



## **aisanehtuo**

a prequel

"That is not dead which can eternal lie,  
And with strange aeons even death may die."

H.P. Lovecraft

Verne Gibson laughed at Death.

He reared back his gleaming bald cue ball of a head, clutched at his distended belly through the loose-hanging flap of the hospital gown, and roared. Spittle flew from his mouth like water from a fountain cherub. His sallow complexion actually pinked.

Verne laughed so hard he convulsed.

His left arm thrashed about as if frantically seeking attention, tearing one of the intravenous lines free from his arm. The freshly starched hospital sheets beneath him began to turn a vivid, slick red.

Verne did not seem to notice.

He rubbed at his bloodshot eyes and wiped away gleeful tears. He covered his face with his hands. He peeked through the gaps between his stubby, swollen fingers, and there, standing at the end of his bed, he saw it still.

His very own special visitor.

Death.

The actual Grim Reaper.

An imposing figure in a bulky black cloak, the Reaper's face was shrouded in the shadows cast by its sinister-looking cowl. In its skeletal right hand it grasped the onyx shaft of a long harvest scythe. The sickle blade was a vicious silver crescent that managed somehow to glitter in the room's twitching fluorescent light.

Verne Gibson looked down at the end of his bed, he glimpsed the Reaper there, and his chuckles started all over again, with renewed vigor. He couldn't seem to help himself. Tears ran freely down his globular face. They dripped from the brown-black melanoma on the tip of his prominent nose. They slipped over his upper lip and into his mouth, sliding under his tongue and pooling around the soft, pea-sized tumor that lurked there, affixed to his gums, like a child playing hide-and-seek.

The Reaper waited a long time for Gibson's laughing fit to stop. Every now and then it shifted its weight from one ponderous leg to the other. For a while, it tapped a funeral dirge on the floor with the butt end of the scythe's shaft. Once it checked the stock ticker running down the bottom of the television screen hooked to the wall in the corner, and groaned. The wave of mirth spilling from Gibson did not subside. If anything, the longer the scene played out, the more intense his guffawing became. His hands grasped fistfuls of his blue-spotted hospital gown near his pained, swollen thighs. His legs kicked and spasmed and kicked.

"Oh, that is good," he managed at one point, knuckling one eye, rolling over onto one side, and laughing.

Eventually, with an exhalation that seemed to take all the air out of its expansive cloak, the Grim Reaper turned quietly, left Verne Gibson's hospital room, and made its shuffling way to the nearest elevator.

As it boarded the car a few moments later, stooping to fit in beside an elderly patient with a colostomy bag and a haggard face that wore the grimace of a constipated bird, the Reaper could still hear the bloated, cancer-ridden, rotten fruit of a man in room 416, giggling uncontrollably.

“That is good,” Verne Gibson yelled. “Oh that is so good.”  
And he positively roared.

#

The echoes of Gibson’s laughter stayed with the Reaper for a long time. They clung to him like small children hanging off a parent’s limbs, cumbersome and clingy and clamoring for attention. Long after the elevator doors had closed, and the car had descended, and those same doors had opened again to let him out into the gleaming marble of the hospital’s first-floor lobby, Verne Gibson’s chuckles continued to echo off the walls of the Reaper’s skull like the peeling of abrasive bells.

As it left the building, emerging into a humid June morning, the Reaper drew its cold cloak around itself, rubbing at its bony temple with an equally bony finger. The gesture was futile. The Gibson homunculus that seemed to have roosted in its head simply would not shut his wretched trap. Images of Gibson’s blotchy pink face and savage mouth twisting into that broad grin, exposing rotting teeth and blistering sores, but still smiling, looking right at the Reaper Himself and smiling, damn him, and throwing back his accursed head and laughing, flashed incessantly across the screen of Death’s mind.

The Reaper’s hard, skinless feet found pavement and began to walk, but they did so distractedly. Death headed north on Lincoln Street without a real sense of where it was going, or the purpose of its being there at all.

It felt old. Weak. Off.

It forgot things.

Like the fact it was supposed to be hiding from view.

#

Jerry Cunningham and his nine-year old daughter, Jenna, went for walks on Saturday mornings, usually before the Irish bakery down the street closed. They strolled down the residential side of Lincoln Avenue, chatted, joked, picked up some scones and brought them back to Jenna’s mother. It was a ritual, fun. And after a week of cheating people out of insurance claims it made Jerry feel almost human.

The north side of Lincoln, where they lived, was lined with two- and three-family houses jammed together like a row of slouching, multi-colored teeth. The area was urban residential, an actual neighborhood, and therefore a rapidly dying breed. It felt anachronistic to outsiders. There were kids. Lots of kids. And conversations: people on the steps of their apartments and homes, hashing over gossip and politics and bemoaning the slow descent of the world into madness.

Jerry and Jenna had a pattern they followed: up the North side of Lincoln, down the South. This meant that their trip home inevitably took them by the Harold S. Rivers Playground. They took this route for no good reason other than that they had done it that way the first time. The path had become part of their little ritual.

Just about the time Death was entering Verne Gibson's room, Jenna and Jerry were passing the Riv, as the neighborhood kids called the playground. The place was more than mildly depressing. The grounds consisted of a single rusty, precarious-looking swing set, a patch of dirt that could almost be mistaken for a baseball field if viewed through a set of faulty eyes squinted mostly shut, and a full-length basketball court with a backboard on only one end and a rim sagging from being treated like a jungle gym by the older kids. A cluster of characters, mostly teenage boys, but a couple of tough-looking girls who represented the last thing Jerry wanted his daughter to end up like in a few years, were engaging in something vaguely like a shoot around on the basketball court this morning. It could not have been an actual game, because there had to be at least thirty of them, and half were smoking cigarettes, or something anyway, and milling about.

All morning long Jenna Cunningham had been in an unusually expansive mood. She was being inexplicably open with her dad. A gangly, freckled redhead like her mother, she had nibbled carefully on her cranberry scone and talked to her father softly and awkwardly about, of all things, boys. At first enthused by his daughter's desire to communicate with him, a now terrified, overwhelmed Jerry was just starting to look for ways to steer the conversation in an entirely different direction. Jenna didn't seem to pick up on his discomfort. She had just named a particular boy -- Robbie Honan, he was going to have to find out about that kid -- when the first shot rang out.

Cunningham had lived in the city most of his life, which was plenty long enough to have acquired the requisite survival instincts. So as the first gunshot crack hit the air, he immediately grabbed his daughter, flung her to the ground, and covered her with his own body. He squeezed his eyes closed and squeezed her tight, and as he lay there waiting for the

danger to pass he took a bullet in his side. A moment later another hit him in the collarbone, near his neck, and yet another struck just above his left buttock. None of them hurt much more than a bee sting, really. He thought to himself, three or four times in rapid succession: I'm all right. Nothing serious. Then the shooting stopped. A young male voice released a torrent of frustrated obscenities; girls, then men, were screaming; something heavy and metal fell over with a clang. An engine revved, tires screeched.

When it was clear the time had come to move, Jerry Cunningham grunted and rolled over, getting off his shaking, sobbing daughter. He smiled at her, made sure she was okay, then checked himself for injuries. He checked himself, then immediately looked away. He had already seen enough.

With a sigh, Jerry rolled onto his back. He watched his daughter watching him, her blue eyes connecting the dots that were his wounds. He caught her eye, tried to wink – it was all he could think to do -- and found he could not.

Right about then was when the discouraged Reaper left Verne Gibson's hospital room.

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A few minutes later, Death finally turned onto Lincoln street, staring at the sidewalk at its feet. Its pace was slow, its gait ever so slightly unsteady.

Cunningham was writhing in agony on the sidewalk a block away. His torso was copiously leaking what was left of his life all over the asphalt. Little Jenna was trying desperately to plug the gaps in her daddy with her too-small, too-few hands, feeling very much like the little boy in that story about the hole in the dike, which her now-bleeding (oh god don't die) daddy had read to her just last week.

The Reaper made no indication of being aware of the commotion swirling around him. He veered deftly, automatically, around running pedestrians, screaming women, barking dogs. Cunningham's eyes widened when he saw the majestic, dark-cloaked creature lumbering towards him. He clutched at his little girl's arm, knowing he was hurting her, but scared and not wanting to let go. She didn't seem to notice.

Death stood over Cunningham for a moment, watching the man's blood pour over his little girl's pale fingers, watching him trying to crawl backwards, away from the Reaper. It knelt in front of Cunningham, took his right hand in its own almost tenderly. It bent over to speak directly to the man.

When it spoke, a ragged white crescent formed momentarily in the shadows of the cowl. A cloud of corpse stench blew into Cunningham's face.

NOT TODAY, rasped Death, in a wet voice like the burrowing of worms through flesh.

Cunningham gave it a confused look, one that requested clarification. Was he being saved, abandoned, tricked?

The crescent-smile widened. Death patted Cunningham's hand, once, then released it. It stood, tousled little Jenna's hair, and kept walking.

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The Reaper moved on. It missed other appointments, too. It overlooked an eighty-year old woman named Emma Perot further down on Lincoln, who had slipped in the bathtub while taking her first shower in nearly a month. It walked right by her apartment without so much as slowing down. A forty-three year old school teacher at the Collins School on Lincoln and Stewart, who collapsed of a brain aneurysm while administering a spelling quiz for her third-grade class, was left to fend for herself as well.

Death missed its dates with both women, without even knowing it missed them. He was utterly consumed by the laughter in his own head.

At some point, without realizing it, the Reaper left Lincoln Street and turned onto Chesterton Avenue, a narrow side street lined on both sides by two- and three-family houses. There, in front of a nondescript two-decker with pale blue aluminum siding and a dangerously sagging second-floor porch, the Reaper finally heard something else besides the maddening snorting and gleeful guffaws. Between the pealing of Gibson's infuriating bells, a soft voice seemed to rasp something into the hole where his ears should have been.

The Reaper stopped. He jabbed at the sidewalk with his sickle and tilted his gruesome head, listening. The voice spoke again, then kept speaking, kept repeating itself, whispering its short phrase. It took Death a while to decipher the words; they were spoken so softly, and the Gibson memory was so loud. But he did catch the message, eventually. There were just two words, but when he heard them spoken, he realized their immediate appeal. Two words, they were, that brought something like a smile to the Grim Reaper's unseen visage.

I QUIT.

He heard those two words again. Again. Again. Every repetition brought more of something like peace to his mind. Gibson's roaring laughter gradually became a soft chuckle in the mind of the Reaper.

I QUIT, the Reaper said to Himself.

The Gibson in his head hissed. Sensing a turning in the tides, Death turned on him then, bludgeoned the fat, obnoxious bastard with the phrase – I QUIT - bringing it down on him repeatedly – I QUIT - like an executioner's ax.

I QUIT. I QUIT. I QUIT, said Death, who had a fondness for both executioners and their tools.

The Reaper's personal version of Verne Gibson shifted, grew brumous, hissed through nasty teeth, began to fade. Death felt Himself lightening, as if he might leave the litter-strewn sidewalk altogether and take to flight.

I QUIT, he announced.

He had never felt relief quite like he was now feeling. This sense of an unthinkable burden lifting was brand new to him, but no less unmistakable for its lack of familiarity. With one final downward swipe -- I QUIT!, he bellowed – the Reaper seemed to silence Verne Gibson's laughter for good. All he heard in its wake was the man's dying wheeze, the rattling of phlegm and blood and fluids in his black lungs, like an old motor trying, unsuccessfully, to start. He smelled his rancid death breath. He sensed no glee whatsoever, in any of it.

I QUIT, Death told Himself.

YES I DO. I QUIT, he said to Verne Gibson, once more, for good measure.

DAMN IT ALL, he said through a mouthful of fiercely grinning, jagged teeth.

I REALLY DO QUIT.

#

“You can't quit.”

Death regarded Lucas Croft from across the poshly appointed restaurant table. His index bone had just stopped its merry drumming on the white tablecloth.

“We have a contract,” Croft explained, pulling a thin packet of folded parchment from the inside pocket of his business suit. He unfolded the paper and laid it out in front of him, running a finger under the words. “You're signed up for...let's see...oh yeah, here it is: forever.”

Croft turned the contract so that it faced Death right side up, pointing at the crucial phrase. He turned to beckon a waiter, who slunk over, bowing low like some castle toadie in an old horror film, and took Croft's request for another bottle of wine.

Chattleby's was one of the premier restaurants in metropolitan Boston. It was certainly the most expensive.

Death and Croft were seated across from one another in the best spot in the house, a corner table in the back room. To Croft's right was the date he had entered the restaurant with, a young lady by the name of Farrah Lynn. Farrah was doing her best to look immensely bored, running a slender finger around the rim of a crystal water glass and sighing every five seconds or so. Occasionally she glanced around the room and yawned petulantly.

Her behavior was beginning to irritate Croft. Farrah was a minor celebrity of sorts, an heiress to a fortune built on medical equipment. She had a wild reputation for hedonistic partying. It was a rep which Craft had discovered first hand was not completely without merit, but still exaggerated. She was, like most female celebrities nowadays, disproportionately buxom for a size four, with sultry green eyes and smooth cocoa skin, and hair that fell over her shoulders like shiny black water.

Farrah was also self-absorbed to the point of absurdity. When Death had approached a few minutes ago, casting its long, bituminous shadow over their plates of food, she had betrayed no signs of noticing. It was only when Croft had gestured for the Reaper to join them that she showed any reaction at all: an irritated hiss through her teeth, followed by a clattering drop of her salad fork onto her plate. As if she had been saying: Great, Lucas. How am I supposed to eat anything with THAT around?

From time to time, Lucas had to resist the urge to cover Farrah Lynn's pretty face with his hand, just smother it for a moment, and twist, remake it somehow into something different. Something better. He was a man used to reshaping things: reality, the lives of others, myth. The impulse was inchoate.

He forced himself at these times to consider her good points. Her legs were stunning, for one thing, miles long and slender. Her lips tasted like honey. Also, she actually ate when they went to dinner, which was more than he could say for just about every model he had dated.

And best of all, her finest point, he would be remiss if he didn't say this about her: She wasn't his wife.

Death's cloak expanded as he took a deep breath.



“THAT CONTRACT,” he said calmly, sliding the pages back across the table toward Croft. “CAN BE TERMINATED AT WILL.”

“Not by you it can’t,” countered Croft. He licked an index finger and flipped a few pages, pointing to an indented block of text towards the bottom. “See hear: ‘This contract’, blah blah blah, yeah: ‘may be terminated at any time by the first party.’ That’s us, my corporation. You’re the second party, Grim. There’s no language in here granting you any such privileges.”

Death blinked. Not that anyone noticed.

“I MISUNDERSTOOD, THEN.”

“I should say you did,” chuckled Croft, in a way that said: Don’t sweat it, chief; we all make mistakes.

“IT WAS MY BELIEF THAT THIS CONTRACT GRANTED TWO-WAY TERMINATION-AT-WILL PRIVILEGES.”

Croft shrugged amiably, took a sip of water from a crystal glass, and placed a hand on his date’s knee.

“IT WAS MY BELIEF THAT THIS CONTRACT GRANTED TWO-WAY TERMINATION PRIVILEGES,” said Death. “BECAUSE YOU TOLD ME AS MUCH.” His skeletal hands gripped both sides of the table.

Craft shifted in his chair. He put up his hands.

“Whoa, now, big fella. Let’s not start throwing around accusations – “

“IT IS NOT AN ACCUSATION IT IS THE TRUTH YOU HAVE LIED YOU HAVE CHEATED ME –“

The air in the restaurant darkened like a solar eclipse.