

Life in a Useless Universe

by Matthew Burkholder

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Cast: Henry Jones
Death

Setting: A small ranch style house, not particularly special in any way. There is a bed, Sofa, TV, Dining table, small side table with a goldfish in a bowl. There are a few pictures scattered around on the walls. Not necessarily all straight.

Scene 1: September 18th. Lights come up on Henry sitting at the dining table finishing supper. The lights begin to flicker, then dim, then go out. Suddenly Death appears dramatically but unnoticed by Henry. Lights return to normal. Death wanders through the house unnoticed until after Henry takes his dish to the kitchen and turns to see Death. Henry crosses back to dining table and sits watching Death absentmindedly fiddling with something. Death looks over at Henry, lowers his cowl to reveal a very nice looking boyish face. He smiles at Henry, Henry does not return the smile, becomes irritated, folds arms

HENRY: I don't mean to interrupt, but if it's all the same to you, I'm ready to go.

DEATH: Good for you. (picks up a deck of cards and begins shuffling.)

HENRY: I'd like to know what you think you're doing.

DEATH: It's called a card trick. Pick a card. Any card.

HENRY: What for?

DEATH: Just pick a card. (Henry does so) Now look at it closely.

HENRY: (pauses, looks at card, at Death, at card, and back at Death) Queen of spades.

DEATH: Don't tell me! Did I ask you what it was? No, I didn't. I said "look at it closely", so you would

remember what it was. Now I'll have to start all over.
(they sit in silence while Death prepares trick) Pick
another one, and this time don't tell me what it is!
(Henry does so as Death sneaks a peek at the bottom card
Now put it on the bottom of the deck and don't let me see
it. Okay, I'm going to shuffle them up, then flip them
over one card at a time and tell you which card was yours
(flips cards) Is that it?

HENRY: (hesitantly) Yes. (Death howls with delight)
What does it mean?

DEATH: (Shuffling cards) Huh?

HENRY: What does the card mean?

DEATH: Mean? It doesn't mean anything. It's a card
trick, a really good card trick, the only one I know.
Wanna see it again?

HENRY: No. (deck is shoved in his face, he takes a card.
Same procedure all through, Death chuckling the whole
time)

DEATH: Is that your card? (smiling broadly)

HENRY: No.

DEATH: That's not your card?!

HENRY: No.

DEATH: That's really not your card?

HENRY: I told you that's not is. I picked the ten of
hearts. That's not the ten of hearts. So what happens
now? I don't get to go with you? I have to live forever!
What? Tell me! (Through this Death has been shuffling)

DEATH: Okay, try it again.

HENRY: I don't want to.

DEATH: Come on.

HENRY: I said no.

DEATH: Come on, just pick a card.

(defeated Henry picks one. Lights fade)

Scene 2 Lights back up immediately, same positions, but Henry is exhausted. They have just finishing the trick again. Death holds out the deck still fresh as a daisy.

HENRY: No! Enough is enough. We've done this stupid trick twenty times. What's this card trick business got to do with anything? If you're going to take me, take me Heaven or hell, I really don't care. Just stop with that stupid trick!

DEATH: It's not a stupid trick. (pause) You just can't figure it out.

HENRY: Okay, it's not a stupid trick. Now let's get going, all right?

DEATH: Get going? Get going where?

HENRY: How should I know!? You're the one who came for me. You're the one who's supposed to know where. Stop playing dumb and let's get on with it. (pause) Please. (longer pause) Well?

DEATH: Well what? I didn't come to take you away. You aren't going to die now.

HENRY: (wearily) Then why have you come?

DEATH: I'm here because I'm bored and you looked like an interesting person to be with.

(Henry stares at Death. Lights fade)

Scene 3: September 21st. Lights up. Henry is in the kitchen making some soup and a sandwich. Death is close at hand watching. A few days have passed.

DEATH: How do you know how much water to add to the soup without looking at the directions?

HENRY: I don't know, it's the same amount every time. On can of soup, one can of water. Get it?

DEATH: I get it. (pause) Why do you put butter on a sandwich with meat?

HENRY: Because I like it that way. Why do you ask the same question night after night?

DEATH: I don't know. I just thought you were supposed to use mayonnaise or something, that's all.

HENRY: You can use whatever you want! I like butter on my sandwich so I butter it. Is there a problem with that?

DEATH: No. (Henry pours soup into bowl) It just seems like it would taste terrible.

HENRY: Well it doesn't! (takes soup and sandwich and storms to the dining table. Death makes a face at the butter then follows to sit across from Henry)

DEATH: What are you going to do now?

HENRY: I'm going to eat my dinner and then watch some TV . . . do you mind?

DEATH: I don't mind. I just thought you might want to do something different. I've seen TV before. It isn't very interesting.

HENRY: Too bad. You said you came because you thought I looked interesting. This is about as interesting as I get. First I eat, then I watch TV, then I get tired and go to bed. I hope you can stand the excitement.

DEATH: Why don't you tell me a story? You look like you know a lot of good stories.

HENRY: I don't know any stories! If you think I really believe you came here to hang around, you've got another thing coming. Death doesn't just visit a man because he's bored! Death doesn't just stop by to catch the ball game. Death comes to get you. Well here I am. Come and get me.

I'm ready. I won't fight you. You won't get any stories out of me. I don't have any to tell. Do you hear me? Eighty-six worthless, boring years. I've lived eighty six years. You would think in that time I would have a story or two to tell, but I don't. Life never gave me anything worth telling. So stop wasting your time and take me. Come on, do us both a favor. Take me. I'll never be more ready.

DEATH: (sobered) You have no idea what death is, my friend. Absolutely no idea. (sees a little globe with the Eiffel Tower in it. When shaken it snows.) Does it really snow in Paris?

HENRY: How should I know?

DEATH: Well, you've got this thing here. I figured . . .

HENRY: I have no idea. Does it snow in Heaven? Does it snow in Hell?

DEATH: How should I know?

HENRY: How should you . . .? You're Death! That's how! You're supposed to come from the world beyond this one. Are you telling me that you don't even remember what the weather was like?

DEATH: It's not like that. I'm just a guide. One single guide among millions. All we do is meet the deceased and take them to the bright light. Where they go from there is anyone's guess. Heaven, Hell, . . . either way I've never been there, so I don't know if they get much snowfall. I don't know if they even exist, and quite frankly I'm tired of being asked! When I pick someone up I walk them down the tunnel of light and that's all I get: "Am I going to Heaven? Am I going to Hell?" Sometimes I could just scream.

HENRY: What about that bright light you talked about, what's in that?

DEATH: I don't know. All I know is that it hurts your eyes if you aren't careful. A lot of people are so busy

pumping me about Heaven and Hell they forget to cover their eyes and they get blinded. Remember that, when you reach the bright light, cover your eyes.

HENRY: So you really don't know if there's a Heaven or Hell?

DEATH: I really don't know. Let's do something! Do you have scrabble?

Henry looks away and Death shakes the globe to watch it snow in Paris. Henry eats his dinner as Death looks around the room and settles on the fishbowl. He crosses to the bowl and looks in at the fish.

DEATH: What's its name?

HENRY: Hm? I don't know. It doesn't have a name.

DEATH: Of course it has a name. It has to have a name. What is it?

HENRY: It does not have to have a name. It's a fish. Fish don't need names.

DEATH: It's your pet isn't it? (Henry shrugs) Everyone names their pets. What did you get a fish for if you didn't have a name in mind?

Henry crosses to the kitchen with his bowl.

HENRY: I didn't get it. The woman next door gave it to me so I would have some company. (looks at fish) I didn't want the stupid thing. I took it so she'd leave me alone.

DEATH: She didn't tell you its name?

HENRY: NO! She didn't tell me its name!!! Maybe she did I don't remember. She's a nice woman but crazy. The kind you don't really listen to. (pause) One of those ladies that gives people fish.

DEATH: Why don't we think up a name? I never got to name anything before.

HENRY: Would you drop it! It's not important to name a fish! They don't come when you call them, and even if they did, what possible reason could you have for calling a FISH!

DEATH: Well, you might just want to say "hello"

HENRY: Look, it's a nameless fish and it will stay a nameless fish. Why can't you stop fooling around and just take me away.

DEATH: Why don't we call him Darryl?

HENRY: Why don't we forget this conversation?

DEATH: Everybody needs a name. How about Sven?

HENRY: (barely able to control himself) Look, I don't care what you call it! it's a fish. A stupid, meaningless goldfish, it has no life. It has no significance whatsoever! Look at it? What does its day consist of? Hm? Eating, swimming through the castle, and looking out the "Big Window." That's it. That's its entire life! So why does it need a name? Hell, it doesn't even need the castle. I paid two and a half dollars for that damned thing and the stupid fish hardly ever uses it! Two and a half ... Forget it. I don't even know why I'm arguing with you.

DEATH: (softly) It's a nice castle. It would be nice if everyone had a castle like that. (pause) How about Bob

HENRY: How about letting the subject drop?

DEATH: Bob is a good name for a fish.

HENRY: (Henry goes to his chair with a newspaper) Okay, what if it's a girl?

DEATH: Oooo, good point. All right, what do you think of Regina?

HENRY: Regina? Regina the fish? Well, Mr. Death, I think Regina is about the stupidest name I've ever heard for a goldfish. That's what I think.

DEATH: Well, you aren't being much of a help.

HENRY: No, no I'm not. Because I don't care. Do you understand? I don't care.

DEATH: If you don't care, then I'm going to call him Bob. Is that all right?

HENRY: Yes. It's fine with me! Bob! Bob the fish! What a lovely magical name!

DEATH: I've never named a fish before. That was fun.

HENRY: Oh yes. Great fun. Really livened up the day, let me tell you. Come to think of it none of the furniture has been named either. Why don't you give it a shot. How about "George the Couch"?

DEATH: Couches and chairs don't need names.

HENRY: (on a rampage) "Paul the Lamp", "Dan the Table".
.

DEATH Neither to lamps or tables, but fish do. (Henry stops and goes to the kitchen) Hello, Bob. (Henry shoots him a glare)

Lights fade

Scene 4: September 25. Henry is curled up in bed in a fetal position. Death is looking at Bob. Lights up slowly as the morning sun rises. Henry mumbles to himself as he rises and crosses to kitchen. One week has passed

DEATH: Good morning.

HENRY: (startled then calm) You're still here.

DEATH: Where would I go?

HENRY: I don't know, I thought maybe you'd be gone. I guess it was just wishful thinking.

DEATH: What are we doing today?

HENRY: I don't know about you, but I'm going to eat my breakfast and read the newspaper. (Henry goes about his business as Death watches) Would you like some corn flakes?

Death shakes his head "no" and Henry shrugs. Henry crosses to door, gets paper, gets breakfast and sits at the dining table. Death gets out of his way then goes to door, looks out and comes back to stand behind Henry reading the paper over his shoulder.

HENRY: Do you mind?

DEATH: No. (pause) Mind what?

HENRY: Mind not reading over my shoulder. I can not tolerate you reading over my shoulder. It's unnerving. You can't imagine how unnerving it is to have Death reading over your shoulder.

DEATH: Sorry. (Crosses away. Passing fish bowl he pause momentarily) Hi, Bob.

HENRY: All right! That's it. After three and a half weeks you have finally done it. You've driven me insane. You say you didn't come here to take me away. You said you came because I looked interesting. Where in the world you got that idea I'll never know. And now you're talking to my lousy goldfish! Well, I can't take it anymore! So make a decision, either take me now or leave me for good.

DEATH: I think it's your face.

HENRY: WHAT?

DEATH: It's your face. You have an interesting face. A face that looks like it knows a lot of good stories.

HENRY: Why do I even bother?

DEATH: You don't think you're interesting?

HENRY: No.

DEATH: Why?

HENRY: Why? I . . . I don't know. Because nothing interesting ever happened to me.

DEATH: Really?

HENRY: Unless you know something I don't. (he goes back to his breakfast as Death crosses to get an old photo album that's hidden away.)

DEATH: What's this?

HENRY: That's . . .I. . . Where did you find that???

DEATH: It was hidden away somewhere.

HENRY: Is that what you do at night? While I'm asleep? Snoop around my home?

DEATH: Mm-hmm.

HENRY: I'll never sleep again. (Death pages through the book, stops and points out a picture to Henry. Henry almost smiles) Close the book.

DEATH: See, you are interesting, you just don't want anyone else to know because then you'd have to share yourself with them, and you would rather shut yourself out from the world than do that. What about that neighbor lady that gave you Bob? Whatever happened to her?

HENRY: I don't know. She came over a couple more times, then she just stopped. I guess she found someone else to bug.

DEATH: Does she still live there?

HENRY: I guess so. I see her every now and then on my way to the store.

DEATH: Do you say hi?

HENRY: Humph.

DEATH: Do you?

HENRY: Yes, I say hi.

DEATH: See. That's interesting. I didn't know that about you.

HENRY: Yeah, well. Look, I have to go to the store.

DEATH: Say "Hi" for me.

HENRY: Don't give me that you spook. I need to get some things. Do you want anything? (Death shakes his head "no") Right. Well, I'll be back in a while. You do whatever you want; talk to the fish, read Charlie Brown watch Wheel of Fortune. Goodbye.

DEATH: Better take your coat.

HENRY: What?

DEATH: I said you'd better take your coat.

HENRY: Why?

DEATH: It's going to rain.

HENRY: How do you know? (Death shrugs his shoulders) Okay, okay, it's going to rain. I don't want to get into it. (mumbling under his breath as he puts on his coat) He's Death. Doesn't know about Heaven or Hell, but it's going to rain today. (out loud to Death) I'm wearing my coat. Goodbye.

DEATH: Bye

Lights fade out.

Scene 6 Lights up dimly. Sound of rain and thunder. Death is sitting in a chair rocking slowly back and forth. Henry enters with groceries and begins unloading them. At some point he pulls out fish food.

DEATH: (meekly) I didn't do it. It wasn't my fault, it's never my fault, but no one ever believes me. I don't

really care if you believe me or not, but I swear it wasn't my fault. His time was up, that's all. His time . . . but you won't believe me. No I'm to blame. I must be. I'm Death, right? The one who takes everyone away. I'm the one who creates so much sadness in the world. Go on, admit it. That's what you think. Don't lie. (pause) You know, no one really believes that the doctor gives a baby life, just because he delivers it. It's natural. It's part of living, but he still gets the credit. Death is part of living too. It's just the reverse process, the end of the cycle, but everyone pegs me for the scapegoat. Well, I'm not to blame. Especially not in this case. Heck, I'm the one who named the darned thing in the first place. Not you, me! I gave your pet a name. You didn't even care enough to help me, but now you're going to blame me because he's dead. Now you're going to point fingers just like everyone else. (Nearly hysterical) Well, I didn't do it. Do you understand? It just happened. Goldfish die. They always die. Nobody knows why, they just do. Everything dies. Bugs, plants, animals, people and fish. Particularly goldfish. They are the most mortal fish in the world. (pause) I was the one who named him. I was the one.

A long beat passes. Death sits on the bed sadly and Henry looks at the now empty fishbowl suddenly struck by how much he was used to having that fish as company.

HENRY: It was just a little fish.

DEATH: I know, but you still blame me.

HENRY: No, I don't.

DEATH: Yes, you do.

HENRY: (more determined) No, I don't.

DEATH: Yes.

HENRY: I don't! I promise you!

DEATH: See, you're yelling, you blame me. Everyone blame me.

HENRY: Well, they only blame you because they don't know any better. Don't let it bother you. You know it's not true.

DEATH: I can't help it, it does bother me. It's a lonely feeling when people are scared of you. You can't just push it out of your mind and pretend it doesn't matter. Do you know what it's like to walk alongside someone who's terrified of you? It's awful.

HENRY: Why don't you just not show up when they die? Let them find the way on their own.

DEATH: Are you kidding? I have to show up. They'd never find the light by themselves.

HENRY: I don't mean to kick you when you're down, but I don't expect they're ever going to love you.

DEATH: I know, I know. But it gets to me sometimes. Just once I'd like someone to take my hand and walk with me down that final corridor without being afraid. I'd love for someone, anyone, to look at me. Talk to me. Tell me what they liked most about their life. Tell me about their hobbies, their family. Their last vacation! I'd love to hear about somebody's last vacation! But no one talks to me, they just want to know about heaven or hell, and when I tell them I don't know, they clam up and treat me like I'm lying or something.

HENRY: Why don't you show them your card trick to liven things up a little?

DEATH: No, you were right, it was a stupid trick. (pause then admits) I used to try it on them, but they didn't care. People who've just died don't care much about a card trick.

HENRY: I guess dead folks aren't much fun.

DEATH: They aren't. That's why it baffles me to see live people who wish they were dead. Why are you so set on going with me Henry Jones?

(silence)

No, I didn't expect you to answer. No one I've ever asked has a good reason to die.

HENRY: (after a pause) I guess I'm just tired of it all. Tired of sitting, tired of standing, tired of eating, tired of watching TV.

DEATH: So you feel you are ready to die because you are tired.

HENRY: I feel ready to die because I'm paralyzed, paralyzed with age.

DEATH: I see. You're paralyzed. Paralyzed and alone. Just a helpless victim with no one to care for you, and you think that dying will solve everything.

HENRY: It couldn't be much worse.

DEATH: How Dare You!?! How dare you presume to my face? What on Earth makes you think that death can't be worse than life? Where in the world did you come up with the notion that things in the afterlife are more exciting than things are here? Have you been listening to me? Do you think I enjoy the hereafter? Do you think I enjoy waiting in that tunnel to nowhere? That's what I do you know, wait. You think you're paralyzed? You think you know what fear is? You should see their faces when they get to the end of the tunnel and look into that light. You should see the terror in their eyes. It's the only time any of them actually want to touch me. They don't even realize they're doing it, they're so scared. They grab my robe and hold it tight. They cling to me, to me! Death. Sometimes they look so petrified that it's all I can do to keep from pulling them close, wrapping my arms around them and telling them it's okay to be scared. That everyone is scared. They loathe me all the way down that tunnel but in the end they cling to me. There is nothing more terrifying than that light, and no one wants to go in it alone. Even if it means bringing Death along.

HENRY: And you really don't know what's in that light?

DEATH: No. No one knows.

HENRY: And there's no divine answer for why I'm here? No revelation?

DEATH: Oh, yes, there's a major revelation. When they reach the end of the tunnel they all say, "Oh God, I'm Dead."

HENRY: I was kind of hoping for some kind of explanation for everything.

DEATH: I'm not saying that there isn't, but I'm not saying that there is. But if there is, you've got to step into the light to find out, and you had better be pretty damn sure when the time comes you want to find out.

HENRY: (sighs) You really didn't come to take me, did you?

DEATH: No, I didn't come to take you away. I told you before, I just needed a break from everything. I wanted to go somewhere where there was life, color, and laughter.

HENRY: Why didn't you go to Paris then?

DEATH: It doesn't work that way. I'd love to go to Paris but it's not in my district, and you can't just go where you're not assigned. It's kind of like being a salesman. But if I ever did get to go you know what I'd do? I'd go to the Eiffel tower right after it snowed, on a day that would look just like the scene in that little globe.

HENRY: I'd find a patch of clean white snow, lie on my back, and make snow angels all around the tower. Big beautiful snow angels. (pause) What if it doesn't snow in Paris?

DEATH: It must snow. Otherwise why would they make it snow in that globe?

HENRY: They make snow scenes like that out of every tourist attraction. Even places where it never snowed before. It's just a gimmick. It has nothing to do with climate.

DEATH: (in shock) You're joking.

HENRY: I'm not.

DEATH: You're kidding.

HENRY: It's no big secret. Ask anybody.

DEATH: Why would they do that?

HENRY: I have no idea. I guess that's just how folks like to see things, all covered up with snow.

(Silence. The two sit facing the audience - either on the floor or on the sofa - studying an imaginary still life of a basket of fruit, broken loaf of bread with a fish beside it on a table with flowers.)

DEATH: That's a wonderful painting. Except for the fish.

HENRY: It's very old.

DEATH: But still good.

HENRY: I don't know about that. I'm not one to know good art from bad. I bought it because I thought it looked pretty, that's all.

DEATH: It does look pretty. But it would look better without that fish lying there.

HENRY: I like the fish there. It kind of makes the whole thing more real. I don't know.

DEATH: (Studies it, now certain) No. It still doesn't work for me. The flowers are nice, the fruit is nice, the bread . . . but that fish is just plain ugly.

HENRY: What is it with you and fish? (pause) Tell me seriously, why did you come here? You must have known an old man like me would have nothing to offer.

DEATH: Maybe if there were two fish. Maybe if there were one on the other side to kind of balance things, or else right alongside the first one. Then they'd look like a

couple, like they were meant to be there, even if they didn't belong. Couples always look better in paintings. (shifts position) Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know much about art either.

HENRY: You haven't answered my question. Why are you here?

DEATH: I don't know, it might just be the frame

HENRY: Am I dead already?

DEATH: No, you're not dead.

HENRY: Then answer my question. Why are you here?

DEATH: I came because I needed the company and you looked like you could use some too. It's no fun being alone, truly alone. I should know. No one is lonelier than death. It's part of my job so I have to endure it. But you don't. You have the entire world right outside. You can help yourself to anything you want, instead of sitting around felling sorry for yourself because things aren't going your way. Because you're old and have no stories to tell.

HENRY: I don't feel sorry for myself.

DEATH: Oh, yes, you do!

HENRY: No I don't.

DEATH: You do!

HENRY: I do not! (beat) I'm arguing with Death.

DEATH: If I had never come, what would you be doing now

HENRY: I'd be watching TV, reading the newspaper, eating. I'd be waiting for you.

DEATH: And I would be waiting for you, or some other poor soul. You want to know why I came? I came because am tired of waiting. I wanted to do something. I wanted to see someone. I wanted, if just for a short time, to

live.

HENRY: Was it everything you dreamt it would be?

DEATH: No. But I doubt Paris would be either. I only hope that death is everything you dream it will be.

HENRY: You really are alone in that tunnel aren't you?

DEATH: Yes. I am really alone. You aren't alone Henry Jones. But all day long you sit here and convince yourself that you're the only one who's suffering. There are millions of you out there Henry Jones. You just don't see them because you don't want to. Because you'd know you weren't the only one. You'd know you weren't alone. You sit around and let everything pass you by. Then you curl up into a tiny, pathetic ball of woe and wish you were dead because you don't have anything. You think the things will be better when you die? Maybe they will. But then again, maybe my tunnel is as good as it gets. The most exciting place in the afterlife. Perhaps there's nothing to be scared of. Perhaps it's only light, nothing more. If you think the universe is useless, then it's useless, and it's going to remain useless every minute of the rest of your useless life until they drag your bones away and toss them in the earth. So look around, and be sure to take some notes, because when we meet again in my tunnel on our way to the light, I'll want to hear all about it. I'll want you to tell me the secret of living so long in a world of futility. Until that day comes, Henry Jones, au revoir.

HENRY: What?

DEATH: That's French for ...

HENRY: I know that. I mean, that's it? You're leaving

DEATH: That's it.

HENRY: Will I ever see you again?

DEATH: Of course you will.

HENRY: But . . .well, what am I supposed to do now?

DEATH: I think the first step should be obvious, step out of this tunnel and step into the light.

(Death picks up scythe and exits as dramatically as his entrance. Henry studies the house; the picture, the Eiffel Tower globe, TV, empty fish bowl. Puts on coat and scarf and exits. Lights up to full then out)

The End