

## AS EXPECTED

The funeral was fine. Jenn would have approved. That is, except for whose funeral it was. And it wasn't actually a funeral but a memorial. Funny, there's a word for how people feel or are supposed to feel at a funeral, "funerial," but none that I know of for memorials. But even memorials seem to be going out of fashion, replaced by celebrations of life. Great! So was Hobbes mistaken in describing life as, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"? "No, silly," I can hear Margie saying, "it's celebration of *a* life." Right – who would know better than Jenn's best friend. She even knows that my name is actually Arnie, not Arnold as I insist and my friends respect. When I'm daydreaming or under the dentist' drill I sometimes work at compiling a list of first names that Margie would be challenged in reducing to "ie" endings.

Jenn and I, as we grew long of tooth and short of memory, increased the frequency of talking through our deaths. Preferences, of course, have their limits, the major one being our lack of control over circumstances. So, we concentrated on how survivors (sounds like a shipwreck) should handle things. What neither of us would have anticipated was the unexpected names, faces, and stories that would accompany the service and thereafter. The past days have been unusual, even strange at times, bringing into my life new names, faces, old faces without names, the retelling of events I neither remembered nor believe ever happened. Many of the faces told stories with such ease and detail I was sure they were told many times before, involving Jenn and others, sans moi, often describing occasions and conversations I thought were unbecoming of my sweet soulmate of . . . years. Right. I can't spot on tell you exactly how long, exactly when we married. So?

"Yeah, just like a man," was opined. Another . . . forgot her name . . . further ventured, with a wide smile and twinkling eyes, "We can't expect much from men, except they'll always act just like men." A cheap retort would have been, "Yeah, just like a woman to say that," but even that would have given greater import to the barb than warranted.

However, later in the evenings, when all had gone their separate ways, after expressing again their sympathy, extending well-wishes, the phrase would resurface: just like a man. Have I been simply acting out the role of the grieving husband, simply doing as expected, dutifully following the age-old script for the sorrowful, pathetic, helpless male? If so, what's the alternative? If I exhibit sadness, then I'm play-acting the poor, lost widower; yet if I display stoic acceptance, then I'm showing my true hard-heartedness. I can't win! Win what? What's to win? See, that only goes to prove I'm taking all this as one big game. "Just like a man!" So what? I'm still strapped with being either a self-pitying oaf or an insensitive cretin . . . I remain adrift with only a whisper of a wish, a quiet plea, for a way to avoid . . . . "How the hell is one supposed to do it!"

Aristotle observed that the surest way to not be happy, to fail to obtain happiness, as if it were a commodity, is to seek it out, to direct your attention exclusively toward being happy. Over the years I recall that Jenn and I never talked about, discussed happiness, which I think is one of the reasons we were so happy with each other. We *knew* we were happy. Not to say we had no downtime, periods when we needed space, needed something, anything, other than being with the person we loved the most. Never, ever, however, did either of us entertain doubts, wondering whether we were best for each other – never. Equally, neither of us had any doubts or second thoughts about the boys. Yet we can't take credit for their being twins. Rather, the credit goes to the joint enterprise of chance and luck. Michael and Willard were and are all we could hope for, and their wives were loving, good, strong souls. Not, however, sufficiently equipped to combat cancer or withstand a plane crash, both occurring within a six-month period. Michael, Willard and their children were still trying to achieve closure, as the saying goes. Then came Jenn's death.

Their mother's death came on slippers during the night, with no likely indication of anything amiss when we kissed goodnight. I phoned them in France and Denmark with the news. Neither expressed a desire for details, having rejected the pretense that such would be equivalent to a show of caring. They had learned well that while there is never an excuse for being impolite or ignoring others' real need, one is not accountable for living according to others' expectations. Clearly, our sons and grandchildren didn't need to be the object of strangers' sympathy, despite

how sincerely extended. They asked only “Dad, do you need us there?” I assured them that I was okay. We exchanged expressions of love.

What bothered me a great deal, what I fought most to control, was my awkwardness in suppressing my disappointment, my displeasure with the seemingly well-meaning folks who invariably asked the whereabouts of boys and children. To Margie’s “When’s Mikie and Willie getting here?” I could only react with a turnabout and “They’re not.” Why is it that people seem to appreciate that every misfortune is unique and personal and yet expect all such occasions to follow the same pattern in being addressed and dealt with? Hadn’t they heard that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”? Wait! In our case isn’t it the other way around? . . . . No matter.

I suspect I’m a hypocrite at times. The boys live by what we taught them, while on occasion I’m weak willed, preferring what is easier, less likely to be sharp edged, less of a mess to simply do as expected, following the social mores, playing the role you are assigned. Of course I’m not pleased about living on without Jenn. But what are my options? And do others really think it helps me for them to remind me of Jenn’s loving, caring way? Do they truly benefit (at my expense) from reliving her life? I don’t see how they could.

I recall a short story in which a lone driver crashed and died in a remote part of the country, and a couple happens upon the scene. While someone had to notify the authorities—some distance away—the other was to attend to the dead man. It was just understood that you don’t leave a dead person unattended. Not out of fear of what animals might do to the body. Not for this or that reason. Rather, it’s just not done. And then there was the Thanksgiving when Jenn, the boys and I were spending it with downstate friends. Their parents had also flown in for the holiday, staying across the road at the brother’s house. Thanksgiving morning, while we were having breakfast with our friends, the brother barges in, excitedly, “Dad’s dead. I went to wake him and he was cold.” Pandemonium. People all talking at once, running around, often in circles, bumping into one another, giving orders, but all agreed that what had to be done immediately was to notify the police. We sat there, safely out of everyone’s path, assured that there was nothing for us to do, or at that time, even to say. It was clear to everyone but us that the situation

required warp speed, man all battle stations, for anything less or other would be to demonstrate that you really didn't love old Pappy, peacefully dead, across the road.

Jenn used to point out my inconsistency when I would pull over and stop when a funeral procession would be moving in the opposite direction. My response would be, "If you wanted perfection you should not have married me," and we would both laugh.

I stopped tracking the times I would say to others, in various ways, that that was then, and this is now. It's been nearly three weeks since Jenn's memorial and people are still tip-toeing around, showing concern for how I'm doing, being very careful of when and how to refer to Jenn.

I've taken out a membership at the gym, usually visit Murphy's for a cold one, and started a subscription to *National Geographic*. With Jenn, we seemed to neither have the time nor inclination to be more energetic than our ritual three-mile walks, to share our company with others while imbibing our afternoon refreshment, or to read about, view pictures of, places we couldn't afford to visit. I'm converting Jenn's sewing room to a small project workshop, and hoping ("hope springs eternal . . .") to finish at least one of the big projects that have multiplied in the garage.

Phil, our neighbor for over twenty years, lately started to come over more frequently. Seeing the garage lights, sometime close to midnight, he was "concerned." He'd shake his head in disbelief when I assured him that I'm not grieving, not avoiding the reality of Jenn's death. His shaking head, his disbelief, his, "But I always thought you really loved Jenn," I could not nullify, so I stopped trying. Then, the other day, I ran into Nancy, Jenn's old school chum, whom I hadn't seen since the service. It was getting close to 5:00 and I suggested we have a glass of wine.

I really shouldn't . . . you know, so soon after . . . Besides, I don't think Jenn would approve.

Sure she would. She always liked you, as I have.

Arnold, you know there are groups that are set up to help those who are suffering from recent tragedies in their lives.

I smiled, bid her good-day and strolled on, surprised in realizing that I really preferred being by myself. I was weary of the old either/or refrain. I needed a change.

Michael and Willard's children were enjoying a weekend together in London, which was about the same distance from their home base for both families. The boys phoned, passing back and forth the device as the subject changed from one family to the other. It had been nearly five months since the younglings had been stateside visiting their grandparents. They were ready for a romp about in the old familiar house, but without the familiar sound and smells.

Great! When?

We discussed the details and finished the conversation with expressions of love.

It was such a relief not to feel I was being judged, not to feel that I am somehow guilty of not properly mourning or for having lived a lie. I still think Hobbes was right. Yet, so was Margie, in her own frivolous way. A life can have meaning, can be rich and bountiful, can be worthy of gratitude. All the more so, perhaps, for those who do not circumscribe their lives too strictly by the rules of what is expected.