

Godmother Death

by Jane Yolen

You think you know this story. You do not.

You think it comes from Ireland, from Norway, from Spain. It does not. You have heard it in Hebrew, in Swedish, in German. You have read it in French, in Italian, in Greek.

It is not a story, though many mouths have made it that way.

It is true.

How do I know? Death, herself told me. She told me in that whispery voice she saves for special tellings. She brushed her thick black hair away from that white forehead, and told me.

I have no reason to disbelieve her. Death does not know how to lie. She has no need to.

It happened this way, only imagine it in Death's own soft breeze of a voice. Imagine she is standing over your right shoulder speaking this true story in your ear. You do not turn to look at her. I would not advise it. But if you do turn, she will smile at you, her smile a child's smile, a woman's smile, the grin of a crone. But she will not tell *her* story anymore. She will tell yours.

It happened this way, as Death told me. She was on the road, between Cellardyke and Crail. Or between Claverham and Clifton. Or between Chagford and anywhere. Does it matter the road? It was small and winding; it was cobbled and potholed; it led from one place of human habitation to another. Horses trotted there. Dogs marked their places. Pigs drovers and cattle drovers and shepherders used those roads. So why not Death?

She was visible that day. Sometimes she plays at being mortal. It amuses her. She wore her long gown kirtled above her knee. She wore her black hair up in a knot. But if you looked carefully, she not walk like a girl of that time. She moved too freely for that, her arms swinging. She stepped on her full foot, not on the toes, not mincing. She could copy clothes, but she never remembered how girls really walk.

A man, frantic, saw her and stopped her. He actually put his hand on her arm. It startled her. That did not happen often, that Death is startled. Or that a man put his hand on her.

"Please," the man said. "My Lady." She was clearly above him, though she thought she was wearing peasant clothes. It was the way stood, the way she walked. "My wife is about to give birth to our child and we need someone to stand godmother. You are all who is on the road."

Godmother? It amused her. She had never been asked to be one. "Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"My Lady?" The man suddenly trembled at his temerity. Had he touched a high lord's wife? Would she have him executed? No matter. It was his first child. He was beyond thinking.

Death put a hand up to her black hair and pulled down her other face. "Do you know me now?"

He knew. Peasants are well acquainted with Death in that form. He nodded.

"And want me still?"

He nodded and at last found his voice. "You are greater than God or the Devil, Lady. You would honor us indeed."

His answer pleased her, and so she went with him. His wife was crouched under a rowan tree, proof against witches. The babe was near to crowning when they arrived.

"I have found a great lady to stand as godmother," the man said. "But do not look into her face, wife." For suddenly he feared what he had done.

His wife did not look, except out of the corner of her eye. But so seeing Death's pale, beautiful face, she was blinded in that eye forever. Not because Death had blinded the woman. That was not her way. But fear — and perhaps the sugar sickness — did what Death would not.

The child, a boy, was born with a caul. Death ripped it open with her own hand, then dropped the slimed covering onto the morning grass where it shimmered for a moment like dew.

"Name him Haden," Death said. "And when he is a man I shall teach him a trade." Then she was gone, no longer amused. Birth never amused her for long.

Death followed the boy's progress one year closely, another not at all. She sent no gifts. She did not stand for him at the church font. Still, the boy's father and his half-blind mother did well for themselves; certainly better than peasants had any reason to expect. They were able to purchase their own farm, able to send their boy to a school. They assumed it was because of Death's patronage, when in fact she had all but forgotten them and her godson. You cannot expect Death to care so much about a single child, who had seen so many.

Yet on the day Haden became a man, on the day of his majority, his father called Death. He drew her sign in the sand, the same he had seen on the chain around her neck. He said her name and the boy's.

And Death came.

One minute the man was alone and the next he was not. Death was neither winded nor troubled by her travel, though she still wore the khakis of an army nurse. She had not bothered to change from her last posting.

"Is it time?" she asked, who was both in and out of time. "Is he a man, my godson?" She knew he was not dead. *That* she would have known.

"It is time, Lady," the man said, carefully looking down at his feet. *He* was not going to be blinded like his wife.

"Ah." She reached up and took off the nurse's cap and shook down her black hair. The trouble with bargains, she mused, was they had to be kept.

"He shall be a doctor," she said after a moment.

"A doctor?" The man had thought no farther than a great farm for his boy.

"A doctor," Death said. "For doctors and generals know me best. And I have recently seen too much of generals." She did not tell him of the Crimea, of the Dardanelles, of the riders from beyond the steppes.

"A doctor would be nice."

Haden was brought to her. He was a smart lad, but not overly smart. He had strong hands and a quick smile.

Death dismissed the father and took the son by the hand, first warming her own hand. It was an effort she rarely made.

"Haden, you shall be a doctor of power," she said. "Listen carefully and treat this power well."

Haden nodded. He did not look at her, not right at her. His mother had warned him, and though he was not sure he believed, he believed.

"You will become the best-known doctor in the land, my godson," Death said. "For each time you are called to a patient, look for me at the bedside. If I stand at the head of the bed, the patient will live, no matter what you or any other doctor will do. But if I stand at the foot, the patient will die. And there is nought anyone can do — no dose and no diagnoses — to save him."

Haden nodded again. "I understand, godmother."

"I think you do," she said, and was gone.

In a few short years, Haden became known throughout his small village. A few more years and his reputation had spread through the country. A few more and he was known in the kingdom. If he said a patient would live, that patient would rise up singing. If he said one would die, even though the illness seemed but slight, then that patient would die. It seemed uncanny, but he was *always* right. He was more than a doctor. He was — some said — a seer.

Word came at last to the king himself.

Ah — now you think I have been lying to you, that this is only a story. It has a king in it. And while a story with Death might be true, a story with a king in it is always a fairy tale. But remember, this comes from a time when kings were common as corn. Plant a field and you got corn. Plant a kingdom and you got a king. It is that simple.

The king had a beautiful daughter. Nothing breeds as well as money, except power. Of course a king's child would be beautiful.

She was also dangerously ill, so ill in fact that the king promised his kingdom — not half but all — to anyone who could save her. The promise included marriage, for how else could he hand the kingdom off. She was his only child, and he would not beggar her to save her life. That was *worse* than death.

Haden heard of the offer and rode three days and three nights, trading horses at each inn. When he came to the king's palace he was, himself, thin and weary from travel; there was dirt under his fingernails. His hair was ill kempt. But his reputation had preceded him

"Can she be cured?" asked the king. He had no time for temper or formalities.

"Take me to her room," Haden said.

So the king and the queen together led him into the room.

The princess's room was dark with grief and damp with crying. The long velvet drapes were pulled close against the light. The place smelled of Death's perfume, that soft, musky odor. The tapers at the door scarcely lent any light.

"I cannot see," Haden said, taking one of the tapers.

Bending over the bed, he peered down at the princess and a bit of hot wax fell on her cheek. She opened her eyes and they were the color of late wine, a deep plum. Haden gasped at her beauty.

"Open the drapes," he commanded, and the king himself drew the curtains aside.

Then Haden saw that Death was sitting at the foot of the great four-poster bed, buffing her nails. She was wearing a black shift, cut entirely too low in the front. Her hair fell across her shoulders in black waves. The light in the windows shone through her and she paid no attention to what was happening in the room, intent on her nails.

Haden put his finger to his lips and summoned four servingmen to him. Without a word, instructing them only with his hands, he told them to turn the bed around quickly. And such was his reputation, they did as he bade.

Then he walked to the bed's head, where Death was finishing her final nail. He was so close, he might have touched her. But instead, he lifted the princess's head and helped her sit up. She smiled, not at him but through him, as if he were as transparent as Death.

"She will live, sire," Haden said.

Both Death and the maiden looked at Haden straight on, startled, Death because she had been fooled, and the princess because she had not noticed him before. Only then did the princess smile at Haden, as she would to a footman, a servingman, a cook. She smiled at him, but Death did not.

"A trick will not save her," said Death. "I will have all in the end." She shook her head. "I do not say this as a boast. Nor as a promise. It simply is what it is."

"I know," Haden said.

"What do you know?" asked the king, for he could not see or hear Death.

Haden looked at the king and smiled a bit sadly. "I know she will live and that if you let me, I will take care of her the rest of her life."

The king did not smile. A peasant's son, even though he is a doctor, even though he is famous throughout the kingdom, does not marry a princess. In a story, perhaps. Not in the real world. Unlike Death, kings do not have to keep bargains. He had Haden thrown into the dungeon.

There Haden spent three miserable days. On the fourth he woke to find Godmother Death sitting at his bedfoot. She was dressed as if for a ball, her hair in three braids that were caught up on the top of her head with a jeweled pin. Her dress, of some white silken stuff, was demurely pleated and there were rosettes at each shoulder. She looked sixteen or sixteen hundred. She looked ageless.

"I see you at my bedfoot," Haden said. "I suppose that means that today I die."

She nodded.

"And there is no hope for me?"

"I can be tricked only once," Death said. "The king will hang you at noon."

"And the princess?"

"Oh, I am going to her wedding," Death said, standing and pirouetting gracefully so that Haden could see how pretty the dress was, front and back.

"Then I shall see her in the hereafter," Haden said. "She did not look well at all. Ah — then I am content to die."

Death, who was a kind godmother after all, did not tell him that it was not the princess who was to die that day. Nor was the king to die, either. It was just some old auntie for whom the excitement of the wedding would prove fatal. Death would never lie to her godson, but she did not always tell the entire truth. Like her brother, Sleep, she liked to say things on the slant. Even Death can be excused just one weakness.

At least, that is what she told me, and I have no reason to doubt the truth of it. She was sitting at my bedfoot, and — sitting there — what need would she have to lie?

About the author:

Jane Yolen is the multi-award-winning author of over two hundred books for adults, adolescents, and children, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and folktale collections. Her most recent book of poetry is *The Radiation Sonnets*.

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