

Keeping Up with the Joneses

Joe loved the holidays. He enjoyed putting up the icicle lights along the gutters of his house, setting up a big fat Santa Clause, along with a sleigh and full reindeer company, on the roof. The best part of the winter holiday, though, was competing with Bob Jones.

Bob lived across the street and over the past ten years, he and Joe built up their Christmas displays from the simple foam candy canes lining their walkways to the monster light show it had become today. Along with the candy canes Joe had thousands of lights, choirs of lighted plastic angels, four statues of carolers with homemade outfits his wife, Kathleen, fashioned for them, and several spotlights pointed at the house - red, green, and yellow, and one that shone "Season's Greetings" against the garage.

Additionally, Bob had twenty presents around the evergreen tree in his front yard, each wrapped in a vast spectrum of colors and textures, and a huge teddy bear adorned with a great red ribbon tied in a bow. Electric candles burned in every window and fake snow adorned his front door. But this year, the truly spectacular feature was a brilliant light over his house, a free-floating phenomenon with a beauty that Joe envied.

One night Joe walked across the street and banged on Bob's door. Answering it with a hot mug of apple cider in one hand and a plain donut in the other, Bob grinned around a mouthful of the doughy morsel and spit some of it out in greeting to Joe.

"Hey, Joe. Waddya know?"

"Don't 'waddya know' me, Bob. What is it?"

Bob frowned. "What's what?"

"You know exactly what. That light floating over your house."

Bob grinned again and walked out on the porch.

"Oh, yeah. Beautiful, ain't she?"

"Sure but what is it?"

"Remember I told you my mother passed away a couple of months ago?"

"Yeah."

Bob jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Well, that's her."

"What do you mean, 'that's her'?"

"I mean that light is her. Her spirit, if you will. I was talking to her the other day, well more to myself really, when this light appeared before me. It spoke in her voice and knew so many personal things that it couldn't have been a hoax."

Joe stared at his neighbor for several long minutes. Finally, he spoke.

"You're so full of it, Bob. If you don't want to tell me what it is, then fine but don't make up this crap."

"I'm not lying. I'll prove it."

He turned to the floating light.

"Mom? Can you come here for a minute? Joe doesn't believe you're real."

The light flared red and zoomed down toward Joe. He backed up, stammering out a retraction.

"I, I didn't say you weren't real. It's just that I find it difficult to believe that you're,"

A high-pitched scruffy voice that sounded just like Bob's mother spoke but whether it was aloud or in his head, Joe couldn't tell.

"Joe Smith, are you calling my son a liar? Some things never change. Do you remember four years ago, when you told your wife that Bob gambled away two hundred dollars you said you loaned him, without asking her I might add, when it was actually you who lost it at the track?"

"How did you know that?"

The light cackled like an old woman.

"I'm dead. I know everything."

Joe looked back to Bob.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you. This really is your mom, isn't it?"

"You bet. She decided to help me with my holiday display here. Isn't she doing a fabulous job?"

The sphere glided up over Bob's house and increased its brilliance to brighten up the entire yard. Suddenly the spotlights at Joe's house sparked, fizzed, and went out. Joe could hear the smile in Bob's voice.

"Aw, that's a shame, Joe. Your house doesn't quite look the same without those lights, does it?"

Joe turned back to reply. Bob stood over him, frowning and holding the steaming cider an inch from Joe's left eye.

"Better go check the wires. You don't want a short to cause a fire or anything, do you?"

Joe backed away into the street. Bob grinned again and went back inside. The light danced back and forth as if laughing. Joe frowned and went to look at the cords from the spotlights. Each was in tact as were the outlets. For some reason, the lights just stopped working.

He turned to look at Bob's house and the orb still danced its happy little jig. Joe realized that she was responsible for shorting out the lights. The old bat never did like him. He ripped out the plugs from each of the outlets, cursing Bob and his mother.

He dragged the spotlights into his garage and sat down at his workbench, defeated. How could he compete with a ghost? If only his father were here. Joe's dad passed away last year and it had been hard for him to cope. He never talked to him though, like Bob did with his mother, because he felt ridiculous and feared people would think he was crazy.

He glanced around the garage, then pulled off his hat, crumpling it between his hands. He looked up at the ceiling.

"Dad? I never really believed in the whole life-after-death thing but I've seen something fantastic tonight. I'm hoping it wasn't a joke or a hallucination. I'm hoping it was real because I need your help, dad. Dad?"

When nothing happened after five minutes, Joe chided himself for being a fool. He crammed the hat back on his head, his face burning in embarrassment, and headed for the side door of the garage. As he reached for the knob, a spark of electricity burst between his fingers. Jumping back he noticed the garage seemed brighter than before. Slowly he turned around and a white orb floated before him.

"Who are you?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, son."

"Dad?"

"Of course it's me. You were just asking for me, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but I never thought... Oh, dad, I'm so glad you're here."

"I know, son. I know what's going on with you and Bob. I also know that crab of an old lady he calls his mother is helping him. So I'm going to give you a hand, so to speak."

Joe frowned.

"How do I know it's really you?"

The swirling light bobbed in close to Joe's face and he felt a sudden sharp pain across the bridge of his nose. His father used to thwap two fingers there when Joe was younger to discourage him from crying.

Joe rubbed his nose.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, dad."

"That's all right. Now let's get to work. We've got to come up with something to out do those damned Joneses for what they pulled tonight."

"Right!" Joe cried. He hesitated at the door.

"What can we do?"

"You just leave that to me."

His father bobbed out the side door and shot over the house. As Joe ran up the orb started spinning and weaving around. Suddenly, it shot out streams of light that sparkled, like jets of luminescent crystals. In a matter of minutes, Joe's entire front yard and house were covered in flecks of silver that winked and flashed in the light from his father.

Bob rushed out of his front door. He stood in the street, mouth agape, dumfounded. Even the light from Bob's mother dimmed in the awesome display. Joe's dad spun faster. Small sparks flew out and fell harmlessly to the snow. Larger ones arced out over the street, straight at Bob Jones. He ducked away from one but a second hit him squarely on the head. As he beat at it and danced around to avoid another collision, Joe's dad slowly moved forward, bringing the shower of sparks closer to Bob's roof. Once they hit it, the roof caught fire.

Bob's mother spun in circles, her color changing from orange to red in a panic. Bob ran for the hose but found an empty spigot instead. He scrambled toward his garage and came stumbling back out, tripping over the uncoiling monster as he ran. The fire was small but spreading quickly. If he didn't act soon enough, his house would be history.

He finally managed to untangle the hose then hooked it up. Bob turned the nozzle and reached for the sprayer attached to the end. When he squeezed, nothing happened. Looking down, he saw a kink in the line. He grabbed the hose on each side and pulled, stretching and straining but the kink didn't budge. He threw the hose down and spun around to face his neighbor.

"Joe, you can't do this! My house, my home!"

"I'm not doing anything, Bob."

Bob's face flushed red with anger. He pulled at his hair and Joe held up his hand.

"Don't have a stroke, Bob. I'll handle this."

He looked up at his father and nodded. The orb flashed green once. Bob frowned and looked at his roof. The fire was still spreading. He turned back to Joe, a question furrowing his brow and Joe pointed at the hose. Bob saw the kink was gone. He grabbed it and shot a stream of water at the fire. Soon it was out but Bob's roof was going to need some repair, unless he wanted it to snow in his living room.

Joe could see the relief wash over Bob as he stared up at his smoldering roof but it was short lived. He tossed the hose to the side and stormed across the street to confront Joe. As he approached, the glowing orb hovered over Joe's left shoulder and Bob faltered. Joe smirked.

"You remember my dad, don't you, Bob? Well, *he'll* be helping *me* during the holidays this year. Though you'd like to know. G'night, neighbor."

He turned, then stopped, and spun on his heel to face Bob again. When he did, his voice burned with a warning.

"Oh, yeah. Don't ever threaten me again, understand?"

Bob gulped then nodded his head in understanding.

A smile curved Joe's mouth.

"Great. Have a good night...neighbor."

By the following Saturday, Joe's and Bob's competition in decor had turned into a rivalry of destruction. With their parents' help, the two men had managed to break almost every window in each other's homes and blow off both front doors. The strings of lights at Joe's house lay broken and lifeless in his yard, and the teddy bear on Bob's lawn lay decapitated and de-limbed, the head spiked on an evergreen tree.

On Saturday night, Joe rigged a bomb under the dead bushes on the side of Bob's house. He chose them because Sparky, Bob's cocker spaniel, relieved himself on them every night at nine sharp. He glanced at his watch and noted the time - 8:50pm. By 8:56, he was done and back across the street in his own home.

Sitting comfortably in his recliner, Joe turned the remote detonator over and over in his hands, tracing circles with his index finger around the red button in the middle.

"Hey, dad. See anything yet?"

"Not yet."

Joe smiled to himself and studied the remote while his father kept watch through the broken remnants of his front window. At nine o'clock, Joe heard the door open across the street as Bob's wife, Sarah, let Sparky out into the yard. She was yelling at Bob to stop this ridiculous feud with Joe or she'd go home to her mother.

"Okay, Joe. Get ready. When I give the signal, you push the button."

Grinning, Joe concentrated on the remote. He could hear Sparky as the dog yipped and barked during his nightly ritual but he wouldn't let that distract him from the task at hand. Suddenly, his father shouted.

"Now, son. NOW!"

Joe pressed the button and cheered when he heard the explosion. He ran to the window, eager to see Bob's reaction. He saw a large form laying in the front yard and frowned. He didn't think Sparky was that big. Then he spotted the dog as it crawled out from beneath the evergreen tree and approached the still form. As Joe shook his head, Bob ran out of his house, screaming in despair. He fell to his knees and cradled his wife's mangled corpse, seeming not to notice as his white sweatshirt turned red with her blood.

As he rocked back and forth, clutching Sarah to his chest, he spotted Joe as he stood in what was left of his picture window.

Bob lay Sarah's body gently on the ground. He stepped around the corpse and crossed the street. His mother swooped down ahead of him for her own fight with Joe's dad. As the two orbs rose above the house, circling each other, Bob stepped onto Joe's front lawn and picked up his pace. By the time he hit Joe's front door, he was running full speed and shrieking. The skirmish was over. It was time to go to war.

Bob threw himself on Joe, pinning him to the floor. He pummeled him with a fury Joe never knew existed. With two quick strikes, Bob broke Joe's nose with a sickening crunch. He salivated through a wicked grin and pulled his arm back for another blow. When he did Joe

double-fisted Bob in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. As Bob rolled to the side, wheezing for breath, Joe wriggled out from beneath him and ran for the kitchen.

Screaming for his father's help, Joe searched for a weapon. He grabbed an eight-inch stainless steel carving knife from a wooden block on the counter. Joe tried to explain as he walked back to the foyer where Bob knelt, arms folded across his stomach.

"I swear to God, Bob. I didn't mean to hurt her. I didn't mean for Sarah..."

Bob glared as he struggled to stand, his rage stabbing in its coldness. Just then, Kathleen came down the stairs. She was pulling on her robe, her eyes bleary with sleep. Before she could speak, Bob was on his feet and running again. Joe turned quickly and pointed the knife at him.

Bob grabbed Joe's wrist and held it with both hands. He spun them around to face Kathleen. Joe heard his own scream of protest as Bob rushed forward and they both plunged the knife into Kathleen's chest, piercing her heart. Her eyes fluttered in surprise. She looked at Joe and smiled softly. After caressing his cheek with the last ounce of strength she owned, Kathleen slumped to the floor, dead.

Joe released his grip on the knife then fell to his knees, sobbing and trying to shake her back to life. Helpless to save her, he leaned over to kiss her forehead and whisper goodbye. He stood, walked slowly over to the sink, and grabbed the rolling pin on the drying rack. When he turned to face Bob, he raised the rolling pin above his head and screamed.

Bob ran for the door. Just as he went through it, Joe caught up with him and smashed the rolling pin against the back of his head. Bob stumbled and fell down the porch steps and rolled into the front yard. As he lay on his back, stunned, a warm pool of blood spread beneath him, melting the snow.

Joe knelt beside him. He raised the rolling pin one more time, hoping to crush Bob's face into his brain. As he bent forward for the final blow, Bob raised the carving knife. He had no strength but it wasn't needed. Joe rushed himself upon the blade, where it lodged into his heart and he collapsed on top of Bob. Each of their final moments was spent staring into the other's eyes as their lives ebbed away.

The orbs floated down and hovered over the two dead men. One blinked and took the shape of a man in his thirties, dressed in a conservative suit circa 1924. The other took the form of a sixty-five year old woman in a shimmery gold silk dress. The two looked at each other and guffawed with delight.

"Well done, mother. This was even better than last year."

"We make a good team, just as we did when we were alive. I wasn't about to let Death spoil all our fun."

"Exactly," the male ghost replied. "Just because we've been damned to roam the earth for all eternity doesn't mean we can't enjoy ourselves, now does it?"

"And I thought killing when we were alive was fun. But we have so much more freedom in this form, don't you agree, son?"

He nodded.

"These pitiful creatures will believe anything you tell them."

The both laughed and floated down the street. The son pointed at the next block.

"You know, there are a few Jewish families living on the next block and Chanukah is eight days long. Think of the fun we could have with them."

The woman chuckled.

"The living are so easy."