

It wasn't a tunnel of light.

It was more of a ringing. The kind of ringing that is just within your hearing, so subtle you begin to question your sanity, the kind that gradually rises from complete and utter silence. I longed to drown it out and I opened my mouth to scream, just to hear something beyond that faint ringing. I could not speak. Not at first.

The ringing continued, but at long last it fluctuated. It became louder and softer at intervals and I tried to turn in order to determine its direction. It was at that moment I realized I could not see. I reached for the ringing with all of my might and found no limbs to move. Still I kept reaching and hoping for an end to my extreme discomfort. I felt as though I were the strings to a puppet, and the body had been cut away from me, leaving me hanging useless.

It was a slow process, whatever reeled me in. It happened by portions and my awareness of my being was not strong enough to comprehend existing in two such different places at once. Because of this I was aware only of nothingness at first, the only relief to me being that the ringing had ended. When my relocation was over, I felt I had lungs once more and I longed to breathe, but found I could not. I looked up—my eyes! They had been returned to me—and saw I was within the earth. The heavy power of it kept me still as I looked about me and tried to discern who had brought me there. At long last I spotted her.

She was almost human, I suppose. Her skin changed shape and form, growing wide and motherly as though pregnant and then reverting to a childlike state and stagnating between the two extremes at an assortment of womanly shapes. I stared a moment at the dark shifting mud that made up her skin and then managed to look upon her eyes. They were earthworm pink, and she smiled at how I flinched from them. Thick ropes of moss hung from her head and draped down her shoulders and one grew outwards to lift my face from where I had been avoiding looking upon her terrible beauty.

"Who are you?" I asked. It was a simple question. I felt inadequate in my lack of knowledge. The figure before me demanded to be known. In fact I felt the answer to my question as an itch under my skin, even before she responded.

"Death," she said, after several moments consideration. I had the strange feeling she had used a different word entirely, one that had held no meaning for me. I had heard death as its closest approximation.

"Oh," I said in return, quite eloquently. In my defense, I had never met Death before. "Am I dead?"

"I need a favor," she said instead of answering me. "Tell me a story."

I was unsure whether or not I should refuse. It seemed such an odd request for something I had always considered to be so powerful. What story hadn't she heard? What could I offer her that she hadn't heard a thousand, a million, a billion times before? Then again, what might she do to me should I refuse out of fear?

"When I was young, during the winter," I began, pulling from my memories a moment of surreality to match the one I found myself in now. "There was a river I would play by. The

water would freeze at the surface and trickle on beneath. One year I broke the ice until the water was frozen entirely through, and then I covered the river with snow and built a home above it. After that winter, the river never flowed again. It evaporated with the ice."

Death hummed at my tale and once it was finished I felt as though a great deal of energy had been taken from me and given elsewhere. It was though my life had been used to feed another, someone hungry and wanting, begging for life in any form it could find. I could barely stand, I was so drained by their need.

"Thank you," Death told me, her hands leaving trails of mud along my shoulders as she pushed me toward a chair of ice. I sat. "In return I can offer you a choice."

"What choice is that?"

"You can either live once again, or you can learn any secret of your choosing," she said. I was astounded.

"Does everyone get this choice?"

"You must pick to know a secret if you want the answer to any question from me," Death said. I wasn't pleased with the arrangement, but I supposed I should be grateful that there was an arrangement in the first place.

Oh, to live again. It was tempting. And frightening. I remember too well the constant fear of Death, how it seemed at my side like a faithful companion. Even now she was familiar to me, and although the fear of her was muted, I was not sure I wanted her by my side for any longer. I felt no pain now, even if my experience had been less than pleasant so far. I shrank away from my memories of pain, how much it had ruled my life. I didn't want to be born again. I didn't want to relearn myself. So I chose.

"May I know a secret?" I asked. Death nodded and waited for me to ask. "What would I have been if I lived again?"

She smiled at me. I could see she thought me foolish. Perhaps I was, but first and foremost I was curious and if I was giving up this next life of mine, I still wanted to know what it entailed.

"You would die young," she said first. "Or perhaps you were old. You felt young and you were sad to leave. When you were born, they were happy to see you come, and when you left they were not happy to see you go. You made no change of any consequence, and you left behind equal numbers of those who hate and love you, few of which remembered you after several years had passed. It was a life."

"Nothing special then," I said, feeling let down. I had dreamed up for myself a marvelous life that, if I had only chosen to live it, might have made me happy. Instead I had been promised more mediocrity. All illusions of any significance or self importance faded from me. "So I made the right choice then?"

"You had joys and pains," Death said in place of an answer. "It would have been a life."

"But not a useful one."

"That is a matter of perspective," Death said. "All lives are useful to me. You feed me, and I nourish you in return. All life is for me. I offered it to you in thanks. But you chose a secret."

"Did I choose wrong?"

"You chose. Why worry which was correct and which was not?" Death said. I realized my chair of ice was melting and I was sinking into the Earth. I watched in silent dismay as my skin turned to mud and I sunk into the ground, my will sapping from me as I melted. It was several eternities before I knew anything of myself again.

"Who are you?" asked a voice. She was young and my heart ached for her.

"I am Death," I said to her. She froze in fear and I longed to help her. "I need a favor."

"A favor," she said softly. Disbelieving. I nodded.

"Tell me a story."

She chose life, in case you were wondering. The first time, at least.