

Meeting Death in a Print Shop

A creeping cold permeates the print shop, cooling the sweat on Sadhbh's skin. She doesn't notice the cold, doesn't notice the absence of a whirr from an air conditioner or fan that should have accompanied the cold. She is absorbed in an unfamiliar computer and doesn't notice the figure that brought the cold with him.

"Do you know how to operate that monitor?"

The question is asked without condescension, without urgency, without noticeable curiosity for its answer. Still, it makes her jump.

"Uh, nope, sure don't!" Sadhbh admits, chipper. As she clicks around the screen, she takes a deep breath. *Obviously, the shop has an attendant*, she thinks. She must have missed him when she came in. Goosebumps rise on her skin, and she shivers.

Sadhbh fusses with the monitor until the man asks, "What are you trying to do?"

At last, the man has her full attention. She looks at him, searching his face for the emotion absent from his voice, his tone, his words. She does not find it—he isn't even looking at her. In his countenance, there is neither the genuine nor the polite amusement usually afforded to her when she tries to be charming. Her mind worries that absence like a tongue worries the bloody hole left behind by a newly lost tooth.

The print shop is silent but for the low hum of the monitor in front of her and quick, rhythmic scrapes. Sadhbh takes too long to answer him.

"I'm trying to print and mail four pieces of paper," she says.

Every iota of her rarely-gathered attention is caught up in the man in front of her. Social mores tell her to stop staring. She ignores them in favor of gulping in every detail she can pinpoint.

Across the narrow store, a man stands behind a chest-high counter. His posture is neither sloppy nor uptight as he focuses on a task Sadhbh can't see from her position. He is black, his skin neither particularly light nor particularly dark by her perception. His head is shaved bald and gleams where the lights of the store bounce off of it. The man doesn't tower over her, though he is taller—just not remarkably so. There is no excess fat pushing through his black polo shirt uniform, and there is no excess muscle pushing through either. His facial features are symmetric but don't lend themselves toward noteworthy handsomeness. His eyes, though, are something

she will never forget. His irises flow imperceptibly into his pupils, both the kind of flat black that seems to suck in the light around it.

Caught up in her frantic observation, she misses what he says to her. She asks for repetition, an apology in her words and her tone.

“I will give you an email to send the documents to when you are ready,” says the man, wholly unaffected by the need to repeat something to someone blatantly staring at him. He is both unrelenting and uncaring in the completion of whatever task is before him. The top of his left arm moves rhythmically, though Sadhbh can’t see what his hand is doing.

Another employee, a woman, appears behind the counter several workstations away from the man. She is on the opposite end of the shop from Sadhbh, whose mind absently registers movement but not the presence of another person.

Sadhbh, still as far from the man as she can be in the small but not-quite-cramped shop, searches for an email on her phone. She finds it and double-checks that the documents, which are so important that she finds herself in this strange print shop squirreled away on the second floor of a hotel, are all accounted for.

“Can I just forward you this email?” Sadhbh asks.

“No,” says the man.

“Oh! Okay!” She wonders why, but she doesn’t want to be a bother by asking. She doesn’t want to seem like she is challenging the man, doesn’t want his ambivalence to change to frustration or even just distaste. Instead, she informs the man that she is ready for the email address.

The man states the email evenly and without changing the rhythm with which his arm moves. Sadhbh notes the way he presents the information to her, impressed by the unconcerned excellence with which he completes what should be an unremarkable task. The long email address is a sequence of letters that seem unrelated to one another, but the man says it without looking it up and without the sing-song quality long, unintuitive sequences often require. He gives the address at a speed precisely tailored to the pace of Sadhbh’s typing.

Sadhbh types the address into an email draft and copies it. Though the man on the other side of the counter appears to exist without rush, her hands tremble as she tries to send each document faster than the last. She is frantic as she sends four emails—titled Sadhbh1, Sadhbh2, Sadhbh3, and Sadhbh4—as if she is being timed to see how fast she can send each one.

Sending the emails does not calm Sadhbh's frenetic energy as she finds herself without reason to be standing so far from the man. As she walks to him, she takes note of how he has not once looked in her direction, much less made eye contact with her. She is used to the attention of men, and she finds herself unbalanced by the lack of it. The lack of it doesn't feel dismissive—his full attention is simply not necessary to help her, so it is not given. She realizes she's relieved that his eyes, twin voids set in an otherwise unremarkable face, have yet to be directed at her.

Sadhbh cannot stomach being directly in front of the man, and so, shivering, stands to his side. Her eyes follow his arm down to where he continues working on whatever has so captured his attention. A naked razor blade gleams in his hand as he scrapes off a large patch of adhesive clinging to the linoleum counter. His back-and-forth movements are not violent or delicate or concerned. He is passionlessly efficient.

A dreadful calm pervades the dimly lit shop. The ugly fluorescent lights are just bright enough to work by without being abrasive, and they wash out the busy advertisements plastered along the walls. The mailing accouterments are too irregular and incohesive to form a uniform aesthetic, but they are all precisely in place and carry no trace of dust.

In the cold and quiet shop, Sadhbh cannot shake the feeling of being in the eye of some momentous storm she cannot see. She makes compulsive conversation. "This place seems like a pretty chill job...environment to be in."

"It can get busy." His tone bears no hint of complaint, no hint of the superiority some find in the opportunity for correction. "But, for the most part, you are correct."

Sadhbh worries she accidentally implied that he is being too slow or unconcerned. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that I was, like, unhappy with the pace of what's going on—"

"No, I understood what you meant," the man says, stopping her anxious ramble. His words, while still delivered the way old trees grow—steadily, confidently, but without fanfare—are a comfort to Sadhbh. There is magnetism in his strange charisma, his ambivalent calm. She feels compelled to know his name, to know anything and everything about this strange man. She squints at his nametag in the dim light as a voice calls from the other side of the shop.

"Are you Sadhbh?" asks the female worker, making her jump.

Sadhbh finally takes full notice of the woman, who is looking over her head at a clock above the exit. She tamps down her embarrassment at being startled and realizes the stranger in front of her has pronounced her name perfectly. Internal alarm bells that she is unequipped to

acknowledge ring. She ignores them, telling herself that the woman must be a fan of obscure Irish mythology. Sadhbh is an inescapably unique name in America. When read aloud for the first time, her name is usually preceded by an “um,” accompanied by a questioning tone, and mispronounced as ‘Sad-huh-buh’. Hearing the correct pronunciation, ‘Sive,’ perfectly and confidently given by someone who is clearly not Irish is not something that can escape her notice.

“Yes!” says Sadhbh. The woman doesn’t follow up with the usual question: “Did I pronounce that correctly?” She knows she did.

The woman behind the counter looks at her computer and smiles. Sadhbh finds herself feeling steadied by her customer service behavior, by the way she acts as she expects humans to act. Muted red box braids spill past her shoulders, and she wears the same black polo shirt uniform as the man.

“I have four emails from you,” says the woman.

“Yeah, I couldn’t send them in one email. Or, well, I was too lazy to figure out how to send them in one email,” says Sadhbh, trying for charisma through self-deprecation.

“All good,” the woman says, not effusively but with that same calm smile.

Sadbh walks along the counter that wraps around about half of the shop to the woman, sensing that the man is done with her. The documents she needs mailed need not be printed in color, which Sadhbh promptly tells the woman upon arriving in front of her. The woman asks if they can be faxed; after looking for a fax number, she informs her that they can. As the woman goes about her work, Sadhbh turns back to the man to see if he is still removing glue.

Another customer stands before him, and still he scrapes. Sadhbh watches intently to see if he interacts with the new customer any differently. The new customer is a stately black man with more salt than pepper in his neat, close-cropped hair. He wears a well-tailored navy suit, a silver, flashing watch, and carries a briefcase. She detects a Nigerian accent lilting through his words, though she misses what he is asking for. She sees him look at his watch before she becomes once again entranced by the male print shop worker.

He, at long last, stops scraping adhesive and moves his dark gaze to the Nigerian man as he speaks to him. He is uncaring without being unkind when he informs the other man that what he asks for is not possible. His words are deliberate and as inexorable as the rise and fall of mountains. The Nigerian man glances again at his watch, nervous, before speaking. Sadhbh can’t

quite make out what he is saying, but it seems to her that the man is trying to be gregarious and good-humored about whatever situation he is in.

Sadhbh realizes she is staring openly at the two men, but neither notice, and she is unable to pull her gaze away from the male worker. She searches his demeanor for any change, curious to see if he warms up to someone of the same race and gender. He does not; he treats the Nigerian man with the same soft ambivalence.

The female print shop worker comes out from behind the counter, and Sadhbh follows her to a large printer across the narrow shop. She finds the appropriate fax number and reads it, sing-songy to the woman who types it into the machine. Satisfied that the important documents are on their way to the correct location, she turns away from the woman to observe the man again.

The Nigerian man is nowhere to be seen; a white woman has taken his place in front of the male print shop worker. She wears a dirty white t-shirt that hangs limply from her bony frame and a sloppy ponytail with brown, greasy strands of hair escaping it. Sadhbh can't quite place her age, can't tell if her skin has been leathered by time only or if more vicious things have carved the lines in her face. Despite the cold, she is flushed and sweat streaks her temples.

Sadhbh begins to wonder why it seems as though only she is affected by the cold, but then the woman's shoulders slump forward and her movements become distractingly erratic. The woman is angry with the worker who looks at her without care or cruelty. She is enthralled by the consistency of his demeanor; she can feel her cortisol rising as the woman rants at him. She watches to see if he becomes placating, if white-woman tears can shift his behavior.

They cannot. The man behaves with the angry woman exactly as he had with the Nigerian man and Sadhbh. He continues to do his job passionlessly, without noticeable regret that it needed doing. He bears no noticeable ill will toward his predicament; his calm remains unaffected despite the woman's escalating frustration.

"I can check you out back over there," says the female worker, heading back to her computer.

Sadhbh gives the angry woman, now pointing furiously at the clock above the exit, a wide berth as she follows. Feeling some guilt for completely ignoring the female employee in favor of her coworker, she repeats her thanks a few more times than is necessary while she pays and stores the documents in her bag.

Turning to leave, she finds the angry woman gone without a trace. The man behind the counter has resumed his endless scraping, even futilely pulling at the adhesive plaguing his workspace. She walks past him to the exit, relieved to find herself without reason to remain in his presence.

A loud bell dings as she pushes past the doors of the shop, but Death does not look at her once.

Author Bio

Nadja D’Rainah is a queer indigenous writer based in the Midwest.