

Everything (But Death) Dies

He threw down the scythe, not paying attention to the hollow wood and piercing metal that crashed to the linoleum floor. "Goddammit," he yelled at no one in particular.

Barry Yorst heard the cry and quickly woke from his sleep. The twenty-nine year old electrician was stunned to see the black-hooded creature in front of him, and he was even more stunned to see the boney outstretched hand that seemed to reach for him. He decided quickly that he must have been dreaming, so he shut his eyes tightly, the wrinkles in his forehead and eyes overtaking his face. "Please go away, please go away," he repeatedly whispered to himself.

"Sorry, Barry, can't go away," the hooded figure replied to the words that hadn't really been intended for him.

Barry opened his eyes. As long as he was dreaming, which he was sure he was, he figured he might as well go along with it. Besides, there wasn't much else to do in the hospital room. "Why can't you go away?" he inquired.

Reaching for the scythe, the figure replied, "'Cause I've got a job to do. You wouldn't go away when the electricity's only half wired, would ya?"

"Depends on whether or not they paid me for the full job yet," Barry responded with an awkward chuckle. The figure before him wasn't sure if he should chuckle as well. He wasn't even really sure how to chuckle.

"That's funny," he said without chuckling. "You're a funny guy. Too bad your jokes aren't gonna get heard any more."

"What are you talking about? Who are you anyway? Visiting hours are over. Don't make me call the nurse. She's a nasty bitch, and she will kick your ass."

"Who am I? Are you serious? Mr. I-Had-Thousands-of-Volts-of-Electricity-Running-Through-My-Body-Today doesn't know who the figure dressed from head to toe in a hooded black robe holding a scythe in a hospital room is. You're a real bright one, aren't you?"

"I'm bright enough to know not to wear a thick black hooded robe in the middle of summer. What is that thing made out of anyway? Wool?"

"It's a wool-cotton blend actually. And it's very comfortable. But I'm not here to talk about my wardrobe. I'm here to—"

"And what the hell's with the scythe? You here to harvest wheat or some shit like that? I'm not a damn crop. I'm a human being, and you entered the wrong man's hospital room."

"Puh-lease. I've been doing this job for an eternity. Well, it seems like an eternity. The eternity isn't up yet, but you get the idea. Anyway, I've been doing this for a long ass time and I have never made a mistake. It's your time to go, Barry."

Barry hesitated for a moment, tried to wake himself up, and then considered the predicament before his weakened and charred body. "You ever been bribed?" he asked confidently despite having nothing really to offer the thing before him.

"Eh, doesn't work very well. I don't have much use for monetary goods, I can't make love with mortals without killing them—not that they would want to be with me anyway—and you can't really offer me eternal life like Ponce de Leon tried. I already have that. Really, there's nothing you can do. You might as well just say your last prayers and let me take you wherever you're going next. I'm not strictly allowed to say."

"Hmmm. Not really sure if I should pray then. I think I would rather spend my last moments trying to get out of this. Seems the more admirable thing to do. You know, never go down without a fight."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, but let me just tell you something now to save you the trouble: it never works. Most of the ones that fight just end up in hell anyway." He finally grabbed on to the scythe and held it up high above his head as if he were ready to strike down Barry. The image did not frighten Barry in the least.

"Look, Death, this is all well and good, but I am not going with you, so you can just put that dumb farming tool down."

Death lowered the scythe, a dejected look hidden underneath his hood. "It's

not a farming tool, and don't call me Death. My name is Robin."

Barry laughed heartily. "Robin? Robin! Are you fucking kidding me? Death's name is Robin? What a riot."

"Are you laughing at the girliness of the name or at the irony of my name juxtaposing the—"

"Haha. Robin. I can't wait to tell all my friends," Barry continued, paying no notice to Robin's thoughts.

"Um, Barry, you aren't going to get to tell anyone anything. I am going to kill you now."

"So you are a murderer?"

"No, no, that came out wrong. I meant I need to take you now," Robin shook his hooded head side to side shamefully. "I'm not a bad guy. I just have a job to do."

"Well, I don't want to go. If you take me, then you are a kidnapper. Kidnappers are bad people, right?"

Robin brought his boney hand to his invisible face. "I'm not kidnapping you. Think of it this way. If you are born to a family and they keep you, they aren't kidnapping you. It's just what happens. And what's this shit people always say about how it isn't their time? How the hell do they know when their time is? Your time is when I tell you it is."

"Well, aren't you Mr. Know-It-All," Barry said through a painful cough.

"See, see, I can hear it in your cough. You're about to die." Robin pointed a boney finger at Barry, the scythe again slipping from his hand. As he reached to pick it up, he looked around hoping that no one had heard the hollow bang the wooden handle had made.

"Of course I'm about to die. I'm looking at Death...er, I mean Robin."

A nurse came in, and Robin hid himself behind a curtain even though he knew she wouldn't be able to see him anyway. He always hid. His job was a bit embarrassing, especially around the ladies.

"Are you okay, Mr. Yorst?" she asked sweetly.

"Of course I'm okay. Why do you ask?" His cough was suddenly gone, although he could still feel Robin's presence in the room.

"You've been talking loudly for the last few minutes," she said with great concern.

"I've been praying. Just in case I die, I want my soul in good standing." He smiled as he spoke. She returned his smile, blushing slightly, obviously approving of his response.

"Well, let's hope you don't go and die," she said with a wink.

"I don't plan to."

"Good night Mr. Yorst."

"Nurse..."

"Yes..."

"If any black-robed guests come for me, please keep them out," he managed to say with a straight face as he glanced at the curtains out of the corner of his right eye.

"Oh, I will," she said with a smile, clearly amused by what she thought was a clever joke.

She closed the door behind her, and immediately Robin popped back out.

"Boo!" he shouted.

Barry was not frightened. "Get the hell out of my room. I need to sleep now."

"That was so touching, that little flirting between you and that nurse. You know, maybe you'll be able to see her again in twelve years."

"Why twelve years? I can go see her right now if I want."

"No you can't. You can't go anywhere. You don't have the strength, and you'll be dead within the minute. Besides, you'll see her again when she gets hit by that car in twelve years. Just don't tell anyone I told you. I'm not supposed to talk about the future."

"I am not going to be dead in a minute, and all you do is talk about the future. I haven't heard you talk about anything else."

"Well, I can talk about your future. Just not hers."

"Oh." Barry looked sheepish. Robin took advantage, holding the scythe high above his head again.

"Well, this is goodbye. I never get to see you again."

"Wait a minute," Barry called when the scythe was in mid-swing. "I thought you took me with you. I didn't think you actually killed me. You are a murderer."

"It's symbolic," Robin said as he lowered the scythe. "I strike you, and your soul vanishes. It doesn't do any damage to your body. If you tried, you couldn't even touch this."

"May I try?"

"Sure."

Robin held out the scythe. Barry reached out his hand and grabbed the air that seemed to surround the tool. He felt nothing.

"Interesting."

"Yup. Can we get on now? I have many other appointments, and the bosses don't like it when I am late."

"Who do you work for?" Barry asked actually wanting to know rather than merely stalling for time.

"Who do you think?"

"No kidding."

"Yup. They're my bosses."

"Doesn't that ever get ugly?"

"No, they actually get along really well. I'm not supposed to talk about that either."

"Wow. You really have a lot of rules. Sucks to be you." For a moment, Barry actually pitied Robin. He hated to think of so many stupid rules to follow.

"It's not that bad. I don't really have to worry about any expenses. Besides, there aren't many other occupations for me to do in my condition."

"So are you dead?"

"Sort of. I guess. I don't really know. No one has ever asked me that before. I guess I just always assumed I was. But that wouldn't really make sense."

"But you're obviously not alive."

"Of course not. That wouldn't make sense either. What sort of living person would want to do this job?"

"So you volunteered for this job?"

"I guess you could say that. I made a deal with the Big Guys. I wasn't ready to die, so they gave me this job."

"Are you the only one?"

"Of course not. I couldn't collect all of those souls. That would take forever."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Are there any openings?" Barry was intrigued by the possibility. If he had to die, he might as well make the most of it.

"Probably, but I can't for sure say. Unless I wanted to give you my job."

"Would you recommend me to your bosses?"

"I don't see why not. You seem like a pretty respectable guy. You don't whine too much, but I'm not sure you are cut out for all the 'kidnappings' as you call them."

"How do I find out?"

"Well, you can't test drive it. If you want the job, you just take it. If there are any openings."

"Would you give me yours?"

Robin thought hard. "I've been doing it for quite some time. It might be nice to take a break. Then I could actually get some rest."

"It would keep me on Earth, right?"

"Of course."

Barry was seriously contemplating taking the job.

"I'll do it if you want to give it up," he said after a short pause.

"Alright, it's yours. Here's the scythe and the robe."

Robin handed everything over to Barry, revealing his skeletal frame beneath.

"What's going to happen to you?"

"I guess we'll see."

The moment Barry took the robe and scythe, his skin melted away and fixated itself upon Robin's bones. Robin instantly was sent into the bed, in Barry's skin but still holding on to his own identity, save for the name, but he knew he could always change that.

"Hey, what the hell?"

"Oh yeah, I should have mentioned that if you take my job, then I take your place. We have to keep a balance. After all, you weren't dead yet."

"Does that mean I am you and you are me?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, let's switch back."

"I don't want to." Robin sounded like a child.

"Yes. Switch back," Barry whined. "I don't want you to be me."

"Nope."

"Then I will just have to kill you."

"Sorry, you can't. It's against the rules."

"Then I will take your soul, or whatever the hell you called it."

"You can't. It's not my time."

"What the hell do you mean it's not your time? You're me, and it was my time."

"Yeah, but after so much time passes, the deadline expires and you get to live."

"You bastard. You knew all this, didn't you?"

"You're the one that didn't want to die. This was the only way," Robin grinned.

"Go to hell," Barry said spitefully, his boney hand clenched in a tight fist.

"No thanks. Besides, you don't get to make that decision."

Barry glared at the man that had stolen his skin, desperately trying to create a plan to get his body back.

"Hey, you're due somewhere else now, aren't you? You don't want to lose your job on the first day. That would earn you a guaranteed spot in hell for eternity."

Barry raised the scythe high above his head.

"Careful, you don't know what you're doing."

"I don't really care. I just want to be me again."

"Don't you know not to ever make a deal with Death?"

"I thought your name was Robin."

"Of course not. But who would have trusted a guy named Death?"

With that, Death, now named Barry, turned himself over in the hospital bed and went to sleep, leaving Death, who had been named Barry, alone in an unfamiliar dimension.