

Introduction

Death is one of those things that's been on my mind as of late. Last Christmas, one of my first cousins, once removed, died. She was sixteen, and she died from some kind of inoperable brain tumor. It was a strange time for me, because I didn't know her very well, but I don't think it was until this past February, during my grandfather's funeral, actually, that I think the tragedy of it all truly hit me. My grandfather was ninety when he died, and there, in the column labeled "Preceded in Death," was sixteen-year-old Natalie McMillian. I don't think anyone ever imagines that they'll die before their great-grandparents, but that's life. It can be good. It can be bad. It can be long, and it can be short. Just about the only thing predictable about it is its unpredictability. After slogging through all that, why shouldn't Death himself be a kind-hearted soul cordially welcoming us to our well-deserved nap?

A Visit From Mr. Death

Even though he was only eight, Alex already knew Mr. Death quite well. As such, his arrival at 12:01 in the afternoon on the seventh of December wasn't alarming. It was, however, a disappointment.

"Go away," said Alex after Mr. Death let himself in. When the god didn't step out of the shadowy corner across from the bed, Alex added, "I'm getting better."

It was true. His fever had been much worse yesterday and the day before. The sisters had forbidden any of the other children from visiting him.

Mr. Death finally spoke. "Is that so?" It was a surprisingly low and soft voice for a creature of his size and stature. In his corner, he extended all the way from the floorboards to the wasp nest in the rafters some ten feet above. He reached into his pockets and pulled out a little slip of paper. "In that case, I just want to make sure I didn't make a mistake. Is this 115 Crystal Rivers Avenue?"

Alex's heart sank in his chest. That was the address of the orphanage.

"And is this room 301?"

"Yes."

"Are you Alexander Sebastian Lea?"

"Yes."

Mr. Death didn't say anything more. There was no need. He returned the slip of paper to his pocket.

“I’m getting better!” Alex said. He kept repeating it over and over in his head, as if he could make it come true by thinking it hard enough. What had Sister Anna said this morning? “Don’t worry Alex, I’m sure you’ll be all better by Friday.” That would have been tomorrow.

This sucks.

Mr. Death stepped out of the shadows and took a seat at the foot of the bed. Alex was too upset to be affected by his appearance. Once in the light, Mr. Death actually looked like a god or at least a monster. He was tall, very tall. He had to duck to avoid the beams. Most of his tall, narrow form was hidden beneath a long, black, satin robe. His face was a beautifully painted horse skull with daisies for eyes.

“You’re not afraid of me?” he asked. “Unfortunately most children your age start crying when they see my face.”

Alex glanced up into Mr. Death’s daisy eyes, then back down at the orange and burgundy quilt. “No. I’ve seen you before. You took Nanny from me when I was three.”

She had been in bed when she died. Just like himself, he supposed. The difference was that when she died, he had been there, along with Sofie, and Mama and Daddy. They had all spent her last moments with her. He was alone.

Nanny had never been afraid of Mr. Death. “When I die, he’s going to scoop me up and carry me into the next life just like Jackie did when we married all those years ago,” she had said. Alex wished he had her courage.

Before she passed, Nanny had called Sofie and him to her side for some final advice. Mama was against it because Nanny was very sick, and she didn’t want her babies to catch it too. Nanny scolded her like she was still a little girl, and Mama relented. “Don’t fear Mr. Death,”

Nanny told them. “He may look scary, but I promise you he is a very nice man. That being said, he is still a god, and you will treat him as such. When he comes for you, I want you to be on your best behavior. You will say ‘Yes sir Mr. Death’ and take his hand. No complaints. If I hear that either of you were rude or impolite to him, I will be very, very cross when I see you again.”

She had passed away later that day. Mr. Death had silently made his way through the crowd, cradled her in his arms like a newlywed bride, then carried her over the threshold into the next life. She died with no complaints. Of course, Nanny had been seventy-five, she had lived a full life, and she had a family to remember her after she was gone. Alex was eight, he was supposed to have a full life ahead of him, and he had no one.

Mr. Death looked toward the door. His daisies blinked lethargically. Alex remembered Nanny’s last words: *no complaints*. Well, it was certainly too late for that. *I’m sorry Nanny*.

“It wasn’t just Nanny though,” he said.

Mr. Death glanced at him.

“The next year, you took Mama when she had Baby Oskar. And then you just had to take Baby Oskar too! And then Sofie in the spring? At least you had the common decency to let Daddy slowly drink himself to death over the next two years! I’m on my own because of you!”

Mr. Death’s stupid daisy eyes blinked once more. Rage boiled inside Alex.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” He shouted himself hoarse. Much to his displeasure, the god was not phased. Alex threw off the covers. Again and again, his small fists smashed into the god’s horse skull face. The bone began to chip and crack. Mr. Death sat there on the bed, taking it. By the time Alex had let out all of his anger, the left half of Mr. Death’s face was

smashed in. Bone fragments littered the quilt and his lap. One of the daisies lay limply on the floor.

“You’re Mrs. Abigail’s grandson?” was all he said.

That gave Alex pause. “You knew Nanny?”

“Of course I know her,” said Mr. Death. “I get to know everyone, eventually. From the mightiest king to the lowliest beggar. Regardless of who they were in life, I’m there for them when their time comes. No exceptions.”

“Everyone?” Alex asked.

“No exceptions.”

Alex turned away from Mr. Death. “Isn’t there a war going on? Don’t you have some soldiers you need to comfort? Why are you wasting your time on some worthless orphan?”

Mr. Death picked the daisy up off the ground and returned it to its ruined socket. “I’m a god. I have all the time in the world. Enough time for you, and for the soldiers as well.”

“But why did you have to leave me all alone?”

Mr. Death let out a long sigh and looked down at the floor. The daisy fell out of its socket again. “I’m sorry it had to be this way. I know all about loneliness.”

Alex gawked at him.

Mr. Death laughed. “God of Death,” he said. “Not conducive to making friends. There are a few like your grandmother, but most go into the next life kicking and screaming.”

“So why do it?”

The god did not immediately answer his question. Instead, Mr. Death turned his attention to the rickety end table at the foot of the bed. A family of brass figures sat gathering dust next to

the empty bottles of that new stuff Sister Anna called “Penicillin.” He picked up the effigy of himself and studied it. Apparently disappointed in its craftsmanship, Mr. Death set it down again. Only then did he answer. “Did Mrs. Abigail teach you your scripture?”

“Of course!” To suggest otherwise would have been an affront to Nanny’s honor.

“Then you know I’m the youngest of these twelve. ‘The Lords of Calamity’ I think is your fancy name for us. Since you humans first crawled out of Africa, we’ve been there. Causing trouble, making your lives a waking nightmare. War, my oldest brother, is having a grand old time. Each day, as the soldiers go out to fight, he and his demons cast lots and take bets on who will live and who will die. In the end, it’s my job to collect the broken souls left behind in their wake.

“Of course, I don’t need to tell you that he’s not the only one enjoying himself. Misery found your father. Birth, who claimed your mother and brother, has always been demented. Disease was the one who came for your grandmother and sister. It’s he who cursed you with your condition.”

“I don’t get it! I was healthy on Monday!” Alex said.

“Yes,” said Mr. Death. “It’s a new illness he cooked up. It just appears to be a simple fever at first, so its victims don’t get the treatment they need.”

“Your brother’s a dick,” Alex said.

Mr. Death reached into the folds of his robe and pulled out a small ledger and pen. Making a note in it, he said: “I’ll make sure to tell him at the next family reunion.”

“So is that it?” Alex asked. “You only do this because you pity us?”

Mr. Death returned the ledger and sat there politely with his hands in his lap.

Alex found that he was almost in tears. “Well, I don’t want your pity! People have pitied me all my life. First, it was ‘I’m sorry for your grandmother’s passing,’ then ‘Sorry about your mother’ and then my sister and then my dad! Whenever the couples come by, asking about adoption, they always get this—this look when the sister superior tells them my story. It’s the same look you give a puppy all alone, in an alleyway. It’s like they see me, but they don’t see me. They—they see this puppy. It’s soaking wet there’s mud in its fur, and and it’s so underfed that you can see each of its ribs. People have looked at me like that my entire life and I’m tired! I’m tired of it!”

Alex burst into tears. He curled up into a ball but the only place to rest his head was Mr. Death’s side. Tears streamed down his face and into Mr. Death’s robes, staining them. If the god was bothered by it, he didn’t complain.

“But why?” Alex asked. “Why do I have to be alone? I thought—I thought my friends would at least be here with me! Or at least one of the nurses!” He began to cry a fresh set of tears.

“That’s why I’m here,” said Mr. Death. Alex found something in the words of the ten-foot-tall immortal deity with now half of a horse skull face oddly comforting. “I’m here for as long as you need me to be,” Mr. Death promised.

After some time had passed, Alex asked: “So what’s it like... up there?”

Mr. Death turned the question back on him. “Well, what do you think it’ll be like?”

“In Nanny’s scripture, it always looked like a bunch of clouds, and all the people had halos and wings. She would say they would just sing. Sing until the end of the time. It didn’t seem all that fun. I’ve never been a good singer,” said Alex.

Again Mr. Death laughed. “Then it is probably not that.”

“So then what is it?” Alex asked. “Fire? Brimstone?”

“No. You’ll be happy.”

“So what is it?”

Mr. Death eased off the bed and stood back up to his full height. “It’s not for me to spoil the surprise, but I can assure you, your brother is most excited to finally meet you.”

“Oskar?” Alex asked.

Mr. Death only held out his hand. “Are you ready to go?” he asked.

Alex was about to take it, but at the last moment, he hesitated. “But what about my friends around the orphanage? Can I say goodbye to them first?”

Mr. Death’s hand fell to his side. “I know its hard, but don’t worry. It won’t be goodbye. You’ll be seeing them again. They may be older than you remember, some of them much older, but you will see them again.”

Once more he held out his hand. Once more he said: “Are you ready to go?” Once more, Alex remembered Nanny’s last words to him. *Let’s try this again.*

“Yes sir, Mr. Death,” he said, and he took his hand.

With that, they went hand-in-hand over the threshold and into the afterlife. As they crossed, Alex glanced up at Mr. Death. His face had fully mended itself, and he had two daisy eyes once more. When he saw Nanny again, she would have no reason to be cross.