



The Second-last Death

Free short fiction by Janine Prince

Crowds of people in a trampling crush, just hold on a little longer, I'm nearly home and maybe this time I'll be safe. The attacks have been increasing in frequency and ferocity. I don't know who or why, and this morning's was just awful. Why are they killing me? At first, I died easily – not expecting anybody to intend me harm. I just hid, or ran, but they always knew where I was and there was no talking, no reasons. The first ones didn't even need to pause. So there I'd be, dead, trying to pull myself together again, and pick up with what I'd been getting on with. It really interrupts the flow of a day – know what I mean? It uses a lot of energy to start your body up again, and I couldn't help but to dwell a bit on the 'why me?' angle. But that was such a boring story.

So I'm fighting for a way through the crowds, but having died nasty earlier this morning I'm really thin and weak. Wrong side of the bed, you might say, and so I push my way through a bit more than I ordinarily would. I feel bad about shoving, but here's the door and it's over. It's a relief to be inside, but I can't remember what I'd been doing before the attack had come this morning, so I wander around my place a bit. You know, just touching stuff – like when you get home after a long trip. My bad mood's growing, I'd left the milk on the bench and it's gotten too warm. There's blood everywhere, the carpets're soaked and there's no way I'll be getting my bond back from this place. Damn it all to hell.

I've barely settled down, and another guy's coming through the door. Can you believe this!? I'm not ready, how could I be, but my dander's up. I've fully got the shits. Good thing too – coz he's fast and determined and telekinetic. He's got an old hubcap he's ground into a giant shuriken and it's already whizzing at my eyes before I even see his face. I realise "this is *it*. I need to kill one of these pricks back, or I'll never get any peace" and so we fight. I'm moving, and he's moving, and the shuriken's moving even faster. The blood from this morning's still wet. It's slippery and kinda distressing if I think about how most of it's mine. It's smeared all over my comical little-boy-skeleton body and I can see it's kinda giving him a problem. He's trying not to gag, and you know, maybe the room does smell a bit too, but he's got other problems coz that shuriken never even made it half way and it's right back atcha buddy. He

deflects it, but where he'd gone for my head, I prefer the chest. Presents a larger target. So he's dodged the main thrust but he's a bit sloppy from the slooshy carpet and the death-warmed-up aesthetic I've got going and so he doesn't get completely clear. His arm's not quite severed, but then we're not quite near a micro-surgery. Suits me fine, coz in that moment an idea comes to me and I can see a way out.

I'd fought the last guy hard, but playing by their rules had still left me dead. I was bored with being dead, and this guy would be better even than the last one. I'd have to pull an Ender, and kill this one good and proper. That would break my cycle, and I realised I could do it if I stepped out of his rules. Love the *third* option.

He sends the Shuriken back towards my neck in a blur. I let it bed-in deep and quiver (just for fun I bug my eyes right out) and then somehow it's a mirror that shatters around it and judders its way loose to the soundtrack of me laughing my guts up. With gusto, I might be recently dead, but my intestines stay in place. Only I'm laughing without a tongue, coz they take *forever* to grow back, and it sounds weird, especially one of those deranged 'you're gonna die' laughs. It was around then that his nerve started to waver, and I knew my strategy was a winner. Hehehehehee. He looks towards me, both of us fighting for control of that shuriken, but he notices the snakes of blood forming in the carpet and moving towards me. Running up my chicken-legs and into me. My blood and the blood of my enemies racing and sliding into me. Drawn in by my call. His blood too. Betrayed by his heart, still pumping blindly, his blood flies valiantly out of the wound in his arm and courses through the rich sodden moss on the floor to my hungry ankles.

Watching it, fresh and bright against the plum of the last battle's fruit, he looks up to meet my eyes. I am no longer a jerky animation. I'm full, plump and powerful. My laughing has tongue. 'This is how easy it is' I think. He realises that the tussle for the shuriken was a feint, and so I let it go. What a fighter! He takes the moment, makes a move and sends it back at me. Fuck. What've ya gotta do for some peace and quiet 'round here?! Everything he had left went into sending it straight and true at my chest. Well, 'do unto your brother' I say. And so I let it in, but it is *his* chest that flowers open.

He died with his whole life flooding into my body. And he did die too, proper, and I put his bones into a red bucket and went whistling out to the garden to feed the roses.

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