



The Candles of Life: The Story of a Child for Whom Death Stood Godmother

Parker Fillmore

Czechoslovak

*Easy
5 min read*

There was once a poor man named Martin. He was so very poor that when his wife gave birth to a little boy, he could find no one who would stand godmother to the child.

“No,” he told his wife, “there’s no one that I’ve asked who is willing to hold this infant at the christening.”

The poor mother wept and moaned and he tried to comfort her as best he could.

“Don’t be discouraged, my dear wife. I promise you your son will be christened. I’ll carry him to church myself and if I can find a godmother no other way I’ll ask some woman I meet on the road.”

So Martin bundled up the baby and carried him to church. On the way he met a woman whom he asked to be godmother. She took the baby in her arms at once and held it during the christening.

Now Martin supposed that she was just an ordinary woman like any other. But she wasn't. She was Death who walks about among men and takes them when their time has come.

After the christening she invited Martin home with her. She showed him through the various rooms of her house and down into great cellars. They went a long way underground through cellar after cellar to a place where thousands upon thousands of candles were burning. There were tall candles just lighted, candles burned halfway down, and little short ones nearly burned out. At one end of the place there was a heap of fresh candles that had not yet been lighted.

"These," Death said, "are the candles of all the people in the world. When a man's candle burns out, then it is time for me to go for him."

"Godmother," Martin said, pointing to a candle that was burning low, "whose may that be?"

"That, my friend, is your candle."

Martin was frightened and begged Death to lengthen his candle, but Death shook her head.

"No, my friend," she said, "I can't do that."

She reached for a fresh candle to light it for the baby just christened. While her back was turned, Martin snatched a tall candle, lighted it, and then pressed it on the stub of his own candle that was nearly burned out.

When Death turned and saw what he had done, she frowned reprovingly.

"That, my friend, was an unworthy trick. However, it has lengthened your life, for what is done is done and can't be undone."

Then she handed Martin some golden ducats as a christening present, took the baby again in her arms, and said:

"Now let us go home and give this young man back to his mother."

At the cottage she made the sick woman comfortable and talked to her about her son. Martin went out to the tavern and bought a jug of ale. Then he spread the table with food, the best he could afford, and Godmother

Death sat down on the bench and they ate and drank together.

“Martin,” she said to him at last, “you are very poor and I must do something for you. I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll make you into a great physician. I will spread sickness in the world and you will cure it. Your fame will go abroad and people will send for you and pay you handsomely. This is how we’ll work together: when you hear of a person taken sick, go to his house and offer to cure him. I will be there invisible to every one but you. If I stand at the foot of the sick man’s bed, you will know that he’s going to get well. So then you can prescribe salves and medicines, and when he recovers he’ll think you have cured him. But if I stand at the head of the sick man’s bed, you will know that he has to die. In that case you must look grave and say that he is beyond help. When he dies people will say how wise you were to know beforehand.”

She gave him further instructions and then, after bidding her godchild and its mother a kind farewell, she left.

Time went by and Martin’s fame as a great physician spread far and wide. Wherever Godmother Death caused sickness, there Martin went and made marvelous cures. Dukes and princes heard of him and sent for him. When he rubbed them with salve or gave them a dose or two of bitter medicine and they recovered, they felt so grateful to him that they gave him anything he asked and often more than he asked.

He always remembered Death’s warning not to treat a sick man if she stood at his head. Once, however, he disobeyed. He was called to prescribe to a duke of enormous wealth. When he entered the room he saw Death standing at the duke’s head.

“Can you cure him?” they asked Martin.

“I can’t promise,” Martin said, “but I’ll do what I can.”

He had the servants turn the duke’s bed around until the foot instead of the head was in front of Death. The duke recovered and rewarded Martin richly.

But Death when next she met Martin reproved him:

“My friend, don’t try that trick on me again. Besides, it is not a real cure. The duke’s time has come; he must go to his appointed place; and it is my duty to conduct him thither. You think you have saved him from me and he thinks so, but you are both mistaken. All you have given him is a moment’s respite.”

The years went by and Martin grew old. His hair whitened and his muscles stiffened. The infirmities of age came upon him and life was no longer a joy.

“Dear Godmother Death,” he cried, “I am old and tired! Take me!”

But Death shook her head.

“No, my friend, I can’t take you yet. You lengthened the candle of your life and now you must wait until it burns down.”

At last one day as he was riding home after visiting a sick man, Death climbed into the carriage with him. She talked with him of old times and they laughed together. Then jokingly she brushed his chin with a green branch. Instantly Martin’s eyes grew heavy. His head slipped lower and lower and soon he fell asleep on Death’s lap.

“He’s dead,” the people said, when they looked in the carriage. “The famous Doctor Martin is dead! Oh, what a great and good man he was! Alas, who can take his place!”

He was buried with great pomp and all the world mourned his death.

His son, whose name was Josef, was a stupid fellow. One day as he was going to church, his godmother met him.

“Well, Josef,” she asked, “how are you getting on?”

“Oh, pretty well, thank you. I can live along for a while on what my father saved. When that’s gone, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Tut! Tut!” said Death. “That’s no way to talk. If you only knew it, I’m your godmother who held you at your christening. I helped your father to wealth and fame and now I’ll help you. I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll apprentice

you to a successful doctor and I'll see to it that soon you'll know more than he knows."

Death rubbed some salve over Josef's ears and led him to a doctor.

"I wish you to take this youth as an apprentice," she said. "He's a likely lad and will do you credit. Teach him all you know."

The doctor accepted Josef as an apprentice and when he went out into the fields to gather herbs and simples, he took the youth with him.

Now the magic salve with which Godmother Death had anointed Josef enabled him to hear and understand the whisperings of the herbs. Each one as he picked it, whispered to him its secret properties.

"I cure a fever," one whispered.

"And I a rash."

"And I a boil."

The doctor was amazed at his apprentice's knowledge of herbs.

"You know them better than I do," he said. "You never make a mistake. It is I should be apprentice, not you. Let us go into partnership. I will work under you and together we will make wonderful cures."

And so, owing to his godmother's gift, Josef became a great physician of whom it was said that there was no illness for which he could not find a remedial herb.

He lived long and happily until at last his candle burned down and Death, his kind godmother, took him.

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