

GRIM REAPING

CHAPTER I

Gravesides are always associated with death.

I have found this association odd for many, many years. Very few people have actually died at gravesides and there are usually a number of days pass between the collection of a soul and the empty corpse being plopped into the earth to feed the insects.

Let me not get ahead of myself though. It would be wrong to lead you into a false idea that I am a morbid bystander making an observation born out of some quite bizarre pastime of grave watching. No, I am much too busy to simply loiter around the plots of human remains.

You can call me Grim. Grim Fandango Reaper if you would like my full given title, but I am sure you will agree that Grim suffices. Some entities call me Death, but that is simply what I do. Humans believe death just happens but it is not quite as simple as that. It requires precise planning and execution, no pun intended, to run smoothly; although having infinite power over time does prove to be a great advantage. It comes in very handy when attempting to get from one side of the galaxy to the other. All in all though, death is simply a lot of paperwork.

In preparing the document you are reading, I have been advised that much of the detail regarding the tedious side of my occupation have been removed by my editor. Having my work edited and commented upon is something I still need to get used to.

I have also been advised by my agent not to bother with a long, tedious introduction to myself. Why anyone would find such an introduction tedious I do not know. It is true that everyone knows who I am, but there are few who know about me. I am sure many would find my existence an interesting topic, but I have been told I must stick to the contract. I am usually the one handing the contracts out, not abiding by them. I will catch on to the notion in time.

That said, I would still like to let you know exactly what you hold in your hand, or wherever else you may choose to hold it. This book has been created using the contents of my numerous journals, by someone I have been told is very good at reaching his audience. Apparently his demographics are excellent. I find it hard to believe that anyone could have superior demographics to my own; everyone is my audience at one point in their lives.

Yes, the words flowing through your mind are direct from my own skeletal hand, written in the ink of midnight and published at very reasonable rates for a substantial fee. Anyone can be an author it seems; as long as you have a story to tell.

As you can imagine, being Death since the Business of Life was founded by Johnny B God so many millennia ago has bestowed an abundance of tales upon me. The tales are not entirely mine to tell as they flow from the lives of others, but I have no problem bringing

them to the world through these journals. The only problem I do have is what off Earth I am to do with all the money they are offering me.

Anyway, to the beginning, which confusingly for some is also an ending.

Some will scoff that I am predictable to begin this story with a death, and I have strongly been advised against it. I still can't get used to taking these opinions on board. It is somewhat irritating to be frank.

Before I begin this tale of the curious and murderous, I cannot resist the need to set a few ground rules. Dispel some of the ludicrous and rather unrealistic ideas that the living have about me and my existence. There are more beliefs about me than I am probably aware of, but I have uncovered many during my time. They all have the common factor of being concocted by those who take a peculiar and potentially unhealthy interest in my work. Unfortunately they are also nothing more than imaginative figments of primarily human imagination. I am at this point in time unaware of an eternal chamber of hourglasses at my disposal, and likewise I do not have a horse on which to travel, although I may be tempted to check whether expenses would allow it. I quite like the idea of riding a horse to my collections.

The most dominant misconception, and a concern close to the heart of this story, centres on my List. Some believe that I am alerted to death by some kind of sensory perception, but I am only immortal. I still rely on a simple piece of devilish engineering in the form of a foot-long piece of time-script which is now, and always will be, known as The List.

I know what you are thinking. How can there be just one list? That is easy; same list, different names. People die and their names all add to my list. I collect their souls, issue them a visa to Heaven or Hell, and they fall off my list into the life everlasting. Except during the episode with the Time Simians; another story for another day.

It all sounds simple, I know, but whether Immortal, mortal, undead or in transient flux, upsets and mistakes are still made. The only difference between the mistakes of the Immortals compared to those of other origin are that ours can have a significantly more devastating effect on Life and our mistakes can resonate through time for the rest of eternity.

And what is to blame for these mistakes? Frequently it is the human trait of curiosity. I know there is a saying that it killed the cat. I have still to work out which cat, or if indeed it was curiosity that ended it. I must say that I have never come across anyone dying of curiosity, but that is by the by.

Despite being around many species and inter-species throughout time, it always seems to be humans that Immortals are drawn to, and them drawn to us. Appropriately curious, I know. Over time I have gained an infuriating habit of recreating my own versions of many human emotions, as of all the Immortals I am one of a few that does not have natural emotion. The job does not call for it. Forming false feelings helps me try to understand why humans work the way they do. I am still many millennia from having any kind of answer.

I think, in simple terms, that being around humans is like a disease. They infect me with ideas and peculiarities. I am frequently unable to resist becoming embroiled in their affairs.

When I seem to be the subject of their affairs it is even harder to resist the pull. Immortals should never be involved in the mortal world. No good ever comes of it, although without it this writing would not exist.

So read on if you too are a victim of curiosity.

And it may be predictable, but I will begin this story with a death.

CHAPTER II

Despite the irregular nature of graveyard collections, on the day my problems started I found myself in a small graveyard to gather a soul. I arrived a moment or two early, so found time to admire the clean-cut grass and the well kept borders around me. Humans puzzle me at times, allowing their own gardens grow into monstrous jungles while ensuring their corpse gardens remain neat and beautiful.

The only thing marring the tranquil sight was the great heap of fresh earth and the gentle chish chish of someone digging. I had found my collection.

According to the list he was sixty five years old and had already suffered two minor heart attacks. It makes one wonder why he was standing in a graveyard in the heat of summer digging a grave. I suppose some people don't know when to take it easy. Well, not until they end up as another addition to the List then they have little choice in the matter.

I took a gentle stroll over to the side of the hole, arriving in time to hear a wheezing voice say "Buggerit!"

The thing I like about this business is I have little that can really cause me exertion. Take for example the moment I had before me; the recently deceased six feet in the ground already and I standing high above on the lip of the grave. You may think I needed to hop down into the hole, but it was as simple as bending over and hooking the soul up with my scythe.

"Hey," the recently deceased protested. "What's this about? Gerroff. What'cha doing?"

Sometimes the old ones are the worst, full of energy that their aged body would not allow them to release while alive. It reminded me of having a swarm of bees in a matchbox then opening it. Nothing more than a sudden release of chaos.

"I would suggest you calm down a little or you'll –" I paused, thinking of how I could possible end the sentence. "– or you'll...erm...not get your visa."

My voice seemed as weak as the ending, but it somehow had the desired effect. The old spirit stopped thrashing, although it was more in confusion than following an order.

He looked me up and down, squinting occasionally, chewing on something even though his transparent mouth seemed empty.

"You look ill, mate," it said without as much as a hint of irony.

"I think it is, as you would say, my pale complexion," I said, as this is something that many people have commented on over the millennia.

"Pale? You'd think you was dead."

I paused, my dark gaze upon the recently gathered soul, as I waited for the hammer to fall.

With many spirits, death comes to them unexpectedly. What was once flesh and bone suddenly becomes a lot less restrictive, many thoughts are lost with the disconnection of the brain and it is only the memory of life essence that allows spirits to recall the life they have just departed. That is how hauntings are possible, when they are allowed, but I will come back to that later.

As I expected, the penny dropped with a clang, and the gravedigger's spirit did what I thought to be an excellent impersonation of a freshwater trout. Its mouth opened and closed with exquisite accuracy of a fish's movements, and the thrashing of its body as it attempted to detach itself from the tip of my scythe was a joy to behold.

"Is that your party piece?" I enquired out of damned idle curiosity.

"No it bleedin' well ain't," the spectre screeched. "I'm tryin' to get away from you."

"Oh," I said with clear disappointment. "You're one of those."

"I'm not one of anythin'. I'm just me and that's just how I intend to stay, if I could just get off this bleedin' hoo-waaugmph!"

I looked at the vacant space at the end of my scythe then lowered my gaze to the ground and beyond into the oblong pit where the gravedigger's spirit lay sprawled in and around its former vessel.

Below me, the shade raised up from the dirt and looked at the body it was sitting in.

When I say sitting in, I do not mean that it had re-entered the carcass. Once they leave their hosts, spirits manifest as nothing more than configurations of air and mist, held in shape by the departed's homeless life essence. They tend to find it hard to alight on anything without slipping through the surface and sinking inside it.

There are always exceptions to the rule of course. My scythe is one; fashioned of hellfire and stardust by Jimmy DeVil and unveiled at the Dawn of Time, the Business of Life's first major event way back in the day. There is also earth. There are scientific explanations behind how they prevent souls from slipping through the soil and stone into Hell without going through the right procedures, but with my workload it is enough to know that the blueprints of Earth included clear instructions on creating some elaborate chemical in the ground that repels the spirits and keeps them trapped on the surface until business is done.

So, for that reason, the gravedigger's ghost found itself sitting in a hole six feet deep with only one way out.

"I think you need to calm down," I said. "And perhaps you could use a hand?"

The shade of the gravedigger looked up at me with a frown that could have singed my eyebrows, if I had any of course. It turned its attention on its former body, casting an eye

over the corpse whose face pressed against the cold metal of a spade and whose arse stuck unceremoniously skyward.

"I'm dead, ain't I?" it said, turning its attention on me again.

"Well," I said, "Technically you are not. He however is."

"So I'm dead then."

"If it makes it easier, yes."

"So what's goin' to 'appen now then?"

"Well, would you mind letting me get you out of that hole first? I'm getting a crick in my neck."

"Oh, yes," the spirit said. "Erm, sorry 'bout this. It was just a bit of a shock, mate."

I lowered the scythe into the pit and raised the gravedigger's ghost once again. I set it down on the grass by the grave and pulled the list from my robe. I rubbed my finger across the name at the top; Boris Morris.

"It's quite a catchy name," I said without thinking.

"'Ere, mate, I'm in enough of a pickle without you takin' the piss. I've 'ad that me whole life so I don't want the bugger all the way through me death too."

"Sorry," I said, metaphorically biting my lip. "I tend to speak as I find."

"We'll say no more 'bout it," the spirit formerly known as Boris said. "So, now what do I need to do?"

"I just have a few questions to ask you then I will have you on your way."

I quickly scanned the tick boxes that had appeared on the list next to the gravedigger's name. Everything seemed in order.

"Do you have any known unresolved grievances against persons living or dead?" I asked.

"Old buggers like me don't have grievances against anyone but the taxman and the government."

"Is that a yes?"

"Why?" Boris's spectre asked. "What happens then?"

"If you have a grievance then it must be resolved before you get your visa. The same rules apply to kept secrets, long lost lovers, and miscellaneous unfinished business."

"In that case, no. None of 'em."

I put a cross in the box with my fingertip.

"Have you ever practiced Devil Worship?"

Boris raised an eyebrow. "What? With my arthritis? I could just 'bout make it up and down the ladder in that grave there."

I put another cross. A question not on the list formed in my thoughts. Curiosity is the single deadliest of all human traits that I have encountered and picked up on. It can lead to all sorts of problems.

"Why were you digging a grave at your age?" I asked.

"Well, I couldn't not, could I?" Boris replied.

I will admit, I was more than a little confused by that. "I really don't know. That is why I was asking."

"Oh. I didn't think you'd be interested in that kind of thing. I thought you'd be too busy."

"I make time," I said.

"Well I guess you'd need to. So many places to get to quickly."

"Erm...yes...and about why you felt you had to dig the grave?"

"Ah that. Well, there's some jobs you just 'ave to do. I mean, there are some jobs you'd die to...erm..yes, well, you just 'ave to do 'em."

I often wish I could control my need to know these things. It was so much simpler in the beginning when all they had to say was, "Ug." Still I had opened the can now so it was only right to see what was inside.

"I don't quite follow you," I said. "Why did you have to do it?"

The look Boris's spectre gave me sat somewhere between pity and disbelief. I had not failed to notice how quickly Boris had overcome the distress of his demise. The detachment of the brain is very much responsible for such lapses of memory. Life essence has a short memory span when it comes to events after death, and I should say that pre-death memories fade rather quickly too. That is why many hauntings never end; they remember why they want to haunt someone at the start, but a week later they don't remember who they were, who they are haunting or how to pass through the wall and leave. It can be quite tragic.

"You expect me to pass up on this opportunity?" Boris's ghost asked incredulously. "To dig this grave was what me life was leadin' up to. I've dug graves all me life and finally I get to dig the big one. I just didn't expect it would lead to the end of me life!"

I did not know it at the time, but my next question seemed to be waiting to be asked.

"Who's grave is so important?"

Damn curiosity.

CHAPTER III

"Well it's a grave for you," the spectre of Boris said.

"Yu who?" I asked.

"You!"

I found a cloudy finger, with the hint of debris beneath the nail, pointing in my direction.

I have been on the receiving end of any number of threats over the course of my work, but a deceased, arthritis-ridden gravedigger could not be described as that. This was nothing more than what humans refer to as conversational banter.

“Why would I require a grave? My immortality somewhat removes the inconvenience of dying.”

Boris gave a quick shake of his head. “Well, you see, that’s what I told ‘im. ‘Why would Death need a grave?’ I said to ‘im. It’d be like saying they wanted to kill God. ‘E said they ‘ave special ways though, and who am I to argue?”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Now you’re asking something,” Boris said, scratching his forehead.

“I know I’m asking something,” I said, becoming a little perplexed. “That is usually the purpose of a question.”

“Well, to tell the truth, I don’t know.”

During moments such as this I often resolve never again to embroil myself in idle chatter with my collections. That resolve, however, proves no competition for the sense of curiosity I have adopted over the years.

And how many, whether immortal or otherwise, would not find questions on their tongue when someone has informed of their impending demise? Then remember who I am.

“Excuse me for sounding rather confused,” I said, “but are you saying you were told to dig a grave by someone you don’t know?”

“Of course not. I know who asked me, I just don’t know who ‘they’ are.”

“This is not being very helpful.”

“Sorry, mate. I can only tell you what I know.”

“Which is what?” I asked without much hope.

“Nothing.”

“I was afraid of that.”

There are minute details that lead to every decision and action we all make. The small fact that I was not getting any information from Boris’s shade indicated that I needed to approach my questioning from another angle.

“Who told you to dig the grave?” I asked.

“Well, that’s easy. It was me gaffer!”

“Your gaffer?”

“Me boss!” Boris said, becoming rather animated. “The Head Honcho. He who must be obeyed. The man at the top!”

“I think I understand,” I said. “And what is the name of this Boss Honcho Man of yours?”

“Bones.”

I raised a metaphorical eyebrow. “You’re not taking the piss are you? I still haven’t issued your visa yet.”

“No, no. ‘Is name is Bones. Frankie Bones. ‘E’s the one who pays – paid – me me wages. Salt of the earth kinda bloke, ‘e is.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “I think maybe I should have a word with Mr Bones. Where can I find him?”

Boris looked down at the pale ectoplasm of his wrist. "Do you 'ave the time? Me watch isn't working."

"I believe it is quarter to four in the afternoon, Greenwich Mean Time."

"Oh," Boris said, looking even paler than before. "In that case, you'll probably find 'im on your list shortly. When 'e sent me to dig this grave 'e told me to look after things for 'im cos when they came back at four e'd be done for."

The events of the universe are in no way under my control, and more often than not I am simply a bystander in the cataclysmic and the mundane occurrences around me. Living entities die and I collect their released souls. It is work, nothing more. In many ways that only made it easier for me to believe that I stood in the centre of some unbound reality where everything that could prevent me getting a simple answer could, and indeed would, happen.

I once again consulted my list. Bones' name had not yet appeared there but it would be arriving soon. If the ghost of Boris spoke true; his boss would not live to see four o'clock. I needed to halt the world's death count for a short while, or at least my collection of their souls. As with any reputable business, there are always procedures for such instances, we just don't publicise the fact that we occasionally allow the world to cope unaided by the higher beings. It would just make humans think they could run the show on their own.

It is easy to delay my business although it does have some consequences. I have often wondered about training an apprentice to aid me in my work, but ironically I have never found the time to look for one. Instead, I simply take the time I need and cleanup the leftovers when I return to duty. No one notices when it is only once in a while.

"Do I get this visa thing now, mate?" Boris' soul asked.

"Yes, I think everything seems to be in order."

I handed over the small document that is to a soul what an All-Day Pass is to a child in human holiday parks, like the one that has the mouse with the large head. The instant Boris gripped the thin membrane of the visa, his shade was gone.

Alone in the graveyard, I saw Mr Bones' name appear at the foot of the list. At least I knew where to find him now. I always preferred to rely on the certainty of the list when locating the living. As I believe many of you say, the only certainties in life are death and taxes. I can vouch for the first of those, although I have never been fond of book keeping to pass judgement on the latter. Death is simple; the name on the list will always be found at the place and time that Chance or Fate have prepared for them.

It had to be said, neither Carla Chance or Fiona Fortune had been particularly kind when choosing just how Mr Bones would be granted audience with me.

I had little doubt that things were about to get messy.