

See You Around

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The first time I met Death was when she took my hamster. I was six years old and very sleepy, so I assumed that the black-robed figure that walked right through my bedroom wall was a figment of my imagination. After all, my parents had assured me that any monsters I might see under the bed or in the closet were not real. They never said anything about tall shadowy figures walking through the plaster, but being the practical realistic girl I was, I assumed this monster fell under the same category. Anyway, I knew the thing wasn't there to hurt me. I don't know how I knew, I just did.

The figment glided across the room to the cage where Mr. McCuddles lived and reached a pale, slender hand right through the bars to scoop out a tiny white light that I was sure was not there before. "What's that?" I asked, pointing at the glowing ball hovering a few centimeters above the ghostly hand.

The figure turned, startled. It wore a hood, so I couldn't see anything beyond the shadow of the cowl except a pair of luminous gray eyes. It spoke in a low, husky voice that sounded anything but human. "You can see me?" I nodded and the figure cocked its head curiously, "How interesting." It approached me slowly, bent down so its face was level with mine, and slowly removed its hood, revealing the face of a woman who seemed familiar and yet alien. She had black hair that fell in a tangled curtain, framing her skeletal face, and her eyes gleamed with the kind of light that coroners shine on corpses during an autopsy. "What is your name, child?" she whispered through thin lips.

"Finley," I answered confidently, staring straight into her glassy eyes.

“You don’t seem afraid, Finley.” It wasn’t a question, but it wasn’t a threat either; more like an observation. “Why aren’t you afraid?”

I answered her truthfully, “Because you can’t hurt me.” Again, there was a certainty behind my words and I didn’t know where it came from.

She gave me a sharp, satisfied smile and straightened, flipping her hood back over her head as she did, saying “See you around, Finley.” Then she vanished, leaving behind the faint smell of ozone and damp earth, and a queasy feeling in my gut.

I went back to sleep feeling faintly disappointed she didn’t tell me what the glowing light was. The next morning, I woke to find Mr. McCuddles still and cold in the corner of his cage. It was only years later that I realized I had met Death.

I’ve seen her a few times since then: Casually strolling through the surgical wing of St. Agnes hospital, standing near the site of a horrific car crash, gripping the shoulder of a man as he has a heart attack. Seeing her is always a nasty shock, like suddenly being doused in ice cold water. Sometimes, she’ll notice me and give me a wink, or a nod, or leave me with the phrase, “See you around, Finley.” Her departures are always silent, smell of graveyards and storm clouds, and leave me feeling sick to my stomach.

Every time I see her, I am reminded of my own mortality and fervently wish it will be the last time she materializes in my life until my own quiet death of natural causes many years in the future. That hasn’t exactly work out. It’s been less than a month after her last appearance, and I find myself standing shoulder to shoulder with Death surveying the grim scene laid out at our feet.

“So I guess this is it,” I mutter a bit disgruntled, “I’m dead?” Surprisingly, dying doesn’t seem to faze me as much as I imagined it would. I turn to the tall figure next to me, “So... do I just follow you through the pearly gates, or do I get some singing Cherubs?”

“That,” she says, still studying the pristine white hospital bed and the still figure lying on it, “is entirely up to you.”

“What do you mean it’s up to me?”

She turns a little and looks at me out of the corner of her eye. “You don’t have to come with me,” Turning back to my prone, empty body still marred with scrapes and bruises from the accident, she nods her head at it and comments, “You can stay here,” the heart monitor beeps steadily, quietly in the space between her words, “stay and keep fighting.” She closes her eyes. She is so still I can’t even tell if she’s breathing. She probably doesn’t have to. “You are on the edge, Finley.”

I sigh frustrated, “What does that mean?” She says nothing. “Would it kill you to give me a straight answer?”

Her thin colorless lips turn up in an amused smirk, “Oh Finley, you can’t kill Death.”

I roll my eyes at her, “Then answer my question.”

“You, my dear, are hovering in the spirit world, somewhere between life and death.” She stops there and I have to restrain myself from shouting at her.

“Thanks,” I say layering my voice with as much sarcasm as I can muster, “that really cleared things up.”

She doesn't seem fazed by my exasperation, "I wasn't finished." She pauses again and I take a deep breath to calm myself down. "Let me ask you a question." Another long pause precedes a wispy sigh that sounds like a breeze brushing past tombstones. She looks down at my body on the bed then up at me, locking her cold gaze on mine. "Do you want to die, Finley?" She asks with quiet frankness.

I look away from her dead eyes and think, really truly think, about her question. If I go back, if I live, I will have no one; the accident took care of that. I will be alone. I will still see Death every time I am near her, and I will still have to go with her eventually. Do I want to die? I guess it depends upon what's behind the veil.

"If I die," I begin hesitantly, "where will I go?"

Death lets out a harsh, crow-like cackle. "Oh, Finley, I can't ruin the best part." She sounds genuinely amused.

To be honest, I didn't expect much else. Death never has been good at answers, if anything, she only leaves me with more questions. Now, however, she is the one asking, and I find that I don't know how to reply.

One final time, I think about living. I think about all the people I've watched Death take, and how she always left me feeling nauseous. I picture mountains, wild places, and skies full of stars, and imagine bustling cities full of people. My mind fills with symphonies and laughter and the smell of freshly baked cookies and the sound of the ocean and fireworks and silence and the touch of velvet, of rain upon bare skin, everything and nothing all at once, the feeling of loving someone and the pain of losing them and... The clamor in my head stops as I come to my decision.

I see Death studying me out of the corner of her eye. After a silence that stretches on for an eternity and yet only seconds, she asks again, “So, Finley, do you want to die?”

I close my eyes, take a deep breath and say firmly, “No.” And I wake up.

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