

# <sup>the</sup>New Physician

*TNP* presents Eva Mathews' honorable mention short story, "The Art of Letter Writing," in its entirety.

## **The Art of Letter Writing**

by Eva Mathews

Ten years ago my father died in a car accident. My sister and I did not expect it, but he did.

It was November and it was the night of the first frost that winter. I was cold, and I remember it made my stomach tighten the same way it does when I'm nervous. On that day, I wrote the last letter I have written in 10 years; it was a simple pen-pal letter to my cousin in Arizona. It was an excessively ordinary day. I had laundry piling up, and didn't feel like washing it. I had a research paper due in a week, and didn't feel like starting it. All I did feel like doing was thinking of this cute guy in my Spanish class, Dean. He had the sexiest accent of anyone in the class.

My sister, Gina, got the call. I was on the screened-in porch with homework spread around me; Gina was in the living room. I saw her answer the phone through the sliding glass doors that separated us. I noticed smudges on the glass, and I didn't remember ever having cleaned them myself. I could see Gina say hello. She waited a moment and then turned her back to me, quickly. I squinted, looking at her. Something seemed odd, but I figured she was talking to her new boyfriend, saying things she didn't want me to know about. She hung up the phone and slouched to the ground.

I knew I needed to go inside.

I opened the sliding door and walked in reluctantly. She looked up at me.

"Margaret, we're going to the hospital right now." I grabbed the keys and handed them to her. I

had a learner's permit, but this didn't seem to be a good time for learning.

"Daddy got hit by a drunk driver," she said. "The nurse said he doesn't look very good."

My thoughts were racing, but I couldn't think of anything to say. What the hell would we do without Dad?

The hospital was less than 10 miles away, but when we got there, he had already died. He was our only parent; Mom died when I was 2 years old. A doctor and a grief counselor sat us down and told us. They tried to make everything seem OK, but my world had become chaos. All these men and women hurried from one room to another in white coats, trying to put everything in order again, but they did nothing for Dad.

My body felt stiff, tight, broken. Gina held my hand as tightly as one would hold a life raft. I wanted to scream. I wanted to wake up. I wanted him back.

Our aunt came and picked us up. She cried with us. She brought us to her house. It was best not to see his empty slippers, his empty chair, and his silent office right away. I remember being relieved that Gina was 18. I was glad that no one was going to ship me off to some strange family now that I was an orphan.

The next morning, Gina and I went for a short walk outside. It was even colder than the night before. The wind whipped at my cheeks and the weather felt cruel, but I preferred cold and clouds to the sun. I don't think I could have dealt with sunny blue skies and girls in pink dresses selling lemonade. It seemed the sky was mourning with us.

"Margaret," Gina said, "Dad told me once, a year or two ago, that he wrote a will."

"Oh...he never told me that."

“Well, he wanted me to know that he had a few letters for us when he died, so that we wouldn’t be so alone. We’ll go home today, Margie, and read them together, alright?”

It was the best news I could have heard.

Gina drove us home that afternoon. The house was large and silent, and I didn’t want to stay there. Gina didn’t know where the will would be. Dad had a big cherry wood desk in his office that we searched through first. We found photos of us when we were little, dressed as Ninja Turtles one Halloween, and birthday cards we had made for him out of old science magazines.

We looked through his boxes and boxes of puzzles. Dad loved organization and fitting things together. He dusted every day, and he loved file drawers. In a Thanksgiving argument, my aunt once said he was obsessive-compulsive. I didn’t really know what that meant then; I thought she was just being mean. However, Dad was known as an eccentric to most of the neighbors. He didn’t buy rugs with fringe because the little pieces would go every which way. He always ironed his shirts and pants, and I had a suspicion he ironed his socks and underwear too, although I never saw him do it. Dad put all of his shoes in individual boxes with a Polaroid of the shoes on the front of the box. That way, they didn’t get dusty or scratched, and each pair was always in the right box.

Gina and I weren’t surprised when we found a neat little shoe box in the back of his office closet with blue block letters that read, “Final Will.” We looked at it for a moment without breathing. I didn’t want to open the box; it seemed so final. Gina looked at me and saw that it was up to her. The lid was tapped on. She used her long, coral-colored fingernails to break the tape. She lifted the lid to reveal three envelopes. In

the same blue pen and the same clean block letters, they read, “Week One,” “Week Two” and “Week Three.”

I had thought that we would read the will and that would be it. But Dad knew that Gina and I wanted and needed to hear more from him. I felt lucky that he had thought to write these letters for us. He was going to help us get over his own death.

“Well,” Gina said, almost whispering, “It’s week one.”

She took a heavy gold letter opener from the desk and slowly slit the envelope. We sat on the floor together, concentrating on what might be in it. He had written the letter in blue ink; I was glad he had not typed it like he did most papers. His handwriting, when not in block letters, was an elegant script with long, swooping lines. Not many people write in script anymore; it seems to be a fading art.

The letter was only two pages long. I had been hoping for more. Gina read it aloud.

“My girls, you are reading this letter because I have died. I’m sorry I left you in whatever manner I have. However, my lovely ones, I will demonstrate that I am still with you. Now, I want you to build a garden. There you can go in the afternoon and remember me. It is to be by the east wall of the yard. First, you will need to move the plantain trees to the north wall. Then you can go to McEddie’s supply store and pick up: 20 tulip bulbs – which were always my favorite flowers, 10 tomato plants, sweet basil seeds, cucumber seeds, and belladonna seeds – whose blue blossoms always made me think of your mother’s eyes. You will need three 20-lb. bags of soil and a fertilizer with lots of nitrogen – Betzler’s is the best brand.

The garden is to form a tight half circle with the belladonna plants as the outer ring, the basil as

the next ring—leave 12 inches between rings—and then the tulips, followed by the cucumber. The tomato plants will line the back wall and will climb the lattice....”

The letter went on with details about getting the money we needed from the bank, and how deep we should bury the seeds and how much to water them. In fact, it was so particular that we had to bring it to McEddie’s Supply Store to make sure we didn’t forget anything.

Gina and I started digging up the plantain trees at sunset. We went to bed late and got up early the next morning to finish them. She and I didn’t go to school on Monday; instead we stayed at home and worked on the garden. We had to break up the roots in the dirt with shovels, and as we did, we talked about Dad.

“I remember Dad putting me to bed at night. He often read me scary stories because I begged him to. And almost every night he read them to me, I would wake up from bad dreams. He was always awake when I went to find him and get him to read me a nicer story.”

“He was always in his office,” Gina said.

“Right, and he was always writing.”

“I think he had trouble sleeping,” she said slowly, “and writing helped him relax. In fact, he had trouble sleeping every night. He wrote compulsively, Margie. He used to be on medicine.”

I didn’t want to hear any of that. I walked to the edge of the garden and shoveled there, looking down at the dirt and roots. But Gina kept talking.

“Dad stopped taking medicine when his doctor said he wanted to check him into an asylum for a while. I heard him talk to Aunt Betty about it.”

This didn't sound like my father. Why was Gina saying these things? I was so angry at her that we didn't talk for the rest of the day.

The next afternoon we put fresh dirt on the garden. We had to get on our hands and knees to smooth it all out. The knees of my jeans were stained from the dirt, and there was also a layer of dirt under my fingernails. Gina and I stood up when we were done and looked at our blank garden. I had never really gardened before. I liked the idea of planting tiny seeds and knobby bulbs and helping them grow into flowers and food.

Smoothing out all that dirt made me feel better. We worked for the rest of the week on the garden. Our only aunt, Aunt Betty, did all of the arranging for the funeral. It was small and quiet, which was nice because it helped me think about Dad.

On Friday it was time to read the second letter. After school, Gina made salads, and we sat on the porch to eat them. Then we went to Dad's office. We had put the shoe box back in the closet because that seemed the right thing to do. We took it out again, and Gina handed me the letter marked, "Week Two." I opened it with the same letter opener as before. This time I read it out loud.

"Dear girls, I am picturing the garden you made for me and for you. I know exactly the way each row looks. When you look at it, I want you to know that I have imagined it just how it is. You should weed the new garden every Tuesday and the old garden every Saturday. Now, I need to tell you how to keep up the house. Vacuuming needs to be done at least once a week—you may want to do this on Sunday evenings after the rush of the weekend. It is nice to have a clean floor to start the week. Gina, I want you to water the houseplants every third day, but don't let them overflow or drip on the floor. You will need to fill up

the watering can twice. Margaret, I want you to dust the glass tables every time you see them begin to cloud. You will probably want to check every morning.

As you know, the trash goes out on Thursday nights because the garbage men come almost before the sun on Friday. The recycling also goes out on Thursday. Make sure you wash out cans and jars before you put them in the recycle bin, otherwise the truck might not take them. You should take turns mowing the lawn once it is an inch and a half long....”

We followed everything he wrote religiously. School was in full swing, and I was very busy studying for exams and doing all these new chores. Dad also wrote in the letter about washing the windows—now it was my job. He said I would need two paper towels for each big window, and one for each small window. I found myself going through the house with a cup of coffee every morning, like Dad used to, searching for dust. One day that week I woke up late, but I needed to dust the glass before school. I missed my first class, but the house was clean.

He was right; we felt like he was still with us. I tended to the garden almost every day, and tried to make sure and do everything that he wanted. I hadn't called my friends since Dad died. Actually, that cute guy, Dean, called and wanted to go out for coffee or a movie. I said no; I felt responsible for the house and for Gina. We didn't go out much.

The day before we were to open the third, and final, letter, Gina and I had dinner at home. We baked chicken and potatoes and listened to Dad's favorite radio station, the oldies.

“Margie, what do you think will be in the third letter?”

I thought for a minute. "Well, he's told us most everything. I guess it's his goodbye."

"He died so quickly," Gina said. "I didn't realize he had all these plans for us."

"I know, he thought of us a lot. I think I'll be more ready to say goodbye tomorrow."

Of course, we were still heartbroken our father was gone. Without him our family was very small. But Dad made it easier for us. I believed then that we should thank him for that, at least in our thoughts.

The next day was unseasonably warm; I didn't even need a sweater. School was a welcome excursion, but I thought about Dad all day. Gina and I had to move on now, and figure out what we should be doing with our lives. When we got home, I couldn't wait until after dinner to open the last letter. My stomach felt tight again.

"Do you want to open it?" she asked me.

"OK." I picked up the same letter opener because we had done so twice before. I opened it slowly, thinking about Dad writing feverishly in the middle of the night. I saw that it contained a list before I read it. I started at the beginning.

"Sweet girls, I've been telling you that I haven't abandoned you, even though I can't be with you. I've thought about this for a long time, late at night. I need to be sure that my little ones will be OK. If you're reading this, my Gina and Margaret, you have no mother or father to consult with anymore. I want you to know that I have already considered one of the most important decisions that you will make— who you will marry.

Don't worry girls, over the years I have puzzled through this decision. What should you do if I can't be around to help you? I realized that I can be there for this decision, and so I have made a careful list for both of you. Keep in mind that I have

considered these boys' character traits such as honesty, bravado, personal neatness and thirst for knowledge. I also know that love is not immune to the outside picture, so I have chosen boys known not only for their enthusiastic personalities, but also for their physical charm. Marriage can be tricky, so I have included a considerably lengthy list of seven names for each of you. I think you will be pleasantly surprised at how well they could suit you."

What followed was indeed a list of seven names under the heading "Gina," and a list of seven names under "Margaret."

I stopped reading there and looked at Gina. Up until this point, we had done everything he told us. I felt dizzy. I scanned the names quickly and dropped the letter. It fluttered like a large and weightless feather to the ground. We stared at each other for a few moments.

"That wasn't the end of it," Gina said.

I made no move toward it. She picked it up.

"Um, after the names it says, 'I hope you find this list suitable. If you do not now, give it time. You will see why I have chosen these suitors for you. Now, it is not time for me to say goodbye. I am not leaving you yet, dear ones. Go to the red armoire in my office. The key is in the fourth drawer of my desk. Unlock it, and there you will find a few more letters from me.'"

My head was spinning. Gina took my hand. I think she was steadying me, but she was in a daze too. We went to the desk and found the key easily. My stomach was a lot tighter now; in fact, it was getting harder to breathe. I didn't think about the list of names for me. I could only think about what might be in the armoire.

It was the dullest key Dad owned; I think he shined most of the others. It was shaped in that

simple and old-fashioned way, with two little rounded pieces that fit in the lock. Gina didn't wait for me to breathe again; she turned the key in the lock. It was hard to turn. She had to use both hands.

She unlocked the door and tried to pull it open. It wouldn't budge. She pulled harder, and nothing happened. Then we both were at it. I didn't want to wait a second longer. What else would he tell us to do? We pulled hard, together. Suddenly the door burst open. We both fell back as hundreds and hundreds of letters with neat block writing fell around us. They scattered to the ground in slow motion like huge snowflakes. "Week 36." "Week 471." "Week 109." "Week 282." All these unopened weeks were spread around us chaotically. Dad wasn't saying goodbye—he had planned 10 years for us. The words all swirled together, and I closed my eyes tightly against them before I ran to the bathroom to throw up.