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## **"The Life of Death"**

*by Richard Romano*

I got the call at three that morning. I have no need for Caller ID—I pretty much know who it is, especially when the phone rings at three in the morning. What I was unprepared for was the content of the call.

"Watson, come here, I need you." He never tired of that one, although there was much less of a playful tone in his voice than there usually is.

"Dave, it's three in the morning," I murmured, not quite used to the idea of consciousness just yet.

"Look, it's really important."

"Just squish the spider."

"It's not a spider this time. It's...a bit bigger."

That jolted me awake.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just get over here."

"Can you at least give me a hint."

A shortish pause. "I killed Death."

"Huh?"

At that point the line went dead—so to speak.

I'm not sure what to make of a line like that. "I killed Death." What the heck is that supposed to mean? I hoped it wasn't just another one of his silly existential crises. Dave was my best friend, but he was far too bookish for his own good, and tended toward moroseness, which wasn't helped by his tendency to read philosophy. I recall once in college he read Nietzsche's "Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music" and was near suicide for weeks. I have no idea why. And Kierkegaard! I had to forcibly wrest "The Sickness Unto Death" out of his hands and hide it. Unfortunately, he had taken it out of the library, and the overdue fines—when it was finally returned—depressed him even more.

So, at any rate, my assumption when he said "I killed Death," was that he had read something he shouldn't have. But, dutiful friend that I am, I immediately threw on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, ran outside and grabbed a cab downtown.

Despite his moroseness, Dave had made some wise economic decisions in his life, despite his having been an ardent socialist in college. Ten years later, he lived in a beautiful brownstone on West 11th Street. He owned no

furniture to speak of, save for a futon and walls and walls of bookshelves.

He buzzed me in; well, at least he hadn't tried to kill himself again.

He was waiting on the second floor and quickly ushered me into the living room. He was white as a sheet and pointed to a black cloak on the floor. A scythe lay next to it. Strangely, a completed game of Scrabble sat nearby.

"What the hell have you been up to?"

"I killed Death." He seemed completely terrified.

"You wanna take this from the top?"

He lit a cigarette and paced as he struggled to coherently describe the events of the recent past.

"I was reading Nietzsche again, and you know how I get. Anyway, I was consumed with the thought of killing myself, and had actually plotted out my demise."

"David..."

"No, it gets weirder, believe me. Anyway, as I was doing so, it appeared."

"It."

"Death."

"I see."

He could tell I wasn't buying it, but decided to press on anyway. "He materialized in that far corner over there by

the window, exactly as you've always seen him described. You know, the black hooded cloak, the scythe. Although, he was much shorter than I would have thought. Well under five-foot-five. Anyway, he said he was tired of my playing games with him, that I should either kill myself or not. But that I should do one or the other, because he was getting sick of coming all the way out here only to have to turn around and go home again."

He paused to light another cigarette. I decided to save any comments until the end.

"I said I can't do that, I'm plagued with indecision, and sometimes life is bliss, sometimes it's a vale of tears. You know. So, he said, 'You want to play games with Death. Okay, let's play a game.' I suggested the more traditional chess, but he was keen on Scrabble. Go figure. So the deal was, if Death wins, I die, but if I win, I live. I said that it sounds like I can't possibly win either way, so I made a suggestion that if I win, Death has to join the living. And, to make a long story only slightly longer, I won. See, he goes for the long, showy words, but the secret is in the smaller words that add up in multiple directions simultaneously."

"Dave!"

"Anyway, there was a puff of smoke, and his cloak fluttered to the ground, the scythe clanged rather noisily to the floor, and he was gone. In sum, then, I killed Death."

"But if he's Death, how can you kill him. It sounds like you made him alive."

"Well, whatever, whatever! Whatever the opposite of whatever he is, he's now that."

I had reduced him to babbling inanity. I've never done that to him before. Of course, I don't know if what he said had happened truly happened, or not, but he certainly was agitated.

"What am I going to do?"

"Look, you're just having an existential crisis."

"Well, duh. I've killed Death—or whatever—and you tell me it's just an existential crisis? This goes beyond mere moping." He looked at me forlornly. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Well, you have to admit, it's more than a tad preternatural. Look, just get a good night's rest and I'm sure things will be better in the morning."

I don't know what kind of advice that was supposed to be; it sounded more than a little insipid. Then again, what

advice does one give to a friend who insists that he has killed Death—or whatever?

I gave him a tranquilizer and put him to bed. After he dozed off, I let myself out and grabbed a cab back uptown. It was by now four in the morning, and I had a tennis lesson at nine.

For whatever reason, I didn't hear from Dave the following day, which made me more than a little nervous. I tried calling him before I left for my lesson, but he either wasn't in or wasn't answering. I was kept busy most of the day, but ran into his next door neighbor on Broadway. Apparently, Dave had been seen alive and well, rushing about earlier that day. So at least he was okay.

That evening I had to go up to Albany for a business conference the next morning. It wasn't until I got back three days later that I noticed things getting a little strange.

I was sitting on the couch, thumbing through a magazine. The 11:00 news was on in the background, and I was half listening to it. Until one report caught my ear.

"Hospitals around the country are reporting what seems like the best news one could ever hear: there have been no

recorded deaths in the last four days. For the story, we go live to Mary Feldstone at Mt. Sinai."

"Here at Mt. Sinai," said who I presume was Mary Feldstone, "doctors and patients alike are baffled yet cautiously elated by the sheer dearth of deaths. This hospital, which reports an average of 27 deaths a day, has literally had none in four days."

The report went on to say that at every hospital polled, no one has died. Morgues and mortuaries have, for four days, been devoid of new business.

I didn't quite know what to make of that. My first inclination was that it was a coincidence. Surely...no, it couldn't be. These things just don't happen.

The following day, things got even more surreal. I found a roach in my bathtub that morning and squished it with a magazine. Completely flattened, its guts strewn across the enamel, it nonetheless moved. In fact, it dashed down the drain of its own accord. This was not only odd, but defied all the known laws of biology. I may not be an expert in the life sciences, but I at least know that when an organism has the guts squashed out of it, it tends to slow down a bit.

That evening on the news, the lack-of-death count was expanded to report on the increasing roach, rat, and other

vermin problems that were plaguing the city. It wasn't just the humans; *nothing* was dying. Call it stubbornness on my part, but I still refused to believe that Dave's "encounter" with "Death" had anything to do with it.

Until...

I was sitting on the couch watching *Live at Five* when my apartment door opened. In walked Dave, dressed in a black cloak and carrying a scythe. He threw the scythe noisily to the floor.

"I can't do it," he said. "I can't kill things. Myself, yes. Other things, no."

"Say what?" I asked, knowing I was going to regret it.

"Before Death vanished, he said that I was now 'in charge.'"

"In charge of what?"

"Dying. The whole not living business."

My head hurt.

"Haven't you noticed that nothing is dying? That hospitals are reporting record numbers of non-deaths and that the city is overcome with vermin?"

"Yes, but I just assumed it was one of those freakish things..."

"Yes! Yes, it *is* one of those freakish things—only it's far more freakish than you could have imagined! I just can't kill things. It's all my fault..."

This is perhaps the first time I had ever heard of someone who was sorry that he couldn't kill anything.

"Okay," I said. "Assuming for the moment that I believe you, that Death bailed on his job and left you in charge of visiting final perdition on everyone and everything...but the roaches, Dave? Surely you could bring yourself to kill *them*."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you? But still, they're living things." He stared at me. "You have to do it."

"Say what?"

"You have to kill things."

"Me? Are you high? I didn't kill Death—"

"Or whatever."

"Or whatever. I mean, this isn't really my problem."

"Oh, spoken like a true New Yorker."

"You're forgetting the essential point here, which is that *I am not Death!*"

"Fine, be that way."

"What way?"

"Stubborn."

I growled. "Well, where did Death go, anyway? Can we find him? He can't have much money. I mean, would a preternatural entity have a nest egg of some kind? Surely he hasn't gotten far."

"Leave it to you to reduce the basic points of existence to money."

"That's because I live in the real world rather than exist in some metaphysical half-life. And call me a Philistine if you must, but at least I haven't upset the basic laws of existence."

"Fine, fine, fine," said Dave, getting increasingly flustered. "What am I going to do?"

"Well, how specifically are you supposed to, um, kill? Just wave your scythe over them, or is it more 'hands on'?"

"As Death explained it to me, when the signal comes in on the Mortaloscope— Oh, go ahead and say it..."

"'Mortaloscope'?"

"There's a more technical name for it, but Death actually does have a sense of humor. Essentially it's a large crystal."

He reached into the pocket of the cloak and withdrew a large green glowing rock. It was pulsating quite rapidly.

"And it's pulsating so rapidly because I'm very behind."

"Oh," I said, "so it's like an answering machine. The speed of the flashing indicates how many messages there are."

"Exactly. What's really annoying is that it also has a vibrate mode, which is getting quite painful."

He rubbed his thigh.

"OK, so when someone or something dies, your rock starts flashing."

"Yes, and then the scythe allows me to- what are you laughing at?"

"Nothing. Go on. Please."

"And the scythe allows me to triangulate on the exact location of the deceased and then, using the scythe, I am supposed to remove the life force from the deceedent."

"'Deceedent'?"

"That's what they're called, yes."

"It all sounds amazingly organized."

"What, do you think death just happens?" he asked me.

"Yes, I kind of thought it did."

"Well, it doesn't."

I really didn't know quite how much to believe him, but I swear I've never seen Dave this earnest—or this worked up about anything. So I decided: I'd do as he asked. After all, since I didn't even know if it was true—and it likely

wasn't (I mean, who kills Death and then has to cover for him?)—what did I have to lose? So I put on the black cloak, grabbed the scythe, and felt like I was on my way to a Halloween party. I took his pulsating green rock.

"All right. How does this purportedly work?" I asked, feeling like a complete dork.

"Now, you're probably going to be very busy for a while."

"So I gathered."

"Hold the Mortaloscope in your left hand," he said, and I did. "Extend your left hand, and extend your right hand, which is holding the scythe." Now I really felt like a complete snickerdoodle. "Now, slowly—*slowly*—bring the blade of the scythe into contact with the Mortaloscope."

I did, and as the blade of the scythe touched the rock, the room went dark. I was suddenly not in my apartment anymore. I was—I wasn't quite sure. At first, it was just a completely black void. If I hadn't felt some kind of surface beneath my feet, I couldn't even have been certain that I was standing on anything. Then, all around me, I was in some kind of wormhole—which is really the only way I could describe it. It wasn't that I was passing very quickly through a dark green tunnel, but it appeared as if I were standing still and the dark green tube was simply flowing past me. In seemingly no time, I was standing in an

urban kitchen. A cockroach stood on the edge of a stainless steel sink. A middle-aged woman hovered over it, a pink, fuzzy slipper in her hand. The roach was not in good shape; it was flat, and its innards were protruding from both its sides. Yet, it was still moving. The oddest thing was that it was encased in a green light, not unlike the green of the "Mortaloscope" and indeed the portal tube I had just been in. Obviously, the green was to indicate the deceased—although the protruding guts were a pretty good hint all their own. I wasn't quite sure what to do—but I figured the scythe had to be involved in some way. So, acting on a hunch, I touched the blade to the dying roach, and suddenly, the green light surrounding the roach passed into the blade of the scythe which glowed green for a scant moment, then faded. The roach was still. The woman with the slipper used the footwear to push the carcass into the garbage disposal in the sink.

So that was how it worked. I could feel the Mortaloscope vibrating insistently. I took it out and held it in my extended left hand. I touched the scythe blade to it, and was suddenly transported into the green tube portal again. In no time (it seemed) I was in what looked like the southwest desert of the United States. A tarantula had attacked a kangaroo rat, and it remained for me to dispatch

the life force of the rat. Which I did. OK, this wasn't so bad. So I got out the Mortaloscope again, and, once I got into the swing of things, began zipping from ecosystem to ecosystem. So being Death basically consisted of making sure that predator got prey. That's not too hard or traumatic. Although, I was quickly finding that it could be exhausting.

Until.

After I had dispatched a few hundred million mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, birds, and so on, I suddenly found myself in a wooden shack in what I presumed was Africa. On a straw bed in front of me, shrouded in the telltale green light, was a small child, I would guess no older than four. He (or she—it really wasn't easy to tell) had obviously starved—and not yet to death. That was what I was doing there. The little figure was really no more than a tiny skeleton that had some dark gray skin draped over it. It was obviously in complete agony—the kind of agony for which death would be sweet relief. And so I touched the edge of the scythe to its little body, the green light was absorbed, and the little body was still. The fact that it was no longer making any noise attracted what I presumed were the child's parents, who held the little lifeless body and cried over it.

Now I knew what had freaked Dave out—this was heartbreaking. And yet—it had to be done.

I got out the Mortaloscope and continued my rounds. Now I was thick into the human deaths. A not insignificant amount of the elderly, more infants than I cared to think about, a random assortment that cut across all demographic lines. I traveled to Africa, dispatching a small child so beset by hunger and disease that he looked like a tiny old man. I traveled back to the United States where a 700-pound man had expired of a heart attack amidst a bed strewn with cupcake wrappers, empty bags of potato chips, and the remains of what looked like a brontosaurus. I visited cancer wards and car accidents. Private homes and public hospitals. If there was one thing that made this job even remotely easier it was taking those who were surrounded by loved ones, who were sad, but wept not the tears of pain but of a good life lived long and full.

I was nearly caught up and I returned to my apartment for a short break before heading out again. Within moments of arriving home, the door burst open and I saw Dave enter the room horizontally a foot or so above the floor. He fell with a dull thud to the carpet. He was immediately followed by a man of average height and what seemed to be of rather

indeterminate age; he could have been anywhere between 30 and 70. He was completely bald and his face unlined and, for that matter, devoid of any conspicuous features whatsoever. In some ways, he kind of looked like actor Donald Pleasence, only much more ageless. He was dressed in a white "I Love NY" T-shirt and bluejeans. He was muscular and in good physical shape. As he charged into the room behind Dave, he was not a happy person. More like Donald *Un-Pleasence*. My assumption was that this was Death. I could see it.

"The point—the whole point—of this exercise was to teach you a lesson," he berated Dave. He had a deep, resonant voice that scared the crap out of me "And like the miserable schmuck you are, you fobbed it off on someone else." He looked over at me; I was still wearing his outfit. "Thanks, by the way," he said to me.

"No problem," I said, as casually as if I had loaned him a pen.

"*This* guy," he kicked Dave's prone form for emphasis, "is the biggest coward I have ever seen. And I'm eternal."

"I couldn't do it," Dave mewled. "I can't kill things. Myself, yes. Others, no."

"Oh, shove it, you pseudo-intellectual putz. You spoiled 21st-century brats have no concept of Death."

"I've read enough philosophy to know..."

Death laughed derisively. "'Read enough.' Give me a break. I'm talking about *experience*, man. You have no idea. You're all so insulated from death that you have lost all respect for life. It's all just an intellectual exercise to you. There was a time—just ask the Victorians—when getting something as minor as a scratch could be fatal. Now you slap a Band Aid on and everything is fine. Modern medicine has cured a bewildering number of diseases and other ailments that were lethal to your forebears. And when people do get fatally sick, they're sent off to hospitals to die and disposed of neatly and cleanly. The funeral industry has expanded to the point where no one need ever actually *see* a dead body. Its all just an abstraction. So yutzes like you can play your little games with life and death because you have no respect for either. I had hoped that by making you take on the role of Death you could get a little...hands-on experience, some perspective, and maybe an iota of respect."

He looked over at me. "You," he said. "I'll be *you're* a changed man."

"Damn right," I said. And it was true. After all I had seen and done, I was not going to take this life for granted ever again.

He took back his accoutrements and was ready to resume his role. He stood over Dave. "So I'm going to make this one final offer. This is the moment you pick life or death. Fish or cut bait. Shit or get off the pot. Because the next time I come out, that's going to be *it*."

Dave wisely chose life.

As he rose to his feet, he asked, "So, what's death like, anyway?"

Death turned toward the door. "I have no idea. That's like asking a bus driver what lies beyond the bus stop. I'm just the driver."

And with that he was gone.

I confess, I was profoundly changed by the experience of having been Death, as one would expect, and decided to devote the rest of my life to finding ways to make other people's lives better. Dave was essentially unchanged, although I never got any more late-night calls. Perhaps he had learned his lesson in that regard.

Every so often, when I walked through a hospital ward, I would feel something unseen brush past me. I think I knew who it was, and was sad that another person had shuffled off this mortal coil.