

Jarvis the Duck

Kurt Venables

The Black Death

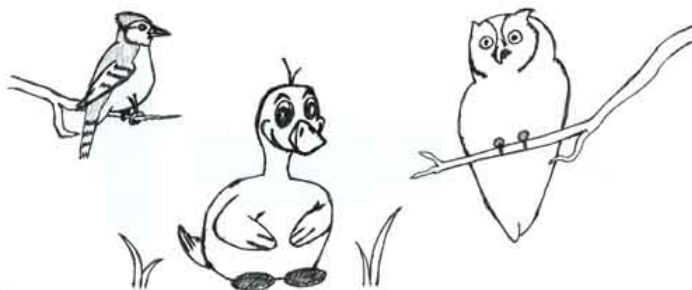
Jarvis is a young duck that lives on a small pond in The Great Poplar Forest. These are the chronicles of his adventures.

The Black Death was remarkable both for its ubiquity and the speed with which it swept over The Pond. The disease would begin with the afflicted becoming tired and melancholy. The disease could progress to result in deep depression and delusional hysteria, completely sapping the energy of its victims. Black lesions could form all over the face and body. The disease struck different individuals with differing severity, though nearly all the ducks at The Pond had been afflicted within weeks of its first appearance. No deaths had occurred at this early date at The Pond, but rumors spread that many were dying at The Great Lake.

Jarvis had been spending increasingly more time with Jay and Sage in the forest, both because of the misery at The Pond and because he simply felt he had more in common with them. Jarvis was one of the lucky few who had not been struck by the plague; neither had Jay or Sage. It was a beautiful, cool morning in early October:

“Trixie and Malcolm were the first to come down with it at The Pond,” said Jarvis. “A few weeks ago. They’re in really bad shape now; can’t get out of their nests and covered in black splotches.”

“The two that you told me were making fun of the little duck this summer?” asked Jay.



“Yes,” said Jarvis and after a pause, “Most of the ducks at the Pond have it now to one extent or another. Things are pretty bad there.”

“Yeah, man. A lot of owls have gotten it as well, all over the forest. It really brings me down to see them in such bad shape,” said Sage.

“It hasn’t been so hard on us smaller birds,” said Jay. “Only a few I know have been affected.” After a pause, he said, “Strange, it seems like it’s the one’s I never really liked.” Then he added quickly, “But I still do feel sorry for them, of course.”

“Bizarre,” said Sage, and after a pause, he said with a sly smile, “I hope you like me.”

The three felt uncomfortable talking about the plague. These were strange times, and you never knew who was going to be next. After a few moments of silence, Sage said, “The owls at The Great Lake say this is the Black Death; it’s mentioned in the Book of the Dead.”

Jarvis perked up, “Do you know about the Book of the Dead?”

“Sure, man. I remember from back in the day, ya know.”

“Angeldown’s grandma was telling me about the Book of Ra. Angeldown and I both like riddles and mysteries; we were trading riddles, and her grandma asked me one from the Book of Ra. Then she told me about the creation, and Osiris, and lots of other stuff.”

“It’s no mystery why you’ve been spending time with Angeldown,” said Jay with a sly smile.

“She’s really nice, and we get along really well,” replied Jarvis, smiling.

“And the fact that she’s a cute girl has nothing to do with it,” said Jay smiling, baiting Jarvis.

“Now I didn’t say *that*,” said Jarvis, now almost laughing.

“No worries, man, I remember what it was like to be young,” said Sage. “There are some pieces missing, but I remember.” After a brief pause, he said, “The famous owl playwright, Shakespeare, once wrote, ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never loved at all’.”

“*Loved and lost*,” said Jarvis, “I’ve only known her a few months.”

“Methinks he doth protest too much,” recited Sage wisely.

“*What?*” replied Jarvis and Jay in unison, and they all broke out laughing.

“Exactly how old *are* you, Sage?” said Jarvis through his laughter, ribbing Sage.

After a few minutes of hearty laughter, Jarvis looked serious as he asked, “Sage, can you tell me about the Book of the Dead? This plague is a real mystery, and I can’t figure it out.”

“Sure, man. The Book of the Dead tells about the afterlife. When you die, your spirit enters the underworld, and you go before Osiris. To judge whether you’re a good person, Osiris asks you a riddle. If you answer correctly, you may pass on to join Ra in the heavens. You become a star and experience everlasting life and joy. Every star you see at night is a creature that has passed on and joined Ra in the heavens. If you respond to the riddle incorrectly, you must stay in the underworld until you become a good person and have learned the answer. The book also mentions the Black Death. It says the plague is a form of living death, and the only cure is to find the answer to the riddle of Osiris while on earth.”

“But if you don’t hear the riddle until you die, how can anyone ever find the cure?” asked Jarvis.

“That would be a problem,” replied Sage. “One last thing, guys, I hear that the owls and ducks at The Great Lake are planning to hold a council very soon to try to find some kind of an answer to help deal with this problem.”