



KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

“I’ve had it with you!” screamed Mrs. Death. “I’ve had it up to here!”

Death himself looked round from the football-game on the TV. He was astonished. “What’s wrong, Gloria, love?” he enquired.

“You have the gall to ask me what’s wrong!” she demanded. She snatched Death’s beer-can out of his hand and flung it at the TV. The screen exploded just as Death’s favourite team was about to score.

“Now look what you done, love,” he complained. “What’s got into you?”

“I slave all day long trying to keep you and your useless children in food and clothes. I wash the dishes, I wash the clothes, I iron the clothes, I go for the shopping, I pay the bills, I tidy the house, I Hoover, I pick up your stupid beer-cans! What don’t I do in this house? And what do you do? Nothing! That’s what you do! I even have to run your business for you, because you’re too busy watching the TV or playing golf with your mates. I answer the phone, I make all the arrangements for the bereaved, right down to the flowers and the type of wood for the coffins and what have you! I do everything, buster, and I’m taking no more of it! I’ve had enough!”

“There, there,” said Death in a placatory tone. “Don’t you go fretting yourself, doll. Listen, why not me and the kids get a carry-out from the Indian tonight, and we’ll all put our feet up and have a nice evening in front of the telly? No washing-up tonight for anyone.”

“You’re not listening to me!” screamed Mrs. Death. She hurled a half-washed cooking-pan directly at Death’s head. He was not quick enough and it hit him on the temple, causing momentary loss of consciousness. So he missed what came next. But the kids, once they’d brought him round with a jug full of cold water, they told him.

“She’s gone out,” they announced. “Gone to see grandma. Taken two suitcases. Said she’s not coming back until we take responsibility. What’s ‘responsibility’, da?”

Mr. Death sat on the floor, rubbing his head dry with the end of the curtain. “What’s that?” he asked confused.

“Responsibility, da. What’s that?”

“Oh, not just now, kids,” he muttered. “Some other time. It’s really complicated that stuff.” He looked around hopefully. “She ain’t really gone? You’re joshing me, ain’t you?”

“Took the hearse, set off down the road at, like, about a hundred,” said young Joe, Death’s son and heir. “It was pretty awesome,” he added.

“She was going to wash my hair and put it in braids tonight,” complained little Meg, the daughter of the family. “She can’t just go off like that. What am I going to do with my hair?” She began to blub.

“There, there, princess,” said Death distractedly. “We’ll get your hair sorted. But da’s got bigger things to worry about first.”

“Like what, da?” asked young Joe, ever keen to be a grown-up.

Death desperately tried to remember. “Well,” he said, “there was washing-up and - and ironing, and - what’s that thing she does?”

“Hoovering, da?” suggested Meg.

“That’s it, princess,” said Death. “That Hoovering. Oh, and I’d better nip across to my office and see what needs doing today for the business.”

“Can I come too, da?” begged young Joe.

“Course you can, son. You got to learn the trade, ain’t you. Never too young. That’s what granda always used to say.”

“Why did granda have to die, da?” demanded Meg, tears in her eyes.

Death did not want to answer that one. “Why don’t you put on mummy’s apron and do some of that Hoovering?” he suggested.

“Duh! - no way am I going to do that!” replied the young lady. She stamped off to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Death sighed and headed for the office. His son followed him eagerly.

The answering-machine on the phone was blinking violently. Death rubbed his forehead and felt panic rise in his chest. “Son,” he said to Joe, “you listen to those messages and note down the numbers. I’m going to look out back.”

With those words, he headed out into the back yard and lit up a cigarette. Why did she have to walk out on him like that? What had he done wrong? Watching some football? If a man could not watch some football for relaxation, what was the world coming to? How was he supposed to run this business on his own? It was OK when his dad had been around. All Death had to do was tag along. Dad knew what to do. It was different now, now he was on his own. He wasn’t sure he was coping.

The back-door opened and Joe poked his head out.

“Done it, da,” he announced proudly.

“That’s my boy!” exclaimed Death, hastily stubbing out the fag. “Anything important in there?”

“There’s a whole load of people wanting you to call round and give an estimate, couple of emergencies -”

“We’d better do the emergencies, son - brings in the readies. Hundred-pound call-out fee, without even lifting a finger. Keeps the rest of the business going. You remember that. Anything else?”

“There were three people complaining about poor service - one of them said she was going to take you to court.”

Death waved aside this annoyance. “Nothing else?”

“And there was a Mr. Wu from -” Joe frowned and checked his notebook, “from Shanghai Megaholdings International. Wants a straight reply to his offer. What offer’s that, da?”

“Oh, nothing important,” said Death quickly. “Now then, let’s get round to those emergencies. You coming?”

Young Joe’s eyes lit up. “Awesome!” he cried.

Death heaved himself, red-faced with the effort, aboard his Nissan pick-up, all black and chrome and smoked-glass windows, settled into the leather upholstery, and revved it up, like young Joe liked. From her bedroom window, young Meg Death pouted and turned the volume up on Lady Gaga.

Later that day, when the emergencies had been sorted out and some business lined up for the following week, Death and his son stopped off at the supermarket to pick up a ready meal for the evening. “Ma’ll be pleased with us,” opined Death, trying to convince himself. On the way to the check-out, he picked up a couple of six-packs of lager, just in case. When they got home, Meg had locked herself in her bedroom and there was a little old lady camped outside his office.

“Oh-oh,” muttered Death. “Better scarper, Joe - that’s Mrs. Jones - she’s not pleased with something.”

Joe took the hint and vanished in the direction of the kitchen, clutching the shopping-bags.

“Mrs. Jones,” said Death in his best professional voice. “And what can I do for you? Not another sad moment in the family, I hope?”

The old lady looked at him sourly. “Even if there was, Death, you wouldn’t get the business. You know what I’m here for - I want my husband back.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, Mrs. Jones,” replied Death, shaking his head sadly. “Now I thought we’d settled all that unpleasantness. Didn’t you talk to my wife?”

“I did,” replied Mrs. Jones, “and she agreed with me. Said I should get my husband back, and then some.”

Death was taken aback. “She said that?” he asked nervously.

“She did,” replied the grieving widow. “Said that standards had been slipping and that the company needed to face up to its obligations to its customers. There’s no *gravitas* any more, she said, no respect nor no dignity. The business is going downhill. I’d go along with that, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, I think that’s maybe a bit strong,” began Death. But he got no further.

Mrs. Jones gave him a resounding slap across the face. “Callous brute,” she hissed. “After what you did to my Eddie, you’ve got no right to think anything at all. Five years you took to take him away - five years? Always, ‘I’ll be round next week, without fail, Mr. Jones, I’ll be there after lunch, directly after breakfast, straight after this emergency job, Mr. Jones.’ He waited and waited, did my Eddie. Every excuse under the sun, you had. You call that respectful? No, I didn’t think so. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

Death rubbed his cheek. It really stung. “Now, look, Mrs. Smith,” he began.

“Jones, Mrs. Jones,” she growled.

“Mrs. Jones, of course. Look, I can’t just go around returning people who’ve gone over to the other side. If I did that for everyone, where would it end? You wouldn’t want a world overrun by people who’d died long ago, now would you?”

“That,” replied the widow solemnly, “is your affair, not mine. I’m not asking for everyone to be given back - just my Eddie. And if I don’t get him back, like your wife promised, then I tell you - I’ll kick up Hell. And then some, like she said.”

“But,” said Death nervously, stalling for time, hoping for some kind of inspiration, a heart-attack maybe to take this unpleasant woman away, “my wife isn’t here just now. I’m sure we can reach some kind of accommodation, Mrs. Smith, but until I’ve consulted my business partner on this...” He spread his hands wide to indicate his position of professional helplessness.

“It’s Jones, you fool,” said Mrs. Jones angrily. “Your wife told me to say just one thing if you kicked up a fuss.”

“She did? And what would that be?” asked Death, utterly out of his depth now.

Mrs. Jones eyed her quarry coldly. “Mr. Wu,” she said.

Death staggered and sat down heavily on the patio-chair that he liked to keep outside his office, for those off-moments when the sun was shining. It cracked under the weight. Death was no longer the lithe figure of his youth.

The missus knew about Mr. Wu and his offer to buy him out! Mr. Wu and his slick marketing machine, and his pay-as-you-go packages. Mr. Wu and his five million buy-out deal.

“Where is your wife, anyway?” asked Mrs. Jones innocently.

“Gone to visit my mother,” whispered Death, cold sweat beginning to pour out of him. If Gloria let that slip to his old mum, he was finished. His mother had more strength and venom in her than a pile of randy boa-constrictors and vipers.

“Well,” said Mrs. Jones, “maybe I should just pop over and visit your mother? She and I go way back. Now, what was that name again - Wu?”

“Joe!” shouted Death hoarsely, his voice barely above a croak. “Joe, Joe! - get yourself out here!” He turned to the widow. “Let’s not get over-hasty,” he said, “we’ll get your husband back to you straight away. Joe, Joe, where are you, you little skiver?”

Young Joe appeared, wide-eyed. He’d never seen his dad so agitated.

“Joe - get me the key to the vaults!”

“The key, da?” asked Joe. “You mean the big black one that hangs behind the office-door?”

“What other bloody key would I mean!” shouted his father in desperation. “Just get the damn thing! The lady here wants her husband back.”

“Lovely boy,” said Mrs. Jones admiringly, watching Joe dart off. “Will he inherit the business, I wonder, if you’re keeping it in the family?”

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