

## **DEATH AND THE LION**

**by David Brandin**

When Death came calling, I didn't recognize the threat. I'd decided to drive along Princess Grace of Monaco's deadly route on the corniche, near *Cap Ferrat* on the *Côte d'Azur*. My rental car's steering suddenly failed, and the vehicle raced towards a five-hundred-meter cliff. I slammed the brakes and the car drifted, sliding towards the precipice. I just managed a panic stop with one wheel over the edge! It was a foolish choice, to follow the corniche on my part, or so I'd assumed.

Death also threatened me with an agent. I barely escaped gunfire at the hands of an armed robber as I ran towards the Ambassador East Hotel, not far from Chicago's Gold Coast. I ducked around the awning protecting the entrance. Windshields shattered down the street as I flew through a revolving door as though it weren't there. The shooter vanished with no arrest. Pure luck, it seemed—but dark thoughts began to gnaw at me.

Death then ruined my thirtieth-birthday scuba trip to Maui. I'd dived to a depth of one hundred feet onto the submerged floor of the dead Molokini Volcano, when a three-pound weight slipped out of my dive jacket. My buoyancy exploded and I began an uncontrolled ascent. Left unchecked, a fatal attack of the Bends was likely. Fortunately, the dive master grabbed my ankle as I soared past his face mask. He pulled me back to the crater floor and held me in place while he retrieved, and re-secured, the weight. The scare cut short the dive. I rose slowly, following a zig-zag pattern, towards the surface, with a pause at fifteen feet, for the mandatory five-minute safety stop. During the ascent I considered how lucky I'd been. The rental car in France, the robbery in Chicago, and the dive weight incident—I didn't believe in coincidences. I remembered James Bond saying, "The first time it happens, it's an accident; the second time, a coincidence; and the third time, enemy action." The memory led to a panic attack that drove up my breathing rate. By the time I surfaced, I'd exhausted the air in my tank.

Death may have masked its identity in seemingly unconnected mishaps, but I feared the attacks wouldn't stop. Death never lost in the long run. But, could there be a way to temporarily, like for sixty years, to redirect Death's attention? Surely there were other targets older and more deserving. Relying on any more luck, after these concerted attacks, would be foolhardy. I thought about other possible ways Death might attack me and I decided to avoid unsealed foods and beverages; one never knew what might be served in public places.

As I flew back to the mainland, after a required twenty-four hour stay at sea level to avoid a possible airborne lethal decompression event after a dive, I wondered if religious authorities could offer guidance. After all, weren't the prospects of afterlife in their domain? It seemed the most reasonable strategy to follow, so I planned a sequence of visits in the Bay Area. After landing in San Francisco, I first called a Jewish Synagogue in Palo Alto for an appointment.

A day later, the rabbi greeted me at the Reform Synagogue on Arastradero. He invited me into his office for coffee.

"My assistant tells me you fear Death stalking you," said the rabbi. "This is not an uncommon concern in my congregation."

I asked for a sealed bottle of water. "Can you help me, rabbi?" I described my three suspicious encounters with Death. "It's only luck that saved me. Now, I fear Death will try again."

"I see. So you think the *Malekhamoves* is especially interested in you, eh? Do you know why?"

"*Malekhamoves*?"

"I'm sorry," replied the rabbi. "I thought you were Jewish. The *Malekhamoves* is Hebrew for the Angel of Death."

"Oh. Well," I replied, "there's nothing particular I've done to earn such attention. Still, Death's interest feels personal, not random. But you mentioned the Angel of Death. Do you think smearing lamb's blood on my front door will protect me from the *Malekhamoves*? Didn't that work for the Jews in the Exodus?"

The rabbi coughed into his hand, poorly hiding a smile. “I think that was a special, a ‘one-off’ event, you might say. Besides,” he added, “you’d have to be the first-born son in your family. Are you?”

I admitted I had older brothers.

The rabbi sipped his coffee and placed his cup down carefully. “We believe death is the ultimate end. You might find some solace in counseling. I’m sorry that I can’t help you, but I can recommend a therapist.” Then he suggested it might also be prudent to avoid large crowds, so as to minimize potential casualties—not just mine.

I was sure he thought I was nuts. But I thanked him for his time and drove slowly to my home in Mountain View. Despite my accelerating fears, I surprised myself at how smoothly I drove, absent my usual road rage. And it paid off. Driving in an unfamiliar slow lane; I narrowly avoided a serious accident on the 101, near the San Antonio Road exit. I wondered if that might have been another attempt on my life.

Next day, I called a Catholic Church in San Jose. It took some time to convince the parish secretary that I didn’t wish to confess my sins, but that my concern justified personal time with the priest or pastor. The secretary’s tone of voice expressed utter skepticism in my problem, but she set a time for a brief visit, maybe to save my soul. I hung up feeling guilty as well as scared.

Even so, the priest was cordial when I arrived. He offered decaffeinated Mango Ceylon Tea, I chose bottled water again. As we drank, the priest asked about my dilemma with Death. I described all the attacks, including the freeway close-shave, and explained my fear of all things, even tap water.

“I think I understand, but yours is an exceptional problem,” said the priest. “Have you ever been treated for ... er .... I hope you’re not offended ... paranoia? Is there a history of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder in your family?”

There it was again, another smear on my sanity. My first reactions were frustration followed by anger, but I just shook my head.

“Well, it is true,” he observed, “that the Church has an unusual relationship with Death. We believe that Death can be overcome, but I’m not sure we can guarantee help with your problem until death is imminent. As of now, Extreme Unction is not yet called for.”

I stifled my anger and asked the priest if he referred to the resurrection of Christ, or of ordinary souls. He made the sign of the cross and declared, “Everlasting life in Heaven is granted to all true believers.”

“But Father,” I said, “I’m only thirty. I’m not in the habit of sinning, but it’s too soon for me to go to Heaven. I don’t need or want to be resurrected just yet. I doubt I’d be at the head of the line, anyway. I seek to escape Death’s attentions, now!”

“Perhaps you might ask your doctor for medication to relieve your anxiety. I think Lithium might be best and of course prayer. Sorry, my son, the Church cannot be of further assistance.”

I’d received little help from these older religions other than holy prescriptions for psychiatric counseling. In disgust, I wondered why they hadn’t recommended a prefrontal lobotomy or electro-convulsive therapy. But, still desperate for assistance, I decided to try Islam. I visited a Mosque on Dolores Street in San Francisco. I just presented myself at the entrance to maybe get a more spontaneous and less guarded reply to my inquiry.

It was a quiet time in the mosque, between the Noon and Afternoon Calls to Prayer. The imam welcomed me, advised me that audiences were limited to thirty minutes, but invited me into his private sanctuary. I drank Arrowhead bottled water as aromatic steam rose from his cup of Arabian Pekoe Tea. I explained my fears based upon suspicious encounters with Death. “I’m at my wit’s end, imam, Is there any way to divert or distract Death’s attention from me?”

“By good works, perhaps?” The imam closed his eyes, seemingly to reflect deeply on my question. Then he nodded, open-eyed, and said, “We have in Islam, many proverbs. They are quite inspirational and some may prove relevant here. I recommend that you find a way to make Death fear you. That would, I believe, redirect its interest elsewhere.”

I found his suggestion intriguing. It was certainly original, especially considering the dearth of ideas from other faiths. But how did one scare Death? It was almost tautological—how did one scare the scariest thing in the world?

I asked the imam if he had a specific suggestion. He mentioned an obscure proverb—but it seemed complicated. Nevertheless, I took his idea to heart and began to scour the daily newspapers.

Days later, the *San Diego Times* reported that an eight-year-old African lion, Thor, the eldest male in a small pride at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, had been shot. The carcass was discovered on the park's artificial savannah near a small waterhole. Visitors often rated the lions their favorite stop on the park's monorail—and Thor the most popular animal in the park.

The shooter hadn't been identified. On a positive note, the park veterinarian reported that one of Thor's kidneys had been harvested. The organ was air-expressed to the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens, for a transplant into an ailing lion.

When I read the article, I sensed the time was ripe to follow the imam's recommendation. I decided to act.

Next day, the *Times* updated its story. The Zoo Safari Park's veterinary hospital had been vandalized and Thor's heart removed from his carcass. The murder had already alarmed wildlife protection organizations, which expressed distress over the poaching and butchering. They characterized the acts as ominous attacks on vulnerable and endangered species. Police speculated the shooting might be related to the theft.

Several years passed with no encounters with Death. Enjoying my escape from Death's clutches, I was sitting in a Peet's Coffee Shop in San Jose's Santana Row, sipping a cup of Major Dickason's coffee blend. The crumbs from a Blueberry muffin were on a dish. It seemed timely to call the imam and give him a progress report. When he answered the call, I reported that his proverbial suggestion had worked and thanked him. I said, "Death is afraid of me because I have the heart of a lion."