



Truth in Advertising

It wasn't the place I expected to see such a thing, but in hindsight I can't imagine a much better place, either. I had arrived at church just as the choir was voicing the opening notes of the processional hymn that began the service. I took a seat to the left of the center aisle then happened to glance to my right as he walked by. Even that brief glance caused the hair on my arms to rise, and I shivered, quite involuntarily.

He was dressed in black, and he stood out because people aren't terribly prone to dress that way at a church service unless it's a funeral. Everything he was wearing was black, right down to the watchband that slid out from beneath the black cuff of his immaculately-tailored jacket as he bent his left arm slightly while taking his seat in an empty row a few feet ahead of me and to my right. I also couldn't help noticing how starkly the blackness of his wardrobe contrasted with the silver of his hair.

I tried to dismiss it as "unusual," nothing more, but my mind and eyes kept being drawn inexorably to the man in black as the service progressed. Dutifully, I stood and sang along with the choir, as did the stranger. As the service moved forward I tried to focus my concentration on the prayers and the singing, but I found myself stealing glances at him from time to time even though, I told myself, there was nothing about his behavior that seemed out of the ordinary. Indeed, even during the time people were encouraged to greet those standing near them, the stranger politely shook hands with the people around him, all of whom seemed oblivious to his attire and appearance. The stranger was too far away from me to greet directly, and I felt thankful about that because I was somehow not sure that I could have brought myself to shake his hand.

I continued to try mightily to pay attention only to the minister, but my focus kept drifting back to the man in black. I watched as he took notes during the sermon and wondered what he might be writing. I also noticed that from time to time he would look around at the congregation as if he was looking for something or someone. Fortunately I was sitting far enough behind him and just to his left, so his gaze never reached me as I continued to observe him.

Finally, the service drew to a close, upon which the man in black stood up, stretched, moved to the aisle and began walking toward the exit. He made no effort to speak with anyone and seemed interested only in leaving as expeditiously as he had entered. As he passed by me yet again I knew I had to do something, so I stepped into the aisle behind him and began to

follow as he threaded his way through the crowd.

As he left the building I was only a few feet behind him and finally found my voice.

“Excuse me. Sir?” He seemed not to notice and continued several more feet. I tried again a little more insistently, “Excuse me! Sir?”

At this the man in black hesitated and looked back. “Yes?” he said.

“Hi. I’m Steven Wright.” I offered my hand, even though I was hoping that perhaps the stranger would decline to shake it.

“Hello,” he said as he took my hand and shook it. He quickly glanced at his watch, and then he simply looked at me without offering his name in return.

“I, uh, I don’t think I have seen you here before. Is this your first time with us?” I asked, my usually strong baritone voice threatening to crack.

“Yes,” he responded, volunteering nothing further.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know we are glad you’re here. Uh, I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name,” I said, trying to be friendly.

“I didn’t throw it,” he responded with a completely deadpan look about him.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, laughing weakly. But I persisted. “What is your name?”

“Death.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I heard what you said. What was it again?”

“Death.”

“My ears just aren’t what they used to be. It sounded like you said Death.”

“I did.” He just stood there, looking at me, not a trace of emotion of any kind showing on his face. But I knew. I knew he wasn’t fooling. I knew he wasn’t trying to be funny. I knew he was serious.

“OK, well, uh, it was good to meet you.” I started to turn to leave, realizing this had not gone well at all.

“Wait,” said Death.

Suddenly I noticed that people were streaming around us on both sides, seemingly oblivious to the two of us standing there having this bizarre conversation.

“I’m sorry, what?” I responded automatically.

“Please wait,” Death requested, seeming now to be making an effort to be polite.

“Ahhh, uhhh, OK. I do have to get going soon, though.”

“I would like to talk with you.” Again he just stood there, seeming to stare right through me.

To hear someone called Death say he wanted to talk with me didn’t feel like anything I was terribly interested in hearing. My mind raced, searching for ways to extricate myself from this terrifying situation without offending Death. After all, to offend Death didn’t seem like a really good idea to me.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Could we walk together while we talk?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess. I don’t want to go far. I need to get going soon.”

“I understand. This way,” he pointed and began walking.

“I mean you no harm,” Death began as we walked. “You have nothing to fear from me.”

“Sure. But you have to admit introducing yourself as Death does nothing for my confidence about that.”

Death smiled. “Certainly. Perhaps it would help you to know that now is not your time.”

“Yeah, well, I suppose,” I stammered, not sure whether to believe what I was hearing.

“Good.” There was a twinkle in Death’s eye. “Perhaps it would be best if I explained a little about myself?” His voice rose perceptibly, clearly making what he said a question and indicating that he expected an answer.

“Isn’t claiming to be Death a pretty complete explanation?”

“Oh, my, no,” Death said, with a slight chuckle. “There is a little more to the story.

“It’s like this. I wasn’t always Death. As a matter of fact, I was once just a man much like you. I was a fisherman. My, that does bring back memories. I haven’t thought much about that in ... well, quite some time. At any rate, I have, indeed, been Death since then . . . but it’s not all bad, you know?”

“Oh, and just how is it not bad? I mean, you do go around killing people. No offense,” I said, feeling a little bolder after being told by Death that my time had not yet come.

“None taken. It’s a common misconception, really. I don’t actually kill anyone. I’m just here to facilitate the soul leaving the body and continuing on its journey to wherever it is destined to go—kind of a middleman, if you will. I’m just doing my part.”

“So, if you weren’t around, what would happen?”

“You mean, if I wasn’t around would people not die?”

“Well, yeah.”

Death chuckled again. “I’m afraid it isn’t that simple. If I am not around, someone who dies will still die physically, but the soul of the deceased will remain trapped in the dead body. Not much fun, don’t you agree?”

“So, in a sense you are saying that you are really one of the good guys?”

“Well, that may be a bit of an overstatement, but I really am just doing my job.”

“OK, but why did you want to talk to me?” I asked.

“Ahhhhh, yes.” Again there was the twinkle in Death’s eyes. “I have a proposition for you.”

“And that would be?”

“Well, being Death is not a bad assignment, and I have lived a very long time. I even get to be in many places at once. For example, while I am here talking to you I am also in thousands and thousands of places all over the world, doing my job even as we speak. But, as you might imagine, that makes the time I have been at this seem rather, shall we say, lengthy.”

“You’re saying you are bored with being Death?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes . . . and that’s where you come in.”

“You are asking me to help with your boredom?”

“In a sense, yes. You see, every so often an opportunity is afforded to stop being Death. Of course, Death can’t just cease to exist, so someone has to take over the job. I’m wondering if you might be interested in a bit of a career change?”

“Whoa, wait a minute. You’re talking about me becoming Death?”

“Yes. I am offering you the same opportunity that was once offered to me.”

“By the guy who was Death before you?”

“Yes. He had been around quite a while, as well, and he just wanted to move on, so he offered me the job.”

“And you are offering it to me?” I stood there as thoughts raced through my mind. I could live for thousands of years. I wouldn’t really be killing anyone. I would get to experience a lot and have no particular worries, including dying. This was beginning to sound better.

“Yes, the job is yours for the taking.”

“And I can pass it on to someone else?”

“Yes.” Death stood there and, once again, just seemed to be looking through me—or deep into me.

“And how soon do I have to decide?”

“Oh, you have plenty of time,” Death said, glancing at his watch. “You have just over sixty seconds to reach a decision.”

“Sixty seconds?”

“Well, fifty six now.”

“Wait a minute! You want me to make a big decision like this with as little as I know about it and all I have is fifty six seconds to make a decision? Are you crazy?” I was now no longer concerned that it was Death I was talking to.

Glancing at his watch, “Well, forty-five.”

“OK, then . . . I paused, confused . . . well, let me ask this: if you had it to do all over again would you have taken the job?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not allowed to answer any questions about the job in the last sixty seconds.” Again he glanced at the black face of his watch. “And now you have only twenty seven seconds.”

“But I can pass the job on, right?”

Death simply looked at me, expressionless, then again consulted his watch. “Nineteen seconds,” he said.

My mind was racing. My life recently had been going nowhere. There was simply nothing preventing me from taking the job. And, after all, I could pass the job on later and just stop being Death. What did I have to lose?

Again Death glanced at his watch. “Six seconds.”

“OK, OK. Yes I’ll take the job.”

“Excellent, excellent. Just in time, too.”

To my astonishment, Death was suddenly, instantly, dressed in my clothing and it was I who was dressed all in black, right down to the watch with the black wrist band and the black face.

“From this moment on you are Death and I am released from my restrictions about what I can tell you,” he said.

“What do you mean, restrictions?”

“Well, yes, you can pass on the job, but only if someone initiates a conversation with you and only if you can convince them within ten minutes to take the job. Also, you are not allowed to answer questions about the job in the last sixty seconds.”

“That’s a kind of an important thing to have left out, don’t you think?”

“Well, truth in advertising isn’t a requirement of the job. By the way, my name is Elihuh.”

“OK,” I said, “how often does someone initiate . . . Oh, no!”

“Yes, I am afraid so. I was ready to dump the job the day after I got it. Been waiting a long time. The guy before me had it a long time, too. He kind of got lucky when I spotted him at his last case.”

“What last case?”

“It was a carpenter who was crucified just outside of Jerusalem.” Then he turned and walked away.