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Death's Day Off

"The moon bathes Death in a light that makes him look like a white star twinkling in the middle of the backyard. The wheel turns and turns and turns, rolled along by the stick Death is carrying."

— *Reinaldo Arenas*

You wouldn't suspect how forlorn he is, out under the moon like that, playing with the bicycle wheel—how cold, how much he would like to step out of the night, be invited into your kitchen, even for tea. And later, a bath. Death is normally very clean. He's been thinking of a bath for weeks—ever since the wheel rolled through mud after rain and splashed his coat. He carries the stick so that he can play without getting dirty. It's only now when he has just the moon to play with while people watch from windows that he is conscious of the filth he's acquired from the world. Something in the watching makes him sad. He lets the wheel fall, looks at his hands, puts them, resigned, into the pockets of his coat. Perhaps they will allow him, at least, to sit on the steps—he's so tired! so tired of pretending, in front of them, that he plays under the moon—that all he does is play, play, play, that nothing phases him, that he never sleeps, never gets invited in. How they all believe, watching from the window, that he can go on without rest. Or, perhaps they know what his being alone with himself will do. After all, he *is* who he is. Death is death. But as long as he has the moon, a step to sit on, and the

negligible warmth of his coat, he'll survive himself—even, some days, enough to take up the stick, and play.

He wonders where they learned that he studied violence. *They are mistaken*, Death thinks to himself, in the backyard, out under the moon. Everything about him is hearsay. It's as if there were no light for him—no light to fall on him in the backyard to make him a star. A mistake the way people believe. Even with all of their watching, the people in the house would rather pretend. They are used to him out there playing, turning the wheel where they can see him. How upset they'd be, if they could see him now, sitting on the back step under the shadow of the overhang, beat.

He looks at the bicycle wheel, dropped, tilted up from the ground. He has managed to keep it out of the garden. Soon there will be frost, and the flowers will curl, and the green will fade, and the wheel can roll wider without harm. He doesn't like winter. He can never rest. He moves from house to house, yard to yard, waiting, looking back into windows—sometimes, still hoping to be invited in. He wants to tell his secrets to someone. He tries and tries for someone who'll hear them, someone besides the moon, but when he gets close enough to the window to whisper to whoever's looking, the next day they disappear—gone with one of his secrets—and he is left outside, cold, to face another window, alone.

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Death begins to count, now, all the secrets he has lost—*one, two, three*, with every turning of the wheel. The moon gets older, high above night, whispering *time, time* Where are we? How high do the numbers go? What will it take to explain all this? A way around secrets. A way to still the turning of the wheel—something of sleep, perhaps, to still the turning. There is almost nothing left to play. The stars, Death notices, are nearly off-course with distance and speed. Look around. How will he stop coming to this place—the centre of one backyard after another? It isn't just that he's cold, either, or tired, but it's something to do with how the light falls that gives him a certain unexplainable hunger—more as each secret passes. He blows on his hands; he can almost see his breath. Tonight, no light in the window, the moon is a sliver. He wishes he could

sing, wishes he had a voice for this instead of counting. . . . What makes him want to go inside?—it would mean the last wheel's turn. And then what? No more eyes watching—only the moon spreading its light like frost over the garden. Only winter coming on. It's all the same. Night. Secrets. Death. Never a place to stay—always wishing. *four, five*. It's getting late. What number can Death pull down out of the sky which waits around him? What he can manage, he manages—*six, seven*. He has never seen the inside of a door. Too late, the moon whispers *time*—even behind that cloud, he can hear it—too late, too late, by the time Sleep comes, the wheel will be broken

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It's not *that* quiet here. If you listen carefully you can hear counting in the air, like secrets. This morning, Death is waking up while you look at your face in the mirror. Without looking, you can tell that it's cold outside, that there's frost in the yard pinching the stubborn flowers. Death begins his rounds in the garden, straightening the flowers fallen over on their long stems. Do they curl a little at his touch? or *is* it the wind? No one is looking out the window. It is Monday. Start again. Death, with no one watching, is looking for his stick. He shouldn't be out in broad daylight; you might catch him misbehaving. How many times have you waited for a morning like this—free not to *do* anything? The spokes on the bicycle wheel are beginning to rust. You feel a little sick; maybe your clothes aren't the way you left them in the drawer. Maybe the sounds you hear aren't coming from outside. And what is all this counting anyway? What does it mean? Whose secrets are they? and when they go, will Death move on? This isn't the first time strangeness has settled on the house. Perhaps it will snow. The eyes in the mirror say *yes, it will snow*. It is *that* cold. Death looks down at the wheel in the yard. Where does he belong? Here, with you?

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Death wants to be human—like anyone else, and that means more than playing. It means *work* so that a day off will come. He wants a day off from being Death. *This*, this wandering, this being shut out is not at all

what he intended. This is out of control—someone in the house knows it, someone in the house whom he wishes to be, someone in the house on their day off.

You are in the house, upstairs, deciding what to do. Looking down into the yard from the bedroom window reminds you of childhood and how you used to hide and dig out there—all the little graves for birds that killed themselves against the windows. But there were games, too, with your friends—statues, and you wish you could play like that again, now. But you can't play like that home alone at your age—they'll have you locked up. So what *will* you do today? Two hours have already gone. You'd better decide quick. *First, I'll go down to the kitchen*

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The kitchen is the warmest room in the house. Something almost always cooking, or about to be cooked. You don't remember how the walls got so blue or busy with patterns. Right now, it is enough to make the coffee. Sometimes it takes telling yourself, your spirit, *Come down and make the coffee*. As you go by the window something out in the yard catches your eye. It's Death, with that stick in his hand; you recognize him immediately. It's such a nice day, and you have your freedom, so you smile at him. He picks up the wheel and smiles back. Even this much, for him, is a beckoning, and he's glad you're home. Your eyes wander over the yard, admiring what he's done with the flowers. They stand up to the cold. The coffee smells good as it's brewing. Nice and warm inside. In a speeding instant you come close to believing how sad Death must be—not cruel or harsh or crazy or blind. What is he doing out there in your yard? Why is he watching *this* house? You begin to think of your heart, and any little pains you have had in your hands and feet, recall the record of headaches. *Is it me?* But you are in your thirties so it can't be—besides, you really don't feel *that* bad for all your complaining, do you? *No*. Just uncomfortable with Death out there in the yard looking in. You move away from the window. Take out a cup. Pour the coffee. Swallowing brings you back to life.

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Death moves closer to the window, wheel and stick still in his hands. He would like to tell you something, but you are sitting down at the table, facing the wall. *Can you keep a secret? Hey! I want to tell you a secret* Death gives a faint tap on the window with the stick. You don't turn around—know it's him—just keep sipping the warm coffee. Suddenly, it crosses your mind that he may want to use the garage to sleep in, or borrow some of your gardening tools to work in the yard. You smile a wide smile at the wall.

Death isn't smiling, feels a bit sick about the greeting you teased him with a few minutes ago. He taps harder, trying to get you to look. *Please look* You get up to pour more coffee into your half-empty mug. *Will you look? Will you look?* Just a glance as you move by and see the eyes in Death's close face following you to the counter. You think, *If only he would go away; this is my day off; he'll ruin it* and he, *Please look! please come over here; I have a secret* The flowers on the wallpaper begin to laugh; the room is full of smiles—you think you will choke—the chairs, the stove, the dishes on the drainboard, the plants, the toaster oven are all smiling and the room is too warm with it, and you begin to feel faint, so, not thinking, you go to the window for air . . .

Something is with this house today—something uneven, something strange. You stop your arms from lifting the window at the last possible second. Death is there. So close. What is he doing? He waves an arm *Open! Open! I have a secret.* . . . Is he counting again? Is he talking to me? It looks like he's whispering something O God, I need air . . .

You open the window halfway; a morning gust rips in, the flowers on the wallpaper freeze. Death drops the stick, reaches his hand in; he is smiling.

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It isn't *really* so hard to look him in the face once the window's open, but you reflexively back away from his reaching hand. You don't want to *touch* him. He isn't saying anything yet even though he looks like he wants to: the silence so thick for a minute you almost wish he would. Others would call this staring, but it's more than that—it's a chance. Somehow you both know it. As he begins to speak to you, you wonder, still absorbed by looking into his face, not hearing, if he would

feel pain if you slammed the window down on his arm (always a defense in mind, it's the way you do everything). Is he a ghost—an immortal, feelingless trick? Or is that flailing arm real enough to break? He repeats himself, you can tell by the way his face looks, *Are you listening? Can you hear me?* You nod so he'll start over again—saying what he was saying: *I have a secret A secret? A secret I want to tell you Me? What is it? I want to trade places: I wish I were you What?, Me?, Why? Why are you home today?* It's my day off. Death nods like you've given the right answer and says, *Exactly. I want a day off.* What do you mean? This is absurd. (The flowers on the wallpaper are beginning to thaw; the fresh air feels good.) A day off? Imagine—a day without Death in the world. *Just one day*, his look, that pleading look, so pathetic. How?, you ask, What do you mean? Death relaxes a little now that he has your attention, gotten this far, and you're not making a move away from the window. *All you have to do is let me in*, he says, *You come out, and I'll go in* What are you talking about? I can't let you in this house, and I won't be put out into the cold . . . are you crazy? Ah, he says, *so you do believe in me*

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But I'm not what you think, Death continues, *not at all what you think, and it seems that you're not like anyone else I've tried to tell my secret to. I hope not. You see—just give me this time to explain—nothing has turned out as I'd planned, it's all wrong, and I'm tired, so very tired... Do you know what it's like to go on endlessly, without rest? To pretend you are doing something when there's no hope or strength left, to have always to live up to people's furious expectations, to be shunned and spit on and locked out and mocked? Do you know that even the moon pities me, this has gone on so long? Can you understand that my secrets are not crimes, that what I have to tell counts for something too, even though no one wants to hear it—especially that no one wants to hear it, because this is the only thing I have in common with others? Please give me this day, just this one day, to see the other side of the door, to stop counting, to leave the wheel and the stick behind, to come out of the cold, to keep a secret. You are my chance, will you help me?*

* * *

What can you say to him? One day? *Yes, yes—just this one day.* Hope creeps into his look, stands at the corners of his eyes. When there are times that you need to prove to the world (and yourself) that you are not old, you'll agree to do nearly anything. *All right,* you say to him. He withdraws his hand. You wish it weren't so cold outside. *Just let me get a coat and a book,* you tell him. He looks like he'll wait for anything, now.

You hesitate a full minute when you meet him at the door. He's shorter than you expect, or is that just because you're two steps up, looking down on him?—and he almost looks feeble in his thin, droopy coat—not at all menacing. When you look at his face as he climbs the first step, it screams *joy joy joy* at you, about to be let in. When you switch places on the threshold, panic seizes you a moment: what if he doesn't let you back in?, what if he won't leave the house? *When will we switch back?* you ask him. You can tell he doesn't want to think about that *now*—at the moment of his pleasure—as if the day were already ending. *Later. Later.* What does he mean by that? *Six o'clock?*, you press. *Oh; if you say so, yes—six o'clock,* and he quietly turns and closes the door.

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Death can't believe that he's finally made it inside. *A chance! At last!* He looks at everything in the kitchen—the room he first steps into—even ventures over to the window, looks out at you.

You are only outside a minute when you wish you could change your mind about this. What *were* you thinking? This is ridiculous. You can't sit outside all day in the cold reading Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason.* What's going on today? How did you give up your day off to sit, shivering in the cold, out on the back step? Maybe you *are* old. You don't want to do this, but you know you're stuck. You'll never get Death to change his mind now. It's made up.

A light appears, faintly, in the window. Death has moved further into the house, turning on the lights. You don't know it, but he's looking for the bedroom—your bedroom. He's so tired. Yet, on the way, he examines every room carefully, awed by the simplest things: the doorknob, a bookend, the hanging plant in the hallway. Then he finds the stairs, climbs them, slowly, reluctant to finish his tour at the top. He likes the

feeling of climbing—a feeling he all too rarely has a chance to feel. His is, rather, the feel of falling. But this, this takes him out of himself—how wonderful it is! At the uppermost step he turns to the left and walks straight into your bedroom as if he knows where he is going. He touches the walls to make sure this is happening. When his eyes have absorbed all that they can see of the room, he lies down on the bed and closes them.

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You begin to shiver in the yard. *That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt.*

Death has a dream:

There is nowhere to go. A boy is kissing his feet. Stop. Here. Rest. A boy he doesn't know, a small boy, is kissing his feet. Ah, this place! The boy does not want to play, he only wants to go on kissing the dreamer's feet. There is no place to go. This is the place all the days have brought, all the endless days—he's brought to the boy who is kissing his feet. Rest. Sun. The moon is gone. The wheel has opened up into the most beautiful flower, and the boy is continually kissing his feet, the lightest, tenderest kisses, kisses of air, kisses of warm breath, endless kisses clean, devoted kisses kisses unshamed

Outside, it begins to snow. While Death dreams you are not cold—you realize it all of a sudden, right now, under the light snow that has just begun to fall—you are not cold, in fact, you have never felt more comfortable in all your life. What is it? Where has this comfort come from? Wait. How can it be that nothing moves? Look! Nothing to see—nothing moving—anywhere.

Time turns to nothing when Death dreams. Is it a secret?

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Hospitals are empty. Gardens burst. Hunger jumps a cliff. Air and water renew. Walls empty. Music, with singing hands, unmakes the beds of war. Snow is lightly falling.

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How much longer before Death wakes?

The snow is making a quilt in the yard. The stick is buried. An inhuman quiet surrounds you. You wonder what Death is doing inside.

Death turns over, and the boy kissing his feet in the dream stops and looks up. Looking down at him, Death struggles to stay, half in, half out of sleep. The boy says *Don't go. Stay with me.* Death's sadness is about this happiness ending—about the boy who doesn't want to play, the boy who will only adore him, kissing his feet. But it is time to wake up and Death knows it—remembers the moon whispering, like a nightmare, now: *time time* No point in fighting it—

Death rises; nothing is still, and sounds, noises outside seem to rise up from the ground. He walks over to look at his face in the mirror. What does he see? More than anything the filth and anger of waking up. He must have a bath, yes, that's it, he'll feel better about this if he has a bath. There is time. Where can he find a towel? As he rummages around the bedroom, Death notices, out of the corner of his eye, a tall piece of furniture he doesn't recognize (he's never seen one in a kitchen) and in it, many black boxes covered with knobs. He opens the glass door to look closer.

For how is it possible that the faculty of cognition should be awakened into exercise otherwise than by means of objects which affect our senses, and partly of themselves produce representations, partly rouse our powers of understanding into activity, to compare, to connect, the raw material of our sensuous impressions into a knowledge of objects, which is called experience?

He touches a big knob in the middle of the third box. It turns easily, but nothing happens. He doesn't know what it's for. Maybe if he pushes the black square which is sticking out from the left-hand corner. . . . Yes, that's it, a little green strip of light comes on and there's music. Why does his hand know that turning the big knob can make the music softer? He doesn't want it loud. He hears it best when it is barely there at all. Like the way the moon whispers.

O this music! He stands up straight, listening. What is this music and who had trapped it so beautifully in the set of black boxes? Remembering his bath, he turns the knob again, right, so that the music will follow faintly behind him into the other room.

He goes into the bathroom, finds a faucet—almost like those he's seen in many kitchens—and turns the water on. Hot water, hot, hot water—only hot, to melt all the cold out of him.

You can't concentrate. What time is it? Good. Four o'clock. What a sad excuse for reading you've put on. It's too cold. You've been daydreaming about what you'll have for supper, and thinking up a story you'll take back to the office tomorrow about what you did today. Of all things to bring out anyway—Kant. You should have chosen a novel. Yes, a Latin American novel. That would have kept you warmer.

Death hesitates before sticking his foot into the tub. He thinks it's a very good thing now that he spied on that woman last week, on the other block. That he looked in the wrong window, the window that he thought went to her kitchen—the high, small window that he had had to stand on a rock to peek through at all. Good that he happened to spy, otherwise he would never have known where to get clean in a house. Or how inviting a human body can sometimes be. He looks down at his own. Naked means almost all empty for him. His body is full of spaces—places where all of his secrets once were. Places that, before he went window to window, were safe for hiding. Now he is almost more space than form, and the moment of hesitation is for the wonder of whether or not all that is left of him, all that is left of his secrets, will melt in the steaming hot water.

Even so, Death, with deliberation, puts his foot down on the bottom of the tub. When he finds that, though the heat shoots like small firecrackers all the way up his leg, his foot still holds him, he brings in the other and settles himself slowly down into the pleasant burning.

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O the music tickling him from the other room as he burns. A music that circles, slow-sad, rampant, party, drown, four times around his heart. A voice when it's over says *Symphony. Mozart*. Music: cover over the hot wonder of everything—tremoring time. The moon will envy him tonight.

In respect of time, therefore, no knowledge of ours is antecedent to experience, but begins with it.

This day the issue of a paragraph. Your day off. Not much longer, you tell yourself, before you'll go inside.

Will Death repay you for the chance you've given him? Perhaps he'll explain himself, never trouble you again. You think about taking him to a bar, about getting stinking drunk together. Does Death drink? You put the book down. The cold step begs you to get up and walk around.

Snow has covered the yard. The sun lowers itself to the housetops. Something in the distance is waving.

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You think Death would make a good gardener for all he knows about the ground. Perhaps you should hire him?

Five-thirty. Is he almost ready to come out?

How will he bring himself to go back out into the cold? Death is perfectly still, soaking in the hot water. His skin, (though not like yours) ever so slightly begins to wrinkle. It is almost time, he thinks, almost. . . . When he leaves this place, now that play is over, will the moon still whisper? the people still watch?

It takes all Death's remaining energy to get up out of the tub. He picks up his dirty clothes from the floor and puts them back on, glad to cover the empty spaces. Shoes in hand, he walks into the bedroom, toward the music—sits down on the bed beside timpani crashing, puts his shoes on. He hasn't any socks. It's so cold. Should he steal some? He wonders what you are doing, walks over to the window to see.

The yard is lit with white and you are the black bug making circles. You walk around and around trying to stay warm. Death notices that the stick and the wheel are gone, looks at your lonely book sitting on the step under the overhang. It is starting to get dark.

So much depends, now, on Death's opening the door.

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Five fifty-eight. Let the game begin again. *Oh no, not the counting*, Death thinks, *not the endless counting!* And dark, too, a sea all around the house, the white yard. Flowers in the garden are waterweeds, and you are the sailor looking to land.

Death descends the stairs, lands in himself at the bottom. How will his heart keep up with the falling, out in the night, the cold, under all that dark? Where will he go to rescue himself from what is final? But, yes, *he* is final. Where will he go to be rescued from himself? It takes more than a single day—even of sleep and music—for that.

He goes into the kitchen, turns on the light. You have been waiting for the sign of that light all day. Picking up your book, you wait under the overhang. While you stand up against that last minute, you don't regret anything. Here he comes.

Is it always this bad?, Death asks you after hesitating to open the door. You observe right away how clean and rested he looks. What?, you give the question to his question. *The feeling, this feeling, how everything closes, suffocates, at the end of a day off?* Oh. He feels it too. Well, yes. I'm afraid so. *The dark is darker, the cold, heavier, the kitchen light, brighter*, he says before letting you in.

You step in, and for an instant you are both in the house together:

I thought you knew it was just a chance, you say, in explanation. *Yes, a chance—this morning, that was all that I wanted. And now? Now, even if I beg you, we can't both live in this house. Now, I have nowhere to go, nothing to play and time is back so I remember everything: in the counting, I can't forget*

Death steps out under the overhang, into the dark. An afterthought, he turns, extends his hand to you. Should you take it? Maybe you should go with him for that drink after all. . . . You shake his hand, (his grip airy) give a faint, irreconcilable smile. I'm sorry—your apology a small puddle the wheel of this heart splashes through. Still facing you, he steps back into the snow, *Thank you*, he says, all the joy gone from his face, *thank you for letting me in.*