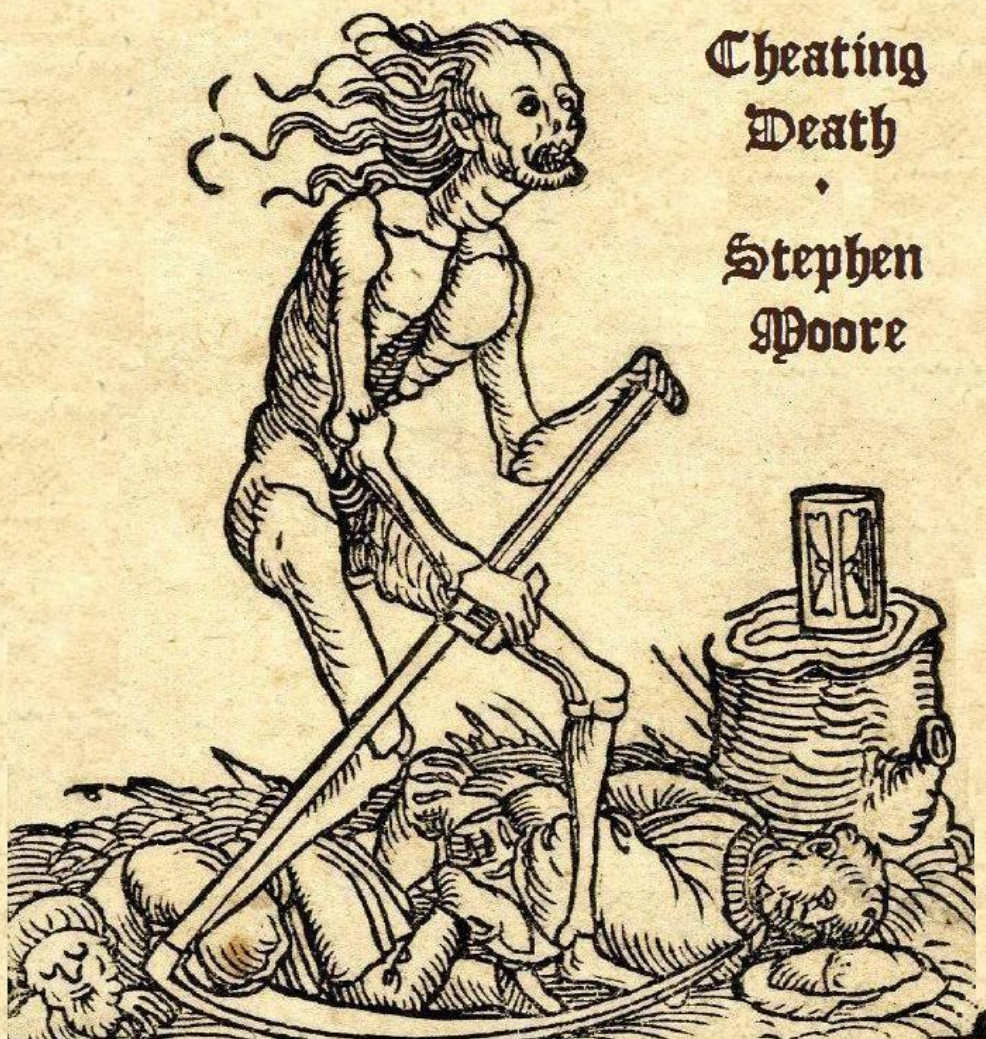

Cheating
Death

Stephen
Moore



a nobel

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Chapter One

Zachary Campbell

In many ways, one cannot describe Zachary Campbell. A man who has lived so long upon this earth is hard to describe, for we are used to looking at the surface of an object or person when we are asked to make a description. But when one has lived a hundred years, what one wishes to describe is an underpinning of all that that man has stood for, all that he has done, and all that he has witnessed through the grand passage of time, of which we have seen but a faint glimmer.

One cannot gaze into the eyes of Zachary Campbell without seeing a mirror of history in which your reflection is but a recent memory. Who has time to plumb the depths of all those passing years? Who has the capacity to understand the workings of a centenarian? One only pales in his aura, and goes on to cope with the mundane acceptance of the present.

However, a description is required before we can go further. He was a tall man in his youth, and still his stature follows his presence from place to place, although his frailty and gait make him seem smaller. His hair was a sandy gold color in his boyhood, and still the golden years are reflected in the golden highlights of his wavy white locks that to this day grow thick upon his pate.

He walks slowly with the help of a walking stick that is

ever in hand. Very few remember him without his walking stick, which he handles as if it was a biological extension of his manners and movements. When he makes a point in conversation, he drives it home with a pounding upon the floor. When he wishes to call someone's attention to an object, his walking stick aims with a directness and exactness that no one can doubt but that he means a certain material entity apart from all others.

His mind remains sharp and attentive, never flagging in its activity and acuity. He can speak of anything with an encyclopedic intensity that amazes and astonishes. Yet he talks little, for at his age, words just seem overused and not quite sufficient to make a man happy or content. To him it is rather useless to talk about the fine points of philosophy or theology. Men have talked about such things for centuries. Why waste the remaining years of his century trying to close a lid on a thesis if it will only spring back open as soon as the next person launches into a variant soliloquy. Variants are endless, but life is short, even at the span of a century.

He always dresses well. On the wall of his bedroom hangs a sampler stitched by the childish hands of a daughter now long passed. On it is pointed the single and incomparable phrase...

"Clothes make the man."

Clothes did indeed make the man, in Zachary Campbell's opinion, and he had little patience for fashion and chameleonic insistence on following its flighty dictates. One always knew how he would appear...sophisticated,

impeccable, and to the point.

For if anything else can be said of him, he was always ‘to the point.’

“Waste not my words with your foolishness and doubts,” he would exclaim, “I have but a single breath to exhale upon argument, before I exhale my last.”

He talked often of death, almost as if he wished to pass through that portal above which is emblazoned, “Abandon Hope!” But upon inhaling, he would take up life again with an energy and vigor.

Of course, people allowed for his slow deliberate pace in life. After all, he was almost one hundred years of age. In fact, he was only one week short of his blessed centenary. He had five children, three of which were still animate in this world. Each of those children gave birth to five children, all still with the living. When Zachary Campbell was sixty-three, the first of his eventual seventeen great grandchildren was born, and at the age of eighty-seven, the first of his eventual three great great grandchildren breathed its first breath upon this earth.

At one hundred years of age (less a week) Zachary Campbell could look upon a healthy and happy progeny of which few men could boast, and they were all gathered in town to celebrate his great centennial. From great distances they came, the Campbell diaspora descending upon the small town where he was born and had lived his life entire.

As he watched them come from places far and near, his eyes would fill with sentimental tears, for with them came the stories of a lifetime. Each face brought memories

retrievable only in the deep recesses of a mind that had witnessed a century fraught with challenge, adversity, celebration and sorrow. Who could tell those stories? Only he could tell them all. Others of the clan could only retain partial memories of the whole, memories that they themselves had witnessed and heard tales of. But all knew that those precious stories of a lifetime would soon descend into the quiet of the grave, from which no tales are told, the monument placed upon the dead a muffling testament to the folly of man's thinking that his voice will never be quieted. The Campbell clan shuddered to think of a time when Zachary Campbell's voice would not be heard. It was part of their collective psyche. What a hole would be left in the collective wholeness that everyone knew, when he was gone. All felt, without actually enunciating the actual event, that his time was nearing an end. This would be the last gathering of the Campbell diaspora.

This would be the last time also, that the family could hear the stories. Stories that recalled their past, their history, their victories, and their losses. All heard the stories from a different level of perception. His children would sit, with tears often dampening their eyes, his stories recalling their childhood and the difficulties they all faced and overcame. His grandchildren would smile, his stories of their parents recalling the joys they experienced through their youth and maturation. His great grandchildren looking on with reverence, knowing they were in the presence of the scion of everything and everyone they knew in life. The great great grandchildren simply sat in open-mouthed

reverence of this entity whose years were a complete mystery to them.

But regardless of their differing perceptions, one fact was indisputably clear. Zachary Campbell, with his shock of white hair and walking stick which was always animated when he spoke, was a consummate storyteller, able to bring forth the deepest feelings and memories of which they were collectively the possessors.

In fact, all agreed that if ever he departed this world, it would be his talent for storytelling that would most be missed, and remembered.

All had booked rooms in the local inns nearby the farmhouse where he lived, and as evening started to envelop the countryside, the shadows lengthening down the long country lanes, they would begin to yawn through the concluding stories and depart for their hotels like bees going to their separate private hexagons in the hive.

After all had left, his oldest granddaughter remained to clean up the dishes and straighten up the house. She alone had remained in the small community with her husband, who had passed away several years previously, and had no reason to leave, though her children had all gone to bigger metropolitan centers to gain a better life. But she, like her grandfather, believed there was no better life than the one she had here, in close proximity to her grandfather, whom she showered with care and affection, comforting his declining years.

She always remained to help him into his evening clothes and see that he climbed the stairs to his bedroom

without mishap, even though he had never asked for her assistance. But his step seemed a little slower that evening. Maybe it was just the tiring experience of so many of the clan in town, listening to his stories late into the night, and he wanting to satisfy their cravings for his tales.

Sometimes he wondered if living all these years had been a blessing or a curse. All his friends from childhood had passed before him. His wife had deceased him by many years now. He seemed so alone. This loneliness had often raised its head in recent years, bringing with it a sadness that could not be fathomed in words or simple stories which he was so good at telling. For the first time in his long life he was faced with a demon he could not overcome, and this unconsoling sorrow wrapped itself around him like a blanket on a cold shivering night, but he still shivered despite its envelopment. He seemed to be the only being from a time long past, leaving all others outside of the context in which his stories were told. He wanted so to touch someone who had shared the experiences of his childhood, now but a distant memory, totally unbeknownst to all who still walked through his world. He would gaze longingly out the window of the upper room of his farmhouse. Very few trees standing were there when he was born in this very room nearly a century ago. Even the giant oaks were but saplings in his youth.

Where were the children who had played tag, employing those saplings as their base, so long ago? They were beyond the next rise of the undulating landscape, resting silently under monuments, their names engraved

for eternity upon the marble faces. Yet he had played, loved, fought, and worked with them all. Why did his voice still resound among the quiet tombs of his friends? Was there a reason he alone was left standing among the dead in the church graveyard, a graveyard that stood outside the church that had witnessed his baptism, now about to be abandoned for a new church with a youthful and expanding congregation? Often he asked these questions in the still silence of the night, which grew dark beyond his windowpane, casting the trees into ebon silhouettes, shadows of their real selves, essences of reality, dissipating into the shadows of sleep.

As he drifted into the confines of restful slumber, he heard the front door click as his granddaughter silently left, thinking him already asleep. So many things he had looked forward to in his long life...education, marriage, birth, and all the excitement of bringing his children's lives to successful outcomes. Now his final landmark, after which all others would pale in comparison, accompanied by the generations which he had wrought, was about to come to fruition.

"One hundred years," he kept repeating to himself, "One hundred years!"

All in all, with all the doubts and questions that plagued his lonely moments, he was glad he still inhaled the breath of life upon this earth.

"One hundred years!" he whispered one final time before closing his eyes and drifting into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Two

A Chance Encounter

He didn't know how long he had been asleep when he heard the front door click again.

"Had his granddaughter forgotten something?" he thought to himself, "Not likely, as she never had before." His senses sharpened for other sounds which might indicate and identify the unknown presence below, but there was nothing.

Then he heard the soft sounds of footfalls upon the stair. Step by step they ascended, not seeming to be in any hurry, and ceased at the top of the flight on the landing outside his bedroom door.

Then nothing.

Time passed cautiously, until Zachary Campbell thought that it had been a dream and closed his eyes once more. When he opened them again, he felt a presence. It was a presence he had never felt before. It breathed, but held its breath. It stood, but was more suspended in time and space. Out of the fuzziness of dreams he began to appear more substantial before him.

He was tall and lanky, skin and bones actually, and he stood there, staring at the man in bed with eyes that never appeared to blink, and which held a depth of character within which whole worlds are swallowed. Zachary Campbell shivered, for a cold chill possessed his being. The wind rustling the leaves of the trees outside the window

ceased to dance.

“Who are you?” Zachary whispered, not yet believing if he was corporeal or a will-o-the-wisp.

“Zachary Campbell,” he whispered back at him, “I have waited long, and now I have come for you.”

“I don’t understand,” he replied, “I don’t know you, and I’ve not called on you to come to my bedchamber at some ungodly hour of the morning.”

He looked at his bed clock, but it had stopped ticking. In fact, all sound had ceased. An eerie and uncomfortable depth of silence swallowed all the surroundings, causing the bedroom he had slept in for a century to seem a strange and unwelcoming place.

The cold crept into his bones.

“What is this chill?” he said, and once again, “Who are you?”

“The chill is the chill of the grave, my friend, into which you are soon to descend. But you will not feel it anon, for you will be past feeling...past caring in fact.”

“But,” Zachary objected, “It is not time! My family of four generations is gathering here to celebrate my centenary in but a week. Surely another seven days is not much to ask?”

“Seven days. Seven hours. Seven minutes. Seven seconds. What matters that? Time is nonexistent in the land of shadow,” spoke the specter, in a voice lacking any concern or care, “Come now, Zachary Campbell, it is time.”

“But,” interjected Zachary, “I have lived a good life. Is that not deserving of a week’s reward?”

"I am impervious to life, no matter whether it be good or bad. I will take all in their allotted time. No deserved reward will close death's gate for a moment. It yawns open for its deserved reward. Come now. It is time."

"But," again pleaded Zachary, "the sadness my family will face will be almost unbearable. Can you not leave them happy for even a week longer?"

"What care I for the joy or sorrow of the living?" Death's steely voice replied, "In death there is no sorrow. In death there is no joy. There is only the cold clay, and the fleeting memories of those we leave behind. You will be forgotten, I assure you."

"I'm not sure that assurance is good tidings," said Zachary.

Death simply shrugged his shoulders.

Zachary stared at the apparition, which had taken on an almost solid appearance before his eyes. The figure of Death puzzled him. Indeed, he was not the specter that he had imagined. Sitting before him was a man of sallow complexion, but impeccably dressed in a fine tweed suit. Tall and stately, with a meticulously educated British accent. His hair was a sandy blonde, streaked with grey at the temples.

He finally sat himself down upon a chair by the bedside and crossed his legs as if he had been a guest here for many a long night, as if he had known Zachary intimately for all his life. Yet this was the first time Zachary ever remembered meeting him.

"Have we met?" asked Zachary, "You seem oddly fa-

miliar.”

“No,” smirked Death, “I never have but one encounter with every living being...usually their last.”

He looked tired as he sat there, unblinking for infinite seconds.

“I have life insurance,” said Zachary, scrambling for any port in a storm, “Perhaps I could insure another se’ennight?”

“Foolish fellow,” cried Death, a slight smile gracing his countenance, “Like any amount of specie or insurance will make a difference where you and I are going.”

“Is there anything that might persuade you?” Zachary asked, “Anything at all?”

Death sat there, staring with those eerie and unblinking eyes. Eyes as shallow as the sands on the seashore, or a springtime puddle of rainwater which quickly dries and dissipates into the surrounding atmosphere. Zachary was running out of arguments.

“Can God be so cruel?” he suddenly cried out, “Why would he deprive me of that which I have worked so long to obtain?”

“Oh, I see!” mused Death, as he sat there with an amused grin on his face, “You think you have worked to make it thus far? What if I told you all your work means nothing as far as your life’s span is concerned? Others work as hard, if not harder than you. Saints spend their lifetimes in the service of others. Why is it that some saints die young while others overstay their welcome? Sinners likewise, who never spend a day in the service of others...you would think that they would be carried away

swiftly due to their uselessness. But no! Many walk the earth causing untold suffering and pain to others. Where then are their punishments and, for the righteous, their just rewards? Where? Nowhere. There are no just rewards or punishments. There is only death, carried on the winds of undiscerning fate. I care not a fig for your hard work. It is chaff in the winds and whirlpools of time.”

“So good works avail me nothing? Why have I striven all my life to be kind to others, to see to their needs, and nurse them through their illnesses? Does it mean nothing?”

“Oh yes, certainly it means something,” continued Death, “I visit many who are dying from the wounds and terrifying destinies of war, hunger, plague, and poverty. If you have spent a moment of your days helping to ease the burden of their passage, you have done good and noble work. But your rewards are not to be given by another in an afterlife. Your rewards are here, at this moment, when you make that passage from which none return. You will die contented, and in that contentment you will pass that threshold in peace.”

“But what difference will it really make,” Zachary admonished Death for his faulty argument, “Especially when Death comes quickly and unexpectedly, as you have done? Is there time to dwell upon all the good works or bad at that final moment, that affords but a slight and insignificant glimpse of all that has gone before? Where is thy sting? Nowhere.”

Death heaved a sigh, as if wondering why he wasted his time through eternity trying to reason with these mortal

frames that were but dust returning to dust.

"You have spent your life well, Zachary Campbell," Death repined, "Is that not enough of a reward; a reward that you have given yourself, not to mention all your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren. How many have I taken away long before they even had a chance to see their first grandchild? Yet, look at your blessings. Count them, Zachary Campbell. They march in grand procession through generations thanks to you. Can a man truly leave a better legacy?"

"But must I pass this mortal portal with stories inside me still untold?" cried Zachary, shaking his head, blinking the tears of regret from his cloudy eyes, "Surely just a little time can be left me to unburden them upon my future generations? Seven days! What is seven days compared to the eternity to which I go?"

Death looked weary and began to rise.

"Not one word more. Arguments are a futile waste. Your time is now, Zachary Campbell, not another seven seconds, minutes, hours, or days. Come now, it is time."

"Somehow I thought it would be different than this," sighed Zachary, grasping for any straw which might prolong his mortal coil but a second, "Where is your scythe? I at least thought I deserved that?"

Death rolled his unblinking eyes, growing distracted by the moment.

"For your information," he replied, "It was too much of a pain to get around with a scythe. Hallways get smaller and houses have doorways that a mouse would have a

hard time getting through, much less a tall specter with a scythe. It's bad enough that I take away loved ones in the night. Need I also destroy the plaster and wallpaper in the process?"

"Well," grinned Zachary, "I think it's the least you owe me. After all..."

"Enough!" interrupted Death, "I'll not be toyed with a moment longer. I have not come here to argue with your mortality. I have come to take you across the divide where no one returns. You have seven precious seconds to finish this business here on earth. Bid it goodbye. Tomorrow is for the living."

Zachary Campbell tried to speak, but Death raised his hand, his eyes ablaze with a fire hitherto unseen.

"One cannot cheat Death!"

Of a sudden, Zachary sensed a challenge. Weighing his words carefully he raised himself from his pillow and spoke.

"Actually," he whispered, as if possessing a secret only he knew, "Death has been cheated on several occasions."

For the first time since he had met Death, Zachary witnessed a slight facial expression of questioning wonderment, as Death raised an eyebrow and slowly sat back down in the chair and uttered his first question which showed any trait of personal interest in the subject before him.

"Oh," he spoke, elongating the single syllable for effect, "Really now!"

Zachary knew then that he had piqued Death's interest,

and saw an opening for what he did best. An opening that might gain him another day, or two, or seven upon this earth. He sat up in bed and looked Death in the eye, vacant and apathetic as it seemed to be.

“If you would leave me in this mortal coil but another day, I will tell you a story of how Death was once cheated.”

It was a gamble, and at unknown odds, but the only opening he had.

Death gazed back at him...and blinked!

“Do tell!”