

Screwelworth

Being a ghost's story of Christmas

by

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Night, Before Christmas

Death is like an onion. It doesn't smell like an onion. (Death is, in fact, odorless.) But it has shape, structure, an anatomy, and as it turns out it is exactly like an onion—and not just any old onion, but specifically a yellow onion. In classic terms, death looks like a tall guy wearing a hooded robe who walks around with a sickle, and it may indeed look like that on the surface. But internally, death looks and works like an onion looks and works. It's round. It has layers. Or skin, if you like, and you can peel back its cold, delicate skin and find another layer, peel back that one and find another, peel back and keep peeling back and back and deeper and deeper into death until you finally reach death's core where layers to peel back no longer exist.

At that point, death itself has died and, if you're the one dying, you are dead-dead-dead. You can not get deader than dead-dead-dead. Dead-dead-dead is it.

When you reach the very core of death, everything we think we understand no longer continues to exist and everything we think we know no longer applies. If you are dead-dead-dead, it means you have reached the Singularity—the place in our universe where our laws of physics and everything else we think we understand breaks down. No words, no concepts, no nothing can be said to explain it, other than to say dead-dead-dead is the very end of death itself.

If you don't believe me, I'd encourage you to talk to a friend of mine, the person who coined the phrase dead-dead-dead. Because of him, professional medical people, as well as less professional medical people, and even those who are completely untrained in the medical field—in other words, just about everyone else everywhere else—use the term dead-dead-dead to describe the very core of death. If you doubt that my friend coined the phrase, and gets credit for it, you can open *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Terminology, 110th Edition*, to “Medical Definition of Death” on page 42, and you will find the proof that you seek: *DEATH: 1.) The*

ceasing of life, i.e., end of life. 2.) The permanent cessation of all vital bodily functions required for life. 3.) Total brain death. 4.) If 1 - 3 are all present in any way, shape, and/or form, the state of being known as dead-dead-dead coined by MY FRIEND.

Even though he was the first to use the phrase, he is not a celebrity because of it. (He could be if he wanted to, but he prefers living a life of relative anonymity.) But he is well respected, especially by people who want to know more about death and how it works. This means you can really find him and really talk to him, but it also means you'd have to stand in a very long and discreet line to do that, and then there's the very good chance that when you finally find yourself in the position to talk to him he wouldn't want to talk to you and you'd never get to talk to him anyway. But if you're really curious, it's certainly worth a shot.

My friend is considered *the* Death Expert on death. The reason for this is because he was an Emergency Medical Technician for many years. What exactly is an Emergency Medical Technician? What does an EMT do? Here's the simple definition: EMTs are Death Hunters. They drive around in ambulances, hunting for it, which is a pretty unusual thing for people to do. If given the opportunity, most people run from death, but EMTs do not do that. EMTs choose to do the exact opposite. When death approaches, they run straight for it, fully intending to fight it to the death.

My friend likes to be called a Death Hunter because 1.) It's an accurate definition of what he did to make a living, and 2.) Death Hunter makes the job sound much more romantic and cooler than it really was. His goal, of course, was to save people from death, but most of the time death beat him to the punch. Alas, that is the Way of the EMT.

What all this means is, my friend spent a considerable part of his life in death's company. He and death got to know one another. They were intimate —if not friends, certainly travelers, like two strangers hiking the same trail. At first they were cautious and standoffish, maybe even a little skittish, but they kept on seeing one another at various car wrecks and suicides and mass shootings and whatnot and after a while it dawned on them that they were going to run into each other all the time. Might as well get it over with and get to know one another, so one morning:

After a small but persistent gas leak took the lives of an entire family in their sleep one night, my friend the EMT Death Hunter showed up at their house and saw death standing by the front door. Hanging around, as usual, sickle in one hand, a Lucky Strike in the other. (My friend says death tends to linger and when it does it smokes, kind of like how some people smoke a cigarette after sex.) When their eyes met, instead of looking away, which is what they both always did, this time my friend held his gaze and gave death a shallow head nod, crisp, non-sense. But it was respectful and courteous and the important thing was they both acknowledged the other. Emboldened by this, my friend walked to death, cautiously at first, and then, feeling unable to turn back and stop what he started, and wishing he could, with a little more enthusiasm. (In other words, he started something and, like it or not, he had to finish it, so might as well commit.) My friend told me that it appeared as if death was not prepared for this and literally turned its head and looked over its shoulders to see if there was someone else standing behind it. It is quite possible death had been taken by surprise. Face to face, my friend said, "How you doin'?"

"Fine," death said. "You?"

"Fine."

Soon thereafter, they walked the trail side by side, in silence most of the time, and then one day a conversation began and death revealed things to my friend about death. It all happened very naturally. As they journeyed on, a relationship developed. It led both to a deeper understanding of the other and perhaps themselves.

I can't speak for death, as to why they became so conversational, but for my friend, death fascinated him like biology fascinates a biologist or snakes fascinate a snakeologist. So, like any good scientist, he threw his life and being into the study of death and, since he got to talk with death on a regular basis, began to learn all sorts of things about it—like, for example, that death has skin like an onion with many layers you can peel back. Death has depth. It has a core.

This led my friend to become the world's leading expert on death. Today, he is so knowledgeable about it and so sensitive to it he can pinpoint death when and where it starts. (It is not unusual, he says, for death to begin at the tip of the left little toe, no matter what form of death a person undergoes. That is to say, if a person gets blown to smithereens by a pipe bomb or flattened like a pancake by a steamroller or dies quietly and all alone in a hospital bed, when death itself begins it often begins in the left little toe. Not every time, but almost, he says.) He can measure how far death has to go, count the layers of its cold and clammy skin, know with exactitude how many layers have yet to be peeled back until you reach death's core. He can see exactly when and where death will kill you. And he will know, without doubt, when you have reached the core, the very end of death, the state of being known as dead-dead-dead.

I used to be skeptical of my friend's so-called death expertise, but he proved me wrong one morning in a bustling city park. I never doubted him again. We were discussing death over coffee and donuts (glazed for him and a cinnamon roll with raisins for me) and I scoffed at his

claim that he understood how death works better than anyone. We were in the heart of the park, the very center (or core if you like), surrounded by lots of living, pulsating life. Mothers and fathers played with their children. Barking dogs ran, jumped, and caught flying frisbees in their mouths. Footballs passed back and forth as overexcited young people shouted that they knew how to throw better. (They made it very clear to everyone in the park that they knew how to do just about everything better.) My friend pointed to a woman seated on a bench and said, “See that lady? The one in the pretty yellow sundress that looks like she’s sleeping? Well, she’s not sleeping. All the people with her, including the people sitting right next to her, think she’s sleeping, but she is not. She is dead-dead-dead.”

I nodded at him, wearing a *sure, sure, whatever you say* smile, confident my friend was wrong and totally off his rocker. I didn’t believe him for a second and thought, *No, for goodness sakes, she’s not dead. She’s asleep. Look at her. She’s young, healthy, a mother. Her children play at her feet and she’s happy. She looks happy. My friend the Death Expert is crazy-wrong, emphasis on the word “crazy.”*

But my friend was not wrong, nor was he crazy. When he saw my doubt, he said, “Trust me, buddy. She’s at the point of no return. She’s reached the core of the death onion. No one ever comes back from that place and she never will.”

“Riiight,” I said, which really meant “Wroooong.” I smiled politely.

Nothing irks my friend more than a smug, polite smile, especially when he knows he’s right. Driven to prove it, he found a hosepipe nearby, turned on the water—he can be impulsive, let’s say—and dowsed her. To everyone’s surprise—husband, children, friends, dog (frisbee fell out of its mouth)—she did not react. She did not move. She didn’t do anything. My friend the

Death Expert nailed it. To everyone's shock and horror, the poor young woman was dead-dead-dead.

If my friend ever says something like that to you? That that person sitting right next to you is dead-dead-dead? Take his word for it. He knows what he's talking about.

So when I use the term dead-dead-dead you can trust me that it means you are dead as dead can be. You are dead in every way possible in the physical world. Biological life no longer flows through your veins. You have literally transformed into something else. You and death have merged into one. In a way, you have become death.

But if you're still in doubt, there is a dead-dead-dead checklist created by my friend the Death Expert that you can use to verify your absolute and complete deadness. No pulse? Check. No breathing? Check. No brain activity? Check. You've been this way for 72 hours? Check. You smell and look like Valdeon cheese, a cow-and-goat's milk bleu cheese that tends to weep as it ages? Check. You've been burned to a crisp. Check. You've been frozen solid for a week. Check. You've been diced up in a candy making machine. Check. You've been eaten by a shark. You slipped on a banana peel in the bathtub and broke your neck. Check. You fell asleep and never woke up. Check. There are no more layers to pull away in death? Check. If that sounds like what happened to you, there is no escaping it. You are as dead as dead can be because everything about you, everything that physically makes *you* you, is gone, baby, gone, so long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye. You have reached the ultimate state of death, the final layer. You are dead-dead-dead, otherwise known as the ol' Triple D. (A term also coined by my friend.)

But Shakespeare understood it better than even my friend the Death Expert. *Ay, there's the rub*, Shakespeare said. *For in the sleep of death what dreams may come. When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause.*

In other words, when you reach the ultimate state of death—as we all will one day—you *will find that you continue to exist*. Yes, you may have reached the core of the onion, you may have peeled back every layer of death's clammy skin until there are no more layers to peel back, your brain, spinal cord, and maybe even your entire body may no longer exist—regardless, you will. At that point you will have reached the Singularity.

And that's exactly where a gentleman by the name of Shmattie Jacobs found himself on the day he died, officially dead-dead-dead, and—say it with me—you can't get deader than that, which explains why he wondered why he still wondered why. After all, he was dead-dead-dead, and since you can't get deader than that it seemed reasonable for him to ask, *Why am I still wondering why?*

Years and years later he would still wonder why, but by then he'd have a better, if not imperfect, understanding of how the layers work in life and death and after death. Time, even in death, which exists outside of time, gives you perspective.

You could say, then, that *life* is like an onion. Or perhaps more accurately, *existence* is like an onion, but an onion without a core. As Shmattie learned in death, even though his body was dead-dead-dead, he was not dead-dead-dead at all. He learned, or would learn, that there is no final skin of existence to peel away, no ultimate nucleus, no absolute end, no last, irrevocable core that leads to total annihilation and nothingness of the Self, the Ego I. There may be one last layer of skin to peel away at death's core as far as your physical body is concerned, which my

friend the Death Expert would tell you is exact fact, but existence is an entirely different matter because there is no core. There are simply infinite layers to peel back forever, and if you are not prepared to meet those layers, the fact that you retain the Ego I, the Self, long after death itself has died means you can go on and on wondering why you're still wondering why after you've been declared legally dead-dead-dead back here on the good, old planet earth. The opposite can be true also. You can be dead-dead-dead and not wonder why at all. In fact, you can be dead-dead-dead and not even know it.

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Shmattie Jacobs had a friend named Screwgelworth and he would not have agreed with the "existence is like an onion without a core" argument at all, but that's because he had a singular perspective from that of Shmattie's. He would one day have to come to terms with that, of course, like it or not.

But from where he stood now, in full agreement with the scientists and doctors, he understood Shmattie's dead-dead-dead death completely, perhaps even better than Shmattie himself (or even my friend the Death Expert). He had no doubt Shmattie Jacobs was dead. He achieved this doubtlessness in a number of ways. He made sure he saw Shmattie's corpse in the casket. He touched his cold, rigid body by poking it with a boney finger once, twice, then a third time. (This final touch had nothing to do with sentiment. Screwgelworth needed total cold, rigid confirmation and he got it.) But even at this point he wasn't quite satisfied or finished.

The final nail in the coffin, as it were, was watching the casket burn with Shmattie's body in it. Screwgelworth closed the lid, slid it into the cremation chamber himself, shut the door, and depressed the incinerator button. The gas ignited, producing a flame not unlike the backend of a

jet engine. He peered through the small, square, wired glass window, blackened and burnt-orange around the edges. (Staring through it was comparable to staring through a pint of Belgian-style witbier, a Blue Moon or Orange Ave. Wit perhaps.) He leaned so close he almost touched the crematorium chamber window with the sharp tip of his hooked nose. And there he remained. He did not move, even with the considerable heat coming off the glass. He remained that way until both body and casket had turned into dust two hours later.

After the chamber and ash cooled, Screwgelworth opened the door so that he could comb through the fragments of fire-blasted bone with his fingers. He did it slowly, like a contemplative gardener in a Japanese Zen garden raking pebbles to replicate the flow of water. If you were sitting on a bench watching him do this, you would have found it very calming. Then he raised a handful of ash and bent his head at an angle and frowned deeply, inspecting all that was left of Shmattie Jacobs. He let the ash filter and fall through his long, claw-like fingers. Again, if you were on that bench, observing, you might have thought he had zenned-out on big, important ideas, postulating about death and life and how curious it all is—that at the end this is what we are all reduced to—but no, you would have thought wrong. Screwgelworth bent his head at an angle because he had a little crick in his neck and the angle removed the cricking pressure. He frowned because it improved and tightened his vision so that he could visually make certain this really was all that was left of Shmattie Jacobs. Also, he had a small and sudden pain in his side (a bit of undigested sushi, he thought) and his face reacted to it by pulling itself down into a frown that looked quite serious, contemplative, and curious.

With a sudden flick of his wrist, Screwgelworth scattered Shmattie's ashes. Afterwards, he slapped his hands together, a cloud of bone fragment dust exploding in the shape of a

mushroom cloud. An attendant stepped up and squirted a gooey blob of antibacterial hand sanitizer into his palms (laced with the intoxicating sent of sweet jasmine so that the air filled with sweet jasmine and the slightly metallic odor of cremated remains), he wiped his hands into slick, twisty fist-knots, and then off he went to a *very important business meeting*, one in a long line—a lifetime—of very important business meetings. He could not have been happier. He had no doubt that his old friend and business partner Shmattie Jacobs was dead-dead-dead and he did not have to think about him again for a very long time.

Now, Shmattie was dead all right, but not as dead as Screwgelworth and everyone else naturally presumed. Certainly not dead-dead-dead, even if you can't get deader than that. And you can't. And Shmattie was.

You can't blame Screwgelworth. It's a common mistake we all make, alive or dead, when dealing with the state of being known as dead-dead-dead. We do not expect dead-dead-dead people to continue to exist. And they do. And Shmattie did.

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Shmattie's death happened like this:

He walked briskly down the sidewalk on his way home—what you would consider an easy, everyday thing to do. He'd been doing it easily, every day for years. He always walked home from the office. Death had not been on his mind. His mortality either.

His last living thoughts were about purchasing some new socks, the kind with those little whirling designs on them that look like dark hurricanes. He would wear those socks when he fired those two young and bothersome brown-nosers Willson Pitts and Bart "Pinky the ADW Clown" Broons. This coming Monday that would be, and deep within his heart he was certain

the moment would be: *Absolutely. Rapturous.* He hated people in general—a given—but he hated adult people with stupid nicknames even more. Nicknames in adulthood were not only infantile, Shmattie felt they were useless, worthless, of no value at all, and he could go on and on repeating the same “of no intrinsic value” model for eternity. Since Bart Broons often called himself “Pinky the ADW Clown”—for some reason Shmattie never cared to discover—his hatred for the man, and clowns, had reached an unparalleled level. (Had he learned what ADW stood for, Shmattie may have had Mr. Broons fired, fricasseed, and served up with an apple in his mouth.) He couldn’t wait to tell him that his career with the S&J corporation had come to a sudden and dreadful end. Shmattie’s toes tingled at the thought, especially his left little toe.

This would not have drawn attention to itself. Shmattie’s toes often tingled at the thought of firing people, or stepping on and killing insects, or kicking ferrel dogs and homeless people as he walked by. Having an especially tingly left toe would have made Shmattie think he was having the best day ever. Not that it would have changed anything if it had. Unlike my friend the Death Expert, Shmattie knew nothing about where death begins in most people.

He strolled along a private street that led to his Gilded Age mansion, a mere 115 rooms, 90,000 square feet, 18-hole golf course in the back. A cleverly engineered glass greenhouse built in 1901 sat on the west side of the house and a formal French-Canadian garden had been parked in the front, what you had to walk through to get to the massive entrance door which was made of Indian sandalwood and polished to a breathtakingly beautiful cherry stained-pinkish-hue. Black gas lampposts and ancient leafy oaks lined both sides of the street, and as Shmattie walked home the autumn breeze blew his thin cap of white hair in playful curlicues. His thoughts (about

the socks he would wear when firing Mr. Pitts and Mr. Broons) were about as deep as a puddle of water after a light rain.

Shmattie Jacobs never walked home again.

Ever.

He shuffled along the sidewalk like an old fashioned steam engine, arms pumping away, little legs spinning. *Shuf-shuf-shuffling!* Old Steam Engine Shmattie—as he was called in far away lands or in dank, dark holes in the ground where his staff could whisper the disparaging nickname in secret half-swallowed chuckles and (maybe) get away with it. If he'd had a smokestack on top of his head, milky-white smoke and yellow sulfur would have puffed out of it, polluting the sky above. *Shuf-shuf-shuffling! Shuf-shuf-shuffling! Shuf-shuf-shuffling!*

He dragged a metal-tipped rosewood cane behind him. He did this with such force it almost seemed possible the cane's tip bit right into the sidewalk, leaving a narrow trail of broken-up concrete behind him. It made an awful sound, which made passersby think of dentists, drilling for Antarctic core samples, and elephants, all at the same time.

If the cane was not present, along with the irritating sound that accompanied it, you'd hear Shmattie's hips popping. When he took a shuffle-step, a perfect popcorn *pop!* followed, and if he walked briskly—as he did this afternoon—his hips sounded like a pan of stove-top Jiffy-pop set on high heat, a continuous explosion of oil, hot butter, flavoring agents, and GMO corn kernels with every step. Even the air around Shmattie had a hot buttered, salted, burnt scent to it. No one really knew why, but they could not deny that when Shmattie Jacobs walked by their stomachs grumbled and most of them longed for hot buttered popcorn. Some thought the old

billionaire wore a popcorn scented cologne, a Jiffy-pop # 5, let's say, or that perhaps his body naturally emitted a hot buttered popcorn odor.

By far, the oldest, most worn out, most abused body part on Shmattie Jacobs was his head. It seemed like a perfectly normal and acceptable head, as heads go, hardly had a scratch, dent or scar on it. Smooth, well oiled skin covered it and the facial features on it were ripening into old age with some grace (with a little help from his plastic surgeon). His head did not resemble a cucumber. In fact, it looked like a fine, old, normal head, but beneath all that normalcy and fineness was a head that had been been badly, and willfully, abused for decades. The internal parts of Shmattie's head, the parts that kept his head together, and that would include his brain, were a wreck and coming loose, and so, accordingly, his head wobbled like a pub sign losing its moorings, left to dangle dangerously in the wind. Shmattie's head clung to his neck for dear life, and it seemed that everything about him, his entire body and being, resembled that wobbly old head of his. Shmattie's body hung on to life for dear life.

And that was the man. And there he was *shuf-shuf-shuffling!* himself along. Old Steam Engine Shmattie. Old Drill Bit Jacobs.

And then all of a sudden—of course, that's how it always happens. And then all of a sudden! A U.S. postal truck careened wildly out of control and shot toward him.

No stranger to surprises, Shmattie took a cool, calm, and collected step backwards, his shallow thoughts unaffected. Those socks with the hurricane designs spun like plastic windmills in his eyes. They were all he saw when he stepped backward.

This kind of thing was not unusual for the man. He'd been taking steps like this for years. They'd become a reliable reflex, something he could count on, requiring little thought and little

physical exertion. It's how he'd gotten so very, very rich. Everything was a cool, calm, and collected step backwards, forwards, to the right, to the left. A calculated dance. Given enough time and effort, and the moral code of a sociopath, he danced his way to the level of Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individual (a UHNWI) and entered the world of the super wealthy, the ridiculously moneyed, a card carrying member of the elite global billionaire oligarchy. Never mind the businesses, human beings, and lives he coolly and calmly and collectedly stepped on in the process.

The process itself had become the most important thing in Shmattie's life. He took great delight in it. The courtroom battles, the victims, the useful idiots (so, so many of them), and, on rare occasions, the surprises. It's true, however, that even those rare surprises did not surprise him. He may have appeared surprised, but it was merely part of the process. Surprises never surprised Shamttie. He controlled every aspect of every thing, even if it appeared as if he had been surprised, which never, ever—not in a thousand years—happened. That kind of control gave him a sense of purpose and he found it pleasing, and absolutely unnecessary. The reason for this was very simple. Power—not a *sense* of power, but real, raw, life-altering power over hundreds, thousands, even millions of people, which was what it was all about. The process was more fun to him than throwing a bag of unwanted, mewling kittens in a river to drown, but it paled in comparison to the power that came with it. He felt right. He felt good. He felt like a god.

Feeling godlike means Shmattie Jacobs actually believed he controlled and was prepared for everything. Nothing surprised the Surpriser. When it came to careening and out of control postal trucks? Well, really, he was prepared for simple surprises such as these. Accordingly, he

simply stepped backwards, his thoughts still thinking about those wonderful spinning hurricane socks.

The postal truck missed him by a foot, maybe more. Quite something, given the amount of last-minute-timing involved. Shmattie didn't break a sweat. He smiled coolly. Calmly. Collectedly. He had done it again, as usual. It was nothing, really. He would get that postal carrier's tag number and before the hour was out that particular postal carrier would be out too—of a job, on the street, a broken man or woman. The gender wasn't important. Race, religion, what have you, none of that played into his scheme. It's the word *broken*. It mattered. When that word attached itself to anything—man, woman, race, culture, country, religion, what have you—that's what did it for old Shmattie. The best surprise of all. Yes, surprises like that really made his day. His smile cooled even more.

Unfortunately for Shmattie, a truly unexpected thing happened. It was one of those things you can never plan for or on or even around, no matter how cool, calm, and collected you may think you think you are. It was so unexpected, in fact, that Shmattie Jacobs was actually taken, possibly for the first time in his long and arguably miserable life, by surprise.

He became, for an instant, the surprised Surpriser.

As he stepped backward, dodging the postal truck with ease, the golden heel of one his Jada Dubai Passion Jeweler shoes found itself balanced on a solitary pebble, well centered—you could say perfectly centered—enough to throw his balance. It also acted like a greased ballbearing, which caused him to kick up and out like a one legged Rockette dancing the can-can. The rest of him followed, gravity took over, and he fell. He landed square on the back of his neck. And Shmattie's neck, which had been hanging on to his old head almost as desperately, if

not more so, than his old head had been hanging on to it, snapped as easily as a brittle piece of oak.

The postal truck went on its merry way and that particular postal carrier went on to deliver the mail for yet another day, oblivious to Shmattie's terrible demise. Of course, Shmattie hadn't been oblivious to his demise because it had happened to him.

He was quite aware, even after he was dead-dead-dead.

And that's how Shmattie Jacobs died.