



The Popular Tradition

The figure of death in Guatemalan popular culture

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Introducción

Folktales, in general, are part of the spiritual and mental culture of a people and, therefore, serve as bearers of a centuries-old tradition transmitted through time. Folklore is the repository where the most genuine and authentic values of a society are safeguarded and recreated. With the specific aim of gaining closer insight into these values that reaffirm the national identity of the Guatemalan people, this anthology of tales is presented, placing death as the central character.

In various regions of the world and across different cultures, death has been an enigma, a concern, a curiosity, and a source of sorrow for humanity. It holds as much significance as life itself, which is why people have turned it into an object of worship and ritual. Likewise, the way a community perceives death is reflected in folk tales, where it generally appears in two forms: either as an adversary or as a supernatural helper. In other words, the death depicted in these stories can take on a benevolent or malevolent character, as can be observed throughout this collection. One way or another, in these tales, death is given a corporeal form, and its relationship with humans is always open and direct.

This collection aims to spread among Guatemalans the richness of the folk tales they possess, allowing them to be appreciated and applied in education. In short, the goal is for children and adolescents to learn and reflect in school on the content of these Guatemalan folk tales, while adults recall and pass down a literary tradition they have long known through oral storytelling.

In this regard, it is important to highlight that the anthology presented here serves a specific purpose: it is intended for the general reader, not just specialists in oral literature studies. For this reason, the transcription of the tales has omitted filler words and other repetitions characteristic of the informant's speech, making the reading experience more accessible and fluid.

The tales have been taken from the literary folklore archive of the Center for Folklore Studies at the University of San Carlos, which holds a wide range of folk tales collected from various regions of the country. To date, more than 1,426 tales have been recorded from different informants, making them an undeniable part of a rich traditional heritage and an essential cultural patrimony of the Guatemalan people.

The Rich Compadre and the Poor Compadre

These were two compadres, one was poor, and the other was rich. They lived at a distance of about a kilometer from each other. The poor compadre depended on the rich compadre for work, as his earnings were not enough to support his many children. And so, he kept working and working.

One day, the poor compadre became deeply troubled because what the rich compadre paid him was not enough. He turned to his wife and said:

/ Stith Thompson. El cuento folklórico (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Ediciones de la Biblioteca, 1972), p.

—Look, m'ja, fix me up a little meal because I'm going to see where I can earn a living, where I can find God to figure out how we can lift our family up, because you see, we are very poor. You'll be left with nothing, but take heart, God willing, things will go well for me.

—But look, m'hijo —the woman said to him— you'll only take tortillas because there's nothing else to eat.

—It doesn't matter, where are we supposed to get more if there isn't any?

The woman was saddened because he was leaving. She prepared his meal, but their poverty weighed heavily on them.

So, he set off on his journey toward the city, walking and walking until hunger struck. He reached a small ravine, gathered some firewood, and began warming his tortillas when he heard someone approaching. He became flustered, embarrassed by his humble meal, and said:

—What are you doing here, son? —asked a man.

—Well, I'm just here, sir, having lunch.

—Look, m'hijo, give me a tortilla.

He stared at him.

—And who are you?

—M'hijo, I am God.

—Ah, you are God?

—I am.

—Ah, look, sir, I won't give you one.

—And why not?

—Because you make some rich and others poor, like me.

—Well then, son, I wish you well. May God bless you.

He continued on his way; the man did not give him a tortilla. After eating, he kept walking until he arrived at a place to sleep, though it was still daylight.

Around five in the afternoon, he gathered some firewood, warmed his water, and started heating a tortilla when an old woman approached and said:

—Son, what are you doing here?

—Oh God, ma'am, I'm out here looking for work because I am very poor.

—Oh God, m'hijo, I am the same, hungry, very hungry.

—And who are you?

—Look, m'hijo, I am Death.

—Well, ma'am, I will give you food because you pull the string equally. You take both the poor and the rich, there are no favorites. When someone's time comes, you take them. That's what I admire about you: you are fair.

So, Death ate with the traveler and said:

—M'hijo, where are you headed?

—I'm looking for work because I am very poor.

—And what kind of work do you know how to do?

—Ah, ma'am, I only know how to work with a hoe, a pickaxe, and chopping wood. That's what I do.

—Oh God, m'hijo! But in those jobs, you earn very little.

—But what else can I do if that's all I know?

—Look, as a reward for the meal you gave me, I will grant you a gift to help you earn money.

—And what kind of work could I do to make money?

—In such a place, there is a rich man who is gravely ill. You will arrive at the house of an old woman, a lady, and ask for lodging. She will inform you that there is a seriously ill man nearby. Then, you tell the lady that you have the skill to heal, and she will go and inform the sick man that someone claiming to cure is there.

So, he arrived at the lady's house, asked for lodging, and during their conversation, the woman said:

—There's a severe illness spreading here.

—Oh God, ma'am, what kind of illness?

—Well, this and that affliction. Right now, a certain man is very ill.

—Well, look, ma'am, when it comes to medicine, I understand a bit. I have healed several people and have had good results.

So, Death told the traveler that when he arrived where a sick person was, if he saw her at their feet, the person would die, but if he saw her at their head, the person would recover. That was the lady accompanying him.

So, they quickly called the traveler from the sick man's house, treating him like a healer. They said to him:

—Sir, — his daughters said to him — our father is very ill, and we want you to see him to see if you can give him medicine. Then he said:

—With your permission, I'll go in and take a look. They let him through. As soon as he entered, he saw Death at the head of the bed and said to the family:

—Your father will recover; he will not die.

—Well, look, if you save our father, we will give you whatever money you want.

—I don't charge more than what my work is worth. First and foremost, whatever you can give me, whatever is within your means.

He laid his hands on him, and within a few hours, the sick man began to feel relief. In the end, he recovered. When he did, the family was deeply grateful to the healer and said to him:

—And how much do we owe you, sir?

—Whatever is within your means, I will accept whatever you give me.

They insisted that he name a price for curing their father, but he refused. In the end, they paid him fairly. And so, he continued healing the sick for several months.

So, when he returned home with money, he said to his wife:

—I'm back. I brought money, so find some builders and have a good house built. I'm going back to work.

So, the next day, he left again. He left the money at home so they could build him a nice house, and he kept working and working.

So, once he felt established, he returned home. Meanwhile, the wealthy compadre found it strange that the poor compadre no bothered him anymore or came to visit. Then, the poor compadre arrived home, with money, a fine house, and good furniture. He was no longer poor. So, he said to his wife:

—Look, m'hija, God has blessed us. Kill several chickens, and we will invite our compadre, because even though he was miserable, he helped us, and we will repay his kindness.

So, they prepared a grand banquet and invited the wealthy compadre and the comadre. The compadre, surprised, had sent a godson to invite him to lunch. He then said to the comadre:

—Let's go, and see what the compadre has to offer. He must have struck something good somewhere, since he hasn't come around lately.

So, by then, he had a fine corral with good cows and strong beasts. When the compadre looked in, he no longer saw a humble ranch but a beautiful house. He was stunned at the sight of his compadre's home. Before he arrived, they went out to meet him and the comadre, but they hardly recognized each other, the once poor were now finely dressed.

The wealthy compadre was startled, and not pleased, to see that his compadre was no longer poor. The meal didn't sit well with him; he was more concerned with asking how the compadre had gained his wealth.

—Let's eat first, compadre, then I'll tell you.

Once they finished lunch, the wealthy compadre asked:

—Alright, compadre, clear my doubts. What work did you find? How did you make your money?

—Well, compadre, it's something very simple that I learned.

—And what did you learn, compadre?

—Well, I went out to make a living because, as you know, necessity drives us. I became a healer, and with the little I knew, using herbs, I began curing the sick, and it started working. Over time, I realized that I can heal people, but I have the gift of laying hands only on those who can recover. If someone cannot be healed, I do not touch them. This is how I have been treating people, and this is the knowledge I have. God has given me this gift, allowing me to lay hands on the sick so they may heal, and if they do not recover, I can still recognize who will be healed.

—I'm glad, compadre.

He said, offering his hand in mockery. They said their goodbyes, and the wealthy compadre headed home. On the way, he talked with his wife, wondering what his compadre really knew about medicine.

—He doesn't know anything. Who knows what he did out there or how he made his money, but I don't think my compadre can heal anyone or has any real knowledge.

They kept walking, talking about it until they reached home. Still envious, he said to the comadre the next day:

—Look, you pretend to be sick, and I'll go call the compadre to catch him in his lie.

—Alright, I'll act sick, and you go call him.

—But listen, when the compadre arrives, don't move at all, just keep groaning and complaining.

And so it went. The next day, the wealthy compadre came to call on the poor compadre, saying his wife was gravely ill and needed to be seen. Without hesitation, the poor compadre set off with him until they arrived at the comadre's house. He stepped inside and saw the comadre lying in bed, completely wrapped in a blanket.

—Well, compadre, she has been groaning nonstop since last night, and she's in bad shape.

—It's true, compadre, the comadre is seriously ill.

—That's why I need you to heal her.

—Look, compadre, I'm truly sorry. I wouldn't want to say this, but the comadre has only a few minutes left to live. I'm leaving now to call her comadre so she can come see her before it's too late.

At that moment, the poor compadre left to call his wife. He had barely walked away when the wealthy compadre entered and shook his wife's body.

—Listen to what this knucklehead says, he doesn't know anything!

He shook her again and again, but she wouldn't wake up.

—You fell asleep, wake up! Listen to the compadre, that liar!

But she wouldn't wake up. He slid his arm under her and lifted her, only to realize she was already dead. Shocked, the wealthy compadre rushed out, shouting at the poor compadre:

—Compadre, compadre, come back! Your comadre has died, she's gone!

—The poor compadre returned.

—What happened, compadre?

—Your comadre is dead. She was perfectly fine, but now, as I told you, she's gone. That's why I tell this story, one should never mock a compadre.

The Godson of Death

Once, there was a poor family, a man and his wife. They had a child, a baby boy. But the husband was extremely poor and humble. Seeing—both in those times and even now—that people are incapable, he wished for a truly just godfather for his son. His wife responded that finding truly just men in this world was a difficult task.

He decided he had to search far and wide until he found the right person.

Since they were extremely poor, they gathered what little they had so he could take a few memelitas and set off in search of the compadre he needed.

After walking for an entire day, he met the first person who could possibly be his compadre. He asked the man where he was headed, and the man explained that he was looking for a compadre to take his godson to church for baptism. But he needed someone truly just, someone who met his expectations to be the right compadre.



Then the person replied:

—Nothing could be better than me as your compadre.

—Alright, but first, tell me who you are and what your name is.

—The man answered:

—I am Jesus Christ. I can take him for you.

—No.

—Why do you think I can't take him?

—Because you are not a just man.

—Oh? Then tell me the reason.

—Because you made both the rich and the poor, but you didn't make them equal. That's why I can't let you take him.

—No.

—Then keep searching.

So, he kept walking and continued his search. Soon, he came across another person and asked the same question, who was he looking for?

So, the compadre replied that he was searching for a godfather to take his son to his baptism. The person answered and said:

—I can take him for you if you wish.

The man replied:

—But first, tell me who you are and what your name is.

The other answered

—I am Peter the Fisherman.

The compadre responded:

—You cannot take my son either.

—Why do you say that?

—Because you open the gates of hell for some and the gates of glory for others; you are not just.

Well, if you think I cannot take him, then keep searching.

The next day, he encountered another person and asked the same question.

—Who are you looking for?!

—I'm searching for a compadre. It's been three days now, and I still haven't found one. Now tell me, who are you, if you want to take my son?

—Alright.

—Who are you?

—I am Death.

—Ah, well then.

—You are looking for a just person?

—Yes.

—Then I can take him for you.

—Oh? Why do you say you can take my godson?

—Because you are truly fair. You make no distinctions.

—Not by faces, nor by colors, nor by rich or poor, you take everyone the same. I see.

—Then you will take him.

—Of course. But first, I want you to see where I live, the land I inhabit. Close your eyes just a little, and you'll see.

The compadre closed his eyes and saw vast halls filled with rows of glowing lights, like oil lamps on candleholders. Some shone brightly, illuminating the space with great splendor,

while others flickered dimly, casting a sorrowful glow.

—He stood there, staring, when Death said,

—Compadre, let's go further in, there's more for you to see.

—As he looked around, some small lights flickered on while others faded away.

Then, inside, Death told him:

—Wait here a moment, take your time, and you'll see what must happen—this is where I dwell. In the meantime, I'm going to have a little lunch. You stay here and wait.

And so it began. First, they served a large plate of rice, and among the grains were pins. They placed the meal before the compadre, Death himself. Then, Death started eating, placing a pin on each grain of rice before consuming it. He had to eat this way, carefully setting a pin on every single grain, until he finished the entire plate.

That was the sentence Death gave to the compadre, urging him to be patient and carry out his plan.

—Oh no, this will take forever, you'll spend thousands of years eating that little bit of rice, grain by grain, with pins.

—Don't worry about that. Everyone must pass through me, sooner or later, they have to face me.

And just as he said that, Death finished eating.

—Well, now you know, one day, this ahijado will have to come to me.

And again, as soon as he said it, Death finished his meal.

—Well, now you know, there will come a day when this ahijado must acknowledge his godfather, and that godfather is me, Death.

So, as my compadre, you must visit me too. You have to seek me out so we can continue our conversation.

—Very well.

—Then, close your eyes again.

He closed his eyes, and they found themselves back where they had first met.

Well, time passed, and the child was baptized, they took him to the baptismal font.

Then, when six or more years had gone by, Death remembered his compadre and said:

—It's been a long time since I baptized my godson. I haven't seen my compadre, he hasn't come looking for me, and I haven't gone to see him either. But in the end, I'll go find him.

But Death was already approaching the compadre, his time was running out, and Death had to warn him to prepare.

So, Death arrived and said:

—Compadre, ever since we baptized our godson, you haven't sought me out or visited me to ask any questions.

—Oh, truly? I forgot the way, I don't remember.

—Well then, you know what? Let's go, I'll take you back again so you'll remember.

And so, Death led him once more to the hall where they had been before, where the lights and the great oil candleholders stood. The long rows of candleholders remained the same, some went out, others flickered to life, and some dimmed in sorrow. At last, Death waited for the compadre to ask him something.

The compadre stared at two lights in particular, while others shone brilliantly, illuminating the hall, another flickered weakly, growing completely dim.

Then, the compadre asked:

—Compadre, what do all these lights mean?

—Look, so that you don't leave here ignorant, I'll explain. All these lights you see they are you, all of you who must die. As long as you live, these lights must keep shining. But when you die, the lights must go out. Each person is a light.

—Oh, really? Then all these that look sad?

—These have enough life left, they still have many years before they die.

And so, he continued asking questions. At last, he focused on a few others and said:

—Come and see, he said, here's one that grows dim with sorrow, and another that rises brightly.

And this one, who could it be?

—Compadre, I would rather not say. But look, this great light, the one that shines so brilliantly and fills this hall, it belongs to your son, my godson.

—Oh, really? he said, pleased, my son has plenty of life left.

—But the one beside it, the one that dims so deeply...

—I would rather not say—but this one is yours. You have eight days left before you must visit me completely and come with me.

Then, he grew sorrowful, troubled by the words.

—Ah, compadre, I did not want this, I am saddened. I regret coming to find you again, because I did not want to know the day I would leave this world. But still, compadre, wouldn't there be a way? Couldn't we fix this, just the two of us?

—Ha! How so? Death asked.

—By taking a little oil from my son's candleholder and transferring it to mine—so that I could lengthen my own life while shortening his.

—Ungrateful! You seek out just men to carry your ahijado, yet now you wish to change fate? No, it is impossible. The law is not a game, and it must be fulfilled. You're going to live it up now, or rather, compadre, you're going to indulge yourself. Dance, sing, leap around, enjoy all the pleasures you desire. Travel, spend your money, and make the most of it, because in eight days, you're coming with me. My godson still has many years ahead in this life, because that's how fate works. The fortune was meant for your son, but you, because of your wrongdoing, this is your reward.

And that's where the story ends.

El hombre pobre y la muerte

He was a very poor man, with many children, and he couldn't find a way to provide for them. He was so desperate that he was losing his mind over his poverty.

One day, he decided it would be best to leave and seek God's help. He told his wife:

—Look, I'm leaving. Prepare me a little food supply, a tecomate of water, and kill a hen for me because I'm going far away.

So, the woman packed his provisions, slaughtered the hen, and he got ready, made his bundle, and set out. He walked and walked. Far away, he grew hungry, gathered firewood, and once there was fire, he heated up the hen, since it was cold. But the hen was very fat, releasing a strong aroma.

After a while, a woman approached him and said:

—Look, I'm hungry. Give me a piece of chicken.

—If you tell me who you are, I'll give you a piece of chicken.



—I am the Virgin.

—Well, then I won't give you anything, because look—you gave me so many children, yet you don't provide me with anything to support them. That's why I won't give you any.

—Alright, that's fine then.

The woman turned and left. A little while later, an old man approached.

—Ah, will you give me a little, a piece of chicken?

—Who are you?

—I am Our Lord.

—No, I won't give you any either.

—And why not?

—Because you are not just.

—Why?

—Because you see me so poor, with so many children, and yet you don't give me anything to support them.

—Alright then.

The old man turned away, and soon after, another woman arrived.

—Ah! What a smell of chicken!

—Well, yes, did the scent reach you?

—Yes, I smelled it. So, will you give me a tortilla with a piece of chicken?

—If you tell me who you are, I will give you some.

—If I tell you who I am? I am Death.

—See, I will give you chicken with a tortilla.

—Alright.

He cut the meat and gave it to her.

—Very well, now you must return home.

—Ah, no, I won't go back. What will I do with my children? They are starving, what will I give them?

—Don't worry, because from now on, I will help you. First of all, so that people won't see how your journey begins, I'll give you an idea, you will become a doctor.

—Ah, alright. And how do I do that?

—Tomorrow, return home. At dawn, go to the corner of your house, I will leave a sack of money there. So that no one notices when it happens, I will show you how it's done. This will be the beginning of your wealth, you will be a doctor.

—And how do I do it?

—I'll tell you, whenever they call you to see a sick person, check if I am at their head. If I am, there is hope they will not die. But if you see me at their feet, then tell them right away, it's time, because they are about to die.

—Very well, he said, then I'll return.

So, the man went back, and when he arrived, he said nothing. But the next morning, after sleeping in his house, there it was, a sack of money. Ah, he was pleased. And at the same time, there was a very sick person. He went to see them, acting indifferent, but he already knew what to do. He asked for permission to examine the patient.

—Come in, they told him, come in.

He entered, the Death was at the patient's head. The family was already crying, thinking he was about to die.

—Enough, he told them, don't worry, he won't die. Look, if you want, I can make him a small remedy.

—Ah, fine, go ahead and prepare something, a remedy, anything, because either way, he's dying.

They say he went to gather some simple leaves.

—Boil this water.

Even if he did nothing, he already knew the patient wouldn't die. So, he gave them the medicine.

—I'll see you later.

Soon after, they called him again—the patient was already better and asking for food.

—Don't worry, he's fine now, no need to do anything else.

And so, he kept curing people.

The one with Death at his feet was truly nearing the end.

A wealthy man, his compadre, remarked: —Look at him, he was once so poor, but now he's thriving. He's getting rich.

—Of course, his wife said, he knows how to heal, that's where his wealth comes from.

—Let's test him. I know he doesn't actually know anything, but we'll call him anyway. I'll pretend to be sick, and you'll go get him.

—Alright, sounds good.

The man fell gravely ill, and though his daughters wept, their tears were false.

—Go fetch the compadre, he ordered.

They brought him, and upon arrival, he asked:

—What's wrong?

—Be quiet, just look at him, how serious his condition is.

The man was feigning illness, but the compadre saw Death at his feet.

—Comadre, prepare yourselves, he's already walking toward his fate.

—How can that be? protested the woman. He can't die!

—Yes, he is dying.

The shock made the woman faint. And the man, he died! In the end, it had all been an experiment to test whether the compadre truly saw what he claimed. That's where the story ends.

The Man and the death

One day, a very poor family struggled, too many children, no work, no money, no shoes, no clothes. The father, desperate and exhausted, was barely hanging on.

—M'hija, I'm leaving, he told his wife. Believe me, I have to go.

Overwhelmed by despair, he added:



—If Death calls me, I'll go. If she asks me, I'll leave with her.

So, the man set off, walking and searching, pleading for work here, begging for help there. But no one gave him anything.

Night fell, and exhausted, the man returned home. His wife, an understanding woman, one of those who uplift rather than discourage, welcomed him.

—Son, how did it go? she asked.

—Oh God, if only you knew... No, better not even tell you.

—Come on, tell me. If you didn't find work today, maybe tomorrow, or the next day. Someday you'll find something.

Honestly, I found nothing. No work, nothing. The children are barefoot, we have nothing, I don't even know what to do.

That night, weary from walking, he lay down to sleep. Then suddenly—he heard the door creak. "rchcc, rchhhh," It swung open. Son of a gun! He opened his eyes, and there, before him, stood a skeleton.

—Sonofabitch! What the hell is this?

And then Death starts and says:

—Give me your butt and I'll give you your bucket, give me your butt and I'll give you your bucket.

And as Death kept singing, she kept getting closer to the bed, and the man just couldn't take it anymore and says:

—Goddamn it! You can't even joke around with you!

—And the poor bastard sits down:

—I told you that, but just messing around, not for real.

I'll hop on a bucking horse so you guys can tell me another one.

The Godson of Death

The lady had just had her baby, and poor thing, she didn't feel brave enough to go out. So she told her oldest little boy:

—Go on, son, head out to the street, and the first person who passes by, man or woman, tell them to come here to me, to just run over real quick, right here with me.

—Okay —said the little boy.

And out he went to wait, and along came a woman, the first person to pass by...

—Good morning, ma'am. My mom said if you could please come do her a quick favor at the house.

—Holy Mary, child —Death replied— and why are you telling me?

—Because she told me the first one who passed by, whether it was a man or a woman, and since you're the first one passing, I'm telling you.

—Alright, son. That's the way to run an errand, just like they ask you to.

So the lady (Death) went into the house. There was the mother, with her little baby she wanted to have baptized, but she didn't feel brave enough to go out, because they were really poor and she didn't have any clothes nice enough to go out in.

Then Death said:

—Ma'am, what do you need me for?

—Well, I want to baptize my little boy, but I'm too poor to go out.

—Ah, I see. Well, don't worry, I'll baptize him myself. I'll go get the priest and come right back.

And off she went. Soon after:

—I'm here for the child. I'm taking him to be baptized.

So she took the baby, had him baptized, and brought him back to his mother. The boy began to grow, and every few days Death would visit, bringing little gifts, checking in on him. As he got older, one day Death said to the boy's mother:

—Look, comadre, I want your son to learn a trade.

—Oh, comadrita, but how? I'm too poor to pay a teacher...

—No, no need for money. I just need your blessing. I'll take care of the rest.

—Well then, if that's how it is, all right.

Then Death turned to the young man:

—Listen, son, you're going to learn how to heal the sick. That's your trade. There's someone ill in the city right now, go see him. Only you will be able to see me. If you see me standing at the head of the bed, place your hand on the patient and gather some zacatíos (herbs), boil them, and give him the tea. He'll feel relief. But if I'm at the foot of the bed, don't bother, he'll die in a few days. That's just how it is.

So off he went, the young boy, still just a little guy, to see the sick man, just like Death had told him. He went to where the man was lying. Ah, he started picking zacatíos, made an herbal water, and gave it to the sick man to drink.

Collector: So, that means Death was at the head?

Informant: At the head, yes, yes, right at the head.

Ah, then the sick man felt relief, and before long, he was completely well. People began to trust the boy, had faith in him. So, wherever there was a sick person, they'd call for him right away. But sometimes, when he saw his godmother, Death, standing at the feet, he would say clearly the person would die, that there was no cure. But when he saw her at the head, he healed them.

Then one day, a man decided to mock him.

—What would that kid even know? —he said— What would that little brat know about healing? So he told his daughter: —Pretend you're sick, go lie down and moan, and let's see if he can tell the difference.



The girl pretended to be ill. They made her lie in bed, groaning and groaning, though she wasn't hurting at all. The boy came to see her, checked her, felt her pulse, and examined everything.

—But she wasn't really sick —he said— they just wanted to make fun of me. But since I came to see her, now she's going to die—she'll be dead within the hour.

Collector: Where was Death standing?

Informant: Death was right there. He saw his godmother at the foot of the bed.

—You did it just to mock me. The girl wasn't sick, but now she really is—and she's going to die.

And she did die, because the godmother was there. From then on, whenever he visited a sick person, the first thing he did was look for where Death was. If she stood at the head of the bed, he'd place his hand on the patient and say:

—They won't die. Then he'd cure them with herbal waters made from zacatíos.

But if he saw Death at the feet:

—No, he'd say, there's no cure. They're going to die.

He could even tell the exact hour they would pass, because Death was already there. And that's the story of The Godson of Death.

The Godmother

As the old stories say, there once was a very poor man. But God blessed him with a child. When the boy was old enough, the man asked himself:

—Who could be my son's godfather? I don't know anyone around here.

So, carrying his son, he set off walking in search of someone. After some time, a dignified man appeared, white-bearded, dressed in white, with a noble gaze.

—Where are you going? —the man asked.

—I'm looking for a godfather for my son, the father replied.

—If you like, I can be his godfather.

—And who are you?

—I'm God.

—Ah, you're God...

The man paused, thought it over, and said:

—No, I don't think you're right for my son. You're not fair, you allow rich and poor, the crippled and the blind,

—You allow the amputees too. No, you're not consistent, you're not fair. You're not right for my son. So, goodbye.

And he kept walking, carrying his child. After some time, another man appeared, well-dressed, but all in black.

—Where are you headed? —he asked.

—To find a godfather for my son.

—If you'd like, I'll be his godfather.

—And who are you?

—I'm the Devil.

—Ah —said the man, thinking— no, you're not right either. Everyone who makes deals with you ends up losing. You're clever, full of tricks, and I don't believe you'd help my son at all. So no, I won't accept you. Goodbye!

And he walked on.

Eventually, he came upon an old woman, who asked:

—Where are you going?

—I'm looking for a godfather for my son.

—Too bad, I'm a woman. But if you'd like, I could be his godmother.

—Woman or man, it doesn't matter to me, I just want someone for my son.

—Then if you wish, I'll be his godmother.

—And who are you? —he asked cautiously.

—I'm Death.

—Ah, you're Death... Then I accept you as his godmother.

—But why do you accept me and not God or the Devil?

—Because you're fair. With or without tricks, to the good and the bad, the blind, the crippled, you take everyone equally. That fairness is why I accept you... and I hope you'll be just as fair with my son's life.



The Grape Vine and Death

Once upon a time, there was an old man who was about ninety years old. This old man was very poor, and all he had was twelve cents. With that, he went to buy three loaves of bread, those white loaves they used to sell back in the day. Just as he was about to eat the first one, a little boy came up to him and said:

—Sir, would you give me one of those three loaves you have?

—Ah, yes, with pleasure —said the old man, and handed him the bread.

—Thank you very much, sir —said the boy, and went on his way.

Later on, an old woman came by, and when she saw him eating, she asked him for another loaf.

She asked if he would give her a piece of bread.

—I'll give it to you whole, even if I stay hungry, but I'll give it to you.

And he gave the second loaf to the old woman. She left very happy, eating her bread. Just as he was about to take a bite of the last loaf, another old man came along and asked if he could have one too. So the old man said yes.

—Now I'll have to go eat roots, because I've got nothing left.

And the old man sat there, lost in thought. At that moment, another old man came up to him and said:

—What's wrong?

—Well, you see, I had three loaves of bread, and I just gave them all away to three different people.

—Don't you recognize me? —said the old man— I'm one of those three people you gave bread to. What do you want me to give you in return?

—Ah, I'm very hungry.

—Well, I'm going to give you a sack, the sack of wishes. And into that sack will go everything you ask for. That way, your hunger will be gone.

—Ah, thank you.

A little while later, a woman passed by carrying a huge basket of quesadillas, and the old man said:

—Let that basket of quesadillas come into the sack.

And the sack swallowed the quesadillas, and there they stayed. So he had enough and ate that day. Another day, he went to one of those public fountains where there were colorful fish; red, blue, all kinds of colors, and he said:

—Let those fish come fried into the sack.

And that's how he kept on living. But then, he grew thoughtful again, and the boy came and asked what he wanted, because the boy, too, had been given a loaf of bread.

—I can give you something instead of bread.

—Oh, really?

—Then tell me, what do you want me to give you? —said the boy.

—I want you to give me a grapevine, one where only the one I choose can climb, and the one I choose can come down.

At that moment, a grapevine began to grow, and it was always laden with grapes. A little while later, the old man arrived and said:

—Don't you remember that you gave me a loaf of bread? What do you want me to give you now?

—I want to have eternal life, or be able to die whenever I choose.

—Well, that's granted to you.

Soon, Saint Peter was fighting with the devil because the old man was an impenitent sinner on Earth. The old man wouldn't die, even though he was well over ninety, and they wanted him to pass away. Saint Peter and the devil were at odds, Saint Peter was defending him, while the devil wanted to take him.

—Why don't you let me go to Earth and bring him?

—Alright, go ahead.

The devil arrived and knocked on the door.

—Who's there? —asked the old man.

—I've come to take you, —said the devil.

—Come on in.

—Let the devil come into the sack! —the old man shouted.

The devil was thrown into the sack, and the old man tied the sack's mouth and started beating it with blows.

—Let me go! Let me go! —cried the devil.

The devil fled in terror from the old man's beating. When he arrived back in hell, he told Saint Peter about the thrashing he had received from the old man.

—Now I'll leave him here, —said the devil.

—I don't want that man.

—I'll bring him back, —said Saint Peter.

Then Saint Peter came and sent for Death. Death arrived and knocked on the door:

—Sir, sir, —said Death.

—What do you want?

—I came to...

—Who are you?

—I am Death. I've come to take you.

—Alright, come in. Look, don't you want some grapes? They're delicious. Come, climb up (the grapevine).

So Death climbed up the grapevine.

—Now you can't get down from there.

And Death stayed on the grapevine. For a time, people didn't die because no one could get Death down from there; nobody could get down from the grapevine. So Saint Peter went to call Death, apologizing to the old man, asking him to let Death go. Eventually, the old man agreed, and allowed Death to leave.

Over time, the old man said:

—I want to die, I'm old now, and here I am suffering. No one wants me on Earth anymore, because living this long has become a burden.

So he went to Hell. When he arrived at Hell, he knocked on the door:

—Ton Ton!

—Who is it?

—It's the old man who beat me up on Earth, said the king of the devils, Get him out of here!

—Ah, nobody wants me anywhere, the old man said. Then I'll go to Glory.

He arrived at the gates of Glory, and there was Saint Peter. He said:

—What do you want?

—I came from Earth.

—Ah, well then you can't come in here, because remember you tricked Death into climbing the grapevine.

—What's going on there, Peter? asked the Eternal Father.

—It's that this man wants to come into Glory, and I don't want to let him in.

—Ah, well, he does get in, because he was the man who gave us food on Earth.

The Vain Rich Man

There once was a man who was very rich, truly rich, rich, rich. One day, he called his engineers, four of them, to draw up the plans for a new building he intended to construct. The engineers were busy drawing measurements and lines to create the blueprint when one of the employees walked in.

—Sir, sir, the worker across the street just died. He fell from the building.

—What an idiot, what a moron! That's what happens when people don't watch where they step. Stupid! Fool! What a dumb guy!

—Sir —one of the engineers said—, I don't think it's like that. Death came, The Grim Reaper shook the scaffold, and that was it, his time was up.

—Engineer, it's a shame you're such an educated man, and forgive me for saying this, such a complete idiot. How can you seriously believe Death had anything to do with it?

—Sir, call me whatever you like; idiot, fool, whatever, but that's how it is. No one dies early. When God says it's time, it is. Death shook that scaffold, simple as that.

—What a dumb idea. Nonsense! What do you guys think?

—Honestly, we agree. When your time's up, Death just shows up and says, "Let's go." Right then, the doorbell rang.

—Go see who it is —the rich man told the maid.

The maid opened the door and saw a tall, pale, bony woman, eerie looking. Surprised, she asked:

—Ma'am, what do you need?

—I'm here to see the gentleman. May I come in?

—One moment. I'll tell him. She went back.

—Sir, there's a tall, skinny woman at the door. Looks kind of creepy.

—Must be one of those street beggars, always out hunting for a handout.

—Tell him I don't have time to see her; I'm too busy.

The maid went to the door and relayed the message:

—The gentleman says he can't attend to you, he's too busy.

—Tell him I need to see him, and if he doesn't want to wait, that's his problem.

The maid went back:

—The lady says either he sees her now or never.

—What a fool, what a bold woman. Go to the door and slam it in her face, throw her into the street!

The maid rushed out, slammed the door hard, sending the woman flying out into the street. Laughing, the maid said:

—Poor thing, she probably landed where the dead man was.

—Liar! —the woman shouted, carrying the maid on her back.

The engineers rushed over, and the woman told them:

—Leave her, she's fine. I'm here to speak to this man.

—What are you doing? You've scared my maid half to death!

—She'll be fine. Just sit down. Let's talk. You see how the worker died?

—Yes.

—That worker?

—Yes, for being careless, for not paying attention.

—Forget those thoughts. Money has made you arrogant and heartless. You think money can solve everything. You're wrong. Remember, death comes for us all, no matter how much wealth we have. Money should never make us forget our humanity. You called me a beggar, but I don't beg for food. I beg for souls. And now, I've come to ask for yours. Your time has come.

—Who do you think you are to say that?

—I am death.

—Death! What do you want from me? Don't you see I'm a wealthy man, I don't even know what to do with all my money.

—Money doesn't interest me. The Lord sent me to take you with me, to join the worker I just took. He's on his way. So prepare yourself.

—Are you threatening me?

—I don't threaten anyone. When it's your time, I just give a little tap or a puff, and it's over.

—Did you hear that, gentlemen? This is a wicked woman daring to threaten me in my own house.

—Say what you want, but money can't fix everything. It's just an illusion. Sure, it's needed to live, but it doesn't make us better. You're busy building big plans, yet you forgot I was coming for you, didn't you?

—Look, I'll give you two million dollars, or quetzals, to distribute among the poor, just let me live.

—I don't sell myself for anything. The Lord sent me to take you, and it's time to go. You've wasted my time. You've got ten minutes left to live.

—Gentlemen, you are witnesses to this woman's threat.

The engineers were too terrified to look up, speechless. The woman who had fallen dead was now fully recovered, watching the exchange between Death and the arrogant rich man.

—Well, look at your watch, five minutes have passed.

—Listen, I won't offer you money, but I'm starting to believe in you.

—I don't care if you believe me.

—Give me thirty days to settle my affairs.

—Your life was enough to settle things. How can you ask for more time now? I don't give extensions. You have three minutes left.

—Wait, are you really threatening me?

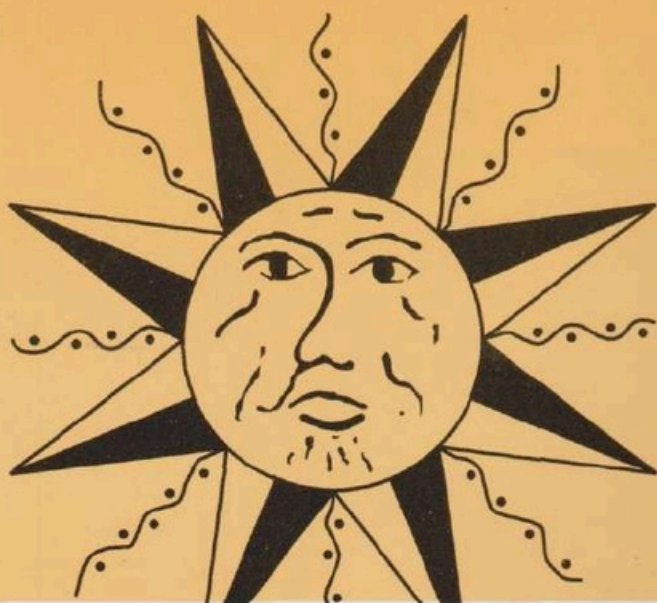
—I don't threaten. I'm telling you the truth, you have two minutes left.

—Gentlemen, you're witnesses.

—Don't bring up witnesses, I don't accept them.
You have one minute left.

Moments later, the man collapsed dead. The
engineers stood up, and Death vanished instantly.





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