THE IMPORTANCE OF LOOKING RIGHT

adapted from the short story

by

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EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET SCENE – BRIGHT MORNING.

FADE IN:

We sweep down from high over New York morning rush hour streets and traffic. The sidewalks are thronged with fast-moving people. Car horns are honking. It is a busy morning.

We zoom down in front of a single man, NORMAN Winslow (32) His head and shoulders fill the screen. He is running on the sidewalk, his tie flapping over his shoulder. He carries a black attaché case and keeps glancing at his wristwatch. He appears stressed, sweating, and anxious.

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

Norman accidentally bumps into an elderly woman carrying packages and sends them flying. The woman stumbles against the wall and almost falls over. Norman shouts over his shoulder

NORMAN
Sorry! So sorry!

The woman scowls at Norman as he runs on, obviously late.

CUT TO:

A yellow cab weaves in and out of traffic, obviously driving too fast. Through the windshield sits an unshaven cab driver, late for work. Middle-Eastern music plays loudly in the cab. A cigarette dangles from the driver's mouth.

BACK TO SCENE:

Norman looks at a large building on the opposite side of the street. He glances at his watch again. It is 8:55 a.m.

CUT TO:

Inside the cab, the speedometer registers nearly 40 mph. The driver is still weaving in and out of traffic, honking his horn and scowling. He waves his arms about.

CAB DRIVER
(Middle Eastern accent)
Move! Move! Get out of my ways! Can you not see I am late!

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

Norman steps between two parked cars. He glances at his watch again, looks to his LEFT and then steps out into the street.

BLACK SCREEN:
We hear the screeching of car brakes from a distance, getting louder, then very loud.
There is sickening, a dull THUD.
The sound of a body falling to the ground.
A pause and then a woman screaming.

In the screen blackness, a calcareous hand rises up from the bottom, up to the wrist and snaps its fingers. The screaming stops abruptly. There is total silence for a few seconds.

FADE IN:

NORMAN lies in the road in front of a yellow cab. His briefcase lies to one side, open. Papers from the briefcase flutter away as cars zoom by. People gather around looking down at NORMAN. The driver walks around, his hands around his head. People mill about. Many pedestrians just walk on by, uninterested.

FEMALE BYSTANDER
Someone call 911! He’s still alive! I saw him breathe!

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

A whole street scene with people gathering to witness the accident.

FADE TO BLACK:

(O.S.) Many people mumbling:

FADE IN:

People have gathered around NORMAN, looking down at him.

FEMALE PEDSTRIAN #1
Is he alright? I think he's still breathing.

MALE PEDSTRIAN
Nah, he's toast, man. These cabs weight over two tons. It's like being hit by an elephant, you know.

FEMALE PEDSTRIAN #2
(in a concerned voice)
Did someone call 911 yet?

The woman glares at the MALE PEDESTRIAN.

FEMALE PEDSTRIAN #2 (cont'd)
There ain't no elephants in this here city, dummy!

MALE PEDESTRIAN #2
He just stepped out. I saw it happen. (more)
MALE PEDESTRIAN #2 (cont'd)
What a dumbass! Didn't even look, and then WHAM! Must be from outta town I reckon.

MALE PEDESTRIAN shrugs his shoulders and walks away.

FADE OUT:

CUT TO:

Close up of NORMAN'S face. We pull back and then tilt horizontal as if standing up. We look down at NORMAN. We pull back MORE to see a slightly transparent image of NORMAN, looking down at him lying in the street. The noises from the streets slowly subside to almost nothing. Close-up on Norman's face. He looks distraught and confused.

NORMAN
(Central London accent)
Oh, no! This does NOT look good.

NORMAN moves his head from side to side to look around. The traffic has slowed to a barely perceptible speed.

CUT TO:

The screen fills with yellow. Pull back so that we see the cab's hood. There is a person-shaped dent in the hood. Pull back a little more. A shadow, moving at normal speed, moves across the hood and then looms over Norman. Norman watches in amazement as it reaches its full height.

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

We see a ghostly outline of Norman still standing beside his own body. Beside him is a tall figure, clad in black. This is DEATH. He is wearing flowing robes with a deep cowl. He carries a scythe in one hand. NORMAN looks up at the figure and then back to his surroundings. Everything has a thin blue line around it - buildings, people, cars. Even DEATH'S scythe is outlined in a thin blue line.

NORMAN looks back to DEATH, who is standing next to him, unmoving:

NORMAN
Oh, no! Don't tell me I'm . . .

CUT TO:

Close-up of DEATH'S cowl
Deep leaden tones:

DEATH
I'm afraid so.
NORMAN spins on his heels to look UP at DEATH. DEATH slowly looks around and then up to the sky.

DEATH
Well, you sure picked a nice day for it.

His voice is calm chatty. Close-up on DEATH'S face inside the cowl, as if he were smiling.

NORMAN gulps, his eyes fixed on the scythe in DEATH'S hand.

In a timorous voice:

NORMAN
Are you, er, DEATH?

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

DEATH stands a full foot taller than Norman. He lowers his head towards Norman. Now there is just blackness inside the cowl. Close-up of DEATH:

DEATH
Well spotted. Correct first time.

DEATH looks down at NORMAN'S prostrate form and slowly shakes his head.

DEATH (cont'd)
Nasty.

CUT TO:

NORMAN'S body is lying on its back in the road. His left arm is at an impossible angle. A trickle of blood has appeared at the corner of his mouth.

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

People start to move toward NORMAN at an incredibly slow speed. One bystander has managed to get a cell phone up to his ear. Norman watches the frantic expression as the man's lips move, as if they have been stitched together with elastic.

NORMAN turns and stares down at his own body lying in the street.

NORMAN
So am I really—?

DEATH
Right again. Full marks for observation.

NORMAN looks at DEATH who has pushed back the heavy cowl. His skull is the color of ancient ivory with tiny dark brown cracks that run in all directions like tentacles of electricity.
DEATH mops his skull with a black, silk handkerchief which he secretes somewhere within his robes. The eye sockets are quite black but there is the smallest glimmer of light in the center of each socket - a tiny pinprick of light that changes color like a soap bubble.

NORMAN is irate

NORAM
(shouts)
This is not fair! I was on my way to the theater and now I'm late!

(O.S.) A small snigger from DEATH

NORMAN'S face shows surprise. He points at his own body.

NORMAN
I'm sorry. You find this funny?

DEATH clears his throat.

DEATH
Er, no. sorry. I thought you had made a joke. You know . . . 'late'?

DEATH'S shoulders droop a little.

NORMAN
(sighs)
Ah, yes. Very droll. Excuse my lack of humor, won't you?
(beat)
I mean, considering.

DEATH lays a calcareous hand on Norman's shoulder.

DEATH
And now we must be going

Norman looks incredulous and stares at DEATH.

NORMAN
Going? What do you mean, 'going'?

DEATH tilts his head. He appears to be flummoxed.

NORMAN
(shouting)
See this?

Norman fumbles in his pocket and withdraws his wallet. From it, he removes a small photograph. He holds it out to DEATH.
NORMAN (cont'd)
(still angry)
This is my wife! We are pregnant!
Don’t be silly! I can’t go anywhere!

DEATH glances at the photograph and then back to NORMAN.

DEATH
I see. That is both fortunate and unfortunate.
(beat)
A DICHOTOMY I believe it is called.
Nevertheless, such things are beyond my control.

NORMAN is now VERY angry. His eyes narrow and his face contorts as if in disbelief.

NORMAN
You KILLED me! We’re expecting a baby and you KILLED me! How can it be beyond your control?
You’re . . . you're DEATH!

The lights in DEATH’S eyes appear momentarily to grow larger.

In a loud voice that echoes between the buildings:

DEATH
I? MURDER? NEVER! I do NOT murder!
I do NOT take life! EVER!

NORMAN cringes at the voice and steps back. His expression softens, as if showing compassion. He senses hurt in DEATH’S voice.

DEATH (cont'd)
The cab, Mister Winslow, took your life. Not I. Because you stepped in front of it.
(beat)
What were you expecting? You did not look properly and now you have paid the ultimate penalty.
(beat)
And by this I do NOT mean a spot fine.

Norman appears nonplussed by this reply. He throws up his arms.

NORMAN
Well . . . well, then, if YOU don’t kill people, what are you DOING here?

DEATH leans over towards Norman
DEATH
My job!

NORMAN looks incredulous:

NORMAN
(in a soft voice)
Your job?
And what exactly is that?
You’re DEATH, you ki—

DEATH'S tone is flat and even.

DEATH
I merely ensure your next journey begins on time.

NORMAN
I see. And what journey might that be? Exactly.

DEATH waves a dismissive and bony hand in the air.

DEATH
That is not for me to say.

NORMAN ponders on this for a while.

NORMAN
So from here I go to Heaven or He—
(beat)
—the other place.
Or Perdition. Or whatever it’s called. Right?

DEATH
As I have already explained, that is not for me to say.

DEATH waves a dismissive hand.

DEATH (cont'd)
That is between you and — well, not me. I can assure you.

NORMAN thinks about DEATH'S words.

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

People are in varying poses around NORMAN'S body, still moving imperceptibly slowly.
DEATH'S voice is a little kinder:

DEATH
Come. We must go.
NORMAN holds up a hand.

NORMAN
Whoa! Now just hold on a second.
Aren't I entitled to some sort of .
. challenge?
(beat)
Or something?

DEATH stops so suddenly that his heel bone skids on the road
He nearly stumbles.

DEATH
(sighs, then speaks slowly)
I see. It has been a while since I
have been . . . challenged.
There appeared to be no point. I
always win. Anyway, they always want
to play me at CHESS. I have no idea
why.

DEATH tilts his head and looks up, as if thinking. He places an
index finger near his chin.

DEATH (cont'd)
Besides, I can never remember how the
horse moves.

Norman waves his hands in front of him.

NORMAN
No, no! I don`t even play chess. I`m
not even very good at Checkers.

Norman glances sidelong at DEATH.

NORMAN (cont'd)
How are you with say, puzzles? How
about a little puzzle? Do you enjoy
games?

DEATH appears to contemplate this.

DEATH
A puzzle. What kind of puzzle?

A sly smile spreads across Norman's features. He rubs his hands
together as if warming them.

NORMAN
Well, how about this.

Norman glances quickly at DEATH, who is watching him in silence.
NORMAN (cont'd)
How about I get a second chance if
you cannot figure out my puzzle. It's
a really simple one.

Norman raises his eyebrows and stares at the impassive DEATH.

NORMAN (cont'd)
Are you a gambling, er . . . man?
Think of it as a game of chance.
Either you get it right, or you
don't.

Norman watches DEATH closely, but DEATH is absolutely still.

NORMAN
(hurriedly)
OK? If you DON'T get it, I get to go
home to my wife and unborn child. I
mean, this IS New York. It's not as
if I'll be putting you out of
business or anything, right?

DEATH passes the scythe to his other hand. Norman leans to one
side.

DEATH
That is true. I DO spend quite a lot
of time here.

DEATH looks into Norman's face but sees nothing other than youth
and innocence - a poker face.

DEATH (cont'd)
Well, what the heck. As I said, it IS
a nice day for it. What do I have to
do with this puzzle of yours?

(O.S.) NORMAN'S voice:
Is this possible? Can I really cheat, no . . BEAT DEATH and get
my life back?

NORMAN looks down at his body again.

(O.S.) NORMAN'S voice: (cont'd)
What can I possibly lose? Besides, if I win, I get to go home,
see Wendy again and watch our child being born. That's what I
have to LOSE!

NORMAN
Oh, it's quite simple, really. Just
some simple arithmetic.

NORMAN averts his eyes from DEATH, but quickly glances back to
see if DEATH is watching him.
With a little . . . twist. Are you game?

DEATH shrugs his shoulders with a sound like a bag of skittles being dropped.

DEATH
Proceed. I am all ears.

Norman rubs his hands together again and concentrates.

NORMAN
(takes a deep breath)
Alright, here we go. There's these three men and—

DEATH
Which three men?

NORMAN
(looking momentarily distracted)
What? It doesn't MATTER. Just three men. Any three men you like. It's just a puzzle.

Norman looks into DEATH's face. Although it was clearly a physical impossibility, he thinks he can see a slight frown on the skull.

NORMAN (cont'd)
Okay. Think of them as three of your friends.

DEATH listens in silence.

NORMAN (cont'd)
Sorry. I don't suppose you make too many friends in your . . . profession.
(beat)
I mean, I doubt you get many party invites.

DEATH
(sounding affronted)
I have made a few friends in my time.
(beat)
Briefly.

Norman tilts his head as if thinking. He grins broadly.

NORMAN
Alright, then, let us call these friends say, WAR, FAMINE and PESTILENCE, alright?
NORMAN shoots a quick glance at DEATH

DEATH.
  (enthusiastically)
  Ah, YES! I know them well.
  (beat)
  The little RASCALS.

NORMAN'S expression shows a pang of guilt. He hurries on to avoid further interruption.

NORMAN
Right. So these three guys decide to share an apartment to save on expenses. You know?

DEATH
Yes. I believe that sort of thing is quite common these days. Especially here. It has added considerably to my workload.

NORMAN contemplates this and nods.

NORMAN
Yes, I'm sure. Anyway, they move into an apartment but unfortunately, the apartment has no refrigerator. So they agree to buy one and split the cost exactly three ways.

DEATH
I am with you so far. Although I know that famine has little need for—

NORMAN
(sounding frustrated)
HYPOTHETICALLY. It's all just hypothetical.

DEATH'S head drops a little.

DEATH
Sorry.

DEATH appears to concentrate again. He looks again at Norman

DEATH
Do carry on. I am simply agog.

NORMAN (O.S.)
Why am I not scared? Or apprehensive? Why am I not feeling . . . ANYTHING? Maybe being dead has something to do with it. Perhaps our mental systems just shut down when we die.
NORMAN
So, the three friends went in to Acme Fridge Sales and selected a refrigerator model that they all agreed was a good one.

WIDEN TO REVEAL:

A slowly flashing blue and red light atop a vehicle in the distance approaches them incredibly slowly. It is blurred.

NORMAN (cont'd)
AND it was only thirty dollars.

DEATH stands upright.

DEATH
Ah! The 1940s. I remember them well!
(beat)
Good times, if a little busy in the middle.

Norman frowns at DEATH, who appears lost in a distant memory.

NORMAN
I'm sorry?

DEATH
A fridge. For thirty dollars. It would HAVE to be in the 1940's, no?

NORMAN
Oh. I see. I suppose so. Anyway, if they split the price of the fridge equally among them, how much would each person have to pay?

DEATH looks down as if thinking and then looks directly into NORMAN'S face.

DEATH
Is that a TRICK question?

NORMAN
(shaking his head)
No, no. It's just part of the . . . puzzle.

DEATH
Well, in that case each purchaser would pay - let me see - yes, ten dollars.

A rear view of DEATH shows him counting on his bony fingers.
NORMAN
(with enthusiasm)
Right! Great!

NORMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
I've always LOVED this part. Everyone has to really THINK about this.

NORMAN (cont'd)
So they buy the fridge and are walking down the road when the salesman suddenly calls after them, waving something in his hand.

DEATH
(sounding suspicious)
Ye-es. Am I supposed to guess what the man was waving?

NORMAN looks perplexed.

NORMAN
Er, no. It's still just part of the story.
(beat)
Anyway, it turns out that this particular fridge was on sale at five dollars off and the salesman had forgotten to mention it.

DEATH nods

DEATH
As they do

NORMAN
So, apparently the store manager had given the salesman five dollars and told him to give it to the three men as a refund because the fridge was on sale, see? It was five dollars off.

DEATH
(nodding slowly)
I see. DEFINITELY the 1940s

NORMAN nods as well and then grins smugly:

NORMAN
And herein lies the problem.

DEATH appears to listen more intently.

DEATH
Oh?
NORMAN
Yes. The salesman was not altogether, shall we say . . . honest, and pocketed two of the five dollars the manager had given him. So, how much does the salesman now have?

NORMAN watches Death’s expression. He speaks quicker.

NORMAN (cont'd)
And it's NOT a trick question. It's just to make sure you're following along.

CUT TO:

The lights in Death’s eye sockets appear to dim, as if he were squinting. DEATH speaks slowly, uncertainty in his voice.

DEATH
FIVE?

Norman blinks.

NORMAN
Okay! Wonderful! Now, let's say that salesman stole two of the five dollars, alright?

There is a flash of white light in Death's cowl, as if he had smiled.

DEATH
Ah! I think I am getting the hang of this!

WIDE VIEW:

The flashing red and blue lights have drawn closer and are now casting shadows on nearby cars and buildings.

BACK TO SCENE:

DEATH
Let's see now. If we ignore the two dollars in the rascal's pocket, he would in fact now be holding . . . three dollars.

NORMAN claps his hands together excitedly and grins.

NORMAN
Exactly! So, how much would the salesman need to give back to each of the three men?
DEATH
Hmm. Assuming no further monetary skullduggery by the salesman, each man should receive one dollar, yes?

Norman rolls his eyes at the appalling pun.

NORMAN
Correct! So, the salesman gave each man one dollar back and slunk off back to the store.

Norman stares intently at DEATH

NORMAN (cont'd)
Now, HERE is the interesting part.
So, pay close attention.

Close-up of NORMAN'S face.

NORMAN (V.O.)
My God. The only thing I have LEFT is his attention.

Norman rubs his hands together, as if he were about to deal the final card in the World Poker Championships.

NORMAN
Now, if each man had initially paid ten dollars but was given one dollar back, how much did each man in fact pay?

DEATH tilts his head to one side, then the other, and then stares at Norman.

DEATH
This is arithmetic, isn`t it?

Norman clears his throat. He stammers a little.

NORMAN
Well, er, sort of. It`s more like .. . sums, really. Yes, simple sums.

(O.S.) We hear DEATH mumbling in the background

DEATH
Er, I would say that each man has in fact now paid only nine dollars for his part of ownership in the refrigeration unit.

Norman looks at the blue and red lights dancing on the surroundings. The bystanders have all moved a small amount and are closing in on his body.
NORMAN
Absolutely right! Now, if we multiply what the men paid, in other words, nine times three we get how much?

DEATH
(sarcastically)
Oh, I know THIS one. The answer is twenty-seven.

NORMAN
Precisely right! And if we add to this the two dollars that the salesman stole, we end up with . . . how much?

DEATH appears to falter.

DEATH
Let me see, twenty-seven plus the two that was stolen would add up to . . . yes, er, twenty-nine.
(beat)
(in a smug tone)
Precisely.

Norman nods his head slowly.

NORMAN
Uh-huh. That's right. But the fridge cost thirty dollars, right? So . . . where did the other one dollar go?

NORMAN rubs his arms together, as if cold, and looks around.

DEATH
(hollow voice)
I SEE. TRICKERY!

NORMAN looks at Death's scythe.

NORMAN
Not exactly. It's more of a . . . well, a puzzler.

CUT TO:

We see DEATH'S foot from under his cloak. His bony foot is tapping on the road.

DEATH
Well?

NORMAN suddenly looks up and then back to Death, who appears to be getting impatient and seems somewhat irritated.
NORMAN
(looking surprised)
Well what?

DEATH
(sighs almost imperceptibly)
Where DID the other dollar go?

NORMAN
(speaks quickly)
Ah, but that's just it, isn't it? We agreed that if you could not answer the puzzle, I would be given a second chance, seeing as it was really an accident and it's not really my fault that Americans have not figured out which is the right side of the road. Or the correct side, actually.

DEATH places the scythe in front of him. One calcareous hand grips it tightly.

DEATH
(louder, menacing voice)
Norman Winslow. I do believe that I have been TRICKED.

NORMAN'S face is deadpan.

DEATH
May I ask what you do for a living, young man?

NORMAN smiles.

NORMAN
Oh, I'm a realtor.

DEATH
(sarcastically)
Well, of COURSE you are. Of COURSE you are. I should have guessed.

DEATH looks down at Norman's body on the road. Two paramedics are bent over it, shining a light into its eyes.

DEATH (cont'd)
I will allow you this one. Just once. But if I were you, I would not push my luck. People that are too sharp can end up CUTTING themselves.

DEATH glances at the scythe in his hand. He takes a step closer to Norman who leans back a little.
DEATH (cont'd)
Au revoir, Norman Winslow. You realize that we will, of course, meet again.

DEATH leans over until his face is now mere inches from Norman's.

DEATH (cont'd)
And if I were you, MISTER Winslow, I would look BOTH ways before I stepped out onto ANY road.

NORMAN breathes a sigh of relief. When he attempts to thank Death, Death's face shimmers and turns somewhat plumper. It very rapidly changes into a humanoid form and begins rapidly to sprout a beard. The black robes are replaced with an EMS uniform.

CUT TO:

NORMAN'S face fills the screen. His move slowly. Movement begins to speed up to normal speed. Paramedics are busy around him.

NORMAN
(mumbling)
Both ways. Right. I'll do that. Thank you, sir. Thank you.

A paramedic stands up and addresses the crowd that has gathered to witness the pavement spectacle.

PARAMEDIC
He's alright. Just a few cuts and bruises and a bit dazed. Give us some space to get him into the ambulance. Thank you. Move along now, please. Thank you. There's nothing to see. He's alright.

Norman runs his hands down the length of his own body. Everything seems to be where it should be. He is loaded into the ambulance and the paramedic inserts a line into NORMAN'S arm. The ambulance sirens begin to wail. As the ambulance moves away, Norman suddenly sits bolt upright and grabs the paramedic's arm.

NORMAN
(almost hysterical voice)
I beat him! I actually BEAT him. He couldn't work it out! He had to let me go!

NORMAN begins to snigger and then laughs aloud. The attendant gently pushes Norman back into the pillow. We see him inject morphine into the line in NORMAN'S arm.
You've had a bump on the head, sir. You were very lucky. Cabbies kill hundreds of folks every year on these streets. Just lie back and try to relax.

The paramedic adjusts the drip on the hook and then looks down at Norman.

I've been around a bit and can tell by your accent that you are from AUSTRALIA. You really need to be careful walking around New York, especially when crossing streets.
(beat)
It's not a game, you know. These streets will kill you.

NORMAN looks up at the roof of the ambulance and watches the shadows flitting past. Shadows without a blue outline. As the sirens and flashing lights relax him, he begins a low cackle that slowly grows into a raucous laughing fit. The morphine slowly kicks in and finds its mark. Just before the soothing drug sweeps over him, Norman turns his bleary eyes toward the paramedic.

(slightly slurred speech)
Where did my last dollar go, eh? Where did it go? Do you know? Eh? He didn't!

The attendant pats Norman's arm kindly.

I have no idea, sir.

The paramedic smiles at NORMAN.

But this is New York.

FADE OUT:

THE END.