**Death - Stories & Illustrations**

**Throughout Eastern Serbia, some newly rich peasants with hefty consumer appetites and a thriving cult of the dead have been building houses on the graves of their relatives, as a show of respect. Some people have even furnished their grave houses with stoves, refrigerators, televisions, video recorders and other appurtenances that they are sure their relatives’ spirits will enjoy in the afterlife. According to an old Slavic belief, if a dead man’s relatives neglect or forget him, his spirit will return to cause crop failure and family ruin. The people who build the grave houses are mostly those who profited handsomely by selling produce in Belgrade’s farm markets and by working abroad for hard currency, says Ivan Kovacevic, a Belgrade University professor of cultural anthropology. “They have so much money that they are itching to spend, and there is no other way to invest it,” reports Kovacevic. Other anthropologists say that the grave-house phenomenon would fade away as Yugoslavia adopts a market-based economy that would give people the opportunity to invest in more practical ways. *(Chuck Sudetic, in New York Times, 1991)***

**Aubrey, my five-year-old son, and I were having a discussion about death. He asked thoughtfully, “Mom, if heaven is so wonderful, why don't people want to hurry up and get there?” “Well,” I began, “God has placed inside us all something that makes us want to live.” “Oh," Aubrey interrupted, “that's what the liver is for!” (K. D. Samuelsen, in Reader's Digest)**

**Good week for The King, after Elvis Presley regained his proper berth as the world’s highest-earning dead celebrity. Presley, who will earn an estimated $49 million this year, was edged out in 2006 by Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain. *(The Week magazine, November 9, 2007)***

**W. C. Fields always referred to Death as “that fellow in the bright nightgown," and he always hated and dreaded Christmas. It is ironic that when “that fellow” came for him in 1946, it was on Christmas Day. (J. Bryan, III, in Hodge Podge Two, p. 42)**

**How come Korean apartment buildings don’t have a fourth floor? The word for four is “sah,” which also means “death.” So they skip labeling a fourth floor the way a lot of American builders skip labeling a thirteenth floor. (L. M. Boyd)**

**When he wasn’t composing musical masterpieces, Richard Wagner oversaw the digging in his garden of his own grave. He was pretty proud of it. Even used to parade dinner guests out to it between courses. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**J. K. Rowling may write for children, says Geordie Greig in the London Telegraph, but her underlying topic is deadly serious. “My books are largely about death,” says the author of the Harry Potter series. “They open with the death of Harry’s parents. There is (the villain) Voldemort’s obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price. I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We’re all frightened of it.” Her own terror of death is easy enough to trace. When Rowling was 15, her 35-year-old mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; after a 10-year-long decline, she died in 1991. At the time, the penniless Rowling was working on a book about a boy with magical powers who goes off to study at a school of wizardry. “I was writing Harry Potter at the moment my mother died. But I had never told her. Dad called m at 7 o’clock the next morning and I just knew what had happened before he spoke. I was alternately a wreck and then in total denial.” Rowling, who has sold hundreds of millions of books, feels cheated that her mother never knew of her success. “Barely a day goes by when I do not think of her. There would be so much to tell her, impossibly much.” *(The Week magazine, January 27, 2006)***

**Steve Jobs was diagnosed with a rare form of pancreatic cancer in 2003 and had a liver transplant six years later, said The Washington Post. He rarely spoke of his illness but addressed it directly in a now-famous Stanford commencement speech in 2005. “No one wants to die,” he said. “Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life’s change agent." (The Week magazine, October 21, 2011)**

**I am glad God saw Death and gave Death a job taking care of all who are tired of living: When all the wheels in a clock are worn and slow and the connections loose and the clock goes on ticking and telling the wrong time from hour to hour and people around the house joke about what a bum clock it is, how glad the clock is when the big Junk Man drives his wagon up to the house and puts his big arms around the clock and says: “You don’t belong here, you gotta come along with me.” How glad the clock is then, when it feels the arms of the Junk Man close around it and carry it away. (Carl Sandburg)**

**As a physician who has been deeply privileged to share the most profound moments of people’s lives, including their final moments, let me tell you a secret. People facing death don’t think about what degrees they have earned, what positions they have held or how much wealth they have accumulated. At the end, what really matters – and is a good measure of a past life – is who you loved and who loved you. The circle of love is everything. (Dr. Bernadine Healy)**

**About 100 people die every minute – somewhere in the world. That means 6,000 deaths per hour, or 144,000 each and every day. So death as a natural phenomenon would be a major problem of human existence even if all crime, war and calamity could be eliminated. (A. S. Otto, Jr.)**

**It’s disgusting and it’s irritating and it’s frustrating, and if you can think of any other words, go ahead and use them. And I’m not dead. (Margaret C. Morris, 95, of Bellevue, Nebraska, after her insurance company and Medicare dropped her coverage because they presumed she was dead due to an apparent clerical error). (Associated Press, as it appeared in the Rocky Mountain News, December 12, 2006)**

**There is an old legend about a rich merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to the market. While he was at the marketplace, he was jostled by someone in the crowd. When he turned around he saw a woman in a long black cloak and knew it was Death. The servant ran home to his master and in a trembling voice told him about the encounter and how Death had looked at him and made a threatening gesture. The servant begged his master to loan him a horse so he could ride to Samarra and hide so Death would not find him. The master agreed and the servant galloped away. Later the merchant went down to the marketplace and saw Death standing nearby. The merchant asked, “Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant and frighten him?” “That was not a threatening gesture,” Death replied. “It was just that I was startled to see him in Baghdad because I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra!” *(Sermon illustration used by Peter Marshall, retold by Alice Gray in Stories for the Heart)***

**Up to about a hundred years ago the custom of “sin-eating" was widespread in England and in the Highlands of Scotland. When someone died, the official village sin-eater was notified. He went at once to the house of the deceased, sat on a stool near the door, and consumed a groat, a crust of bread, and a bowl of ale. When finished he would rise and announce the peace of the departed soul, for whom he thus had just traded his own soul. For some people I can think of, it would take a lot more than a groat and a crust of bread! (Bernie Smith, in The Joy of Trivia, p. 7)**

**I recently revisited the little town of Lakeside, California and was reminded of how things were there in 1949. As you drove into town, which was all of two blocks long, from the west, there was a stretch of road lined with cork elm trees that formed a tunnel. At the beginning of the tree tunnel was a billboard-size sign that read, “Please Drive Carefully. This Is a One-Hearse Town.” There was, in fact, a mortuary on Main Street. It’s still in business. (Sister Anna Mary Meyer, in Reminisce magazine)**

**John DeFrain, a social researcher at the University of Nebraska, has studied about 500 families who have experienced unexpected death. “At first,” he says, “they are so stunned they don’t even know what they need to do, let alone tell others how to help.” This is why people who are grief-stricken seldom respond to the well-meaning offer, “If there is anything I can do, let me know.” (Barbara Russell Chesser, in Reader’s Digest)**

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