

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

NORMAN
(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.

NORMAN (cont'd)
 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.

PARAMEDIC

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.

PARAMEDIC (cont'd)

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.

NORMAN

(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.

PARAMEDIC

I have no idea, sir.

The paramedic smiles at NORMAN

PARAMEDIC (cont'd)

But this is New York.

FADE OUT:

THE END.