

“An Early Morning Chat With Death”
Steven Mark Kohn 8/2021

Dave rolled over in his bed. The peace of his sleep evaporated as the morning light crept through the blinds.

“Shit” he muttered to himself. He was alone as usual, since his wife had, years ago, chose to sleep on the downstairs couch. No declaration of war, just a steady and quietly widening chasm.

Mornings were always the same. He resented that he could never remember his dreams. Since he preferred sleep to being awake, it frustrated him that half of his living memories failed to be imprinted on his cranial thumb drive.

The next waking phase involved the slow recognition of those components that made up his reality; his mediocre marriage, the kids who never called, the house that needed work, the boredom of his days. All of it. These formed a critical mass that settled on him like a low-lying leaden grey cloud. He hated his life.

The third and final phase of Dave’s morning awareness ritual followed. He laid his head back onto the pillow, closed his eyes and recycled his rote interior monologue: “Oh, God. Just take me now. I am so sick of it. Let me die here. Now. Please, just let me drift away. I am so tired of it all. I don’t want another day. Let me die.”

But, as usual, God was not checking his messages that morning, and Dave did indeed have another day to face. He groaned and sat upright in bed. Taking in the light of the new day, a slow realization came over him. There was someone else in his bedroom.

He allowed his gaze to pan left to the reading chair in the corner. Seated there was a young man, maybe 30 years old. He was well dressed, a tailored sport coat, polo shirt opened at the top, slim-fit jeans and stylish brown shoes. His beard was neatly trimmed and he looked like a TV spokesman for Citibank or one of the wealth advisor services. He smiled gently at Dave.

“Mornin’ sleepy head” said the stranger.

Normally this would be a real shocker for Dave, or anyone for that matter, but Dave assumed he was still dreaming, so he responded with uncharacteristic calm.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I am the angel of death” the visitor said, in a congenial manner.

“Death” muttered Dave, half audibly. “Good one”

“I’m glad you like it.” His guest smiled, revealing a perfect set of straight white teeth.

“Wow”, thought Dave. “His parents must have gotten him braces in middle school.”

Assuming this was a dream, Dave was willing to roll with it. Yawning, he managed to conjure up “so, whadda you want?”

“I’m here for you. Just like you asked.”

“I asked?”

“You sure did. And many times.”

“Wait a minute, *Mister Death*” responded Dave, sarcastically.

“Woah, woah. Mister Death was my *father*” interrupted the stranger. I prefer Notorious AOD, *angel of death*. I’m not a big fan of hip hop, but those artists come up with some great names. Lil-this and Biggie-that, and Ice-T and Ice-Cube and Ice-Tray. Those guys have swagger and style. I like that. So, I am Notorious AOD. But you can call me...”D”.

“Right...mister D--“

“uh...just “D”.

“D...what the hell do you want?”

“I want you, big guy.” Said D congenially. “I’m going to take you away from all of this.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means death, Dave. The dark and eternal void. You’ll love it.”

“You’re here to kill me?” asked Dave, his voice beginning to show a faint tone of concern.

“Kill you? Heavens no. Nothing as blunt as that. I’m just here to...escort you out. No need to grab your coat and hat. Easy peasy.”

“Oh, fuck off” growled Dave, trying to shake off this dream.

“Oh, now hold on here.” answered D firmly. “You asked for me. Literally begged for me to come and not once, but constantly and for decades! You were relentless, dude! “Take me! Take me! I want to die!” Well guess what? I had a break in my schedule. Today is your lucky day.”

“And what if I don’t want to die today?” said Dave.

“That would be hard to believe.” D responded, quizzically. “Everything you’ve said and thought has led me to believe that you don’t want to live. I have a huge file on you. You hate your life, Dave. So, I’m giving you an out. You should be thanking me.”

“I’m not...so sure...about...” Dave stammered.

“You know Dave, modern science has made tremendous strides in the field of mental health. They really have” said D calmly. “There are all sorts of names for the various conditions: *depression, anxiety, panic attacks, stress, bi-polar, on the spectrum*, it’s quite remarkable. And I feel for those who suffer, I really do. But there is a word on the street for an assortment of the smaller ailments. They add up to comprise a simple and oft-used term: *Dickhead*. You’re a dick, Dave.”

“Now wait a second—”

“No, really. You are the classic dick. You bitch and moan and blame and complain constantly. It’s like the whole world is here just to mess with you. You are the perennial victim. It’s everyone else’s fault. Like that poor old woman holding up traffic yesterday. She was doing her best. But what did you scream at her? “Move your ass, you old fart!”. Wow, Dave. That is cruel. Like she asked to be born? Did she ask to grow old? Do you really think she meant to inconvenience you? You are cold, dude. The truth is, you are just a whiny self-centered little bitch. Get over yourself.”

“Hey, that’s not exactly—”

“Dave, you have grown old...but you have not grown *up*. Wisdom is supposed to come with age. Empathy, a greater understanding of ourselves and others. Patience. But hey, it is what it is. You hate people, you hate other political views, other opinions, other races, genders, you hate this world, you hate your life. You are afraid, bitter and angry. But that’s all right. That’s why I’m here. To take you away from all of that. Your prayers have been answered. Pretty cool, eh?”

Whether a dream or not, a certain severity began to settle on Dave as he grew more uncomfortable. There seemed to be something of genuine importance at stake.

“Wait, wait a minute.” Dave stammered. “I, I don’t really want to...I don’t want to die.”

“Of course, you do!” chirped D. “We can go any time.”

“No, wait, really—no. I don’t want to be dead.”

“So, all of those complaints, all that begging for death, that was just bullshit?”

“Well, I didn’t really mean—”

“Dave, that makes you not only a whiny little snot, but a hypocrite as well. Lame-orama. But hang on, let’s run with this. So why, after all your complaining, would you suddenly want to live?”

“I have kids...and grandkids.”

“Riiight...” said D. He produced a cell phone from his vest pocket and began scrolling through messages. “Tell me about them.”

“Well,” Dave groped for the words, “Joey is in Chicago and Deb lives outside of Denver and there are three grandkids. That’s something to live for, right?”

“When did you last speak with them?” D asked, not looking up.

“They don’t call much. It’s been a while. They really should call me more—”

“Woah, woah, hang on” interrupted D. “Why don’t you just call them?”

Dave stammered “I...uhh...”

“Pick up the damn phone!” chided D, waving his phone in the air. “Call your kids. You wait and wait and then blame *them* if they don’t call? You have disempowered yourself. That’s another mental-health term. I’m an avid reader.” D put his phone away.

“And there are other things I want to do. I’ve never seen the Grand Canyon”

“Why not?” muttered D, checking his fingernails.

“uh...I was planning to...eventually...”

“Oh. shut up! You had 50 years- not counting the first nineteen, where you were living at home and going to school and really not able to make your own plans-50 years to see the Grand canyon! Epic fail!”

“There are other things I need to do, too. I was going to put mulch down on our flower beds...”

“Hang on. Dave, you know what mulch is? It is literally crap. Actual crap. So, your reason for living is so a truck can come to your house and drop off a load of shit? That is weak, man.”

Dave was starting to panic. “Oh, I don’t know! There is... a new pizza place in town. I was gonna try their pizza!”

“Wait...” said D calmly. “This may be the first thing you’ve said that makes any sense. I mean, some people live for pizza. Did you know that pizza is the only food with its own heading in the yellow pages? It’s true. Look under “P”. Most people don’t know that.”

“But if I die, won’t people be sad?” entreated Dave.

“Some, maybe, a little”, said D, stifling a yawn. “Your kids will get over it pretty quickly. Young people do. It’s natural. It’s your turn to get out of the way and let the next generations rise up and make their mark. But your wife will suffer.”

“Right! My wife! I couldn’t do that to her!”

“No, it is tough. She’ll come up and find your lifeless body. And let’s be honest. Even if she has wished you dead many times, it is still a jolt. She’ll scream and fall on you, wailing “Oh, Dave, Noooo! Noooo!” People have a problem with dead bodies. It will be quite a scene. And then, the poor woman. It doesn’t stop there. Because not only is death a real heartache, but it is a massive inconvenience. She’ll have to call the cops, then the funeral home, then all your family and friends, well, mostly *her* friends. Then she’ll have to plan a service where people will lie and say what a great guy you were, because that’s what people do. And that’s just the beginning. Then she’ll have to deal with all of your stuff. And that sucks, man. She’ll have to empty all your drawers and give away your clothes, and yes, she will find your girlie magazines. She’ll have to get rid of the tools in the garage, yadda yadda, it’s a lot of work. It could take a year. And then, believe it or not, she will experience something new and unexpected...loneliness. No, it’s true. Because as much as you both complained about your marriage, there is something to be said for sharing a life with someone, raising kids together, a shared history. Most people don’t realize how sweet it is to tell your phone to “call home” and have someone pick it up at the other end. Not everyone has that.”

“See, you’re right, D. You’re right. So, I can’t die now. I can’t.”

“But hey, I’m just blabbering. So, death shows up and all of a sudden you care. Pathetic, dude. “Oh, I don’t want to die! No! Not yet!” Then D’s tone became more severe. “Too late, bro. Had your chance. Let’s go.”

Dave was in pure panic mode now. “No, please, please! What can I do? I’ll do anything! Anything! Give me one more chance! I want to live!!”

“You don’t get it, do you?” said D, firmly. “I do not take my job lightly. I am not a villain. I bring people peace, relief, escape. I end suffering. I guide folks smoothly and lovingly from one existence to the next. I do important work here. And I do *not* appreciate having my valuable time wasted by some whiny hypocrite!” D paused, and in more measured tones said “What the hell would you even do...with one more day?”

Dave shook the dust off himself and began to stammer, “I would...uh...go downstairs and give my wife a big good-morning hug, and then, then I would make coffee and we would sit

together on the deck. Then maybe we would take a walk in the park or see a movie. And tonight, we would try that new pizza place.”

Uh, huh...” said D, suspiciously. “Right...”

“Please.”

“You know, I am a busy man. Full schedule.” D paused, mustering up his patience. “The next time you whine and bitch and beg for death, mister, I swear I will zip right over here and toast your sorry ass in a heartbeat. No dialogue. Adios.” D’s tone was stern and unyielding.

“I understand Mister...I understand, D.”

“Sure, you do” said D with a cynical nod. He smirked “until next time, Dave.”

“Yes, sir”

Dave mustered up a weak smile and heaving a long sigh of relief, turned to put on his slippers. There was a gentle flutter of wind, and D vanished. The last thing Dave heard was a faint voice, dissolving away. He could barely make out the word... “jackass”.