

## Death Comes with Jeff

“What?”

“Well . . . I mean, you know . . . er . . . umm . . . does It go *everywhere* with you?”

Jeff stopped walking, closed his eyes, massaged his temples, breathed deeply and let it out slowly. Fifteen count, just like his therapist instructed. When he opened his eyes, Sandy’s pretty face was staring up at him, her bright blue eyes troubled, confused, a curl of dark brown hair fell to the left side of her face, and her lips pursed with concern in such a deliciously adorable way that he couldn’t help but smile. Jeff had met Sandy last night at Josh’s party. Both had been slightly drunk, Sandy slightly stoned as well. In the press of the people, the noise, the smoke, the music, the shouting, the laughter, and the instant desire that flared up between them, Sandy hadn’t noticed the dark shape that was never more than five yards from Jeff. Not noticed, or was able to ignore. However, now, in the light of day as they walked along Narragansett beach on a chilly, but brightly beautiful October day, It was, well, rather obvious.

Death was following Jeff.

Somehow, despite the black cloak and hood, Death was not menacing. Somehow, despite the boney hand holding a very sharp scythe, Death was not frightening. Basically, what Death was to Jeff and anyone he tried to get close to—and oh how he wanted to get close to Sandy—was a constant, silent, black-robed *nuisance*.

Jeff stroked Sandy’s cheek. Please, he thought, please let her get used to It. I really, really like her.

He kissed her, lightly. The sounds of the beach faded as he experienced the taste of her lips on his, and the feeling of her body as he pulled her close and felt the muscles in her back relax slightly. Her smell was clean and earthy, like pine needles on a forest floor. The kiss ended and they each stepped back, both at a loss, both a bit short of breath and flushed, both with silly grins on their faces.

After a moment, Jeff remembered her question and his grin faded.

“Well, umm . . . yeah. It kinda does. Everywhere.”

They looked at Death, who quickly turned to look out at the ocean. Somehow, something in Its stance, in the posture of bones through the black cloak indicated embarrassment and not a little shame. In moments like these Jeff, as irritated as he was with the whole situation, felt sorry for Death.

Sandy took Jeff's hand, turned away from Death and began to walk along the beach once more.

"At least you always have someone to play chess with," she said, then laughed. Jeff was struck with a deep aching at the sound of her laughter: it was so free, so light and sparkling, like a bouquet of sunlight through green leaves. He was also puzzled.

"I don't play chess," he said.

She laughed harder at that and shook her head slightly, making a curl of hair do the cutest thing around her left eye.

"Nevermind."

She turned back again, looking at Death as It tried, in a black shrouded, scythe-holding way, to look completely innocuous. It was rather cute, she thought, in a disturbing way. She made a decision.

"Hey, let's sit."

They did. She put her head on Jeff's shoulder and they sat looking out at a bright blue sky over a steel gray ocean.

"So," she said, taking his hand in her own, "Tell me about It."

And so he did. For the first time in his life, he unburdened himself of his every major experience with Death, from the moment that It had appeared suddenly one night when Jeff was five—a little miniature Death the same size as Jeff. He told Sandy about his parents, in those early days, trying to rid him of Death by a variety of ways, from beating at Death with a broom, to using bug-spray, to bringing in a Catholic priest (despite being Seventh Day Adventists) to perform an exorcism. Death, at five years old and standing all of 3'5" was completely unfazed by the attempts to banish It. For weeks, Jeff's parents kept him out of school, trying prayer, incense, invocations, pleading, bribery, and threats. Nothing worked. Finally, they did what any parent would do faced with

their child having some sort of odd connection with the physical incarnation of an immortal concept: they simply began to accept and ignore It.

Jeff told Sandy about that first day back at school, the first day when Death came with Jeff to the playground and how Robby, the red-headed bully who made a point of stealing Jeff's cookies and pushing him down on a regular basis, came up to Jeff, ignoring the black figure standing ten feet away, and laughed right in Jeff's face.

"Who's your stupid friend? It ain't Halloween so why's he in that stupid costume. You're stupid."

Then, and all the kids in the playground agreed that it happened just like this: Robby lifted his hands up to his chest, elbows back, preparing to give Jeff a fierce and inexorable push to the ground. Suddenly, in a literal blink of an eye, Death stood between Jeff and Robby, pushing Its small hooded skull at Robby's face, bony hands clasp- ing Robby's arms. Shaking Its head slowly, it pushed and Robby when flying twenty feet, landing in the sandbox. That was the last time any of the school or neighborhood bullies ever attempted anything physical with Jeff. In addition, Jeff became the friend and champion to all the small children who were normally picked on. Like a cult, other chil- dren would flock to his side, basking in the protective glow of the shining scythe. Jeff knew that their friendship was predicated on It being around, but he pretended that the other kids genuinely like Jeff as well.

By third grade, however, things got more complicated and bullying turned to snob- bery and skilled manipulation of social standing. Death couldn't help Jeff with that, and so his flock dissolved, went their separate ways in desperate attempts as social accep- tance. Attempts that would never be helped by hanging around with a gangly, awkward kid who was constantly in the company of a weirdo.

Jeff paused. The waves crashed and seagulls called out. Nearby, Death drew some- thing in the sand with the end of Its scythe, something complicated and mystical. Fin- ished, It would then erase it, rubbing out the sand with one skeletal foot. Then, with a shrug of bones, It would begin drawing again.

After several minutes of silence, as Jeff tried *not* to think about moving his hand to cup Sandy's small but invitingly firm breast or about moving in to nibble her ear, he fi- nally continued.

“Then, I was seventeen . . . I figured out how I could use It to be cool, well, to some people. And started a punk rock band. We were called the DeadFuckinHeads and It was on bass, me on guitar, and this complete junkie basketcase on drums who everyone just called “Blowup” because he was always talking about blowing up all A & W drive-in restaurants left in the country. I was full on punk those days, angry and lost, but at least I could have a place where Death was accepted and, more importantly, he didn’t steal focus from me. I mean, I was the lead guitarist and he was only the bassist. And not very good. Although, I know there were some girls who thought he was the “coolest” of us, but you know, there are always those who root for the underdog.”

Sandy carefully did not say anything about her crush on Radiohead’s bassist Colin Greenwood, however she couldn’t help but look at Death as he squatted down, boney knees showing through the cloak, and imagining him with a Fender Bass. Yeah, she could see it. Then, the silence became pointed and she realized Jeff was waiting for her to say something, anything, about his story so far.

“I bet you were a cute punk.”

He blushed a little, but smiled. His smile is good, she thought. Honest. I really do like him. Turning herself around, she faced him and ran a hand through his brown hair.

“So what brought you from punk to Business major?”

“Oh, well. I got a bit bored with it all. It wasn’t really me.”

There was a grating sound, instantly recognizable as bones rubbing on bones. Jeff and Sandy both turned toward Death, realizing at the same time that It was clearing Its throat. Jeff, looked down and away, frowning slightly.

“Oh, and yeah, *It* quit the band. And Blowup went to jail for possession of . . . well, pretty much possession of everything.”

Sandy looked at Jeff as he tried not to look down her shirt. She smiled, leaned in and kissed him lightly. Jeff’s mind was racing, his heart beating and a mantra kept repeating itself in his head:

“She hasn’t run away, she hasn’t run away.”

Then, without thinking, the thought leaked past his lips.

“Hey, you haven’t run away.”

“Should I?” She asked the question with a twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

“Well . . . I mean, it’s not, Its not dangerous or anything. But most people, most girls get a bit freaked out. By, you know, the Death thing.

“Hey Jeff,” Sandy said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not most girls.”

Jeff watched her face as it resolved into a fiercely determined grin. God she was cute! He couldn’t help but slowly look down from face to breasts to hips to legs as she stood, brushed sand from her oh-so-yummy bottom and extended a hand.

“Come on you. I’ve something to show you.”

His indecent thought must have flashed across his face, because she laughed as he took her hand and she helped pull him to standing.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

She took a breath, leaned in close.

“But you may just get a chance to see that too, Jeff. Maybe.”

Then she was off, holding his hand, pulling him along, and striding down the beach like the world had come to a particularly momentous decision.

“Well . . . I mean, you know . . . er . . . umm . . . does It stay in your room all the time?”

Jeff was standing in Sandy’s room, charmingly stupified. Death stood by the doorway, idly spinning his scythe. Sandy was on the bed, sitting cross-legged and hugging a large yellow teddy bear. At the window, looking out at the street below, filing her nails and drinking from a can of Fosters lager, was a ruddy, full figured female faun who filled the room with the sent of vanished woodlands and wet, ripe earth.

“Pretty much, though sometimes she’ll go up on the roof when I want some privacy.”

“Oh,” said Jeff. A long silence stretched.

"I *said* sometimes she'll go up on the roof when I want some *privacy*."

The Faun sighed, drained her beer can, picked up a copy of National Geographic and headed out the bedroom door, pinching Jeff's ass on the way and pushing past Death with a flirtatious wink. Death shot a boney hand out from Its cloak, gave a stark white and skeletal thumbs up and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Sandy smiled, put the teddy bear to one side and leaned back. "I think," she said, her voice as soft as spring sunshine, "we have the room to ourselves. Unless you have something you haven't told me about? A ghost or anything?"

Jeff grinned and moved quickly, very, very quickly, to the bed, sat next to Sandy and put his hand to her cheek.

"Nope, just Death."

"Well, ok then. What are you waiting for Mister?"

They kissed. And other things. For a very long time.