

A BAD DAY FOR DEATH

-A FABLE.

“Well I think I should get some form of shift allowance.”

Thanatos looked hard at his brother. It had already been a long day and The Messenger of Death was not in the mood for his twin’s moaning.

“After all,” Hypnos continued, “I spend most of my working hours in complete darkness.”

“In that case I should get an allowance for my unpleasant working conditions.” Thanatos replied, smashing his hourglass down on the table. This disturbed a drunken group of giggling dryads over by the bar who promptly stopped their raucous behaviour when they spotted the cowled figure in the corner of the bar.

“All you have to do is make humans sleep. They are usually in nice cosy conditions, mostly at home and in bed. People die everywhere but usually in nasty or unpleasant conditions. You don’t hear me moan though, do you!”

Hypnos blinked, giving one of his dreamy ‘I’m right’ looks at his brother and the subject was closed. The silence was broken by the irritating bleep of Thanatos’s pager.

“Oh well brother, nature calls”, Thanatos said rising portentously from his seat. The general chatter at the bar stopped as the tall, dark shape, scythe in hand, walked towards the door. Although every single being in the bar was an immortal of one sort or another, the members of the Olympus Sports and Social Club, feared him. Death has long talons and each centaur, neriad and satyr knew that at a whim of Zeus their immortality could be taken away. For this reason they all treated old Thanatos with fearful respect, particularly, and usually, when he had been irritated by his younger brother, the Giver of Sleep. Although they felt a slight compassion for the mortal whose time on earth was about to end, they also were relieved that

Thanatos was leaving for the night. With a rush of dank air behind him the cowed figure swept across the floor and out of the door.

“I thought it had been a little dead in here tonight” a slightly inebriated dryad mumbled into her pina colada. Nervous laughter echoed her comment as the barman turned up the music.

Zöe took a very deep breath. She felt the crisp autumnal air saturate her lungs with very life force of London. However, this still failed to clear her head. She was aware that she should not have agreed to that last gin and tonic but Miles was very insistent - he always was. She fumbled for her car keys and watched with dismay as they fell to the ground. That driving home was not a good idea drifted into her brain but then disappeared again into the myriad of thoughts and memories clouding her mind. She staggered across the street, spotting her red Corsa parked up on the pavement. The keys, as if in some sad attempt to avoid the inevitable, refused to find the keyhole. The edge of the key scored a neat little scratch on the metallic paintwork in its efforts to avoid finding accommodation. After three attempts, and purely by chance, the key and the keyhole were joined in an unholy alliance. The car door opened. Zöe’s fate was sealed.

“Oh, not a car crash” Thanatos cursed under his breath. He particularly hated car crashes. They were messy and always unpleasant. After aeons of doing his job he always found himself disturbed by unnecessary waste of life. Car accidents always took people before their planned time. As Hypnos had said to him one day “If the god’s had wanted humans to travel at sixty miles an hour they would have made them look like cheetahs”. For once Thanatos agreed with the Bringer of Sleep. He glanced down at his pager. Through the twilight he could read the name Zöe Freeman. “And so a fate is sealed”, he thought, as he folded his cloak around him and slipped into hyperspace.

Even the engine was trying to stop the inevitable. Either that or Zöe, in her addled state, was having great difficulty in starting her car. At the third attempt the motor roared into life and into the road. She leaned forward and in doing so pressed down hard on the accelerator. The car picked up speed quickly. By the time Zöe had

realised what was happening it was too late; the front of the oncoming juggernaut was only feet in front of her bonnet, and approaching with appalling speed. She had a split second to take in what was about to take place. She closed her eyes and awaited the unknown.

The hyperspace portal closed and Thanatos stepped into reality. Glancing up he heard the screech of tyres and the desperate hiss of air breaks. He had, as usual, arrived spot on time. Little was he to know that this time was the start of a new way, a new order. It was then that time changed everything, forever.

“Hi”, The voice said.

Thanatos turned round. Standing, or more accurately, shimmering, in front of him was a being made of light.

“What is going on, and who are you?”

“Daemon”, came the reply.

Thanatos thought quickly, the word meant something to him, something he had long forgotten. It then hit him with crashing suddenness.

“You are all back again?” The Bringer of Death stuttered. “But I thought that human consciousness had forgotten about you, trapping you for ever inside the mind?”

“But some people now know of our existence again”.

Thanatos was stunned, but at the same time pleased. He disliked his job, considering it to be an unfortunate necessity brought about by mankind forgetting the basics of their own nature. He liked human beings and found it a great tragedy that they had lost their way. He could see a looming redundancy cheque followed by a pleasant retirement.

“How did they re-discover you?”

“Some book called ‘Cheating the Ferryman’ is just about to be published. The young woman you are about to take is the first person to approach death after reading it. She is the editor of the book and works for the publishing house involved. Indeed the reason she is in this unfortunate position is that she has been out celebrating the completion of the project. It’s going to make some people very rich”.

Thanatos looked around, all was quite and literally still.

“Yes, time has almost stopped” the Daemon said.

The lorry and the car were within a few feet of each other. Frozen in anticipatory horror was Zöe, looking out of the car window at an unfeeling and very solid looking radiator. The car and the lorry were actually moving but very, very slowly. Impact was going to be some time yet.

Time itself had dilated.

“You know what is going to happen now?” the shimmering presence asked Thanatos.

“Of course, but it is more than my job’s worth to not try.”

Thanatos moved towards the impending collision.

Back in real time the front of Zöe’s car was within a metre of the front of the lorry. Impact was only fractions of a second away. However within Zöe’s mind time was also doing very strange things. Her impending death had sobered her up quicker than any cure she had ever tried. Her mind was crystal clear, in fact so crystal clear that she could perceive things around her with a clarity that she had never known before. It dawned on her why. Time itself was starting to slow down. It had taken no more than five seconds from her realising that she was about to have a head-one collision to the point she was at. The strange thing was that in her mind the first second had taken exactly that, one second. But the second second had taken twice as

long to pass. Her car had therefore travelled only half the distance it travelled in the previous second. The third second took twice as long as the second second and the car travelled half the distance again. She suddenly found herself perceiving the world in smaller and smaller pieces of time, but to her these pieces were taking the same time to be processed in her brain. Chemicals in her brain were somehow speeding up her metabolic rate to such an extent that time was slowing down exponentially. With the passing of each micro-second she was getting closer and closer to the lorry and her death, but each subsequent microsecond was taking twice as long to pass as the previous one. As her mind tried to understand what was taking place she suddenly realised that she could recall everything, everything that she had done, seen, experienced and read. It was as if for the first time that she was using her full brain. This new found ability allowed her to easily recall, in total detail, exactly what these events reminded her of.

“Of course” she said out loud “Its Zeno’s bisection paradox!”

With her ever-expanding time scales she was able to recall, with frightening clarity, what she had read in “Cheating the Ferryman”. She could see the page in front of her and read it, word by word:

“This is the formulation of the bisection paradox of Zeno:

Put the case of a man who walks one mile in one hour non-stop. Let him now walk only $\frac{1}{2}$ mile (in $\frac{1}{2}$ hour), stopping for a protracted rest of $\frac{1}{2}$ hour. Resuming his walk, he now walks $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (in $\frac{1}{4}$ hour) and again pauses to rest, this time for $\frac{1}{4}$ hour. Next he walks $\frac{1}{8}$ mile (in $\frac{1}{8}$ hour) and pauses to rest for $\frac{1}{8}$ hour, & ad infinitum. Following that schedule of intermittent motion, he may be expected to reach the terminus of his journey having walked (on and off) a distance of one mile at the end of two hours. Here, then, we do, in fact have an infinite succession of *actual* finite intervals, an infinite series *per se*, not merely *per accidens*. This third formulation might have been anticipated from Aristotle’s own words describing Zeno’s bisection paradox: “If you count the first half of what is left, and so on, you would have to count an infinite series of numbers before you get to the end of the journey; which is admitted to be impossible”.

For how can an infinite series, i.e. a series without an end, be understood as ever coming to an end?”¹

“Exactly”, she thought. “I am trapped in an infinite series involving my own internal perception of time”. It then dawned on her.

“My God, I’m never going to hit that truck, never. I am, in my own little world, immortal”.

Thanatos looked back at the Daemon. However quickly he tried to move towards the girl in the car she was always ahead of him.

“What is happening here?” asked the Bringer of Death.

The being of light smiled.

“You and she are both caught in a temporal time flux. She is ahead of you in space and time. In order to reach her you have to get to where she was when you started your pursuit”.

“So?” replied Thanatos, becoming more puzzled by the second.

“Well”, the Daemon replied, “by the time you get to where she was she has moved nearer the impact.

“I do not follow?”

“Hmm, well actually that is exactly what you are doing, following. That is your problem. If it takes three seconds of earth time for you to get to the point where she was when you started to pursue her, she has had that three seconds to move to another point three seconds closer to the impact.”

Understanding flickered across the usually impassive visage of the Bringer of Death.

“So however fast I chase her she will always have moved on by the time I reach where she was”.

“Exactly. Both you and she are existing in your own time perceptions and are both caught in a real life, or is it death in your case, Zeno paradox.

“But if I never catch her, she will never die!”

“Right again. Now that we are back protecting our Eidolons you have become redundant. Death has ceased to be.”

“What is an Eidolon?” Thanatos asked, already visualising his happy retirement.

“I suggest you read ‘Cheating the Ferryman’ my friend. That explains it all. But I now have work to do. Zöe has to move onto her next stage and she cannot do that without me”.

With those remarks the Daemon’s diffuse haze shrunk to a concentrated point of light, moved towards the car and in a twinkling disappeared into Zöe’s head.

“Hi”. Said a voice to the side of Zöe’s right ear. Startled she looked around the car. It was still moving towards the lorry but there was no evidence of anybody else in the car.

“Who are you, and where are you”. She asked.

“I am within you and part of you”. The voice said. “I am here to guide you through the next phase”.

Zöe felt her mind reeling. This was all simply too much. And then in a flash she recalled the book.

“My God”, she said, “Peake was right, you are my Daemon aren’t you?”

“Call me your guardian angel or spirit guide if you like,” the Daemon said, “I have much to show you but all the time in the universe to do so”.

As well as the whole of the “Ferryman” book Zöe found other memories flooding into her mind. Her past life contracted into a permanent present. All the events of her life were with her in one timeless memory.

“Are you ready to go back?” the Daemon asked.

“I cannot wait” she replied.

She felt the pull of the midwife’s hands. The light was bright and the exciting chatter of the maternity theatre was a cacophony of new sensory experiences. As the nurse cut through her umbilical cord a last few fleeting memories fired within her newly formed neuron networks.

“I remember it all now, at the start of “Cheating the Ferryman” was a really weird short story. What was the name of the girl who didn’t die...”

“ Zöe. What a beautiful name”, said the nurse as she handed the newly born to its mother. “It is quite unusual, what does it mean?”

The exhausted mother enveloped the baby girl into her arms.

“It means ‘life’, it is the Greek word for life”.

Thanatos watched from afar. Wiping a tear from his eye he looked down at his celestial P45.

“It’s going to be a good retirement,” he thought.

¹ Bernardete J A

“Infinity” page 9.

(Oxford University Press) (1964)