

An Appointment with Death

(Inspired by my daughter Melanie's dream)

by

Geoff Davies

©2021

Otto opened his eyes and found he was staring at the white ceiling of a room smelling of hospitals. He was flat on his back with his right arm in plaster and supported in a sling hanging from the ceiling. He didn't remember the complete sequence of events but just recollected that one minute he was driving along the motorway in torrential rain and the next thing he was aquaplaning across the carriageways and then being hit by something big. Now he was lying in a hospital bed with his plastered arm and tubes attached to his left hand.

He sensed someone near the bed and turned his head to the left. A figure in a black cloak and hood was standing with its back to him doing something with its hands.

"Er, excuse me" Otto said.

At first, the figure didn't respond, but then, in a raspy voice, replied "I won't be a moment I'm just texting a reply to a colleague."

Great! Otto thought. *The doctor or nurse is supposed to checking up on me, I presume, but is too busy on his or her bloody mobile phone.* While he was waiting for the person to finish he thought the uniform rather strange. Normally, a doctor would wear a white coat and a nurse would wear a blue or green uniform. Women would also wear a little hat to keep their hair in place; but a black cloak with a hood? Most strange ... and a little disconcerting. From behind, the figure could be mistaken for 'The Grim Reaper'. Otto suddenly realized that he was thirsty and in need of a drink but couldn't reach across to the jug of water and plastic cup on the bedside table.

"Excuse me, I wonder if ..."

"I said I would be with you shortly" was the raspy interruption. "Bugger! Bloody predictive text. Why can't one just disable it? Instead of sending '... nearly dead', it changed it to '... near indeed'!"

Otto waited while the figure presumably sent a correction text before turning around. He stared at what one could hardly describe as a person standing before him. It looked like the Grim Reaper. It stood there wearing a long, black loose and tatty cloak which was wrapped all the way around its body with its face, or skull to be exact, beneath a deep hood. Two bony skeletal hands protruded from the sleeves, the left one holding a mobile phone with the other one cradling a scythe in the form of a long pole with a curved blade fixed to the top. Otto's first thought was of a practical joke, which he didn't think funny under the circumstances.

"It's not funny."

"What's not funny" replied the raspy voice.

"You, dressed up like The Grim Reaper."

"What do you mean 'dressed up'? I find that rather patronizing.

"What do you expect? I wake up following a road accident and here you are pretending to be The Grim Reaper as though I am dead."

"You are dead. That's why I am here."

"No. I am being serious, deadly serious."

"I know; and everything you say from now on will have deathly connotations."

"But I am not dead."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not!"

"Yes you are."

"No I'm ... okay Doctor Death ..."

The skulls teeth were clenched shut conveying a look of annoyance, if a skull can look annoyed.

"... if I am dead, then why am I lying here with my arm in a plaster cast and ..."
Otto turned himself enough to grab the alarm button which he saw laying on the beside him.

"You don't want to do that" the rasp said.

"Why not?"

"Because it might alert someone."

"Hah! Then you admit that I am not dead if I can summon someone to come?"

The skull dropped forward in embarrassment. "It appears that maybe I've got it wrong."

"Too true you have because I am alive and in good health; well, apart from a broken arm and bruised body."

The grim reaper lifted its phone up and poked it with a bony forefinger looking at the screen. "You are Zeus Otto Granthum aren't you?" It said with a low cackle.

"Yes, and what's so funny?"

"Your name. Whoever named you after a Greek God?"

"My parents of course." Otto was feeling a bit peeved.

"But why 'Zeus'?"

"I think it was because I was born in Olympus Drive when Jupiter was visible in the night sky."

"So why didn't they name you 'Jupiter'? There must be another reason."

"Well, yes there is as it happens."

"Enlighten me."

"My father believed in ... dragons."

The skull's jaws clattered loudly with laughter.

"His favourite was a cartoon dragon called 'ZOG'; hence my name or initials to be precise."

"It could have been embarrassing."

"It was, particularly when I was at school. They used to call me King Zog."

"Why?"

"Because he was the King of Albania for eleven years until the start of the Second World War."

"I should know that."

Otto was getting fidgety.

"Look, I don't want to appear to be rude but where is this going?"

“Oh sorry, we’ve digressed.” The grim reaper looked around the ward, which contained three other beds – all unoccupied. “I thought that maybe I had the wrong bed.”

There followed a momentary silence while the grim reaper returned to its phone and Otto lay dying for a drink.

“The alert definitely came from this ward and your name flashed up. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“Okay” said Otto abruptly and getting annoyed. “The joke’s over. Take off that silly costume and help me to sit up please Doctor Death.”

“What silly costume?” The reaper replied. “And don’t call me ‘Doctor Death’. My name is Reaper, Grim Reaper.”

“You’re joking.”

“Does it look as though I am joking? I’m deadly serious.”

“Unfortunately your face, sorry skull, is pretty expressionless.”

“To you maybe, but not to my friends and colleagues. Watch.”

The reaper stood staring at Otto.”

“This is me smiling.”

“Y..e..s.”

“Now with an angry expression.”

“O.. kay.”

“And now concentrating.”

“R..ight.”

“Well?”

“They all look the same.”

“Oh I give up.”

“Anyway, prove that you are who you say you are.”

Grim extended his left hand. “Feel that.”

Otto saw the skeletal hand holding the phone at the end of a bony arm consisting of a radius and ulna devoid of flesh. “Undo your cloak.”

“Why? It’s freezing in this ward. I’ll catch my death of cold. You ought to ask them to turn the heating up.”

“I want to see the person who’s controlling the arm.”

“As you wish” sighed Grim.

He parted his cloak to expose the skeleton beneath. “Satisfied now?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? Just feel my ribs.”

“I’d rather not thanks.”

Otto waited whilst Grim pulled the tatty cloak back over his skeleton.

“You really are The Grim Reaper, aren’t you.”

“Of course. That’s what I keep telling you; and it’s ‘Grim Reaper’ not ‘The Grim Reaper’”

“Okay Grim, have it your way.”

Otto thought back to him being called ‘Zeus’.

“How come your name is ‘Grim’?”

Grim appeared embarrassed. “I was named after the Brothers Grimm because my sponsor enjoys fairy tales.”

“But ‘Grim’ is their surname.”

“I know, and I also have been the butt of jokes about chasing up dead fairies.”

Otto laughed. “What about elves and pixies?”

“Oh shutup.”

There was a slight pause before Grim asked if he could pull up a chair to sit down. “My bones are aching with all this standing. Must be old age.”

Otto nodded, as they sat there for a couple of minutes in silence.

“So Grim, why are you here if I’m not dead?”

“False alarm it seems. Too many mistakes being made these days. It will be the death of me. I blame the software – too many bugs. They keep bringing out new releases but don’t test them properly.”

“Who writes the software?”

“Ghost writers. That way, if bugs are found, they don’t get the blame.”

“Strange arrangement if you ask me.”

Otto’s thirst returned.

“Could you pour me some water please.”

Otto watched Grim put the mobile phone on the table and pick up the jug of water with his phalanges and metacarpals fearing that it might slip out of his grip. He handed the plastic cup to Otto who gulped the refreshing liquid down.

“God, I needed that.”

Otto offered the plastic cup to Grim.

“Do you want some?”

“No thanks; food and drink go straight through me.”

Grim sat stroking his bony chin with his phalanges, then asked Otto “When you die, do you hope to go to that place you call ‘heaven’?”

“No. I don’t really believe in the existence of a God.”

“You have a choice you know.”

“A choice of what?”

“Heaven or Hell, would be your equivalents.”

“But I don’t believe in heaven or hell.”

“That’s irrelevant. Believe it or not, you will end up in one of two places. If you do not register your choice then it will be selected for you based on your lifestyle leading up to your death.”

“So what are these places?”

“The first is a place of fun and excitement: dancing, barbeques, debauchery and rampant sex.”

“Sounds good.”

“Not if you can’t tolerate the heat. The other choice is a place where peace and tranquillity reign and where you can enjoy the attention of dryads, hamadryads, sirens,

mermaids and fairies who will offer you plenty of music, food, drink and ... rampant sex."

"What do you recommend?"

"It depends on one's personality. Extroverts, for example, might find the first option, Hades we call it, more to one's taste whereas introverts would probably prefer the latter, or Paradise."

"Paradise sounds more attractive."

"Yes, but it can get a bit boring and monotonous. It depends on what you're looking for in the afterlife."

"Is anyone in charge of Hades and Paradise? Like the Devil or God?"

"Of course. Someone's got to keep order otherwise anarchy would reign."

"So who's in charge?"

"Mephistopheles in Hades, but he's not a very good manager. Bone idle in my opinion. All he does is drink all the time with his select group of cronies. They are known as the Meph's drinkers and often drink until they are blind drunk."

"Oh dear; I guess it gets pretty chaotic."

"Surprisingly not. Residents are too busy enjoying themselves. In fact dancing is very popular."

"Oh?"

"Yes. One of the most popular pieces is Danse Macabre."

"I know it quite well."

"In fact, the dancing sometimes becomes so wild that the dancers end up with their bones interlocked with each other. It's a bugger to separate them without breaking any."

"I can imagine that."

"In fact the composer, Saint-Saens, is a resident and still composes; but mainly for the xylophone which he plays with his phalanges; quite effectively."

"What about Paradise? Who's in charge in there?"

"Gabriel."

"Not the Archangel Gabriel?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Not personally, but he is quite well-known."

"Oh, I didn't realize that."

"Yes, he is known for his fiery temper."

"Really?"

"Yes. A Russian called Valery Bryusov wrote a novel about him and the composer Sergei Prokofiev wrote an opera based on the book."

"How interesting."

Otto realized that he needed the toilet.

"I'm going to have to press the buzzer."

Grim seemed to go tense.

"Why?"

"I need someone to help me to the toilet."

"I can help you."

"How can you help? You are just a ... bag of bones."

"And you are a lump of putrid flesh!"

"I am not rotten and I don't stink."

"Says who?"

"Anyway, I don't think I want to get too close to you."

"Why not?"

"I don't want a 'near death' experience."

"Full of laughs aren't you!"

"I think it's funny."

"You would. I don't."

"Sorry."

"That's alright. I'll excuse your naivety."

There was a brief pause while neither Otto nor Gim said anything.

"I must admit that I always thought the Grim Reaper was just mythology."

"Many myths are based on fact. In fact the story of Count Dracula is based on fact."

"He died with stake though his heart didn't he?"

"No, that's just a rumour to frighten little children. He actually died from a coffin fit."

"Poor chap. Perhaps he had consumption or something."

"No. He had a fit whilst lying in his coffin. I thought you said you wanted help to go to the toilet."

"Oh, yes."

Otto slowly eased his plastered arm out of the sling, then himself from under the bed covers and sat on the side of the bed.

"How do you feel?"

"Okay. I think. Just stand by me in case I feel unsteady."

"Just a minute."

Grim laid his scythe across the bed and held out his bony hands ready to support Otto as he stood up slowly.

"Well?"

"I'm okay at the moment."

Otto grabbed hold of the mobile support, on which hung a drip connected by tubes to his hand. The two of them walked slowly towards the toilets, which were visible from Otto's bed. As they reached the entrance to the ward Otto saw two nurses sitting at the ward station. One was typing on a computer whilst the other one was talking to her. Just as he reached the door of the toilet, a voice called out "What are you doing?"

"I needed to go to the toilet."

The nurse who had been talking got up and came towards him.

“Why didn’t you press your ‘attention’ button to summon help?”

“Grim...”

Otto stopped himself just in time.

“I should say it would have been grim, if you had fallen over; and that arm should be supported. Still, as you are here now, you had better go. Will you be able to manage okay with one hand?”

“For what I am going to do, yes thanks.”

Grim followed him in.

“What are you coming in for? Come to think of it, the nurse can’t see you.”

“Of course not. Only those about to die can see me.”

“But we agreed that I am not dead ... but we haven’t ascertained whether I am going to die.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Well yes, of course. I don’t want to die and don’t feel as though I am about to snuff it.”

“Have you finished?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get back to the ward. I need to send a message.”

“Who to?”

“None of your business.”

As they left the toilet, the nurse hurried over and helped Otto back into bed and returned his arm to the sling.

“Thank you.”

“Call us next time.”

“Will do.”

“Who put this chair by your bed?”

“I don’t know. I only woke up a short while ago.”

“You must talk in your sleep.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I thought I heard you talking with someone.”

“Oh, maybe I do. I do have some funny dreams at times.”

The nurse returned to her duties and Grim picked up his phone and sat down.

“As you have delayed me trying to decide whether to die or not, my schedule has gone to pot so I need to call in to cancel my next appointment.”

“I thought I intimated that I wasn’t going to die just after we started talking.”

“I thought it was touch-and-go.”

“Do you get very busy?”

“Yes, at times, but at the moment we are understaffed; can’t get quality deceased.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“One of the problems is your habit of killing each other with your interminable wars and pogroms. Okay, it does suggest a pool of recruits but most of the victims are

either invalided or suffer from extreme trauma. We do recruit a few disabled, like those with missing limbs, but there is a limit to the extent to which they can be employed. The second problem is that more of you are being cremated these days with rates over 75% in some countries. A pot of ashes is no use to us.”

“Well, it’s possible that things will get better. Although the world population is currently still growing, as poverty is reduced and women across the world are given equal rights and education the birth rate is predicted to drop below replacement rate; so over time the world population will decrease, which means fewer people dying and less work for you and fewer staff required.”

“Then we might have to make some reapers redundant.”

“Oh come on; don’t be such a pessimist. Look on the bright side of life.”

“Somehow I think I would find that difficult.”

“Hm. So what happens when someone dies and you, or one of your colleagues, turns up to escort them to Hades or Paradise?”

“First we take them to a staging post known as ‘The Isle of the Dead’.”

“No, not really? There is a painting of that place by the Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin and a symphonic poem composed by another Russian composer: Sergei Rachmaninov.”

“Incredible!”

“It is also the name of a small island adjacent to Port Arthur in Tasmania, Australia.”

“What a coincidence!”

Grim got up off his seat following a long pause.

“I think I had better be going, otherwise I will get ribbed for talking too much.”

“That’s a pity. I was quite enjoying our chat.”

“Me too. Well, if you are ever in a situation where you need to talk about life and death, give me a bell. I’ll leave my number on your phone.”

“I haven’t got it with me.”

“No probs, it will be sent and downloaded automatically.”

“I guess this is goodbye until ...”

“Yes; and if you do decide to join us please don’t get cremated. You are a very cultured, sociable and understanding person and there will always be a job for you. I will ensure that your name is put forward for consideration.”

“Very kind of you.”

“That’s alright.”

Grim put his phone in a pocket in his tatty cloak and took his scythe off the bed.

“Musn’t forget this.”

“I could have used it to cut my lawn.”

“Ha! Well, so long Zeus.”

“Otto.”

“Whatever. Enjoy the rest of your life.”

“I will. Cheerio Grim.”

The reaper turned and walked out of the ward, past the two nurses swinging his scythe close to their necks.

“You wish” Otto muttered to himself.

===== “ =====