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His new F&SF story (his first in more than a decade) doesn't deal with taxes. It's about the other certain thing in life. There might be only those two certainties, but our staff is pretty confident you're going to enjoy this tale.

Bronsky's Dates with Death

By Peter David

I.

T

HE FIRST THING YOU NEED to understand about Bronsky is that he was a talker, which is probably why he kept talking about death.

The second thing you need to understand is that he couldn't help himself. But we'll go back to the first thing first.

There's nothing wrong with being a talker. In Bronsky's case, his tendency to talk and talk and talk had served him well in a formidable career as a salesman. In his life, Bronsky had bounded from one company to the next to the next, and at various times it was women's clothing, women's underwear, cosmetics, medical supplies, plumbing supplies, office supplies, books, auto parts, body parts (artificial), body parts (genuine; don't ask), and so on and so on. There was not a part of the country that Bronsky had not flown over or walked upon or driven across or ridden by bus or by rail.

Bronsky's salesmanship was so comprehensive that he was able to

sell himself as still being a salesman even as his years crept upward along with the mileage, both geographical and physical. Eventually the years caught up with him, and the companies told him as politely as they could that it was time to hang it up, and not even Bronsky's famed gift could talk the bosses out of it. So he gracefully, if noisily, eased himself into retirement.

But he didn't stop talking.

He talked about everything and anything that was on his mind. And when he did, he spoke with absolute honesty and candor. That is doubtless what contributed to his superb salesmanship. People typically don't trust salesmen because they figure that salesmen will say whatever is necessary to move the product, whether they believe it or not. Bronsky was psychologically incapable of that. He sold things because he believed in them, and because he believed in them, they sold. There's something about the truth that is irresistible. The look in the eye, the tone in the voice. It's unmistakable; it's captivating. George Burns once said that ninety percent of acting is sincerity, and once you could fake that, you had it made. Bronsky didn't have to fake it. He told the truth. He had to.

The reason for that, so the family said, lay during the time when he fought in the war (which one? Pick one. There's always one). He took a bullet to the head and the doctors removed it (the bullet, not the head), and it was pretty much touch and go for a while. But he recovered, and at first there didn't seem to be any brain damage to young Bronsky. (He was always addressed by his surname. He claimed to have been called Bronsky since he was six months old. He had a first name, but it had atrophied from lack of use.)

But then Bronsky slowly began to discover that whatever part of a person's brain it is that screens out the things he shouldn't be talking about...wasn't there anymore. He talked with relentless earnestness about all the things you shouldn't talk about. Politics, religion, whether that dress makes you look too fat, anything and everything, nothing was off-limits for Bronsky, especially if someone asked him. He was incapable of dissembling. This was something of a trial for his young wife, who was just so happy to have him back alive that she resolved to live with it and learned to avoid certain questions or, if at all possible, change the subject

to something less inflammatory. She salvaged more than one dinner party that way.

Time passed, and Bronsky didn't change, aside from getting older, which his wife was considerate enough to do as well. And as he reached the advanced point in his life where his dates with death commenced, it seemed — at least to his wife and daughter and to his friends, as few as there were — that the thing he talked about the most was his impending demise.

Bronsky wasn't actually dying, *per se*. He had a lot of the things that could lead him *to* die. He had type 2 diabetes. He had high blood pressure. He had an extra thirty or so pounds that he was carrying around his gut, the type that didn't go away no matter how much you exercised and ate right, which would have been a factor had Bronsky been eating right and exercising, except he did neither, so, you know, not so much. He had arthritis in the right knee and hip which made it hard for him to sleep and even harder to get out of bed in the morning. He took so many different types of colored pills in the morning that it was like having a bag of M&Ms for breakfast.

But actually *dying*? The kind of thing where the doctor looks at you gravely, shakes his head, and tells you that you have six months to get your affairs in order? No. Not as such, no.

That didn't stop Bronsky from talking about it. Endlessly. Incessantly. Without cess did Bronsky talk about it.

"You're not dying, Bronsky," his wife said. (Yes, she called him Bronsky, too. Only one person in the world didn't call him Bronsky.) "Stop talking about it. You're upsetting yourself."

"You're not dying, Dad," his daughter said (she's the one person, obviously). "Stop talking about it. You're upsetting me."

His daughter, Penny — grown-up, smart, an account executive for some company he couldn't remember, but it didn't make him any less proud — was the light of his life. He tried to explain: "I'm not talking about dying. I never say 'dying.'"

"You've been getting all your affairs in order, consolidating bank accounts, making sure everything is paid off. I call you, I ask how you are, you say, 'I'm winding down.' You say, 'I'm not going to be here much longer.' What are you talking about, if not dying?"

"That's how you always talk when you're planning to go on a trip," Bronsky said.

"What trip? Mom didn't say anything about a trip."

"Well...." Bronsky shifted uncomfortably in his chair, the phone pressed against his ear. Penny lived in Minnesota. He hated that she lived in Minnesota. He wished like hell she was with him. "It's...kind of a one way trip, without her — "

"Dad!"

"Look, honey, I'm just not afraid of death, that's all," Bronsky said. "I've seen a lot, I've done a lot. I have no regrets. It'll be fine. Death is fine."

There was a pitiful pause over the phone, and then, with a little tremble in her voice, his daughter said, "Don't you love me, Daddy?"

"Certainly I do!" Outrage shook his body. "How can you think otherwise?"

"Because I don't want to think about being without you, and Mom doesn't either. Are you that anxious to leave us?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Well, we don't want you to leave us, and we don't want to think about it happening, so stop talking about it and acting like it's no big deal."

Except, to Bronsky, it wasn't. Obviously, though, that wasn't the case for his daughter or his wife. So, to appease them both, he promised he'd stop talking about it. And then he said to his daughter, his Penny: "By the way...can I interest you in a time-share?"

She laughed. She always laughed, because it was a family joke, left over from when Bronsky had a job selling time-shares and he'd practice on Penny, who was six years old at the time. She'd looked at him blankly and then said, "Maybe later," because she didn't know what the hell he was talking about and wanted to get back to important things, like her stuffed toys that she was busy arranging into a zoo. It had become a running gag, and it was how he signed off most of their conversations. "Maybe later," she would say in the same patient tone she always used, and then remind him one more time not to talk so blithely about death. He would promise one more time.

And he would mean it.

But within a day or so, he'd go right back to talking about it, and he

and his wife and/or daughter would tolerate it until they couldn't and they'd have the exact same discussion or some variation thereof.

And so it went. And it didn't bother Bronsky because he knew that time was on his side and it would be settled sooner or later by death. Probably sooner.

II.

BRONSKY'S FIRST DATE with Death began one autumn morning when he discovered the note. A mouse was standing on his desk when he came into his study, upright on its little feet, holding the note in its mouth, standing so perfectly still that at first Bronsky thought it was some sort of tiny porcelain statue. When he noticed it was breathing, he started to reach for his shoe to hit the thing. Before he could do so, the mouse put the note down on his desk, bounded to the open window and out. Bronsky, who didn't remember leaving the window open, slammed it firmly and then picked up the paper. He was almost about to throw it out, assuming it to be some random scrap the creature had picked up somewhere, but then he noticed that his name was on it. As you know, your name tends to pop out at you if you hear it said in passing or it's written down somewhere, and so it was here. The note read quite simply:

"BRONSKY: We have a date today. The park. The bench by the playground. 11:37 precisely." And it was signed *"Death."*

Curiously, Bronsky never once thought it might be a joke of some sort. Instead all he said was, "Morning or evening?"

The letters "AM" were suddenly next to the 11:37 where they hadn't been before.

"Uh-kay," said Bronsky, which seemed the reasonable thing to say under the circumstance.

His wife had gone out shopping, which meant the car wasn't an option, but the park wasn't all that far a walk, despite the pain in Bronsky's knee and hip. He was a proud man, was Bronsky, and didn't use a cane. He preferred to limp. He felt it made him look more willing to bear up under the eternal series of miseries that life tended to toss at you. So limp to the park he did. It was certainly a decent enough day for it.

There was one bench near the playground, where children were actively bounding around in various play structures. They were all plastic, and the ground was covered with some sort of rubbery material to cushion the impact from a falling child.

A gray cat with haunting yellow eyes hopped up onto the bench and looked at Bronsky quizzically as Bronsky *harrumphed* at the playground. "They coddle children nowadays," he said to the cat. "When I was a kid, the playground had this big log structure made of rotting wood. The ground was blacktop. We got splinters from what we crawled on, and if we fell off, we cracked our heads open good. You know what it taught us to do? Watch where we crawled and not fall off. Anyone who couldn't learn that, *pbthh*," he blew a raspberry. "Better off with them taken out of the gene pool when they're children, 'cause they're not going to get any smarter. Instead now the dumb ones survive and grow up to make even more stupid ones, and that's why the government is the way it is."

"What way is that?" said the cat.

"Stupid," said Bronsky, before it dawned on him that the cat had spoken.

The cat was grooming itself.

"Death?" said Bronsky.

Death licked its genitals and then nodded. "Yes."

"This isn't exactly how I pictured you."

"Let me guess: Cloak? Skeletal face? Black wings? A scythe?" said the cat. "I figured this form is going to make it easier for you to understand."

Bronsky stared at Death. "Except I'm not sure I do understand. Is it my time?"

"Yes," said Death.

Bronsky had wondered whether all his talk about accepting death had been some sort of defense mechanism. That when the time actually did come, he would cry and beg and plead for one more month, one more day, one more minute of life. When he opened his mouth to respond, he truly wasn't sure what was going to come out.

"Uh-kay," said Bronsky, which for some odd reason he found comforting. It was nice to know he had the consistency of his convictions. "So...are we doing it right here? Because that might upset the children. Maybe — "

"Shut up. We're not doing it here," said Death. "We're not doing it at all."

Bronsky was now completely lost. "I don't understand. You just said — "

"I'm not taking you because you keep waiting for me to take you."

"That does not clarify matters to the degree that you might have hoped," said Bronsky.

People were walking past and not giving Bronsky or the cat the slightest glance. The fact that they weren't paying attention to Bronsky wasn't particularly strange. They probably just assumed he was speaking on a Bluetooth in his ear. Nobody was glancing at the cat either, though, which led Bronsky to believe that he was the only one who was hearing the cat speak.

"I don't do well with expectations," said Death. He licked his paws delicately for a bit. "It is my nature to be contrary. Why else would good, sinless people die before they've experienced life, while evil people with tons of bad habits live to a ripe old age?"

"The Rum Tum Tugger is a terrible bore: When you let him in, then he wants to be out; He's always on the wrong side of every door."

Death stopped licking himself and looked up at Bronsky with interest. "You know your T. S. Eliot."

"I read," said Bronsky with a shrug. "Sitting around waiting for you, there isn't all that much else to occupy me."

"There you go again."

"I'm sorry," said Bronsky, genuinely apologetic. "Seriously? You can't take someone if they keep talking about accepting death?"

"Not can't. Won't. As I said," and Death's tail twitched, "it's my nature."

"Why not just take me in my sleep?"

"Because your thoughts are still present when you sleep. Where do you think dreams come from? You carry your attitudes with you while you slumber."

"People die in comas," Bronsky pointed out. "All the time."

"I know that. I invented comas. When you've slipped into a coma and you're there long enough, eventually you stop being you. That's when I step in."

"What about suicides? They want you. They *embrace* you."

"That's not me," said Death, and his voice filled with disgust. His body pulsed, his neck stretched, and he coughed up a hairball onto the bench. Where it struck, some paint sizzled and then chipped away. "That's a different Death. You wouldn't want to meet *him*; trust me. He takes you places you wouldn't want to go."

"Well...uh-kay, then," said Bronsky. "So...what do you want from me?"

"Just stop talking about me and saying you're ready and winding down and all of that. It's putting me off and causing me to run behind schedule. That would be bad for everyone."

"Bad as in the different Death bad?"

"Not that bad. But pretty bad."

Death glanced upward at a bird, a robin, that was twittering in its nest. Death licked its chops. The robin suddenly went stone stiff and toppled from its nest. Death caught it neatly in his jaws, hopped off the bench, and strolled away from Bronsky. A growling dog approached until Death glanced at it, and then the dog turned tail and ran.

"Uh-kay," said Bronsky. He swore to himself that he would heed Death's command and stop talking about him. If nothing else, his wife and daughter would be grateful. Not a word would he say. Nothing.

III.

MRS. BRONSKY STARED DOWN the dinner table at him. "You had a date with Death?"

Bronsky hadn't intended to tell her. It had just slipped out somewhere between the salad and the meat loaf. He had tried to keep it to himself, he really had, but as mentioned earlier, he just wasn't terribly good at not talking about things.

"Yes," said Bronsky.

"And what does that mean, exactly? You went to a candlelit dinner? A show? Did you have sex with Death?" She didn't sound upset, which actually disturbed Bronsky a bit. Instead she just sounded curious.

"Maybe 'date' is the wrong word. It was more like a meeting." He then, as quickly as he could, told his wife everything that had transpired

that morning. Even as he did, he mentally scolded himself because this was exactly what he wasn't supposed to be doing, talking about the whole thing. But he couldn't help himself. He was never able to help himself. The old salesmanship instincts kicked in and he had to try and sell her on the idea that everything he was saying was one hundred percent genuine.

When he finally lapsed into silence, she studied him for a long moment. He had no idea what he was expecting her to say. Finally she did speak, and what she said surprised him greatly:

"Where's the note?"

"Note?" he said, and then understood. "Oh! The note! The one from —"

"Death."

"Right." He reached into his pocket where he had shoved the note. His hand came up empty. The note wasn't there. Bronsky attempted a smile that he knew must have looked incredibly weak. "Uhm...."

"It's gone, right?" She didn't sound the least bit surprised.

"Yeah."

She folded her hands in front of her. "You hate my meat loaf, don't you."

"What? No!"

"If you didn't want to eat it, you could have just said so."

"It has nothing to do with your meat loaf!" said Bronsky with such intensity that he slammed his fist on the table. The jolt was so violent that it upended his plate and the meat loaf, along with the green beans, clattered to the floor. He stared down at the mess, and then back to his wife.

Without a word, she went into the kitchen, came back with a dust pan and brush, and cleaned up the mess. He said nothing the entire time until finally she returned to her chair, sat down once more in a manner resembling a queen sitting on a throne, and she said, "You need to talk to someone, because this is getting out of hand. You have an unhealthy obsession with death."

"I don't have an obsession with it! It is what it is!"

"You keep talking about dying."

"That's because I'm too old to talk about living."

"You need to stop talking about it."

Bronsky wasn't entirely sure he understood. "You want me to talk to someone about it...so that I can stop talking about it?"

"Exactly."

"That makes no sense to me."

"It does to me and that's what matters."

"Uh-kay," said Bronsky.

So she made an appointment for him with a psychiatrist. Bronsky didn't know how she happened to pick this particular one, but she seemed quite fixed on the notion that he was definitely the ideal person to sit down with Bronsky and cure him of this annoying acceptance of death. So off Bronsky went, his wife driving the car and him sitting in the passenger seat with his hands neatly folded in his lap as if he were a recalcitrant child being shepherded to the principal's office.

She brought him to a nondescript office building in an area of town that he hadn't been to before and would have been perfectly happy never to go to again. An elevator brought them up to the eighth floor and she led him into a tidy, if sterile, outer office where a tidy, if sterile, woman in a blue dress informed him that the doctor would be right with them. Bronsky was a bit concerned because the woman in the blue dress appeared to be suffused with a certain radiance. The receptionist was, in fact, transcendent. But his wife wasn't giving her a second look, instead burying her nose in a magazine with a cover date from six months previously. So Bronsky kept stealing sidelong glances at the receptionist but otherwise tried to focus on just about anything else in the room.

The glowing woman finally told him that it was his turn to go in. Bronsky found this a little odd, because no one had emerged. If it was his turn to go in, shouldn't someone else have gone out? He said as much to his wife, but she just blew air impatiently between her teeth, so he simply got up and headed for the door. His wife followed directly in his heels, but the woman behind the desk said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. It's not your time yet."

This struck Bronsky as rather curious phrasing, but his wife sat down with such obedience that she could have been trotted out at a pet show as an example to all the others. Bronsky then walked into the adjoining room, shutting the door behind him.

A man was sitting behind a desk and he stood when Bronsky walked

in. There were two chairs set up facing each other. No couch. Bronsky had thought there would be a couch.

"I thought there would be a couch," said Bronsky. He tilted his head and studied the man, whom he took to be the doctor. The doctor was in his sixties, rail thin, wisps of brown and gray hair, an overlarge nose whereupon thick black glasses were perched. He looked like Woody Allen. "You look like Woody Allen, you know that?"

"You're killing me, Bronsky. You're absolutely killing me," said the doctor. He didn't move toward either of the chairs, nor did he indicate that Bronsky should sit. He just stood there, looking forlorn.

Bronsky stared at him. "Death?"

"Of course Death. Who else but Death? I look like Woody Allen because under these circumstances, that's how you see me. It's very subjective."

Bronsky realized he should have been surprised. Instead he was not; somehow it all seemed to make perfect sense. "Oh, hey: Do you know what Woody Allen said about death?"

"He's said a lot of things. He's almost as bad as you in that respect. What did he say in particular?"

"He said," and Bronsky grinned at the recollection, "'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying.'"

Death did not so much as crack a smile. "He's a riot," said Death flatly.

"So what are you doing here?" said Bronsky as if greeting an old friend.

"What am I doing here?" said Death, thumping himself on the chest. "What are *you* doing here? What are *we* doing here? I told you. I *told* you not to talk about me. What part of 'don't talk about death' did you not get?"

"I got it all. But people keep asking me how I am, or what I'm up to, or how things are going with me. And I have to tell them. I can't help it. And frankly," Bronsky said with growing impatience, "I don't get any of this. I mean, you said you were like a cat. Wrong side of every door and like that. But you're not a cat now. So if you're going to take me, then just take me. Right now." He thought of his wife in the outside office and how she'd react upon discovering that he'd just keeled over right then and there. It should have daunted him. It didn't.

Death was very aware of this. "You're not at all afraid."

Bronsky shrugged. "No. I know maybe I should be, but I'm not. I'm thinking maybe that part of my brain got shot off, too, and I'm only just now finding out about it. It's not like I don't care whether I live or die, but, you know...life. Nobody gets out alive. Right?"

"Right," said Death, looking more uncomfortable with every passing moment.

"Okay then, so...just...make it quick so it doesn't hurt. I got a low pain threshold."

He met Death's gaze evenly, his head held high.

"Stop watching me," said Death.

"What?"

"You're watching me. Stop it. You're making me nervous."

"I'm making *you* nervous? You're Death! What do you have to be nervous about?"

"Just stop looking."

"Jeez," said Bronsky, but he obediently turned around. He couldn't fathom what Death's problem was. It wasn't as if he didn't have job security. People had to die, after all.

He closed his eyes and waited. "Is my life going to flash before my eyes?" he said. "I always wondered about that. And is it just the memorable parts, or is it more or less everything? Or would you know that? Can you actually read people's minds when they — "

"Shut up!"

"Okay, fine," said Bronsky, and he made a "zipper lip" gesture. Then he waited. And waited. The clock on the wall seemed stuck at 11:37. He glanced at his own watch. It had stopped moving as well.

"Why'd my watch stop moving?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Death cried out. Bronsky could hear the crunch of leather and knew that Death had sunk into one of the seats. "Can't you stop talking for five minutes?"

"Well," said Bronsky reasonably, turning around, "I'll have eternity to stop talking, right? So what's wrong with using my last few moments to make myself heard? Am I really so out of line?"

Surprisingly, Death chuckled ruefully. "No. No, you're not. And it's not you. It's me."

"You wanna talk about it?" said Bronsky, sitting in the opposite chair.

Death shrugged. A housefly directly overhead stopped buzzing, fell, and bounced off the desk. Death ignored it. "You'll think it's stupid."

"I'm sure I won't."

Death didn't continue immediately; Bronsky waited patiently.

"It's not just the cat thing. That's not it at all, really. It's just...I get nervous if somebody's expecting it. Expecting me to, you know...do my thing. I stand there and nothing happens."

"You mean it's like, whattaya call it, electoral malfunction?"

"That's erectile dys — *no!* It's not like that at all," Death said defensively, his back stiffening. "It's just...it's hard to describe. It's like...."

"Nervous bladder?"

"What *is* it with you, Bronsky, that you think everything has to do with that part of the body? Okay, look," and suddenly he was holding two small horseshoe-shaped magnets. "Look. See how they resist each other?" He tried to push them together but they fought him. "It's because they're alike. Positive to positive, negative to negative...they resist each other. When they say 'opposites attract,' they're talking about more than polarity. They're talking about the metaphysical setup of the universe. I can do my job because people either aren't thinking about me or actively don't want me. The more you think about me, the more you talk about me, the more you drive me away."

"You're saying I could wind up living forever just because I'm talking about you?"

"No," said Death with concern on his face. "That's not going to be allowed to happen. I mean, eventually you'd slip into a coma and then I'd take you, but 'eventually' won't cut it here. These things run on a schedule. The longer you're around, the more you set the schedule out of whack, and that isn't allowed to happen. You're a nice guy, Bronsky. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"You have a worst enemy?"

Death didn't respond at first, and when he did, it wasn't to answer the question. "Stop talking about Death, Bronsky. Stop telling everyone you're ready to go. If someone says, 'How do you feel?' just say, 'I feel fine."

Couldn't be better.' Don't say, 'I'm winding down, getting ready to die.' Do this for me. Do this for yourself. Okay?"

"I'll try," said Bronsky, "but I'll probably fail."

IV.

BRONSKY WAS as good as his word. He tried. In short order, he failed. Spectacularly.

It lasted as long as it took for his wife to go down with him to the car. She turned on the ignition and said, "So how did it go with the doctor?"

With absolutely no hesitation, Bronsky told her.

She didn't drive so much as an inch. She just sat there in the parking garage with the engine running and listened. When Bronsky was done talking, she turned off the ignition, said, "Wait here," and exited the car.

She was gone for a good long time. So long that Bronsky was starting to worry about her before she finally returned with an expression so grim that it would have made the Grim Reaper nervous. She sat down in the car once more but did not turn on the engine.

"He does not look like Woody Allen," she said with no preamble. "He looks nothing like Woody Allen."

"Who does he look like?" Bronsky said with interest.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that he said he sat there and talked to you and talked to you but you said absolutely nothing."

"What's he going to do? Tell you the truth?"

She had been looking straight ahead; now she fixed her gaze upon him. "Yes. Because he has no reason to lie."

"But you know I never lie."

"I know," and now there was unutterable sadness in her voice. "I know."

Then she said nothing else, which was disturbing to Bronsky because as voluble as he was, his wife was no slouch in that regard and was rarely at a loss for words. In this case, though, that seemed to be exactly what she was. She looked like she wanted to say a great many things and could not bring herself to utter any of them. And so she remained silent and

thoughtful, and Bronsky coaxed her and cajoled her the entire way home but she said nothing more.

She dropped Bronsky off at home and said firmly, "Stay here. Do not go anywhere until I get back."

"Where are you going?"

She didn't reply. Instead she pulled out and left Bronsky standing at the front door. He was glad he had his house keys in his pocket.

His wife did not come back that evening. This worried him a bit, but not a lot. He reasoned that she just needed some time to herself. He even wondered if this would somehow satisfy Death's preference that he not discuss life's end. Perhaps his wife would return and find him slumped over in his chair, thus solving everyone's problems.

"That *would* solve everyone's problems," said Bronsky. "That would be fine with me. Let death come and take me right now. I'm ready. It would mean I don't have to stand up again, with my hip hurting and my back is bothering me now. I have all my affairs in order; it wouldn't be that big a deal. And I know, I know, that sounds self-pitying, but it's not really meant to be. I just have a reasonable expectation that the world will go on fine without me, since it did fine before I got here. Which makes me think that — "

He went on like that for hours, talking to himself, until his throat got sore and he tilted his head back to rest for a bit, and then he fell asleep.

Death swung by and looked in on him, but Bronsky was muttering in his sleep about dying, shmying, so what, big deal, and Death rolled his white, empty eyes and left again.

When Bronsky awoke, vaguely recalling having dreamt of Ping-Pong balls staring at him, his stomach informed him that he was hungry. He groaned as he hoisted himself from his chair, meandered into the kitchen, and was just in the process of finishing up cornflakes in milk when he heard the car pull up into the driveway. His instinct was to run out there, to ask a hundred questions about where his wife had vanished to, but he decided to play it cool instead. He calmly finished his cereal, and then neatly placed the bowl in the sink after washing it out. Then, as if he had all the time in the world, he strolled in leisurely fashion into the living room.

Penny was standing there, her cherubic face swathed in curls. She was

holding a small overnight bag, which she set down. Bronsky's wife was busy hanging up her coat.

"Hi, Dad," said Penny.

He breathed out a sigh of relief; he could not recall the last time he had been quite so happy to see someone. In a flash, he was years younger, and she was an infant, no bigger than his forearm. He was lying on his back in bed one lazy morning, drifting in and out of sleep, his wife downstairs making pancakes, the smell wafting up the stairs. And Penny was sound asleep on his chest, the top of her head just under his chin, her feet not quite reaching to his navel. She rose and sank in perfect tandem with his breathing, and it was as if she had no weight at all. They lay heart-to-heart. And in her slumber, the infant started to half-turn, and even though she didn't have the upper body strength to flip over, it was enough to send her sliding to the side. Uninterrupted, she would have tumbled right off him, possibly off the bed and onto the floor. And Bronsky, who was ninety percent asleep, instantly became one hundred percent awake, and he brought up his arm and caught her before she'd slid much more than an inch. He slid her back into place. Her eyes remained closed and she slept on, blissfully unaware of the near calamity. "I'll always catch you," he whispered.

He wished it was always that easy to keep her safe.

Bronsky moved from one side of the living room to another so quickly that it seemed as if he'd just teleported without bothering with the steps in between, and he enfolded her into his arms. He felt her heart beating against his. It had slowed considerably from the hummingbird-like speed it had possessed back when she was lying on his chest, but it was strong and steady and, hopefully, would continue unabated for a good long time to come.

"What are you doing here? I know! Time-shares. You finally — "

"Mom asked me to come, and I had some time off coming, so...." She shrugged.

He didn't understand. He would have if he'd given it any thought, but he was so happy to see her that thinking about it just went right out of his head.

Penny gave her mother a significant look, which her mother exchanged with equal significance, both of which went right past Bronsky.

"Let's go somewhere and talk, Daddy," and she squeezed his hand once.

"Oh," said her mother, "while you're out, could you pick up a couple of things at the deli?"

"Sure, Mom," said Penny, and her mother handed her a list with a few scribbled items on it. Penny took it and tucked it into the pocket of her jacket.

And Bronsky and his daughter went out for a walk, from which one of them would not come back.

V.

“A ND IT WAS RIGHT THERE, right where you were sitting. That's where the cat was," said Bronsky.

Penny, who was seated on the park bench, looked down as if the animal were under her. "The cat that was Death," she said.

"Right," said Bronsky, nodding.

Bronsky had already told her the entire story. Now they were simply going back over the details because, Penny had said, she wanted to make sure she understood all of it. Bronsky was so pleased that what he was saying wasn't being dismissed out of hand that he was happy to go over it as many times as she asked. Why not? His little girl was there, and he drank in the presence of her as if it were a narcotic.

"And he was a black cat with yellow eyes. And when he was the psychiatrist he looked like Woody Allen," she said.

"To me," said Bronsky. "To you he might have looked like some younger actor who's kind of a nebbish. I don't know their names. I don't keep track of the new crop of actors. You ask me, there hasn't been a good movie made since Brando died. *Streetcar Named Desire*. *The Godfather*. Those were movies."

"Daddy...," began Penny, something different in her voice.

"Your mother asked you to come." He had figured it out by that point. "She thinks I'm lying."

"No. We know you don't lie. That's what scares her. And me. We know you believe every single word you're telling us." She placed a hand on his. "Daddy...Mom's afraid that it's starting."

"What's starting?" He stared at her blankly.

"It. You know. When...you get older...." Penny cleared her throat.

"And your mind starts to go...."

He stared at her, appalled. "You think I'm going senile?"

"Mom is afraid — "

"Is that what you think?"

"Dad, it's not about what I think. It's about Mom and what she — "

"I don't care what she thinks!" Bronsky said, his voice rising. He was on his feet now.

Penny stood as well, and there was fear in her voice, but also iron determination. "Well, you'd better, Dad! Because she's the one who's here, and she's the one who has to plan for it, and she can't go through it again! You know what I'm talking about."

Bronsky did indeed know. His wife's mother had passed away, leaving behind her only daughter — Bronsky's eventual wife — to be the primary caretaker for her father. Her father's mind had started to go in very short order, and she had described it like being in a rowboat going over a waterfall very, very slowly, watching disaster unfolding before her and only being able to hold on without being able to affect the outcome. Little more than a teenager at the time, she had watched him slip away, dying by degrees, until he had no idea who she was and expressed outrage every time she came near him. She'd come in one morning to find him dead, having choked on his own vomit, and she was grief-stricken and also relieved.

And Bronsky understood instantly what his daughter was saying.

"She wants to put me away," Bronsky said softly.

"No, Daddy, she doesn't." She sounded like her voice was about to crack. "Neither of us does. But she's terrified because of all the things you've been talking about. It was bad enough when you couldn't even answer a simple question, like, 'How are you?' without saying you were getting ready to die, but this whole thing, it's just...it's too much. She's lived in terror of this happening, and now it is, and — "

"I need you to stop talking now," said Bronsky.

"Daddy — "

"I thought you, of all people, would understand. I thought you...." He shook his head. "I tried, Penny. I really tried. But I am what I am. I say what I say, and if others can't deal with it — "

"We're just scared for you. Mom has a place she wants you to look at; it's very nice, and — "

"I don't care how nice it is. Go back to Minnesota. Go back to your good life. I'm sorry you had to come all this way." He turned and strode away from her, his hip screaming at him to slow down. He ignored it.

"Daddy!" she called, and she started to run after him.

He shouted back over his shoulder, "*Don't follow me! I mean it!*"

She stopped in her tracks, stunned by the tone of voice that her father had taken with her. A voice that was filled with fury and tragedy and betrayal and hurt, so many roiling emotions that it served to freeze her. Bronsky kept walking and didn't look back.

He reached the sidewalk, taking big strides, and his hip began to complain in a way that would no longer be ignored. Bronsky slowed out of necessity, but his mind was still whirling with so many emotions. He had distanced himself from Penny because he knew he would not be able to control himself, and he had no desire to say to her all the things that he was thinking, because that was not going to end well for anyone.

He didn't know how long he was walking, or where he was going. All he knew was that life was becoming an unendurable agony, and he could not wait for Death to take him.

A honk from a car parked at curbside startled him and he reflexively began to move away from it. But then a soft voice called from within, "Get in, Bronsky." He looked more closely at the car. It was a pale Ford Bronco.

The passenger's side door had opened. He couldn't see the driver clearly; he seemed cloaked in shadow even though it was sunny out.

"Death?"

"Yes."

"We're doing this again? I told you, I can't change."

"You've told me nothing. You haven't met me before. Get in."

Bronsky wasn't sure what he was talking about, but then he remembered what Death had warned him about. That there was another Death that Bronsky really didn't want to meet.

Apparently he was going to meet him now.

"Uh-kay."

Bronsky didn't hesitate. He climbed into the car and automatically buckled himself in.

From the shadow of the driver's seat, Death said, "You buckle in? You, of all people, taking safety measures?" He spoke in a whispery monotone.

"It's the law," Bronsky said primly. Then he leaned forward. "Wait a minute. You look familiar to me."

Death leaned forward out of the shadows. "I look familiar to everyone."

"Brando?" Bronsky wanted to laugh, but he was also appalled. "You made yourself look like Marlon Brando? For me?"

"You said it yourself: it's how you see me." He turned on the car and it rolled out of its parking space onto the street. Death handled the wheel with confidence.

"So...you're a different Death than the one I was talking to before?" Bronsky had to shake off the impulse to tell Death how much he loved his work in *On the Waterfront*.

"I'm the enforcer. I'm the one who handles the aberrations from the way things are supposed to go. Suicides, martyrs...and the occasional off-the-beaten-path problems such as yourself." Death shook his head. "What have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?"

"I can't help it. It's my brain — "

"No, it's not. You've been saying that for years, believing that for years. It's an excuse, a crutch," said Death. "Your brain is fine. You've convinced yourself that you have no means of restraining yourself so that you can say whatever you like. The fact is that you could control yourself if you want. But you like the freedom from responsibility. You're hardly unique in that respect. I see it all the time. Usually it's movie stars or people in power. Celebrities who believe that they control every aspect of their world. And their arrogance convinces them that they can even control Death. They do the same thing you do: They keep talking about how they welcome it, that they're not afraid of it. And they're usually surrounded by Yes Men who nod and smile and don't tell them to stop talking about it. And the same thing happens with them that happened with you: My brethren show up and warn them to stop. And they won't, because they're used to doing things their way. That's when I'm called in."

"And...what do...." Bronsky hesitated, strangely afraid to ask. "What

do you do? I mean, how do you handle it? Do you just — ” He made a throat-cutting gesture across his neck.

“Yes, but...not them. I tell them I’m going to take other people like them. People whose time isn’t actually up yet, but I have some leeway.”

“People ‘like them’?”

“Other celebrities. I tell them who is going to die, and then I take them. And sometimes they still don’t believe, and so I tell them again and take another. Then they believe. Then they show fear. Then they shut up. That’s why famous people seem to die in threes. The third one is the one who was really supposed to go; the first two were just warning shots.”

“Oh,” said Bronsky, who didn’t quite know what to make of that. He was only half-listening, actually, trying to reassess the entirety of his life. Was Death right? Had he really been deluding himself all this time into thinking he physically had no self-control? His thoughts wandered, and Death said nothing to fill in the silence until finally everything Death had said began to sink in. Suddenly he turned to Death and said, “Wait. Are you saying you’re...you’re going to start killing famous people in order to get me...?”

Death came as close to a laugh as he was capable. It sounded like the creaking of a coffin hinge. “You may have some renown within limited circles, Isadore,” he said, and Bronsky suddenly felt naked with the speaking of his first name, “but famous? You? Hardly. Hardly that. No...I think that, in order for you to understand the gravity of your situation, we’re going to have to hit you a bit closer to home.”

He was staring straight ahead, and Bronsky turned to see where Death was looking. His eyes widened in horror and for a split instant his heart forgot to beat.

Penny had just emerged from the deli. She was holding a small white bag filled with assorted groceries. There was a bag of flour, which indicated that Bronsky’s wife was probably going to bake cupcakes, Penny’s favorite, that evening. Penny looked distracted and even from this distance, Bronsky could see that there were tearstains on her face.

Then Bronsky heard the engine roar to full strength. Death slammed his foot on the pedal and drove the car straight at Penny.

Penny turned, saw it, froze, her mouth opened in a perfect “O” of surprise.

With a scream of horror, Bronsky lunged for the steering wheel. The seat belt held him back. He unbuckled and grabbed at the wheel, struggling furiously with Death as the pale Bronco bore down upon his daughter.

And for that instant — just for that instant — death was the most terrifying thing that Bronsky could conceive. The notion of it horrified him, terrified him, and pain slammed through his chest like a meat cleaver and he prayed to hold on, just for a moment, just long enough, please, *Oh God, please, I don't want to die, I don't, don't take me, not yet, give me one more month, one more day, one more minute of life*, and he lurched the wheel as hard as he could while still in the passenger seat. The car swerved, so close to Penny that she could feel the breeze of it passing by and the heat of its exhaust, and then it slammed at full speed into the deli. A foot to the right and it would have crashed through the front display window. Instead it struck the brick face and collapsed like an accordion.

It took emergency services twenty minutes to get there with the Jaws of Life to extract Bronsky from the wreck. He was gone long, long before that.

There was no one else in the car.

VI.

PENNY HAD BEEN lost in thought, replaying the entire scene with her father over and over in her mind, trying to figure out how she could have handled it better. Nothing was occurring to her, which bothered her, because Penny had always considered herself a problem solver. She resolved right then and there that she was going to find some way to square things with her father. She didn't know how, but she would find a way to make things okay.

Screams from people nearby alerted her and she stopped in the middle of the street and looked up.

She saw her father, in the passenger side of an oncoming car, leaning over and struggling furiously with the wheel. She had absolutely no idea what in God's name her father was doing in this strange vehicle.

Interestingly, under the circumstances, that wasn't her primary concern. What stunned her into immobility was the driver of the car.

At first she thought it was some sort of madman in a Grim Reaper costume. He had a face that was a death's-head skull with eyes that seemed to burn right into her soul, and a black hood, and she wasn't sure but she could have sworn he actually had the tops of what appeared to be black wings behind him.

Barely had she recognized the driver for what he was supposed to be dressed up as when she recognized him for what he actually was.

She went totally numb, her legs turning to frozen blocks of ice.

She saw the terrified look in her father's face and then, just like that, the car wasn't there. There was a screech of tires and it took her a few seconds to realize the car was no longer in front of her, because she was still looking fixedly in front of her. Then the heart-rending crash jolted her from her paralysis.

She ran to the car, screaming her father's name.

He wasn't there to hear it.

She sagged back against a lamppost. No one seemed to notice her; they were far too fixed on the car itself. Half a dozen people were dialing 911 simultaneously.

"Miss? I think you dropped this."

Penny turned and her vision took a few moments to focus on the young, nerdy-looking guy who was holding up her small shopping bag. She looked down at her own hands as if she expected to see it still there. Then, wordlessly, she nodded.

He placed the bag at her feet. "People are coming. It's going to be all right."

"No," she whispered. "It's not all right. It's...." She couldn't form thoughts, much less articulate them. She looked at the kindly-faced young man and it seemed such a non sequitur that she could not comprehend it. He looked like that actor from the film about the pregnant girl...the one who played the young dorky friend who knocked her up....

"I'm not him," he said, as if reading her mind. "But I get that a lot."

She looked from him to the car, and then away. What was visible of her father's mangled body was so horrible that she couldn't watch. She didn't want it in her mind. She just wanted to erase it for all time.

She turned back to the young geeky guy.

He was gone as if he hadn't been there.

There were many questions afterward, investigations into what had actually transpired. The initial thought was that Bronsky had somehow snapped, becoming so angry at his daughter that he had stolen a car and tried to run her over. Penny put a quick end to that speculation, swearing that there had been another man at the wheel and her father had been fighting him. This was buttressed by the fact that Bronsky had been in the passenger seat, his feet firmly planted on that side, making it incredibly unlikely that he had had the slightest thing to do with controlling the forward motion of the vehicle. The driver's whereabouts were a mystery. It was generally conceded that he must have somehow leaped out of the car just before it hit and made a fast getaway. Granted, no witnesses were able to corroborate that scenario, but it was the only thing that made any sense.

Any further answers — who the man was, how Bronsky had wound up in the car with him, why the man would have tried to run over Penny — all these remained a mystery.

Penny's mother never remarried. She did remain around long enough to see her daughter marry and provide her with a granddaughter who was named Isadora, or Izzy for short. Grandma passed away some time after Izzy's arrival, complaining about death the entire time.

Penny lived the rest of her life with regrets, as all of us do, but the greatest was that her last conversation with her father — which she had not realized it was going to be — had been so terrible. That she could have hurt him so badly with that final encounter settled into her and festered, and there would be nights where she would sob uncontrollably. Her husband eventually grew tired of telling her that she needed to get over it and left her for a younger model with very little baggage or brains to go with it.

And eventually, many years later, Penny was lying on a bed in a hospital, with more tubes sticking out of her than an old-style television set, her hair gone from chemo that hadn't gotten the job done. The cancer had worked through her incredibly quickly, so much so that she hadn't even told Izzy — who was working in Tokyo for a year — about it. She had reached the stage called "acceptance," but had come to realize that all that meant was that one accepted the inevitability of it, but was still determined to fight it for as long as humanly possible.

She lay there, staring at nothing, and then she was staring at something.

Bronsky smiled down at her.

"Well, look at you," he said.

She had thought that the radiation had sucked the moisture from her, but she still felt tears welling in her eyes. "Daddy," she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

"For what? For worrying about me? For acting with what you thought were my best interests at heart?" He blew air dismissively through his lips. "It's okay — "

"It's not. I hurt you so badly — "

"I got over it pretty quick. I got a new job. I get to talk about death constantly and no one tries to shush me about it. The guy who had all the problems with taking me? I took over his old route. He seemed glad to be able to move on to other things."

"That's...that's good." She winced. "Is it going to hurt?"

"Nah. It's like..." He smiled. "Like when you were little. And you almost rolled off my chest, remember?"

Penny tried to laugh, but couldn't. "I was maybe a month old, Dad. But I remember you telling me about it. And you caught me."

"It's the same thing. Heart to heart," and he touched his and then hers, "and then you just roll over, ever so gently, and I'll catch you."

"Okay."

Bronsky chuckled. "Hey...can I interest you in some time-shares?"

She chuckled back, a whispery, paper-thin sound. "Actually...I think I'm finally ready to listen."

She rolled over...

...and Bronsky caught his little girl.

