THE ARCHIVIST

V S NELSON

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In memory of Fay Martin,
who slipped into the Aether far too soon.



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Chapter One

There is no God. There is no heaven and there is no hell. There is only the Aether. It follows your every moment, ponders every impulse. It is a carrion bird that has circled you from birth. It bides its time. It is patient. It does not matter how strongly you deny it or how hard you fight; the Aether will possess you.

So do not expect Death's gentle embrace. It arrives ravenous, eviscerating, devouring, desperate to consume all that you ever were, every thought, every feeling, every memory, no matter how fractured or flawed. The Aether cares not for the life you led or the beliefs you held. The Aether accepts all.

It is no secret that the Aether and I share a fractious relationship. I am its antithesis, breaking the barbs from its claws and prising its grip from the depths of your essence. I take what it covets, keeping you for myself. An opportunist, a johnny-come-lately, I am the one satiated while the Aether starves. And so, I become your afterlife, linking your essence with the living while your body rots. I am your only chance of salvation, the single raft on the Aether's infinite sea.

I also charge. A lot.

I drink my coffee. Undissolved granules float to the surface and stick in my

throat. I feel indentations in the Styrofoam that don't align with my teeth. I put the cup down, pushing it to the edge of the table to avoid absentmindedly reaching for it again. I still feel new to this and nerves have distracted me; I've not bought coffee today.

No one sits next to me. The seats opposite, behind and diagonally across are empty too. Everyone knows I am something to be avoided. It is not conscious knowledge, but a deep-seated fear that lurks in the unexplored recesses of the mind. Without knowing why they are doing it, people find themselves taken to a seat elsewhere. I am abandoned on an island, beyond rescue. This does not concern me: it is all I have known.

A woman runs past the rows of waiting room chairs, wailing incomprehensibly. She kicks a bottle of water, which spills over the shoes of an old woman dressed for an evening out, and elbows her way through a glut of teenagers. The child in her arms is grey, her limbs flaccid. A nurse takes one look at the little girl and opens the door to the emergency ward. Woman and child disappear. A man two rows away rants about how long he has waited, every word punctuated with an expletive. He notices me looking and glares. Too caught up in himself to see the obvious, he soon loses interest, eyes searching for anyone else who dares look his way. There are screams from inside the emergency ward. Everyone falls silent except for the irate man, who continues to grumble about the sanctity of queueing.

An old couple in the corner ignore the commotion. They huddle together next to a wooden table cluttered with toys. The children keep their distance, too fearful to approach. They can sense what I can see; the old woman is dying. For the last two hours I have been locked in an internal debate over whether I should introduce myself. Their clothes suggest they cannot afford the service I offer. Though desperation is often good at finding cash.

The rest of the waiting room holds only the mildly injured. Even the man who periodically treats us to his rants only has a twisted ankle. He moves with an exaggerated limp to sit next to a black woman with an untamed afro. She types furiously into her phone between stolen glances at me. Our eyes meet several times and I watch surety change to confusion and doubt each

time eye contact breaks. She smiles to herself as the ferocity of her typing intensifies, a chance encounter in a waiting room no doubt becoming a blog post.

I am not here for her. Or for the man with the twisted ankle or for the teenagers who huddle around their phones, two broken arms between the five of them. I need the nearly dead. Those who balance on the precipice, teetering between two worlds as they await the faintest gust to push them across the divide. Only the old woman in the corner flickers between life and death. She has folded herself into the old man, her head hiding in the crook of his armpit, his emaciated arm wrapped across her back. Like me, they know that she will die regardless of any intervention from a doctor. Unlike the man with the twisted ankle, who now raises his hand as if ready to slap away the young woman's phone, they do not demand attention from anyone else.

If they reject me, then what I am will be known to the room. I do not want that. My face is hidden as much as it can be without appearing overtly suspicious. Occasionally I read a magazine, flicking the pages at regular intervals while I study the people around me. There is something about the couple that suggests they accept the finality of death. I oppose that finality, prolonging what nature would rather destroy. I convince myself that they would reject me and, as they were my only option, decide to leave.

As I stand, the man with the twisted ankle grabs the coat of the young woman and pulls her towards him, launching into a tirade about treating people with respect. The nurses are quick to call for security, but there is no need because seconds later the young woman has him on the floor, his arm bent behind his back and a knee pressed into his neck.

Security lead the man away. The young woman speaks to a nurse. She appears keen to leave and, after a few clipped words, takes her bag and marches to the door. The nurse looks for someone to share in her incredulity and as the only other person standing, her eyes fall to mine. She looks away. Frowns.

I sit down unnaturally fast, throwing a magazine open onto my lap despite knowing that feigning interest in *Country Living* won't deter her.

She approaches, stares at the magazine with a puzzled expression. A wave of panic hits me, and I'm convinced the magazine is upside down. I check. Fortunately, it is not. Less fortunately, I appear to be engrossed in an advert for feminine hygiene products.

She notices my realisation and smirks. Then it's back to business. 'You've been here for three hours,' she says, 'and you've not signed in at the desk.'

I close the magazine and smooth the cover with my gloved hands. 'I know.'

'If you don't sign in, then we can't triage your condition and you won't be seen.'

'I am not ill.'

'This isn't the visitors' waiting room.'

'I am not here to visit anyone.'

She appears uncomfortable. Having dealt with one unreasonable man in the last five minutes, it's clear she has no desire to tackle a second. She is young, but the circles under her eyes are strikingly dark against such pale skin and every movement she makes feels delayed. Her hand is in the air, ready to call someone over. I look up at her moments before she turns away. Her finger hovers, retracts. She lowers her arm.

The nurse rubs her eyes with her palms. She likely believes this to be a hallucination brought on by exhaustion. She turns to me again, her knees bending so that her face is level with mine. Those patients who aren't too absorbed in their own self-pity are paying attention and utter the gasps that have stalked me since birth.

The nurse has yet to react. She continues to stare until, finally satisfied, she closes her eyes. It is her turn to gasp. She staggers backwards, falling over a man in a suit who tuts loudly.

'Oh my God! You're one of them!' she cries.

I did not want a scene. Checking my escape, I am on my feet before the nurse shouts.

'Wait!' She looks across the room. 'Nurse Crawley! Nurse… Jane! Jane, where did they take Mr Braithwaite?'

The other nurse looks up from dealing with an irate, red-faced man.

‘Fallon, but they may have moved him again. You saw him, Jenny, he should have gone to the palliative ward.’

‘This is why you’re here, isn’t it? For the dying.’

‘It is.’

‘Then why did you wait in A&E for three hours?’ She’s admonishing me, but struggles with the words, fighting their desire to leap from her mouth in a chaotic flurry. She shakes her head, trying to regain some composure. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says. ‘A man was brought in two days ago with severe pneumonia. He was transferred to another ward and his family are with him. He’s eighty-four. A history of heavy smoking as a young man and a long-term bronchitis sufferer. There was nothing we could do for him.’

The nurse goes to take my arm. I snatch it away.

‘You shouldn’t touch me.’

She nods to herself. ‘Oh. Right. Well, please come with me.’

I follow and people stand to get out of my way, some with reverence and others with fear, violently recoiling as I approach.

I watch the old lady in the corner of the room die. Peacefully, she leaves her body, her essence floating through her flesh, her clothes and her husband’s arm, which is draped around her with such love and sorrow. She scatters into writhing facets of pure silver. They bury themselves into the walls and ceiling of the waiting room until the last one vanishes.

I am the only witness to her death.

The husband continues to cradle the empty shell of his wife. Soon he will realise that she has died, someone will be alerted, and people will panic.

The nurse runs, periodically stopping to wait for me as I follow on behind at barely a brisk walk. She looks irritated. If I wasn’t what I am, she would have spoken up, grabbed my hand and dragged me to this Mr Braithwaite. Eventually she gives up and walks beside me.

‘Does everyone forget what you look like?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even you?’

‘Even me.’

We stand aside as an old woman is wheeled past on a bed. Half of her essence hangs from her, fluttering like a wind-tossed scarf as porters rush her to another ward. It reaches for me, desperate for a home, knowing that its current one will soon die. I reject her facets, leaving them to cling to the woman's dwindling life until it ends and they scatter into the Aether to be combined with others and formed into someone new.

The nurse looks at me again and I watch as her eyes flick over my features, moving from one to the next and then back again, as if to be certain.

As soon as she turns away, she shakes her head.

'How do you do that?'

'It is not something I control.'

'You could cause a lot of trouble with that.'

'I'm in the business of death,' I say. 'Trouble comes with the job.'

Silence stalks us through the corridors for the next three turns.

'My grandmother believed in people like you,' the nurse says as I'm led through a set of double doors. She applies antiseptic foam to her hands from a wall-mounted dispenser and rubs it in while staring at my gloves. 'Her brother, William, died of tuberculosis when he was seven. She said there were more of you around back then, but you were still expensive. Her parents weren't rich, so they could only keep William for four months. She said it helped at first, but after a while it made things difficult. William couldn't understand he was dead, and his parents cried every time they saw him. Even so, she always wanted to have her soul preserved when she died. She made us promise we'd find someone like you, but of course we couldn't, because to us you were just characters from old stories. She died two years ago.'

She's doubting herself. Doubting me. It creeps into her voice. She's telling herself that she hasn't even asked me if I am what she thinks I am. She's just assumed based on stories, but she hasn't had it confirmed. Already her walking has slowed. She thinks I'm a fraud. False hope for the family of the soon-to-be deceased.

'I know what you are thinking.'

The nurse bites her lip and checks a board that lists the patients' room numbers. 'There's an old man in there who will die tonight. His family are with him. If you're a fake, if what you do with your face is some trick, then walk away now, because if you go in there you'll break them, and no one deserves that.'

'I am exactly what you think I am.'

She nods once and motions for me to wait outside the room as she enters. After a while she opens the door and beckons me inside.

The room is full. Adults and children have arranged themselves awkwardly against the walls, balancing on windowsills or half-leaning on a table. No one speaks. Everyone watches the old man lying on the single bed. His body is thin, barely creasing the sheet. He has thicker hair than most men in their thirties. Another man leans over the bed, pressing his ear to Mr Braithwaite's mouth. Mr Braithwaite's lips move, but the other man just shakes his head. He places a comforting hand on the old man's chest before pulling it back and walking over.

He looks at me, closes his eyes and opens them again. Then he repeats, this time looking away and pausing for longer before he looks once more. He smiles as much as he can, given the atmosphere in the room.

'She told me what you were, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it.' He takes a tissue from his pocket and wipes his eyes. 'My dad can't speak. He's trying, but nothing comes out. He just doesn't have the strength. It's strange because he always spoke so much. He was one of those people who knew something about everything. It didn't matter the subject; he'd always have a few facts on it stashed away. You'd never see him without a book. Even when he was driving, there would be one on his lap. He used to love traffic jams. "Any excuse to read," he would say. Sorry, you don't need to know this, I just… don't know what I'm supposed to do.'

'I cannot make the decision for you. But you should know, what I do will kill your father.'

'He led a good life. It should end with the dignity he deserves.'

A woman walks over. She was standing by the other side of the bed,

holding Mr Braithwaite's hand. As she steps away, someone else takes her place as another family member peels herself from the wall to place her ear over the old man's silent lips.

'You can't just make that decision, David. He's my dad too.'

'If we don't, then this is it, and he dies desperately trying to speak to us while we strain to make out the words. He doesn't want to go like this, Sally. You know that as well as I do.'

'But he might—'

'He won't. You heard what the doctors told us. It's going to be tonight. That's why our family has driven hundreds of miles to say goodbye. Let us at least do it properly.'

'But what if he's a fraud?' Sally says.

'Look at him!'

The siblings stare each other down and, with the slightest lowering of her eyes, the sister acquiesces.

'My service is not free,' I say.

'Of course,' the son says. 'We'll pay anything.'

I hand him a card from inside my jacket pocket and his eyebrows raise as he reads the price, but soon he's nodding to himself and handing the card back while he ushers me towards his dad.

'If you want to say anything to him, hold his hand, or hug him, then you need to do so now.'

'You really will kill him, won't you?' the daughter asks.

'I have to.'

The family approaches the bed, each saying goodbye to their father, grandfather, uncle, cousin, with a sense of unreality, as if nothing will happen.

'Please step away,' I say, and they do.

I remove my gloves and lay them on the bed next to the old man. The family don't turn away, like I would expect. Instead, their phones are out, recording what will take place. It won't work. What a brain interprets and what a camera records are different things, but I see no need to correct them on this.

I stand at the side of Mr Braithwaite's bed and close my eyes. Everything is black at first, but soon his essence appears, a mass of writhing facets of silver threads knotted into the shape of a human. Every aspect of his personality, every memory that has clung on through the years, his loves, his hates, his shames, his fears; each one is represented in a single facet, wound into the essence that is him. I bend forward.

'Release the life you hold so tight; welcome me and leave the light.'

My forehead touches his and instantly facets flow into me, fighting each other in their desperate bid for salvation. Uncorked, they burst into the room, foolishly escaping. I reach out, pulling them in with my hands while the facets inside my arms grow longer, forming emaciated, ethereal counterparts that push through my palms and sweep the room. They race through my head and charge down my arms, right into my centre, where they collect and shrink – retaining everything that they are while fitting themselves into the space I can offer.

The family will have seen nothing of what I experienced. To them, I am a willow-bodied eighteen-year-old, barely a man, who has a face they cannot remember. I have bent over the body of their beloved relative, muttered something unintelligible, and waved my arms trying to catch things they cannot see.

A few of the older children fail to stifle their laughter while their parents slap their legs with the back of their hands, their faces sour and pinched. Annoyance seeps into the room and accusatory stares are aimed at me and the son. The sister is opening her mouth when someone screams.

'He's dead!'

The family run to him, surrounding the bed, prodding and poking, shaking and trying to wake the man I have just killed. All except for the son. He stands in front of me, waiting, hoping desperately that I am real, that a character from his childhood history books stands before him.

I could say something, but I am busy. I have a new essence inside me and if I do not bind him to me, then he will escape into the Aether.

The family turns away from the bed one by one, wanting to know what I

have done. They call for the doctors. The nurse waits by the door. To her credit, she doesn't back away, but she doesn't enter the room either.

Finally, Mr Braithwaite is secured. I watch the son as the face of his father appears over my own. His mouth lifts at the corners, smiling, beaming. His eyes crinkle, then run with tears. Everyone around the bed, and those who hang out of the door calling for help, rush over, gasping and laughing and crying as they see the face of Mr Braithwaite, who lies dead only metres from them, where my own should be.

'Well, this is a surprise,' says an intelligent voice emanating from my mouth, though not at all of my doing. 'Where on earth did you find an archivist?'