

#746 – Cash Prize for Dying

by Taylor Murch

(Excerpt. The beginning of a short story written for a writing class my freshman year)

We had always known the man in that mansion was richer than God. He even had the same ethereal ambiguity as Him; nobody knew his name, nobody could picture his face. He had lived shut up in that great big mansion for as long as anybody could remember, and the closest we ever got to him were the rumors we spread. He would've fossilized like that, embedded in the city's lore as nothing more than a fictive construct of our collective speculation, except that one day, he invited us all to come play a game.

The mansion doors went from never open to never closed. Players were instructed to maneuver through his extravagant estate, room to room. Every room posed a new danger that could kill you, but, ah, here was the thing—the deaths were false. Those who were “killed” simply materialized in the front courtyard and had to start over. If you managed to be the sole survivor in a room, you were brought forward for final judgment. There, if you passed the rich man's test, you would walk away with the entirety of his multi-billion dollar fortune, and the game would conclude.

Well, with the deaths being fake and an incomprehensible amount of money up for grabs, people came. And they kept coming and not many of them left. But for weeks, nobody won.

Come to think of it, I don't know how he announced the terms of the game. If he came into town and boldly declared it from a street corner or a courtyard, I never found a single person who remembered seeing him do so. No one got an email or a text or even a robocall. Maybe he set a few bushes on fire to whisper the message at passersby—who knows. But however he told us, this man with a name people could only spell in dollar signs, the word spread. One day we knew nothing about him and the next, we knew everything about his game.

The rumors didn't go away, though. They just adapted. And for those of us who didn't play, stories and suppositions were all we had. There was plenty to be made up about a man who faked not his own death, but *yours*.

I think, at first, a part of us all worried he might actually be God.

At the time, Abigail Ashwood was my best friend. I had many friends in much the same way that I had many books, but Abigail was a limited edition binding of a human being. I shared more than just a modest apartment with this novel girl. We shared a bathroom that would have been small for even one of us, and we hardly kept track of shoe ownership because we shared the same shoe size. We shared a single goldfish in a cylindrical glass vase by the front door, and we never gave him a name but we quarreled over whether we needed to give him a wife. We shared space, we shared time; we shared the kind of thoughts you could only express at one in the morning, memories with each other so dangerously embarrassing they were social hand grenades, and an absolutely uncontrollable obsession with chocolate-covered pretzels.

I suppose you could say something changed that Sunday, just another day well into the season of the game at the mansion. Abigail was at work. And myself? I was doing nothing. The blissful kind of nothing you can only do on Sundays. The nothing that brings you out to the balcony with a book and a glass of lemonade and no concept of time.

Our apartment had a direct view of the road leading to the mansion. During the day it bustled like a parade and in the evening it glowed like Tokyo. The rates for nearby hotels skyrocketed because tourists wouldn't know better. Business-savvy merchants had set up booths of carnival food and trite souvenirs. Banners coughed weakly on the occasional gust of wind and the unlit paper lanterns crisscrossing the street hung dully in the daylight like the egg sacs of spiders.

But the people. Hundreds of them—thousands, maybe—and they seemed no more calculable or distinct than rainbow sprinkles. No one knew when this circus would pack up but everyone hoped that *they* would be the one to dispel it. All of them fantasized about the obscene things they'd do with all that wealth. Like playing pool with billiard balls of gemstones or painting their naked bodies with liquid gold. They wanted to roll around in heaps of money like autumn leaves, and not a single person would ever care about the filth of these bills—the germs and stripper sweat and flakes of cocaine ingrained like regrets into the green fabric; the ugly dirt of greed. No, they'd kiss every dead president's face with masculine mouths or stains of ruby red lipstick.

When it became too dark to read outside, I relocated to the living room. The road to Death's game slowly turned on patches of light for its gradual metamorphosis into its vibrant nocturnal form. It was fully alive with light by the time Abigail came home late in the evening. From the flourished way that she swept into the apartment and sang out my name, you could tell that she pronounced "theatre" with three syllables.

I closed my book and set it on the coffee table. Abigail had once told me that the only thing she found unsettling about me was the fact that I never used a bookmark. I can remember when she first noticed it—from the look on her face, you would have thought I just told her I used prayer beads as birth control.

"Hey, Abigail."

"How was your day?" she asked pleasantly, dropping her bag and bending over to unstrap her shoes.

"Great. I got a lot of stuff done. Walked the dog, cleaned the gutters, reorganized the basement...."

"So, you did nothing?" She straightened herself and passively tossed her keys up into the porcelain key bowl with a rewarding clink; if it had been a large red ring onto a milk bottle, her aim would have won us a second goldfish.

"Naturally." But when we called reading nothing, we didn't mean it literally. We both went through books like smokers go through matches.

"Another leisure Sunday. Good for you."

"Is there any other kind of Sunday?"

Her laugh was jaded, a soldier ironically amused with misconceptions of war. "Not in retail."

"My condolences," I returned.

I studied Abigail as she stepped flatfooted across the hardwood and winced as if the floor was ice burning her soles. She wore nude lipstick and all funeral black (and maybe customer service was the death of her patience). Her whole adult life, she battled her hair to hold its styling, and three-quarters of her adult life, she lost. That day, however, her curls had remained intact. I complimented her on it and this made her glow, victorious. And with her hair so sweet and her eyes on her feet, she looked, for a moment, like a little girl contemplating hopscotch. I made this mental image from a memory, actually, since I had known her since fifth grade. I wish I still knew her now.

Finally, she flopped beside me onto the couch and heaved her feet into my lap. “I have retail feet. Rub them for me? Please, Faye?” she begged, flashing her most irresistible smile across her pretty, freckled face.

“Do they smell?”

“Like roses!” She wiggled her toes. Her nail polish was pink like flowers.

“...Feet kind of freak me out,” I said awkwardly.

She pouted and rolled onto her stomach, resting her chin on the arm of the sofa and draping her arms down the side of it. So I wrapped my hands around her upside-down foot and pressed my thumbs into random spots. My obliging her must have made her happy, but now she stared out the glass door to the balcony, through which we could see the glare and the glitter of the Death street.

“My coworker and I were talking today—he went up to the mansion.”

“Really? I take it he didn’t win,” I remarked.

“Extremely astute.” Abigail jabbed her thumb into the air in mock approval. She was still talking at her reflection, but this time (ah, yes, there were contrary times) it was not vanity.

“So? What did he say?” I pressed.

“He didn’t go into much detail—we were swamped. Too swamped for chitchat.” I could hear her acrylic nails gently scraping the couch’s side as she absently drew patterns in the suede. “But he said it was insane—exactly that word, *insane*.”

“Maybe it will drive people mad.”

“Y’know, I’ve thought about that?” She flipped back over, and the turning direction of her feet like small sunken ships righting themselves in my fingers made me realize that I was still rubbing them. “It can’t be good for you. They used to bitch that violent *video games* made you violent. That killing people virtually messed up your sense of reality—and your head.” She tapped the tip of a fake nail against her left temple. “Now this. This is.... It has to mess with your perception of reality, too, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I wonder that, too.” I wondered if the phoenix ever became bored of dying.

“Well, anyway. My coworker—he just threw around a bunch of synonyms for a while. And then he finally freaking mentions that he made it to the judgment room.”

“Shit. He did?” We had not known a single person who had made it that far. Nobody. It was Atlantis—a final frontier submerged under the dark, heavy tidal waves of improbability. You would drown a thousand times looking for it.

“Yeah! Denied, obviously. But what he said was... weird.” She furrowed her brow and it moved a few freckles, shifts in an astrological starscape. “He said that it was about twenty contenders, and they went into this room—like a dance studio. A man in a mask was waiting there, and apparently nobody smiled at him, and that’s why the man dismissed them all. He was like, ‘You don’t smile at strangers, so you can’t have the fortune.’ And that was it.”

“Rich people are so fucking weird.”

Abigail turned back onto her stomach and stared out the window. “A lot of people died today,” she said heavily.

“People die every day.”

“Yeah, but before him, none of them died more than once.” Before *him*. Not “Him” with a capital H, but “him” with a drawl, with contempt, with the haziness of namelessness and the characteristic of an inside joke.

I lifted Abigail’s feet and slid out from under her. I was drawn to the spectacle of the road in the same way I am drawn to lightning. I did not open the balcony door but only stood staring through the glass. The intermittent puddles of neon had leaked outward and onward since I last saw them. The entire street, from the town courtyard to the mansion, was a dizzyingly long serpent of activity—its scales made of ruby, emerald, sapphire, gold. The players walked on the asphalt of its reptilian skin, weaving through colors of gemstones and dreaming of diamonds.

Abigail’s voice broke through my hypnosis. “What would you do with all that money?”

“Spend it,” I answered plainly.

“On what?” I could hear her eye-roll in her voice.

Somehow, I knew my answer immediately. I knew it like I knew my last name, my favorite season, and what I was doing next Sunday. We probably all knew our answer in that town. “I’d save the Bengal tigers. They’re going extinct.” I said it like I knew the tigers personally.

“Huh. Well, that’s a good idea, I like that. You know what I’d do?”

I absently rapped the knuckle of a finger against the glass, and then turned to face her. “Hm?”

“I’d use it to save my favorite shows when they’re going to be cancelled. When they say they can’t afford production costs, I’d write them a big fat check.”

I snorted a laugh.

“But, no, actually, wait. I’d buy my parents a beach house.”

“Same. I’d buy all my friends new houses, too.”

“And charities for days.”

“I’d pay off strangers’ hospital bills.”

“Oh, and travel the world!”

“Yes! Travel for months.”

“Travel for years.”

“I’d hire a housekeeper.”

“And a chauffeur.”

“And a personal assistant.”

“And a cook!”

“Shit, honestly, I’d have my housekeeper change and iron my sheets every day if I could.”

“Are you kidding? I’d never do the dishes ever again!”

And then we stopped. We stopped as if we had been caught up in lust, like we were each married to a humble integrity that taught us money did not matter, and we just realized that we were cheating on our spouses of standards by entangling ourselves in these fantastic daydreams of wealth. But the truth was that we did not really believe that money could not buy happiness. The truth is that I doubt many people do. And, no, it was not just fancy cars and excessively large houses, not two-hundred dollar T-shirts or fifteen-hundred dollar first-class or a grand for an ice cream sundae. We were attracted to financial stability and freedom and the miracles that only seem to happen when a rich signature bleeds ink on the line of a check. We wanted to deposit our good intentions and withdraw everything from the world that money could offer us. And since almost everything comes with a price, that was a lot.

Money is like the heroin that society shoots into its veins, and it swims through the highways of the bloodstream up into its brain, and, sometimes, all the time, it's the only thing on our minds. You could get high just on the *idea* that maybe, one day, it won't be like this, the daily grind grinding us down into a fine powder of our labor which we then sell to our employers on a bad exchange rate. I mean, really: A massive retailer paid Abigail minimum wage to stand on her feet all day and smile while customers mistreated her; reputable publications offered to pay me for my stories with *good exposure*. We were made painfully aware of our place with every paycheck.

But if we had the kind of money to own anything, financial restraints could no longer own us.

Abigail exorcised her excitement through a heavy sigh, and her voice descended into seriousness.

"Why do you suppose he's doing this?"

I turned back to the window. The neon lights of the booths, blurred by the distance, bled onto the darkness like melted crayons. I tried to spot God's castle at the end of the Death street. "I think he's lonely." I couldn't see the mansion. All the glittering glamor must have obscured it.

"Simulating death isn't exactly the best way to make friends," she remarked.

"It's not exactly the best way to make a fortune, either," I countered, facing her.

Maybe we could have left it at that and maybe, even, that would have been noble. But there was a great big dragon of mystery asleep on ten tons of gold at the end of that road, and the second-hand smoke of his hot breath finally drifted downwind and snuck through the vents. We were intoxicated with curiosity. I could feel it in our hesitation to let the conversation go. It was the kind of hesitation in the breath of a bad liar.

"Let's go. Just go check it out," Abigail suggested.

I pressed my shoulder to the dark glass—an inch, a physical touch, closer to the mansion. "Tonight?"

She flexed her feet. "Tomorrow. We'll go tomorrow."

"Works for me," I said, folding my arms. "Sundays, I don't do anything—I'm certainly not going to die on a Sunday."

[end of excerpt]