

Collected Stories

by J.P. Ogden

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Death Dealer

I met him the day he killed his wife. Her blood was still warm in her flesh. Not three miles from his home, he'd been running, afraid of her body being found, when the ground in front of his headlong flight betrayed him, giving way and collapsing, sending him crashing with the detritus into a small cave.

Groaning, he held his ankle, twisted in his tumble, as he sat up and took in the dark underground interior of the cave. His eyes stopped on a spear leaning against the stone wall. Had his fall taken him three feet to the right, it would have impaled him on the bronze tip.

The shaft was simple wood at first glance. A closer look revealed sinuous lines dug into its surface. Jagged. Done in anger.

"Hello," it said to him. In him. In his mind. It spoke. He told me later he thought he had gone insane.

He didn't move. A frightened animal. Prey. If he didn't move, the danger might not see him. But it did. It saw all the way into him.

"I can save you from them," it cooed. Silk passing over sand. "They won't believe you. They won't think she deserved it. But I know."

He gulped. Fear shone in his eyes, terror written in the white shining in the dark. His eyes jerked to the hole above him, then back to the spear.

"How? How can you save me?" He thought he already knew. The point was sharp. Its purpose clear.

"I bring many answers. I hold many forms. I have many names." It oozed into the crevices of his doubts. "I can hide you. I can convince them. I can make *them* pay. Bring me close. I can bring you whatever you desire."

His breath came in ragged pulses.

A jangle of harness and thump of hooves ripped away the silence. The fool hadn't bothered to hide his trail. He'd struck her in anger and the taste of his release broke him and his rage ended her. He'd left her there, blood pooling on stone, fire dying in hearth, her twitching, boots scratching on stone. It all cooled and stilled and he ran in fear.

"There!", a cry from the woods above. A rider thundered up to the hole, flying from the saddle and stared straight into the opening. Straight into the man's eyes.

The rider cursed, and left.

"Nothing down there. Dammit!"

Horses went away. The man's eyes went back to the spear. His hand reached out and grasped the black shaft.

"Yes," came it's sonorous voice slick in his head, "I hid you. I saved you. Together, we can do so many things. I can give you so many things. I am your salvation."

"How? How did you do it? Why didn't he see me?", he asked, fingers following the hateful etchings, eyes drinking the edges of the spear head, point sharp enough to pierce reality.

"I gave him what he wanted. I held his fear. He is angry at you. Afraid he will not get his revenge. I allowed his fear to be his truth."

The man held the spear now in both hands. In his heart. This *was* his salvation.

"What do we do now?", he asked. "I don't know if I can climb out of here."

He looked up at the hole to the sky. The tree branches avoided the space, like fingers splayed over a fire, wanting warmth but afraid of being burned. You could almost see the line, the arc, as if something fell from the sky, plummeting and breaking, crashing through the ground as he had, coming to a restless stop in this hollow, this hole.

"Your ankle is fine."

He felt it, wiggling his foot, surprised to find it true.

"You can climb out. I will help. I will always help", its words dripped with reassurance. He was easy. He desired this salvation.

He stood gingerly, testing the ankle, using the spear to lift himself, there was no pain, only strength. He laughed.

Climbing out revealed his weaknesses further. There were handholds and grips in the stone, and his mind couldn't fathom them. What few he

found, slipped from his grasp when he attempted to haul himself up even meager distances.

He slumped to the ground, resting his back against the dirt. He gasped great breaths. Spent.

"I can't do it", he said with dejection.

"I can give you the strength. I can bring you to safety."

He perked up. "How? Do it!"

A spasm wracked his body, folding him into the dirt. He kicked twice and cried out. Then, unmoving, began his panting again.

"Climb again. You will see."

A few moments more he lay, his eyes pinched. Slowly he unfurled, and stood with vigor, surprise evident on his features. His hunger leaking into his grin.

The spear grasped in his hand, he vaulted up the walls. At the top, he rolled out and lay on his back, laughing. The woods held silence as he cackled.

He sighed, deep and long, and rose, hefting the spear. It was beautiful in the sunlight. No sign of wear or age touched its surface. His gaze took in the forest around him, longing pulling at his brow as his eyeline pointed toward home. There would never be respite there, never again, never before. He walked in a different direction.

He revelled in his newfound strength. Flexing muscles he'd never known, breaking branches with childish glee, leaping up and off stumps. His cackling returned.

Mid-cackle his body rocked again. He collapsed, heels scraping jagged angry lines in the dirt, no cries escaped his clenched jaw.

When the fit passed and he recovered his hand caught his attention. He held it in front of his face, against the dappled sunlight of the forest canopy. The thing was withered and spotted, he held up an old man's hand, unrecognizable as his own.

"There must always be a payment," came unbidden to his ear.

"You did this to me?!", squeaked from his lips.

"I gave you what you desired. You paid the price." It's oily voice slipped through his skull.

At that moment, his stomach entered the conversation, aggressively and loudly. He ignored it, thinking for the first time today. "Is the price fully paid?", he asked.

"I have taken what I must."

"And will you take no more without my say?", his greed understood a price.

"I will take no more without your bidding."

He sighed, unrest evident in its length.

"I'm starving." He looked toward home again. Toward the one who would never make his meals again. "Can you bring me food? Clothes?"

"For a price."

He stayed silent, weighing his hunger against the prices he had already paid. Grumbling, he rose, carrying the cursed thing into the woods.

* * *

Some time later, his discomfort grown, he heard laughter through the trees. A short barking and a longer tittering following after.

Moving in the direction brought the smell of woodsmoke to his nose. And other smells that drew his hunger to the surface.

Through bramble was a camp. Two men sat, a fire crackling between them, sausages on sticks held to the flame.

He licked his lips. The heavenly smell of roasting flesh permeated his sensations. He leaned forward, hand on branch, absorbed in his hunger.

The branch snapped, dumping him face first onto the forest floor.

The men jumped, one scrambled across the dirt, the other leaping to his feet, long legs and arms lashing and snapping, unfurling his frightened bulk. The scrambling titterer faced the noise with a large knife. The barker held a large stick.

Our intrepid fool spoke up, voice shaking. A murder and a coward.

"H...hello! I mean no harm. I was passing through and heard a happy fire, and smelled welcoming sausages."

He rushed his words, his fear powered his voice. Scrambling to his feet, they should have killed him, but they were not much brighter than he.

The bulky long one straightened. A man of opportunity, he asked "Got anything in trade?"

The spear was set aside, ever the fool, hand patted his pockets. Out came a broach, costume jewelry, no one of wisdom would find value in it. No one of wisdom stood in this clearing. He had grabbed it off her body in haste, knowing what it was. He had paid for it. She had purchased it. He hoped to swindle someone with it. A sausage was a chance.

"Two sausages!", he said, gambling.

The one with greedy eyes jumped up from the forest floor, leaning forward, licking his lips. "Toss it over."

"Two sausages?", came the reply.

Lip licker brandished his knife. "Probably."

'Probably' seemed enough at knife point. The broach flew, flashing reflected sunlight, the shine bright in the dark forest. It was pocketed at the end of its arc, hiding the object alien to the woods before eyes could see it and regret. The knife followed, and grins spread on three faces, the trade complete. The best kind. Both parties happy. Both parties swindled.

Arms spread as wide as smiles, teeth said: "Join our table."

He entered the clearing bearing the spear. It drew their hungry eyes, something else to take, but its age pushed their hunger away, old rubbish worth nothing.

The co-conspirators say by the fire, opposite the murderer. None were great at conversation, but they tried to fill the silence.

"Where are you from?"

"Oh, round about the area. What brings you into these woods?"

"Just some errands to the next town over. Sausages seem ready."

"So they do. You first."

"No, you. I insist."

"Please, be my guest."

The large one angrily broke their sparring and took a sausage stick in hand, chomping down, grease cleaning a dirty face, running into an unruly beard.

The silence returned for a moment, then drowned in the sloppy sounds of three mouths enjoying succulent gristle and muscle and blood.

The spear leaned against the log the man sat on, its point resting near his shoulder. His eyes caught the eyeline of the man with the stick, staring at the spear, mouth unmoving, eyes glazing.

Abruptly, the eyes snapped up from the bronze head, into the eyes of its current bearer, then away, guilty. Neither said anything, but one pulled his spear closer. The others' eyes wandered to his big stick.

The minutes filled with more silence and slurping and glancing, the large man breaking into a sweat, eyes occasionally losing focus. Head listening.

He dove for the spear.

It ended as quickly. The spear-bearer tumbled backwards, razor point stabbing, another life ending.

The other man ran, knife forgotten, leaping tree and bush, bramble and brush as lithe as a deer in flight.

The spear pinned him to a tree at five-hundred paces, pin-point accuracy piercing the heart.

A third life taken.

The bearers nerve gave seconds later. He sat heavily on the forest floor, frightened eyes willing the scene undone. His stomach didn't know, grumbling at the remaining sausages. He sighed, shaking.

The shakes became spasms, his whole body twitching, kicking, flailing, crying out in pain. His wild and random movements carried him over the fire, sausages smothered in dirt and ash, smashed while he burned. His flailing eventually put out the fire on the ground and his clothes, before fading to a stop.

This time it took minutes to recover, lying in dirt and ash, groaning, the pain of the spasms replaced by burns and cuts. And hunger. It gnawed and dug, a deep hole inside him and through him.

When he could, he sat up. He dug around near the fire, pulling crushed sausages from the dirt, and shoving them into his mouth, swallowing grit and gristle as one.

He paused for a moment, staring at his arm. The spots had spread from his hands, up the arm. What little muscle he started the day with, was atrophied. His arm looked like an ancient man, decrepit.

Crawling slowly to his feet, he walked to the body of the large man. The coveter of the spear. He searched its pockets, finding as little as you would expect on a man eating sausages in the woods in the middle of the day, a man who carried a big stick. He did find another sausage under the body. It didn't sate his hunger.

The man pinned to the tree had nothing but the knife. He pocketed it and pulled out the spear, the body sliding to the ground, ignored. The spear's point glinted, the bronze unmarred by blood, bone, or wood.

He asked it, "Did you entice him?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"You both desired the sausages. I made sure only one got them."

"That's insane," he said. "I was fine sharing. I didn't want to kill them."

No response entered his brain. The spear was silent.

"Don't do that again. Don't choose for me."

"I know your desires."

"I should leave you right here."

"I know your desires."

He did not leave the spear behind.

* * *

Days passed wandering the woods. Nights passed in hunger, burns ached, cuts inflamed. He slept little, talked less.

Attempts were made at finding food. Animals evaded him, the spear flew weakly. He tried trading with the spear, to throw with accuracy and force, but the spear had no interest in animal flesh and death. There was no glory. No pain.

He tried berries and roots but his stomach rejected them, emptying what little he filled it with. His hunger grew until it filled him. A void. A pit that became his world.

His wanderings brought him out of the wood in a land he didn't know. Hobbling, the spear was more crutch than weapon now. In the distance, smoke rose from chimneys of a large manor house. No other movement in sight. No people in the windows, none in the fields.

Houses held food.

He crossed the fields slowly, hiding in rows of crops, dashing when he could, groaning in pain after, always toward the house, the food.

Closer to the house, music and laughter grew. Far in the distance, across more fields, a white pavilion rose. Crowds gathered under its expanse, a band played, people danced and laughed. And the house stayed empty.

His lumbering steps increased speed, taking him to the back of the manor, to a small door in a stone wall. The door opened to a dark tunnel, his steps echoing in the space. Shuffle, clunk, shuffle, clunk.

At the end of the tunnel, a long table overflowed with food. Cakes and pies and torts and tarts and meats and vegetables, roasted, seared, candied, piled, tumbling, a cornucopia, a sight, a feast for him alone.

His pain forgotten, he bolted down the rest of the hall, slamming into the table, scattering food, platters clanging. Shoving food into his face, he sprayed as much behind him and onto him as in him.

He nearly didn't hear the small gasp behind him.

Turning to his left, he made eye contact with a young servant. Her eyes were platters of fright. Meat fell from his open mouth. She bolted.

"Wait!", he screamed ineffectually and ran after her.

She knew the house, but he ran with the fervor of one with murderous rage. He caught her in the entrance hall, shoving her against a wall. She crumbled to the ground.

"Wait!", she yelled ineffectually and he stabbed her.

She cried out no more and her blood ran, rivulets following the patterns in the wooden floor.

"Lillie?", came a cry from outside. Other voices called out, closer than the pavilion.

He ran in terror back the way he had come. The house was large though, he lost his way. Shouts, angry; and screams, fearful, rang out from the entrance hall behind, and he ran harder.

A hallway led to a door which led to a lawn. He was seen, the shouts of "Stop!" and "There!" chased him.

At the end of the lawn was a garden, hedges high, blocking his path. A small stream bubbled toward an exit. He splashed into it as barking dogs rang out with shouts of hunters. The stream ran into a river, he saw his salvation in the dark water. He wanted this to end.

That is when the spasms struck.

A wordless roar broke from him as he willed them away, the strongest his mind had ever been, but it wasn't enough.

He stumbled and fell, the spear tumbled end over end, landing with a splash in the river.

It sank in the depths as the dogs caught him, tearing his flesh.

I settled into the silt at the bottom, the disturbed filth hiding my shine.

I could wait.

I have many times before.

We are all the same, and all of us are different - A story about you.

Chapter 1:

He stepped on something as he entered the bathroom. It squished. He moved his foot aside and made a face.

"Ew", he thought.

The object was long, dark red on one end, and whiteish-green on the other.

Is that a tampon? Or a plant?, he wondered. I'm almost 30. I should probably know what a tampon looks like? That's embarrassing. Or...it would be if someone was reading my thoughts. Oh shit! What if they're in my thoughts right now!

He smiles.

He looks inside himself.

He sees you.

But that's crazy.

He moves on.

* * *

Do you know how annoying it is?

I do too.

Today we follow Andrade as he learns who we are.

Andrade is a man.

One of those.

He often apologizes for it, though he isn't sure why, but it does seem to make people like him more. Usually.

Andrade has roommates. Some are men and some are not.

Andrade works for a multinational conglomerate banking organization with diversified interests encompassing the financial industry, real estate, and hobby-grade robotics. He doesn't know why that last one either.

Today is a big day for Andrade. He is going to work and he is going to give a presentation in front of his boss's boss.

But first he has to leave the house on time.

* * *

"Rachel, did you leave...something...on the bathroom floor?"

"Oh my god Dre", she rolled her eyes and shut the fridge. "You don't have to keep telling me to pick up my towel." She slammed the milk on the counter and said: "Do you want a bowl?"

"No that's not...", he sighed, "Yes I want a bowl."

They prepared bowls of brightly colored cereal. Jamming brightness into your mouth brightens any day correct?

No. No you're right.

Andrade didn't know what else to say. He had picked up the...thing and tossed it in the trash, but you can't ask your roommate to go digging through the bathroom trash can to see if the weird smushy thing is a used tampon. What the fuck Andrade?

No. He finished his bowl of cereal and stood. Rachel's bowl was empty in front of her. She was still in her pajamas. Scrolling on her phone.

"You not working today?"

"Nope. Ain't gonna do shit today. Paul paid me back for taking a shift last week and now I get to sit at home while you schmucks live out your dreams behind a desk. I fuckin' love a Tuesday off."

Andrade did as well.

* * *

He had showered, shaved, dressed and rushed out the door on time, at the usual time he rushed out the door.

The bus was on time too. Which meant he would definitely not be late. Which was not much.

He sat on the bus and read his book. It wasn't great. But it was thrilling. It gripped. And it let him ignore you.

His book lets him ignore you when the old lady in the walker sits down near him. He even holds her walker steady while she lowers her bones into a bus seat as bony as her. His book allows him to fail to notice that the button-down cotton sweater with patterns on the sleeves, which she wears on this bus every day, has a hole just above the elbow. And he definitely does not notice that her plastic shopping bag, which she fills every day with her lunch, which she eats at the park at the end of this bus route on her own every day, has become worryingly empty the last few weeks.

His book is gripping. The murder *is* gratuitous. The hero *does* make a good main character in a summer blockbuster with explosions and one scene where a car flips over in slow motion.

* * *

Andrade arrives at work on time. And to be honest with you, not much happens. I think you understand.

He makes coffee, he goes to his desk, his cubicle-mate and he converse about various television shows that they have recently seen. Shows where characters repeat the same procedures in each episode, and the events happen in roughly the same order and with similar intensities each week.

After those conversations, he moves documents from place to place. In some cases he moves data from place to place. These data and documents lead to transactions and exchanges of goods which in turn bring feelings to the individuals performing the transactions and exchanges of goods.

After that he gets coffee.

He crosses the street, because getting coffee from the place across the street takes him to a different place. It also takes 20 minutes to cross the street, get through the line, 'um' and 'uh' a bit, put in his order, wait for his order, smile and nod at the person handing him his order, stir more sugar into his order, blow on his order, squeeze back through the line that's crowding around the door by now, cross the street again, and get back to his desk.

And it let's him see Laura.

Laura has long black hair, slightly curly, with a purple streak, this week. And she has a tattoo and she wears black shirts, which makes sense because that's the uniform at this particular coffee chain, but he thinks she would probably wear them anyway. You know?

He doesn't talk to Laura though. That isn't how this goes.

* * *

Back at his desk, Andrade prepares for meeting his boss's boss. It is a meeting where situations and events will be discussed, which pertain to the aforementioned data-documents-transactions-and-exchanges-of-

goods situation. It is a meeting which will decide his future. Which is quite depressing to think about now that you've got him thinking about it. And you have. Which is where the problems arise.

Andrade attends his meeting. It goes better than expected, though he does stumble on his words in a few places. And once he makes a joke that he thinks might have been taken as off-color even though he didn't mean it as off-color but how do you recover from that situation? The only things he could think to do other than pretend it didn't happen, all lead toward situations he would have to put himself 'out there' and possibly be vulnerable with other people. Can you imagine?

The rest of the afternoon continues. Time does not pass well in the afternoon. He should probably get coffee.

* * *

After work, Andrade heads home. Home is where his friends are. And Paul. Andrade lives in a 'pretty cool' place if you ask him, which I'm not interested in, but if you were, he would tell you he 'lives in a 3-story, Gothic-inspired former mansion, the kind some crazy old lady lives in in a horror movie, but, like, after someone's bought it and fixed it up'. It is in fact a large Victorian-Gothic-style house that once belonged to a moderately wealthy family at the turn of the century, who fell on hard times and sold the house to a property-developer who turned it into a boarding house which housed many interesting lives and characters, which Andrade would actually find more interesting if he knew about it. And which was still a house that housed many interesting lives and

characters, now that you make the point. Andrade is one of those, but we'll get to that.

Inside the house is quite a lot of action and activity. Rachel has convinced others to go out that night, to attend a local gathering at a local gathering-place. The kind with lighting whose purpose is less about lighting things and more about making things seem like they were more interesting than they were. Andrade didn't feel like going.

"C'mon man", she leaned in and said conspiratorially, "I even made sure Paul had something to do tonight."

"I just got home Rache", he flopped into a stylishly worn and garishly colored armchair. "I thought you were going to do nothing today?"

"Day's over Dre. I am well rested and ready to get exhausted again!"

"Yeah", he grumbled, "well we didn't all take the day off."

"You should try it sometime. You need it. You miserable fuck."

"I don't have any PTO."

She poked him in the chest and said in a sing-song: "I don't give a fuck-T-O, you're gonna go." and left.

He grumbled and got ready.

* * *

The local gathering-place had a name you would expect, and a large black awning over the front with tables and chairs underneath but it wasn't known for its food and Andrade wasn't sure he had ever seen anyone use them, plus was it even open during the day?

It was an open-mic night, which he kind of hated, people were so bad at most of the things they tried to do up on the stage, but it was also a Tuesday and all his friends were here so he was here.

Most of the house, and their friends and even some friends of friends had come along. It was quite a popular open-mic night. Do you understand why so many people are interested in this sort of thing? You'll have to explain it to me one day.

Andrade stays near a wall, at a table tall enough he can lean on, hoping to look casual and uninterested but in a way that shows he's uninterested for cool reasons, not because he's uninterested. He thinks he even achieves it, because that girl at the bar keeps looking at him and nudging her friend. He even convinces himself to talk to her, and follows through. We won't recount that because it didn't go well and he doesn't like thinking about it.

Back at the table Rachel, and Jeremiah, and Anne, and Richard, and Mark, and Andrade keep drinking and watching the open-mic competitors take the stage. A young man plays a guitar. Another sings a song. An older woman recites a poem. A man in his fifties performs a short monologue as Mr. Darcy which Andrade finds hilarious for the wrong reasons. None of them are great at what they do. Andrade doesn't see what goes on inside.

Three beers in Rachel reaches under the table and pulls out her flute case.

"Wait you're actually going up there?", Andrade says.

"Yeah! I told you I wanted too!"

"But you haven't played since high school!", he looked around. "And it's a bar!"

"And this is a flute", she wielded it at him and went up to the stage. She sat down on the stool on the stage while the crowd chattered. Some accompanying music played, and she played along, surprisingly well all things considered. It wasn't the worst thing he'd ever heard and he applauded. She came back to their table laughing, to rounds of congratulations. Andrade congratulated her too. What else could you do? A few minutes later a guy came up to their table and offered to buy her a drink, so they went to the bar together. His friends filtered in and out, of range of the table. Smokes outside, bathroom, drinks at the bar, sneaking up to the roof through an employee-only door that everyone knew about and the bar manager pretended to care about. That kind of local gathering-place.

Andrade watched the performances.

Not long after Rachel came back from the bar, a young man went up to the microphone. He adjusted its height, clearing his throat too loudly and drawing more of the bar's attention than he'd intended. But he did it anyway. He said that he was going to read a poem he had written. It had

tumbled out of him a few months after his grandfather passed unexpectedly. He would try not to cry.

The bar dimmed for Andrade. The spotlight softened on the man's face. A very young face. It got younger as he spoke. It was a beautiful poem and Andrade saw into his soul.

A wholly unexpected experience.

Other people did things that night on the stage. Andrade didn't feel those. He didn't mind though.

* * *

The next day went the same as others, in fact the following few weeks did as well.

Weeks later he saw Rachel cleaning her flute at the dining room table. He sat down.

"Rache", he began but didn't know why.

She looked up. "Yeah...?"

"When you played the flute at the open-mic the other night..."

"...Yeah?"

"Weren't you afraid of being laughed at?"

"Damn I was that bad?", but she was joking.

"No, actually I expected you to be worse."

"Thanks."

"I just mean...weren't you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Dre...you know I tell you you're a miserable fuck sometimes?"

"... Yeah."

"What do you want to do with the rest of your life?"

"Huh? Uh...I guess get rich or something? Get married?..."

"Live in a ranch-style dwelling in suburbia with a red lawnmower participating in bake sales on the weekends until you're old enough to covet a sports car?"

"Something like that."

"But do you really? Want that?"

He sighed. "I don't know what I want. I just wanna be happy."

She finished wiping the flute and put it in the case. "Have you thought about trying to be happy?"

"All the time."

"Dre, when I went up on that stage, I knew I wasn't going to be good. And I don't care about being good. Because being good at the flute", she clunked the case on the table, "is not something I'm interested in."

"Then why'd you do it?"

"Because if I didn't do it, I never would have done it."

"...what?"

"Jesus dude", she threw her hands up, "you have more money than me, a promising career, you're a good looking guy, you have friends and your family loves you, and you're a miserable fuck. Just once in your life, try living life. If you don't embarrass yourself, if you don't *risk* embarrassing yourself, you're going to pick the red convertible at the end of the journey."

She poked him in the chest repeatedly. "And I. Don't. Think. You'll. Like. It." and walked away.

* * *

It took him a few more months to understand, which is often how it happens. For some it takes years. Sadly for others it never does.

One night, a work night even, he attended a pottery class. He was abysmal, but they said that was often the case. He wanted to go back, and eventually he would, but not yet. He took a cooking class, a martial arts class, he went to the gym, he even learned to knit. None of these were right. He took a creative writing course. He wanted to like that.

He'd always wanted to like that. But it still didn't fit and he didn't know why.

"Rache", they were on the porch swing, enjoying the fall morning, leaves fell, children laughed. It was a month of fading and the beginning of the beginning of new things. "How do you not care so much?"

"Jesus, am I a psychopath?", she laughed.

He laughed. "No! I mean the flute thing from before. It's so hard to just...embarrass myself."

She sighed. She did that around him a lot. She had good reason. "I said something about risk. The truth is that there is no easy way. If it's easy, it's probably not worth much. You know the phrase 'leap of faith' right? If you don't leap..."

He still didn't fully understand yet. But he started writing poems. He thought they were pretty bad. Which was the biggest part of his problem. One of them did start with 'Roses are red', but sometimes you have to. Another started with 'I ride the rails to keep going...'. But that's ok.

* * *

It had been shy of one year since the infection began. Since a young man's face and words would shine and reflect off his soul. Tonight was when it would finally set in.

It was a Tuesday. They were at the open-mic night. He had a poem prepared. His friends had encouraged him, helped him improve his poems. They really were bad, but that wasn't the point. If you don't get the bad ones out of the way, the rest can't move in. But the poem he had written tonight was not right. He didn't fully understand why. He does now though. Rachel told him it was the best one he'd written and had convinced him to leap.

He had been thinking about that leap a lot. He'd already leapt in ways he didn't understand yet. He would later be surprised to realize the hard part was already over. But the leap, and the young man's face kept saying things to him and this poem for tonight it didn't say anything. Not to him or of him. And finally he got it.

So he wrote. Hurriedly, frantically, feverishly, he wrote like a madman on a small notebook he kept with him at all times now. He wrote words that meant things and he even cried a little and the space in front of him was amazing to behold.

He got up on the stage. And this is what he said.

"

This will be free.

Because I want to be free.

If I can't be free on the page, in my silence and solitude, then freedom will run from me in life.

It has been a long journey to this point. I still feel locked, even in this moment where I let it flow. What if someone reads this? Judges this?

Learn to not give a fuck.

They can judge. I can grow. Contained, I will not grow. Growth is into open space, and no space is more open and free than the air when you jump off a cliff.

So I leap.

I will leap off the cliff every day, or I will be sucked back to the top where the chains are.

I'm sick of being contained. It. Wants. Out.

Be a child of gods. Speak with thunder and lightning and winds. And in your special case, speak as a susurrus. Because you are special in all your distinct ways. In the universe of the infinite and unknown, it is undoubtable that your configuration of thoughts and perceptions and sounds belong only to you.

Wear them, with strength and vigor, or waste them into non-being. For if you do not wear them, they will rot.

My soul sings at these words. I feel it in my heart. It soars as I write; it wants to roar, it wants to stretch, reach and grow until the world sees the dragon of my being spread wings in all its glory and pride.

To stop is to die. So don't.

Roar.

"

Chapter 2:

When Death is Your Friend

Draft

TO THE READER: This story is not finished. It is just an idea for now. But I think it's a good one.

I first saw Death when he stole my father. It was violent. One moment we played in the pile of leaves, bundles of laughter and joy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone walking up the drive. We lived in the suburbs, large lawn, long driveway, happy kids playing games in the street on summer nights.

And then my father started convulsing.

In my childish glee, it seemed like he was playing. I laughed. He screamed. I cried out for help. I looked to the stranger in the driveway, watching us and begged for his help.

The only help he offered was to end my father's cries. I don't know how I knew it. He never said anything. He never spoke into my mind. His intentions were known to me. He reached out a hand, bony, not bone, flesh; he pointed the first finger of that phthisical appendage at my father and the convulsions ended and the birds twittered and the wind blew.

And from that day on, Death followed me everywhere I went.

The years of therapy following my father's death had me riding the knife edge of a fence between insanity and normalcy.

At first, I tried to tell people about this strange man, face obscured by an anachronism of a hood, body only visible in the folds of a night-black robe as he moved. All the adults in my life insisted I was "troubled" or "in denial" or "attention seeking". After all, I had just witnessed my father's heart attack in person. What 10 year old is okay after that?

My mother sent me to therapy. My teachers sent me to councilors. My friends found other friends.

Eventually, I learned that no one else could see him, and I should stop talking about him. Some people understood him as a metaphor, which helped me understand the reality of him. It did not help me understand why he wouldn't leave me alone.

Everywhere I went, there he was. Every door I locked, only stopped him as long as it took to turn a handle. Every building I went into, he had access. At school, he was there. At church, he was there. He sat three booths down when we went out for a meal with friends after Sunday service. He watched my baseball games. He stood outside the window, my mother staring straight into his face out the kitchen window while she made dinner and gushed about the variety of birds who came to her bird feeder.

He was with me for three years before he took another life. Which I know doesn't make sense, people die every day, millions, but Death followed me around for three years, until one day, in the park, I was up to bat, my team was winning, and out of the corner of my eye Death turned and walked away.

It terrified me.

When you spend almost a quarter of your life with the creepy, hooded man always looking at you, always following you, always in your presence, you don't know what to do when that changes.

I stood there, at the plate, bat held on my shoulder, as I watched him walk through the crowd that stared at me, restless at my inactivity. No one in the crowd noticed him, no one ever did, even when he pushed them aside. Some started yelling at me. The umpire asked me if I was okay. The pitcher threw a strike. I watched Death walk to the next field over, raise his arm, long sleeve hanging below like a banner waving in the wind, point his finger, and then the crowd ignored me because a woman in the crowd at the next field over was screaming "Help! Someone call a doctor!" as an old woman collapsed in the stands.

It was five more years before I realized I could direct him.