

## An Honest Mistake

The sun was setting on the town. It was not a particularly remarkable sunset, it was all blues and greys, like an old bruise on the sky. It brought a chill with it and pedestrians on the street rushed from shop to shop. Only one of these shops was overlooked entirely.

Baits and Tackles stood between Barry's Bacon Emporium and Batteries 'N' Things. Narrow alleys separated Baits and Tackles from its neighbors as if the buildings themselves would rather not be associated with it. Even the seagulls seemed reluctant to perform the chore of shitting on the rooftop.

Howard Fitzhoward, who owned Baits and Tackles, stepped out of the shop accompanied by a cloud of cigar smoke, looked up at the sky and then spat on the ground right at the feet of a woman walking a dachshund—dick dogs Howard called them. The woman made a disgusted noise and moved on, taking no notice of Howard. He didn't even get a disgruntled *exca-use me*.

He'd had no business all day, which wasn't different from any other day. Normally he would open the shop at his leisure and close it when the mood struck him. He'd spend his days doctoring expiration dates on packages and making sure there was at least one live worm in the bait tins. He'd thumb through the decades old fishing magazines he kept at the register while smoking fat, cheap cigars that smelled like burnt toast. He'd done none of these things today.

Really the only chore he'd done was to use his sleeve to wipe away the grim in the window, which created a porthole sized gap and allowing him to watch the street. And watch he did.

He counted the number of people going into Barry's Bacon Emporium (and coming out laden with purchases). For every dozen customers Howard allowed himself to smoke another cigar. He was quickly running out. Right before stepping outside he'd begrudgingly thought of how long it would take for all the filth to grow back on the window.

Barry from Barry's Bacon Emporium had been over to Howard's shop the day before with a proposition: he wanted Howard to sell him his shop (*"for a fair price," Barry promised*).

Howard flatly refused.

"But the bacon business is expanding. I need the floor space. People put bacon on everything nowadays. Did you know, I was at a wedding last weekend and they actually had bacon on top of the cupcakes. The cupcakes. Can you believe it?"

Howard said that he could not.

"The point is, don't you see, bacon is a growing industry and fishing, well, it's floundering."

At this Howard had threatened to beat Barry with a flounder if he didn't leave his shop immediately.

On the lamppost in front of Baits and Tackles was a flyer announcing the disappearance of a cat (Precious, black and white, no mention of a reward). Howard ripped the flyer off and went back inside. He brought the flyer over to the counter and grabbed a black permanent marker. On the blank side of the page he wrote, "FREE BACON WITH EVERY PURCHASE" and taped it to the window so that the cat's face

looked in at the shop. Howard drew Xs over the cat's eyes and a fat tongue hanging out of its mouth. He stepped back to admire his work.

Death was having one hell of a day.

A few months ago he'd been assigned to a telemarketer (59, male, stroke). When it happened the telemarketer was drinking out of a cup that said I HATE MONDAYS. Even though Death did not work a traditional Monday through Friday job, he was beginning to understand the sentiment.

Death's official title was Agent of Death, Dying, and Mortal Soul Collection, but no one ever referred to him as that.

His day started out with him getting reamed out by the boss for being too soft on a gang member ("*Gunshot wound to the head? You couldn't think of anything more original?*") all while the other guys listened on. It was embarrassing. When he'd just been a Junior Collector he could get away with all kinds of things. Giving extra time, letting them die in their sleep, that sort of thing. Now his boss expected more from him. His last performance review was full of recommendations like *The Agent needs to take more initiative and explore the current methods at his disposal*. Then, just to punish him further, the boss assigned Death to kid duty. Some of the guys actually liked kid duty, but not him. Call him self-righteous but he could only really stand his job when he was assigned to people who had it coming to them.

His boss was also insistent that all the Agents use these new iSoul tablets. With just a couple of taps Death could pull up a person's entire file in seconds. Using some sort of algorithm the tablet could even suggest causes of death based on a person's

history. There was even a group chat feature so the whole staff could stay in touch throughout the shift. It went off constantly. The other guys loved the new technology. They'd send each other messages about what they had planned for their marks and how well their plans panned out. Earlier Death's iSoul buzzed with a message saying, "*My farmer just got trampled by his herd into manure...sure was a dirty job.*" The iSoul's messaging system was certainly much faster than the old parchment method, but Death still hadn't gotten the hang of it.

Death was just leaving the hospital (Denise Bailey, age seven, cystic fibrosis) when he saw Howard Fitzhoward step out into the street.

Just for practice Death used the iSoul's facial recognition feature to pull up Howard's file. No family, no pets and no relevant contributions to society. The tablet took a whole minute before it came up with a suggested disposal method and even then it was the least creative Death had seen yet (*drowning—based on a near death experience*). Death was once responsible for taking care of the man who invented the trick birthday candles that you can't blow out (cause of death: caught in a fire started by one of those candles); even that guy contributed more to society than Howard Fitzhoward. Christ, even his name *Howard Fitzhoward* was a nuisance.

Howard was like a cardboard box that had not been handled with care. His contents may have once been valuable but after being kicked around and then promptly neglected his insides were now worthless and damaged. With his uneven gait and gnash of a mouth he looked like his edges were dented and his tears had been mended with packing tape. He had no substance, no use. A blemish on the sidewalk.

And yet Howard took no notice of his mediocrity. He opened up his unnecessary shop every day, knowing that he would get no business. He didn't open the shop out of some demented hope that one day his business would flourish. It seemed to Death that he did it out of spite. Howard and his shop were mars on the otherwise quaint town. They were like pit stains on a wedding dress.

Death's first thought was that someone should have come long ago to put this man out of his misery. His second thought was that he should send a memo to the Angel of Mercy as soon as he got back to the office. His third was that inter-office memos always got lost and the Angel of Mercy was a pompous prick anyway.

Not for the first time Death wondered why the mundane, the worthless, the filthy, the scum of the earth were allowed to continue on when the imaginative, the fiery, and the creative were snuffed out.

His thoughts went to Denise Bailey. The hospital staff would have found her by now. Her parents would have been notified. At least Death didn't have to stick around for that today. Denise had drawings taped up all around her hospital bed. A pirate ship being capsized by disembodied tentacles. A tree with no leaves but deep, intertwining roots. She kept a journal with a threatening note on the title page warning would be snoops of the fate in store for them should they read her private thoughts. An empty threat, but Death didn't peek, even after Denise was gone.

Something on Howard's file caught Death's eye and he did something that he hoped his boss would never find out about.

Had Baits and Tackles been less gloomy Howard may have noticed the shadows lengthening. The shop was always cool and clammy, but the air started to thin until it was arid and biting.

“Howard Fitzhoward,” a voice said.

“We’re closed,” Howard said automatically.

The figure in the shop was lurking in the shadows. From what Howard could tell the man was wearing a black suit. He was leaning on a cane. He was wearing a brimmed hat that was tilted to cover his face.

“I have come to give you a great gift,” the figure said.

Howard pointed to a sign that said NO SOLICITORS. “If it’s the gift of god you can just wrap it back up and give it to somebody else.”

“It is the gift of knowing.”

“All I *know* is that you’re trespassing.”

Death was taken aback. Here he was sticking his neck out for a mortal and all he was getting was attitude. The other guys had a saying: *don’t expect them to thank you*. Some of them liked to stalk their customers for weeks, leaving omens for them or lurking in the shadows just beyond the line of sight. They devoured the fear; they said it tasted better than a thirty-year scotch whisky. Not him. He waited until the final minute if he could. He’d made sure Denise Bailey had been sleeping before he came for her. He’d get a demerit for that, but it was worth it. Any time Death told the other guys about an especially uncooperative customer they’d tell him that he was being too nice. *Don’t be nice, bring out the scythe*. For once, he took their advice.

His cane began to lengthen until it was as nearly taller than him; the slope of the handle became a lethal blade. As Howard watched this transformation the glass on the windows splintered but did not break. Frost appeared on the surface of the glass as if a spider was weaving a web of ice rather than thread. The overhead lights burst one by one, emitting exhausted little *poof* sounds like they were relieved they'd never have to shine light on this store again. Howard plunged into a darkness he had only experienced once.

For a man who owned a fishing gear store Howard had only been out in the ocean on a boat a handful of times. The last time he actually swam in the ocean was when he'd gone scuba diving as a young man. He descended into the water, sinking into the unknowable depth of the ocean. Howard expected to feel weightless underneath the water, but instead the blackness pressed upon him, crushing him from every direction. He'd been arrogant, thinking of all the things he would see and discover. But all he saw was the void. Even the all-powerful sun could not penetrate the barrier of the water—the ocean water snuffed out rays of light that traveled millions of miles. Howard was as isolated and powerless as an astronaut stranded in space. He tried to rise back up to the surface but there was no way to tell up from down. The terms were meaningless in the all-encompassing blackness. Fatigue embraced him in a cold and merciless shroud. But then he saw light light, flickering and ghostly like a Will-o'-the-wisp. He followed it, not knowing if he was heading to his salvation or his doom. Eventually his head broke the surface and even though he was reeling and sick he was alive.

Howard felt himself sinking into that subterranean abyss again. Trapped. Powerless. Even though he knew his feet were firmly on the floorboards of his shop

Howard envisioned himself floating in the womb of the void. That same fatigue crept back into his bones and he knew there was no escape this time. Howard sank to his knees.

“Pathetic,” Death muttered and released him. “Now you listen to me. I’ve come to tell you when you shall die.” He reached into the chest pocket of his suit and pulled out the iSoul. “Ah, here you are. You will die at 5:39 am on the fourth of September of this year.”

“But that’s in—”

“A month,” Death finished.

“I can’t believe this.”

“Like I said, consider it a gift.”

Howard had regained some of his strength by now. “Aren’t you supposed to *ask* people before you tell them this sort of thing?”

“You know, they didn’t exactly cover that at Death School.”

“Well I didn’t want to know.”

“Look I’m sorry, but it’s done now.”

“Wait a minute.” Howard looked at Death’s tablet. “How about you look up a name in there for me?” Howard hoped to at least outlive Barry.

“That doesn’t seem very ethical,” Death said.

“Your ethics can go eat a bag of dick sticks,” Howard said, which was a phrase he had heard once and liked very much.

“There’s no need to be vulgar. You know some people would be grateful to have this information so that they could live their lives to the fullest.” Death’s thoughts went again to Denise. He wondered what she would have done with this knowledge (A trip to



Disney? Paint something on a real canvas?). She certainly would have done more than this pathetic shell of a man before him. Death gestured to the flyer of Precious. “Why don’t you do something nice for a change? Rescue that cat or something.”

Death was running behind schedule now. His tablet screen beeped at him urgently. “My boss is going to kill me,” he said and was gone.

“Boss,” Howard repeated. “Wait a minute. I’d like some contact information for him. I want to lodge a complaint.”

Howard did not rescue Precious. He held the flyer to his chest, the crumpled paper anchoring him to reality. He was afraid that if he let go of the paper he would get sucked into the vacuum of blackness again.

Somehow he made it up the narrow flight of stairs that led to his studio apartment. He sank down into his mattress, which was tough and springy.

First he thought of a life insurance policy, but there was no one to leave the money to. His second thought was if he could put in his will that he wanted his store demolished after his death so that at least it wouldn’t get turned into a bacon warehouse.

Then the inevitable, morbidly fascinating thought occurred and he wondered how it was going to happen.

There were entire TV shows dedicated to the idiotic ways people got themselves killed. The possibilities were endless. One such show had a narrator that always ended a segment with a witty pun. In one episode a fruit truck driver jackknifed on the interstate; the driver’s brain and the fruit wound up all over the pavement. The narrator said, “*That sure created a traffic jam.*”

One month.

And yet the weeks went by; Howard self medicated with cheap beer and cigars until the Death incident was a vague memory in his mind. As more time passed the phenomenon lost its vividness and force, like witnessing the northern lights or an eclipse. He had been going about his business as usual. Opening the shop, smoking his cigars, glowering at Barry and his slew of customers. Even if he did only had a month left to live he simply couldn't think of any way he'd rather spend it than doing what he always did.

Howard was prepared to chalk the whole thing up to inhaling some sort of dangerous fumes and hallucinating. A month left to live. He just couldn't believe it. He wasn't a dangerous man, he didn't take risks. He barely even left his shop. He supposed he could always drop dead of a heart attack he supposed, but he felt fine.

One morning Howard rolled over in bed and heard the noise of crunching paper underneath him. It was the cat flyer. Precious the cat seemed to glare at him.

Written in the top corner of the page in a hand that did not belong to Howard were the words: *You're wasting your time. I'm watching you.*

Howard yelped like a dog and sprang from the bed.

"That's an empty threat," Howard grumbled to the sky. "What are you going to do, kill me?"

And that was when Howard realized something: He couldn't die.

If his death was foretold then Howard was essentially invincible for the next two weeks. He could rush into a burning building or jump off a skyscraper and amaze the audience below with a miraculous escape from death. He could walk over to Barry's

Bacon Emporium with a shotgun and take all of those suckers out and when the police arrived he would miraculously avoid every bullet and escape. He could hold up a bank and live the rest of his days rich and on the run.

No. What he really wanted was to settle an old grudge. He'd show an old enemy exactly who was superior.

He'd swim across the Atlantic Ocean.

The reporter had no idea what he was doing here. When he'd arrived at the office this morning there was a blinking message on his phone. When he hit play he heard a voice wheezing with excitement. "If you want the story of your life head down to the docks at noon tomorrow."

So far other "stories of his life" had included the heroic rescue of a missing cat from the tree it had been stuck in, the 101<sup>st</sup> birthday of Ethel Hopkins which made her the oldest person in the town, and an unlikely friendship that had formed between a squirrel and a St. Bernard. Things weren't very exciting in the town.

The reporter looked at his watch. 12:10.

He sighed resignedly and turned to head back up to the main street when he saw an absurd sight coming towards him.

It was a man dressed in an old fashioned one piece bathing outfit with horizontal stripes. A snorkel and goggles were strapped around his forehead, the snorkel cocked at an almost inquisitive angle. His midsection was engulfed in a silver inner tube, his belly spilling out over the plastic. His progress towards the reporter was slow since he was

wearing flippers and with each step he had to raise his knees up past his hips to avoid stumbling.

“What in the—“ the reporter muttered as the man raised his hand in greeting and shouted “Ahoy!”

“Ahoy,” the reporter managed.

“’Spect you got my message.”

“I expect so, yes.”

Howard explained everything to the young reporter as he looked out at the ocean. The water looked like it was churning; white caps began to form as if the ocean could sense a challenger. No matter what the old bitch threw at him Howard would not (could not) be stopped.

“This story might just be your big break, sonny,” Howard said.

The reporter doubted it, but said nothing. This man was clearly mad. He’d stopped taking notes at the visit from Death part.

“Even if this story is true,” the reporter began.

“It’s true,” Howard said.

“Okay,” the reporter said cautiously. “Well if you know when you’re going to die why don’t you do something heroic or cross something off your bucket list?”

The question angered Howard, who didn’t really know what a bucket list was. He’d heard the term before but he had never thought of anything he wanted to do before he died.

“You just make sure you spell my name right in the article,” Howard said.

He jumped.

The reporter cried out. He watched Howard start a hitching stroke out of the bay. He looked like a wounded fish. "Maybe I should call the Coast Guard," the reporter said. He looked down at his notepad. He hadn't written down the man's name at all.

Howard's progress was slow and only became slower as the day wore on. He did not pass any boats; if he had Howard would have likely abandoned the idea, hitched a lift and gone back home. The land was far behind him when Howard decided to let the water simply carry him out to sea. Why do the work when the current would do it for him? After a few tries he pulled himself up on the inner tube and made himself comfortable, imagining the story the reporter would write about him. All he needed was a cigar and a beer and he'd be happy as a clam. When the sun set completely Howard decided to close his eyes and bring the day to an end.

When he woke he was an island in a sea of water all around him. He could see nothing but the distant horizon in all directions. The water gleamed molten silver and hurt his eyes. He pulled a waterproof map out of his bathing outfit and unfolded it across his belly. He had no idea where he was. He hadn't eaten or had anything to drink since yesterday. The thought didn't bother him. Dehydration and starvation couldn't touch him. He was master of the universe.

Sometimes he got off the inner tube and paddled with his flippers. Even though he had a snorkel he never submerged his head. Most of the time he just let the water pull him further out into the void.

He passed two days like this.

And then a storm found him.

When the wind started to pick up Howard was pleased because it was making his progress much faster. The water churned underneath him and he allowed himself to close his eyes and rest, enjoying the way the wind felt against his chapped, sunburned body.

His eyes snapped open as the inner tube lurched unpleasantly. He'd been riding the swell of a wave and it had deposited him roughly. The sky was black now but Howard's glowing digital watch told him that it was still the late afternoon. He held onto the tube tightly as he felt another wave forming underneath him. The plastic handholds were slick with water.

The rain started, thrashing his face with droplets that felt like shrapnel. The inner tube was rocking dangerously underneath Howard and he felt it capsizing. He looked up to see a wave as ominous and towering as Death himself looming over him. Then it crashed down, dunking him under the water.

He lost the tube. The flippers were wrenched off his feet.

The waves pummeled him like a bully. Rain came down in sheets. When Howard broke the surface of the water there was no oxygen for him to take in, only rain. Lightning illuminated the sky. Howard knew that he could not die, not on this day, and so he fought perhaps less vigorously than a drowning man would typically fight. He thought briefly that the rainwater was actually refreshing. The ocean sucked him under as if a pair of mighty and wicked hands were closed around his ankles in a vice grip. The world was nothing but black ice and salt. He could not breathe. No matter how he clawed through the waters he could not surface. He didn't even know if he was swimming the right way. But he needed air. His lungs screamed. He opened his mouth.

And there, in the waters of the Atlantic, Howard Fitzhoward died.

Death was on his (half hour) lunch break. He was playing Scrabble with Cupid and Elvis. He looked over at the live feed he had of Howard on his tablet and groaned.

“I thought you said he had another two weeks to live. I had a bet going with Abe Lincoln on when a shark was going to take a leg off,” Cupid said.

Death pulled up Howard’s file again, shrinking the video feed. “Oh no,” he said. “I pulled up the file for Howard Fitzhowards by accident.”

Elvis huffed. He’d never quite forgiven Death for confusing his time of death with the death of Elvis Parsley’s.

“Oh how many times do I have to apologize?”

Cupid played the word *corpses* on a triple word score. “You know,” he said, “We might be hiring for Seasonal Junior Archers soon. I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Thanks, but I heard that Love’s a lot harder than Death,” Death said. “And I’m a poor shot.”

Two weeks later, news of Howard Fitzhoward’s death reached the town (or rather, Howard’s swollen, fish-bitten corpse washed up on the town’s beach). No one quite knew who the man was, except for the reporter, who had forgotten to notify the Coast Guard and who (wisely) never told a soul about his meeting with Howard on the docks. No one in the town shed a tear for Howard. They were surprised to learn that he even owned a shop on the main strip. It was considered a suicide and the case was closed.

One person, however, did say a prayer for Howard. Barry, the owner of the Bacon Emporium, looked up at the sky and thanked Howard for his timely death and wished him well in the afterlife. Then he smiled signed the deed to Howard's shop.