didn't think you were Death material. Then you hugged your mother. Boy, did that shock Grimmy.

HARLAN

I killed my own mother? By hugging her?

REGIONAL DEATH

(sheepishly)

Accidents happen? Anyway, You are now a Messenger of Death.

INT. HEADQUARTERS

Mother is in the all-white headquarters, sitting on a white couch, staring at a wall of televisions -- which reflects her idea of Heaven. Mother holds a complex remote control.

On most of the screens are typical daytime television, but one in the center features Harlan.

MOTHER

That boy can't get anything right.

(fussing with remote)

Isn't "Matlock" on somewhere?

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan? We need to get started with
your orientation.

Harlan nods slowly, still in shock.

Regional Death retrieves a remote from his desk and presses
some buttons. A wall bookcase opens to reveal a large screen.
An old 1950s-style educational film starts to play.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The Department of Communications:
Connecting Heaven and Earth for A
Very, Very Long Time!

INT. HEADQUARTERS

In aging black and white film with scratches and flaws, a
tour of Headquarters begins.

The NARRATOR is dressed as a 1950s news anchor might be. His
voice has the artificial nature common to old newsreels or
educational films.

Narrator walks among the cubicles.

NARRATOR

Welcome to the Department of
Communications. In this episode
we'll be visiting Partings and
Separations, better known as the
Division of Death.

The Grim Reaper walks by, an obviously staged moment.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Why, here's the division head
himself, the Archangel Azrael.

The narrator steps up to Grim Reaper who turns toward the
camera, though his face is never visible.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

It sure seems busy here in DOD. How
do you do keep up with demand?

GRIM REAPER

(slowly, ominously)

Regional managers. One thousand six
hundred and ninety regional
managers.

The Grim Reaper walks away, between aisles of cubicles into the distance.

NARRATOR
 (overly enthusiastic)
 Yes, 1690 Regional Assistants to the Most Eminent Deliverer of Eternal Souls make sure messages are delivered and souls sorted promptly and accurately.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

Regional Death looks to Harlan.

REGIONAL DEATH
 I'm Regional Assistant... Well, everyone simply calls me Regional Death 143.

HARLAN
 Don't you have a name?

Regional Death ignores the question.

INT. HEADQUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

NARRATOR
 Here we see the support staff of Peter and Company completing requisition and rerouting forms. These forms will be sent to the regional offices.

Narrator approaches one of the cubicles, where a PARTINGS WORKER, a pleasant older woman, is typing quickly.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
 Excuse me. Would you mind telling our viewers what you're preparing?

PARTINGS WORKER
 Oh, hello there! I'm typing requisitions for a little flood. We expect six new arrivals and four routings. New arrivals! Isn't that wonderful?

Regional Death, precisely as he appears to Harlan, not one day younger, walks up to the cubicle and is handed a stack of forms. The action is badly staged. Regional Death is a lousy, stiff and nervous actor.

NARRATOR

Why, here's a Regional Assistant hard at work. Can you tell us what you're doing?

REGIONAL DEATH

(stilted)

I am taking these forms back to Terra, also known as Earth, Region 143. There, one of my 100 messengers will deliver each form to a designated soul for processing.

NARRATOR

Sounds like challenging work.

The film shows signs of being edited for several takes.

REGIONAL DEATH

It is an honor to work for Peter and Company.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE

The film continues for a bit, Harlan watching carefully. As it reaches "The End," Regional Death turns off the film using the remote control and the bookcases slide back over the screen.

HARLAN

You expect me to believe a few thousand messengers deliver every soul in the universe to Heaven?

REGIONAL DEATH

Technically, it's The Heavens. We only serve this quadrant.

Harlan is dumbfounded.

HARLAN

And 100 messengers--

REGIONAL DEATH

Some regions have more messengers, some of fewer. We are understaffed right now. Unfortunately, we downsized in the 1980s and a few too many Wall Street types entered the Pearly Gates. Hiring new messengers is a top priority, now.

HARLAN
Death downsized.

REGIONAL DEATH
You thought things would be
different?

HARLAN
I don't know what I expected.
(abruptly)
I'm not dead, am I?

REGIONAL DEATH
No. You're not. Not exactly,
anyway. We have a handbook
explaining it all.

Regional Death hands a thick, ancient book to Harlan. The cover is embossed "Delivering Heavenly Messages, Volume 2: Soul Separations."

HARLAN
I'm a Messenger of Death? How does
that work?

REGIONAL DEATH
You tell people, animals, plants...
whatever is on your schedule, that
Death is coming.

HARLAN
We don't collect the souls?

REGIONAL DEATH
Not until you're fully trained.

HARLAN
What do I do?

REGIONAL DEATH
What you've always done so well.
Tell the, uh, client, the truth.
Maybe not the best sales technique,
but we value the truth. I have to
admit, you might be the most honest
person I've met.

MONTAGE

Regional Death is "seeing" Harlan being honest with customers, similar to the opening sequence. Harlan is shown at various employers, helping the customers through his instinctive honesty.

END MONTAGE

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

REGIONAL DEATH

All you have to do is be yourself.

HARLAN

And tell people they're dead?

REGIONAL DEATH

(nods)

Some will be comforted, some will be... not so comforted. Once you are revealed to someone as a Messenger of Death, that soul is marked for collection.

(sternly)

But be careful. A touch of your hand passes the mark no matter what.

HARLAN

Someone should have mentioned that earlier.

REGIONAL DEATH

Yes. If our division makes a mistake, the results are very unpleasant.

(thinking back)

It takes years to collect a lost soul.

HARLAN

Lost soul?

REGIONAL DEATH

(looks at watch)

Oh, my, look at the time. He'll be here any minute.

HARLAN

The Grim Reaper?

REGIONAL DEATH

Don't call him that to his...

(softly)

His name is Azrael.

There is a buzz from the intercom.

RECEPTIONIST (O.C.)

He's here.

A TAILOR enters Death's office with a swatch book in hand and tape measures around his neck.

HARLAN

Azrael is a tailor?

REGIONAL DEATH

No. No. I am not going to have you delivering messages looking like a "Matlock" impersonator.

TAILOR

(to Harlan)

Stand. Stand.

Harlan stands, placing the ancient book on Regional Death's desk.

TAILOR (CONT'D)

(looks at Harlan)

Oh, my. It's... it's... hideous. I haven't seen anything like it in decades. Who dresses him? His mother?

REGIONAL DEATH

Not any more.

Tailor walks around Harlan, studies him.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Tell me there's hope.

TAILOR

Always hope, even when the odds are so unfavorable.

Tailor takes a tape measure from around his neck and begins measuring Harlan for a suit.

TAILOR (CONT'D)

(to Harlan)

Stand straight.

(measuring)

Arm out.

(measures arm, etc.)

Hold still.

(measures neck)

I can do it.

REGIONAL DEATH

How long?

TAILOR

Two, maybe three days.

Tailor places the swatch book on the desk, next to the handbook, and opens the swatches to gray fabrics in various patterns.

TAILOR (CONT'D)

(to Harlan)

What pattern? Black, pinstripe?
Double or single-breasted? What do
you want?

HARLAN

I don't know. I've never ordered a
suit.

TAILOR

Obviously.

REGIONAL DEATH

Use your own judgment.

TAILOR

I hope you are sending him to Juan
for this hair? I do not want one of
my suits worn with this hair.

HARLAN

Hey!

TAILOR

(to Regional Death)

I have what I need. I'll call you
to schedule the fitting.

The Tailor gathers his swatch book and exits quickly.

HARLAN

He wasn't very friendly.

Harlan sits and retrieves the handbook. He flips through the pages.

REGIONAL DEATH

Now, where were we? Oh, yes. We
generally mark fewer than half of
all souls. Substantially fewer.

HARLAN

Who marks the others?

REGIONAL DEATH
Our competition...

HARLAN
You mean they're from--

REGIONAL DEATH
(interrupting)
We don't discuss that place. No matter who collects the soul, it is forwarded to data processing for a background check and review. That's the heart of Peter and Company. Some go into holding, some straight down, others to the Pearly Gates to judge their deeds. It's all very complex once we're out of the picture.

HARLAN
So just because our competition marks a soul, it's not condemned?

REGIONAL DEATH
No, no. They just like to spread death and destruction. It's even part of their union contract. We have to let them; it's part of the agreement -- at least for the time being. But again, that's a complex matter that we don't worry about.

Regional Death leans forward and taps the handbook.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
That book contains all the rules, regulations, et cetera. The appendix includes a list of benefits and the labor contract.

HARLAN
I don't know if I can learn all of this.

REGIONAL DEATH
Don't worry, you've got a long time. A very long time.

INT. HEADQUARTERS

The Grim Reaper is standing alone, in a circle of darkness.

Regional Death enters, carrying stacks of paper. These are the pink and gold pages from triplicate forms, along with a bound spreadsheet report on regional productivity.

REGIONAL DEATH
Greetings and salutations, oh Grim
One.

GRIM REAPER
One-forty-three. Call me Azrael.
(beat) Someday...

REGIONAL DEATH
Yes, sir.

GRIM REAPER
Weekly report.

REGIONAL DEATH
I have that right here.
(presents bound report)
It's very good.

The Grim Reaper browses the report pages, his scythe tucked under an arm.

GRIM REAPER
Mistakes.

REGIONAL DEATH
We have one of the highest accuracy
rates in the division.

GRIM REAPER
Unacceptable.

REGIONAL DEATH
There will always be a few minor
problems.

GRIM REAPER
Unacceptable. Five last week. Two
souls still lost.

REGIONAL DEATH
But they were a politician and a
used car salesman.

GRIM REAPER
Unacceptable. Lost souls.

REGIONAL DEATH
You can't prove they had souls.

GRIM REAPER

(growls)

Not funny.

REGIONAL DEATH

We still had a 99.8 percent success rate this week, up from 99.6. Do you have any idea how many souls that is?

GRIM REAPER

This week 15,617. It was to be 15,619.

REGIONAL DEATH

We're overworked.

GRIM REAPER

The new hires?

REGIONAL DEATH

They're still in training. We'll probably need to hire more after this group.

GRIM REAPER

Regions 152 and 175 are doing better. Talk to them. Study their training procedures.

REGIONAL DEATH

Yes, sir.

The Grim Reaper closes the report binder and taps his scythe on the floor.

GRIM REAPER

And Harlan Howe?

REGIONAL DEATH

He's... doing... fine.

GRIM REAPER

Details.

REGIONAL DEATH

(shaking head)

You made a side bet with Gabe.

The Grim Reaper hangs his head in embarrassed shame.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Tell me you didn't bet against me.
After all these years, you bet
against me.

(pause)

Then again, it is Harlan. I suppose
I would have bet against me in the
same situation.

GRIM REAPER

(sheepishly)

Not exactly. Last four months.

REGIONAL DEATH

He might. Harlan looks a lot
better. He finally got a new suit
and a decent haircut.

Grim Reaper sighs. The darkness around him expands.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

I suppose you want more detail than
that.

(pause)

He's memorized most of the rules,
but he doesn't understand them.
Usually we hire people with some
beliefs -- he had none. You have no
idea how hard it is to explain the
universe to someone with no faith
in himself or anything else.

GRIM REAPER

Faith develops.

REGIONAL DEATH

I don't know.

GRIM REAPER

I will visit him.

REGIONAL DEATH

That was my suggestion from the
beginning. Actually, that was
Gabe's idea, too.

GRIM REAPER

(pounds scythe on floor)

Not to take his soul! To show him
his place.

REGIONAL DEATH

A visit from a million-year-old
angel with no fashion sense is
going to help Harlan?

GRIM REAPER

(to self, mumbling)

He only has to last four months.

Grim Reaper starts to walk away.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'll do what I can.

EXT. CITY MAIN STREET - SUNSET

People are walking an entertainment district, with bars,
restaurants, coffee shops, and high-end boutiques. It is
early evening, adding to the crowd.

Harlan and Regional Death are walking together. Harlan is in
a new suit, with a new haircut. Harlan stands tall and walks
confidently. Both men are wearing leather gloves and hats.

REGIONAL DEATH

Your training has gone quite well
these last two months. The higher
ups are thrilled to death. I mean,
the Angel of Death is thrilled.

HARLAN

I had my doubts.

REGIONAL DEATH

We all did.

(stops, admires Harlan's
clothes)

But look at you now. You're going
to knock 'em dead. Well, actually
that step isn't your responsibility
yet, but you'll deliver the
message.

HARLAN

You are in a good mood today.

REGIONAL DEATH

Feeling good about the odds. Almost
giddy.

HARLAN

The odds?

REGIONAL DEATH

(catching self)

Oh, nothing. Azrael and Gabe thought one or two new hires might not be trained by the deadline. Grimmy did bet on us, though.

HARLAN

The Archangel Gabriel bet against--

REGIONAL DEATH

At least Azrael hates to lose. Especially at chess... Ever see... Never mind.

Harlan reaches up and fiddles with his hat, something he does when he is nervous.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Nice gloves.

HARLAN

Oh, yes. Soft leather. I really like the fit.

REGIONAL DEATH

It is important to have properly fitted gloves. You wouldn't want them slipping off your hands. Sunglasses?

Harlan withdraws some dark sunglasses and puts them on.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Sensational. Sunglasses at night. Making eye contact is generally not dangerous, but they say that the purest souls -- good or evil -- can spot us by our eyes.

HARLAN

People can see us?

REGIONAL DEATH

Of course. But only the pure souls notice us.

EXT. ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

The Grim Reaper and Gabriel appear, walking towards the street. They stop at the sidewalk to peer around buildings. They are spying on Harlan's progress.

EXT. CITY MAIN STREET - CONTINUOUS

HARLAN

There are pure souls?

REGIONAL DEATH

I've met four or five in a century. They are unnerving, if you ask me. The pure good souls are torn between wanting your message and wanting to stay behind and do more good. The evil souls... they don't care. Heaven, Earth... Hell. They couldn't care less. I bet some even scare Lucifer when he gets them from processing.

HARLAN

Sociopaths.

REGIONAL DEATH

Pure evil in human form.

HARLAN

Why aren't there only good, decent souls?

REGIONAL DEATH

I guess it's just The Boss working in mysterious ways.

The pair walk along the street, watching people.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

Choose someone and tell me what that individual feels. The soul.

HARLAN

(looking about)

That woman over there.

(nods towards a young woman)

She's having a bad day. It doesn't look like it, because she can't frown. She believes her smile is her a job. Maybe sales or marketing? She's very unhappy.

REGIONAL DEATH

You are doing well.

HARLAN

This is like snooping. It doesn't seem right.

REGIONAL DEATH

We never pry. Usually we only read the emotions of those we need to meet.

A man bumps into Harlan, smiles, and continues walking.

HARLAN

He is in a good mood. He just... Oh my!

REGIONAL DEATH

(looks back)

Oh, no. And to think Frank is married!

HARLAN

Frank?

REGIONAL DEATH

Think. Concentrate Harlan. Search for facts.

HARLAN

(furrows brow,
concentrating)

Franklin Wilson. Two kids. He goes to church twice a week.

(pause)

It's the organist! He's--

REGIONAL DEATH

That's not our business, Harlan.

HARLAN

But, he--

REGIONAL DEATH

Our job is not to judge others. You cannot judge anyone or anything.

HARLAN

My mother used to say "judge not" something... something... something.

REGIONAL DEATH

It still holds true.

(looks at watch)

I have to be going soon. Will you be okay tonight?

HARLAN

All things considered, it's not as bad as I thought it would be. After all, this is just another job.

REGIONAL DEATH

That's a good outlook. And don't let the little mistakes get to you.

HARLAN

(startled pause)

I thought we couldn't make mistakes.

REGIONAL DEATH

We try not to, but we're not The Boss. The little things that go wrong make existence exciting. Those are the things worth waiting to watch. We hired you, after all.

(laughs, then notices Harlan)

Uh, just kidding, Harlan. I must be going.

Regional Death tips his hat, turns, and walks away in the opposite direction.

MONTAGE

Harlan continues to walk along, studying people. He is occasionally shocked, but also laughs once or twice.

Gabriel and Grim Reaper slip out of an alley, following behind Harlan. The Archangels observe Harlan for some time.

END MONTAGE

EXT. CITY MAIN STREET

Harlan approaches a tropical fish store and pauses. He looks at the displays through the front window.

The hours on the window indicate an 8 p.m. closing time. Harlan looks at his watch and sees it is 7:55.

HARLAN

I always loved watching fish.

Harlan enters the store.

EXT. ALLEY OPENING - CONTINUOUS

The Grim Reaper is peeking around the corner, watching Harlan. Gabriel pulls the Grim Reaper back so he can take a turn spying on Harlan.

GRIM REAPER

Hmmmmmm.

GABRIEL

Relax. He's just browsing. What could go wrong?

GRIM REAPER

Ask his mother.

EXT. CITY MAIN STREET - CONTINUOUS

Harlan exits the store with a plastic bag of goldfish and a fishbowl.

HARLAN

You're going to like your new home.

Gabriel and Grim Reaper follow Harlan.

INT. HEADQUARTERS - LATER

The Grim Reaper and Gabriel are standing in the middle of nothingness, with a dark area around Grim Reaper. Regional Death enters, running from the distance to the angelic pair.

Regional Death can "hear" the conversation marked by head shaking and shrugs.

REGIONAL DEATH

What is it?

(panting)

Harlan?

(panting)

Unauthorized partings?

The angels switch to speaking.

GABRIEL

Some fish met a rather untimely demise.

GRIM REAPER

Many fish.

GABRIEL

(to Grim Reaper)

It started with a couple of goldfish.

REGIONAL DEATH

A couple of goldfish? This is all about a couple of goldfish? Goldfish die all the time. They have a built-in expiration date, as far as I can tell. I never had one live more than a few months when I was a child.

GABRIEL

You never told them you were a Messenger of Death!

REGIONAL DEATH

Excuse me?

GABRIEL

Harlan purchased some goldfish tonight. Grimmy here...

Grim Reaper raises scythe, pounds it on floor.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

...I mean Azrael, had been following Harlan.

Grim Reaper pounds scythe again.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

All right, all right. We were both following Harlan.

REGIONAL DEATH

You should not be following one of my messengers.

GRIM REAPER

Observing. Special case.

GABRIEL

True. How many others mistakenly hug their mothers and introduce themselves to pet goldfish?

REGIONAL DEATH

Again, Goldfish? What is the big deal?

GRIM REAPER
Goldfish. Only the beginning.

REGIONAL DEATH
I'm betting I don't really want to
hear this, do I?

GRIM REAPER
Tried to exchange them.

GABRIEL
Which would have been fine, if he
hadn't talked to the fish in the
display tank.

GRIM REAPER
Hundreds of fish. Hundreds.

REGIONAL DEATH
No!

GRIM REAPER
Yes. Spotted me. There was
screaming.

GABRIEL
He was shouting "Don't fear the
reaper!" over and over to the fish.
I'm surprised he made it home
without being arrested and taken to
a psych ward.

GRIM REAPER
Talk to him. If not--
(pounds scythe)
--I will.

REGIONAL DEATH
You two messed up, not me.

Regional Death exits off screen.

GABRIEL
Harlan doesn't stand a chance, you
know.

Grim Reaper shakes his head, depressed.

EXT. CITY STREET - AFTERNOON

Harlan has been wandering, sleepless. He's still wearing the
same suit and wearing sunglasses. Harlan is slouching and
dragging his feet.

HARLAN
 (to self)
 Those poor fish.

Harlan looks about while talking to himself, wallowing in self-pity as he compares himself to others.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
 Goldstein, there, he has no problems. Nice wife, good kids. His fish are still alive. And Janice Wood, on her way back to the office. She couldn't kill a houseplant if she tried. Her cat Buttons, yes, he can kill a plant with one pounce -- but not lately.
 (stops walking)
 It just isn't fair.

Regional Death comes into view, looking for Harlan. Harlan does not notice.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Harlan.

Region Death rushes to catch up with Harlan.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 (placing gloved hand on Harlan)
 Harlan.

HALRAN
 (startled)
 Oh, it's you.

REGIONAL DEATH
 This is no way for a Messenger to be acting. Stand up. Get a grip.

HARLAN
 Life stinks.

REGIONAL DEATH
 And the alternative is better?

HARLAN
 Apparently not.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Relax. It was just a few fish. Look on the bright side. At least you didn't buy a puppy.

HARLAN

Great. Mock me.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'm not mocking you. I really am glad you didn't buy a puppy.

HARLAN

Gee, thank you for your support.

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan, you have got to start acting like a Messenger. You're an adult, not a child.

HARLAN

What does that mean?

REGIONAL DEATH

As long as your mother was alive, you never have had to succeed. She didn't want you to succeed. Didn't you realize that?

HARLAN

I thought she was a pessimist.

REGIONAL DEATH

She wanted to make sure you needed her. It was selfish. Now, you are alone. Alone in a way most people never imagine.

HARLAN

You've got that right.

REGIONAL DEATH

Rise to the challenge. I know you can. Azrael knows you can. That says something. If Azrael thinks you can succeed, then it must be possible.

HARLAN

Azrael told you I could make it as a Messenger?

REGIONAL DEATH

Let's just say that he's willing to take a chance on you.

HARLAN
 (standing up a bit)
 Really? An Archangel believes in
 me?

REGIONAL DEATH
 It is meaningless if you don't
 believe in yourself.

HARLAN
 I can do this job!

REGIONAL DEATH
 That's the spirit.

The two sit on a sidewalk bench and watch people for a bit. Regional Death retrieves a slip of paper from his shirt pocket and looks at it.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
 Your first solo appointments.
 (handing paper to Harlan)
 These won't be tough. A used car
 salesman and a bank loan officer.

HARLAN
 Sounds easy enough. I'm sure I can
 handle them.

REGIONAL DEATH
 Good. If I get any more
 appointments, I'll text you.

HARLAN
 Really?

REGIONAL DEATH
 (nods)
 I need to go back to the office. Go
 home, clean up, and do your job.

Regional Death turns and walks down an alley.

EXT. CITY STREET - LATER

A city bus pulls to a stop and Harlan exits. Harlan has cleaned up and appears refreshed. He is in a new suit, while still wearing gloves and sunglasses. As the bus pulls away, Harlan looks about.

HOMELESS WOMAN approaches Harlan. She is pushing a cart, loaded with various belongings, including several old Bibles and religious books. The woman studies Harlan.

HOMELESS WOMAN
I thought I recognized you.

HARLAN
(checking pockets)
Do you need some money?

Harlan offers the woman some cash from a billfold.

HOMELESS WOMAN
(taking only one bill)
Ah, you're good. Keep up the act.

HARLAN
Excuse me?

HOMELESS WOMAN
I know who you are.
(looking around)
I won't tell no one.

HARLAN
You must have me mistaken for
someone else.

HOMELESS WOMAN
Oh, like there are so many of you.
(points finger at Harlan)
No, I know. I know.

HARLAN
What do you know?

HOMELESS WOMAN
Testing me. Very good. A skeptical
one.

HARLAN
Most salesmen are.

HOMELESS WOMAN
Salesmen? That what they call you
now? Whatcha' selling?

HARLAN
I used to be a salesman. I'm in a
different line of work now.

HOMELESS WOMAN
Yes. You are. The gloves, the dark
sunglasses. You can hide your eyes,
but not who you are.

HARLAN

So tell me. Who am I?

HOMELESS WOMAN

You think I'm crazy. I'm not. Been on the streets a while. Gives me time to watch. I see things. You and your friend. You've been walking the street, scoping things out.

The Homeless Woman looks about, nervously. She retrieves an old illustrated book and shows Harlan various illustrations of death. She turns pages while talking, pointing at each to emphasize what she knows.

HOMELESS WOMAN (CONT'D)

Each picture is different, but the eyes...

(pause)

You're walking death.

HARLAN

I... I'm not what you think.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Not really Death himself. His Messengers. I'm right, aren't I?

HARLAN

I don't think--

HOMELESS WOMAN

Oh, that's right. You can't tell me, can you? A Messenger of Death. That's what you are.

(looks at Harlan's hands)

It explains the gloves -- Touch of Death and all.

Harlan shoves his hands into pockets.

HOMELESS WOMAN (CONT'D)

Hmm. I knew it!

(respectfully)

Oh, don't worry. No, I'd never tell anyone. Not that anyone would believe me. Hah!

(looks at an imaginary pocket watch)

Look at the time! I must be going. Soup kitchen stops serving lunch soon.

Homeless Woman places the book carefully in her cart and starts to walk away. She does not look back to Harlan.

HOMELESS WOMAN (CONT'D)

No, I won't tell anyone.
(laughing to self)

The Homeless Woman wanders away. Harlan watches the woman for a moment, then turns to resume his tasks.

Harlan walks along. His cell phone beeps. Harlan retrieves the phone and looks at it.

HARLAN

Congressman Roberts? (beat) Wait,
I'm judging others again.
(looking up)
Sorry, Mother.
(looks at phone)
Excelsior Hotel, 4 p.m. The rumors
might be true.
(pause)
Room service time, Congressman
Roberts.

EXT. CITY STREET - AFTER MIDNIGHT

A young couple is walking along an empty sidewalk. They are talking and laughing towards the end of a first date. The YOUNG MAN seems polite, gentlemanly. The YOUNG WOMAN seems to adore her date.

Harlan is in the distance walking while checking the screen of his phone.

Two thugs are looking out of an alley. Only THUG ONE speaks, and he has a gun. THUG TWO is much larger and doesn't need a gun to terrify potential victims. The thugs look at the couple and then to Harlan in the distance.

THUG ONE

This is really easy. I keep the gun
on the guy, you collect the goods.
Got it?

Thug Two points to Harlan.

THUG ONE (CONT'D)

Don't worry. People never get
involved, especially at night. He's
no hero. Just look at him.

Thug Two nods. The thugs step out of the alley and block the couple's path.

THUG ONE (CONT'D)
We don't want any trouble.

YOUNG MAN
Excuse me. You're blocking the way.

THUG ONE
(showing the gun)
I said, we don't want any trouble.
Empty your pockets and hand over
the purse.
(to second thug)
Check 'em. Get everything.

Harlan notices the robbery. As he starts towards the people, NERGAL appears in front of him.

NERGAL wears a trench coat and fedora. He looks like a police detective, except for his red glowing eyes. He's definitely evil -- and angry.

NERGAL
Stop. Turn around and leave. Now.

HARLAN
(pushing Nergal aside)
Excuse me.

Nergal reappears in front of Harlan. Harlan tries to read him, but can't. Harlan notices the red eyes.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
Out of my way.

NERGAL
Who are you? And what in our Hell
do you think you're doing?

The robbery continues, still some distance away.

THUG ONE
Come on! Everything you've got!

The Young Man takes off a watch, finds various items in his pockets to hand to Thug Two. The Young Woman offers her purse.

THUG ONE (CONT'D)
Come on! Hurry up!
(to second thug)
Hurry, the suit's coming.

HARLAN

Stop!

The Thug grabs the Young Woman and puts the gun to her head. Thug Two runs away, dropping only the purse. The Young Man is terrified, but does not run away.

YOUNG MAN

Please. Let her go.

Nergal appears in front of Harlan again, trying to stop the interference in events.

NERGAL

What are you doing? You can't interfere!

HARLAN

Just watch me.

THUG ONE

(to Harlan)

One more step, I shoot. You want that?

HARLAN

(calmly)

No. No, I don't want that.

NERGAL

I do!

(points to Young Man)

I'm here for that one!

(to Harlan)

You're violating the rules.

THUG ONE

What's going on?

NERGAL

Will you pull the trigger, already?

HARLAN

No!

THUG ONE

(confused)

Who are you guys?

NERGAL

(to Harlan)

Look what you've done. He's not going to pull the trigger.

THUG ONE
Oh, yes I am!

HARLAN
Not if I can help it.

Harlan takes off his gloves and inches closer to the Thug.
The Thug looks nervous.

THUG ONE
You two can't stop me!

NERGAL
We're not togeth--

Thug shoots at Nergal. Harlan lunges forward and grabs the
Thug's hand.

HARLAN
(to couple)
Run! Go!

The couple run away, leaving the Young Woman's purse behind.

NERGAL
No! You can't do this!

Enter Regional Death. Regional Death approaches Harlan,
Messenger, and Thug.

NERGAL (CONT'D)
Look at what this clown has done!
I'm filing a report on this, 143!

REGIONAL DEATH
(frustrated)
What's going on here?

THUG ONE
Ahhhh.
(slowly collapsing)
Help me!

HARLAN
(to thug)
Like you deserve help.

NERGAL
It wasn't his time.

Thug One collapses, holding chest. He drops his gun and
gasps. He dies in severe pain.

REGIONAL DEATH

What have you done, Harlan?

HARLAN

I stopped a crime.

NERGAL

He interfered with one of our scheduled appointments. That male robbery victim was scheduled for 1:33.

REGIONAL DEATH

Do you want me to meet up with him?

NERGAL

Nah, that's okay. I've got a free slot before sunrise. I don't normally do this, but I'll take care of it.

HARLAN

(protesting)

But I just saved that young man's life! You can't just go around killing people!

Nergal and Regional Death look at each other and then to Harlan.

NERGAL

You just marked the wrong person.

A Dark Messenger approaches. He looks around, confused.

DARK MESSENGER

(to Nergal)

Isn't it 1:30 here?

NERGAL

(to Messenger)

There were some issues.

(to Regional Death)

You guys must be desperate for new hires.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'll deal with this.

NERGAL

(annoyed)

Sure. Whatever. You know, I'm going to take a lot of heat for not stopping this.

REGIONAL DEATH
I'll talk to Gabe, He can talk to
old flame breath.

NERGAL
(motions for whispers)
Shhh. Quiet.
(pause)
All right. But you better make sure
nothing like this ever happens
again.

REGIONAL DEATH
Trust me.

NERGAL
Yeah, well you're moving up the
management ranks and I'm...
(to Harlan)
Of course, after this screw up,
they'll probably promote you.
They're so forgiving upstairs.
(to Dark Messenger)
Let's go.

Nergal touches the Dark Messenger, who is still confused as
they both fade away.

REGIONAL DEATH
Looks like I better take this soul
to processing. You can't wait too
long, you know.

HARLAN
This is so unfair.

REGIONAL DEATH
What? You thought death was fair?
Harlan, I want you in my office
first thing tomorrow. Understand?

HARLAN
Yes, sir.

REGIONAL DEATH
Go home.

Harlan slouches and slinks away. Regional Death watches
Harlan as he passes under streetlights. Death shakes his head
in a mix of understanding and pity.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
(to self)
He meant well.
(MORE)

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

(to Thug)

Come, on. Get up.

Thug One's spiritual form, identical to his body, slowly stumbles up, as if dizzy, feeling ill.

THUG ONE

What the--

(pause, stumble)

I don't feel so well.

Thug One leans on Regional Death. He looks down at his body.

REGIONAL DEATH

You're going to feel a lot worse after processing places you.

THUG ONE

Who are you?

REGIONAL DEATH

I'm Death.

THUG ONE

(to self)

No way...

REGIONAL DEATH

You had thirty more years ahead of you. Not that you were going to change.

THUG ONE

What happened? He tried to take my gun. The guy in the suit.

REGIONAL DEATH

You had a massive heart attack.

THUG ONE

I lost thirty years? Thirty?

REGIONAL DEATH

They were all likely to be in prison. This was your third strike, after all. Let's go.

THUG ONE

It's not fair.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'd have to disagree with you. Maybe it wasn't time, but it was eminently fair.

INT. HOWE LIVING ROOM - PRE-DAWN HOURS

Harlan is sitting, watching television. He is in gray, drab, pajamas. He looks exhausted and depressed.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
We will return to the Late Late
Show after these messages.

Harlan exits to the kitchen, returning with a glass of milk and plate of cookies. He sits down and watches the television again, eating. Some time passes, Harlan trying to relax.

The Grim Reaper appears in front of the television. Harlan stands at attention, like a soldier.

HARLAN
Hello, sir.

The Grim Reaper motions for Harlan to sit. Harlan does so.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
It's never a good sign when the
boss's boss wants to see you.

The Grim Reaper leans his scythe against the side of television, walks to a chair and sits. His hood still covers his face. It seems to be an empty robe. He looks at the television and back to Harlan.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
"Night of the Living Dead."
Appropriate, I suppose.
(offers plate to Grim
Reaper)
Want a cookie?

The Grim Reaper reaches over and takes one cookie. Eats a few bites.

GRIM REAPER
(slowly, mouth full)
Got milk?

HARLAN
Oh, yes. Yes.

Harlan rises, exits, and returns with a glass of milk.

The Grim Reaper reaches up to remove his hood. We cannot see his hands. Harlan stares anxiously. The hood drops to reveal a young man with sloppy hair, somewhat "nerdish" in looks.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

I'll be--

The Grim Reaper sounds nothing like he has in other scenes. There's no echo, no deep booming voice. He sounds like a young man.

GRIM REAPER

Don't say it. It's not wise to swear in the presence of an Archangel.

Grim Reaper takes the milk.

HARLAN

I thought you were the Grim Reaper?

GRIM REAPER

(offended)

Who told you that?

(drinking milk)

Grim. Blah. It's an image.

HARLAN

My manager called you...

(thinks better of it)

Never mind. You're... not what I expected.

GRIM REAPER

(echoes loudly, deeply)

My name is Azrael, Collector of Souls.

("human" voice)

Cool, huh? Unless you have to sound like that every minute of every day -- for eternity. Come on, sit down.

HARLAN

(sitting, confused)

You're really Azrael?

GRIM REAPER

You have no idea what that means, do you?

HARLAN

No. But I've heard of the--

GRIM REAPER

(annoyed)

Azrael. As in "The Divine Assistant, Helper of..."? The Archangel Azrael?

Harlan still appears stunned and somewhat puzzled. Azrael isn't terrifying; he is frustrated and feels unappreciated.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)

Everyone knows Gabe and Mike, but no one remembers the rest of us. There are seven of us, not two, not three, not four. Seven.

HARLAN

I didn't mean to be rude.

GRIM REAPER

(to self)

No one remembers us. It's the name. No one wants to name a kid after Israfil, Zadkiel, or Azrael.... Now Rapheal, "The Healer," that's a good name. Michael, "Like the Creator," now that's really good, too.

(grudgingly)

Even Gabriel, "The Strength," even that's not bad.

(to Harlan)

Would you have named a child Azrael? Of course not. It's difficult to pronounce, much less spell.

HARLAN

I don't think Harlan is much better.

GRIM REAPER

No, I suppose it isn't.

(drinks milk)

I love this movie.

The two watch the movie and eat for a bit. The Grim Reaper dunks cookies in milk and makes gory sound effects. He's enjoying himself.

HARLAN

Why are you here? I thought you would always be working.

GRIM REAPER

Oh, no. My assistants do a lot of the leg work. I spend most of my time shuffling papers lately.

MONTAGE - HEADQUARTERS

The Grim Reaper is shown performing various office tasks, in his Grim persona, always in a shadow. He staples papers, fights the copier, and tries to use the computer. He is clearly not meant for office work.

END MONTAGE

INT. HOWE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

GRIM REAPER

I, uh, try to get out a few hours here and there, to keep my skills fresh.

HARLAN

You took my mother. I saw you.

GRIM REAPER

That was quite a shock, you know. One moment I'm on my way to an earthquake -- the next, I'm here. You realize everyone survived the earthquake.

(points to the ceiling)

The Boss was not happy.

(laughs)

Then again, local church attendance has increased dramatically.

HARLAN

An earthquake? That's terrible.

The Grim Reaper turns to face Harlan. His expression is serious. He leans forward slightly.

GRIM REAPER

The Boss really does work in His own mysterious way. We don't always understand until decades, centuries, or even eons later.

HARLAN

Being human stinks. You're lucky.

GRIM REAPER

This existence is not better, only different. I'm what I have always been and will always be. You have a chance to do what I can't.

Harlan looks puzzled.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)

You can change.

(pause)

It's not easy to work in our division. Harlan, you broke the first rule in the handbook.

HARLAN

I couldn't just--

GRIM REAPER

You don't make those decisions. I don't make those decisions. What you did...

Grim Reaper shakes his head.

HARLAN

I seem to bring trouble along with me.

GRIM REAPER

Well, stop it!

HARLAN

I'm working on it.

GRIM REAPER

It is an honor to work for any department or division. Death is essential to the human experience. Knowing life is short, each day matters. Each day could be the last chance a person has to be a good person. Do you understand that?

HARLAN

I suppose so.

GRIM REAPER

You've always been good and honest. That proves you're stronger than you realize. It's difficult to be a good person. Have faith in yourself, Harlan. You never have before, but now you must. That is why you have failed. You can believe in nothing else until you believe in you.

HARLAN

Yes, sir.

GRIM REAPER

And please, follow the rules.
 (looks at television)
 Now, then, let's watch the movie.
 (not looking at Harlan)
 Have any more of these cookies? And
 more milk, too, please.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - MORNING

Harlan is seated across from the desk from Regional Death.
 Their meeting is underway.

HARLAN

And who was that red-eyed creep to
 tell me what to do?

REGIONAL DEATH

Nergal is the enforcer of Hell, the
 major demon in charge of rules and
 order.

HARLAN

He's not my boss, then.

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan, it's more complex than
 that. Nergal watches other demons,
 and sometimes our employees. He
 reports violations to Lucifer or,
 if extreme enough, Satan himself.

HARLAN

Lucifer or Satan? I thought--

REGIONAL DEATH

Look, the rules are the rules. You
 can't do you want. It's not our job
 to decide.

HARLAN

So I've been told. But we just
 follow orders? Why take a decent
 soul early?
 (softly)
 Why?

REGIONAL DEATH

There is no early or late. There's
 simply the time. You, me, Grimmy --
 we follow orders, the master
 schedule.

HARLAN

I thought we had free will?
 (forcefully)
 I thought we determined our own
 destinies.

REGIONAL DEATH

Humans do have free will. The
 future is written as one lives and
 makes choices.

HARLAN

Why didn't my actions change the
 course of events?

REGIONAL DEATH

We know only a short time before
 someone is to be marked. Once the
 decision is made, however, that's
 it. The scheduled deaths, like
 terminal illnesses, are the easiest
 to deal with -- we see those
 coming. Receiving a delivery
 message unexpectedly still unnerves
 me, after all of these years.

HARLAN

How do you rationalize this system?

REGIONAL DEATH

Maybe the world needs evil, right
 now at least. It's some sort of
 character building for humanity.

HARLAN

After several million years, we
 should have a lot of character.

REGIONAL DEATH

Humanity seldom fails to surprise
 me with horrible choices.

HARLAN

Really?

REGIONAL DEATH

The Civil War. The Holocaust.
 Terrorism. As long as mankind
 exists, we'll be busy. People were
 lousy 100 years ago, they are lousy
 today. They will be lousy in a
 century... if they still exist.

HARLAN
That's uplifting.

REGIONAL DEATH
I have always wanted to do what you
did. I never have.

HARLAN
You've never saved anyone? Never
reached out to punish evil?

REGIONAL DEATH
I don't recall much about my life,
but I believe I was a coward, only
concerned with my own survival. Not
evil. Not good. No Heaven, no Hell
for me. At least not yet.

HARLAN
How would that help in this job?

REGIONAL DEATH
You can't have a lot of emotional
messengers running around marking
souls out of a sense of justice.

HARLAN
I just realized...
(pause)
I killed someone. Intentionally.

REGIONAL DEATH
Yes. You did.

HARLAN
I never would have thought--

REGIONAL DEATH
When you grabbed that thug's hand,
you weren't thinking about your own
life. That's special.

HARLAN
Proves I'm a fool.

REGIONAL DEATH
It proves you care. That's not a
bad thing. But don't let it get in
the way of your work ever again.

HARLAN
I won't.

REGIONAL DEATH

You have no idea how much paperwork this is going to require. Flame breath is really angry. Then again, anything that upsets him is fine with me.

HARLAN

Is he really that bad?

REGIONAL DEATH

He lives for chaos, destruction, mayhem. The worse the human condition, the more he thrives.

HARLAN

I suppose that makes sense. I always admired the character in Paradise Lost. You know, "better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven." The independence of it.

REGIONAL DEATH

That's only a poem. In reality, he's nothing like the character.

HARLAN

Azrael wasn't what I expected, either.

REGIONAL DEATH

This isn't a Bergman film, but Hell is still not a nice place with concierge service. It's eternal suffering.

HARLAN

Why would a demon take a good soul?

REGIONAL DEATH

Not every employee downstairs is a demon. Anyway, they don't get to keep the good souls. That young man will be okay.

HARLAN

He's dead.

REGIONAL DEATH

I need to fill out some forms explaining last night. Why don't you take the day off, read the manual some more, and relax? I think you need the time.

HARLAN

(rising)

All right. Maybe I'll go play bingo at the church. Mother always enjoyed a good night of bingo. It helps support the soup kitchen, too.

Harlan exits the office.

REGIONAL DEATH

(to self)

Bingo? Chess, maybe, but bingo?

INT. BINGO PARLOR - LATER

People are sitting at tables with bingo cards and markers. There are a handful of nuns. Nun One is at center, back, calling the squares. Nun Two is at the door. There are two nuns seated at a table in front, where prizes are, and handful of others wandering about the tables.

NUN ONE

O-Six. O-Six.
(draws again)
B-Ten. B-Ten.

Harlan enters, in his suit, gloves, and sunglasses. He approaches Nun Two.

HARLAN

Excuse me.

NUN TWO

Shh. A game is in progress.

HARLAN

(quietly)

I'd like a card for the next game.

NUN ONE

N-Five. N-Five.

NUN TWO

After this game.

NUN ONE

(draws)

G-Twenty. G-Twenty.

The WINNER stands, excited.

WINNER

BINGO!

NUN ONE

We might have a winner! Your numbers please?

WINNER

B-Ten. I-Seventeen. N-Five. G-Twenty. O-Six. BINGO!

NUN ONE

Yes, we have a winner! Please see Sister Mary Joan to select a prize.

A nun sitting at the prize table waves. The winner walks over to the table.

NUN TWO

(to Harlan)

How many cards, young man?

HARLAN

One, please.

NUN TWO

Are you sure? Your odds improve with more bingo cards in play.

Harlan shakes his head.

NUN TWO (CONT'D)

Suit yourself.

(handing Harlan a card)

One dollar, please.

Harlan carefully hands over a dollar.

NUN TWO (CONT'D)

Thank you.

(announcing to room)

Who needs a bingo card? More cards, more chances!

Harlan takes a seat. He surveys the room, looking at various players who are intently organizing their bingo cards.

Nun Two passes out several cards to players at the tables, taking their money. Nun One prepares for the next game.

NUN ONE

Okay. Let's get this show on the road!

(draws a number)

(MORE)

NUN ONE (CONT'D)
 G-Twelve. G-Twelve.
 (pause, draws number)
 B-Two. B-Two.
 (draws)
 N-Fifteen. N-Fifteen.
 (draws)
 B-Seven. B-Seven.

HARLAN
 (to self)
 As if I'm going to win.

NUN ONE
 (draws)
 I-Nine. I-Nine.

HARLAN
 I could have taken 20 cards and
 still would be a loser.

NUN ONE
 (draws)
 N-Three. N-Three.
 (draws)
 O-Eight. O...

HARLAN
 BINGO! I don't believe it! BINGO!

NUN ONE
 Well, young man! Let's hear those
 numbers!

HARLAN
 (rapidly, excited)
 B-Two. I-Nine. N-Fifteen. G-Twelve.
 O-Eight. I won!

NUN ONE
 Yes you did! See Sister Mary Joan
 to select a prize.

HARLAN
 (standing)
 After this week, I deserve a break!
 This is great! A Messenger of Death
 wins at bingo!
 (long pause)
 Oops.

Regional Death appears in the room. The Grim Reaper appears shortly after. Grim Reaper is concealed again, the image of death we expect.

REGIONAL DEATH

What the...

People collapsing.

GRIM REAPER

(deep, awesome echo)

Harlan!

INT. HEADQUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

The nuns are walking towards ST. PETER, who stands at a podium near the pearly gates to Heaven. St. Peter is puzzled; he searches through the big book in front of him to no avail.

One or two of the bingo players join the line.

St. Peter puts his head down on the book.

INT. HEADQUARTERS - LATER

Grim Reaper, in his ominous persona, stands alone, swaying. He is exhausted, leaning his weight on the scythe.

Gabriel approaches, oblivious to recent events.

GRIM REAPER

You win.

GABRIEL

I was starting to think he'd last at least four months. The Boss is terminating Harlan?

GRIM REAPER

He will.

GABRIEL

Did I miss something?

GRIM REAPER

Nuns. Bingo players. Madhouse in processing.

GABRIEL

Harlan? What did he do?

GRIM REAPER

Nothing much. (beat) Went to play bingo.

GABRIEL

And?

GRIM REAPER

And? And? He won. They lost.

GABRIEL

Death 143?

GRIM REAPER

In shock. Incoherent mumbling.
Raphael is with him.

GABRIEL

I suppose I should be glad I wasn't
around. I never like dealing with
nuns. They giggle too much when
they see me.

Grim Reaper lowers his hood. He is the same young man as
before, but he looks frazzled. His voice changes from the
awesome echo to a tired, quiet man's.

GRIM REAPER

They weren't scheduled to arrive
for years. None of the nuns were
even close to their arrival times.

GABRIEL

How bad is it?

GRIM REAPER

They're going to share rooms with
the chorus. Their rooms weren't
ready, to say the least.

GABRIEL

I can't say I'm happy about winning
this bet. He should never have been
hired.

GRIM REAPER

It is too late now to think about
what might have been. He'll be off
the job soon enough.

Lights flash and grow very bright. The Archangels shield
their eyes, with the Grim Reaper bowing.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)

Hello, sir.

GABRIEL
I am terribly sorry sir. I just
heard what happened.

GRIM REAPER
When do you wish to have Harlan
terminated?

Lights flash. Thunder.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)
Not now? Sir?

GABRIEL
Sir?

Lights flash. Singing begins. Lights flash, softly. The
voices of a choir rise.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
No, sir. I can't say that I have
ever heard the chorus with such
energy. Quite a Heavenly choir,
sir.

GRIM REAPER
(to Gabriel)
Kiss up.

GABRIEL
But, sir, what does this have to do
with Harlan?
(pause)
The nuns?
(pause)
Choir practice?

GRIM REAPER
And I thought nuns only intimidated
young students at Catholic schools.

Lights return to normal. Singing fades.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)
Did you hear that?

GABRIEL
It was good.

GRIM REAPER
I guess you don't win.

GABRIEL
At least, not yet.

GRIM REAPER
(looking up)
He always has a plan, you know.

The two angels nod to each other, then walk away in different directions.

INT. HARLAN'S HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Harlan is sitting on his couch, holding a fishbowl. His hair is a mess, he is slouching.

HARLAN
You don't want to know what happened to your cousins. It wasn't fair. I'm learning that life and death are both unfair. In fact, the universe is unfair, as far as I can tell. One minute, things are going well, the next, you just wiped out a convent of nuns.

Knock at the door. Harlan puts the fishbowl down and opens the door.

KID, about 10, is standing at the door with a box of candy bars.

KID
I'm selling candy bars to raise money for our school's library.

HARLAN
I used to be in sales. You know most people won't buy from you. Less than twenty percent. Worse, going door to door like this.

KID
Do you want to support our library?
(looks into box)
I have chocolate, caramel filled, and almond.

HARLAN
I started just like this. I sold candy for my school. I got used to rejection, at least. I kept selling just to prove to myself I could. That one sale out of a hundred kept me going.

Kid starts to turn away.

HARLAN (CONT'D)

Listen to me. I know what I'm talking about. You don't want to sell candy. You don't want to sell magazine subscriptions. Get out while you still can.

KID

(certain Harlan is insane)
I've got to go.

HARLAN

No! You need to hear this.

KID

No I don't. I need to sell candy bars.

HARLAN

You don't want to sell anything. You'll end up like me.

KID

I definitely don't want that.

HARLAN

First, your Mother dies, then your goldfish, then a pet store worth of fish, then a bunch of nuns! All because you were an out of work salesman looking for any type of work!

KID

(nervously)
Please, mister. I've got to go.

HARLAN

Nothing is fair -- ever. Even when you win, you lose.

KID

Take the candy. You can have it all.

Kid throws box down and rushes past Regional Death, as he enters the house.

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan, what was that all about?

HARLAN

I was explaining life to that kid.

REGIONAL DEATH

This can't be happening to me. It just isn't fair. Tell me you didn't touch the kid.

HARLAN

(smugly)

No, but I bet that kid never sells another thing.

REGIONAL DEATH

This can't go on. Sit down.

Harlan goes to his couch, sits, slumps over and puts his head in his hands. Regional Death picks up the candy and puts it into the box.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

I need to find that kid and pay for this candy. It's the least we can do.

HARLAN

I did my part.

REGIONAL DEATH

Yes, you did.

HARLAN

I explained life to that kid.

REGIONAL DEATH

That didn't accomplish anything.

HARLAN

Yes it did.

(somberly)

No, I suppose it didn't.

REGIONAL DEATH

(approaching Harlan)

What do you want?

HARLAN

I want to resign.

REGIONAL DEATH

You can't do that.

HARLAN

Why not? Just kill me. Take my soul. Whatever...

REGIONAL DEATH

Processing is already angry enough
without one more unscheduled soul
standing in line.

HARLAN

It's not fair.

REGIONAL DEATH

You've said that. It's all so
unfair. Life, death, the universe,
your job. Grow up.

HARLAN

(offended, raising head)
Excuse me.

REGIONAL DEATH

Grow up. You're throwing a childish
little fit. You've done this your
entire life and I'm not going to
let you do it for an entire
afterlife. That's a mighty long
time.

HARLAN

Kill me!

REGIONAL DEATH

You believe that's the easy way
out. I've got news for you. It
wouldn't change a thing. Sure, you
leave the body behind, but nothing
else changes.

(pauses, to self)

But you would be somebody else's
problem.

HARLAN

What? You don't want me around?

REGIONAL DEATH

You said you don't want to be
around.

HARLAN

You don't have to like the idea.

REGIONAL DEATH

Think of all the disasters I could
have avoided.

HARLAN

You said the little things that go wrong make existence exciting. The things worth waiting to watch, you called them.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'm supposed to thank you for all the things I've gotten to watch?

HARLAN

I don't know. But it isn't right to want me dead.

REGIONAL DEATH

You suggested it.

HARLAN

Well...

Regional Death removes his gloves, approaches Harlan slowly, ominously.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'm willing to fill out another incident report in return for the peace of mind.

HARLAN

(stands)

Wait! You can't! You have rules!

REGIONAL DEATH

So? You never follow them!

HARLAN

I was wrong. I was wrong! You can't kill me.

REGIONAL DEATH

(stops, feigns confusion)

One minute you want to die, the next you don't?

HARLAN

I was wrong. I can learn. I can follow the rules.

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan, I couldn't have taken your soul.

(puts gloves back on)

You know me. You know Death.

(MORE)

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
I touched you the day we met. Think about it.

HARLAN
You mean...?

REGIONAL DEATH
(shrugs)
We're between life and death. We're in both.

Harlan sits in his chair. Regional Death sits on the couch.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
You know that death is just like life, but you didn't want to die. But what you really feared was losing another job. That's a start.

HARLAN
What?

REGIONAL DEATH
It means you do have some amount of pride. You have some desire to be more than a failure.

HARLAN
I am a failure.

REGIONAL DEATH
Amazing as it is, the Nergal was right. We are very forgiving. You still have a job. You still have a chance to prove you can succeed.

HARLAN
To whom? Who cares if I succeed or fail.

REGIONAL DEATH
You do.

HARLAN
Yeah. I do.

REGIONAL DEATH
Your mother is fine. The nuns are fine. Even the fish are fine. Eventually, all this will be distant memories, and you will be a successful Messenger of Death.

HARLAN

How about the thug with the gun?

REGIONAL DEATH

He's not so fine.

Regional Death takes a candy bar out of the box, hands it to Harlan. He retrieves a second candy bar and begins eating it.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - MORNING

Regional Death is pacing. The Grim Reaper is sitting in a chair, his head following Regional Death's movements.

REGIONAL DEATH

Why do I want to be reassigned?
I've been in middle management
for... I don't recall. Was it 1850
or 51?

GRIM REAPER

Fifty-one.

REGIONAL DEATH

I've seen the Civil War, the
Spanish American war, two World
Wars, two conflicts -- I'm just
thankful I was never assigned to
Europe, Asia, or Africa. I don't
think I would have lasted this
long.

The Grim Reaper nods.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)

You must understand. I can't do
this job forever.

GRIM REAPER

I have.

REGIONAL DEATH

You were created for one purpose,
but I wasn't. I started out as a
normal man.

GRIM REAPER

Maybe I do understand. A bit.
Billions of people. Thousands die
each day. Let Gabriel handle
paperwork. I like to work with
people. I am a people person. Er,
angel.

REGIONAL DEATH

The position of Regional Assistants to the Most Eminent Deliverer of Eternal Souls is not exactly an easy position for anyone to hold.

GRIM REAPER

Azrael means "Divine Assistant."

REGIONAL DEATH

That makes me Assistant to the Assistant. I'm exhausted.

GRIM REAPER

Job not exciting? Not challenging?

REGIONAL DEATH

No. Harlan is proving what a challenge death can be. But, I'm tired. I'm bored. Imagine, Death bored!

GRIM REAPER

Bored?

REGIONAL DEATH:

Azrael, do you know how old you are?

GRIM REAPER

I have always been. Will always be.

REGIONAL DEATH

Don't give me that "since the beginning of time" nonsense. You don't have a clue, do you?

GRIM REAPER

No idea.

REGIONAL DEATH

Haven't you ever wondered about doing more? Something else?

GRIM REAPER

There is nothing more for me.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'd give anything to sit a quiet desk, away from people for a few decades, doing paperwork. Don't you ever just want to stop for a while?

Quick flashback to Grim Reaper fighting the office copier.

GRIM REAPER

No.

REGIONAL DEATH

You have spent, from the human
standpoint, eternity in one job?

GRIM REAPER

I maintain order, continuity.
Without me, there is no life.
Balance is maintained.

REGIONAL DEATH

Have you ever wondered why we do
what we do?

GRIM REAPER

The Creator's will. The Law of
Natural Order.

REGIONAL DEATH

Harlan proves there is no
perfection. I have lost faith... in
the order. I wonder... I
question.... I am confused.

GRIM REAPER

You have no needs, no wants.

REGIONAL DEATH

I suppose I prove what another
Archangel once said.
(lowers voice)
You know the one. As long as humans
are allowed to theorize, to
explore, they seek even more.

GRIM REAPER

You will not be transferred from
Death.

REGIONAL DEATH

I'm stuck with Harlan?
(pause)
Azrael?
(pause)
Grimmy?

The Grim Reaper fades away.

INT. RILEY BEDROOM - NIGHT

JOHN and LIZZIE are an elderly couple. Lizzie, ailing, is in bed. John is kneeling beside the bed, holding Lizzie's hand.

John rises and exits the room.

INT. RILEY LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

John sits down in a comfortable old wingback chair. He sighs and looks upward.

JOHN

May I be forgiven, but I am tired,
too, Lizzie.

A knock at the door. Another knock.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Who could that be? It's much too
late for a salesman.

(rises, walks slowly
towards door)

Just a minute.

(opens the door)

Hello?

Harlan is standing at the door. He is professional, but still slightly unsure of himself.

HARLAN

Hello. I'm here to deliver a
message.

JOHN

A message?

HARLAN

Yes. A message. May I come in? It's
rather unpleasant outside.

JOHN

(hesitant)

I suppose so.

Harlan enters the house and John closes the door.

HARLAN

Thank you, John.

JOHN

Oh dear.

John studies Harlan, cautiously, with suspicion.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Only one type of messenger dresses this well, and it's not Western Union.

HARLAN

No, I am not Western Union.

JOHN

Big Tony sent you. I will pay him! Things have just been--

HARLAN

I don't work for Tony.

JOHN

The government. I knew it. My nephew swore all the deductions were legal.

(pause)

This old house is all we have--

HARLAN

I'm not with the government. I'm with a higher authority.

JOHN

Then who sent you to see me?

HARLAN

I'm not here to see you. I have a message for Elizabeth Riley.

JOHN

(softly)

Oh my. You're--

HARLAN

Don't say it. I know what you are thinking. Trust me, John -- do not say it.

JOHN

You're--

HARLAN

John, relax. Take me to Elizabeth.

JOHN

I suppose I don't have a choice.

HARLAN
I'm sorry, but no. Neither do I.

JOHN
She's been asleep all day. The doctor said it's just a matter of time.

HARLAN
Obviously.
(realizes his mistake)
Oh, dear. I am sorry John. This is never easy.

John walks towards the bedroom. Harlan follows.

INT. RILEY BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

JOHN
May I be with her?

HARLAN
My message isn't for you. Most people don't even choose to see me. I wonder why you can.

JOHN
You knocked. Of course I can see you.

HARLAN
Oh, yeah. I haven't learned how to.... Nevermind.

JOHN
I want to say goodbye.

HARLAN
Whatever you do, do not try to listen to me.

JOHN
I understand. Sort of. This isn't what I expected.

HARLAN
It never is.

Harlan approaches the bed.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
Hello. Elizabeth? I know you can hear me.

LIZZIE
 (weakly)
 Yes.

HARLAN
 Elizabeth, I have a message for
 you. It's one you have been
 expecting.

LIZZIE
 John?

HARLAN
 He will be fine. He loves you very
 much.

LIZZIE
 He has never been alone.

HARLAN
 And he never will. He will know you
 are watching.

LIZZIE
 Was it wrong to wish for you?

HARLAN
 I don't know. I haven't been on the
 job for long. I don't know the
 answers to the really tough
 questions.

LIZZIE
 (a bit stronger)
 I need to say goodbye.

HARLAN
 (to John)
 Elizabeth wants to talk to you.

John is crying, silently. He walks to the bed.

JOHN
 Lizzie?

LIZZIE
 (sitting up)
 John, it's my time. We both know
 it. But I wanted to tell you --

John approaches, takes Lizzie's hand.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)
 I love you. I always will.

JOHN

I...

LIZZIE

I will always be with you.
 (points to Harlan)
 He promised me I can keep an eye on
 you. I'll be watching. So none of
 those late night snacks.

HARLAN

It's time.

John hugs Lizzie and then steps back.

LIZZIE

(to Harlan)
 So now what?

HARLAN

All I do is introduce myself or
 touch you.

LIZZIE

Cute. All these years I was
 expecting so much more. Instead, I
 just meet Death.
 (scolding Harlan)
 I have half a mind to tell your
 boss how stupid this is.
 (pause)
 Well, get on with it!

HARLAN

Elizabeth Riley, I am the Messenger
 of Death.

LIZZIE

Now what?

HARLAN

I'm not trained to collect, yet,
 but if I'm on schedule...

The Grim Reaper appears.

LIZZIE

Now that's who I was expecting!

The Grim Reaper motions to the old woman. She climbs out of
 bed and walks towards him briskly

LIZZIE (CONT'D)

I haven't felt this good in years.
 (to Harlan)
 Thank you for coming. I was tired.
 John was tired. It was time.
 (to the Grim Reaper)
 Let's get a move on, kiddo.

Lizzie and Grim Reaper walk away, fading.

JOHN

When will I see her again?

HARLAN

I can't say.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - MORNING

Regional Death is seated behind his desk.

The Grim Reaper is seated. He is not in full Archangel mode, instead speaking in his nearly-human voice. He speaks in unusually long bursts and in full sentences.

GRIM REAPER

I've been thinking. I like to be out and about, not tied to a desk. You, on the other hand, want to be in an office, without collection duties.

REGIONAL DEATH

Yes.

GRIM REAPER

Would you like to be the new Executive Manager of the Division? It's an office job, at headquarters. No soul collection. No messenger training. Just paperwork -- and lots of that.

REGIONAL DEATH

You're kidding?

(pause)

No, of course you're serious.

GRIM REAPER

There will be a lot happening in coming days.

(MORE)

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)

Many of the Regional Deaths will become District Managers, new Regional Deaths must be promoted from the ranks of Messengers, new policies and procedures written.... A great deal of paperwork.

REGIONAL DEATH

Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it. It will be nice not to have to deal with little mistakes anymore.

GRIM REAPER

You mean Harlan.

Regional Death nods.

GRIM REAPER (CONT'D)

It has been a very tough few months, hasn't it?

REGIONAL DEATH

Did I tell you he thought he wanted to die?

GRIM REAPER

Really? A bit of paperwork, and the wrath of processing... but I could see the--

REGIONAL DEATH

I couldn't. He just was trying to run away from responsibility.

GRIM REAPER

As if there is anywhere to go? Who wouldn't want to work for us?

REGIONAL DEATH

I know.

GRIM REAPER

He would miss the annual staff party. What a shame. You don't really know how much fun Death is until you meet some of the old timers.

REGIONAL DEATH

They are great parties.

GRIM REAPER

Remember when the choir thought it
would be funny to sing "Stairway to
Heaven"? That was
(laughs)
great. Truly great.

REGIONAL DEATH

Want a candy bar?

Regional Death retrieves two candy bars from a desk drawer.

GRIM REAPER

Where did you get these?

Grim Reaper takes on the candy bars after considering each.

REGIONAL DEATH

I bought them from a kid.

GRIM REAPER

I love the ones with nuts.

Grim Reaper opens the candy, begins to eat, savoring the
taste.

REGIONAL DEATH

I really like the dark chocolate.

GRIM REAPER

(mouth full)
Do you accept--
(swallows)
--the promotion?

REGIONAL DEATH

No Harlan. Yes. Definitely, yes.

GRIM REAPER

We'll need to promote someone else
to Regional Death.

REGIONAL DEATH

That shouldn't be too hard. I have
several great messengers.

GRIM REAPER

Good. Too often we promote...
(quietly, to Regional
Death)
Rewarding skill would be nice.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - MORNING

A few days have elapsed. Regional Death has changed into an ivory colored suit with gray stripes. He carries stacks of folders. The receptionist is on the phone.

REGIONAL DEATH
(to self)
Just a few more days. Finally!

The receptionist hangs up the phone. Regional Death places a stack of folders on the desk.

REGIONAL DEATH (CONT'D)
Would you fax the list of candidates for this position to headquarters?

RECEPTIONIST
You know, this was supposed to be a temporary job.

REGIONAL DEATH
We're a growing enterprise.

RECEPTIONIST
Then I'd like to be a regular employee.

REGIONAL DEATH
Trust me, the complications aren't worth it.

RECEPTIONIST
I don't even know what this company does. Why all the secrecy? You don't even have a business card.

REGIONAL DEATH
You've been here five months without asking one question.

RECEPTIONIST
I've done good -- Well, okay, I've done some work. I deserve a job.

REGIONAL DEATH
(sighs)
Let me talk to headquarters. I ran this office alone for years.

RECEPTIONIST
Don't the other offices have secretaries?

REGIONAL DEATH
Some of them. But most of the
office staff--

RECEPTIONIST
If I don't have a real job soon,
I'll die!

REGIONAL DEATH
No, you won't.

RECEPTIONIST
Yes... I will!

REGIONAL DEATH
Trust me, you won't die without
this job. I mean, it won't kill you
if you don't... The job isn't
worth...
(exasperated)
Oh, I'll let you know.

Regional Death goes into his office, closing the door firmly,
but not slamming.

RECEPTIONIST
(to self)
You'd think it would kill this
company to hire me. I'll never
understand corporations.

She looks at the papers on her desk.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Hmm.
(reading note on page)
Call the following people. They
need to report to the address below
tomorrow morning at ten.
(puts paper down)
That's easy enough.

Regional Death's office door opens. He pokes his head out.

REGIONAL DEATH
Whatever you do... please...
(pause)
Never mind.

RECEPTIONIST
What?

REGIONAL DEATH

It's just Harlan. Nah. No big deal.
Forget I said anything. Make the
calls.

Regional Death closes his door.

RECEPTIONIST

(looks at the list)
I don't see Harlan Howe, but if
that's what he wants.
(writes something on list)
There, Harlan is now on the list.
I'll even call him first.

Receptionist dials the phone. She waits.

RECPETIONIST

Yes, hello. Mr. Howe? Yes, you have
an appointment for tomorrow at ten.
(pause)
It's with someone from the home
office.
(pause, reads)
It says transportation will be
provided.

INT. HEADQUARTERS - NEXT DAY

A number of white plastic chairs are in rows. A podium is
across from them. The chairs are filled, with Harlan near the
middle. The audience is dressed in a mix of suit styles, but
everyone wears gloves and sunglasses.

Gabriel and the Grim Reaper enter. Gabriel goes to the
podium.

GABRIEL

Let me welcome you to the new
headquarters of the Department of
Death. For too long Death has been
relegated to divisional status
within the Department of
Communications. I am pleased to
announce that as of today, I am no
longer your department head.
(motions to Azrael)
As of this afternoon, Azrael, a
skilled Archangel and my close
friend, will once again assume
control of the Department of Death.
Azrael?

Gabriel steps aside, the Grim Reaper takes the podium, holding his scythe. He is in full "Reaper" persona.

GRIM REAPER
Welcome, Regional Deaths.
Congratulations.

A hand goes up. It is one of the many NEW DEATHS.

GABRIEL
Yes? A question?

NEW DEATH
(stands)
Will we be under the standard labor agreement, or are we now management?

GABRIEL
As outlined in the labor agreement, you are management. Don't worry. Contrary to the rumors, exempt employees still work a 40-hour week under normal conditions.

NEW DEATH
Thank you.
(sits)

GABRIEL
Any other questions?

Harlan raises his hand.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
Yes?

HARLAN
You said Regional--

GRIM REAPER
Stand.

Harlan stands.

GABRIEL
(stunned)
Harlan? How?
(pause)
Not again.

GRIM REAPER
(drops scythe)
No! This cannot be!

Gabriel runs away screaming. Grim Reaper stands in stunned silence.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - MORNING

Weeks have elapsed.

The APPLICANT enters the waiting room, carrying a coat. Removes his hat, and tentatively approaches the receptionist.

APPLICANT

Excuse me.

Receptionist continues to read. The applicant tilts his head, cautiously studies her.

APPLICANT (CONT'D)

Madam? Hello?

Receptionist looks up without lifting her head.

APPLICANT (CONT'D)

I believe I have an appointment. My name is--

RECEPTIONIST

Take a seat.

APPLICANT

Uh, don't you need to know--?

RECEPTIONIST

Take a seat.

APPLICANT

Yes, I'll just take a seat and wait.

Receptionist returns to reading, Applicant surveys the room then selects a seat and approaches it.

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

We see the back of the executive chair. A hand takes a manila folder from the desk. It appears Regional Death is reading the contents.

The hand places the folder back onto the desk. An intercom buzzer is pressed.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

RECEPTIONIST
(not looking up)
The boss will see you now.

The applicant rises, waiting to be escorted into the office.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
(exasperated)
Well? Go in!

INT. REGIONAL DEATH'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Applicant opens the door to the office.

APPLICANT
(holding the door)
Hello?

HARLAN (O.C.)
Please, come in.

Applicant enter the room, slowly approaching the desk.

HARLAN (CONT'D)
Have a seat.
(rotating chair to face
applicant)
I'm very pleased to meet you.

FADE OUT:

THE END