



The Danse Macabre

Greg Manuel

Mythology

She sat down heavily on the seat across from him, grabbed a fry and dipped it in ketchup. Her nose crinkled in distaste. “I think I’m a mayo type of girl. You know, like the Europeans,” she said, wiping her hands on her skirt, “Hi, my name is Saturday.”

His eyes widened. Everyone avoided this part of the diner. Everyone avoided him. Not Saturday, apparently, and she cut quite the odd figure. Poets would say she had alabaster or even porcelain skin. She wore knee high combat boots with fishnet stockings where one could glimpse the slight distance of her thighs to her black skirt. Her outfit was completed with a tuxedo top, a smallish top hat atop glossy black hair, and makeup and nails done in a vibrant crimson that contrasted starkly with her white complexion. She had a black and white walking stick with a jester headed skull at the top.

“Who are you?” he asked. He couldn’t believe she had stolen a fry from his plate. No one had done that since...

“I just said I’m Saturday,” she said, tsking at him. “You really should take more care of your appearance, Michael.”

Saturday wasn’t wrong. Slovenly would be a generous description of him. His beard had grown in, patchy and gnarled. He was wearing the same clothes that he had been in for the last week. There were defined bags under his eyes and his breath could have been used by DARPA. He didn’t care though. He was working and couldn’t be bothered by such trivialities as his appearance.

“What do you care? Who do I have to impress anyways?” he asked sullenly.

For a moment, it was like a veil was drawn back and he saw the sadness in her eyes. It was old and fresh all at

once. Like something eternal and ceaseless. Then the curtain covered it once more. Michael shivered reflexively.

“This isn’t what she would have wanted.”

“Who?” he asked. Michael couldn’t explain it but he could feel the melancholy in her voice. He knew who she was talking about but didn’t want to believe that this stranger could possibly know.

She favored him with a look that was a mix of sympathy and reproach. She tapped him with her walking stick.

“I’m sorry you don’t understand why she’s gone. But you aren’t dead. You have to go on living.”

“What do you know about it? Who are you to tell me anything about my life?” He half rose from his seat, his fist balled in anger.

“Sit down.” She didn’t raise her voice or change her friendly expression but he obeyed immediately. For an instant, he couldn’t have imagined doing anything else than obeying Saturday. She reached out and turned the notebook in front of him to face her. It was a drawing depicting a skeletal figure with black wings, a scythe, and a mad grin perched on the bed of a sick person. She looked at Michael in disapproval. “A little bit unfair, don’t you think?”

“What?!? No,” he said.

“That isn’t a very good likeness,” Saturday said.

“I think it is.”

Her lips quirked as if to say, ‘Whatever, I disagree, idiot.’

“What do you know? Death, he’s a fucking parasite just waiting for us,” Michael’s voice rose in volume and trembled.

“What if I told you that she wasn’t.”

“Well, obviously you would be wrong. Death’s nothing more than an asshole.”

“You are being quite offensive for someone that doesn’t know the first thing about what he’s talking about,” She cocked her head to the side, regarding him calmly.

“What makes you such an expert? Who are you to tell me what I know? I’ve lost! I’ve seen Death for what he is...”

“No, Michael, you’ve known Loss, not Death. He is a completely different animal.”

“I’ve known loss because of death!”

“Fair point, but that doesn’t mean you know Death. Take these comics, for example. That isn’t Death... this is Death,” Saturday passed her hand over the comic and the picture changed. Instead of perched upon the bed like a waiting vulture, Death was dancing with the sick man’s spirit while his corpse lay in peaceful repose upon the bed. “Death’s not an asshole, Michael.”

“If he wasn’t, then he wouldn’t have taken Allison. She’d done nothing wrong. She didn’t deserve it,” he said, wiping tears that had started to well in his eyes.

Saturday shook her head. “Say what you really mean, Michael. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“What?!? That’s not it...”

“Bullshit,” Saturday interjected. “I’m not saying that you didn’t care about Allison, but cut the crap. All this,” she waved her hand at the drawing, “is about you. You lost. You no longer get to see her.”

“Who the fuck are you to say that to me?”

“You haven’t figured it out? Would it be better if I looked like this?” Saturday said. Her form shifted and sitting in front of Michael was a hooded, skeletal figure with a scythe. Only a moment, though, then Saturday sat before him once more. “Should I give you thunder?” she was punctuated by a great boom of thunder. “I don’t need theatrics, I am Death! I am not a choice, I am an inevitability. Now look, it has been a year since I called Allison across the chasm that separates the living from the dead. One year and you haven’t tried to move forward. Instead, you bury your head in this childish need to crucify me in pictures and prose.”

Michael didn't know why but he believed her pronouncement that she was Death. A torrent of emotion crossed Michael's face, from fear to confusion to grief, finally settling on anger. "How dare you come here and act like I should just be fine with her death!"

Saturday shook her head. "I didn't say that you should be fine with it. I said that you should quit blaming me. You don't understand enough to make such blatant defamatory remarks upon my person."

"You're Death. You're literally the last villain these people will ever know."

"I'm not a villain."

"You're a piece of work. How can you even say that to me? You robbed me of Allison!"

"Or I gave you enough time that you actually appreciated Allison."

"What?" Michael scoffed. "I loved her!"

"No doubt. The thing about Love, I've known his many different incarnations personally. He doesn't always last forever. Love dies. I gave Allison the chance to die while still being loved."

"No, I would have loved Allison forever!"

Saturday favored him with a sad smile. "Would you like to see?" She didn't wait for his response and simply waved her hand.

He slipped the ring off his finger. He didn't know why, but he did. Looking back on the bed of the hotel room, he saw Karen. Allison's best friend. She was wearing nothing. It felt wrong but he felt aroused despite himself. He moved towards her. He realized he wasn't in control. He could feel her heat as their lips pressed against one another. She kissed her way down his body and he groaned.

He was awash in relief as she continued to make a trail down his body. The day had been long. Allison had been particularly difficult. The rift between them had continued to grow. His infidelity didn't help. He didn't know what to do, he just wanted to feel passion...

"What the hell was that??"

“Your future, if Allison had lived.”

“No, that isn’t me! I would never have cheated on Allison.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. At least, not the you now or the Allison that you remember. But the Allison that lived would have been far different from the one that you fell in love with. She would have been listless and unresponsive most days. At best, angry at the world. At worst, angry at you. And you, poor Michael, would have been in debt because of her. Kids would have been out of the question. She couldn’t bear any. You would have been beaten down by the situation,” Saturday gave him a gentle look.

“Are you trying to make me believe that you did this out of the kindness of your heart?”

“I do most things out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Like Death has a heart.”

“I do and it has been broken many times,” she said, gentle and sorrowful.

Michael was at a loss for words. Her statement made him feel like he was adrift in an ocean and was about to drown. Her words echoed how he felt but far outstripped the depths of his feeling. “I still can’t forgive you.”

“Oh, quit being selfish!”

“What!?! I’m not being selfish!”

“Yes, you are. You are treating it as if I did this to you. Did you ever consider that this wasn’t about you? For even one moment? Do you ever think that this was about Allison?” Her eyes hardened into small, radiant diamonds.

Michael was taken aback. Had he? Of course, he had! But still...

Seeing his confusion, Saturday continued, “Consider this; Allison wasn’t there for you, you were there for Allison. She was going to die soon, she deserved to be loved at the end.”

“But I could have loved her so much longer!”

“Maybe. Probably not though. It isn’t how most creatures in the Universe are made. We love but love burns

with an intensity that soon burns out.”

“You can’t know that!”

“Michael, I’m Death. I know the end of all things.”

“But...but... I can’t believe that guy could be me.”

“Given the right set of circumstances, that could be anyone. It isn’t just you. And that is you under extreme duress. The situation you would have found yourself in was by nature unbearable. For both of you. Allison included. It wasn’t sustainable.”

“I don’t want to get over her! I don’t want to let her go!” Tears streaming freely down Michael’s face.

“Michael, you are still being selfish. You still think that this is about you,”

Saturday said softly. She stood up and held out her hand. “Come with me.”

He recoiled as if her hand was going to bite him.

“If I had wanted to kill you, you’d be dead. I’m Death; you not touching me doesn’t stop me. Come on, I just want to show you something.”

Cautiously, he extended his hand. He was surprised that her hand wasn’t cold and clammy but warm and alive. He felt a momentary bout of vertigo and then the world reordered itself. He was no longer in the diner.

They were in a closed down ward of a hospital from the looks of it. No one else was there except a woman in a hospital gown and wild hair. She was facing the wall and muttering to herself. Michael gave Saturday a questioning look.

“This is Millicent,” Saturday said in response to his unspoken question. “She is quite a tragic character. Came into the hospital one day in the summer of 1943 for what she assumed was an easy procedure. She never left.”

“What happened?”

Saturday shrugged. “Allergic reaction to some of the medication they had used. That isn’t the question you should ask. You are missing the point.”

“What should I ask?”

“How about why is she still here?”

Michael looked at Millicent, who was now clawing at the wall with a ghostly hand. He was surprised when she turned to him. Her face was a skeletal mask, eyes lit with blue fire, hair flailing wildly in the air. She pierced the silence with a scream of pure rage and torment. Michael had never heard anything so awful. She lunged at him and he recoiled instinctively. Michael needn't have bothered, her form no longer meant to interact with the world.

Michael turned back to Saturday, “I don't think I want to know.”

“But you need to.”

“Why?”

“Because this will be Allison if you don't.”

Michael looked back at Millicent, trying incessantly to claw at Michael and Saturday. Michael was stunned. He didn't know what else to say, so he asked the question he'd been prompted to. “Why is she still here?”

“When Millicent died in 1943, she left behind a husband that loved her very much. So much, in fact, that he never stopped grieving her passing. His grief was like a chain that held Millicent here.”

“Is he still grieving?”

“No, he died back in 1986.”

“Then why is she still here?”

Saturday nodded. “Now you are getting it. She's still here because those years that she was stuck here drove her past the edge of insanity. Time passes differently for the dead than for the living. A few years can be an eternity when you are locked within yourself without being able to interact with the mortal world. Death is meant to be a time of transition when you are embraced by the Danse.”

“The Danse?”

Saturday smiled, happy that Michael was finally engaging rather than fighting. “It is where all life goes and

comes from. The Danse Macabre. It is something of haunting beauty and terrible infinity. We are all connected by it.”

“Even you?”

“Of course.”

“What about Allison?”

“Not at this moment, no. She is stuck outside of the Danse; somewhere she isn’t supposed to be and she knows it. She’s in a terrible state. You’ve held her at the moment of her death, weak and frail. She isn’t supposed to be. She was a strong and vital woman. She should be in death. But instead, she is between two states of existence because of you.”

“How am I supposed to let her go? I love her too much.”

“That is the very reason you let her go!” Saturday said, her hands gesticulating madly, “I’ve told you, this chapter of your life wasn’t about you. She wasn’t here for you, you were here for her. You keep saying that she didn’t deserve what she got. No one earns death, everyone gets one. What she did deserve was to know love and happiness at the end. And she got that. But now she needs you to let her go, so she can join the Danse Macabre and be part of the Circle of Eternity once more.”

Michael sat down heavily on a seat with an explosion of dust. He put his head in his hands and wept. “I understand what you are saying but I don’t know that I can. I want to let her go but I don’t know how.”

“You can start by living your life. Allison isn’t the only one that is trapped by those chains of grief. Engage life once again. Get up in the morning and do more! I promise you, little by little, the pain will fade. Never completely, it doesn’t work that way. But each day you will feel its sting a little less until one day when it will be only background noise to your soul.”

“Then what? I forget her?”

“No, you’ll never forget her. She is an indelible part of you. But... when you think of her, it won’t make you cry. Not every time. Most of the times, you will smile to remember that one quirky thing she did, or laugh at the time she wore that dress and didn’t realize how naughty the pattern was.”

Michael found himself smiling despite himself at the memory. Allison had bought a dress with a festive holiday theme but hadn't realized that there was a little elf that, when she wore it, looked like it was sticking its head out of her crotch. Oh, how they had laughed when he had pointed it out.

"See. That is how Allison should be remembered."

"You're right," Michael said. He looked thunderstruck. "It is time, she deserves better than this."

"Come, let's go back."

Michael took her hand without hesitation and they were back in the diner. He looked at Death with genuine affection and said, "Thank you. Thank you for caring."

"I care about everyone, Michael. It makes my life hard but meaningful."

Saturday left Michael, who was furiously starting a new drawing. She almost laughed when she got a glimpse of what it would be. Saturday, as she had looked to Michael, dancing with a host of spirits. He would call it the 'Danse Macabre'.

Outside of the door of the diner, she saw a youngish man leaning against the side, smoking a cigarette. "You should quit those before they kill you," Saturday said, deadpan.

The man crooked a smile. "If only."

"He's all yours," she said with a sigh.

"He's ready to let her go?"

"I think so."

"You did good, sister," the man said, blowing a heart shaped ring from his cigarette.

"Yeah," Saturday said pensively, "Now I have to reap a seven-year old that is not surviving her transplant surgery. Most days my job sucks, but at least I got to do a soul good today."

Looking over her brother's shoulder, Saturday saw Allison. She was no longer a sunken shell of a woman pulling an IV stand around with her. She was hale and vibrant. She waved at Saturday and smiled. Soon she

would be able to join the Danse.

Death waved back.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com