

The Witness

Every twelve years in the village, a flurry of white descended on its shingled rooftops. But instead of landing in powdery heaps on the streets below, neat clumps formed at the bottom of each doorstep. They were not snowflakes, but blank envelopes.

When the villagers went out in the morning to fetch their milk bottles, they would spot the envelopes and gingerly pick them up. There was no writing on the outside of them, but when the villager touched the envelope meant for him or her, a red stain would spread from the person's fingertips, flushing the paper with the color of blood.

Dr. Darius Cottonwood received many of these envelopes in his long life. He was the only doctor in town. When he had first moved to the village, he didn't understand the envelopes. Where did they come from and what did the messages inside them mean? No one would tell him. It was taboo to speak directly of the envelopes; they were only mentioned in winding allusions and circumlocutions.

Mere months after he had moved to this small town to start his practice, he had woken to an envelope on his doorstep. Inside there was a slip of paper that read, "The Town Square, 8:00 o'clock in the evening, Year 2, Day 35." The words were printed in gold ink in an old-fashioned hand, full of loops and curls, and at the bottom of the message, there was a stamp in the shape of a squinting eye.

Darius stuck the note in his coat pocket and walked to work. There were no cars in the village back then. By the time he arrived at his office, he had forgotten about it entirely. He said hello to his nurse, a young woman who had been trained by the local midwife (there had been no doctor there before him). She nodded back to him, but it was clear that something else was on

her mind. Later that day, when he was eating lunch alone in his office, he felt in his pocket again and his hand clutched the note.

He went out to the waiting room and walked over to the nurse at the desk, who was busy filing some papers.

“Excuse me, sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to interrupt you, but I was wondering if you could tell me what this is all about. I got it in the mail this morning.”

Her eyes flicked to the envelope and back and her lips pursed into a tight line. She looked around at the room, confirming that they were alone and in the hoarsest whisper, she said, “You must not show this to anyone. Be at the time and the place that it says, but that is all. Never speak of it again.”

“But what is it? What does it mean?”

“You will know soon enough,” she said. “Everyone receives an envelope on one Delivery Day or another. They say there are some who are lucky enough to never... but that is beside the point. You must be at the time and place that it says, and that is all. You must not miss it, do you understand me? This means, you must be there in the second year after the Delivery, on the 35th day. Just nod, say nothing, I should not even be speaking about this at all.”

He was about to speak, but now he closed his mouth, frowning. She continued, and he had to lean in to hear what she said, since her words were so soft and low.

“It is forbidden to speak of it. You must not discuss it with anyone, do you hear? Anyone. You are an intelligent man, Dr. Cottonwood, but you are not as smart as you think you are.”

Darius thought that the young woman might be disturbed, so he asked some other villagers, his neighbors and friends. But he received the same response from everyone, and some refused to speak to him when he inquired. Even the only other man of reason in town, the

schoolteacher, turned around and walked away without saying another word when Darius brought up the mysterious letter.

One year and thirty-five days after the letters were delivered, Darius took a stroll down Main Street to the town square. Darius expected a gathering, so he grabbed a table outside a café to wait and watch. At exactly eight o'clock, he gazed across the square. The square was mostly empty, except for a few people entering and exiting the shops and cafés. At the center of the square, there was a corpulent man walking his dog.

All of sudden, the man keeled over. His dog next to him, a shaggy cocker spaniel, nudged him and began to yap. Darius jumped up from his seat and rushed over to him. The dog growled at him, but backed away as Darius knelt down and tried to revive the man. No one else made a move.

“Please, someone help me lift him up, I need to take him to my office,” Darius pleaded. The bystanders continued to watch, while the man still lay on the ground. Darius desperately tried to revive the man, but after a few minutes, the man still lay unmoving on the ground, his pulse silent. There was no use. He was already dead.

Darius stood up. He blinked back tears and gazed at the audience, sitting on benches, at coffee tables, calmly continuing like before, as if nothing had happened. How could they have witnessed such a scene and remained so unaffected? The only clue that a tragedy had occurred was the sound of the pitiful whimpering of the dog, which had laid down next to her owner.

“Do you have no decency?” he demanded, his voice shaking as he addressed the crowd before him.

They acted like they had not heard a thing. Everyone except for one woman, the nurse, who crept up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. She had also been sitting in the square.

She didn't say a word, but she gave his shoulder a squeeze. He turned towards her, and followed her gaze, which curved down to the dog licking the man's pale cheeks.

"Here, let's take him to the mortuary," she said, and each of them took one end of the man and lifted him up. They carried him to the small mortuary business at the end of Main Street and dropped him off unceremoniously on a bench in the hallway.

A gentleman sat at the front desk. His suit was of a finer cut than the villager's coarse, homespun clothes, and his face was adorned by a top hat and sideburns. He looked like as much of an outsider as Darius, perhaps even more so. The man at the front looked up to watch them as they walked in. Without moving his head or opening his mouth, his arm rose, almost like it was not the man controlling it, but some other entity. It pointed at a table where a white sheet was already laid out like a tablecloth. His meaning was clear- they were to leave the body there. This was certainly a strange system to handle death, Darius thought to himself. Did the man have no family? Or would they go to the mortuary to seek his body later? But Darius kept his lips sealed. He had learned not to pry too much into the affairs of the villagers, not to look too deeply into their customs. It won him nothing but cold shoulders.

They deposited the man's body onto the table and left.

Outside the door was the dog, who had followed them the entire way. She was yapping sharp cries at the door through which her owner had been taken. The nurse tutted and scooped up the dog in her arms, where she calmed down a little.

"You knew about this, didn't you?" Darius asked her. He couldn't help himself. He needed some answers.

"You would have known about it too, if you had been paying attention," she answered coolly. But then she looked up at him. While they had been carrying the man, he had been able to

treat the situation professionally, to handle the corpse as he would any other body. But now, the terror hit him all at once, like a punch in the stomach. He clutched his head in his hands, his breath coming in short bursts. He had trouble focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. That was death he had seen. In his medical training he had handled cadavers, but never before had he seen life drain from a body before his eyes. He couldn't shake the vision of that dead man's face. His eyes had glazed over, staring upwards into the abyss, without a glint of hope.

And, most horrible of all, had been the men and women who had watched, all the while never moving a muscle... Some had even continued to sip their coffee...

The nurse walked closer to him and held out the dog.

"She's yours now," she said.

He knelt down and gingerly pet the dog's head. The dog, who seemed just as unsettled as Darius did, gave a small whine, but when he picked her up, her tail gave a feeble wag.

"Let's go get some ice cream," said the nurse. "It will make you feel better."

After that traumatic day, they began to meet often after work. They would go to the only park in the entire town, which unfurled in gentle rolling hills of grass, and take a stroll together with the dog, whom Darius had christened Annie. After a few weeks, they began to walk arm and arm on these walks. Two years later, they were married.

Darius loved his wife, Laura, and when they first married, he believed she was different from the other villagers, freer to live without letting death's approach rule her life. They lived a quiet but passionate life, in their little cottage at the edge of the village, which over the years Darius worked on his spare time, adding an extra floor, then a patio, and a garden. Two years after they were married, his wife gave birth to a healthy baby son. For this milestone, there was

no celebration in the village. No flowers, no cards, not even a polite “congratulations” was offered to the couple by their patients. It was the villagers’ custom not to acknowledge birthdays of a child until he or she survived a Delivery Day. To do otherwise was to tempt death, the villagers believed. Their boy, Felix, grew up with no candles or birthday parties, just like all the other boys in the village.

The children had their own way of talking about the village’s mystery, as Darius discovered. Felix, a quick boy, who was always racing his other friends to prove he was the fastest or reciting mathematical equations to show how much he knew, learned the lore of the villager’s children, the nursery rhymes, and chanted them under his breath constantly whenever he was playing in Darius’s office. While his father checked pulses and his mother drew a patient’s blood, Felix pranced around the office, skipping and singing to himself.

Drip, drop, the delivery stop

Right before your door

Letters make the plans

Crimson in your hands

Pop, your dad falls on the floor.

From up above, they’re watching

As we dance round and round

Like spinning tops left alone

They’re just letting us know

One finger can send us to the ground.

One day, he was in the waiting room, singing to himself while he drew in a coloring book. The other patients in the room eyed him, their lips pressed tight in disapproval, but didn't say a word. At last his mother came to him and snatched away his notebook.

"Stop singing that," she told him, with uncharacteristic sharpness. "It's not polite to sing in here."

"You wouldn't mind if I was singing any other song," the little boy said. "You just don't like talking about how all the people die and you can't do anything about it."

"Felix!" his mother hissed at him. She took a step towards him, her hand raised. For a second, it looked like she was going to silence him with a slap. But she stopped her hand in midair. She couldn't bring herself to hit her only child.

Darius, who was walking in from the exam room to collect a patient saw this exchange. He put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Felix, listen to your mother, please," he said. "The villagers don't like that song. If you keep singing it in here, soon we won't have any patients left."

He cracked a playful smile, but it did nothing to dispel the tension in the air.

Felix stopped singing the nursery rhyme in the patient room, but when they came home and his mother wasn't in the house, Darius often heard him humming it under his breath, as if the song were playing again and again in an unending loop in the boy's head.

One night, a few months later, Darius tucked his son into bed and gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"Dad?" the boy asked, calling after his father as he turned to leave the room. "Do the letters really come? Once every twelve years?"

“Yes, they do,” Darius said. He knew he would have to explain this to his son, one day. “Don’t speak about it in front of your mother though, all right? She doesn’t like talking about it.”

“Why not?” Felix asked. “What’s the big deal about it anyway? So you get told when you’re going to see someone die. That’s what it is right? Why does it matter anyway if there’s nothing you can do to change it? Or can you?”

Darius paused.

“I don’t know,” he said, caught by surprise by his son’s questions. They were the same ones he had too; he just hadn’t expected a child to be so perceptive.

“And what happens to the people who leave?” his son asks. “The people who leave the village. If they never come back, do they never get any more letters?”

“I don’t know either,” Darius said. “You know what, kid? If you find out, you tell me. But don’t mention this to your mother okay? It would only make her worry.”

Felix nodded.

Darius fondly ruffled the boy’s hair and kissed him on the forehead.

The next Delivery Day was just days after Felix’s ninth birthday, the last one he wouldn’t have to celebrate. The letters arrived on their doorstep, life soft, white feathers fallen from swooping birds. Darius received three. It was going to be a difficult dozen years, he guessed. His wife received one. And Felix received none. That, in itself, wasn’t too abnormal for a child, who still had time to be shielded from the harshness of reality.

“Can I see the letter?” Felix asked his parents, trying to peer over their shoulders as they examined the curling script on the crisp parchment.

“Absolutely not,” said his mother. “I forbid it. These letters are private, Felix. No one must read the letters save for the person who receives them.”

But later on that night, when Laura was out at the market, Darius let the boy sneak a look at one of the enigmatic slips of paper. The boy traced the outline of the eye with his fingers.

“Who wrote this? Where does it come from?” the boy asked.

Darius shrugged.

Felix trusted his father more than anyone else. He told his dad what he could never mention to his mother for fear of her reactions. He and a couple of the boys at school had taken it upon themselves to get to the bottom of the mystery. On Delivery Day, several of the boys had stayed up all night waiting at their doorstep to see where the letters had come from. But all of them, every single one, had not managed to keep their eyes open until daybreak. They had all slumbered off, to find the letters waiting on the steps. A few of Darius’s friends had even received letters and they circulated them amongst the group, looking for clues. Each one was identical down to the script and the symbol, although the letters looked like they had been formed by hand not printed. Aside from that, they hadn’t discovered much.

Hearing this, Darius’s heart surged with pride. The boy really did have a lot of his father in him, and he was braver than him too. Darius was determined not to let his fear overcome him the next time the time in one of his letters came to pass.

Darius and Laura held a picnic for Felix to celebrate his tenth birthday, the first party of its kind for the boy. As it was springtime, they invited the boy and his friends to a meadow in the woods nearby the village. They set out checkered red-and-white picnic blankets and Laura unpacked a basket overflowing with Felix’s favorite food: cheesy rolls, slow-cooked pork that

Laura had made the night before, mashed potatoes and gravy, and ice cream, which she toted around in a separate iced cooler.

They had just set up the entire meal and the boys had begun to eat when a man came running down the path next to the meadow calling out, “Dr. Cottonwood, Dr. Cottonwood!”

“Yes?” he replied.

“Missus Ferris is going into labor!” he said. “I’m her nephew. Please she told me that you gotta come quick.”

Darius sighed. He had been looking forward to this day for so long, just a day to spend time with his wife and his son. He was tempted to stay. The next appointment he was supposed to attend wasn’t until next year, so Missus Ferris and her baby would probably work itself out if he let it. But he wasn’t a man to shirk his duty.

He kissed his wife on the cheek and handed his son his birthday present.

“You can open it now,” he said. “Go on.”

The boy ripped open the newspaper covering it. Inside gleamed a miniature magnifying glass.

“For your investigation,” he said, winking.

“Thank you!” the boy said, flinging his arms around his father.

Smiling, Darius walked back to the village, a skip in his step.

Late that night, after a long, protracted labor and successful delivery of a new baby to this world, Darius came home. The door creaked open and Darius immediately sensed an absence, a silence seeping into the corners of the house.

His wife barred his way into the kitchen, her eyes downcast.

“How—?” he demanded, but she just shook her head and stepped aside to let him see.

Felix’s broken body was lying face down on the table, his limbs splayed at impossible angles, the back of his head, bloody, far too, bloody.

In a low voice, Laura explained: The boys had gone down to the river and were swimming in it. Felix had flown off a rope swing the wrong way while trying to swing into the same pool. He had cracked his skull on the ground and died, all while she had watched.

“Why?” Darius said, the word escaping him like a whimper. “Why didn’t you call me, ask me for help? Laura, why?”

She shook her head.

“I couldn’t do a thing,” she said, her breath a whisper, “and neither could you.”

Darius was too shocked to speak. He wanted to hold his son, but he couldn’t look at his wife.

“Get the hell out of here,” he growled, and scooped his lifeless son in his arms.

Darius’s wife locked herself in her study for weeks. She would never discuss the incident with Darius, beyond saying there was nothing she could have done, even when he begged her to tell him why she had not warned the boy to do such a stupid dangerous thing. He knew she had suspected he would die, that she had received a slip of paper telling her when and where it would occur. How could she have concealed that from him? But even worse, how could she have stood there and watched as the life drained out of him, without even trying to call for help?

Many times he had mustered up the courage to ask her, “Why didn’t you try to change his fate?”

But whenever the words formed on his lips as he stood before her, they refused to leave and she would stare at him with bloodshot eyes, as if to say, you know, Darius. You know, why I couldn't.

The villagers were more afraid of defying death than they were of death itself, and though Laura spent most of her time around Darius, a foreigner, she could never change her instincts, never treat death in a different way than the only way she knew.

It had taken a long time for the couple to win back the other's trust. Their son's death had almost broken the two of them. Now they hardly spoke of him, except to say, yes, that was Felix's favorite color, he would have liked that shirt, or Felix knew that girl in school.

Darius was in his seventies when the envelopes arrived for the fifth time in his stay in the village. That morning, he saw the envelopes on his doorstep. There were two of them. He took them into the kitchen. But as he grasped them between his fingers, neither envelope turned red. Frowning he deposited them in his wife's lap. She sat by the fireplace knitting. Placing her needles down, she brushed her hands across them. They both bloomed crimson at her touch.

The doctor and his wife looked at each other, and without saying a word, they nodded in unison. They understood.

Darius had always received an envelope on Delivery Day before now. The village was short on medical supplies, which were trucked in from the outside only every few months, so despite his best efforts, he had witnessed too many tragedies throughout his long life. Babies and mothers who passed together, cancer patients, he had even seen their neighbor die in a horrible accident when he had fallen off of a ladder while painting his house.

There were two reasons you wouldn't receive an envelope— either you would be lucky enough to go the next twelve years without witnessing a death, or death was coming for you before had a chance to see someone die. Darius, who had reached an age that most of the villagers never saw, suspected that his time had come.

But there was a slim possibility that an envelope was still on its way. It was just taking its time, drifting down from the sky. Once a man who had even started to prepare for his own death, buying his own coffin from the funeral home and setting up the ceremony with a local priest, had been struck by an envelope as he walked down the street. He lived to see another Delivery Day.

Darius prayed that he would be so lucky, but he wasn't sure to whom he was praying really. Most of the villagers were deeply religious, believing the Delivery was a direct message from God, even if they never said so out loud. But Darius knew otherwise. Why would God choose to only alert one village in the entire world about future events? He had his theories about the Delivery, but after Felix's death, he had tried to put them out of his mind. It was no use to ask why, when the result was always the same: death came for everyone.

Darius' wife did not open the envelopes.

His wife took his hand and squeezed it.

“You know this doesn't happen in other places,” Darius murmured. “There are places where death is still a mystery.”

His wife said nothing. She stood up, tottering towards the fire.

“Don't!” Darius cried out, flinging out his hand to try to stop her. His thrust his arm in front of her, barring her way.

She looked at him. Her wrinkled mouth was set in a stubborn line. She gently pushed his arm down and tossed the red envelopes into the flames.

Darius didn't know exactly what happened to those who missed their appointments. But there were rumors that the villagers spread, rumors traveling on whispers nods, hints of breath. The ones who ignored their summons tended to be found dead in a ditch by the roadside or locked in their house. Invariably, they died alone; succumbing to death with no witnesses. Darius could not imagine a worse fate.

Darius feared death more than the other villagers did. His wife, who had grown up in the village watching death after death, was unfazed by it. It seemed to him as if her heart had hardened with every death she witnessed.

This time around, when he had seen her toss the unopened envelopes in the fire, the unspoken grief for their son, made his wife's defiant act to toss the envelopes into the fire mean all that much more. It was proof of her loyalty to their love, blemished as it was.

Darius drove his car to work, but he had to pull to the roadside because tears were blurring his view. As he walked into his office, he tried not to look around too often. He was afraid to see if there were more people than usual sitting in the waiting room, watching, ready for their appointment. As he walked to the butcher's shop after work to pick up some meat for dinner, he couldn't help but keep glancing over his shoulder to see if there were onlookers outside, their noses pressed up against the glass.

The days passed. Sometimes, he gazed up at the sky pleading with it, willing one more stray envelope to fall down for him.

Going anywhere in the village set Darius on edge, so he started spending more time at home with his wife. They would sit together by the fireside. He would stroke her hair, while she closed her eyes, feeling between his fingertips the soft strands of her grey hair. He watched her

while she worked in their garden, pulling up weeds and watering the vegetables. When he asked to help her, she refused to let him, lest he strain his back, or worse.

Two weeks after Delivery day, he was walking across the town square when an envelope landed at his feet. The instant he picked it up, red raced through it like a wildfire. Relief flushed through his limbs like a shot of adrenaline. He tore open the envelope, it read that day's date. The place, his own address. He had mere minutes. Then he remembered his wife, and the stubborn expression she had worn as she had burned the envelopes. Fate was coming for her, he was sure of it. This time, he promised himself, he would dare to challenge it.

He raced down the street to make it home in time for the appointment, perspiration soaking through his shirt. He hopped into his car and sped off. When he reached his street, he saw that his clock read only one minute until the appointment. He pushed the gas pedal down even harder.

Fearing the worst, he looked towards his house as he made a wide turn to park in his driveway. He didn't see the car barreling towards him, coming the other direction. Hearing the screeching of brakes, his head jerked up and he witnessed his car's hood plow into a man who had been sitting in the driver's seat of the other car. At the moment of impact, the man's was taking a drag from his cigarette. His hat flew off his head and tumbled to the side of the road as his body was crushed.

Darius only had a split second to turn his head back towards his house before the flames from the explosion of the two cars colliding engulfed him. The last image Darius saw was his wife's face in his front window as she witnessed the collision. His wife had not missed her appointment after all.