



Mother Death

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Mythology, Retold Fairy Tales

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It could have been last year, or it could have been longer ago, that Death lived in the world among people and was known to all as a mother. A chair awaited her in every household. Wherever she visited, she would sit at this place of honour while the children greeted her with rhymes and flowers.

In those days, everyone lived to be a hundred and on the eve of their birthday, Mother Death would appear. She took the celebrant away with her through a door that made everyone equal – short ones became taller, and tall ones shorter; the rich lost and the poor received wealth; the clever people shed some of their wit that the dim ones gathered as they passed. Unlike our earthly mothers, who birth us to a world of differences, Mother Death made sure everyone was treated the same.

But once there was a bird tamer who thought this was not fair at all. Although everyone had to live exactly a hundred years, and not a day more or less, some people had to endure sickness, poverty and misfortunes of various kinds, while others enjoyed happiness all the days of their lives. Both the wicked and the good received the same treatment, and the bird tamer felt this was wrong indeed.

Therefore, when her daughter was born, she pretended to seek a worthy Godmother for her, saying, “There is nobody in the village willing, since I am but a bird tamer, and cannot give them wealthy gifts for the service.”

Then the Sun looked down on her and asked if she could be the girl’s Godmother, but the woman thanked her and said, “I could not accept it, dear Madam Sun, as you shed your light more on the plains than on the valleys,

and I live in the latter.”

Then the River came to the woman’s door and asked if she could fulfil the role, but the woman thanked her and said, “I could not accept you, dear Madam River, as you come and go, depending on the rain that feeds you, and what if you are not there when my child needs you most?”

When Mother Death heard about the bird tamer’s need, she came to her door and asked if she could be the girl’s Godmother. To this the woman said, “I appreciate your offer, for you are known as both fair and dependable.”

She invited Mother Death into her house and fed her cakes and wine. When they had agreed on all the details of Godmotherhood, and Mother Death rose to leave, the woman asked her to come and see her birds. They went to the coop where there were many winged creatures, all aflutter. Then one magpie, which had been so trained by the woman, flew straight to Mother Death’s face and plucked out her eyes.

She cried in agony, holding tight the magpie that had maimed her. She sat on the floor to compose herself, for she would utter no curses – or, indeed a single word – to the bird tamer. Instead, taking the sash from her dress, Mother Death tied the magpie’s leg and told it, “Now I am blind, so you will have to be my eyes and my guide.”

Mother Death raised her arms to the sky, holding the magpie in the cups of her hands, and then released him, to fly where it pleased. It first went into the house of his mistress, where Mother Death stumbled upon the bird tamer’s daughter. As she put her hand on the little one, the girl died on the spot, going away to the lands of her Godmother. Mother Death sighed but stayed true to her word and, from then on, she only went where the magpie took her.

In each place, people fell if she but lay a finger on them, or even if the hem of her dress brushed against them. Nobody knew any longer when their time would come, and all were afraid, and burned the chairs of honour meant for Mother Death. Nobody was safe from her. But no matter how much they ran hither and thither, she would still find them and there was grief in all the lands.

Then a gardener thought this was cruel and unbecoming of Mother Death, but she pretended to be kind, and invited her into the orchard that she tended. Mother Death walked slowly and carefully so she would not brush against the gardener. She sat under a tree and the gardener gave the magpie sweet pears and succulent apples,

juicy apricots and savoury plums. He took these to Mother Death, who feasted on them and was satiated for the first time in many days.

Being well pleased with the reception and generosity of the gardener, Mother Death asked what boon she wished for, as it would certainly come to pass.

The gardener said, "Only that you are tied by roots and branches to this tree under which you sit, and are unable to leave and bother the world anymore."

And as she said, so it was, for the trees, plants and flowers fulfilled their gardener's every wish. The roots shot up and the branches swooped down, tying Mother Death by her own promise to the place where she stood in the orchard. As hard as she tried, she was unable to release herself. Then she untied the magpie's leg, but the bird stayed, as he could feed off fruits as much as he liked, whereas there was no carrion anywhere to be found. He sat in the tree and cawed.

People lived on and on, whether healthy or sick, rested or tired, merry or miserable. The lands became crowded and everywhere the suffering and the wretched started to call upon Mother Death to return. She could not move an inch, however, and nobody knew where to find her.

Then one basket weaver – whose hands were bleeding with too much work, whose back was bent with too much burden, and whose eyes barely saw where she was going or what she was doing – decided to seek out Mother Death and beg her to take her away. She said, "It is only proper that one blind woman should look for another," and she went on her way.

At every step, the reeds and willows that she made into baskets whispered where to go next. Each day, the weaver walked and walked until her feet could carry her no longer. Then she rested, only to continue on her way the next day, walking as far as she could, always listening to the soft voices in the wind. One evening, when she thought she would not be able to get up in the morning and walk a single step further, the wind told her about a nearby orchard. She went to it plucked some fruit to refresh herself, when she heard the cawing of a magpie.

Following this sound, she came to a tree, under which she found the bound Mother Death. The woman approached her, greeted her, and then used her shears to free the prisoner from the roots and branches. She brought water to Mother Death and then stood humbly before her.

Mother Death thanked the basket weaver, the first in a long time to treat her kindly, and promised her a reward. Nevertheless, she would only give one boon, and it would be the very last one, so the woman had to choose it carefully.

Although she yearned to ask Mother Death to take her away, the basket weaver felt another plea leave her mouth, “Be kind upon us, Mother Death, and also fair as you have ever been, even though now you are blind. Make our fates into a ballot, so that nobody can blame you when their time comes.”

Mother Death smiled and promised it would be just so. Then she asked the magpie to show the basket weaver the way back to her house, and there the woman found new tools to make her baskets so her hands would not bleed. She blessed her with many children, to help harvest reeds and carry the baskets to the market, so her back would not hurt.

But that day Mother Death went away from people, who had maimed and tricked her, and she built herself a manor in a faraway place. From then on, only the most ardent could reach her. Before the manor house of Mother Death there rests a lake and it is filled with the first tear of each new-born – yours and mine alike.

Upon this Lake of Tears, Mother Death sails in her boat every day. In her cupped hands, she holds a crystal chalice and fills it with some of the water. Those people whose tears end up in the chalice are the ones to die that day, so that, although nobody can know when their time should come, at least it is a fair game for all.

The magpie has stayed in her service and he brings her news from the world. This is how she heard the rhyme people now chant in her praise,

Death is mother, Death is kind

Death is fairest, Death is blind

It made her smile for the first time in ages. However, the magpie never tells her of those who do not understand but fear her still.

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