

May 31, 2025

[MB Short Story: Early Retirement \(Kent Version\)](#)

[22 hours ago](#)

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"Looks are the only requirement for becoming a Grim Reaper?" Kent asked.

"Well, no," Death confessed, "but if I'm hiring employees, they might as well be eye candy, right?" She leaned in close enough that Kent could see the back of her skull through her empty eye sockets. "You, I like because you're inscrutable. Inscrutability is a good ability to have when you're have to tell people that yeah, they died, and no, you're not allowed to give spoilers about what comes next."

"What does come next?" Kent asked.

"Spoilers," Death replied without missing a beat. "Now, let's talk compensation."

"Compensation?"

"Job benefits," Death clarified. "Payment consists of one soul, living or dead, to be brought to your temporary dwellings in Purgatory until your contract expires two centuries from now, at which point you both get to pass on to your intended afterlives."

Although her skull wasn't expressive, Kent felt as if Death were smiling.

"It's a great offer," Death said. "Work for me, and you essentially get another two-hundred years with your loved one. So, who do you want me to bring?"

Dark smoke coalesced around one skeletal hand, transforming into black parchment that Death perused with missing eyes.

"It says here that your spouse is still alive," Death notes. "I can bring them over a little early if they're your choice."

Kent shook his head. "I don't want to take them away from our family early," he said. "Even if we're separated after death, I know that we'll find each other again."

"Damn, kid, that's romantic," Death said.

Kent chuckled at her words. How long had it been since anyone had called him 'kid'?

"Guess that answers the same question for other still-living family members, then," Death continues.

"Hmmm . . . what about your best friend? Looks like Glitch died three years ago after . . ." Death choked on a laugh. "Wow. Seriously? And here I thought that I'd seen it all, given since I've been around since creation of the universe and all."

"Glitch was always a risktaker when it came to his experiments."

"You're not kidding," Death replied. "What a way to go. I'm just shocked that he somehow managed to survive to age seventy-nine." She shakes her skull in bewilderment. "Bring him back, and he might be the first ghost to figure out how to accidentally die again. Too much of a risk, sorry."

"You said that I could have any soul as my companion," Kent reminded her.

"Exceptions exist," Death reluctantly divulged with a sigh. "Some mortals are too dangerous to bring back, sorry. Man, I haven't had to reject a companion soul since the sixteen hundreds." Her skull tilts to the side. "You would've liked Tycho. He was one of my best Reapers before passing on, but he wanted to bring back his pet moose, which I obviously couldn't accommodate."

"Animals are outside your domain?" Kent asked, because the possibility that they might not possess souls didn't even occur to him.

"No, I can bring animals back as well," Death answered. "But no mounts. I made that concession for Caligula, and people *still* go around saying that 'Death rides a pale horse.' I refuse to let rumors circulate that Death rides a moose."

"Makes sense," Kent agreed. "I know who I want to select."

Time flew when you were younger, but it crawls agonizingly slowly these days. The nursing home that you're in provides the best of everything, but you can no longer feel the softness of the bed nor silkiness of the sheets. Only the long, painful drag of each breath through the tube leading from your nose to the tank at your bedside.

Your family and friends visited again this evening, like they do every day. Their hugs were longer this time, their goodbyes more tender. Everyone knows that the end is coming.

About damn time.

In the decade since your husband passed away, you've managed to experience joy. You've found fulfillment in travel, in pets, in friends, and even learned how to speak a new language from classes at the senior center after you had to move to assisted living (Kylie, in the apartment next to yours, says that your accent is terrible). But you're tired now.

And you miss Kent.

Your faded memory isn't what it once was, but everything has suddenly become sharper and clearer these past few days since the stroke. Behind closed eyes, you can see Kent standing in a threshold, wearing nothing but a towel and holding a foamy toothbrush. You feel his hand holding yours in the darkness, leading you down an unending passageway. You hear his voice, calling out to you from that old mustang, saying that . . .

"It's time to go. Are you ready?"

You open your eyes but are unable to make out anything but a blurry form. Gentle, familiar hands help put on your glasses.

His silver hair is black again, and he's missing his own wire-frame spectacles that he started wearing in his late sixties. Your husband looks twenty-five again, but his smile towards you contains all the love and shared experiences of the fifty years that you two spent together.

"What took so long?" you rasp, the words burning your parched throat. The IV in your arm can only do so much. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," Kent replies. "It's why I'm retiring early—so that we can go together."

He sits down on the edge of your bed, although it doesn't dip at his weight.

"Are you a ghost?" you croak. "Do I get to become hot again when I die, too?"

He smiles, tenderly brushing a lock of white hair out of your eyes. "You're already perfect," he whispers. "You've always been perfect."

You snort, which sets off a rattling coughing. "That's not what you claimed when I bought that magenta sofa," you accuse once you can almost breathe again.

"The one you got after we moved back to Chicago?" Kent laughs. "I said that *you* were perfect, darling, not your sense of interior design."

"Annie and Cass loved that couch," you retort.

"They did," Kent agrees. "They were so old by then that they barely moved off it. Speaking of which . . ." He snaps his fingers together, and two familiar shih-tzus appear atop you—although you can't feel their weight upon your chest. Their bows bob as they desperately pepper your slack cheeks with decades worth of missed kisses, fluffy tails wagging at warp speed.

Wetness leaks out the corners of your eyes. "I missed you, girls."

"They missed you, too," Kent says, "in case you couldn't tell." He squeezes your hand, and you look down to where he's holding it. His hand is warm unlike yours. Your fingers, knuckles swollen with

arthritis, twine with his, but your hand is so cold. So very, very cold. Everything is cold.

You rise from the bed, leaving the coldness behind.

"Will the dogs be coming with us?" you ask Kent in a voice that's no longer weak.

"No." Kent's lips quirk up in a half smile. "Death's adopting them as her condition for my resignation."

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[Delivery for the Damned: Death \(Sneak Peek\)](#)

[21 hours ago](#)

"Ah, shit. I hate when kids go like this." Despite being heavy with regret, the woman's voice is the most beautiful that you've ever heard.

She must be an angel come to take you away. You open your eyes, but everything is a red-fogged haze. You attempt to wipe away the blood and sweat, but your hands no longer obey your commands. You've been in this alleyway for too long, slowly but surely bleeding out ever since Robin twisted his knife deep within your gut.

You shouldn't have stolen his donut.

A boot nudges your side. "Hey, kid."

You're not surprised that you're going to die after being stabbed, nor are you particularly frightened. The nuns always said that someone would murder you someday. It's fine. No one knows what comes after death, but it can't be worse than life at the orphanage.

"Kid."

It's not a bad thing to die at age eight (or nine—the nuns weren't sure when you were born). If you die now, and heaven exists, then you're definitely getting a free pass there because there's no way that God would kick a kid out of heaven.

"Kid!"

Not that you know much about God, other than a few broken crucifixes and burnt bible pages that you'd dug up in the church catacombs. The nuns had renounced their religion decades ago, when the apocalypse kicked off.

"It's not smart to ignore me, kid."

Choices:

1. "Do you mind?" I snap. "Kinda busy trying to die here."

2) "Are there donuts in heaven, angel?" I ask dreamily. "As many as I can eat?"

3. "Did Robin take his knife out of my stomach?" I wonder aloud. "He'll need it for Thursday."

4. I hold my breath in order to speed things along.

"Shouldn't you be begging for me to save you instead of dreaming about donuts?" the angel asks, somehow comprehending the wet choking noises that emerged from your mouth. "Seriously, kid, what is wrong with you?"

"Adults don't save kids," you state matter-of-factly, although your words come out as a gasping rattle.

Ice-cold, fleshless fingers brush across your eyes. The red haze clears, and you gaze into the dark hollows of empty eye sockets. The skeleton before you, dressed in a fashionable leather jacket and blue jeans, cocks her skull quizzically to the side. You instantly know—deep within some primordial core—that she's Death.

"Gonna scream now?" Death asks.

You shake your head only for it to lethargically *thunk* against the dumpster as it rolls to the side.

"Huh," Death mutters to herself. "That's new. I didn't think new existed anymore."

Her bones clink like windchimes as she squats down, bracing herself against the dumpster with one arm so that she looms over you.

"Alright, kid," she says. "Make me an offer." She holds up a single skeletal finger before you can speak. "Make it a good one. You only get one chance at this, and I'm not easily impressed."

"An offer?" you gurgle out with what should've been your very last breath.

"Give me something," she elaborates. "Something that's precious to you."

You ponder the options. As an orphan, there aren't many things that you can call your own.

"I'll give you . . ."

Choices:

1) "My soul."

2. "My favorite book."

3. "My donut."

4. "Robin's soul."

"Really, kid?" Death groans. "Do you know how many of those I already have?"

You cough out a clot of blood, and she heaves an exasperated sigh.

"Fine, I'll pretend that the scrawny soul of a nine-year-old isn't worthless," she grumbles. "And, yes, that's how old you are as of yesterday, by the way. Happy belated birthday."

[MB Fairy Tale: Once Upon A Time in Babysitting](#)

[19 hours ago](#)

Excerpt from a TRASHY GOSSIP RAG

Once (no, twice) upon a time (two times, actually!), a prince kissed a frog.

The first time was when the prince was four years old, and it hadn't really been so much of a "kiss" as it was a long lick down a random toad's back because the prince wanted to know if it tasted like chicken. The toad did not taste like chicken, but it was poisonous. The young prince was bedridden with severe stomach cramps for an entire month.

Needless to say, Prince Nick has since banished this event from his memory. As far as this story, recorded for posterity, is concerned, the Crown Prince has only kissed one frog in his entire life, and that frog is his wife.

(Not that the Crown Princess resembles a frog currently. Princess Salome is a peerless beauty without flaw.)

You deftly catch the crumpled gossip pamphlet, drawn in crayon on the back of a blank envelope, that Sally throws in your direction.

"What's wrong with it this time?" you demand impatiently. "I worked really hard on this version."

"I've decided that your Kingdom only thinks that I'm engaged to Prince Nick because the culture is too sexist to accept that women can be foreign diplomats," Sally says with an imperious sniff. "My engagement is a lie, because I don't wanna play the frog princess anymore." She eyes the paper still grasped in your hands and perks up slightly. "Is it true that your brother once licked a toad?"

"That's what my mom says," you reply. "But Nick didn't get sick from it." You frown thoughtfully. "I don't think that Prince Nicholas would lick toads, though. It's not very prince-like. We should take—I mean, we should force the press to take that part out."

Sally falls backwards onto your twin-sized bed with a disgruntled huff. "Too bad. It would've been nice to have some leverage to hold over him now that we're negotiating the new trade deal."

"Is that how diplomacy works?" you ponder. "I always thought that there were more assassins involved."

Sally waves a languid hand in your direction. "Blackmail is less messy." She rolls over on her bed so that she's resting on her stomach, chin propped up with one hand and hazel eyes glinting mischievously. "I have an idea."

"It's probably a bad idea," you say, crossing your arms.

"You haven't even heard it yet!" Sally protests.

"I'm guessing that it has something to do with blackmailing on my brother," you retort. "Who is, first of all, my brother, and second of all, and more importantly, the Crown Prince of Wisemandia." You thump a small fist to your chest. "I cannot betray him."

"It's not as if I'm asking you to commit treason," Sally complains.

"You want me to spy for a rival nation!"

"So, you won't do it?"

"I never said that—I can just change nations. But if we spy on Nick, then we have to write our observations in a journal because that's what spies do."

"We definitely need a journal," Sally agrees. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be spies."

Excerpt from The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Trusted Accomplice, Who Is Not Prince Nicholas's Younger Sibling But Whose Job Title Has Yet To Be Decided – Day One

Prince N. woke up before 8am. We do not know what time he woke up exactly, because we did not wake up before 8am because it is summer break.

Prince N. made himself breakfast. Upon catching sight of us, he offered to make us breakfast as well.

The pancakes were very delicious. Prince N. must be trying to win us over.

The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome Alavidze, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Friend, Who Is Also A Diplomat From Anotherlandia – Day Two

Prince N. invited a girl over to his room today. We thought that she might be able to become the new Crown Princess now that Sally doesn't want the role, but she ignored us when we asked her.

Prince N. said that she wouldn't be invited back to Wisemandia Castle, because he didn't want a princess who is rude to his loyal subjects. The Diplomats both told him that referring to them as "subjects" was an insult because we're both from Anotherlandia.

In order to avoid war over this affront, Prince N. baked us cookies. They were very delicious.

The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome Alavidze, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Loyal Knight – Day Three

We snuck into Prince N.'s chambers while he was practicing with his band in the garage. His room smelled like dirty laundry, so we tried to light a scented candle, but Prince N. discovered us before we could light the match. He said that we almost burned down the castle.

He also challenged Loyal Knight to a duel for breaking into his room without permission. Diplomat S. smacked his shins with a sword and then we ran away.

The sword broke, though. Prince N. said that he would find us a sturdier stick, then he made us grilled cheese for lunch. It was very delicious.

The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome Alavidze, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Loyal Assassin – Day Four

Loyal Assassin stole Prince N.'s stuffed monkey from his royal chambers. It is now our hostage until Prince N. agrees to all of our terms.

Prince N. made spaghetti and garlic bread for dinner, which means Mr. Nutterbutter lives another day. It was very delicious (the spaghetti, not Mr. Nutterbutter).

The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome Alavidze, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Two Loyal Assassins – Day Five

Nick said that he didn't want to be the Crown Prince anymore, so now we have two assassins. They have to do everything that Diplomat S. says because that's how diplomacy works.

In accordance with the Diplomat's wishes, Assassin N. made cookies again. They were very delicious, but not quite as delicious as the last ones were because this batch was a little burnt.

As punishment for burning our food, Assassin N. was ordered to keep dancing the entire time while we watched Mousehunt. Assassin N. said that we reminded him of the mouse.

Assassin B. told him to keep dancing.

The Top Secret Observation Log of Salome Alavidze, Diplomat of Anotherlandia, and Her Two Loyal Assassins – Day Six

Assassin N. made croissants this morning. He said that it was his first time making them, so they probably wouldn't be very good. He was right, they were super flat, but we lied and said that they were delicious anyway.

He still seemed sad, probably because he knew the truth from Assassin B., so we gave him back Mr. Nutterbutter in order to cheer him up.

Day 7

"You survived," Hope Wiseman commented, inspecting her son with amusement and a tiny bit of concern. New bags were under his eyes, making him look older than his seventeen years, and his apron was smeared in a week's worth of flour.

Nick threw himself into her arms with a groan. "Take them back," he pleaded. "When I agreed to watch Button for the week while you and Dad were on a mission, I did NOT expect that their terror of a friend would show up every day as well."

"You could've said no," Hope pointed out. "Like I told you to."

"But then Button would've been sad."

Hope chuckled and patted his back with the arm that wasn't supporting his limp body. "Well, according to Button, they both had a blast. You earned enough money to buy that new electric guitar that you wanted. Your father already transferred the funds into your account, plus extra as a hazard fee."

"Thanks, Mom," Nick said. "Attending Aeon next year will be a cakewalk compared to babysitting."