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From the Teeth of Angels

By Jonathan Carroll

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Several summers ago, *Esquire* magazine ran an scornful essay blanketing most contemporary novelists with the criticism that their subject matter was too small, their concerns as minimal as their prose style. Where were today's Tolstoys, Prousts and Joyces? Had they drifted into film in the wakes of Jean Renoir, Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini? In short, asked the essay, had the modern novelist's arm grown too short to box with the eternal questions?

It certainly hasn't in Jonathan Carroll's latest blend of magic and matter. Sometimes this novel triumphs and sometimes it fails, but its ecstasies and agonies all follow from how high Carroll has aimed. His theme here is no less than the mystery, power and limitations of death itself.

Like Zeus, Death takes on many human forms in its furtive, insidious visits to Earth, entering the lives of Carroll's characters through many doorways. In Sardinia, Death, in the form of a long-deceased friend, visits Ian McGann in dreams, offering to answer McGann's questions. But if McGann cannot grasp Death's answers he must suffer penalties that might cost his life.

In Los Angeles, Wyatt Leonard, once the host of a children's television show, is dying slowly of leukemia. Leonard is not the type to dream of death directly. He dreams of death indirectly, dreams of playing guitar naked in the back of a Dodge with Jimi Hendrix. For the site of a direct visit to Leonard, Death chooses a toy store.

Death's most sinister appearance occurs in Vienna, where actress Arlen Ford has retired early from enormous fame and pervasive ennui. Into her tranquil but barren existence comes photographer Leland Zivic. Tender, cultured, adventurous, playful, Zivic is far more than Arlen had dreamed possible in a man, and she falls fathoms-deep in love with him. Then he tells her the most frightening truth imaginable about himself. Then he tells her something far worse.

Gradually braiding the narratives of Leonard and Ford, Carroll brings the two together in Vienna where they will face Death jointly. But they do so from different perspectives. Leonard has wrestled for a long time with the glacial, inexorable advance of his impending surrender to leukemia. "I don't *want* to have any more hope," he says. "I would like to learn how to die now." Like Montaigne (who stole the idea from Cicero), Leonard suspects the whole of human knowledge is distilled in the knowledge of how to die. However, the only region we enter by abandoning all hope, as Dante described, is hell. Hope is Arlen Ford's strength, perhaps even her salvation. It just may, in fact, enable her to know the nature and weaknesses of Death better than Death itself knows them. It may even allow her to defeat Death.

But, then again, it may not.

If the success of this novel springs from the heights Carroll scales pursuing the vastness of his subject matter, there also lie the grounds for its deficiency. Pushed by the metaphysical nature of his material into a kind of metafiction, where Death sits about European cafes eating hot dogs with sauerkraut, Carroll's characters occasionally shed their humanity to become mere mouthpieces for conflicting ideas. As playwright Tom Stoppard once noted, "Dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself." True, but the great fiction writer always stays a fiction writer. Even the most cerebrally transcendent moments in, say, Dostoevsky or Kafka get woven seamlessly into the narrative. Not always in Carroll, though most of the time, and poignantly so in the case of Arlen Ford.

More troubling to many readers will be what may seem pedestrian answers to unanswerable questions. Can we, as Arlen Ford suggests, find a way to triumph over Death before his inescapable victory over us? Any answer to this question—which human reason has offered no universally accepted answer to thus far—risks seeming small or even pat.

But if Carroll's reach exceeds any of our grasps, his sincere and keenly intelligent effort wins our admiration.