

Death Returns
(A Stage Play in One Act)

Tiffany Tang

DEATH: a dark figure, often donning a hooded cloak. This character is very tall, very imposing, ugly, frightful.

BETTY: Death's ward from the past - shown as a teenager and as an adult, played by the same actress. Also plays the Principal Shelly, an idiot.

KAT: A teenager. Lost, searching, misunderstood, confused.

BART: Kat's drunken, abusive father. Also plays train conductor, a magical creature.

THE SETTING: The first scenes take place in between worlds, a sort of limbo, purgatory setting. The stage is very sparse, the lighting dramatic between light and dark, almost in a German Expressionist manner. Death is very comfortable here. This is barrenness is home. People come and go. Memory and reality are intermingled.

The last scenes take place in a small town. No major set pieces are necessary. The football stadium can be represented by a backdrop or a projection on a scrim, or even through sound. The house can be a free standing door and a chair and maybe a bed. The simpler, the better.

SCENE ONE

AT RISE there is darkness. Suddenly, a door upstage opens. The light streaming through the door is bright and fills the doorframe. It is accompanied by a sound, like generator power. Silhouetted in the door is DEATH, sitting on the floor downstage of the door, uncloaked. The cloak sits in the darkness.

Suddenly, the door shuts as quickly as it opened, sound and bright light ceasing abruptly. Lights up softly

around Death. He raises his head and addresses the audience.

DEATH

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

(pause)

I never saw it coming. I just...didn't see it.

(pause)

It's hard to think about love when all you're meant to think about is Death.

(pause)

Betty. Her name was Betty.

(Death stands, paces, addresses the audience as he speaks, explaining.)

It's what we do, you see. We... watch over. We don't guide...or protect. We stand back and see what happens, ready at the end to...collect. We certainly don't...interfere.

(Death steps forward into the light.)

That's the way with Death. That's the way with us. Our kind. One of us for one of you. Following you. You think angels are there at your birth? Not hardly. Just one of me. A Death. Your Death. There when you are born. Ironic, right? There when you are born, there throughout your life, and finally, there when you are finished living. That's when we actually meet.

(Death fetches hooded cloak and dons it during the next line.)

You know how it goes. You've heard the stories. Sights of the "grim reaper." The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. Where do you think these tales come from? Us. Me.

(A full picture of the grim reaper is before us. Death lingers a moment. Death makes creepy, groaning sounds. Then, Death pulls back his hood. He laughs.)

Scary stuff, right?

(Death disrobes and casts off his hood.)

Work clothes. Yech.

(Back to business.)

And then, when day is done, and we've escorted you to...wherever you're off to...we get another assignment. Another ward.

(Death turns toward the door behind him.)

Through there. That's where they decide.

But, you see, this time it's different. They don't know what to do with me this time. I crossed a line.

Betty.

(Maybe Death sits on the edge of the stage. Maybe he is emotional.)

I...I...had never met anyone like her. She was born, she grew - just like any other ward. But she was...different. How? Well, for one thing, she could see me.

(Pause)

Yeah, that doesn't ever really happen. I mean, yeah, sometimes kids, when they're really young, will be able to see into "where I am," but the logic of the "real world" soon convinces them that I'm not real, and I disappear for them. But Betty. Betty never stopped seeing me. Never lost her childlike magic, somehow. You can imagine my surprise when I was invited to tea parties with her dollies.

What could I do?

I went. Imaginary tea: hits the spot.

And it went on from there.

(BETTY marches in from stage right as a teenager. She addresses Death.)

BETTY

Death, do you want a sandwich? Mom is making sandwiches.

DEATH

(to audience)

I'm not kidding. This happened.

(to Betty)

Uh, I'm good. Thanks.

(Betty shrugs and exits stage right.)

DEATH

It's really a wonder that her parents didn't have her committed. Her parents were more or less accepting of her "imaginary friend" and once she figured out that others couldn't really see me, she stopped announcing my presence in public, at least, like she used to.

(Betty appears in a special upstage)

BETTY

Deee-aaaath! Come on! We're going to be late for dinner at Grandma's!

(Death just shakes his head with embarrassment. Light on Betty goes out.)

DEATH

But it was weird. We became...friends. We hung out. We joked around sometimes. I had never done that with a ward before. Usually it's all just lurking in shadows and watching life play out. It was certainly never... participating in it.

(Pause. Betty walks onto the stage. She is "older" now. She sits on the stage. Maybe on a bench. She is lost in thought. Perhaps she is journaling.)

As Betty grew older, things were different. She would talk to me more and more often, ask me questions no human should ever want the answers to.

BETTY

(looking up from her journal)

Death? What's it like? I mean, is it scary? What's it like?

DEATH

(cautious)

It's just...

(looks around)

...empty. Where I am, it's empty.

BETTY

Is that where I will be one day?

DEATH

No. You won't come to this place.

BETTY

Where will I go?

DEATH

Where you are supposed to be when the time comes.

BETTY

But, not with you.

DEATH

No. Not with me.

(pause)

BETTY

That...makes me sad.

(pause)

DEATH

(turns away from Betty, toward audience)

Me too.

(Betty continues to watch Death. He addresses the audience again.)

And so it went. Conversation after conversation. I never really understood why she could see me when no other ward had ever been able to. What was it that tied us together so differently? Why were we allowed to interact, but no one else had ever been able to? And then, it was almost as if...she needed me.

(Voices are heard off stage - angry voices of parents arguing. Angry, ugly voices. Betty turns, fearful, towards them, then puts her hands over her ears. They stop. She shifts position, lies on her stomach,

props her head up on her elbows, gazing
ahead at somewhere new.)

BETTY

Death, what do you think about Christmas music?

DEATH

(Matching her gaze into the audience. They
are hanging out.)

It's okay, I guess. Why?

BETTY

Just wondering what you think sometimes.

DEATH

(looking at her)

Why do you want to know me so badly?

BETTY

I don't know. I just want to try you on sometimes.

DEATH

And how do I fit?

(Betty looks up at him.)

BETTY

Too easily.

(They hold the moment, each other's eyes.

Death looks away.)

Death? Do you ever think about...

DEATH

(a joke)

That would be a little redundant, don't you think?

(Death looks at Betty. Betty smiles. She
stands and exits.)

DEATH

You see why I couldn't let anything happen to her. I
just...couldn't.

After all, I don't know what happens at the end. Not
really. I mean, we are basically just escorts.
Transitioners. Keep track of -ers. I transport, but I
don't...follow. I don't know what lies beyond. "What dreams
may come." Etcetera.

So...when it happened, it was really an instinct. It wasn't supposed to happen. But it did.

(We hear tires screeching, a car slamming on its brakes. Betty screaming from offstage. Death reaches out in front of him.)

Noooo!

(Death mimes enveloping her in his arms and holding her close to him.)

I've got you. I've got you. I've got you.

(Death realizes she's not there. He lets her go.)

I...saved her. Broke the big rule. Saved her from...well...

From me.

(Blackout. The door opens again, bright light from behind, accompanied by the sound. Death turns to the light, listens. Door, light, and sound slam abruptly. Death turns back to audience, picks up his cloak.)

I'm going back.

(Blackout)

SCENE TWO

AT RISE we find KAT, sitting on a bench. The door from scene one is gone. We are now in a high school football stadium. A projection of this on the back scrim is ideal. The stadium is empty. Stadium lighting floods the stage, but it is cold and harsh.

Kat is journaling. Every so often she looks around nervously, anxiously, searching for familiar faces. Then, she returns to journaling. She is cold. Maybe there is a little breeze blowing on her. She has been here for hours, football game long over.

KAT

"And she knew then that the time of loneliness was past. She reached up and felt strong arms envelope her. She was home. The end."

(Kat looks at her writing with satisfaction. Then, she takes in the loneliness of her surroundings. Her smile diminishes.)

The time of loneliness was past. Past.

(She is so alone. She turns the page in her journal, starting another story. She thinks for a minute. Then, she writes.)

"The train sped through the night, hurdling itself toward its destination. No one could tell where it would stop. Except for Death. Death knew."

(Kat regards her journal.)

Seriously, Kat? You're writing about death now?

(She closes her journal.)

Great.

(Suddenly, the lights shut down in the stadium with a loud bang. Kat sits in darkness.)

Greeeat.

(Kat rises, pulls her bag onto her shoulder. She begins a walk home. This can be represented by traversing the stage in a large circle, with the lights signaling her journey as she moves through them. As she moves, we hear the sounds of her neighborhood. Not always good. Sometimes yelling, sometimes doors slamming. Kat tries to keep to herself as she moves. Finally, she arrives at a door. Her home. She breathes in deeply before entering. It is dark. She creeps quietly through the house. Suddenly, a light snaps on. BART, her father, is standing in a doorway, holding an empty bottle.)

KAT

(startled)

God, Dad! You scared me!

(Kat is visibly uncomfortable. Bart just stares at her for a second.)

So, um. I'm gonna go to bed. Good night, Dad.

BART

Just a minute, missy. Where have you been?

KAT

At the football game, Dad. At the football game. Like I told you.

BART

It's late. It's well past eleven. Football games don't last that long.

KAT

No kidding, Dad. You were supposed to pick me up, remember?

BART

Don't sass me!

KAT

Just go to bed, Dad. You're drunk.

BART

Don't SASS me!

KAT

Dad. Go. To. Bed.

(It's a stand off. Then, Bart lunges toward Kat and Kat darts out of the way. He grabs her arm. Her backpack goes flying. Bart raises a hand. Blackout.)

SCENE THREE

AT RISE we are in a train station. This can be indicated with sound and a bench for the seat on the train. Death is waiting on the platform, cloak donned, hood down, with an old fashioned suitcase. He tries to be

nonchalant. Then, he notices the audience. He addresses them.

DEATH

Well, I couldn't just stick around and let them send me back. What? What? Fine. I know what you're thinking. I'm a chicken. Death, the chicken. Well, maybe I am. So what?

(pause)

I mean, it's not like I would do this girl any good anyway. I mean, I'm a mess. Seriously. I mean, look at me. I'm in a train station. I mean. This isn't the way we normally travel.

(pause)

I can't, okay? I just can't. It's just. I can't.

(Death buries his head in his hands. The train CONDUCTOR enters - played by the same actor who played Bart. He checks his pocket watch and regards Death.)

CONDUCTOR

Where are ya goin', anyway?

(Death looks up at the owner of the voice. He answers confusedly.)

DEATH

I...I don't know. I don't care. The destination is not as important as getting the hell...eck away from here.

CONDUCTOR

I see. Running, are we?

DEATH

Listen, Token Randomly Wise Train Conductor. I see through you. You can't "sage advice" me back into my responsibilities, okay? Polar Express, this is not.

(The Conductor regards his watch again, and then looks at Death.)

CONDUCTOR

So, you'll be abandoning her then?

DEATH

Yes. I will.

CONDUCTOR

Seriously? Even when I say it like that? "So, you'll be abandoning her then?"

(Death looks at the conductor. He shakes his head.)

I see.

(pause)

DEATH

What good would I be anyway? I'm not a watcher anymore. I'm a "saver," apparently. I'm broken. I can't...do this anymore.

(pause)

CONDUCTOR

They didn't tell you?

DEATH

Tell me what?

CONDUCTOR

This girl needs savin'.

(pause)

That's exactly what this girl is needin'.

(Death looks at the conductor. Blackout.)

SCENE FOUR

AT RISE, Kat is in the principal's office, alone. She shuffles her feet on the floor, looks around anxiously. She has a large gash in her forehead, which has been bandaged. She holds her beanie in her hands, wringing it. Moments stretch.

PRINCIPAL SHELLY enters (played by the actress who played Betty). She is all business. She regards Kat in a business-like demeanor, perhaps over her glasses. She nods and sits. She tries to be tender but she fails miserably.

PRINCIPAL

So, Miss Lumen, would you like to talk about what happened today?

KAT

(quietly)

Not really.

PRINCIPAL

I see.

(A moment passes. Awkward. No one gives.)

Finally...)

Miss Lumen, it is very important that I know what has happened here. Why did you cause such a disruption in your English class?

KAT

I didn't. I didn't cause a disruption. Miss Minor, she...it was just a misunderstanding.

PRINCIPAL

I see. And...that terrible gash on your forehead. Is that a misunderstanding as well?

KAT

I don't know.

PRINCIPAL

What happened, Miss Lumen?

KAT

Nothing. Who cares?

PRINCIPAL

Miss Lumen?

(silence)

I'm afraid I've had to call your father. If you are getting into fights at school and causing disruptions, that is potential grounds for suspension.

(Kat becomes visibly distressed.)

Whatever is wrong, dear? Ah, here's your father now. Let's see if we can get to the bottom of this.

(Bart enters, the model of a perfect parent. Kat looks as though she might be sick.)

Miss Lumen, why don't you wait outside while your father and I have a chat? Then, you two can discuss this at home.

(Kat moves to the "waiting area" outside of the office. The principal and her father chat and look at her and share a laugh and get along swimmingly. Perhaps there is a loud sound effect that is swelling up in Kat's ears as she witnesses this scene. She can't bear it. She runs.

She runs in a similar circle to the one she walked earlier. Everything disappears. She journeys. The sound grows louder and louder until finally - back in the football stadium - she collapses to the ground and screams, holding her hands over her ears.

At the end of her scream, hooded Death appears behind her. He walks slowly towards her as the loud sound fades. She slowly realizes there is a presence behind her. She knows it is Death, without seeing him.)

BETTY

It's you. Oh God, is it time? Oh God, seriously? This can't be happening. I just - I mean, come ON. Seriously?

(Death continues to advance ominously, approaching her from behind. She does not turn, just continues her denial, until finally Death reaches out his arms and envelopes her in them. She stops talking.)

What's happening?

(Death continues to hold her. She tries to break free a bit, but he won't budge. She eventually surrenders to the embrace. She may become emotional. Then she clings to Death. She breaks down completely.)

DEATH

I've got you.

END OF PLAY