

The Many Stages Of Courting Death

"GASP!"

Jill sprang forward, her chest heaving with a massive breath, then fell back into her seat. A sense of confusion and foggiess surrounded her. After a moment she regained composure and spoke.

"Where am I?" A few moments passed before her memory returned to her.

"Oh that's right I'm on the train. Oh dear I-I must have dosed off. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, what with everything that's happened."

She sat in silence for a moment and realized that the train was not moving. She looked out of the window only to find pitch black darkness, nothing was visible.

"I guess we're in a tunnel. I wonder how long we've been sitting here?"

Jill looked down through the faint light of the train car at her watch. She was annoyed to find its hands were as stationary as the train.

Jill shook the watch, listening for life in the time piece. But alas, it remained silent. "Of course it would be broken" Jill exclaimed.

"I wonder if my miserable prick of a fiancé gave it to me broken intentionally as a final insult!" Jill ripped the watch off her wrist and threw it blindly down the train isle.

Jill sat for a moment and then suddenly realized how quiet it was. She slowly stood from her seat, looking around the train and was surprised to find it was virtually abandoned.

"I wonder where everyone has gone?"

Looking toward the front of the nearly pitch black train car, she could see someone sitting in one of the isle seats. The form was silhouetted by a lone ceiling light. She stepped out from her row and walked towards the light. She stepped right behind the figure then stopped.

Taking a deep breath Jill said to herself, "Well here goes nothing." She tapped the figure on the shoulder. "Excuse me. I'm sorry to bother you. It seems my watch has stopped. Do you by chance have the time?"

Death had been sitting patiently, awaiting his next appointment, when he felt Jill's tap on his shoulder. Surprised by the unexpected touch, he slowly turned his head. His dark, hollow eye sockets met the vibrant eyes of his female inquisitor. His mouth opened slightly, as if he were about to answer, but stopped short, his breath taken away by something inexplicable about her.

"Sir? Are you all right?" Jill asked with a smile. Death stared silently into her eyes, his jaw hanging slightly open. Before he could respond, the train began to move. The train lights came back on and a faint glow began emanating through the windows, as the voice of the conductor rang out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now approaching our final stop. Please collect your belongings and prepare to disembark."

Death gestured with his hand, inviting Jill to sit with him.

"Why thank you!" Jill scooted by Death and sat in the seat beside him. "Honestly I was feeling a bit lonely back there. Its nice to have some company for a bit isn't it."

Death agreed.

Jill told Death that she had just been dumped by her fiancé and was returning home to an empty house. Death sat captivated by her voice, her charm. She bewitched him. As the train came to a stop at Jill's station, a bond had formed between them and the fires of passion were burning. As Jill stood to leave, she scribbled her number on her business card and handed it to Death.

"I think you're a charming gentlemen" She gushed. "There's a terrible shortage of them nowadays. Give me a call sometime." And with that Jill was gone.

Death sat there for what seemed like an eternity, when he was suddenly brought back to reality by a sharp and persistent ticking. He looked down to see the golden watch Jill had cast away near his foot. Death picked up the watch and held it. The hands were a minute away from striking midnight. Death looked at the card with Jill's number and a little message that said, *Time stands still for no one.*

The watch was now seconds before striking midnight. Grasping the knob on its side, Death turned the hands backwards. He then placed the watch in his pocket and bolted from the train, finding Jill trying to hail a cab outside the station.

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Death and Jills first few dates were fairly mundane. Dinner at Applebees, cocktails at the Blue Lounge, a movie in the park viewing of the Seventh Seal. The last one being Deaths suggestion as felt it would be nice if she shared in his culture. Jill did all the talking on their dates.

"Well, I work in advertising, nothing special just a small firm in the lower east side. We mostly deal with small business accounts, a few larger corporations at times but not often. I enjoy it, but I'm hoping to reach management level within the next five years. Though in these economic times it's a bit of a pipe dream, but I give a hundred and ten percent anyway"

Jill went on to tell him about her family life.

"Well, I have two older brothers, a couple of knuckle heads, but they're decent men. One younger sister who lives in Seattle. I haven't seen much of her lately, I'm afraid. And then my parents who live in the rural farmland. My father runs a hardware store and my mother was a seamstress, but now makes quilts for soldiers over seas in her off time. I guess you could say they're salt of the earth."

Death sat there as she talked, intently focused on her. Jill admired him immensely for being such a wonderful listener, a trait that was sorely lacking in the men she previously dated. He just seemed to be completely engaged with her every word.

"He's so attentive to me." Jill said to her friends, Libi and Tina. "Even with his exhaustive work schedule, he always finds time for me. We're perfect for each other. How does he feel about me, you ask? Well, we've only been dating for two weeks but I'm certain he loves me. How do I know? Well, why wouldn't he, Libi? He's a man, I'm a woman, its God's will that we met. Besides, men like him need to be tamed. He's been a bachelor for far too long. And even if he didn't love me, yet, which he does, he'd learn soon enough that that's what he feels. I'm certain of it Tina."

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Dating a man capable of killing you with the slightest touch does pose some interesting challenges, especially when that man is constantly killing everyone around you as part of his job. However Jill always tried to find the positive in it.

"We were out at the park yesterday evening watching the sunset" Jill said to Tina. "I was thinking how lovely things were going when all of a sudden a plane crashed into the field in front of us and burst into flames. At first I was in shock, thinking that he would have to go into work and that our night was ruined. That is until he reached behind the tree we were sitting under and pulled out a basket with a pre made dinner and a bottle of fine wine! I told him that's all well and good but what about the plane crash victims? He told me to close my eyes for a moment. So I did. And when I opened them, there in front of us was a production of *Gone With The Wind*, using the burning wreckage of the plane as a back drop for the fall of Atlanta and acted out entirely by the plane passengers, brought back to life! That romantic devil, he planned the whole thing to pre-empt his work appointments."

"I asked if he had caused the plane to crash ahead of time to coincide with the sunset. He tilted his head looking coy and gave a pinching motion with his fingers, and told me they were just going to hit a flock of pelicans when they got to the harbor and blow up anyway. And you know the play wasn't half bad. Not Tony good, but still decent considering all the actors were facing oblivion after the play ended."

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Sex was a complicated matter the two discussed at length. While neither of them was a virgin, the intricacies and mysteries of a human and a possessed, fleshless, skeletal nether being engaging in copulation were both exciting and enigmatic. On top of the obvious issue of Death lacking any kind of visible reproductive organs, there was the more pressing matter that simply having Death touch Jill without protection would result in her instant demise, though Jill would typically shrug this off as "pre sex jitters" on his part. Jill felt his concerns had less to do with her safety and more to do with his possible fear of intimacy, shame over an erectile disfunction, or even latent unfulfilled homosexual urges, as these were the prevailing opinions of male sexual resistance, expressed from the myriad of daytime talk show personalities Jill played pulpit to on a daily basis.

"Were both monogamous" She told Libi over the phone. "Neither of us has a STD and I'm on the pill, I just don't know where all this fear of intimacy is coming from. I watched an episode of Dr. Pill yesterday, and he said that most men who can't get into sex with their female partners were likely abused in their youth. Of course, I don't believe that's his problem. I think Dr. Joyce Sisters has it right, that most men are just little boys that need strong women to drag them into manhood, kicking and screaming if necessary, but that it's for their own good! I think he just needs a firm hand on the rudder as it were!"

Libi suggested that perhaps they should see a sex therapist. To which Jill replied:

"We actually tried that, but he got paged into work twenty minutes in and harvested Dr. Pinters soul right there in mid-session! Then he vanished into the mists of eternity, leaving me with having to go to lunch afterwards by myself. I'm still arguing with the insurance company over having to pay for the full hour."

Jill puzzled for a moment then conceded: "I don't know Libi. Maybe-maybe I'm just too much woman for him. Perhaps he's afraid that by sleeping with me I'll somehow crush his manhood and throw his used withered husk aside in preparation of my next male conquest. I read about how some women experienced that in a TV guide interview last month."

"Though I must admit, a part of me does find Death playing hard to get rather exhilarating! It's really allowed me to get in touch with my naughty side!"

Jill entertained and suggested many ideas in an effort to warm Death up to sex, some mundane, others bordering on the bizarre, but Death dismissed each of Jill's ideas more quickly than the last.

"He's so picky" she told Tina over lunch. "He constantly insists he'll kill me if we touch. So I suggested he wear a full body leotard, like the ones people wear during stage productions to remain hidden in the background. You know what I'm talking about right? Well, he shot it down, because he says he's claustrophobic and having fabric over his eyes might cause a panic attack."

"Then one day he comes over to my house with what looks like a huge oversized rubber glove and a bottle of baby powder and tells me to "try it on". He called it a latex body glove! It's essentially a body condom!" A look of shock overcoming Tina. "Yes, I know Tina. I'm allergic to latex!" Jill throwing her hands up.

Both Death and Jill ran down the gauntlet of ideas from various kinks, to blow up dolls, even pantomime sex. Then Jill suggested that Death cover himself in clear coat paint. But alas, it worked too well and it took Death hours to sand his hands down to a point where he could kill anyone after that.

"I thought the paint worked just fine" Jill said to Tina with a touch of bitterness. "Plus it made him dishwasher safe, so clean up would have been a breeze! But I shouldn't really be surprised. Men can't even pee in the toilet half the time and they invented it! It seems simplicity just isn't in their vocabulary."

Then one day Death suggested something that got Jill's attention. He stated he could simply possess a freshly dead person. Jill, being the ever opportunistic business woman, thought about this, weighing the pros and cons as though she were taking on a new account.

"I suppose it's not such a big deal" she thought. "I mean after all if JFK, our most distinguished president, engaged in three-ways, it can't be all that bad. I should remain open-minded to new experiences! If anything just to move this relationship forward already."

Eventually, Jill gave in to Death's suggestion, providing that the corpse be fresh, springy, and that she get to pick which body he used.

"It must be a man." she said. "With a decent build, and he can't stink" She then added "And no peg legs unless absolutely necessary!"

Death agreed.

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After committing to Death's idea, Jill took to spending her days pouring over the obituaries, as one might search for a used car. This would lead to days out with Death, in his finest robes and strongest sunscreen, and Jill in her best black dress and sun hats as they went about window shopping at the local funeral homes and morgues. Their search for just the right scratch for Jill's itch was like that of any man looking for the perfect purse or piece of fine jewelry for his wife. And when they found something that looked to fit the bill, Jill wasn't merely content with simply looking at the merchandise, she wanted to know it was quality goods. She would take to casually attending burials and chatting with the grieving family and friends to learn about any potential flaws in the recently deceased. Jill would work in her inquiries with the deft subtlety of an escort trying to pass off a bad case of genital herpes as razor burn.

"Oh my dear, I'm so very sorry for your loss. Yes I know Charles was such a wonderful man. And you say he was loyal to you all those years? Oh no, I'm not doubting you darling, it just makes one wonder if Charles even had a hook large enough to catch any other fish in the sea. "

Jill's inquiries didn't stop at mere anatomical inquests. Her probing became more and more particular. With each interrogation, another potential lover would be crossed off the list.

"Now Martha I find it hard to believe that Phillip was impotent. How could he have been, you two had twelve children. Hmm, what's that? He got it caught in a weed whacker, both of them, well that would answer my next question then. "

Eventually, after Jill had exhausted all the available opportunities in the region, she moved onto more exotic options.

"Yes, Doctor Bernard, I am aware that cloning is illegal in this country. I was simply asking if it were legal to clone a person, approximately how quickly before it would be of legal age? Mmm Hmm. The full eighteen years then. And there's no way of speeding that up? Well then, is it possible to just make an older person younger? And why not? Well if that's the case, then why am I paying taxes? Look, if I had God's phone number I would take that up with him! "

However, despite Jill's wheeling and dealing, it was Death who pulled through in the end. Late one afternoon, Jill got a knock at her door. It was Death and it looked as though he had some kind of large sack slung over his shoulder. Jill opened the door and immediately asked him what this was all about. Death entered and tossed the enormous bag onto the floor like a sack of potatoes. The bag was black, about six feet long, with a zipper from top to bottom and a large red bow tied onto it. On its front was printed "State Morgue". Jill's curiosity could take it no more.

"Alright mister, whats in the bag?"

Death motioned for her to open it.

Jill, with a mix of excitement and uncertainty, grasped the zipper and slowly began to pull it. About half way down, the bag opened wide and fell to the sides. There within lay the body of a man. But this was no ordinary man, his body was hard and chiseled like that of a Greek statue. His face was firm, with a strong jaw line and a flowing ocean of long dark hair that fell to his shoulders. And a member that could have been used to tamp down rags in a cannon! Jill looked at Death and then spoke.

"Oh Darling, at long last you finally found someone perfect! And here I thought we were going to have to settle for either the hospital janitor with the lazy eye or just gamble with the body condom and an epi-pen!" Then Jill noticed something familiar about this man, as though she had seen him somewhere before.

"Darling, I'm curious. Who is he? He seems awfully familiar."

Death then procured a clipboard with a few sheets of paper attached to it and handed it to Jill. Jill looked at it and saw it was a death certificate. Jill read on for a moment and then her head shot back to the man, then to the certificate, and then back at Death.

"Wait. You killed Fabio?!"

Death extended his thin bony finger and tapped at the line below where she was reading.

"Ohhh. You killed a Fabio impersonator. Well thank God for that! You gave me such a scare. Half of my book collection has him on the cover!"

Death rolled his eyes.

"Well, my dear, I think this will do just fine. Oh I'm so excited! I'm just going to go get ready. I'll let you do whatever it is you need to do."

Death stood there craning his neck as Jill turned up the hall and walked into the bedroom. As soon as she was gone, Death gave the all clear and the "corpse" opened his eyes. Death went over everything with him. The corpse who's real name was Daryl, then asked.

"You know I'm not sure I wanna do this. It just doesn't seem right. Maybe there's another way you could..."

Death cut him off in mid-sentence by holding up the phony death certificate and pointed at the name as it slowly changed from Fabio to Daryl.

"Alright then. So I assume you want her walking funny in the morning?"

Death agreed.

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After awhile, Jill decided it was time to introduce Death to the family. She brought up the subject over breakfast in her kitchen.

“Darling, we’ve been dating for over two months now, and I think its high time that you meet my parents”.

Death looked up from his plate and stared at her silently.

“I know what you're going to say, that its too soon. But my mother’s birthday is coming up, and I was thinking we could go down to my parents home and spend the weekend with them. What do you think?”

Death agreed.

So the two of them got onto the train and made the six-hour trip down to the farmland where Jill’s parents lived. It was a fairly small community, a quaint little place where everyone knew everyone. Jill sat looking out the window of the train car as they made their way into town. A flood of happy memories came to mind at the sight of her home town.

“Oh it's so good to be back. I have such found memories of this place.”

Upon exiting the train, Jill directed Death to the car rental office across the street from the train station. Jill insisted they rent a car even though a cab would take only fifteen minutes to arrive at her parent’s home.

“This is your first meeting with my parents, you do want to impress them, don't you?” Jill stated in between haggling over the price of the rental car with the attendant. After thirty minutes of back and forth between Jill and two managers, Jill and Death got into the car.

Even though the rental car company had stocked the vehicle with a GPS device, Jill insisted on navigating. This proved to be a woefully poor decision when several trips down one-way roads in the wrong direction led to Death nearly having to harvest Jill due to surprised oncoming drivers. All of this, of course, Jill passive aggressively blamed on Death.

“Now lets try to pick up the pace, darling. We’re already late for dinner, I don’t want to keep mother and father waiting any longer.”

Death ignored the opportunity to point out the obvious and silently drove, waiting for Jill to dole out the next direction.

The pre-dinner banter and introductions was mixed at best, with Death and Jill’s father getting off to a cold start. Until, that is, they stumbled upon and bonded over a discussion of the proper way to gut a sheep. Meanwhile, Jill slipped into the kitchen to speak with her mother.

"Oh Mother!" Jill exclaimed. "I've found him! I've found my future husband! Oh it's only a matter of time before he proposes and oh I'm just so excited you and father are finally able to meet him!"

Jill’s mother looked up from shoveling fistfuls of various animal innards out of an impressively sized turkey carcass onto a platter. Uttered only a half hearted "That’s nice dear" before returning to the business of gutting the main course of its side dish.

"Oh mother, just think, In a few months father could be walking me down the aisle! And then I'll bless us all with a child of my own. A little bundle of joy that father can bounce on his knee and that you can teach how to roast live Cornish game hens, just like you did with me mother!"

“The squawking helps season the meat. ” Jill’s mother replied while stuffing the empty turkey with day old ducklings.

“Oh mother, I just hope things stay this perfect forever!” Jill gushed.

“Oh just give it time my dear. He’ll screw up eventually” Jills mother muttered, as she began sewing the turkey’s gaping, quaking maw shut.

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The train ride back home was chilly and awkward. It was late night, and they were seated in the front of the train. The entire car was empty except for them. The train had just entered the long tunnel before their destination, leaving the cabin pitch-black save for a lone light at the front of the cab. The two sat in biting silence. But alas, It didn't take long for the silence to be broken, with Jill casting the first volley.

"You just had to kill Mrs. Crawford right as my mother was serving dessert, didn't you?"

Death tried to explain that it wasn't his fault that Mrs. Crawford was choking on a piece of food. But Jill interceded.

"My mother cooked that meal! So I assume you're blaming my mother now for killing her, are you?"

Death avoided that obvious trap, and instead countered that he did attempt the Heimlich maneuver on her. To which Jill complained:

"Yes! But did you have to thrust your hands into the cake first? Mother spent all day preparing that for my home coming, and in a second it was ruined. Oh, and the clean up afterwards, I was so embarrassed!"

Death reminded Jill that if he hadn't done that Mrs Crawford would have died instantly upon being touched by his unsheathed hand.

"Well, a lot of good that did. She still died! And on top of everything, you just leaving on the spot like that to cart her spirit off to eternity without so much as even thanking my parents for the meal. Why are men so careless about their manners?"

Death attempted to respond, but Jill cut him off.

"And don't give me that "It's my job" line. You were off the clock. Mrs. Crawford wasn't going to get any deader. You could have helped with the dishes first, or taken out the trash. But no, apparently your work is more important than my happiness! You need to learn to stand up to your boss, darling."

Death rolled his eyes back in silence, a practice he was quickly mastering. After what seemed like an eternity, Jill spoke up again.

"Darling, there's something I need to say. I think I'm pregnant."

Death sprung forward from his chair with a gasp. After a few moments slowly turning his head, his shocked eye sockets met Jill's effervescent gaze.

"I'm late" Jill said.

Death woefully answered, "I know".

"The train began to slow down as it approached the end of the tunnel, light began streaming in through the windows. Death fumbled around in his pocket for a small object, pulled it out, and opened it in front of Jill. Within its black velvet exterior lay a golden watch."

"Oh, Darling my watch!" Jill gasped. "I always regretted casting it away so carelessly that day. You were having it refinished all this time?"

Death nodded then showed her the inscription he had placed on it.

"Oh, its more beautiful than ever! Oh thank you, I cant wait to wear it."

Jill extended her hand to Death in anticipation. As the train finally exited the tunnel, he placed the watch on her wrist. Jill marveled at it, feeling a sense of floating and breathlessness. Death inquired about the time. To which Jill replied:

“Why, it’s a couple of minutes to midnight.” She thought for a moment then added. “Wait, was this the time we first met? Here on this train car?” Death nodded.

“Oh, darling you planned this all, didn’t you? So that’s why you killed Misses Crawford, so we would have to take the late night train! Oh, this is so romantic.”

A sudden euphoria overcame Jill as she fell back into her seat. An overpowering sense of calmness quietly took her.

“Oh my, I guess I’m more tired than I thought. Perhaps I should take a brief nap.” Jill laid her head on Death’s shoulder as Death grasped her hand in his. The train flooded with light. Moments later Jill’s watch stopped, the hands halting at midnight sharp as they pointed to the inscription that read simply, *Time stands still for no one.*