Death ON FRIDAY

Death does not wear a heavy coat in winter. He has no need of polar fleece, packable down, or a faux fur lined hood. He wears a simple coat, blacker than the plastic border on a 60" LED 4K Ultra HD Smart TV. Sometimes you can see him coming, a black figure stark against the white of the snow. Other times he takes you unawares, appearing illuminated by a pool of artificial light in a suburban parking lot.

That was how it was when he approached the noisy throng of people gathered outside the locked doors of the big box store a little before midnight, a few minutes until Friday. He had not expected so many people would be here at this time of night. In fact, he was surprised to be in this place at all. But, he went where he was needed. It was his duty. It was not quite his time yet, so he waited, his elegant coat flapping out behind him in the wind.

Most people did not notice him. They usually didn't. But one lady next to him accidentally bumped his arm. She looked up at him and laughed her apologies. "Sorry about that," she said. "I guess I'm just over-excited." Death looked down at her, saying nothing, but she was undeterred. "I know some people think it's crazy, but we just love it." She laughed some more. "It's a family ritual. Me and my sisters," here the lady indicated two equally jolly ladies beside her, who waved their fingers at Death and smiled, "we write out our lists and each of us has things we're assigned to get, then when we get inside, we split up. Divide and conquer, right girls?" The sisters exchanged high-fives.





The lady fell silent for a moment, but was unable to remain so for long. She put her hands on her hips and looked Death up and down. "So, what are you after, new coat?" Death did not answer. His coat was still immaculate after all this time; the buttons shone and no thread was out of place. He had no wish to change it. The lady pulled a store circular out of her copious purse. "Oh, no offense. That one's really nice, but it's kind of old fashioned, you know what I mean?" She opened the ad and held it up for Death to see.

"See, they got some really nice puffer coats, you know, or wool blend, those look good, too. And you look like you could use something warmer, this one doesn't look very thick." The lady squeezed Death's upper arm to feel the fabric of his fine coat. She raised her eyebrows at her sisters. "Oooh!" she said, lingering on Death's bicep, and the ladies all giggled. Death was still.

The second sister spoke up, "Well I think he looks just fine."She turned to the third sister and said in a stage whisper, "Real fine." She spoke louder again. "He doesn't need a coat." She studied Death's face. "You want something electronic, am I right? They've got lots of good deals. Flat screen TVs, iPhones, no, no, I got it—you want a virtual fireplace."

The third sister stepped in. "No, I'll bet he's looking for jewelry." She grabbed the circular from the first sister and turned a few pages. "This one's nice—the 'Just the Two of Us' pendant." She elbowed the second sister. "For that special lady!" They all laughed good-naturedly as Death shook his head, just a little.

The first sister had been silent too long. She indicated the second sister, "Well she's single!" And they all laughed again. Death regarded each sister in turn.





The second sister looked as though she didn't mind her sister's proposal in the least. "Oh, I'm sure he's got somebody to go home to. Maybe it's a special guy...." She searched Death's face. "No? Well, I mean I sure wouldn't want you to go home to an empty house." Then she laughed to show she wasn't serious. At least, not very serious.



Death shook his head. "Not yet," he told her. He turned to the third sister. "You will be first." He turned to the second. "Then you." He turned to the first. "Then you."

The sisters exchanged raised eyebrows. "Whoa, tiger, I'm married," said the first sister, trying not to look pleased.

"And she's old enough to be your momma," put in the third sister, and the three dissolved into laughter again.

But Death could not hear them now. The noise of the crowd rose. A store employee was shouting through a bullhorn about remaining calm and not running. The doors of the store opened. The crowds all around Death surged forward and he was pushed and shoved from every angle. There were shouts and screams and what might have been a gunshot. Chaos was not new to Death, but he soon decided he preferred a battlefield or natural disaster to this particular form of pandemonium. He was needed tonight, but he could come back later. There would be time enough. There was always time.





The three sisters rode the tide of people to the store's entrance as Death disappeared from the crowd. When the first sister noticed his absence, she shouted to her sisters, "Well, I figured him for a lightweight. Some people just can't hack it."

Death arrived at the door of his mountain home, the skirts of his coat streaming out behind him in the driving wind. He walked through the dim, gray halls past rooms filled with furnishings that might have been grand if you could have seen them properly. He came at last to a room with a fire in the fireplace. The fire gave no warmth and little light, and it made no sound. But Death did not return to an empty house. As he took his chair beside the fire, the skeleton of a cat rose from its cushion and stretched, preparing to greet him.

The creature arched its vertebrae, rubbing against Death's legs as he caressed its delicate skull. Then he reached into his pocket. He had made a stop on his way home, and now he laid something small and white on the floor at his feet. The cat of bones bent to examine it, a sniffing noise coming from the hole at the tip of its skull. It was the delicate skeleton of a fish. The cat turned empty eye sockets up to Death and thanked him with an unearthly wail, then began licking the fish bones clean with the ghost of a tongue.

Its meal complete, the little creature hopped onto Death's lap and curled itself into a pile of bones on his fine coat. Death settled back into his chair with a sigh. He scratched the bony head and the cat made a rattling purr. One corner of Death's mouth lifted with the hint of a smile. He was grateful indeed to have someone to come home to. He would need to return to the parking lot soon, for there was work to be done. But there was time. There was always time.



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