

Death by Submission

By
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Primed by a cold beer, I sit at my computer in my office, staring at my divvy of submissions for our magazine. They blur into an electric glow and I blink. The letters transform into words:

SUBMISSION: *This Is Your Death. Rec. 08/24/06 23:59*

I'm jaded, and I've always got deadlines that have nothing to do with the magazine, but I like to respond to our writers as quickly as possible. I'm stalled on my own short story. I'm too exhausted for the deep revisions required by my novel, three weeks late to the publisher. It's too cold and late to walk the dog. I'm only reading tonight because of my stupid compulsion that demands a completion this day.

I bring up our form rejection in Word to jinx my needing it. Every editor loves the orgasm of creative deliverance when they read a really good story. We hope we won't reject a story almost as much as its author does. I open the file and tap my fingers against my silver beer can as I wait for the computer to comply. It's less than a page long and it starts with the words:

Tonight you die.

Second person and flash besides. Not promising. But my other kindness as an editor is reading to the end. They bothered to write it and send it in. The least I can do is read it.

You don't believe yet, of course. You're sitting at your crumb-laden desk with a drink in your hand and you read on only because you're waiting to disprove the opening line.

I take a pull of beer and sigh.

You think it's absurd, of course, but absurdity never precludes truth. You think you're going to reject this story and go to bed happy you ate that healthy salad for dinner because you're watching your weight.

I swallow more beer and glance at the lo-cal Italian congealing around the bits of lettuce on the plate by my elbow.

But fat is fat, even when you're dead. You won't lose weight until you're on the mortician's table, and everyone will be much too busy studying your wounds to notice your thighs anyway.

The dog sighs, asleep on her rug by the sliding glass door. She doesn't so much as flick an ear. The only bright spot in the night glass is the glow of my computer screen. I go back to the story. I'll send it on for a second review if the ending doesn't disappoint.

Now you're coming around. Might have been worth staying up after all. And it is worth it because tonight you die, and you wouldn't want to miss it, would you?

The dog emits a low growl. Her golden hackles make an uneven ridge on her back. A shadow hovers behind me, reflected in the glass, the glow of my monitor shining in a curved blade. My chest closes around my heart. The words on the screen transform into a whisper against the back of my neck:

"Good stories about death are usually longer than this one, you think. But the best stories take the fewest words. Like this one, for example. The words have run out, and yet, the story is just beginning."