

# DEATH COMES AS A FRIEND

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The clock chimed; the hour came. The woman's eyes scanned the many family photographs on the mantel. Where was her best-est boy, nudging her to go out?

"Time for a walk!" She called to him.

She pushed herself up from the armchair. "Oogh," she laid a hand flat against her lower back. She shuffled towards the door and exchanged soft fleece-lined house slippers for rugged outdoor boots. She buttoned her sweater then grabbed the puffy mid-ankle-length coat from the peg on the wall.

She bent to fit the slider into its track, fumbled with the zipper then finally pulled the tab up to her neck. She absently reached for the leash on its peg before she remembered. Her hand stopped, and she tapped the photo like a talisman. The red-coated puppy with its soft tongue and toothy smile, suspended in time on the wall above a set of bowls layered with dust from disuse.

Snow flurries swirled around as she pushed the door against a bitter gust of wind. Where once she and her steadfast companion would have run and played amongst the soft floating laces of falling ice, she trudged alone. Her head down, thoughts empty. Her heart longed for the glee of her four-footed companion. She marched alone towards the end of the street, which meets the dunes in front of the sea.

As she approached the beach, a child skipped right into her path. Another child, now grown and half-way around the world, flashed through the woman's memory. Skipping joyfully was the core of every childhood, and the envy of every adult. She smiled and continued, her feet crunching the thin layer of snow now accumulated on the sidewalk. The hairs on her neck rose.

The child continued ahead. The woman looked around for a parental unit, a grandparent, or even a sitter. Modest homes and mature trees lined either side of the narrow street. The houses glowed with the warmth of families around tables for their evening holiday meal. Multiple cars emphasized the gatherings inside. She and the child were alone.

"Where are your parents?"

The child ignored her and skipped towards the beach. The woman shrugged and followed; presumably adults would appear soon, frantically searching for their kid. For now, the woman watched the light-footed child. The bitter wind died down, freeing the woman from clutching her coat tightly around her. Her arms swung at her sides with ease. Her steps didn't stumble on the uneven sidewalk or the wayward stolon creeping across the pavement from the trees. The woman marveled at the dazzling stars, no longer hidden by clouds. The flurries had ceased as well.

The child's skipping feet seemed to hover above the ground; easy steps of unburdened youth. Hadn't the woman been that carefree, once? She raked through the cobwebs clouding her childhood memories. But only the effortless joy of puppy paws racing across the snow and jumping up to catch snowflakes came to the woman's mind. Mostly she remembered the dark and joyless days. Cancer. The dark evil that robbed her of the complete joy of children and family. Cancer carved a sharp dividing line of Before and After in her life.

Watching the child, a shiver raced through the woman as she began to suspect something more.

"I know who you are," her voice quivered. "It's my time, isn't it?"

The child stopped skipping and turned to face the woman.

"Yes." A voice filled the woman's ears.

The woman's heart beat like a drum. She should just collapse dead right there, shouldn't she? She waited, but remained alive.

"Great. I have questions. Why does your master stand around and do nothing while children die? Why the fuck is there cancer?" She paused to take a breath, and her breath rattled.

"Why does evil seem to win more than good?"

The child turned away and continued to skip towards the beach.

The woman aimed several curse words in every language she knew at the child's departing figure.

"I really don't like you," she coughed, and her breath rattled even more. "Why bother revealing yourself if you're not going to tell me anything? Shouldn't you be comforting me? Helping me pass my last moments quietly, reminiscing about all the people I've loved, places I've seen, running with my dogs and maybe even being visited by their ghosts?" She wagged her finger at the child. "You're not very good at this. Are you new? Did I get a discount Death to help me over?"

"Everyone gets what they need."

"Then you should be a dog. Far better companion to the afterlife." The woman breathed heavily as her boots slogged through the snow-covered sand. "I'd follow a dog into Hell." She spat at the child. "Far less scary than children. These days people are afraid to help children; puts one at risk for misunderstandings and being called 'pedos.'"

"I'll take it under advisement." The very un-childlike voice responded.

"Please do." She stopped to take a shallow rattling breath. "Is there an 'afterlife'? Or do we just fade into oblivion?"

The child smiled, "you'll just have to find out for yourself."

"Suppose I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

The child shook its head, and the woman sighed.

"When you're young and it hurts, they call them growing pains, but there is no soothing name for the pain before death." She stopped and clutched at her chest, breathing heavily. "We all have to die. Alone. This isn't a trip you want to take with someone. But it would be nice to be met with a friend." She glanced at the child. "I want my dog. To see him one more time."

"Which one?"

"I'll take all of them. But if not all, then Orion. He was the best-est boy ever." She spoke in the sing-song way she used to talk to him. In her mind's eye she saw his face and his tail wagging rhythmically. "My best boy."

"Why not your baby?"

She turned on the child. "Never. Don't ever dangle my baby in front of me as a way to get what you want."

Images of the pediatric ICU flashed before her eyes. A tiny hand in hers, and then a lifeless body cradled in her arms. Tears formed in her eyes. Her heart consumed, again, by the deep sharp ache.

The pain that never left, lying dormant; only to be summoned back to life by memory, like a slumbering dragon that awoke to burn everything in its path. The path was across her heart and soul. The woman stood wracked with sobs. When she finally tamped down her pain and sealed it back into the hole in her heart, she turned on the child and spewed all the pent-up fury that hadn't had a tangible target until now. At least death was good for something.

"You gave him cancer, so fuck it! You and your boss too."

The child did not respond.

"I'd rather pass alone, buzz off."

The woman turned her back on the child. She took a few steps forward, then stopped and used her left boot to push away the snow. She lowered herself onto the sand and faced the water. The sea spread out before her, the sun an orange ball. The sky turned shades of pinks, purples, and plums.

"Now this is the perfect view to die to."

She waved her hands towards the horizon. The prominent veins and crinkled skin gave her pause. She was old. Her life was at its end. She spent this last holiday alone to spare her family. Released from the obligation, her granddaughter and great-grandchildren opted to travel. She would have been a burden accompanying them. Now, she hoped they were enjoying themselves and happy with their decision instead of sitting huddled around her as she died.

The woman looked back on her life. Well-spent moments of utter joy, accomplishments, and pain of course. She believed that joy was only appreciated when contrasted with pain. She only wished her pain hadn't been so deep, so soul-crushing. And now this, another moment, a growing pain of the final kind; moving through to the next phase. The mirrored water, dyed in the colours of the setting sun, brought contentment to her. The sun slid towards the sea in its final descent. Final for her at least.

A warm muzzle nudged her bare hands. The woman turned her eyes from the sunset to the puppy sitting next to her. Tail wagging and tongue hanging out, with eyes that reached into her soul and warmed her.

"My best-est boy!" Joy coursed through her at the sight of his wagging tail. Her face creased with the widest smile. She hugged him. He licked her face as tears overflowed from her eyes. She snuggled against his warm fur.

"You came back for me."