

WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

A One-Act Play

(excerpt)

John Shanahan

## CHARACTERS

Death: A tired-looking man of 40-50. Clearly too busy

War: A well-built woman in her 30s. Hard-edged and confident

Pestilence: A robustly healthy man, no older than 40.

Scene: A city park. One park bench. A trash barrel.

*As the lights come up, WAR is sitting on the park bench. She's an athletically built woman, wearing loose-fitting slacks and a tight T-shirt. She's got a take-out container of chicken fingers next to her. She's reading a book about Gandhi, and laughing.*

WAR Oh, God, that's good. Too funny. Yeah, you had the right idea, Mo. Good call.

*She laughs again, snacks on a chicken finger, and glances at her watch.*

WAR *(under her breath, a bit anxiously)* Any time now, boys.

*She goes back to reading.*

PESTILENCE *enters from R, above the bench. He's a heavy-set man in his 30s. He has a very clean, healthy look. He's casually dressed and appears happy. He looks around for a moment, then sees War.*

PEST *(loud)* WAR!

*War jumps up and turns.*

PEST HUNH!

*Now War is smiling, and drifts upstage to him. Together they sing...*

WAR & PEST Good God y'all! What is it good for? Absolutely nothin'!

PEST Say it again!

*They throw their arms around each other, laughing.*

WAR It's so good to see you!

PEST You too!

*They move back toward the bench and sit as they speak.*

WAR How've you been?

PEST No complaints. Staying healthy. How about yourself?

WAR I'm good. I'm good. Don't I look good?

PEST Compared to the people I usually deal with? Yeah, you look great.

WAR I'll take that as a compliment, Pestilence.

*She sits.*

PEST Can you believe it's finally here? (*He sits*) Everything's in order in heaven and on earth. All the signs are in place. The timing is perfect... It's time.

WAR It's been a long wait.

PEST Tell me about it! But I have to say, I've been so busy I've hardly noticed. But you know what that's like, don't you? I've been watching the news lately. You've been going pretty strong yourself!

WAR I do what I can. But I'm not as busy as you'd think.

PEST No?

WAR You'd be surprised. I can hand a lot of stuff off. Warlords, jefes, generals, mad dictators—they're all really happy to take over a solid project. You start a good holy war and it'll run for generations under its own power. I might have to quash a cease-fire now and then, but that's it.

PEST You're so lucky. You can delegate. I can't delegate. I have to be on the ball constantly, watching for treatments and vaccines and I have to be out there coming up with mutant strains and variations. Unbelievable. Do you know that I spend two days a week—two whole days—doing nothing but reading medical journals just to try to keep ahead? Kills me.

WAR You should hire someone.

*She offers him a chicken finger. He takes one, munching on it through his line.*

PEST I tried. There's nothing out there for talent. I got one guy, I thought he'd really be great. Good pedigree, medical school degree, the works. I set this guy up in the lab and after a year—a whole year—the best he could come up with was this acne thing that moves around whenever you try to treat it.

WAR So what did you do?

PEST What could I do? I had to let him go. Gave him a wasting disease and sent him on his way.

WAR Seems fair to me.

PEST Hey, all's fair.... (*He stops, with a big smile*)

WAR Oh, that's funny.

*Pestilence takes another chicken finger and bites into it. He stops and regards it.*

PEST Do you have any idea how many really awful afflictions I could lay on someone with one of these?

WAR Yes I do, and I try not to think about it while I'm eating.

*DEATH enters from L. He is an older man, at least mid-40s, in business dress. He walks with his shoulders slumped forward. His eyes are slightly baggy. He looks for all the world like a man who's on the verge of simply giving up. He's exhausted.*

*Pestilence notices Death and jumps up from the bench. Pointing, he calls out in an announcer-type voice.*

PEST Ladies and gentlemen, unwitting victims of the upcoming Apocalypse, would you please welcome the hardest working man in Armageddon, the Griiiiiiiiiim Reaper!

*Pestilence and War applaud. Death shuffles forward.*

DEATH Yeah. Great. Thanks. A little louder so everyone hears.

PEST What? They're going to believe it? Not real likely.

DEATH You could be a little more discreet. It wouldn't kill you.

PEST Why bother? Watch this.... *(He moves a few steps DR, addressing unseen passers-by)* Excuse me, folks—can I have your attention? Hi, my name is Pestilence and I just wanted to let you know that the end of the world is coming. Today. That's right, the end is nigh—and we mean it this time. *(Indicating Death, War, and himself)* The Horsemen of the Apocalypse, sitting right here. Death and devastation on its way. Repent, for the end is at hand.... Anyone? Anyone? Hello? No? *(Turning back to Death and War)* See? They watch too much TV.

DEATH You're an ass. *(He sits next to War)*

WAR What's wrong with you?

DEATH I'm tired, okay?

WAR *(offering the take-out box)* Have a chicken finger.

DEATH *(pause)* That's not funny. You know I'm a vegetarian.

WAR I haven't seen you in a while. I forgot. *(She eats one)*

DEATH Of course you did.

PEST If you're so damn tired, you should have taken some time off.

DEATH Time off? Are you joking?

PEST Why not? Give the poor mortal suckers a break for a few days.

WAR Heh! Imagine the ruckus that'd cause.

PEST The media would have a field day! "A Day Without Death!" Details at 11!

WAR Every movie channel would run "Death Takes A Holiday" over and over.

PEST That would be funny.

DEATH Oh, yes, and then when I return from my "rest," I've got a tremendous backlog of deaths to catch up with and process, so I've got more work than when I left. I can't leave the office for a minute! Do you have any idea how many people die every day?

PEST A lot?

DEATH More than a lot, thank you. And it's all the "your time has come" type. I've hardly had time for any custom work since the late 1800s. Time off. Indeed. Once this is over, I'll rest.

PEST You'll have to. We all will. We'll be out of work.

WAR That just seems weird, doesn't it?

*(A short, reflective pause)*

WAR I'm going to miss it. Aren't you?

DEATH No.

WAR Not at all?

DEATH No. Not at all. It's gotten so dull, so repetitive. There's nothing new to what we do.

PEST I beg to differ. I was just telling War—

DEATH Set 'em up, knock 'em down. Over and over. It's like an incessant game of ninepins.

WAR Tenpins.

DEATH Excuse me?

WAR It's tenpins now. They don't really play ninepins any more.

DEATH It doesn't—

PEST I love bowling.

WAR I was never crazy about it. I was hooked on bocce for a while, though. I spent some time in Italy around the turn of the last century.

PEST I never played bocce. Is it fun?

WAR It kills time.

DEATH (*a burst*) It's not about bowling! It was an analogy, all right? Forgive me for attempting to exercise a little artistic license. I'm— (*A big sigh*) My point is, no—I'm not going to miss it when it's gone. Being Death is dull.

WAR A deathly bore?

*War and Pestilence laugh.*

DEATH Can we just get started, please?

PEST Skinny's not here yet.

WAR Don't call him that. He hates that.

PEST Well, since he's not around to hear it, what does it matter?

DEATH You've never liked Famine.

PEST I don't mind the guy. It's just...I don't know. He's always been—this is how I see it, anyway—he's always been kind of the weak sister in the group.

WAR "Weak sister"?

PEST No offense.

WAR Offense taken.

PEST All right, look. Lo, he is dreadful in aspect and mankind doth tremble before him, but he's not like you, War, coming on all hellfire and destruction. And he's not like Death, he whom all peoples of the world doth rightly fear. Or even me, o'ertaking them in my myriad guises. I mean, yes, he kills a lot of people, I give him that. But...he's always seemed the lesser of four evils, you know what I'm saying?

DEATH Still, he *is* one of us.

PEST Yes he is but that doesn't mean I have to treat him as an equal.

WAR (*pause*) He *is* kind of boring. You ever have to talk to him at length?

PEST No, thank goodness.

DEATH I have, and I don't think he's that bad.

PEST He clears his throat all the time. It's annoying.

WAR I know! And it's not even like he's just clearing his throat. It's this thing, this sound, like... (*she makes a kind of dry, retching sound like there's something large stuck in her throat*)

PEST Exactly! It makes me feel like I ought to throw the Heimlich on him.