Death (and a Girl)

by Rob Boone

I was in my boss's office. I sat down in the leather chair opposite his desk, looking out over the bay, admiring his view. I tried to think of the people below, but my mind kept coming back to the fact that I was sitting in my boss's office.

I had no idea why I was there. I had done something wrong, I was sure of that. In an act of sadism, he left me wondering for fifteen minutes. When he entered the room, he smiled at his secretary before closing the door, directing his gaze toward me, and letting a crestfallen look sweep over his face.

He fired me. The rest is a blur, although I vaguely recall wondering what his home life was like, whether he glided through life with the calm assurance that seemed to propel him forward at work.

I was a bit numb as I rode the elevator toward the first floor with a box of my belongings. I wished that I could hide that box. I might as well be wearing a sign saying ‘I was just fired.'

I didn't go home. There was nothing to go home to. I didn't want to go anywhere else, either. Everywhere else, there were people, and I didn't want to see people. When you want the company of others, they're nowhere to be found. When you want to escape them, they're everywhere.

I toyed with the idea of suicide, then quickly cast it off. Death wouldn't be interesting. Liberating, perhaps, but not interesting. I hadn't yet lived enough to die.

I thought of the bridge on the outskirts of St. Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment*. In the book, every emotion seemed to converge on

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that bridge. Fear, ambition, happiness, sadness, indignation, jealousy- all in one place. I decided to find a bridge on which to think. Perhaps they were indeed a gathering place for emotion, and I needed to feel something, to chase the numbness away.

I found respite under a small bridge overlooking an inlet on the northern edge of the Tampa Bay. I listened to the cars pass overhead while watching for signs of life in the water below. The occasional jumping fish caused ripples on the water, and the ripples comforted me. They had a predictable cause and a predictable effect.

I listened to the cars pass over the bridge. I silently cursed each driver as someone blessed with better luck than I, then I cursed myself for cursing them.

I fell asleep. As I dreamed, Death approached me, wearing the traditional garb with one exception: his robe and scepter were entirely white- blindingly so, almost. He sat down beside me with a quiet sigh.

“Do you know why I'm here?”

“No. Are you taking me?”

“No. It's not time, yet.”

“Then why are you here?”

“You're interesting, and I need a break. I'm tired.”

“Tired of what?”

“Of taking.”

“Taking lives?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don't you stop?”

“I can't stop. I'm needed. My service is needed.”

He saw my confusion.

“If there were no death," he said, "there would be no life. Loathed as I am, humanity descends into chaos in my absence. Death is the only thing that propels life. Without death, there is no fear. Without fear, there is nothing. Fear drives every action, every thought, every moment of life.”

“It can't be behind everything.”

“Yes. Everything. A lawyer's ambition, a mother's love, a lover's embrace. A walk in the park, an evening meal, a friendly conversation- all driven by fear. It's not the catastrophe that you assume it to be. Fear is the necessary ingredient to life, and rightfully so. It is the most powerful catalyst, and the most misunderstood. Fear is not terrifying; that is only one form it takes. Fear is art. It is sadness, it is compassion, it is loneliness, it is love. All striving is a movement towards fear. All suffering is movement away from it.”

I woke up. Above me was a girl, and as I shook off my sleep, I noticed that she was smiling.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi. Who are you?”

“It's not important. Did you have a nice nap?”

“I'm not sure.”

Still fighting off the remnants of grogginess, she took off her clothes, laid them neatly on a large rock, and walked to the water. She was small, with delicate features and a wave of auburn hair that curled in on itself just above her shoulders. She didn't look back at me as she walked. Slowly, she submerged herself in the water. I expected her to ask me to join her, but she didn't. She just floated in the water, not quite swimming, but not quite being still. I watched in amazement, and then I became amazed at the fact that I was amazed. Surely a woman soaking in a body of water is not uncommon. Why should it be amazing, or significant even?

I soon joined her, unprompted. I felt compelled to tell her.

“I just lost my job.”

“Oh.” There was neither sympathy nor judgment in her voice.

“I wasn't good at it. I pretended to be, but I wasn't. I suppose they finally found me out.”

“Why did you work there?”

I tried to think. “I'm not sure. It just sort of happened that way.”

“What did you love about it?”

“Well.... nothing, really.”

“Then why are you mourning the loss of it?”