Peggy Danvers and the Terrifying Figure

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One Tuesday morning in autumn, at about 8:17 a.m., Peggy Danvers pulled on her fading turquoise robe, walked downstairs into her kitchen, and died. As her body fell to the bare, wood floor, her head hit the corner of the kitchen table. She came to rest face down, arm awkwardly hooked on the kitchen chair, a few flakes of its peeling, white paint falling in her hair.

Peggy watched her blood pool on the floor. The vibrant red rolled across the rough grain of the wood and matted her gray hair. She stood there over herself considering whether or not she should get some pledge and a mop. She stood there considering so long that her blood started to congeal a bit. Peggy ultimately decided that dead people really shouldn't be concerned with bloodstains on their kitchen floor, as unsanitary as it was.

She heard Mrs. Kingston's screen door squeak on its hinges and knew the old bat was coming to pester her about helping to organize the Sunday School Christmas pageant. The two widows had been friends before their husbands died, but while Peggy moved on to knitting and putting out food for stray cats, Sheryl moved on to church pageants. Thus their friendship ended. She had said no to Sheryl's pageants for the past 14 years and now, gazing in slight consternation upon her own dead body, Peggy Danvers smiled perversely at the surprise the nosey woman would be getting this year. What a final and resounding "no" this would be. Still befuddled, but much happier about it, Peggy passed through her back door and into the clear, morning sunlight, not at all feeling the autumn chill in the breeze.

As Peggy walked away from her house and towards town, Sheryl Kingston made her way uninvited into her neighbor's kitchen and released a scream that woke the stray cat living under Mrs. Danver's porch.

Peggy strolled down Main Street, casually window-shopping. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she thought that maybe she should go somewhere. Standing next to her own dead body didn't sound like a worthwhile way to spend the rest of her morning. There were people inside the shops and businesses, getting ready for the day, but the sidewalk was relatively deserted. The people Peggy passed didn't look at her and Peggy didn't look at them. She came to a stop in front of Lou's Haberdashery to admire a deep purple bowler hat adorned with an electric blue feather that certainly didn't come from any bird around here.
"Lovely hat, isn’t it? But it’s far too young for an old fart like me,” a rusty voice mused to Peggy’s right.

Peggy turned to find her dead father standing next to her, inspecting Lou’s array of hats. She probably would have died from shock if she hadn’t already watched herself die that morning.

"Papa?"

He turned towards her and looked confused. "What? No I’m not—Oh! Oh right! I forgot that’s what I looked like. Sorry, sorry, I’m having a slow morning. No I’m not your father. I should introduce myself properly before I go on blathering about hats."

He held his hand out and bowed slightly, "I’m Death. It’s a pleasure to meet you Peggy Danvers."

Peggy shook his hand. If she still had nerves and muscles she thought she might have trembled. As it were, whatever substance she was made of stayed steady. Death’s hand was cold but his smile was peaceful and genuine.

"Why do you look like my father?"

"Ah," Death exhaled and his smile fell a bit. "I don’t really. You just see what you want to see. I’m a far too terrifying figure otherwise. You understand don’t you?"

Peggy wasn’t sure she did but she nodded anyway.

Death clapped his hands together in a cheery, finalizing way. "Right then! Let’s get going."

Peggy felt unsure for the first time that morning. "Where are we going?"

Death pulled her father’s face into the happiest grin she had ever seen on that somber, wrinkled visage.

"Down the river, of course." He gestured vaguely towards the dinky, little creek that ran through the center of Peggy’s small town.

Peggy followed the gesture and caught a glimpse of the sun flashing against the shallow water between the orange and red of the trees.

"It’s the same place I took your husband. And let me tell you, that man complained the whole way. I can already tell you’re a lot more pleasant. Or at least
you’re quiet. I get along a whole lot better with quiet.”

Peggy looked back at Death, who was staring dreamily at the light, fluffy clouds that were futilely attempting to cover the sun.

She looked briefly back down Main Street, towards her neighborhood, towards her home. She thought about Mrs. Kingston’s Christmas pageant. Peggy nodded and said, “Okay.”

Death shook himself out of his reverie and beamed at her. “Excellent! Good choice. In my opinion, sticking around to haunt people is overrated.”

He held out his hand and she took it, feeling the familiarity of her long-dead father’s palm, the grooves and curves some part of her never forgot, and the unfamiliarity of Death’s cold grip.

“You’ll like it down the river,” Death continued to babble happily as he led her away, throwing one last longing glance at the purple bowler hat.