



Death 1.0

By Katarina Emgård

"You've got to dig a bit deeper," my dad says, puffing on his non-filtered cigarette and exhaling an exemplary smoke ring. A repetitive squeaking and the on and off sight of his mustard-colored indoor slippers make me certain he's rocking the garden hammock in full swing. The slippers shine in contrast to the blue evening-shaded grass, and they're all I see of him from down here.

"Café-latte-break?"

My forehead's streaming sweat, my back is bent like Quasimodo's, and my legs are filled with lactic acid. Dad helps me climb out of the pit. I empty my pink rubber boots of wood lice and worms. I've spent the last couple of days down in this hole, digging and fighting insects. This I do for Dad. He turns seventy-seven in a week, and this is my gift to him. It's his investigation, him being put to the test, but we're both exploring the unknown. I've come to face my own fears as well, with all the tiny, hairy spiders crawling down my cleavage. At least I haven't shoved my shovel into a clown-nose remnant, lucky me, then I'd be traumatized for life.

I sit down next to Dad and rest my legs. A gentle breeze rattles the chestnut tree and a red leaf falls onto my lap, bringing with it a smell of decomposition and a longing to go into hibernation. The coffee's hot and there's an approaching sunset on the horizon.

My family home is overloaded with creatures: swinging garden gnomes, statues of growling lions, and porcelain fairies bathing in the birdbath. This is dad's passion – the garden. Due to his loyal affection there are still blooming bushes in shades of orange and ripe red apples ready to devour. The rhododendrons have been guarding the backyard for almost thirty years. My dad planted the first one the same day the stork brought me home. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have had this exotic playground to grow up in. Despite the neighbors' laughter, my dad created and displayed these fantastic creatures for me to enjoy and for the world to see, consequences be damned.

A ray of sunshine lights up my dad's face. He's unnaturally tanned. If there's the slightest potential for getting sun-kissed, he does, no matter the temperature—a habit I've inherited with pleasure. We raise our cups, greet the forthcoming autumn, slurp a mouthful of our lattes, and inhale summer's final warming sunlight. Harry Belafonte's "Shake, Shake Señora" crackles

through the construction radio. My dad takes a leap and clicks his heels in time with the music, and I can't help but smile. The sky is painted dark and stars outshine the sun. In comes the full moon, the mosquitoes and gnats. Harry's voice is replaced with the owl's hooting and our moaning cat in heat. I stink of dung and rotten leaves, and I have got to take a shower. From over here the pit looks like a magic portal or a trap for a gang of bandits, bottomless and full of surprises. Its black ground is masterly camouflaged underneath the chestnut's foliage; there it hides and eagerly awaits its next victim like a ninja ready for prey.

"You've missed a spot over there."

"Very funny, Dad. So are we 'gonna paint that coffin, or what?"

"We sure will, but what is the color of Nothing?"

"I'd say black."

"What makes you so certain?"

"I was just thinking that if life equals light and it's white, then the absence of light equals its opposite. Or, no wait, I've got it! We'll use a mirror, since it will be pretty damn dark down there. A mirror will reflect Nothing, right?"

"That's my girl, clever as ever."

The night is turning crystal clear, and a crispy cover of hoarfrost shrouds the surrounding rooftops and chimneys. Dad's dragon and centaur-trimmed hedges are transforming into a couple of deformed snowmen thanks to their new white dresses. The cold air is refreshing; it chills my lungs and clears my head. While I fetch my winter jacket, Dad strolls across the lawn, heading for the garage. He's only wearing his "X-files" t-shirt, shorts and the mandatory slippers with socks in them. Dad's never been bothered by the cold. Claims he's hot-blooded like a werewolf, and I believe him, 'cause who wouldn't want a dad with superpowers? I stumble over every rock and branch as I try to catch up and follow his lead towards the garage—his hideout. He says every man needs his hiding place. I left home as fast as I could, due to Mom, so I can't blame him for craving some space.

The garage is filled from top to toe with necessities. In addition to the ordinary gardening tools, there are also three black top hats, my dad's pet rabbit, a box with cards, a bouquet of plastic roses, and primary colored scarves, all leftovers from our glory days as touring illusionists. The naked bulb hanging from the wooden ceiling barely lights up the two square meters. It's hard to spot our almighty creation: the coffin, standing between the band-saw and lathe on two sawhorses. We've built the casket out of pine and rusty nails that we found in an old poisons box in the attic. Since I'm not skilled with a hammer and saw, dad has done most of the work. Thanks to all the goodies we got from the supermarket last night, we're very well prepared. We check our list one final time.

Two down duvets

Four feather-pillows

Two walkie-talkies

An oxygen cylinder

One unicorn-shaped mirror

Two identical pink bracelet watches

Check! Next mission: attaching the unicorn-shaped mirror. Dad loves gluing stuff, anything from broken windows to car parts and shoes; he says everything can be fixed with a tube of super adhesive. He even glued my favorite headless teddy bear once. I tried to tell him that cotton and cyanoacrylate don't mix, and I was proven right; the poor thing never fully recovered. My dad doesn't seem to recall this incident, as he contently hums "The Gnomes' Christmas Night" while gluing the unicorn-shaped mirror to the inside of the coffin.

I fluff up the pillows and put on a set of strawberry sheets. The coffin's "interior" made quite the discussion. Dad said he needs the pillows and blankets for his old back and metallic hip. I said they don't count for Nothing, but he needs to feel comfy. I drew the line at the flashlight, a "Top Gear" magazine, and a bag of cheese puffs. There has to be a limit. Dad stays in the garage while I head outside. It's walkie-talkie testing time.

"One, two, testing, testing."

"I hear you, roger, copy, roger, over and out."

The walkie-talkie works great. I hear dad's voice perfectly. We're all set. Another cup of coffee, and we're good to go. I thought Dad might be anxious but I haven't seen him this excited since the day he won an all-expenses-paid weekend at Dracula's castle in Romania. His exultation is contagious. We bounce around the pit and clap our hands, imagining being great Indian warriors in pursuit of exposing the unknown. I laugh and laugh until my stomach cramps and I can no longer feel my fingers and toes from the cold. If Dad's neighbors saw us now, they'd probably lock us up for good. Well, I just say, "bring it on." I've managed to break out of a straitjacket once or twice before, during our old conjurers' performances. If we both survive this week's tests we're thinking of taking up the practice again. We haven't told Mom about any of this. She'd go up in smoke, convinced we're playing with fire. She won't be bothered, though, because she's at a beach in Mallorca, drinking piña coladas and checking out boys by the pool. It's simpler to keep her in the dark, maintaining the family peace.

At last, the stillness of the night slows my dancing heartbeat and chills my rosy cheeks. Dad lies knocked out in the middle of the lawn, watching the stars twinkle and the bats catching moths.

"You ready?"

"I sure am. You've refilled the oxygen cylinder?"

"Of course. You've got your Nicorette patches?"

“I have five.”

“Watches synced. 02:15:30.”

“Check.”

“What are we ‘gonna do about the smell?”

“Yeah, you sure stink like shit, hon. Sorry, but you kind of said it yourself.”

“We could always put some tampons up your nose. I bet that’ll do it.”

“That would definitely cut off my sense of smell, and probably choke me to death too. You think that’d be funny, don’t ‘ya?”

“It would sure simplify the experiment.”

We get the coffin from the garage, carrying it on our backs. Dad’s cat jumps out of the bushes and starts rubbing against my legs, meowing and moaning. She bites me goodbye, disappointed I’m not the tomcat she’s longing for. I’ve tied together a couple of old Mickey Mouse pajamas and we use them to haul the coffin down into the pit. Dad slips into his more comfortable fleece robe and climbs into the hole. He looks way too pleased when he nestles down under the covers and rests his head on the down pillows. The last thing I see before closing the lid of the coffin is a reflection in Dad’s glasses of the unicorn-shaped mirror.

After applying tons of ineffectual deodorant, and with a pumped left arm, a nose puffy with dirt and an approaching cold, I’ve filled up Dad’s grave. Stopwatch set to three hours—that’s the plan, which means I’ve got time to kill. My stomach growls; I haven’t eaten anything since our coffee and banana breakfast. With the walkie-talkie strapped to my rivet belt I head inside to the kitchen. The hippie flower tapestry and naked baby pictures of me still dress the walls. My dad built the slanting triangular dining table and the three-legged chairs surrounding it, and they’re good for nothing but decoration. A week’s unopened bills, moldy coffee cups, and spaghetti leftovers pile up in the sink. I turn on the stove and heat up lots of hot chocolate, stuffing plenty of marshmallows into it. I watch the cuckoo clock on the wall tick . . . and tock. Tick, tock. One minute, five marshmallows, three minutes, two marshmallows, ten minutes, zero marshmallows.

Death looks delicious in his ankle-length black robe and his newly sharpened scythe. I feel like I’m swimming in a deep blue glimmering ocean as our eyes meet. My legs shiver and my galloping heart carries me far beyond the endless universe. His hollow, heart-shaped lips are closing in on mine. His cold body—no wonder I ain’t got a boyfriend, who could live up to my expectations—closing in on . . . A crackling noise interrupts my slumber. It could be mice nesting in the walls or the hot plate I forgot to turn off, but it’s not. The noise is coming from the walkie-talkie.

“Dad, I can hear you. What ya’ doin’?”

“Ehm, Nothing.”

“You better be, but you ain’t. I’d recognize that sound from a mile away. You brought it with you, didn’t ya?”

“Maybe.”

“You put that magazine away right this instant, you hear me? You’re supposed to be thinking about Nothing, remember?”

“Sure, hon.”

“It’s only two hours and forty-five minutes to go. The experiment won’t work if you fill up your head with sports cars and pretty girls now, will it?”

“You’re right, sweetie, but I’m getting bored to death down here.”

“Well, then you’ll just have to stop thinking about how boring it is. Boring is something, you know.”

“I’ll do my best, hon.”

I put on my “Little Hop” costume and I feel sexy, oh so sexy. Death can’t resist my gorgeous, soft body. He sweeps me into his cold embrace and my bunny-ears fall off as we tumble around smooching under the ghastly, pale sky. Two sets of lips become one. He kisses my fluffy paws, my neck, the insides of my thighs, then back to my lips, my breasts—

A high pitched groan drags me back to reality and I could swear I saw a clown’s merry smile, multicolored wig and cocaine eyes glowering at me from outside the kitchen window. I should probably stop watching “Bozo the Clown.” I have an unhealthy relationship with my phobia—

“Dad, what the fuck is that?”

“Oh, it’s just my kitty cat. Guess she jumped into the coffin before I did. She’s just a bit overexcited, that’s all.”

“You brought your cat with you? What the hell, Dad? Now what are we ‘gonna do?”

“Don’t worry, hon, she’s just fine. Ho, ho, she’s licking my toes. It tickles.”

“Nothing, we did all this for Nothing.”

“Now, don’t be discouraged, sweetie. We’re highly comfortable down here. I think this will be my new secret hideout.”

“Ha, ha, very funny. There’s two hours left, but if you don’t want me to exhume your cat, I suggest I dig you guys up within thirty minutes, or your cutie kitty will suffocate. And please try to stay focused, will ‘ya?”

The cat's purring and Dad's giggling never ends. I turn off the walkie-talkie and head for the shower. They'll manage on their own.

While walking up the stairs, every step creaks and sags beneath me. Reaching the top, the bedroom doors on each side of the dark hallway are closed. There's only a feeble stream of light shining from the bathroom at the far end, creating an army of illuminated spider shapes crawling across the fitted carpet. Afraid of stepping on them I leap towards the bathroom, yank the door open and shut it tight behind me.

There's a fluorescent light flickering and buzzing, it feels like the shower room at a mental institution. The outside temperature has found its way in through the open window and I shiver as I undress, feeling naked and exposed. All the abysmal eyes of the little plastic pattern cows on the closed shower curtains are staring at me. The drapes are never closed. It could be my imagination running wild, but I sense a blurry figure behind the curtains each time the light flashes. With a racing pulse and a toilet brush in hand I pull open the curtains. A doll-sized clown in a merry costume is standing there, laughing scornfully at me. I flinch, its high-pitched chuckle piercing the air. By instinct I grab the clown, rip its head off and throw it out the window. The limp body, in its bright colorful costume doesn't feel quite as intimidating without its freakishly happy face. One of Dad's jokes, very funny. Very funny, indeed. I keep the shower curtains wide open as I turn on the faucet. My eyes sting from the soap. I'm afraid of closing them. Blood will be shed. Revenge.

Ten seconds, five seconds, three, two, one. The frosty earth is a lot heavier to shovel than I imagined. I pry open the padlock with a crowbar, since I mistakenly buried dad with the key. I never thought it would make me so happy, seeing Dad's dribbling face. I must admit that a part of me was worried. They're in deep sleep, him and the cat, snoozing side by side. He wakes up, surprised by the sound of his own snoring.

"Oh, I must have dozed off for a sec."

"The drool spots on your pillows tell otherwise."

I help Dad to get out of the pit, pour him a cup of hot coffee and serve him a plate of fried sausages, his favorite midnight snack. He looks unexpectedly content.

"Well, my watch shows 03:45:50. Ninety minutes ain't that bad, Dad."

"Mine says 03:41:49"

"No, it's definitely 03:45:90. I synchronized and checked the clocks twice, see?"

"That must mean—"

"That you experienced Nothing after all. What was it like, what were you thinking? How did you do it?"

“I wouldn’t know now, would I? Since it’s Nothing we’re talking about. But we did it, hon! Our experiment worked. Though, if that’s what happens when you die, I’d rather put myself in a cryotank, ‘cause Nothing is pretty darn boring if you ask me. Catch my drift?”

“Yea, I get ya, dad. Well, heaven’s the next one on our list.”

“Oh, can I play the harp then, can I, can I, can I?”

As we watch the sunrise through the chestnut tree, I realize that someone has to fill the pit and cover it up with grass before morning traffic starts buzzing on the road out front.

“You smell fresh by the way. Been taking a comfy shower, have ya?”

Katarina Engård studies at Malmö University. Before taking the creative writing courses there, she wrote and drew a superhero comic, called "Kisenja." Creating the comic awoke her curiosity and made her want to dig deeper into the craft of writing. In "Death 1.0" she wanted to investigate "the assumptions, ideas and theories regarding life after death and wanted to do so with a humoristic twist." This is her first publication.