

Those Brought to Decay

By Ryan Mitchell

At rise the setting is a dirty, run down Hungarian tenement. There is a bed in the corner of the room parallel to a door. There is a window next to the bed and sunlight shines on the bed.

Death is ghost-white with dark black and brown hair. He is draped in a ratty black robe and carries a sickle like the traditional image of the grim reaper.

Clara is an old Hungarian woman with green eyes, white hair and plenty of wrinkles. She lies in the bed. She is dying.

Death enters through the doorway.

He walks to center stage

He speaks directly to the audience.

Death: It is my personal pleasure to introduce myself, though I need no introduction. You all know me... or think you know me, rather.

Extends finger and points out into the audience

You all fear me, though some of you hide it.

Takes off hood

Yes, where it is mother life's job to bring the 'energy of action' through your veins it is my duty to drain it out...and then leave the bodies to decompose slowly.

Walks over to the side Clara's bed

Decompose, like old Clara here...Her time has come... The worms shall dine on her frail bones.

Walks back to audience

You humans are all afraid of my line of work, (*whispering*) though you know it's part of nature, (*Normal Voice*) Many of you strap beliefs on me, believing I can be captured in your Korans, Bibles, Torahs... In your temples to Zeus and Shiva ... But when you really see me... you realize...you realize...

You might wonder how I spend my day. Well, I collected some babies and a bunch of elderly folk. I collected Palestinians and Israelis... I don't care who wins any of your mindless wars... I collected a suicidal taxi driver from the Thames River and an American soldier from a burning tank in Fallujah... They were all fine specimens, but as the sun goes down I come upon one I've waited for years to die.

Points to bed

Clara lived an innocent childhood as a farmer's daughter in a village near the Slovakian border. At seventeen she met Elek¹ and they fell deeply in love. Then the Communists came and I was buried in work. Elek and Clara were forced to work at a great factory in Budapest.

Their love endured...well sort of.

Then the Revolution of '56 happened and the Soviet tanks rode into Budapest. Elek was caught and he was brought to be hung as a rebel against the State. Even as the noose was tightened around his neck he never knew that he had been betrayed ... by the woman he loved

Clara looks up scared

Clara: (*shakily*) Who is that? ...You a robber?

Death: In a manner of speaking, yes.

Clara: Who is that?...I can't see a thing in this light...Who is that? Answer me!

Death: Guess....

Leans head into light so Clara can see

Clara: Oh! Christ, it's you!

Death: Shocked?

Clara: I had that feeling...that feeling that...that I wasn't going to get up.

Death: Do you honestly have anything to get up for?

Clara: Well...

Death: Don't answer! It was a rhetorical question

Clara: Oh...Oh... Well, I see how it is it's the supreme nature of... the supreme nature of pain...

Death: What are you trying to say, my little wilted flower...who I shall soon reap?

Clara: It is the supreme nature of pain that I have to die in this wretched place, rather than ...have you come to take me when I was rich and happy

Death: You were never rich

Sits down in a chair

Clara: No, But In comparison to now, I was living like a queen... Sure others were wealthy but at least there were points where I felt a little less...poor

Death: Now that brings us to the other more interesting question. Were you happy...?

¹ Pronounced "Ehl-eck"

Clara is silent

Why don't you answer? Hm?

Clara: This is about Elek, isn't it?

Death: I need you to explain it to me. Nice and clear.

Clara: I wasn't the only one...

Death: The only what? Only Judas?

When Clara says 'Compromise' a second time death starts counting each time she says 'Compromise'

Clara: Everyone had compromised something in those days. We were a nation of compromisers. Compromising our individuality for what we thought was (*Sighs*)...was stability...security. We compromised our life in the country for labor in the factories of Budapest (*Sadly*)....Then some got sick of it...They called themselves heroes. Elek wanted to be a hero so he compromised...himself

Death: Five

Clara: What?

Death: You said compromise five times. The word sounds so much cleaner than other words.

Clara:(*Angrily*) What other words?!

Death: Oh, words like, death, murder, betrayal.
Takes deep breath

You know when I collected Elek's body so many years ago he never mentioned the word 'compromise'.

Clara: You, you saw him?

Death: Well obviously, Intellect was never one of your virtues was it?

Clara: Old age has swept many of his features from my memory...I remember his brown mustache when it was covered with frost and...and I remember how his eyes looked liked miraculous green pools always turned up to the heavens and--

Death: They weren't looking up towards the heavens when the rope was pulled, I can tell you that...

Clara starts to cry

They shoved his head savagely into the noose. Mercy was of no consequence to them, he was a rebel anyway.

Clara: (*Screams*) Stop it!

Death: He didn't want to die. He was shaking and sweating and –

Clara: (*Screams*) Stop it! Stop it!

Death: And they shoved him into that noose carelessly and violently

Clara:(*Screams*) Shut up! Shut up! Shut the hell up!

Jumps out of bed

Death: And here 's the best part, Clara, He never saw it coming.

Clara moves rapidly for the door.

Oh no, my little flower. We aren't going, yet.

Clara stops.

Walks back into bed.

Starts to cry.

We've hardly begun, my little wilted flower.

Clara: What more do you want from me, you monster?

Death stands up

Death: Let me explain my existence to you. I am eternally collecting. Always collecting and have no rest. I never sleep, I never go on vacation, I never even gamble. This existence forces me to come face to face with the blatant similarity of it all. Every collection shows the similarity. It makes me sick to the stomach. To make a long story short, I need entertainment. You, my little wilted flower...you are a cinema of suffering.

Clara: So this is this is just some sick way of having....Well, it is a whole life to me...Filled with everything

Death: Almost all of you people seem to value your life as if it is something special.

Clara: But...But, I thought it was

Death: So the real question here is why did you do it?

Clara: Then will you take me out of this hell?

Death: I make no guarantees, my flower.

Clara: I...I...

Death: What's wrong, the memories too painful?

Clara: Too obscure, abstract rather. We were all a bunch of idiots in those days -- we had nothing else to aspire to. All the heroes were too stupid to fear you, and all the cowards worshiped you more than God.

Stares out sadly

I didn't realize how stupid we were, thinking we could preserve our love when...when...

Death: When what, my Darling?

Clara: ...When the whole world wanted to tear itself apart... There were collaborators and there were rebels and those two universes tugged in every bystander until violence was inevitable-

Death: It always is.

Clara: We both were moved into jobs in the factory and I tried to cut off any connection with either of our families. I figured that we could survive together by not getting attached to either side. How wrong I was...

She gets out of bed.

Goes to window and stares out

...He met some men from the factories who had been pushed around by the Russians. Some had lost their whole families in the invasion. They filled his head with their ideals and quickly he was smuggling weapons all over the 'Pest' side of the city....

Death: Did that bother you?

Clara: Elek wasn't afraid of you!

Death: He seemed afraid when I picked him up.

Clara: He knew it would eventually end with his death. He didn't care and neither did I...After all, we had each other for the time being... We knew deep down that it wouldn't last, but it was the eternity we wanted-

Death: Until you killed him.

Clara begins to cry.

Leans her head against the window.

Pardon me; I have grown impatient for the juicy part.

Clara gets back in bed

Clara: It was midway in the revolution. He wasn't home until very late and I was sitting in the corner of this very room. I was just so very scared. He came in limping, blood streaking down from his temples. His face was very bruised. That didn't bother me nearly as much as the blood. He dropped a bloody knife onto the floor and told me to hide it..

She cries more

...It was then that it happened...I didn't need to see the soldier's body in the gutter. No. Right then I knew, and I hated myself for it. Elek with the gentle face and calm face was gone. It wasn't his fault it was theirs...

Death: Who?

Clara: The men at the factories. Those bastards made him a killer! I realized what he was and what he could make me become if he tried!

Death: So you killed him to keep yourself innocent. You humans are the most bewildering creatures!

Clara: I'm not finished yet. It was the fear he brought into the room whenever he came home. All I could think of when I looked at him was that bloody knife. We began to argue about little things. They were so minor but behind each one was the big argument. Every snide comment made to each other had something to do with the incident.

Death: So It spiraled out of control. It's a primal story. The lovers look for freedom from the restriction of society and run into the jungle. But they realize they are not ready for the jungle and the jungle's power overwhelms them and they eventually go after each other. It is so basic.

Clara gets up and stands in the center of the stage.

The spotlight falls on Clara. Rest of stage falls dark

Clara: I was going crazy. I couldn't see him as a human anymore. All I could see was a soldier... An agent of war.

Death: The reward was large.

Clara: To be blunt, yes.

Death: Now how do you see him, my little wilted flower?

Clara: What?

Death: Do you still see Elek as an agent of war?

Fiddle tune (Alasdair Fraser's "Stratherrick") is played

Clara drops to her knees mournfully.

Tears come down from her eyes.

Clara: No... I remember how he would...how he would...die for me. He would gladly lay down every bit of life left in him so that...so that I could be happy...and I betrayed him.

Lights come up

Music stops (not abruptly)

Death starts clapping

Death: Bravo, bravo, a splendid performance! My little wilted flower, truly a world changer. You might say it was the best performance of your life -- if I may be so bold.

Clara stands up

Clara: All right, get me out of here.

Death stands up

Death: A deal's a deal.

They walk slowly for the door

Clara: Wait!

They stop

Death: What?

Clara: Take me to the deepest circle of hell if you must...I'll fit in there. But promise me, *promise me* Elek will be in heaven.

Death: Sorry, Clara, as I said there are no guarantees.

Clara: (*screaming*) You mean...

Death: I've said it to the more faithful of your race, you strap your damn names on to me without mercy. Heaven, Hell, Reincarnation, Paradise, Oblivion, Valhalla, The Valley of The Reeds. It's all so very despicable and disgusting, those names...

Clara: But...

Death: No buts. There are no guarantees about anything. Even where I am taking you. Could be anywhere in existence or nowhere. All that was guaranteed for you and Elek has past...Come, come, my pretty flower, it is time to wilt away...

They exit

Death ushers her offstage and stays. He walks to center of stage and addresses the audience.

Death: What do I have on my schedule for the rest of the day, folks? Well some pretty standard business. In México city a small gang fight just broke out and they expect me to swing by and pick up the pieces...Of course I will -- I always do. In West Virginia coal dust has finished off the lungs of an old worker, and in Spain an abusive mother has drowned her daughter...

As morbid as you may find it all, it's the closest thing to life for me...and I intend to live it.

Death exits

The End