

AN EXCERPT FROM
a modern way to

DIE

PETER WORTSMAN



**A MODERN
WAY TO
SMALL STORIES
&
MICROTALES** **DIE**

by
PETER WORTSMAN

SECOND EDITION



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A Modern Way to Die

Once there was a war that no one could see. No bombs exploded. Nobody shrieked. People just dropped dead suddenly. Inexplicably. In the kitchen, in the bedroom, on their weary way home from work. Some said it was heart attack, but too many succumbed to the mysterious affliction for that theory to hold. Others swore it was something in the air: a poison wind from the east, a cosmic inversion.

Though never openly discussed—“cloudy weather” was the favored euphemism—everyone secretly feared being next, and there were those who went so far as to wish it, just to put an end to the unendurable anxiety. But man has an uncanny ability to adapt and make the best of things.

Children started the game, adults followed suit, and soon everyone was at it, picking out prospective victims from the crowd. The talented few, able to point with a deadly accuracy, earned the epithet “golden fingered,” and the best of these could command sizable fees to perform in public. Concert halls and stadiums were hired. People flocked to see their favorites.

“Prize fingers,” as the papers liked to call them, were invariably shorter than their poster effigies, and despite the blindfold (government regulations), they strode confidently straight to centerstage. Some went in for arabesque antics:

twists and turns, and Latin incantations—but the truly great worked with sparse gestures in absolute silence.

A raised palm hushed the crowd. The thumb and three fingers bowed, and the forefinger seemed to grow as it swept out over the sea of anxious eyes, drawn like a compass to the next malignant north. Sometimes a scuffle ensued—the way baseball fans struggle for possession of a homerun or a foul ball, only in reverse: nobody wanted to catch it. But the issue rapidly resolved itself (to the wild delight of spectators) with a sudden squirm and a frenetic hiss, like that of air leaving a balloon. Ushers carted off the corpse, and those seated the closest wiped the sweat off their brows and invariably claimed they'd had their eye on him or her from the start.

Of course there were fakes as there are in every art, individuals lacking in any genuine talent who climb the latest bandwagon for fame and fortune. They hide behind a lot of hocus pocus—and rumor had it that certain charlatans stooped so low as to plant hitmen in the audience to discreetly dispose of predesignated targets on cue.

A great favorite, whose reputation is still the subject of some debate, had black eyes and a finger that drove the women wild. Old maids and teenage girls alike swooned at the sight of him.

“Ladies! . . . Gentlemen!” he whispered, the microphone turned up to capacity, “Look your neighbor in the eye! Can you see? Can you tell? Who is going to be next?” Married women shivered, husbands studied their wives, even young lovers regarded each other with new interest.

“Take me! . . . Take me!” cried the most fervent fans, as the drumroll marked the moment.

What followed at one particular performance has become legend. Eyewitnesses swear that a little boy high up in the bleachers broke the shell of silence. “Hey, Mister!” he

cried out, but the master had reached the climax of his act and refused to be disturbed. People tried to still the child. The drumroll swelled, the master's finger swayed. "Mister!" the little boy yelled—heads turned in shock and wonder at the child's audacity—"Mister!" he called, "you're next!"

Stagehands later confirmed how they saw the prize finger tremble and turn white, how one hand clasped the microphone while the other tore off the blindfold, and the crowd's black-eyed darling crumbled to the floor of the stage.

Critics had a heyday, unanimously lambasting the deceased, who had been popular too long, and hailing the boy as a fresh new talent. The incident flickered on in the news till a colorful murder case preempted the spotlight. The boy was said to have made something of a career for himself overseas.

Nowadays, outside of a small circle of diehards, nobody pays much attention to the art anymore. Death has become such a common occurrence that the thrill of guessing has gone out of it. Live combat is back in fashion—war as vivid and spectacular as it once was. People missed the epic sweep and the glorious bang of the bomb.

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