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never plea, only ask

Disenchanted with life Byron Diaeh placed an advert in the paper for Death. It read:

I sit in a chair of the finest apathy
and as I wait quietly for the world
to become fiction, I request a tryst
with Death. May we discuss Life.
Please Respond.

If you are anthropocentric it is your belief that mankind is the centre of existence. Not an unusual belief, most of mankind believes it to be true, that they are not only the dominant species but they are also the superior species. But what exactly have they achieved due to their superiority? To stand on two legs? Big advance. Ask the ape, or the bear, or the dinosaurs that preceded them. Opposable thumbs? I suppose it makes it easier to poke these thumbs further up their collective arses. But then again, monkeys have four opposable thumbs, and bigger arses. And of course not forgetting to fight; to have the self awareness to hate others of the same species for reasons that eclipse on a planetary level the conception of the ridiculous. It gives them the minds to invent endlessly more efficient and entertaining ways of destroying themselves, and the planet that they carve up with misconceived ownership, to disperse in the most self-gratuitous way possible. Rhetorical questions are not my strong point.

Not all mankind, now a term the wrong side of politically correct. Not all personkind (even the women) believed this. Byron Diaeh didn't believe this. Death herself didn't believe this.

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Byron would have liked to have been a poet, but he wasn't very good with words, his heart had the poetry, his tears bypassed language. A lot of animals have the capacity to love, no other animal but the human has the capacity to hate. There is a civilisation wide delusional feeling of grandeur on this place, a phenomena which might be somewhat ironic, cause mirth even, to those that can sit, watch, and realise. The folk that laugh to themselves in the many establishments designed for the mentally unhinged, I believe they get it. Give them the world and go home for jelly I say, you'll feel better. And before this fictional story starts, pay human kind the greatest honour, and laugh at yourself. With respect, you're funny.

Mr Diaeh stared with a mix of pretend apathy and real disappointment at the scrap of paper upon which the advert had been written. It had been three weeks since it had been placed, and it had run for the full three weeks since. He had received the usual abusive response, it had amused him at first when he collected the mail from the post office box. Now it was merely vexing; threats on his life, from people who did not know him, the recipient of a dozen leaflets from a dozen different religious groups, offering their help. Now you may ask, what of these believers and their gods a plenty, do they not give credence to the previous statement of anthropocentrism? I will merely speculate; however high the power, humankind does not do humble.

Someone had even sent Byron a packet of razor blades, the note attached said "see you on the other side". Byron could not raise a smile to this one. The cup of coffee under his nose began to steam his reading glasses, the noise from the coffee shop began to filter back in, Byron added a sigh to the general blare. He sat uncomfortably in his middle twenties, of average height and weight (if not a little undernourished). The one redeeming feature he held was the cause of the destined solitude he had endured his whole life. Beneath his dark and untidy hair, matted in places, hid his eyes of indistinguishable colour. They were dark, of that people were sure, but how

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dark no one could say, they appeared to be permanently under shadow. It had led to his peers never knowing or understanding whether he was actually looking at them or not. Therefore he had never been included, his appearance made him an outsider to the normal folk. But it was something he never did mind, his voyeurism on life gave him a perspective he thought he would not have had if his eyes had been blue, possibly a forced superiority complex of his own. Those who did see him, and did not look to his eyes first, may have seen the scar on his arm if it was uncovered. And they would still have walked away. His left arm had a jagged disfigurement running from his shoulder to half way down his forearm, the scar was raised in parts, indented in parts and the sewing punctures were still visible. The accident had happened over fifteen years ago, and still he was judged a man of questionable ethics, they assumed it had happened in a fight of some sort. They probably watched too much television.

When Byron was ten years old, he used to swim in the local reservoir. He was always alone, even at this age, although he did not understand, he had learnt to accept his fate. If you believe such things: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, may spin, apportion, and cut his life yarn, but his destiny was his own. Of this he was adamant. Byron believed he was in control of his destiny, a director, and not a player in somebody else's. He had swam here for the last few years, no one asked him anymore where it was he was going, he had isolated himself long ago. The day was bright, the sun warmed his poet's heart and he even managed a smile at the sky. He stripped off to his cut up jean shorts and carefully folded all his worldly belongings into his towel. A yell of excitement echoed through the woodland beside the reservoir as Byron threw himself into the dark blue water. The glacial chill accepted him again without emotion. The water was always cold even on a hot day like this, as it stung his bones and reminded him he was alive. An event was soon to happen that reminded him what being alive was. The fair folk of his hometown had an inherent laziness when it came to the dumping of household bulk, the tip was another town away, and the reservoir was not. The basic mathematics of humankind dictated that

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an old bed and half a car were better off under water. Unfortunately certain sides of this reservoir were not man-made and therefore sloped as nature's erosion intended. The stinging at Byrons' bones was no longer just the cold, he had twisted under the surface to swim back to air, but as he did, somewhere between the iron bedsprings and the decaying bonnet he became stuck. The iron springs gripped at his arm, the bonnet snapped at his legs like an emaciated hippo. As he struggled vainly his lungs expelled the air he wanted to keep, rising to the surface in bubbles, each bubble wore a face of mocking as they burst to the surface leaving Byron behind. Panic pushed adrenaline to all corners of Byrons small frame, his legs at last came free, and with what little oxygen that remained reflexively hurled his feet against the solid metal of the dead car. The sting became a burn in his arm as he exploded towards the surface to inhale a breath to rival his very first. Pain swan across his arm and legs, he lurched against the agony to reach the bank and dry land. As he crawled out he noticed his legs were cut and bleeding, the water mixed and turned the blood pink as it cascaded across the downy hair on his shins. Not too badly hurt he thought, until the pain in his arm forced his eyes to look. A hideous mouth stretched from his shoulder to his forearm, white puffy tissue smiled at him, blood did not pump, it seeped maliciously from the opening. Blind terror forced his other hand to grip at the fissure, trying to force it back together, it was then it started to bleed. In sporadic coughs the blood that was supposed to feed his brain vomited from his arm in thickening clots. Grabbing his t-shirt and wrapping it about the gash, more to take his eyes from it than to stop the bleeding, he slammed his feet into his trainers and ran home. Blood pumped faster around his body and it was sheer terror alone that got him to his front door. He kicked madly at the wooden blockade, his heart in his ears. He remembered his mother's face, looking worried for the first time that he could remember, her screams for his father were the last thing he could remember before passing out.

The doctors had said the reason for the uneven technique on his patching up was due

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to the fact that parts of his flesh were literally scoured out and that they had to bunch the skin in places, it could be corrected by cosmetic surgery after it had healed.

Byron looked at his forearm now, it had never been corrected. Partly, he remembered, because of his stubbornness not to have it corrected, it had made people care after all, but mostly because he slipped back into anonymity soon after the accident. He remembered getting a telling off by his father, never to go back to the reservoir again, the disciplinary speech rose in tone as his father demanded that Byron look at him when he was speaking. Unfortunately Byron was looking at him. His father walked away in mid scream, yelling to his mother that the boy was impossible, that he didn't pay a blind bit of notice to him. Life wound on.

Behind this memory was the passion to meet the personification named Death. He knew she existed, he had told the councillor that, after his accident in the third and final meeting before he was dismissed, he had seen her. Death was a girl the same age as him, he was sure. She was in the water with him, she had swam to the surface with him, he remembered. He remembered her complexion, ghostly white, nearly florescent under the darkness of the water. She had walked from the water with him, always a few steps away, looking at him calmly, constantly. His mind racing with the pain he had hardly noticed that she was there, until he thought back later. She had run all the way home with him, just looking. Her face blank and expressionless, but within the features carved from stone was something, something of a feeling rather than any impression that he got from her, sort of like compassion, maybe even concern. As he reached his house, she stopped behind him, and then Byron could remember no more. He knew that she had been Death. She had been wearing a black dress. Her lips were red, her eyes were black, utterly black, without pupils. They had reminded him of his own eyes. Byron had been persuaded that it had been part of the panic he had felt, that his mind had been playing tricks on him. But Byron knew it to be true, his ten year old logic told him so, and so he had kept quiet about it ever since.

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Begrudgingly leaving the warmth of the coffee house Byron began to speculate, his resolution still fixed on his truth; that it was her turn now, to stay quiet about his existence.

Never get in a boat going to Hell

The day was cold and the warmth of the coffee shop disappeared quickly from his bones. His arm had begun to ache. The city he had moved to a few months ago, the city he now attended, busied itself around him, it paid him no heed as he meandered through street and park. Those he looked at he recorded their faces, he could watch longer than others, who can pass only the merest of glances between strangers for fear of making too much eye contact. A sad state that people can no longer greet a stranger in the street without being branded a pervert, a mugger, a thief, or a killer. Even hormones are fought in the battle not to touch another's eyes with your own, men do not want to be mocked, or worse, misinterpreted for a rapist. And women do not want to appear to offer themselves as prey, or become part of the male dominated sport of "nice arse, shame about the tits, but I could still 'ave her". If angels sing in the clouds it is without societies enlightened inhibitions.

The letters clutched in his hand were a weight to his soul, the huge park he walked through seemed nothing more than an offensive scar on the city's otherwise self delusive perfect complexion. He discarded them, threw them in a passing bin and muttered a curse pulling his coat around him tighter.

"Hey glum gus, Maybe there was the reply in that lot." For a moment Byron ignored the voice of the woman sat on the park bench next to the bin, Byron wasn't used to people making conversation with him.

"Hey you, do you hear me?" Still no reaction.

"Byron you plank." She spoke again, this time with a little more volume, enough volume to rival a gas explosion. Byron heard his name, from someone other than

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himself, an odd experience he hadn't been familiar with for a while. He stopped and walked back a few paces to behold the women calling him, apart from a little tug in his stomach at the appearance of the pretty stranger no recognition fired in his mind. "You think I'm pretty? Why thank you." The voice took on a girlish tone of sugar, the kind fathers cave into all over the world. Perplexed, Byron's face showed an emotion that may have resembled a smile, but it lacked practice. He continued to look at her silently, the subtleties of manners passing him by with a tisk. His colourless eyes whirled in reverence at her milk coloured skin touched with peach, presented to him by a plunging v-necked jumper and visible between the open lapels of a heavy woollen coat. She uncrossed and crossed her legs unconsciously pulling his eyes to her short skirt and thick woollen tights, all cloth made of black. Byron's eyes followed the indulgent symmetry of her reclining figure, ascending her slender neck, the colour of her skin and slow recognition, to her poetic face. Her full lips were painted light blue, the colour was vibrantly alive compared to the paleness of her cheeks, her eyes were wide, open, and beautiful. And they were black, without pupils. She flashed a smile at him.

"Do you remember me now my little Houdini? I'm a bit dryer than when you last saw me." She whispered with sugar.

"Death? ...but your older." Replied Byron, the total lack of notation of a possible insult passing his non-existent people skills with deft speed.

"Why thank you." Death replied indignantly.

"No I didn't mean... I'm sorry" Stammered Byron, his alarm diminishing as Death flashed another playful smile.

"I didn't think you'd reply," He Said, "They thought I was mad you know, when I told them I saw you all those years back. Behavioural problems and delusional tendencies they said." Byron stopped. He'd noticed Death looking at his face quizzically.

"I know, my eyes." The sorrow in his tone discharged the excitement he felt at an actual conversation.

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“They’re pretty.” Death replied. “They’re grey.” Byron flinched unable to disguise his astonishment.

“Are they?” His voice nearly pleading for confirmation, “I didn’t know, or at least I knew but no one else has ever known. Thank you. Your....”

“I know, you think I’m pretty.” Death laughed easily, Byron could just stand, stupefied. She reached out a slender hand her fingers tipped in blue to match her lips, chilled to the touch she gently caught his hand and pulled him carefully to sit next to her. She swung around on the bench and sat cross-legged facing him. He turned his head, a little overwhelmed, his eyes darting across her beauty and to the floor without control. His brow furrowed for a second, his mouth forcing a question to challenge his reason, a conversation is a powerful tool to those who cannot converse with ease. “How can I know that it’s really you? You could just be another nut or predator like the others that responded to my ad. Or would you like to save my soul?” Byron avoided the girl’s eyes, unfortunately the sweep of her sweater offered the only other view. Byron’s eyes narrowed, just visible under ribbing of the v-neck was the tip of an odd tattoo, it was a crude design, it looked freshly scribed but in a style that must have died in the last millennium. From what he could see it looked to resemble the tip of....,

“It’s a scythe.” Death pulled the neck of her jumper to the side, quite an unfortunate act for Byron’s already shivering heart. Her skin lifted with the shape of her breast, too smooth and faultless, it seemed unreal. The barely perceptible crescent of subtly darker pink whispered promises of equally perfect nipples. Byron’s attention flitted nervously between the two. Finally, and surprisingly, the black and ancient shape of the scythe won. It looked engraved rather than painted into the skin, scoured by tools that no longer existed. He looked to her eyes for an explanation.

“It was done by a people that live now only in myth, just before their island sunk. And yes, it hurt like hell. I am Death Byron, I don’t have to prove it. I am who I am, just as you are who you are. And stop looking at my breasts.” She demanded. He looked shameful in his questioning, embarrassed with his line of vision, but to most

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people Death's anthropomorphism was a fictional creation at best. Byron was just touching on a corner of society's rationalism, within its square was a place totally void of fancy. Life. A place, to his credit, he did not visit often.

"Now this tryst that you requested, shall we begin?" Death leant forward, Byron's eyes, heart, and lap, twitched in foolish and uncontrolled anticipation. His heart nearly gave up as he saw Death's tongue dart across her lips, wetting them before a kiss. She touched her lips to his. The delicate pressure fed his heart with as much adrenaline as it had ever tasted, soft was a word that would be left describing thorned bricks in comparison. The frictionless moisture pressed against his dry mouth, her lips opened slightly and he felt the tip of her tongue like a waterfall sending pulses of sensation through his chest, some parts of him indicated that they might explode. Death pulled away slowly, tracing the bow of his top lip with her tongue before she departed. Byron could not open his eyes. He dare not in case she had gone.

"Open your eyes little one." He heard her voice and knew she remained, but it sounded different, the atmosphere it resonated in had changed, they were somewhere else, but where? There was a slight echo to her speech, inferring a space enclosed, and the silent wind of the park was now deafening in its absence, but how? Slowly and anxiously Byron opened his eyes to find himself still sitting beside the figure of Death, he went to breathe a sigh of relief, until he realised the park bench he had been sitting on was no longer a bench.

Death sat beside him continuing to stare at him with a smile wide across her face, the ease of her smile failing to subdue him.

"Where the hell are we?" Byron jumped from his seat, which now took the form of wooden seat at the bow of a half built river barge. That is to say the barge was without cover, the wooden seats were the only interior visible, and they stretched back the thirty or so feet to the stern in shapeless irregular rows. The boats rudder was manned, if such a description could be bestowed on the creature leaning

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