

Adult Short Story Honorable Mention

From March to September

By Cliff Gale, Brookeville

March 8

Let's pretend you're still here. I know you're not. I'm just trying to stay alive, though sometimes I question why. The kids are young enough to forget all of it, have no memory of us at all, and the insurance money will set them on easy street.

You're keeping me alive somehow, Karen, so play along. I'm doing this to comfort myself, and what's wrong with that? Southern Comfort only helps for a few hours; your brother Brent says it's no help at all, but it sure feels like it to me these days.

You ask, "How are you today?"

I answer, "Oh, about the same, can't complain."

"Really, Dennis?" You have that look on your face you get when you knew I wasn't telling the truth.

"Of course not. I feel sick all the time. You're gone, Karen, just like that. You were the biggest thing in my life. Think of everything we did together."

"Then go ahead and remember our times, but don't be trapped in our past."

"Sure, that's easy for you to say. You're not stuck in time. I am. So, what's it like to be dead?" Of course, that's as far as it goes. You don't answer.

I just don't have any energy. Getting out of bed is ridiculously hard. But waking up is worse. That first second, when you realize the ugly truth again. That first hit is hard to take.

So let me read you some of the condolence cards. They are the worst. Look at this one—fat pinky angels hovering over "In Sympathy." How about this one: birds flying around "Our Loved Ones Live on In Our Hearts." A scribbled something over "In This Time of Loss." I can't even make out what it's supposed to say. It's from your aunt; she must have been nervous. Look at all these different versions of "Thinking of You." Many folk claim to be thinking of me, praying for me. People I don't like are thinking of me.

March 9

I write you notes and letters. So, I'm nuts. So what? Who wouldn't be, in my position? Not even 30 and I'm a widower with two small children.

At the funeral home Aunt Jody told the kids, “Your mother is asleep,” and they seemed to accept it. They played with their marbles on the pretty red carpet. Some people were unhappy with me for “letting them behave like that at such a time.” I said, “Leave them alone; let’s just hope they don’t lose their marbles.” Admit it, you would have laughed, too.

Brent and Jill took Jimmy and Jeffrey right after the funeral. I was worthless. They stayed there for days, waiting for dear old Dad to pull himself together. Now they’re with your parents, and there are others on the waiting list. They all say, “We’ll be happy to keep them for as long as you feel you need.” One thing they all agree on is that I’m not worth much these days. Luckily, we have so many people who like our kids; quite a few of them don’t like me.

I went downtown Friday night. Thought I’d be better off out in the noise, not alone in the house. I blew an hour in a bookstore and another in a record shop. But it was like I could not see or hear any of it, like I wasn’t really there. Just disembodied. Like a ghost, but you’re the ghost.

Then I went to Flipper McGee’s, against your better judgment. I drank at the bar, staring into my drink making sure not to make eye contact with anyone. Some geezer sat down next to me and said, “All walls fall down, eventually, and all bridges, too.”

“Damn right and quite profound,” I said. It got me out of there; I can’t stand it when a drunk thinks he’s being “deep.”

When I was sitting there, I kept hearing a voice saying, “Keep drinking until you drink enough to pass out—permanently.” Of course, it wasn’t a voice outside myself; it was just me, but it seemed like it came from outside.

March 11

I called and checked on the kids on Saturday. Jill answered and said the boys are spending the day with Jody. So now Jody’s got ‘em. It’s a game: keep-away-from-Dad. They all want to protect the kids. Good thing none of them saw me last night. Drinking is bad for my personality, I know, but it helps in other ways, you know.

I felt obligated to call your parents. Your father sounded terrible; we spoke for about 10 seconds; it was too weird for either of us and we both hurried to get off.

March 12

Lousy weather. Bleak. Melodramatic. If I didn’t have to think about Jimmy and Jeffrey, I might have joined you today. Would you reject me or hate me for doing it? I don’t think you should. Brent and Jill would give them a happy home. Everyone would forget quickly enough. Life is so busy, and life is for the living and I hardly feel like I’m living. Most of life is just keeping stuff going. Life stinks, and then you die. Good night.

P.S. What am I supposed to do with all your clothes and photo albums, all the stuff that screams your name? Can't bear to throw it out and can't bear to keep it.

March 14

It's 2 a.m. I can't sleep. I haven't slept in our bedroom since last week. I went in once to pull out three weeks' worth of clothes so I won't have to go in there. I understand why so many believe in ghosts. It's like I can feel your presence.

I'll never forget your wake. Your face was unmarked, but it didn't look right at all. Powdered. Something was gone. I guess that's why so many people believe in the soul. You looked inappropriate dead.

I overheard Jenny whispering that I looked terrible too. No kidding. This is raw.

March 18

People say really weird stuff to you when they find out someone close to you died. It seems to me that everyone is suddenly religious. They think it helps if they tell me you're in a better place or that you're now an angel and will watch over the kids. Even Arnold the Argumentative Atheist said, "I may not be much of a believer but I don't know what the hell happens after you die. Maybe there is something, who knows?" I figured I must have been looking real bad for him to say something like that to me. The Atheist cheers up the agnostic, that's a good one.

March 19

Loretta came by and was obviously trying to distract me in any way she could think of. It was almost comic. She babbled on about anything that came into her silly head. Guess that's what a Ph.D. in thermodynamics does for your brain. She sure knows how to make kids laugh. Makes me groan.

Do you live in a dreamworld now? "When I want you in the night all I have to do is dre-e-e-e-eem." I hated that song. But it's horrible to dream about you and then wake up. That's a nightmare.

March 22

I got Jimmy and Jeffrey back today, after being interrogated by half your family. You should have seen some of the looks. When you mix pity with anger and confusion it can really contort the face. They don't want them alone with me. Me neither. I told them we were going to see Jody at The Downtown Grill. It was nice and noisy, and it was clear that Jody has found her niche. Running around, taking orders, bringing the burgers, she just fits right into the riot. You would be happy for her.

After we ate, we walked along M Street and saw a man being led away in handcuffs by three officers. Two of the police were over 6 feet and he made them look small. This guy was a monster. The kids ate up the whole scene, cops-in-real-life-action adventure. They talked about it for the next two hours.

"Was he a bad man, Daddy?"

"Are they going to shoot him?"

"What did he do? Did he kill somebody?"

"No, he just stole a candy bar," I told them, "but they might shoot him."

Then I thought how you would get pretty mad about me saying that.

March 23

Our kids are in the next room watching cartoons and I hear, "There's no such thing as monsters," and I'm happy for them. We know there are lots of monsters.

Lots of people think they have the right to just pop right in, like Anita does. She's been here four times in the last six days. She means well, dear, but she's a jerk, to be blunt. I never understood what you liked about her.

March 25

I'm having trouble sleeping. My mind races all day and all night. I keep replaying scenes from every part of our life. I keep replaying your accident, even though I wasn't there; I still see the deer, your face, the skid, the car rolling over, the fence, the horses getting out.

I've been thinking about religion. That's normal in the face of death, right, so at least I'm doing something normal. I'm not coming up with much. I wish I would shut up. I irritate myself all day long.

March 26

The kids played Chutes and Ladders. They weren't playing it right at all so I tried to demonstrate the correct manner and they just brushed me off. Jimmy said, "We don't do it like that," and Jeffrey said, "It's more fun our way." All they do is go up and down the slides and ladders any way they feel like. I have often thought that game a good metaphor for life. Now I slide. Don't see any ladders.

March 28

Yesterday was warm and sunny, an early spring here, and the kids were outside playing in the teepee. Not every family has a teepee in their back, but I noticed the canvas is mildewing. I guess you didn't spray enough of that protectant on it. Or would you prefer me to say "we" instead of you, even though you said you would take care of it? Do they have arguments where you are?

Get this one—Jimmy said, “I made up a song, Daddy.” And then he and Jeff both started singing, “I gotta go peepee but I’m in a teepee,” and laughed like idiots about it. I was glad to see them laughing.

I took the kids to the graveyard but never told them you—your body—is there. I said we were just going to a park. It is a nice-looking place if you disregard the reality under your feet. The boys played hide and seek. Weird when they jumped out from behind a gravestone shouting “Boo!”

It’s idiotic for me to go on pretending to ask you these stupid questions, but I don’t think it’s any more idiotic than what everyone does when someone leaves—OK, dies. I said it.

I’m not doing so great with the kids. Nothing terrible, I just don’t know what to do with them. I can’t play. I’m lucky they like to play with each other and ignore me. And lucky so many people keep taking them places.

March 30

Brent pulled me aside today and said: “Look, I know it’s been the hardest thing you’ve ever been through, none of us have had anything like this happen, but are you aware that you either say absolutely nothing or you just ramble? Are you cracking up? You gonna make it, Bud?” That’s what he called me—“Bud.” He’s never called me “Bud” before. Can you imagine me babbling? That really stings my pride.

He’s bringing pizza tomorrow, and then taking the kids and me to the circus. “Whether you want to go or not, Bud. Already have five tickets. You’ve got to keep the kids involved with other people.” Then, somehow, he segued to his favorite rant: the Kennedy conspiracies. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe and so on. I think he was filling the awkward silence. Babbling.

Loretta pulled up in the driveway at that moment and that gave Brent his escape route.

I went back to work today. It was weird but after people tried to have normal work conversations with me. For some reason Mr. Richards has started calling me “Old Sport.”

April 1

April Fool’s day. Would have been a good time for you to show up.

April 5

Jill brought over *The Seven Stages of Grief* and had marked passages she thought I must read. I thought it was only five stages, but I guess they grow, like everything else.

I got the message she was not so subtly passing—you need to get through the grief and go on with your life, for the sake of the kids.

She's not the only one sending those messages. Missing someone seems to have a two-month time limit, then you're supposed to "move on."

Get over the fact that your wife and your kid's mother is dead, buried, rotting? I don't want to "get over it." You are not an "it."

Did you die instantly? Or did you lay there, trapped in the wreck, knowing you were dying? Were you seeing lights and tunnels or fat pink baby angels? Were you in pain, hoping you would die soon? I've heard that they always told the war wives and mothers, "Your son (or husband) was killed instantly by a bullet to the heart. Never knew what hit him."

Yes, sir, righty-o, sir, no doubt. Died instantly, no suffering.

The boys will be spending the weekend with your parents again. Cookies, ice cream, cartoons and play. Oh, the good life.

April 17

I think I'll get skunk drunk and have a big pity party with myself. You want to join me?

April 22

Yes, I've been drinking heavily, but I'm not out of control. You tended to get pretty disgusted with me when I was drunk; you said, "You get a stupid sense of humor when you're drunk and make a fool of yourself and embarrass me. Haven't you noticed nobody laughs but you?" That really stung, Karen. So, I drink alone now, and don't tell stupid jokes to anyone, but it's no fun to drink alone.

I have to confess that I wonder sometimes if I'm really cracking up. Today I kept having this stupid phrase go through my mind, for hours: *I was standing alone among the hot dogs*. I have absolutely no idea where that came from, but it wouldn't leave. It was driving me crazy—I mean, what a stupid thing to get stuck in your head. But then I tried your trick and turned it into a song for the children, and we sang it over and over on the drive downtown, in three-part horrific sounding harmony. They laughed their little heads off until we were all sick of it. Well, at least I was. When we get to Loretta's, Jeffrey says, "Guess what? I was standing alone among the hot dogs," and she had no idea what to do.

The boys go to bed a bit later than they used to. Sorry. I keep them up because I don't like how weird it gets when the house goes quiet. It's spooky. Of course, they aren't arguing. They get to watch more television. I know it's not the greatest thing to do but they'll survive. I go to bed quite a bit earlier myself.

May 3

Haven't felt like writing much for a while now. Watch a lot of television and videos with the boys. A lot of stupid stuff, kid stuff, nice and shallow. A lot of cartoons. Keeps them and me happy. We snack a lot too and I've put on some weight, according to Jody. The guys at work

asked me to come out for the softball team. They play three times a week and then go out for pizza if they win. I can bring the kids too. I think I'll do it. I know you would want me to.

May 6

Brent and Jill stopped by and by the guilty look on their faces I knew right away they were about to say something weird. They're not usually awkward dealing with me so I was curious. Turns out they told our boys that you are not coming back, that you aren't going to "wake up." At first, I felt like saying, "How do you know?" just to give them a hard time, but then I thought it was for the best. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to look at Jimmy and Jeffrey with their innocent blue eyeballs and tell them you were dead. I bet they did a good job anyway, better than I would have. They explained that they would have them and Loretta and Anita and Jody and their cousins and that apparently satisfied them.

May 17

Here's a list of what people have said I need, or recommended, or strongly suggested, during the past three months:

Counseling

Psychotherapy

Hypnotherapy

Return to the Church (I think they mean any old church, any religion)

Acupuncture

Counseling

B-12 shots

Aromatherapy

Ayurvedic something

Music therapy

Grief counseling

Yoga

And a few others I forget. Oh, yeah, and counseling. I must need an awful lot of counseling. They all look so sincere and sad when they look at me; it's a little hard to take, and sometimes I'm thinking bad things about them, know what I mean? I keep my mouth shut, at least while they're in the room.

July 4

Took Jimmy and Jeffrey out for a big picnic and fireworks shindig at the lake, the one we've been going to since you and I met. It was the same as always. Big whoop. Except I didn't drink. Believe it or not, I haven't gotten drunk in over two weeks. It was too dangerous. And I've quit philosophizing. That was even more dangerous.

July 11

I guess in a way I've been avoiding you. Of course, I'm not. This is stupid. I'm not really writing to you and you're not reading any of this. It's just me writing to me. I'll probably throw it all out soon, with all the dumb condolence cards. I have no reason to think you are here in any way

anymore, whatever I might want to fantasize. I'm going to stop doing this to myself; it doesn't seem to do me any good, though I think it was a useful therapy for a while. Now it's just plain weird. I can admit now that the raw agony is already gone, and even the dull pain is not always there. I deliberately don't think about some things. I go to work, associate with others again, play ball, eat, sleep, take care of the boys, sometimes even laugh at TV shows and jokes. I even told a new joke at work yesterday. If I think about you, and us, I can slip down pretty quickly, but I'm getting better at compartmentalizing. Don't be offended. It's a useful survival tactic practiced all over the world.

The kids seem to have adjusted miraculously, though I think it's really just their ages that saved them. They just want to play and have fun and eat treats and enjoy all the attention they've been getting from everyone. They're all right. We're not alone. Your people keep coming around. I don't mind some of them as much as I used to.

Aug. 14

It's been over a month since my last letter. I have to admit that it feels stupider as time goes on. Rereading some of the earliest letters is embarrassing.

I wrote this next thing a few weeks ago but never "showed" it to you. But I've been thinking it over and decided this will be my last letter, maybe, I think. Anyway, here is what I wrote, please read it through to the end and don't get angry.

Sooner or later, I'll see another woman who catches my eye. I've been sexually numbed for the past couple months, but that won't last. I'll want another woman to take your place, even though of course no one can take your place. But I'll forget more of you as a newer image takes the place of yours. The children won't remember you much and they'll like the lady and she'll like them. She'll think I'm amusing and not bad looking for my age.

That's what I wrote, and you never saw it and aren't seeing it now, but I'm going to play this thing out. It will probably go something like that. Then your relatives will stop coming around, for the most part, and I won't be constantly reminded of you. I'll allow Brent and Jill, or whoever, to carry all your stuff away. But not everything; I'll never forget you while I'm alive.

There are so many things that were only meaningful to us. Five of my 30 years were dominated by your presence, and they were five great years, mostly. But five years is a small fraction of 50 years, or even less of 80, if I should go so far. I have more life to live. I'm still alive. The kids are alive, very alive. They made me buy them a cat. Can you believe I let a cat in here?

I don't know how to end this or say goodbye, so I won't.

Sept. 14

The kids are back in school of course. They love their homeroom teacher. They asked her if she wants to be their mother.