

SAINT PETER AT THE GATE

A One-Act Play in Three Scenes by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ST. PETER	INDETERMINATE AGE, HE APPEARS IN A DIFFERENT COSTUME AND PERSONA IN EACH OF THE THREE SCENES.
VIRGINIA	AGE 70, DRESSED FOR CHURCH, WEARING A SILLY, OVERSIZED HAT.
KEVIN	AGE 25, AN UNSHAVEN, HEAVYSET MAN WITH A BAD HAIRCUT
BRAD	AGE 40, A CONFIDENT, SHARPLY DRESSED ATTORNEY
DORIS	AGE 30, BRAD'S WIFE
SETTING:	<p>THE PEARLY GATE, WHICH CONSISTS OF A DOOR FRAME WITH A CURTAIN OF DANGING STRANDS OF PEARLS. A WHITE LIGHT ILLUMINATES THE PEARLS.</p> <p>THE GNARLY GATE, WHICH CONSISTS OF A DOOR FRAME WITH A CURTAIN OF DANGLING SNAKES. A FIERY GLOW ILLUMINATES THE SNAKES.</p> <p>A THRONE-LIKE CHAIR, BEHIND A LARGE DESK, IS SITUATED BETWEEN THE TWO GATES. AN ENORMOUS <i>BOOK OF LIFE</i> SITS ATOP THE DESK</p>
TIME:	THE AFTERLIFE

SAINT PETER AT THE GATE

Scene I

SAINT PETER, DRESSED IN A WHITE ROBE, WITH A SHOCK OF WHITE HAIR, SITS ON THE THRONE BETWEEN THE PEARLY GATE AND THE GNARLY GATE, BOTH OF WHICH ARE ILLUMINATED.

VIRGINIA

(Enters in a rush, only sees the Pearly Gate.)

It, it is Heaven! Oh, thank you Lord, thank you Jesus!

(She twirls and dances toward the Pearly Gate, hand on a big, silly hat to keep it from falling off.)

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

(She tries to step through the gate, but an invisible barrier stops her. She tries harder, but bounces back and falls on the floor. She stands up, annoyed, and adjusts her hat. Notices SAINT PETER for the first time.)

VIRGINIA

Who are you?

SAINT PETER

I am the keeper of the gate, Virginia. I am -- SAINT PETER.

VIRGINIA

(Eyes him like some heathen miscreant)

I don't care if you're Saint Peter, Paul and Mary; I am walking through them Pearly Gates.

(The Gnarly Gate flares and hisses like a den of snakes.)

VIRGINIA

What, what's that ugly thing?

SAINT PETER

Behold the Gnarly Gate, Virginia. Many who stand before me walk the fiery path.

VIRGINIA

Um mmm, not me. I've earned my ticket to Paradise, and I'm going first class.

(VIRGINIA stomps towards the Pearly Gate, determined to enter. She presses her hat to her head, but can't get through the invisible barrier. The Gnarly Gate flares and moans. VIRGINIA turns to the Audience for a beat, silently pleading with them. Then she stands before SAINT PETER.)

VIRGINIA

You better check that old book of yours, Saint Peter, because I know I'm going to Heaven.

(SAINT PETER opens the Book of Life and starts flipping through it.)

VIRGINIA

If you look there you'll see I gave up my whole life to take care of Momma, bless her soul. And when Momma finally passed on, I took care of another old lady, for over twenty years.

SAINT PETER

Mrs. Bernstein?

VIRGINIA

That's right, Miz Bernstein. I gave that sweet lady ten different pills every single day. I cleaned up when she messed herself and never made her feel embarrassed 'bout it. Look it up, Saint Peter, look it up in your book. Miz Bernstein used to call me her Angel from Heaven.

SAINT PETER

Yes, I see it right here. It says you looked after her.

VIRGINIA

With eyes like an eagle.

SAINT PETER

And honored her.

VIRGINIA

Like she was my own poor mother. And every year I helped with her annual yard sale, for the orphanage.

SAINT PETER

Is that where you got your hat, Virginia?

VIRGINIA

(Fiddles with her hat.)

This old thing? Why yes, I suppose so. Momma used to have a hat just like it.

SAINT PETER

Thou shalt not steal, Virginia.

VIRGINIA

It's just a stupid hat. Nobody woulda bought it. Miz Bernstein woulda give it to me.

SAINT PETER

But you didn't ask.

No. VIRGINIA

Thou shalt not steal. SAINT PETER

VIRGINIA
 (Slowly, reluctantly removes her hat and stares at it.)
 I never even wore it. It looked so stupid on her. I used to tell her, but she was stubborn. I couldn't stand it. I threw it out when she died, but when I saw another one just like it...I don't know why I stole the damn thing.

SAINT PETER
 You felt guilty about it?

VIRGINIA
 Every day of my life I would look at this damn hat, hangin' on Mama's bedpost, totally useless. But I couldn't get rid of it. You see, I was responsible.

(She whacks the hat against her knees.)
 I had to keep it dusted. It was always so damn dusty, like it sucked up all the dust in the room. God, I hate this damn hat, I hate it so much, I love it so much, oh, God help me!
 (She sinks to her knees, clutching the hat. SAINT PETER gives her a moment to compose herself.)

SAINT PETER
 Do you remember how you died, Virginia?

VIRGINIA
 (Nods her head)
 I was driving to Church, in my new car. I was late. Never got the hang of that car.

SAINT PETER
 The light turned red.

VIRGINIA
 I meant to jam on the brakes, but the engine revved and the car bolted -- oh my God!

SAINT PETER
 Three other people died in that accident.

(VIRGINIA gasps and drops her hat. The Gnarly gate flares and hisses. Still on her knees, VIRGINIA turns to the Audience, hands clasped.)

VIRGINIA

Please don't let him cast me into them Gnarly Gates. I know I got a lot of sins. I know I'm just a foolish old lady. But once, just once, I wanna see what Mama's face looks like when it ain't ugly with pain. Please, just once...

(She pauses for a moment, then turns back to SAINT PETER.)

VIRGINIA

Please, Saint Peter. Please, please, please...

SAINT PETER

Virginia, you can walk through the Pearly Gates anytime you want. It was only your damn hat that didn't fit.

(The Gnarly Gate lets out a groan of disappointment.)

VIRGINIA

I can see Mama?

SAINT PETER

She's waiting for you. Miss Bernstein, too.

(Heavenly trumpets sound. VIRGINIA struggles to her feet and walks toward the Pearly Gate. She parts the strands of pearls and steps through as lights fade to black.)

Scene II

THE STAGE IS DARK. SOMEONE IS WALKING BACK AND FORTH, OBVIOUSLY LOST.

KEVIN

(Shouting.)

Hello? Am I on a spaceship? Is this an alien abduction? Can we just get the anal probe over with so I can go home?

(Pause.)

Oh, shit. I think I'm dead. I sure as hell hope this isn't Hell.

(A rimshot - Badum-CHING!)

Lights rise to reveal SAINT PETER, sitting on a drum set between the Pearly Gate, which makes a heavenly sound, and the Gnarly Gate, which hisses. The chair, desk and Book of Life are gone. SAINT PETER is dressed as a hack comedian, chomping on a big cigar.)

SAINT PETER

So these three married couples die and they're standing before my gate. I say to the first guy, a real boozehound, 'when you were alive, all you ever thought about was drinking. You liked drinking so much, you even married a girl named Brandy.'

(Badum-CHING!)

So I sent them both to Hell. Then I say to the next guy, a real porker, 'when you were alive, all you ever thought about was eating. You liked eating so much, you even married a girl named Cookie.'

(Badum-CHING!)

So I sent them both to Hell. Now the third couple is really nervous. The guy turns to his wife and says, 'Titty, I think we're in trouble!'

(Badum-CHING!)

KEVIN

I think it's Fanny.

SAINT PETER

Thanks, I think it's funny, too.

KEVIN

No, not funny, Fanny. The wife's name is Fanny. The guy turns to his wife and says, Fanny, I think we're in trouble. Not Titty. Nobody is named Titty.'

So now everyone's a comedian?

SAINT PETER

It's an old joke.

KEVIN

You have no idea how old.

SAINT PETER

Is your name really Saint Peter?

KEVIN

Hey, it was that or Saint Dick.

SAINT PETER

(Badum-CHING!)

With jokes like that, I think I'd prefer the anal probe.

KEVIN

Then you want my cousin Herb.

SAINT PETER

(Badum-CHING!)

You don't let up, do you? This is crazy. I'm dead, Pete. Dead. Death's not funny. God's not funny.

KEVIN

Of course He is, Kevin. Who's funnier than God? Nobody's smarter, nobody's more powerful, nobody's more all-knowing. Of course He's the funniest. Trust me, I've seen his act...and He kills.

SAINT PETER

(The Gnarly Gates hisses and lets out a hideous laugh.)

I got to be honest, Pete, I figured that when I died I'd just go to the end of the line and try again, you know? Maybe get a break next time, get born into a nice family. Hell, I spent most of my life in group homes and halfway houses, not to mention prison cells.

KEVIN

What, free food and housing and you're still complaining?

SAINT PETER

(a limp rimshot)

Not funny, Pete. So tell me then, what does it take to get into heaven these days? I don't have a resume and I can't pass a drug test. But I must have done something worthwhile. Don't you have some kind of giant Book of Life?

SAINT PETER

(Withdraws a thin comic book from his pocket. KEVIN's face is on the cover.)

Let's see: My Crappy Life and Who Can I Blame? Nice title, Kevin.

(He flips a few pages.)

Now this is interesting. I see you believe in the Trilogy.

KEVIN

I do?

SAINT PETER

Yes. Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll!

(Badum-CHING!)

KEVIN

You got me all wrong, Pete.

SAINT PETER

It says here you got drunk, stole an old lady's car and drove it into a ditch. True?

KEVIN

Pretty much, but in my defense, I didn't know it was an old lady and I didn't know it was a ditch. No Badum CHING, huh? Nothing? Anyway, the old lady turned out to be a Saint. She harassed the judge so much he let me out in half the time. We became really good friends, me and Virginia. Kinda weird friends, you know, but she treated me -- oh, man, Virginia's going to freak out when she finds out I'm dead. I can just see her face, oh man.

(KEVIN addresses the Audience.)

This whole afterlife thing is so freakin' unfair, you know? I never had a chance. My mom was like a, a doormat at a shoe-shit factory. And my father refused to acknowledge I even existed.

(KEVIN turns back to SAINT PETER.)

You think that's fair, Pete?

SAINT PETER

(Wiggles his fingers like he's playing a small sting instrument.)

You know what this is, Kevin? Heaven's smallest harp.

KEVIN

(Gives SAINT PETER a flying middle finger.)

You know what this is, Pete? Heaven's smallest Angel. Go ahead, send me to Hell. I don't care.

(KEVIN walks toward the Gnarly Gate. It hisses and flares. He stops and reconsiders.)

KEVIN

You know, I never really hurt anyone, Pete. And I was trying to improve myself. I'm down to one six-pack a day, I tried broccoli once, and I was seriously thinking I should stop having sex with my landlord's wife. I had potential. Virginia saw it.

(KEVIN faces the Audience)

I was on my way to meet her, but some idiot ran a red light. I swerved, but this little punk on a skateboard was crossing the street. The light was red, I swear. It was the kid's fault.

(KEVIN turns back to SAINT PETER.)

Drove into a freakin' brick wall to avoid the little jerk. Probably some spoiled brat.

SAINT PETER

Not so spoiled, Kevin. Truth is, he lives in a violent home, with a mother who's a doormat, and a father who refuses to even acknowledge his existence.

KEVIN

Wow. I should have done him a favor and run over his ass. Probably grow up and assassinate the Pope or something.

SAINT PETER

Actually, when he grows up he's going to become a wealthy doctor and open a chain of free medical clinics.

KEVIN

Oh. Well. Thanks for sucking the life out of my sob story. Okay, Pete, you win. Goodbye Pearly Gates

(He walks toward The Gnarly Gate.)

Hello Hell.

(The Gnarly Gate hisses.)

SAINT PETER

When he's fifty he'll donate the entire wing of a hospital in your name.

KEVIN

(Stops.)

What? Why?

SAINT PETER

He'll never forget how you saved his life. How you kept him from turning into -- you.

(The Gnarly Gate groans with disappointment. The Pearly Gate brightens and plays a heavenly tune.)

KEVIN

That's a good thing, right? Hell, I'm like a Saint. I'm Mother Theresa on wheels.

SAINT PETER

Oh, Kevin, God is going to love joking around with you. He's about to come on and you don't want to miss His act. Go ahead, step through the Pearly Gate, Kevin. Be sure and tip your waitress.

9.

(SAINT PETER starts a drum roll. KEVIN moves cautiously toward the Pearly Gate.)

KEVIN

This isn't a joke?

(SAINT PETER shakes his head and continues the drum roll. KEVIN pauses at the entrance.)

KEVIN

You're not messing with my mind?

(VIRGINIA suddenly steps through the Pearly Gate from the other side and takes KEVIN's arm.)

VIRGINIA

Come on, Kevin, before that fool changes his mind.

(She pulls KEVIN through the Pearly Gate. A rimshot as lights fade to black.)

Scene III

A COUPLE BICKERING IN THE DARK.

BRAD

Doris, will you please just shut up. Don't make any statements they can use against us.

DORIS

Me? You're the one who said only idiots believe in life after death.

BRAD

I didn't say it exactly like that, Doris, and that's exactly the kind of statement I just told you not to make. I'm begging you, Doris -- please -- just follow my lead.

DORIS

You may be a hotshot lawyer, Brad, but you can't bullshit your way into Heaven.

BRAD

Doris, honey, you have no idea how good I can bullshit.

(Lights rise. SAINT PETER is dressed in a judge's robe and wig. A laptop computer sits on his desk. Both Gates are dark. He addresses the Audience.)

SAINT PETER

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this is the case of Heavenly Judgment versus Brad and Doris. Please pay close attention and remember -- this trial is not a matter of life and death, it's a matter of eternal life,
(The Pearly Gates are illuminated.)

or eternal death.

(The Gnarly Gates hiss and flare.)

BRAD

(Surveys the Audience.)

Okay, I can work with this. Mostly women, middle class, a few blue collar workers, some overdressed highbrows.

DORIS

(Falls to her knees and begs the Audience)

I throw myself on the mercy of the jury.

BRAD

(Yanks Doris to her feet.)

Get up, Doris, you're embarrassing me. Your honor, I will be representing my wife and I'm prepared to defend her against all charges.

DORIS

Me? You're the one who needs defending. You're the one who cheated on his income taxes.

SAINT PETER

Is that true, Brad?

BRAD

Uh, yes, your Honor. And thank you, Doris, for bringing that to the Court's attention. I do, in fact, admit to fudging the numbers a little. But who was I really cheating? The IRS? That's like cheating the Devil. And if I'm cheating the Devil, then I'm working for God. You should thank me for it.

SAINT PETER

Hmm, while cheating the IRS isn't considered a spiritual felony, it doesn't make you hero. But it was a felony to make your wife quit Church.

DORIS

I loved that church. Everyone was so kind --

BRAD

It was a cult, Doris! They thought Jesus was going to return in a spaceship, riding a Unicorn.

DORIS

Maybe he is.

(to SAINT PETER)

Is he?

BRAD

Sure he is, Doris. Or maybe you're just so desperate for a little kindness you'll believe anything. Your Honor, it's simple: cults are Satanic. When I dragged Doris out of that dilapidated old church, I was doing God's work. You should thank me, and that's the truth.

SAINT PETER

Is that the truth, Doris?

DORIS

Well, Brad used to tell me he was such a great lawyer he could find a spec of truth on the ass of a lie. So, I don't know. I'm confused.

BRAD

No, you're just confusing the jury. Sweetheart, they don't know me like you do. They might get the wrong impression. They don't know you're my little baby.

DORIS

Speaking of little babies, Brad, why couldn't we have one? Huh Brad? Why?

BRAD

Sweetheart, this is not the time --

SAINT PETER

Answer the question, Brad. Why didn't you want to have a baby with your wife?

BRAD

Why? I don't know. I just -- you're the only baby I ever wanted, Doris, that's all.

(BRAD tries to hug DORIS. She pushes him away. BRAD addresses the Audience.)

I'm just not the fatherly type. My father wasn't the fatherly type. I'm not even cut out to raise a dog, let alone a child. Trust me, I would have been a lousy parent. Doris should thank me we never had children.

DORIS

(to the Audience)

Now I'll never have a child.

BRAD

(to DORIS)

It's for the best.

DORIS

(to BRAD)

Is it? Don't you even care? Don't all men want a child to carry on their name, their blood, their DNA?

(BRAD, with a guilty look, turns away.)

DORIS

What? Brad? No. Don't tell me. You had a child with another woman?

BRAD

I only kept it a secret for your benefit, sweetheart. I knew how awful you would feel, and it was a brief affair, nothing really. It was only out of respect for you that I refused to have anything to do with it.

DORIS

Oh my God, Brad, now I really feel awful.

BRAD

I know. I tried to save you from this. I told the bitch to get an abortion. I told her if she kept it, I wouldn't help. I wouldn't pay, not a dime. And I didn't, all these years. Not a dime of our money. You should at least thank me for that.

DORIS

Was it a boy or girl?

BRAD

Who cares?

A boy.

SAINT PETER

Is he alive? Is he okay?

DORIS

He's dead.

SAINT PETER

Kevin's dead? My son is dead?

BRAD
(Stricken.)

I didn't think you cared.

DORIS

I don't. I don't...

BRAD
(Still in shock.)

Brad and Doris, please turn and face the jury.

SAINT PETER

(BRAD and DORIS face the Audience.)

Brad, do you have any last --?

SAINT PETER

I don't...

BRAD

Doris?

SAINT PETER

(DORIS falls to her knees and starts quietly praying. SAINT PETER addresses the Audience.)

SAINT PETER

The time has come to make a decision. If you have a shadow of doubt, or find a shadow of faith, then you must vote innocent. Otherwise, consider the defendants guilty as Hell. Doris, please rise.

(DORIS stands.)

SAINT PETER

Guilty or innocent?

(SAINT PETER claps and waits for the Audience to join in.)

SAINT PETER

Innocent!

(The Pearly Gates emit a heavenly tune and grow brighter.)

SAINT PETER

Brad, get down on your knees.

(BRAD hesitates, then reluctantly gets on his knees, facing the Audience. He's about to say something. Saint Peter gives him a moment, then shrugs.)

SAINT PETER

Guilty or innocent?

(BRAD starts clapping and encouraging the Audience to join in. It doesn't.)

SAINT PETER

Guilty!

(The Gnarly Gate hisses and flares. BRAD gets to his feet and turns on SAINT PETER.)

BRAD

I'd like to appeal, Your Honor!

SAINT PETER

I gave you a chance, Brad, when you were on your knees. You didn't take it.

DORIS

Do you hear the music, Brad? It's heavenly. And look how bright!

(Mesmerized, DORIS steps toward the Pearly Gate. BRAD covers his face with his arms.)

BRAD

It's too bright!

(BRAD turns away from the Pearly Gate and staggers toward the Gnarly Gate, as if pulled by an invisible chord. He reaches out and grabs hold of DORIS.)

BRAD

Come with me, Doris. Be my baby forever.

(DORIS tries to pull away, but BRAD drags her closer and closer to the Gnarly Gate.)

DORIS

Let go of me, Brad! Let go!

(BRAD is halfway through the Gnarly Gate, DORIS in tow, when she spies Virginia's hat on the floor. She grabs the hat and smacks BRAD hard. He releases DORIS and falls, screaming, through the Gnarly Gate. The sound of something large dropped into a vat of boiling oil.)

DORIS

You should thank me, Brad.

(DORIS tosses Virginia's hat through the Gnarly Gate, then walks to the Pearly Gate and steps through. Both Gates go dark. Only SAINT PETER is illuminated.)

SAINT PETER

(Addresses the Audience.)

So, who's next?

(A spotlight flashes on INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS of the Audience. Fade to black.)

End