

THE MAN OF THE FAMILY
by Craig Joseph

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Mother
Craig (Age 10)
Grandmother Nellie
Adult Craig (Age 44)

MOTHER is dropping off an excited CRAIG at GRANDMOTHER NELLIE'S for a visit.

MOTHER

Now, I want you to be on your best behavior. Remember to say "please" whenever you want something and "thank you" whenever you receive it.

CRAIG

I know, Mom.

MOTHER

Grandmother Nellie didn't have to invite you over today. This is a special privilege since you're turning ten, so I want you to act like a young man and be appreciative.

CRAIG

I know, I know.

MOTHER

Well, I'm just checking.

CRAIG

What are we going to do for my birthday? Is she taking me to a movie? Are we going to Chuck E. Cheese? *(An amazing thought)* Do you think she got me a puppy?!

MOTHER

I don't know. All she said on the phone was that she wanted to mark your birthday with something special. I'm sure it will be wonderful. If you behave.

CRAIG

Mooooooooooooom!

(GRANDMOTHER NELLIE opens the door and his tone instantly changes.)

Hi, Grandma! Are you ready for this awesome day?!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Laughingly) I certainly am! The question is: are you ready to become an important young man in our family? Because today is a big day.

CRAIG

I sure am!

MOTHER

He's been looking forward to this all week; I'm sure he'll be excited for whatever you've got in store. What time should I pick him up?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

I'm no really certain when we'll be done. Let's keep it loose and I'll make sure I have him back to your house by dinnertime. Will that work?

MOTHER

Sounds good. Now, Craig, remember what -

CRAIG

Mom? I got it, OK? Bye.

MOTHER

Bye, bye honey. Thanks again, Nellie.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

My pleasure. *(Ushers him into the kitchen)* So young man, let's get you started with something to eat. What sounds good? A breakfast sandwich? Should I chop up some cantaloupe or honeydew?

CRAIG

I'm not really hungry, Grandma.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Nonsense. How about some kibbee?

CRAIG

Raw lamb for breakfast? It's OK. I had some cereal before we left the -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

I know what's even better! I couldn't sleep last night, so I got up and made some hummus at about 2 in the morning. I've got some fresh pita from Damascus grocery. I'll cut up a few pieces and you can see if there's enough garlic in the -

CRAIG

Grandma, I'm really not hungry. *(She finally gets it.)* I don't mean to be rude, but could we maybe get started with my birthday surprise, whatever it is? I'm real excited.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Laughingly) Of course you are! And I'm so glad to hear it. I've been praying to God that - as you grow up - you'd begin to take a more active interest in your family.

CRAIG

Of course I'm interested! Interested in what we're gonna do today! Where we going?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Almost continuous from above) And that you'd be ready for the responsibility that comes with being the oldest grandson.

CRAIG

Responsibility?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

So, sit down right there, close your eyes, stick out your hands and get ready for your birthday present. *(He does as she says.)* No peeking, young man.

CRAIG

(Almost quaking with excitement) I'm not! I promise!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE goes to a cupboard or a drawer - whatever you have available scenically - and pulls out an overstuffed manila folder with lots of different things hanging out of it - various colored pieces of paper, a key on a lanyard, maybe some photographs. There should be some inexplicable stuff in there. The front of the folder should be labeled: WHEN I DIE. She places the folder in his open and eager hands.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Open your eyes! *(He does.)* Surprise!

CRAIG

(Reading) When? I? Die? What is this?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Oh, honey, this is a special moment. The day when I share with you some very important things that I want you to help me with after I pass away. Now that you're becoming a young man, I trust you with these things and I know you'll take good care of them for me because you love me so much.

CRAIG

But what about Dad and -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Oh, your father means well, but he's always so busy. He doesn't have the time and patience to look at this stuff like you do.

CRAIG

Uncle Mitch -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

He just gets frustrated with me, and says he doesn't want to talk about my dying. Like it's too far away. Thank God, I'm healthy, but you never know. Some day I'll be dead and gone and then no one will have to worry about me anymore. But you -

CRAIG

(Sort of dazed) - will take care of these things because I'm your oldest grandson?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

That's right!

CRAIG

And this is the special reason that you wanted me over here to celebrate my birthday?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

You got it! Now, where should we start? Open up that folder and there should be a key in there, yes? On a ribbon?

CRAIG

(Unenthusiastically locating it). Um - yes. It's right here. But -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Great. *(Leading him further into the house)* Bring it in here to the spare bedroom.

CRAIG

But we're not allowed to go in -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Not usually, but now that you're ten -

CRAIG

It's kind of creepy in here.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Now take that key and unlock the closet door.

CRAIG

OK. *(A little cautiously, but then, his face lights up)* Wait a second! Have you been pulling my leg? Is this just a game because you're been hiding my present in here? *(As he's opening the door, excitedly)* Have you just been tricking me the whole time?

The door opens to reveal a garish and colorful nightgown, a pair of fuzzy slippers / houseshoes, and a somewhat ornate hairband, maybe looks like a tiara. It's all visible, though wrapped in plastic. He is disappointed.

What the -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Now, first things first. This is what I want to be buried in.

CRAIG

I -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

I know, I know, it's a little non-traditional, but I don't want to wear black. It shows all sorts of lint and fuzz, plus everyone will be wearing it anyway. I want to go out in style!

CRAIG

But these are pajamas!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Well, I'm going to be laying around for quite a while. I might as well be comfortable, right? And these houseshoes feel so good on my feet - better for my bunions. Then just make sure to put this in my hair to complete the whole outfit.

CRAIG

(Taking things out to examine them more closely) Have you ever worn this stuff before?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Careful, careful. No, I haven't. I got it all a few months ago on sale at Penney's - and I used my retired associate discount to get an additional 30% off. Guess how much I paid for the whole thing? *(He has no idea.)* Guess!

CRAIG

Forty dollars?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Laughing) Come on now! Don't you know I did better than that!? \$16.75 for the whole thing! How do you like that? And these are very good quality. *(He's trying to take items out of the plastic.)* Uh, uh, uh, honey. Let's leave it in the plastic so it stays nice and fresh and clean.

CRAIG

Shouldn't you be in a dress with make-up or something like that?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Mildly disappointed) Well, listen to you, mister. You ARE your father's son. Now, pay attention to me. *(She is sort of in his face.)* Your father and your uncle are going to try and do just that - put me in some stiff, formal number that I wouldn't wear alive, much less dead. Don't let them do it!

CRAIG

Okay, okay.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(pulling him over to a dresser or end table drawer) And this is where I've put some of my favorite costume jewelry. *(She's rifling through various broaches, earrings, bracelets - all of them a bit outlandish.)* You pick out a few pieces that you think will go nicely with that outfit and make sure the mortician puts them on me before I'm in the casket.

A few seconds of silence, where he's just looking at the drawer of jewelry and she's looking at him.

Well, go ahead. Pick something. Don't be shy.

CRAIG

Now?! I thought you meant later -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

I know what you thought, but let's make sure you've got a good eye.

CRAIG

Wouldn't my Mom be better at this?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Pick something!

Impulsively, half out of fear, he does, and quickly hands it to her.

'Atta boy! Terrific choice! You know what you're doing.

She tosses the piece back in the drawer and then starts pulling him toward the den.

Now, somewhere in that folder, there should be a little black spiral notebook. Dig it out if you can and make sure there's a blue pen and a red pen inside of it. You're going to make a very important list, so put your listening ears on.

CRAIG

(Warming up to this process despite his misgivings). Ok. Got it!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Now there's a lot of furniture and antiques in this room.

CRAIG

I know. We're not supposed to touch most of it.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

But you need to know what it is and where it's going, so listen carefully and take notes. Blue pen means keep it. Red pen means toss.

CRAIG is scrambling to get organized.

To begin: that end table in the corner.

CRAIG

The triangle one?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

That's the one. Whatever happens, don't let your father and Uncle Mitch get rid of it. They think it's junk, but it's not.

CRAIG

The leg is pretty wobbly and it has scratches all over the top of it.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

But it's the first piece of furniture your grandfather and I bought for our home. We'd just returned from our honeymoon in Niagara Falls and had a little bit of extra wedding money to spend. We'd just finished setting up the front room and realized we didn't have anywhere to set all the pictures of our parents and siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins. So we found this little piece that tucked neatly in the corner by the sofa and made it the home base for all of our family pictures.

CRAIG

But there aren't any on it now.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Because we grew! You've seen all the pictures of your cousins and siblings covering the mantle in the living room, yes? They could never fit on this little thing. Plus your father ran into it one too many times when he was tearing around the house as a child. How do you think it got so beaten up?

CRAIG

So he's the one who turned it into junk?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Laughing) Well, yes, I suppose, but it's not junk. It's just . . . retired. Not good for holding pictures, but it holds a lot of memories.

CRAIG

I gotcha. So what should I do with it?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Don't let them get rid of it; you put it in your house. For YOUR wife and children.

CRAIG

That's forever from now. I don't even wanna get married.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Don't be so sure. Time passes so quickly; you'll blink and then think, "How long ago was it when Grandma Nellie first showed this table?" "How long have I had it in my house?" "When did my children suddenly move away?" "How did I get to be the head of such a large family?" (*She ruminates pleasantly.*) Honestly, Craig, sometimes I'm so amazed that all those people in those pictures came FROM ME. How do you like that? It's unbelievable! What a life! What a story!

CRAIG

Don't worry. I'll find a place for the table. And I won't let them throw it away.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Sweet boy.

CRAIG

What else?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Yes, back to it. That coffee table can go. Write it in red. I never liked it. Oh! But keep the doilies on top of it. My mother made those. Blue, please. There are hundreds of them all over the house. Divide them equally between you and your cousins. Except Michael. He gets none of them. Let your sisters divvy up the paintings in this room. Those are all in blue. Toss that rug: red. The sofa is blue - and you tell your father I want him to keep it in your all's living room - even if he fights you on it. That piece is gonna be worth a lot of money someday, mark my word. Put it in blue.

CRAIG has been trying to keep up with her instructions, balancing the folder of papers, while trying to switch back and forth between the pens as she gives her instructions rapid fire. As he does, an envelope of pictures falls out on the ground.

CRAIG

Oops! Sorry about that!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Will you look at that? I almost forgot. We've got plenty of time to work through the whole furniture list, but wait till you see what's in here. Come sit. *(She motions him toward the sofa and proceeds to lay all the pictures out on the coffee table in front of them.)* Now, sonny boy, what do you think of that? Beautiful, huh?

CRAIG

(Mildly horrified and jumping up from the sofa) Oh my gosh! It's like a scene from a scary movie! Why do you have these pictures, Grandma?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Surprised, trying to usher him back to the couch) What are you talking about, honey? They're beautiful. Don't you wanna help me pick one out?

CRAIG

Pick one out?! For what?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

For my plot at the cemetery. What else?

CRAIG

Grandma, those are tombstones! Ghost and skeletons and zombies come out of those things. Haven't you seen *Thriller*? And all those terrible creatures that come crawling out of the dirt and start dancing with Michael Jackson?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

What on Earth are you talking about?

CRAIG

I don't want you to become a zombie!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Pulling him into an embrace)

Oh my goodness. Hush, child, hush. That's not going to happen. These grave markers don't have that kind of power. That's just in the movies.

CRAIG

But I saw it happen!

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

In real life?

CRAIG

Well.....no.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Only on those things you shouldn't be watching late at night, am I right?

CRAIG

Yes, mam.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

I've told you so many times to turn that garbage off. And now - look. It's gotten you all worked up over nothing. Have you actually ever been to a cemetery?

CRAIG

No, mam.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Well, it's not a scary place. It's a place that you can visit me after I pass away. A place where you can still come to talk with me and tell me about your life. A place where you can just sit quietly if you need a break from the world around you and want to remember all the wonderful times we've had - and are still going to have - together.

CRAIG

But what about those tombstones?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

Those are just markers so that everyone knows exactly where their loved ones are buried. The stonemason carves names into the stones, along with the date that the person was born and the date the person died. Sometimes, there are Bible verses or quotes on the stone that remind us of what the person was like.

CRAIG

(Tentatively looking at the photos) And there are different designs on them too. This one has a cross. And this one has an angel.

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

This one has a carving of my favorite flower - the lily. There are some many nice options. I was hoping you'd be willing to help me decide. Do you think you could do that, Craig?

CRAIG

Yes, Grandma. I will. And then -

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

What is it honey?

CRAIG

Could we maybe take a break and go to a movie?

GRANDMOTHER NELLIE

(Laughs) Of course we can.

As they continue looking at the pictures, trying to select the perfect stone, the lights grow dimmer on them and come up on ADULT CRAIG, who speaks as we continue to watch them mulling over options.

ADULT CRAIG

My grandmother was very vigorous and not anywhere close to death. In fact, she lived another 24 years, departing this life at the ripe old age of 94. But she gave me a gift that day: she began preparing me for her eventual demise and helped me get comfortable with one of the only certainties we have in this life: that our loved ones will eventually have to leave us.

When the time came, the details of this day weren't really important. She didn't insist on the nightgown; the triangular end table had long since fallen apart; the stone had already been picked and set in the cemetery years before. So I didn't have to fulfill those duties she'd laid out specifically.

Instead, I lived at her house several nights a week, for the last year of her life. My father, uncle, and I all took turns having dinner with her, watching TV, playing cards, and spending the night, relieving the day nurses for a bit and enabling her to stay in her own home until the very end.

And it was during these final months that she taught me even greater lessons about how to die well - to leave this life with everything in the right place. I watched her tell

people regularly how much she loved them. I saw her ask for forgiveness and make apologies where she needed to. I laughed as she continued to experience the wonder of this world - without even leaving the house; she became a big fan of Star Trek and science fiction, and her living room was filled with lots of "oh mys" and "will you look at that" as she watched each episode.

But most of all, I'll remember lying in bed at night, listening to her praying out loud in the next room, talking to God and asking God to watch out for all of us after she died. She prayed for us each by name, shouting out her hopes and dreams for our lives - all of us who were lucky enough to have our photographs fill the mantle of this wonderful woman's home. *(He looks heavenward.)* Love to you Grandma; until we meet again.

Lights slowly dim on both ADULT CRAIG and CRAIG and GRANDMOTHER, who are embracing.