

Killing With Kindness

By Anja Placzek

“And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.”

- *Revelation 6:8 (ESV)*

The sun was setting, and War had not returned home. Death tried not to think about it. Turned the TV on and sat down. Tried not to think about it. Stood back up. Tried not to think about it. Tapped his fingers at his sides. Went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Tried not to think about it.

He realized with a jolt that his pale hair had gained another streak of white, the foggy mirror shoving his horrified stare right back at him. His toothbrush clattered to the counter, and he dug his nails into his own clammy palms with a deep sense of foreboding.

Minutes later, he was driving to town, dial cranked up on the radio's classical station to drown out his thoughts. The stars twinkled calmly against the hazy pitch of the night, and Death allowed the surging violins to enter his brain and rend the disgusting worry from it. He felt bile clawing its way up his throat and choked it back down. *He probably just got pulled over. He's an idiot.* But somewhere in War's eyes, Death saw a piece of himself.

He jerked the car into park, so fast that a slight headache surfaced in his temples, and cut the engine, the orchestral accompaniment fizzling out and leaving him with only his own labored breathing.

A horrible sight greeted him outside the bar War and his lackeys frequented on their downtown adventures. The neon sign illuminated Death's eccentric roommate in his worst form, in the throes of that twisted sense of justice that caused him to take an eye for an eye. While Death turned the other cheek, War scratched and spat and took what he thought he deserved.

War's mouth was covered in blood like a wolf that had just slaughtered its prey, and his eyes were almost glittering in the moonlight. He smudged his hand across his face, the gore from his split lip creating an oddly beautiful color contrast against his pale cheek.

Famine and Pestilence gripped the arms of a struggling stranger as War reared back to throw a gnarly punch. At once, Death felt a stream of memory flash before his eyes in rapid succession. High school. A girl flinching back as she was shoved to the ground, the bully laughing at her pained wince. War's eyes gleaming with a sickly strange anger that Death had noticed an inkling of before but never seen in its full glory. Blood flying from the bully's face as War slammed his fist into the bully's nose. A sickening crack echoing across

the schoolyard. Death's attempt to grab War by the shoulders and wrestle him away from causing further damage ending in a sharp elbow to the face. Death staring at his only friend in shock and terror and his friend staring back and seeing only red.

In reality, the memory had only taken a few seconds to replay, but it seemed to take ages for his brain to catch up to his body- his feet were suddenly pounding the asphalt as he slammed the car door and sprinted toward the violent display. A reflection of the past was cascading into the future, yet Death could only hope the man being held in place by Famine and Pestilence had done something, *anything*, to warrant such punishment. Otherwise, War was truly too far gone.

“*HEY!*” Death's voice ripped out of him, lungs and legs burning.

War's entire body seemed to stutter for a moment, but he couldn't stop the momentum of his fist and the man's head whipped sideways with the force of the hit. His knuckles were covered in blood as he wiped them on his shirt and the man blinked harshly, struggling to remain conscious.

“What are you doing here?” War's voice came out in a murmur that so vilely contrasted his extreme display of brutality that Death felt like vomiting.

Death swallowed hard and dug his nails into his palms. “I was worried about you.” His stomach churned. “I expected you home earlier.”

“He hit someone. In the bar.” The words came out in a jumble. “He was trying to steal their cash and they caught him and he hurt them-”

“So let the police handle it!” Death spat.

Famine tried to interject, but Death silenced him with a glare. Pestilence's eyes seemed to pierce Death right back, but he stayed quiet.

“He's already bribed the security! He's getting a taste of his own medicine! Isn't that a *good thing*?” War's voice was straining now, and his ruined lip trickled weakly with blood.

Famine finally managed to get a word in. “You're lucky some other drunkard didn't punish him before we did.”

“*Punish?* He's half-dead! I think he gets it!” Death shouted incredulously.

He reached toward the man like he would a wounded animal, stretching out his palm like a peace offering, but the man began thrashing around in Pestilence's grip.

“You freak of nature!” The man spat, his mouth contorting hysterically.

Death touched a strand of his own grayish hair, confused, but he realized the man was staring at his eyes. They were so dark that they appeared pitch-black.

“Just let me help you.” Death protested weakly, and the man seemed to lose some of his manic energy. He slumped over and Famine struggled to keep him upright. Death was sure he was close to passing out.

He turned to War, who'd been opening and closing his mouth like a gasping fish for several minutes. "I'm just tryin' to be fair. You want things to be fair, right?" War mumbled, searching Death's dark eyes.

Death's voice seemed to suck the warmth from the night air. "You're ruining your own life, sure, but I'm always cleaning your messes, yeah?" He shook his head. "And it's ruining mine."

The fight visibly left War's body, leaving an exhausted husk behind.

"Can you move?" Death asked the man. The man was eerily still, so he leaned forward to tap his shoulder and narrowly missed being clawed in the face. The man had reserved a final burst of energy and nearly knocked Death to the pavement as he wrenched free of Famine and Pestilence and hobbled quickly away into the night.

"No ambulance?" War asked.

"That'd bring authorities." Death's voice had a blunt edge. "He'll live."

War picked at the skin of his knuckles, transfixed by the mess of battered flesh. It was a long moment before he spoke again, in a faint, broken voice. "Can we go home?"

The evening news played quietly in the background as Death scrubbed grease off the dishes and War (somewhat begrudgingly) folded a pile of laundry. War had calmed significantly after the bar incident, doing a long list of chores to regain Death's favor and buying him copious amounts of frosted animal crackers which he accepted like a haughty monarch from a servant.

A peaceable silence had descended upon the apartment, broken only by occasional cursing as War knocked over a pile of folded shirts and had to redo his arduous task. Death hummed some stupid pop song that Pestilence had been obsessing over. The two roommates were working in tandem for the first time in years.

An image flashed across the screen and War let out a strangled yelp, aggressively motioning Death toward the TV.

The plate in Death's hand slipped to the floor and shattered. His stomach dropped. Pressure built up in his temples and a faint ringing sounded in his ears.

It was a photo of the man he'd saved from War's grasp three weeks ago, captioned with three sickening words: Wanted for murder.

Death sped across the backroads, blank-faced and unfeeling. He'd left the house before War could say anything, left the broken pieces of the dish on the floor in his hurry to escape the suffocation of the apartment where the image from the news seemed to crush his lungs and churn his gut. He could still see the expression on War's face, flickering between a 'told you

so' and a sadness so intense he couldn't fathom its depth. It was burned into his mind, that wavering look.

Something skittered across his line of sight and he slammed on the brakes, heart beating rapidly in his throat. A small crunch of his wheels, and he was swerving to the side to park the car, staring at the corpse of a fawn that had met its fate beneath his roaring vehicle.

All at once, his mask of indifference disintegrated and he fell forward in his seat, banging his head on the steering wheel like he could dislodge his thoughts.

You can't escape your nature.

All those times he'd thought if he could fix the problems War caused, be kind, be mature, be quiet, be careful; if he could restore peace, if he could save just one person from cruelty, then maybe he could mend this yawning emptiness in his soul.

The body in the road was so small.

It always leads back to you.

Back at the apartment, War's precariously healed knuckle split, and a tiny drop of blood hit one of Death's shirts. A red stain bloomed across it like a grotesque flower.