

Death in a Landslide

A comedy in two acts

by Jay Martel

Death in a Landslide was produced at the Grove Street Playhouse in New York City on October 3, 1996. The director was Kirk Jackson; the producers were Skin and Bones Productions in association with Michael Moore and Kathleen Glynn. The scenic design was by Jason Sturm, the lighting design by Charlie Spickler, the costume design by Liz McGarrity. The production stage manager was Amy Joan Lewis. The cast was:

Cuff Riley.....	Chuck Montgomery
Vivian Finn.....	Linda Hill
Abel Troutman/Pundit Three.....	Ray Bokhour
Nora Thorton/Debate Moderator	Sue Scarlett
Death.....	Joseph McKenna
Reverend Twist/Pundit One/President Thorton...	Bruce Katzman
Senator Borden/Pundit Two/Secret Service Man..	Christopher Hurt

The play takes place in Cuff Riley's office in Washington D.C., about six months before Election Day, in the near future.

ACT I, SCENE 1

(Lights rise on a political consultant's spacious fourth-floor office. A window faces out over the Capitol Mall. One door serves as the main access to the front reception area; the other, closer to the large desk, opens onto staff offices. On the wall nearest the desk hang a few very visible White House mementos and photos of Cuff Riley with the famous. Cuff speaks to Vivian Finn, his long-time pollster. Cuff is clearly in some physical distress. Breathing hard, he clutches at his chest. Just when he seems about to keel over, he belches.)

VIVIAN

Are you all right?

CUFF

Fine. Where was I?

VIVIAN

The new poll...

CUFF

Right. (Beat.) Re-election. It's really what it's all about, isn't it? Even deeper than the getting it is the holding on, the clinging to power at any cost, the talons clutching at prey, the jaws locked around meat, the primitive brain with one single directive: never let go.

VIVIAN

(Dryly) Does that mean that you would like another poll on the First Lady's hair style?

(Cuff considers for a moment.)

CUFF

Forget it. Who cares if the Midwest doesn't like her hair? She's the most popular First Lady in twenty years. What does Senator Borden's wife have? A bun!

VIVIAN

It's more like a small beehive.

CUFF

Bun, beehive, she could have a blinking slab of gold inscribed with the secret of the universe and we'd still win."

VIVIAN

Assuming we're running the campaign by then.

CUFF

Stop worrying. We will be. What's next?

VIVIAN

We have to choose the 60-second spot on the president's decisiveness.

CUFF

Which one did the president like?

VIVIAN

He couldn't make up his mind. Though he hasn't exactly been returning our calls lately.

CUFF

The President's been very busy lately--probably dealing with that mess in, you know, Bannanastand.

VIVIAN

Uzbekistan.

CUFF

Whatever--some pretty nasty stuff is going on over there and I want everyone on staff to pray that if this unfortunate conflict should happen to escalate, that it escalate closer to November.

(Cuff opens a drawer in his desk, and takes a slug of Maalox.)

VIVIAN

Cuff, he's got a potential war, he's got twenty points on Borden, he'd just as soon forget that if it weren't for a thirty-second spot that scared the pants off the country, he'd be teaching civics to bored undergraduates...

CUFF

Amazing how winning gives you instant integrity, isn't it?

VIVIAN

What does he need us for?

CUFF

The President's not going to dump us--if only because he's afraid of what we'll do to him if we work for someone else.

VIVIAN

What about respect? Who do we have to elect to get that?

CUFF

Respect is just fear in a dark blue suit.

VIVIAN

And loyalty?

CUFF

Fear in fur and a collar.

VIVIAN

Love?

CUFF

An evening gown. "I love you." What does it mean? "I'm afraid of not having you," "I'm afraid of being alone."

VIVIAN

See--this is exactly the kind of thinking that's got the president backing away from us.

CUFF

On the contrary, without this kind of thinking we'd have never won the election in the first place. Haven't you ever wondered why the death penalty works?

VIVIAN

It doesn't. Every study done shows it has no value as a deterrent.

CUFF

Of course, it doesn't work work. I mean as an issue. It's perfect. Elect me, and I'll keep the wild animals from eating you. The human race managed to get itself out of the cave, but it still goes into the voting booth.

(Abel Troutman enters. He's an ambitious, albeit over-eager, young intern.)

ABEL

Mr. Riley--there's someone to see you.

CUFF

I'm not here.

ABEL

It's the First Lady.

CUFF

Show her in.

(Abel exits. Vivian reads from a schedule.)

VIVIAN

I don't like this.

CUFF

Relax.

VIVIAN

She's off-schedule. "Eleven a.m.--talk to Arlington schoolchildren about the danger of drugs."

CUFF

Maybe her prescription ran out.

VIVIAN

Jesus, Cuff. If the president discovers what's going on we'll be lucky to get a school-board race.

CUFF

Will you stop worrying? I've got everything under control.

(Nora Thorton, the First Lady, enters. She is a very attractive woman in her 40s with an intense, voraciously gracious demeanor.)

NORA

Cuff. Vivian. I'm not taking you away from any divisive hate-mongering, am I?

CUFF

No, we're only up to partisan mind-fucking at this point.

VIVIAN

(Upset) You changed your hair.

NORA

You like it?

VIVIAN

The White House is supposed to let us know about any major changes in appearance.

CUFF

Thanks, Viv.

(Vivian begins to exit. Abel enters, clutching three mugs of coffee.)

ABEL

Here's the coffee...

CUFF

We asked for an hour ago, thank you, Abel.

ABEL

Abel Troutman. Intern. I just wanted to say that you're in my top-ten First Ladies. No contest.

NORA

Thank you.

ABEL

And that dog you write those books about. What's his name?

VIVIAN

Cocky.

ABEL

Cocky the White House Spaniel. "The little white dog in the big White House." I love it.

CUFF

Abel's only with us for the summer.

NORA

What a shame. Cuff, I stopped by to have a look at those polling samples you mentioned the other day...

VIVIAN

You might as well just throw them out the window, now.

CUFF

Thanks everyone. If the staff wouldn't mind withdrawing to the staff section of the office...

(With Cuff's coercion, Vivian and Abel exit. As soon as the door closes behind them, Cuff and Nora lock in a passionate embrace.)

CUFF

Are you insane? Walking in here in broad daylight?

NORA

We're discussing the re-election effort.

CUFF

We are.

NORA

Yes. And how the mere thought of it makes me ill.

CUFF

It's only a few months. Why not write another book? "Cocky Visits the United Nations."

NORA

How about "Cocky Visits the Pound"? "And Cuff and Nora Run Away Together, Like They've Talked About Forever"? Come on, Cuff. Let's do it. Before all the election madness starts again.

CUFF

You can't just up and leave. You're the First Lady.

NORA

You didn't mean it, did you? I've called your bluff.

CUFF

We're four months from re-electing the president of the United States here. And nobody elects a cuckold. There is no "cuckold vote."

NORA

Who cares? A third-rate game-show host could do a better job.

CUFF

Yes, but not Senator Borden.

NORA

If I'm willing to go down in history as a runaway slut, you should be willing to go down as the man who made me that way.

CUFF

But...the re-election.

NORA

Four more years of not having an issue bigger than hair.

CUFF

Four more years of the most powerful job in the world.

NORA

Four more years of a medicated mannikin posed before a narcotized public, bravely lending a veneer of decency to a charade in the service of corporate greed.

CUFF

Four more years of quickies in Lincoln's bed.

NORA

Ha. You only want me for my approval rating.

CUFF

I want you because you saved my life.

NORA

I saved you from an endless chain of high-priced hookers.

CUFF

That's what I mean.

(Vivian enters.)

VIVIAN

The White House is on the phone. The Virginia governor's at the school wondering where the First Lady is.

NORA

He hates kids.

CUFF
~~VIVIAN~~

Tell them to send the limo over, that she had to stop by to go over her recent polls.

(Vivian exits.)

NORA

And she was saddened to find that the majority was opposed to her latest proposal.

CUFF

Not opposed. Undecided. We can't make a decision like this now. You're supposed to be talking to schoolchildren about drugs.

NORA

Right.

(Nora slugs down some pills. Cuff looks at the pill bottle.)

CUFF

What's "Fifthanol"?

NORA

It's three after Seconal.

CUFF

Don't they use these to stun moose?

NORA

It's a cry for help. I've got to get out of that ghost house. The misery of women permeates the walls and drapes like second-hand smoke.

CUFF

Give it some time, Nora.

NORA

But I feel like we're running out. Both of us.

(Abel enters.)

ABEL

The First Lady's car is here.

(Cuff and Nora exchange looks. Nora starts toward the door.)

NORA

You can elect anyone, Cuff, you can win every election, and you can still lose. We're both perfect examples of that.

(Nora and Abel exit. Cuff hits the Maalox again. He begins breathing heavily and rubbing his left arm.)

CUFF

What am I doing?

(Cuff starts towards the door.)

CUFF

Nora.

(Cuff opens the door. Death stands in the entryway. He is a large skeleton in a black robe, carrying a scythe.)

DEATH

I have come for you, Cuff Riley.

(Blackout.)

ACT I, SCENE 2

(Cuff and Death stand in limbo.)

CUFF

I know how busy you are--if you have to run off to the Mideast and catch me later, I'll completely understand...

(Death is unmoved.)

CUFF

This is the worst possible time. You see, I've left something unresolved. I'm in love. That's what it must be. Oh my God. I'm in love with Nora. But she doesn't know that. She thinks I've been using her to win races. I've got to talk to her before I go.

DEATH

I'm always amazed by how frequently I inspire these sudden realizations. "I'm in love." Oh, okay. That makes you exempt from the laws of the universe!

CUFF

But I only thought...

DEATH

Don't even start with this. Please. I just had to take a chartered plane full of trial lawyers out of Chesapeake Bay. I've heard every argument against me and then some. (Almost to himself:) Centuries of grieving mortals pounding their breasts and waving their fists. "Death be not proud!" Do I look proud? How can I be proud when I am despised wherever I go? But I digress. Cuff Riley, you must come with me--and there is no love that can save you now.

CUFF

Or you.

DEATH

You're mocking me.

CUFF

No. Just the opposite. I want to help you.

DEATH

How could you possibly help me?

CUFF

You need to find a way to turn that fear thing you have going for you into a positive. It could be just a tweak to your message...

DEATH

I have no message, much less anything that would benefit from tweaking.

CUFF

"Every death is a new beginning."

DEATH

Cuff Riley, I must ask you to come with me.

CUFF

"Today is the last day of the rest of your life."

DEATH

This has gone far enough.

CUFF

I can make people love you.

DEATH

That's impossible.

CUFF

If you take me now, it is.

DEATH

If I were to give you what you want, everyone would want it.

CUFF

No one has to know. It'll be our secret. If I tell anyone, boom, I drop on the spot. Listen to me: Two months from now, you can walk into a room and instead of everyone running for the exits yelling, they'll smile, they'll cheer, they'll say, "Thank God Death's here. Now we can have some fun." It's your choice: screaming for you, or screaming at you--now and for the rest of time.

(Blackout)

ACT I, SCENE 3

(Night. Cuff and Vivian are deep into a strategy session. Cuff is psyching himself up.)

CUFF

It's perfect. If the economy stays flat, if the president doesn't manage to start a war in Percodan...

VIVIAN

Uzbekistan.

CUFF

We've got a good shot. But when we kick off the campaign, we've got to take the country by complete surprise.

VIVIAN

I don't think that'll be too much of a problem.

CUFF

There's no other story, the media laps it up--open-field running, grabbing all the headlines we can. By the time the other campaigns catch up, we've got credentials, we're in the debates. Now this, this is where it gets a little tricky. We've got to win the debates. It's our only clear shot at credibility. From there we tiptoe, avoid surprises, and surf a wave of voter rebellion right into Election Day. What do you think?

VIVIAN

You really want to know?

CUFF

Yes.

VIVIAN

I think you should see a doctor.

CUFF

I just did. He said I'm in perfect health. You heard him.

VIVIAN

He didn't examine your brain. Cuff...Death for president?

CUFF

I told you: Death wants to be popular. This is his big chance.

VIVIAN

Okay. Let's say for a moment that there is a Death and that he does want to be president. Fine. There are a few problems. The largest being: Why do we help him?

(Abel enters with a big pad of paper.)

CUFF

Any word from Nora?

ABEL

No, Mr. Riley.

CUFF

I want to be the one to tell her about this, understand?

VIVIAN

That's fine with me.

ABEL

(As if talking to a nutcase) Mr. Riley, would Death like a snack or a hot beverage?

CUFF

He's not here yet.

(Abel sets down notepad.)

ABEL

Oh. Good. Because I wouldn't want to set this on top of him or anything.

CUFF

He's not invisible.

ABEL

Of course, he isn't.

(Death enters. Vivian and Abel scream.)

CUFF

See?

DEATH

Perhaps I've come at a bad time.

CUFF

No. We were just getting started. I want you to meet my chief pollster, Vivian Finn. And...

ABEL

Abel Troutman, intern.

(Abel extends his hand to Death. Death doesn't offer his.)

DEATH

Death.

ABEL

Nice to meet you. Through work, of course.

CUFF

Okay. We have to move fast because the candidate is a very busy man. Which works for us--he's not a professional politician. First things first. How's he going to look on T.V.? Viv?

(Vivian stares at Death, in shock.)

VIVIAN

Black and white.

CUFF

Have you ever considered something in a color?

DEATH

No.

CUFF

Viv, hire a style consultant. I want to run a few different suits by a focus group. And some wigs, while we're at it.

DEATH

Wigs?

CUFF

You're going to have to trust us on this one.

DEATH

How can I have hair? I don't even have skin.

CUFF

Skinless is no problem. But our research shows that it's easier to elect a candidate with nothing in his head than nothing on it.

VIVIAN

(In an outburst) You can dress him in a Santa suit, we're still looking at the naked face of our own mortality. I mean, what are we doing here, Cuff?

CUFF

We're making history.

VIVIAN

What kind of history? Hitler was elected chancellor.

CUFF

Hold it right there. I am personally offended by your comparing Death to Hitler. We don't need that here.

ABEL

I have to agree, Viv.

CUFF

I think you owe Death an apology.

VIVIAN

Are you serious?

(Cuff nods. Vivian turns to Death.)

VIVIAN

I'm sorry for comparing you to Hitler.

CUFF

Good. Now let's talk about how we announce this thing...

VIVIAN

Maybe a press conference on the steps of the city morgue.

CUFF

Viv, you're not helping.

VIVIAN

What do you suggest? First question you'll get--after, of course, they stop screaming: "Why does someone who has killed every American president, every American soldier, AND every American deserve to be president of America?"

CUFF

Go ahead. Answer her.

DEATH

This is foolishness.

CUFF

It's politics.

DEATH

What's the question?

CUFF

How do you justifying killing everyone?

DEATH

I don't have to. It's what I do.

ABEL

I buy that.

CUFF

No, no. The good German thing doesn't cut it--no comparison to Nazis or their leaders intended. The best defense is a good offense. "Do you have any idea how bloated and disgusting Elvis Presley would be if he were still alive? And surely you're not suggesting that this country would be a better place if Warren G. Harding were still in politics."

ABEL

"Face it: John Kennedy's a much better president historically than realistically. Kennedy is great not in spite of me, but because of me."

CUFF

The kid's not bad.

VIVIAN

(Disgusted) Jesus.

ABEL

Jesus. "Who can imagine the Christian church without the death of Christ?"

CUFF

(To Death) What do you think?

DEATH

Cuff Riley, I've had second thoughts about this entire enterprise.

(Cuff begins breathing heavily and clutching at his chest.)

CUFF

She said she was sorry about the Hitler thing...

DEATH

But she's right. The whole notion that anyone could vote for me is completely ridiculous. Cuff Riley...

CUFF

Viv, help me out here. Give me some positives.

ABEL

He treats everyone the same.

CUFF

(Grasping at straws) Good.

(Cuff writes down the word "FAIR" on the pad.)

VIVIAN

It's true. Everyone we love, and every one of us.

DEATH

I've heard enough. Cuff Riley, I believe we have an appointment elsewhere.

CUFF

No. You've got to give it a chance. Viv.

DEATH

Come, Cuff Riley.

(Cuff doubles over.)

VIVIAN

(Blurting it out) Death ends the lives of murderers and drug-dealers. He's tough on crime. Tougher than anyone.

CUFF

Hell yes! You're the toughest crime-fighter this country has.

DEATH

True. But I also take grandmothers...

VIVIAN

You know how to cut Social Security.

DEATH

And sick children, little boys who drink Drano, Girl Scouts stuck in caves...

VIVIAN

You're for population control, against drug abuse, and in favor of a balanced approach to the environment.

ABEL

And with less people, there's more jobs to go around. "Tough decisions are coming up, Death is the man to make them."

CUFF

Health care?

VIVIAN

He cuts more medical expenses in a minute than you could spend in a lifetime.

CUFF

Foreign?

ABEL

No one's going to mess with Death as commander-in-chief.

CUFF

This is no intern!

DEATH

What about the deficit? They always ask about the deficit. What can I possibly say about the deficit?

CUFF

By now people are looking for an excuse to stop worrying about the damn thing.

ABEL

And we've got him right here. "You need cuts made? Elect the candidate who takes no prisoners."

CUFF

Good, but we've got to think bigger. We've got to make Death part of the big picture.

ABEL

"Accept the inevitable--vote Death."

CUFF

Warm it up.

ABEL

"Vote for Death, and someday, you can say you met the president."

CUFF

Good, but we've got to wave the flag, we've got to make Death as American as apple pie.

ABEL

"Give me liberty AND give me death."

CUFF

Great. Here's a rough draft of the official announcement. Why don't you read it through for us?

(Cuff hands a speech to Death. Death reads awkwardly from the speech.)

DEATH

"A difficult age requires a difficult solution. I am that solution."

CUFF

Okay, now put some life into it.

(Death rises to leave.)

DEATH

This will have to wait. I am far behind on my rounds.

CUFF

Remember: the more you help us, the easier our job's going to be.

DEATH

What do you mean?

CUFF

Why not take your work across the border for a couple months?

ABEL

And if it's a choice between non-voters versus registered voters...

DEATH

Overcrowding, food shortages, plagues. Is this what you all want?

CUFF

Hey, no need to get your robe in a bunch. It was just an idea.

DEATH

You don't understand what I do, either--no one understands or appreciates it. It's just scream scream scream.

CUFF

That's what we're here to change.

DEATH

I only take those whose time has come--and I am late.

(Death exits quickly.)

ABEL

There he goes, costing us votes.

CUFF

(Hopefully) Maybe he's in Asia. Or Africa.

(Loud screeching noise, followed by metal on metal--the sound of a large traffic accident.)

CUFF

Well, we'd better get started.

ABEL

I'll talk to the stylist.

CUFF

Fine.

(Abel exits.)

VIVIAN

You know, I didn't think you could surprise me anymore after you ran that ex-Klansman on the brotherhood ticket.

CUFF

Thank you, Viv. I'll never forget this. I know he's not exactly a font of charisma. But he's going to be the best horse in this race.

VIVIAN

I don't think you have a choice, do you?

(Nora enters.)

NORA

Cuff.

CUFF

Nora.

(They embrace. Vivian exits discreetly.)

NORA

I just got the news. I can't believe it. Is it true that you've quit the campaign?

CUFF

It's true.

NORA

Why? What happened?

CUFF

Soon after you left, I realized that you're right. Life's much too short to spend it living a lie.

NORA

Let's go. Let's throw it all away and get out of here.

CUFF

Yes. We will.

(Nora pulls away.)

NORA

Will?

CUFF

I swear. The day after the elections.

NORA

No. Don't do this to me.

CUFF

Nora, I'm not sure how to tell you this...

NORA

Let me guess: Someone who has no business being president offered you something you couldn't refuse, so now you're running his campaign.

CUFF

Basically, yes.

NORA

It's just like Ed always said: All you ever cared about was yourself and the next race. To think of all the times I've stood up for you, argued for your loyalty. And now you're running against us!

CUFF

Us? What's this "us" crap? You were just ready to leave him.

NORA

Pretty amazing, huh? From Ed's First Lady to Cuff's Latest Dupe.

CUFF

You have to know that the only reason I'm doing this campaign is so that we can be together.

NORA

You must think I'm so desperate I'll believe anything. And you're almost right. But one thing you've taught me is to recognize a cheap ploy when it's slapped across my face. Well, I can play that game, too. For the first time in my life, I've got something to campaign for. And you're not going to win this one, Cuff Riley.

CUFF

Nora...

(Nora exits. Unseen by Cuff, Death enters.)

CUFF

I love you.

DEATH

"A difficult age requires a difficult solution." Better?

CUFF

Let's work on it.

(Blackout.)

ACT I, SCENE 4

(Lights rise on Death standing at a podium set in limbo. A banner reads "Death: For Change." Flashes pop as Death speaks. He's not yet the polished stump speaker, but he's become more eloquent than in the previous scene.)

DEATH

A difficult age requires a difficult solution. I am that solution--an outsider, yes, but one who has served for over thirty millennia as a public servant. Government wastes your hard-earned money; every day, I save the taxpayer 3.2 million dollars in Medicare and Social Security payments. Government is impersonal and uncaring; every day, I work with 4200 citizens on a personal basis. I know your cares. I know your fears. By taking the stage of the living, Death will bring a better life to all.

(Applause. Lights fade and rise again on the podium. The banner now reads: "Death: For Growth.")

DEATH

I can think of only one group of people who need to fear a Death presidency: the IRS. It's been said that there are only two sure things in life: Death and Taxes. Well, in November, my fellow Americans, only one of us will be left standing.

(Heightened applause. Lights fade and rise again on the podium. The banner now reads: "Death: For the NRA.")

DEATH

Gun don't kill people. I do.

(Big cheers, applause. Blackout.)

ACT I, SCENE 5

(In limbo, three Television Pundits sit.)

PUNDIT 1

Death. Plague or populist? Scourge or scam? A threat to national security or just a freak in a robe?

PUNDIT 2

On the contrary, John--I think he's a Yankee Doodle Dandy. The resolution passed last week by the UN urging the U.S. not to elect Death should give the new candidate the support of everyone who's sick of this great nation being treated like a second-rate power.

PUNDIT 1

Flavor of the week or new face on the block?

PUNDIT 2

New skull on the block: Death has a lot of things Americans are looking for right now--the outsider status, the promise to make hard decisions on spending, pro-death penalty, tough foreign policy...

PUNDIT 3

I don't know how we can sit here and actually talk about someone who doesn't have a face as if he were presidential timber.

PUNDIT 2

Have you ever negotiated with someone who doesn't have a face?

PUNDIT 3

No, thank God.

PUNDIT 2

Neither have I. But it's got to be pretty intimidating. I think he'll be the best hard-line negotiator we've had in the Oval Office since Nixon.

PUNDIT 3

At least Nixon had a face.

PUNDIT 1

He doesn't anymore.

(Pundits argue ferociously as lights dim.)

ACT I, SCENE 6

(Morning, one month later. Cuff stands at his desk, poring over overnight poll results.)

CUFF

Where are my women? (Louder) Where are my women?

(Vivian enters.)

CUFF

Have you seen these overnights? They're like the Nielsen ratings for pro football.

VIVIAN

We're stronger than we expected with minorities.

CUFF

Guess we should have run skinless candidates a long time ago.

VIVIAN

The elderly surprised me, as well.

CUFF

But in every category, females are sitting it out. Why?

VIVIAN

I guess you haven't turned on a television lately.

CUFF

What is it?

VIVIAN

Nora's book tour started yesterday.

CUFF

Damn.

VIVIAN

"Cocky Visits the United Nations" is number one with a bullet.

CUFF

She doesn't even like dogs. Get her schedule. I've got to talk to her.

VIVIAN

That might not be an option right now.

CUFF

What do you mean?

VIVIAN

She called.

CUFF

You should have told me.

VIVIAN

She didn't want to talk to you.

CUFF

How was she?

VIVIAN

I'd say that "horrified" pretty much sums it up. "What's he doing running Death, he'll kill us all, oh the humanity," etcetera-- nothing you haven't heard already.

CUFF

What else?

VIVIAN

She made me feel like the antichrist for not quitting on you.

CUFF

Of course that's what she'd do. She's the First Lady. (Throwing down the polls) The most popular goddamn First Lady in history. Why doesn't she just shoot me and get it over with?

VIVIAN

We have options. I ordered new spots.

(Vivian hands Cuff scripts.)

VIVIAN

We've got the goods: prescriptions, police reports. No one knows about the week she spent at the clinic. We've got the damn receipt.

CUFF

No.

VIVIAN

What?

CUFF

We're not going negative. Not on Nora.

VIVIAN

We don't have a chance otherwise.

CUFF

We've got to find another way to get women.

VIVIAN

There's Thorton's bimbo file.

CUFF

No. Nora would have to spend the next month going on talk shows and declaring her undying love for the president. It would kill her.

VIVIAN

What's wrong with you? This is a no-brainer--you've got to pull the trigger.

CUFF

Okay. New spots. (Beat.) "Death Cares."

VIVIAN

Huh?

CUFF

"In his work, Death has spent more time in hospitals and senior centers than any other politician. He understands." Quick cuts of the candidate holding babies, visiting the homeless, looking at pollution in a river, a big tear rolls out of one eye...

VIVIAN

Socket. They're not going to buy it.

CUFF

We have to try.

(Cuff throws negative spots away. Abel enters.)

ABEL

Reverend Twist of the Christian Confederation is here.

VIVIAN

He endorsed Senator Borden.

CUFF

He wants to meet Death.

VIVIAN

Death and the Christian Confederation?

CUFF

It would get us into the debates.

VIVIAN

Sure. But how do you sell it?

CUFF

I don't know, but it's all we've got.

VIVIAN

(Looking at the waste basket) It is now, yes.

ABEL

Perkins from finance also wants to see you.

CUFF

He can wait.

ABEL

He says that the campaign's broke.

(This stops Cuff short.)

CUFF

What happened at the fundraiser?

ABEL

Same old thing. Everything goes great until Mr. Spooky tries to shake hands with people. Then everyone runs away screaming.

VIVIAN

It's a problem. How do you pump flesh when you don't have any?

CUFF

This is the worst possible time. The other campaigns are just getting around to attacking us. You've seen the president's new spots with those little yellow chicks and that "Can we really trust Death with our lives" bullshit. No money, no spots, we're on the defensive and we're gone.

ABEL

I've been chatting with that tobacco billionaire, Philip Reynolds.

CUFF

He called back?

ABEL

Uh-huh.

VIVIAN

If it gets out that Death is taking tobacco money...

ABEL

He's willing to create a secret slush fund.

CUFF

How much?

ABEL

Five million.

VIVIAN
We're rich.

CUFF
Not so fast. What's the favor?

ABEL
He wants the candidate to tell him the date and cause of his death.

VIVIAN
Talk to him, Cuff.

CUFF
He'll never do it.

ABEL
The Reverend's waiting.

CUFF
Vivian, let him in.

VIVIAN
Good luck.

(Vivian exits.)

CUFF
Give me a piece of paper.

(Cuff scribbles on a paper.)

CUFF
Give this to the tobacco king.

(Cuff hands piece of paper to Abel.)

ABEL
"November 10th, 2035. Heat." He dies from heat?

CUFF
Heart. Heart attack. Hopefully before he realizes we've screwed him.

ABEL
Is this ethical?

CUFF
Come on. All he wants to hear is that it's not lung cancer.

(Abel exits. Reverend Twist enters.)

TWIST

Cuff.

CUFF

Hello, Reverend. Sorry about the delay. I really appreciate your stopping by and meeting the candidate.

TWIST

(Warily) When's he showing?

CUFF

It's hard to tell. He had to go to Asia on business. It's a full time job, you know, keeping down the heathen population.

TWIST

I can imagine.

CUFF

There's quite a few things about the candidate that I think you'll appreciate.

TWIST

Well you know, of course, that the Christian Confederation has officially endorsed Senator Borden.

CUFF

But you didn't come here for the instant coffee.

TWIST

You know the story, Cuff. Once the good Senator clinched the nomination he started slipping away from us like a snake down a greased chute. School prayer went from definite to maybe to not a prayer. But he was the only game in town, and we certainly weren't lining up again for that Judas in the White House and that she-bitch of Byzantium he calls his wife. When I heard about your candidate, well, to be honest with you, Cuff, I didn't think there was any way the Christian Confederation could support Death. But it turns out we have a lot of common ground. The fundamentalists like him cause he's a tough old teetotaler and everyone seems to think he's here to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. Is this true?

CUFF

Why not?

TWIST

Well, I always expected the Lord to send us a wrathful messenger, but I never dreamed we'd have to elect him.

(Abel enters.)

ABEL

Excuse me, Senator Borden is here.

CUFF

He is?

TWIST

Imagine that.

CUFF

Show him in.

(Abel exits.)

CUFF

You didn't happen to leak this meeting to the Senator's office so that he'd come by and cough up concessions?

TWIST

Lord have mercy on you, Cuff Riley.

(Senator Borden enters.)

CUFF

Senator Borden. What a surprise.

BORDEN

I hope you don't mind my dropping by--I've heard so much about your candidate I wanted to meet him for myself. Reverend Twist--what brings you here?

TWIST

Same as yourself. I'd be letting down the twenty million I represent if I didn't meet all the candidates.

BORDEN

Well, as a man of God, you must be well prepared to meet Death.

TWIST

And you, as a man of your word, shouldn't have anything to worry about either.

(Death enters. The Senator and the Reverend scream. Death wears a dark blue suit, light blue shirt, red-and-blue-striped tie, and a tasteful, and a large, coiffed wig that makes him look not unlike Senator Borden.)

CUFF

Death, I'd like you to meet Reverend Twist, chairman of the Christian Confederation. And Senator Borden, one of your opponents in the general election.

BORDEN

Where are you coming from, Death?

CUFF

Asia.

DEATH

Jerusalem.

BORDEN

You've been there before, haven't you?

CUFF

Death goes everywhere.

BORDEN

Meet any Christians in your work today?

CUFF

Death works with all sorts of people. Murderers on death row, for instance.

BORDEN

Not enough of them. I believe that every convicted first-degree murderer should receive capital punishment.

TWIST

What about you, Death?

DEATH

Yes?

TWIST

What are your views regarding the death penalty?

DEATH

Death is something that is ultimately in the power of no man. It is governed by forces beyond reckoning.

CUFF

Death, may I speak to you a moment. Excuse us, gentlemen.

TWIST

Of course.

(Cuff takes Death aside.)

CUFF

Look, I know you're new to this and you haven't been prepared for a debate. But do me a favor. Lose the cosmic mumbo jumbo and make some promises.

DEATH

What can I promise?

CUFF

To vanquish the wicked. To spare the righteous.

DEATH

But everyone has their time...

CUFF

That's the crap I'm talking about. Knock it off.

DEATH

This is ridiculous. Look at me. I walked onto a sinking ferry this afternoon and someone mistook me for the bursar. I've become a parody of myself.

CUFF

Look at Borden. What do you think he is? A parody of a senator. People act a certain way because they think that's what people want their leaders to act like. I'm not asking for anything special. You're Death--get Deathly.

(Cuff and Death rejoin Senator Borden and Reverend Twist.)

BORDEN

We were just discussing abortion, something I've always opposed.

CUFF

My candidate has ended the careers of more abortion doctors than all the Right-to-Life groups combined.

BORDEN

Not enough of them. I would make doctors who perform abortions eligible for the death penalty.

TWIST

I'm encouraged, Senator. I never thought anyone could make Death look like a liberal, but you're doing a pretty good job.

DEATH

I promise to vanquish...somebody.

CUFF

Senator, what about your stand on sex?

BORDEN

(Insulted) I'm a married man.

CUFF

So you're against it.

Of course. BORDEN

Fornication? Adultery? CUFF

Opposed. BORDEN

Pot? CUFF

Never inhaled. BORDEN

What about exhaling? CUFF

Just where are you heading here, Cuff? TWIST

Well, naturally, I feel that the most moral candidate for president should have your endorsement. CUFF

Naturally. TWIST

So I think the Senator should be able to swear that he's never ever smoked marijuana or had sex with anyone but his wife. CUFF

These questions are an insult to the Reverend and the importance of what's at stake here. BORDEN

(Cuff turns to Death.)

Ever smoked pot? CUFF

No. DEATH

Ever had sex outside of marriage? CUFF

No. DEATH

Ever had sex? CUFF

DEATH

No.

CUFF

Your turn, Senator...

(Reverend Twist chuckles.)

TWIST

I don't have time to wait for his answers. .

BORDEN

As a good Christian, you cannot endorse Death.

TWIST

If I endorsed you, I can endorse anyone.

BORDEN

Why did you kill Jesus?

DEATH

When a mortal dies, it is because it is his time.

BORDEN

Mortal--he said mortal!

CUFF

Death is only saying that God in heaven is the ultimate judge over all of our souls...

DEATH

No, I'm not. There is no God and no heaven as you perceive them.

BORDEN

Well, I guess that just about wraps this up.

DEATH

Life is life and death is death. Speaking of which, I have work to do.

(Death exits.)

BORDEN

Well, it's been fun, Cuff.

TWIST

Sorry, Cuff, as much as I'm intrigued by your candidate...

BORDEN

After you, Reverend.

TWIST

And as much as I can't stomach this sidwinder...

BORDEN

Doesn't look like you have much choice, does it, Reverend? See you at the prayer breakfast.

(Senator Borden exits.)

CUFF

You didn't think Death would believe in Jesus, did you? That's the beauty of Christianity isn't it? Your faith transcends Death. You're above Death. But that doesn't mean you can't make use of him. Quite the contrary. Don't you see? Reverend, you should get down on your knees and thank God for sending you this candidate. Because He did send him to you, knowing as He does that nothing cultivates religious values among humanity more than the fear of the unknown. Times of uncertainty, plague, death--that's when people turn to faith. Endorse Death, and you'll get the best friend fundamentalist Christianity ever had. Your churches will overflow, your membership will triple, your influence will rocket to the heavens.

(Blackout.)

ACT I, SCENE 7

(The candidates' debate. A podium is set in limbo--we only see one candidate at a time. A moderator is heard but not seen.)

SENATOR BORDEN

Freedom. Family. Future. And values. Good values. Good, good values. And change. Lots...lots of change. People...you all...you're tired of business as usual. You're ready for change. I'm the man who will bring you that change.

MODERATOR

Thank you, Senator Borden. Death, you have thirty seconds to rebut.

(Death steps to the podium. Lights rise on Cuff's office. The campaign staff pensively watches a T.V. Vivian is on the phone.)

DEATH

I may not be the prettiest face up here tonight, but I can say one thing for sure: if there is any one candidate capable of bringing about change in your lives, I am that candidate. I know it, you know it, even Reverend Twist, who gave me his enthusiastic endorsement, knows it. Senator, you seem like a nice enough guy, but when it comes to change, give Death his due.

ABEL

Yes!

VIVIAN

He is smoking. That last answer got him ten on the machines.

CUFF

Come on, come on, we know it's coming.

MODERATOR

The next question goes to Death...

CUFF

Look out.

MODERATOR

Why John Lennon instead of Paul McCartney?

VIVIAN

What kind of question is that?

CUFF

Shhh.

DEATH

I have said this a million times in my campaign, and I will say it again: Every living being has its time, and that is the time at which that being dies. Not one second earlier or later.

VIVIAN

(Overlapping with Death's response) We're dipping.

ABEL

They've heard it before--they're bored.

CUFF

Wait.

MODERATOR

President Thorton, you have thirty seconds for rebuttal.

CUFF

Hold on tight.

THORTON

Death's right--he has said, over and over again, that every one of us has their time. Now, maybe I'm not being fair, but I happen to believe that Death bears some responsibility for death.

VIVIAN

Uh-oh.

CUFF

Shh.

THORTON

Like many of you, I have faced Death's unfairness square in the eye. I don't have time to talk about every for-instance, but I would like to take a moment to remember my father, William Jennings Thorton, a great man and a great patriot, who died thirty years ago this month at the age of fifty-three.

CUFF

Fifty-four.

THORTON

I hope my opponent isn't proud of that one.

MODERATOR

Death, you have one minute for a final remark.

CUFF

(To the television) Get him.

DEATH

I believe in the human race. I believe in the human race's ability to lift itself up from the perils of mortality to the roles of the ages. And I did not take William Jennings Thorton before his time. The president's father died of lung cancer after smoking three packs of cigarettes a day for twenty years. In the last four years, the president has refused to cut tobacco subsidies and has vetoed bills to regulate the sales of cigarettes to minors. If he is looking to pin blame for his father's death, he need look no further than his own office.

(The campaign staff cheers. Blackout. End of Act I.)

ACT II, SCENE 1

(TELEVISION PUNDITS sit in limbo.)

PUNDIT 1

The debate. Who won? Who lost? Does it matter?

PUNDIT 2

Death won the debate, John, or the President lost it. The latest polls show Senator Borden and President Thorton running dead even.

PUNDIT 3

Speaking of which, look who's running dead last.

PUNDIT 1

Death. The bony one relegated to the role of spoiler?

PUNDIT 3

Looks like it. Women don't like this candidate. Even his speech last Thursday to the Mothers for Peace--when he talked about having to take the Lindbergh baby and broke down in tears--haven't helped his numbers with women.

PUNDIT 2

(Teary) And that was a great speech.

PUNDIT 1

Women. What's wrong with them?

PUNDIT 2

Who knows?

PUNDIT 3

Maybe we should have one on the show sometime and ask them.

PUNDIT 1

(After a beat:) No.

PUNDIT 2

It just doesn't make sense they wouldn't like Death. Heck, they live ten years longer than us.

PUNDIT 3

Not everyone operates from a position of total self-interest, Mort.

PUNDIT 1

Like the First Lady on her book tour?

PUNDIT 2

Right. Maybe what Death needs is to write a book about a cute doggy.

PUNDIT 3

Don't patronize Nora Thorton.

PUNDIT 2

I wouldn't dare belittle your deep admiration for the First Lady.

PUNDIT 3

And don't patronize me.

PUNDIT 2

I'm not, and it's pronounced "paytronize"...as in "patriotism."

(Pundits bicker as lights fade.)

ACT II, SCENE 2

(Night. Cuff sits alone, looking the worse for wear after months of campaigning. Death enters, followed by Vivian, who carries briefing books. Death wears a big cowboy hat. He also has a stain on his suit, which Vivian is dabbing with a cloth.)

DEATH

And when I finished the speech, and the screaming crowd rose up as one and raced toward the stage? I've never seen anything like it-- except maybe at that Who concert. (to Cuff in Texas drawl) Howdy, Cuff Bob! How's it hangin'?

CUFF

By a thread. Speech go well?

DEATH

Texas has always been mah kinda state.

VIVIAN

He killed them.

DEATH

It was better than that.

VIVIAN

He shook some hands. He even kissed a baby!

CUFF

What happened to your suit?

VIVIAN

The baby.

DEATH

I promise you: I am never holding another living infant.

CUFF

Fine. Compassion isn't working for us, anyway.

DEATH

Back to the tough stuff, eh? (With too much enthusiasm) "Death will never coddle criminals!"

CUFF

(Holding her ears) Death be not loud.

(Abel enters.)

ABEL

The limo's here from the studio.

CUFF

He's on his way.

DEATH

Do you like how I dealt with that one heckler at the rally?

VIVIAN

Oh, yeah.

DEATH

This one lad kept yelling, "Death took my mother away!" And so I said, "Well, maybe you shouldn't have shot her." Big laugh.

CUFF

Maybe you should stick to the speech.

DEATH

Cuff, you know what your problem is? You need to relax.

CUFF

Enjoy life while I can, right? Viv, call Twist tomorrow morning. Tell him we need a spontaneous demonstration of pro-death pro-lifers downtown in Dallas.

VIVIAN

Right.

DEATH

The pro-death pro-lifers. Have you seen them? They're at all my rallies, trading tapes of my speeches and playing their happy little games of hacky-sack...

ABEL

No, those are the Death-heads.

DEATH

Right. The Death-heads. I always get them confused.

ABEL

The pro-death pro-lifers are the ones who stand at the entrance and scream at people who leave the rally.

DEATH

Right.

CUFF

You'd better get going. You go on the air in twenty minutes.

DEATH

You know, Cuff, I was thinking: Maybe this is the moment to unveil my domestic plan.

CUFF

I wasn't aware you had one.

DEATH

Just some ideas I've been toying with. The Death Corps, Death Across America, A Thousand Points of Death--dreams maybe, but that's what this country's all about, isn't it? Making dreams a reality.

CUFF

Let's stick to the game plan, for now, okay? And remember to smile --or whatever that thing is you do with your jaw that looks like smiling.

(Death "smiles.")

CUFF

But not too much.

DEATH

Whatever you want--just no more kissing.

CUFF

I don't think Larry King's going to want to kiss you.

(Death and Abel exit.)

CUFF

(Grimly indicating polls) Not that it would help.

VIVIAN

Cuff, I know you never thought you'd hear me say this, but ignore the numbers. You should see him out there. He's charming, he's persuasive, he's a candidate. We did it. It may not be showing up in the polls right now, but he's winning them over.

CUFF

It seems like every time we make a little headway, Nora talks about adopting an orphan and back down we go.

VIVIAN

Next time the president tries to call you, maybe you shouldn't demand to speak to his wife.

CUFF

Why not? She's the one I want to talk to.

VIVIAN

Ever since we made him look bad in the debate he's wanted to make a deal. So make one. Tell him that if he sits the First Lady down for a couple weeks, Death will quit the race and endorse him the last week of the campaign. He's gotta go for it.

CUFF

A Munich agreement.

VIVIAN

Right. Election day approaches, Death changes his mind. He's determined not to quit, we can't reason with him, I mean, we're mere mortals, right?

CUFF

I'll think about it.

VIVIAN

You've done this sort of thing a million times before.

CUFF

This is a different race.

VIVIAN

What are you trying to do? Run an ethical campaign for Death?

(Abel enters.)

ABEL

The president and the First Lady are here.

VIVIAN

This is perfect--they're coming to us.

CUFF

I can't do it.

VIVIAN

What?

CUFF

(to Abel) Tell them I'm not here.

VIVIAN

Do you know what's a stake here? Not just for you. For us. It's not pretty out there, Cuff. This campaign has ruffled a few feathers, to say the least. None of us has a future if Death loses this campaign. We were there for you when you needed us. Now it's your turn.

CUFF

I need some time.

(Cuff exits.)

ABEL

What should I do with them?

VIVIAN

Send them in. I'll keep them occupied while you go after Cuff.

ABEL

Right. (Beat.) What do I do with Cuff?

VIVIAN

Tell him...the First Lady wants to speak to him.

(Abel exits. President Thorton and Nora Thorton, followed by a Secret Service Agent, enter.)

THORTON

Vivian. I hope you don't mind us stopping by like this.

VIVIAN

I have to admit it's...unexpected.

THORTON

I needed to unwind a little. It's been crazy lately, what with that big mess over in Bazookastan.

VIVIAN

Uzbekistan.

THORTON

Whatever. So we took in a show at the Kennedy Center. Couldn't stay for the end because of security...

NORA

Job security. The latest poll came in at intermission.

THORTON

But we enjoyed it nonetheless. About a brave king who was chosen by fate to lead his people, overcoming all sorts of obstacles to claim his rightful throne. What was it called, dear?

NORA

"Macbeth."

THORTON

We were driving back in the motorcade, and well, what do you know, we were coming down your street.

NORA

You know how motorcades are wont to wander.

THORTON

Where's Cuff?

VIVIAN

He just stepped out. I'm sure he's nearby if you want me to get him.

(Thorton stops Vivian.)

THORTON

Allow us. I'd like to make sure he doesn't slip away from me again.

(Thorton exits with Secret Service Agent.)

NORA

So. How's Death?

VIVIAN

He talks about you every day, Nora.

NORA

Death?

VIVIAN

Cuff.

(Vivian takes a file from Cuff's desk and give it to Nora.)

VIVIAN

I might as well give you this.

(Nora looks in the folder.)

NORA

The clinic. You had this?

VIVIAN

Believe me, I tried to get him to use it. But he refused. He's doing this all for you, Nora.

NORA

(Aghast) What?

VIVIAN

And it's totally screwing up the campaign. He won't talk about it, but I'm sure running Death was the only way he could survive that day. You remember that day. You had your little run-away bag. You walked out of here and Cuff's heart stopped for ten seconds. We thought he was gone. But then it was like nothing happened. Except that we had ourselves a new candidate.

NORA

Are you saying that for Cuff to live...

VIVIAN

He has to win. But he's not acting like it. He needs you, Nora.

NORA

But how can I help Cuff when it means helping Death?

VIVIAN

I had some qualms about the candidate myself. But he's not so bad, once you get used to him.

NORA

That's what I'm afraid of.

(Cuff enters, closely escorted by the Secret Service Agent and Thorton.)

THORTON

Found him staring out the window. Imagine that? Cuff Riley, two weeks before an election, lost in thought.

CUFF

Hello, Nora.

THORTON

Happy to see her, aren't you? And she's happy to see you, too. We miss having you around, Cuff. I mean, when was the last time the three of us got together like this and chatted?

CUFF

The last Bimbogate. Two weeks before the general election.

THORTON

That's right. And you saved our asses.

CUFF

The First Lady saved our asses.

(Nora snaps into smiling, perky campaign mode.)

NORA

"I'm doing this not out of any sense of duty or obligation, but because I truly love this man." Where's the scotch?

CUFF

Same drawer.

(Nora pours herself a drink.)

THORTON

Cuff, do you mind if I ask you a question? What the hell do you think you're doing? Death for president? If you've got some personal vendetta with me, there's no reason to take it out of the entire country. Now, I know you were unhappy with your access after the election. On the other hand, I have some excellent reasons for being a little less than happy with you. The expensive hookers

THORTON (CONT'D)

weren't bad enough--you had to go for my wife! But I say, let's let bygones be bygones. Name your ticket. Ambassador to Bermuda? How about national security? Hell, you can have your own operation. I know how you like to lurk, and this country can always use more intelligence.

CUFF

Agreed.

THORTON

State? Is that what you want?

CUFF

What I want, you can't give me.

THORTON

But I suppose it's worth handing the country over to some...evil skeleton. How can you live with yourself?

CUFF

Believe it or not, I got asked that question more often when I was working for you.

(Secret Service Agent enters.)

SECRET SERVICE AGENT

Sir, it's a call on the gold phone: the President of Uzbekistan.

(The Agent talks into his phone during the following.)

NORA

The Uzbekis beckon.

THORTON

Couple years ago they're just a bunch of nutty vodka-swilling peasants who swap children for livestock. Now they're the fourth largest nuclear power and I have to take their calls.

CUFF

Uzbeki forces are threatening American interests?

THORTON

A peace conference has been called.

CUFF

But I'm sure you're keeping your fingers crossed.

THORTON

Cuff, you know me well enough to know that I could never, ever put our boys into armed conflict for the purposes of winning an election.

(Thorton takes the phone from the Secret Service Agent.)

SECRET SERVICE AGENT

I've got the generals on line two.

THORTON

Talk to him, Nora. Vivian.

(Thorton and Vivian exit, followed by Secret Service Agent.)

CUFF

How'd he find out?

NORA

I had to tell him. You didn't give me much choice, calling day and night.

CUFF

He took it bad, huh?

NORA

You really are slipping aren't you? He welcomed the news. Because now he has something on me, and something on you. Which brings us to the real reason for our visit.

(Nora begins undressing.)

NORA

The president of the United States has authorized me to use any means necessary to induce you to give up your campaign.

CUFF

He really put you up to this?

(Nora nods.)

CUFF

Scumbag. (Beat.) But as long as you're here...

(Cuff kisses Nora.)

CUFF

Nora, I need your help.

NORA

Cuff, I've been twisted around enough today, please.

CUFF

Take a break from campaigning.

NORA

The president might have a problem with that.

CUFF

Finesse it. Tell him you want to spend more time with him.

NORA

You want me to sleep with the president so that you can win. The president wants me to sleep with you so that he can win. What kind of world is this where everyone wants to win and nobody wants to fuck?

CUFF

This campaign's about more than winning. Do you really think I chose to run Death?

NORA

I'd like to meet him.

CUFF

Who?

NORA

Your candidate.

CUFF

Why?

NORA

Let's just say that I suddenly find him...an attractive alternative.

CUFF

Nora..

NORA

Isn't that what you want, to get me on Death's side?

CUFF

You don't need a meeting with him.

NORA

Maybe I want my own deal. Maybe I want to get something for myself out of all of this.

CUFF

Forget it.

NORA

Do you want my help or not?

(Blackout.)

ACT II, SCENE 3

(Nora Thorton serves Death champagne. She is dressed elegantly in black.)

NORA
Do you like it? It's French.

DEATH
Delicious.

NORA
State dinner leftovers.

(Nora slugs down some pills and champagne.)

NORA
You did very well in the debates.

DEATH
I was briefed quite thoroughly.

NORA
For this as well?

DEATH
No. Cuff only said you wanted to meet me.

NORA
Yes. Ever since I was a child. And then when I was a teenager, quite a bit. Then when we lost an election--don't worry, that was before we hired Cuff. A lot of blame was flying around with no place to land. Till it found me, of course. I'm surprised you don't remember me--I was quite the flirt.

DEATH
Of course, I remember. But we were never properly introduced.

NORA
I guess I've always thought you had some answers for me.

DEATH
That's quite a build-up. I'm really not that special, Mrs. Thorton.

NORA
Please. Call me Nora.

DEATH
Nora.

NORA
And you just go by...Death.

DEATH

Except in the New York Times, where I'm Mr. Death.

(Nora stands close to Death.)

NORA

It's not happening.

DEATH

What?

NORA

I've been reading bestsellers. They say that when you get close to death there are all these tunnels and lights and waving dead relatives.

DEATH

I'm afraid I'm disappointing you.

NORA

You think I want to see my dead relatives? Shall we dance?

DEATH

I don't, really.

NORA

I'll help you fake it. Trust me--I've had a lot of practice.

(Nora turns on the radio. Nora and Death dance.)

DEATH

You must excuse me.

(Death pulls away from Nora and extracts a dead fish from his robe.)

DEATH

It's those damn Indonesian ferries. They never carry lifeboats.

(Nora drinks some more champagne as they continue dancing.)

NORA

(Coquettishly) "Le petit mort." That's what they call an orgasm in France. So what do you suppose "the big death" means?

DEATH

Does your husband know that you're here?

NORA

He knows I've got a little thing for you. In a way I think he'd be relieved. We haven't been close in a while.

DEATH

I'm sorry.

NORA

It happens, you know. People drift apart, drift away. If they don't meet you first. You know, I bet you save a million marriages every year.

DEATH

I've never thought of it quite like that..

NORA

You're very handsome.

DEATH

Please.

NORA

I'm serious. I've always been a sucker for great bone structure.

DEATH

Thank you.

NORA

When I look into your eyes, I see...

DEATH

What?

NORA

Nothing. You don't know what a relief that is.

(Nora and Death embrace and kiss. Blackout.)

ACT II, SCENE 4

(Death sits. Cuff paces, greatly agitated.)

CUFF

Please. Tell me this is some sort of sick joke.

DEATH

You know I can't tell jokes.

CUFF

Are you telling me it's her time?

DEATH

Sure.

CUFF

Her time?! With you?! In my office?!

DEATH

Why not?

CUFF

And you didn't have anything do with that?

DEATH

I wouldn't go down that road, if I were you.

CUFF

So it really isn't her time.

DEATH

Weren't you the one who told me to lose all that cosmic mumbo jumbo? Now, let's get back to work here. Tonight's my first speaking engagement at West Point, and I want it to be special.

CUFF

How long does she have?

DEATH

It's a coma, no hurry. I'll stop by the hospital after we're done here. Now, the speech is on live T.V., right? So I want to hit all the big themes: crime, drugs, school prayer, work prayer, play prayer, prayer prayer...

(Abel enters. He holds a bouquet of flowers.)

ABEL

Here are the flowers you wanted for your visit to the hospital.

DEATH

Thank you.

ABEL

And I took the liberty of arranging some media coverage.

CUFF

(Horrificed) Abel, this isn't a campaign visit.

ABEL

Oh. (Then, with greater understanding:) Oh. Uh-oh.

(Abel exits quickly.)

DEATH

What's his problem?

CUFF

It's not just his problem. It's all of ours. You can't got to the hospital and take Nora.

DEATH

Maybe you should have thought about that before you set up the meeting.

CUFF

I didn't mean for you to kill her!

DEATH

You're the one who's always said that Nora's the one person who can defeat this campaign. Well, now there'll be nothing in our way.

CUFF

Wait a second. You think that...Jesus, you have a lot to learn about politics.

(Vivian enters.)

VIVIAN

New polls.

DEATH

How are they?

VIVIAN

About what we expected.

(Death eagerly takes polls from Vivian. He's horrified.)

DEATH

(Shocked) Thirty point down? My God--we're cratering!

VIVIAN

You're surprised?

CUFF

He's Death. Of course, he wouldn't know how death works.

DEATH

We were almost even yesterday!

CUFF

It's called a sympathy vote. We're not running against a bad president anymore. We're running against a grieving widower.

DEATH

Surely the American public knows that everyone must die.

CUFF

On the contrary, it's a surprise every time.

VIVIAN

I can guarantee that from now until Election Day you won't see one photo of Ed Thorton without tears in his eyes. His campaign staff peels onions and he weeps his way into four more years.

CUFF

Do you understand? We don't have a chance with Nora dead.

(Abel enters, again with flowers.)

ABEL

It's okay. I called off the media. Where do you want these flowers?

DEATH

Have them delivered for me. With a card. "Regret that I'm unable to keep our appointment. All the best, D."

(Abel exits.)

CUFF

So I guess it wasn't her time after all?

DEATH

Careful, Cuff. I may be in a monkey suit with a dead animal on my head, but do not make the mistake of toying with me as you toy with your fellow mortals. I am now willing to use every means to win this election. But given that, anything less than victory is unacceptable. There is no hell now, but for you, I will make one.

(Blackout.)

ACT II, SCENE 5

(Four hours later. Vivian and Cuff go over poll results.)

VIVIAN

We've come up every hour since Nora left the hospital. It's perfect--the media's even giving Death some credit. This could be exactly what we need to get women. If he goes to West Point tonight and kills--I mean, if he does really well--we'll be right back in it.

(Abel enters.)

ABEL

The First Lady's here.

(Cuff comes to life.)

CUFF

Great. Fine. Just give me a moment and send her in.

(Abel exits.)

VIVIAN

Cuff, you don't have time. The speech isn't even written.

CUFF

It'll have to wait.

VIVIAN

But it's in two hours...

CUFF

Later.

(Vivian reluctantly exits. Nora enters.)

CUFF

Nora.

NORA

Cuff.

CUFF

You're okay.

NORA

I'm fine...

(Cuff rushes to embrace her.)

NORA

Thanks to you.

(Nora knees Cuff in the crotch.)

NORA

I had one thing left in my life that I could control. One thing. Everything else, I was doing what somebody else told me to do, except for this: I could decide when I wanted to die. Or I thought I could. Wasn't it enough to control my life? Did you have to control my death, too?

CUFF

I couldn't let you die, Nora...

NORA

No, you couldn't. Because it would have meant losing, wouldn't it?

CUFF

No. I mean, yes, we would have lost, but that's not why...

NORA

So my eternal rest takes second place to another Cuff Riley victory. Hooray for Cuff! He may have to kill one half of the country and bring the other half back to life, but he knows how to win an election.

CUFF

That's not why you're alive!

NORA

No, it's so I could be the life of the party. Watch this.

(Nora takes a bunch of pills out of her purse.)

NORA

Valium. Snail poison. Drano..

CUFF

Nora, don't...

(Nora swallows them.)

NORA

With a white-out chaser...

(Nora grabs a bottle of white-out from the desk top and swigs it down.)

NORA

And I've never felt better! Now watch this.

(Nora takes a revolver her out of her purse.)

NORA

It's the Pat Nixon service revolver...

CUFF

Nora!

(Nora puts the gun to her head and pulls the trigger. The gun goes off, but nothing happens.)

NORA

And not so much as split end!

(Nora pulls a knife from her purse and stabs herself repeatedly. Again, she is unblemished.)

NORA

And the Mary Todd Lincoln paring knife doesn't even make a scratch. I'm in perfect health. Even my allergies have cleared up! Why, I can hit the campaign trail tonight, because I'm as healthy as an ox. And I owe it all to you. Thank you, Cuff. Thank you for making me a freak of nature.

CUFF

Nora, listen to me...

NORA

No, Cuff, that's not what I came here for. I came here to be the first one in your life to tell you that there are consequences to playing God, to running Death to stay alive. Vivian told me. She tried to sell me the story that you were doing it for me, but now I know that you never cared about me, just like you never cared about anyone. You used us all, Ed, Vivian, me, and now you're using Death. But that's all going to end on Election Day. I'm going to make sure of it.

(Nora exits. Cuff, stunned, picks up the gun and shoots himself. Death enters.)

CUFF

You've come for me.

DEATH

I've come for my speech.

CUFF

There is no speech.

DEATH

What is it now? Cuff, I don't need to tell you what a crucial juncture this is for the campaign. We really must bear down in the next few days.

CUFF

Nora came by. And she hates me. She can't wait for me to die. And you know what? I can't blame her.

DEATH

But she's alive.

CUFF

She's upset you didn't visit her in the hospital.

DEATH

She didn't like the flowers?

CUFF

Listen to me: it's over. I can't do this anymore. Take me now and let's forget it ever happened.

DEATH

I need you alive, Cuff. I've got appearances to make, I've got interviews to give, I need that speech for the goddamn cadets!

CUFF

I want out.

(Cuff tries stabbing himself with the knife.)

CUFF

Start doing your fucking job!

(Death take the knife away from Cuff.)

DEATH

Cuff, please. You still have so much to live for. (muttering) I can't believe I'm doing this. (Back to Cuff:) Life is so...precious. And after we win, you'll have lifetimes to convince Nora that you are a better man, a decent man, a man who would kill himself for her love. But to win her over then, we've got to win this election now.

CUFF

You're right.

DEATH

Now, about that speech...

CUFF

Jesus, what time is it? Vivian, Abel, get in here.

(Viv and Abel enter.)

CUFF

What are we going to say in the speech?

VIVIAN

How about "I'm really sorry." (Beat.) An hour ago there was a freak landslide in Malibu. It buried twenty houses. In one of the houses, a fundraiser for the Borden campaign was in progress. Three of Borden's top advisers were killed.

(Cuff, Abel and Vivian turn and stare at Death.)

DEATH

What are you looking at me like that for? There is something called gravity, do you understand? Occasionally, gravity causes large amounts of earth to descend onto other amounts of earth and, sometimes, people.

CUFF

Great. You can just go on national T.V. and say, "You may have noticed that my opponents have been dropping like flies. And that you can't kill my campaign manager with a bazooka. But it's not me --it's gravity."

DEATH

(After a beat:) I think it needs to be punched up a little. I must make my rounds. Have it ready for me when I return.

CUFF

If we're going to have any chance of winning this, you have to stop killing the opposition.

DEATH

Lighten up.

CUFF

Where you headed now? Senator Borden? His two daughters? I hear the Pope isn't doing that well.

(Death exits.)

CUFF

Any ideas?

VIVIAN

We can play it like that freak electric storm at the Thorton rally last week: This would have happened whether or not Death was running. The fact that it still happened, if anything, is an example of the candidate's integrity.

CUFF

They'll never buy that again.

VIVIAN

(Resigned) You're right.

ABEL

It's a shame isn't it? We were so close. And now...Well, if voters were scared before, think how they'll feel now.

CUFF

What? What did you say?

ABEL

If they were scared before, think how they'll feel now.

CUFF

Give me that.

(Cuff takes a piece of paper from Abel and scribbles on it.)

ABEL

What are you doing?

CUFF

They're going to want a statement. Let's give them one.

(Abel reads the statement.)

ABEL

"There is absolutely no connection between the tragic death of the Borden campaign staff and Death's candidacy. Believe us, Death had nothing to do with it. He wasn't even near Malibu..." I don't get it. It's a weak denial.

CUFF

Make it weaker. We've been going about this the wrong way. All along--it's been right there in front of us.

ABEL

I don't understand.

CUFF

We know that fear wins elections. We know that voters always elect the candidate that scares them the least. But what do you do when you've got the scariest candidate ever?

VIVIAN

We turn it around.

CUFF

Right. Forget about scaring them with what's going to happen if the other guy wins. We scare them with what's going to happen if our guy loses.

ABEL

You mean...

CUFF

"Vote for Death, because when Death loses, everyone does."

VIVIAN

"Put Death in the White House, so he won't come to your house."

ABEL

"Death--the worst sport ever."

CUFF

"Death--if you want life."

(Blackout.)

ACT II, SCENE 5

(Death stands behind a podium.)

DEATH

My fellow Americans and cadets. It is with great sense of duty that, two weeks from now, I will accept your call to the presidency of the United States. I've enjoyed a long working relationship with this fine country. In such hallowed settings as Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, Hiroshima, and Grenada, I have toiled behind the scenes to bring about historic change, advancing this great land ever further in the family of nations to make it what is today: the greatest, most respected, most envied, most feared nation on Earth. And now you, my fellow Americans, will recognize this important relationship by giving me my first formal office. You will put your trust in Death, and Death will serve you well. To ensure peace, I will visit those who war. To ensure prosperity, I will visit those in poverty. To ensure happiness, I will visit those who grieve. The greatest ending is the greatest beginning. To ensure life, we must have death.

(A huge ovation engulfs the stage. A band plays. A crowd cheers and chants "Death! Death! Death!" Black-and-white confetti and black balloons fall. Blackout.)

ACT II, SCENE 6

(Television Pundits sit in limbo.)

PUNDIT ONE

Election eve. Too close to call?

PUNDIT TWO

If the First Lady stays out of a coma for the next twenty-four hours and not too many more famous people perish under torrents of hot mud, you've gotta give it to the Bonemeister. Thorton can't find a good enough reason to bomb anyone, Borden's a bore, and Death has really come on strong these last few days--there's a reason they're calling him the Comeback Crypt.

PUNDIT ONE

What about the president's latest proposals to cut taxes in half, eliminate the deficit and give satellite dishes to the homeless? Are they enough?

PUNDIT TWO

No. Voters are tired of the usual safe positions and empty rhetoric, John. They're ready for a president who's not afraid to be spooky.

PUNDIT ONE

The ultimate scare tactic. Is it working?

PUNDIT TWO

You better believe it.

PUNDIT THREE

I agree. Put me down for Death.

(Pundits One and Two are taken aback.)

PUNDIT ONE

Excuse me?

PUNDIT THREE

I said, I agree.

PUNDIT ONE

(Awkward) So...I guess we're in agreement.

PUNDIT TWO

Wait a second--you're conceding defeat? He's only a few points up.

PUNDIT THREE

Can you imagine anyone saying they're not going to vote for him? I'm sure not saying that. My kids are visiting relatives in Southern California.

PUNDIT ONE

Well, there you have it...Death in a landslide.

PUNDIT THREE

(Suddenly, out to audience) Stay away from the mountains, little Zoe!

PUNDIT ONE

Make that...Death in a walk.

PUNDIT TWO

(Muttering) Liberals.

(Blackout)

ACT II, SCENE 7

(Cuffs sits. On one wall is a large sign that reads, "It's the mortality, stupid." Vivian enters.)

VIVIAN

I'm so sorry, Cuff.

CUFF

When did you know?

VIVIAN

I guess when we lost Texas. We were so solid there. You figure if a state that executes fifty people a year doesn't go for Death...

CUFF

Right.

VIVIAN

It's my fault. We never went after Borden.

CUFF

He got lucky. We took Thorton out, but they returned the favor.

VIVIAN

Talk to Death. He's got to give you points for getting close. I mean, he got Maine.

CUFF

No. I had to win.

(Abel enters and shakes hands.)

ABEL

Those are the breaks, huh? Just wanted to catch you guys before we all moved on and thank you for a great campaign.

VIVIAN

What's next for you, Abel?

ABEL

You'll never believe this. I got a job in the White House. Weirdest thing. I've been dating someone on Borden's staff and she let it slip that none of the big guys were in that house in the landslide. They were caught in traffic! Can you believe it--it was just a bunch of volunteers that got buried. So, I guess they figured they owed me for keeping a secret. Well, seeya.

(Abel exits.)

VIVIAN

Rat.

(Cuff laughs.)

VIVIAN

What's so funny?

CUFF

That's exactly what we would've done twenty years ago.

VIVIAN

I was thinking about heading down to the Sheraton. Someone should talk to the troops.

CUFF

And you'd rather not be here when Death gets the news.

VIVIAN

Can you blame me?

CUFF

No.

VIVIAN

Good-bye, Cuff.

CUFF

Good-bye, Viv.

(Vivian exits. After a beat, Death enters.)

DEATH

Sorry I'm late. Crazy day. You have no idea what it was like, trying to avoid California. Where did I go? So, what's next? I've got the acceptance speech down pat.

CUFF

You won't be needing it. We lost.

(Cuff stands, prepares himself for the worst.)

CUFF

Shall we go?

DEATH

(Stunned) We lost?

CUFF

We'll end up with about thirty percent of the vote--good enough for a strong third place.

DEATH

Third place! What about the crowds? The polls? I was nine points up yesterday!

CUFF

We put a gun to the head of the American electorate and they didn't blink. Fear didn't work.

DEATH

The ingrates. I was ready to give them everything!

CUFF

Well, at least you kept your day job. Ready?

DEATH

I would've slain their enemies, I would've been their inspiration, I would've been like a big, skinny father to the entire nation. What's wrong with them?

CUFF

They're vain, selfish, and greedy, like all people. It's what's right with them I've never understood--and I guess I never will.

DEATH

They screamed for me, they trampled each other to shake my hand, but I was just a new face, wasn't I? A freak show for the circus. They never took me seriously--that's quite clear--they never appreciated who I am or the beauty of dying and the deliverance from this shallow, petty world. I blame you for that. You dressed me in blue and shot me through a filter and filled my mouth with blather about "new beginnings." Only Nora really understood but you had to mess that one up, too. Now neither of us will have her.

CUFF

So what's it going to be? Another heart attack? Or is my head just going to explode waiting for something to happen?

DEATH

You can't wait, can you?

CUFF

No. I can't.

DEATH

Can't wait for the moment you can pick up that gun and blow a hole through your head and let everything go dark.

CUFF

Will you stop talking and get to it?

DEATH

No, Cuff Riley. You're not getting what you want anymore. You'll never die. You're stuck with your pain and your grief. (Beat.) Third place! It would serve this country right if a huge, fiery ball descended from space and wiped every stinking inch of it off the globe! On second thought, I'll leave it to you and the other

DEATH (CONT'D)

Cuff Rileys of this world. You'll take care of it soon enough.

(Death exits. Nora enters. She has her run-away bag.)

NORA

Cuff? I didn't think you'd still be here.

CUFF

Neither did I.

NORA

But you lost.

CUFF

After I saw you last, I tried to kill myself. But Death wouldn't take me. Same thing today. I think he's decided that letting me live is the best way to get back at the country.

NORA

(Impressed) You tried to kill yourself?

CUFF

It wasn't hard. You left Pat Nixon's gun on my desk. What about you? Tried any exciting new poisons lately?

NORA

It was either die or get divorced and for the first time I can remember, getting divorced is easier. Ed told me I'd go down in history as a bad wife. I thought, who needs history, I'm immortal.

CUFF

So...we're both alive with no place to go.

NORA

Looks like it.

(Death enters.)

DEATH

Excuse me. I forgot something.

(Cuff and Nora stand still as Death recovers his scythe from behind the desk. He walks back to the door.)

DEATH

Until the next time.

(Death exits. Cuff and Nora run together, embrace and kiss. Blackout.)

THE END