

# Life Expectancy

By Levi Smock

I sat in front of my computer and shook my head. I looked up at the pictures of my family that line the wall behind the desk in our computer room.

“You know you’re going to out live me, dear.” I shouted through the wall to our adjacent bedroom in which my wife, Karin, was getting dressed.

The thought had just come to me as I looked at the pictures on the wall. Somewhere in a dark part of my imagination I saw her sitting here much as I was then, going about her business and looking up at the pictures on the wall much the way that I was. Only she was older. There would be a framed picture of me hanging on the very same wall. I would look older than I did then, much older in my imagination. My hair would have grayed and I would be half-smiling, a reluctant smile toward the camera. In truth, the reluctance would ultimately be due to the annoyance that I would feel as I was being badgered to pose for a picture at some holiday or another. This image would be deemed the best suited to represent me in my immortality, in other words it would be the one chosen to be on the front of the program or whatever they call it that would be handed out by a well-paid mortician at my funeral service. The program would be framed by my wife and placed on the wall of the very office I was sitting in and my wife and children would look at it from time to time over the years as they were waiting for the computer to shed some cheesy island-themed screensaver. Shaking the mouse impatiently, they would catch themselves trying to remember some happy or sad or standout moment with me. They would succeed in finding some small comfort in this I supposed and then go on with their day or week or month, until sometime later when they were again confronted with this image and went through the entire process of trying to feel all over again. This cycle would repeat itself over the years until at last my wife herself would pass away and then the house would be sold and the framed program would be taken down.

“What did you say dear, I didn’t hear you?”

Karin poked her head into the room. She was straightening out the bottom of her blouse which was flowing and billowy. It was what she said the style was. I looked up at her.

“You’re gonna outlive me. The life expectancy for women is longer than that of men.”

“Why would you talk like that?” Her brow furrowed together the way that it sometimes did when she was unsure whether there was something to be worried about or not.

“I don’t know, never mind, I was just thinking.”

She walked back into the bedroom, probably picking out earrings.

“Well don’t think like that. If the kids heard you say something like that...”

“The kids are at my mom’s.”

“That’s not the point. Are you almost ready?” she asked sharply.

I rubbed my forehead. Aggravation worked its way tediously into my spine; I gave it a second to subside before I answered. "I've been ready for over an hour, honey. I'm waiting on *you*."

"Well, I'll be ready in just a few minutes. Did you start the car?"

"No, *dear*, I didn't know when you would be ready." I stood up and walked to the doorway of the bedroom. Now it was my turn to poke my head in.

"Goddamn it, Gary! I told you fifteen minutes ago to warm the car up."

"Did I hear you?" I retorted.

"Who can tell if you are listening? When you're sitting at that damn computer, it's like you're in another world."

"It's not the end of the world. I'll go warm it up now."

I shuffled down our short staircase quickly, trying to ignore any aggressive response that she was most likely shouting at my back.

In the living room, I threw on my half-length leather jacket and fake leather gloves, the combination of which always made me feel a little more dapper and stylish than they probably actually made me look. The Christmas tree was lit up in the corner of the room to the left of the oversized, and overused flat-screen television and I briefly wondered if all of the gifts underneath it would actually bring the excitement that they were intended to or if the emotion that they incite would be as superficial as the wrappings on the outsides of their boxes.

As I walked out the door into the frozen Midwestern tundra of my front lawn, this thought – or the notion of it – seemed to stick to me the same way that the smell of smoke lingers in the lining of an expensive jacket. And I felt uneasy. I felt as if I was already dead. As if I had been for ages, and thinking of the life that I had left behind only pained me with jealousy for those whose lives continue and were still able to introduce changes into the world around them simply by interacting with it.

I looked at my--our car sitting there in the driveway. I hadn't had my own car for years. Not one that was really mine anyway. Two kids; one ten, another four, it had been sometime that I had a car or anything, for that matter, that was truly mine.

I shivered and shook my head. How long had I really been standing out in the cold staring at the damn car? My thoughts had been wandering more and more all the time. As I slipped my glove off and reached into my pocket for the keys, I noticed that the door to the house was cracked open. It was only open a hair, but for some reason this bothered me. A thousand times I had told Mikey, our oldest, that we weren't heating the whole neighborhood. Did I close it when I came out? I couldn't be sure. My head was in the clouds. I reached around the steering wheel and started the car.

As I was headed back to the house, three or four steps from the door maybe, I heard a scream from inside. It didn't startle me into action like some hero from an action movie. I just kept walking inside. I argued with myself whether or not something was actually wrong and decided that it probably wasn't. In my head, Karin had seen a spider crawling out of the floor vent in the bathroom. Worst case scenario, she had caught her bare toe on the side of the bed frame or dresser. All the same, as I walked in I hollered her name up the stairs; just prove to myself that everything was fine.

"*Karin? You alright? Hurry up honey, I want to get there before eleven.*"

Everything was fine – except she didn't answer. I waited at the bottom of the stairs for twenty...thirty...forty-five seconds, still no answer. Something felt wrong, but

still the pure mundane-ness of my life wouldn't let me believe that something was truly amiss. I would just walk up the stairs and she would be standing there in our bedroom, checking herself out in the mirror one last time. Ready to harp on some little task I had neglected or comment on the fact that my shirt hadn't been properly pressed and no, no, there was no time to change now I would just have to show up looking like a bum. Her husband, The Bum.

I walked up the stairs. That's not exactly right, I marched up the stairs thinking for some reason, if I acted like nothing was wrong, nothing would be. The louder my footsteps, the less likely it seemed that something was upstairs to be afraid of. As I reached the top I realized how wrong I had been.

Looking through my bedroom door, I saw a younger man with dirty blond hair, two or three days' growth on his face, standing over my bed. He was wearing a black jacket, the kind that has the elastic band at the bottom and always leaves the bottom of your back uncovered when you bend over. I couldn't see the bed through the wall, but I knew what he was looking at. My heart dropped to my stomach. My eyes welled up not with sadness, but with an acute kind of fear. To my credit, I actually took several quick steps toward the man, but by the time I had reached the threshold of the room he had the gun in his right hand trained on me. He had known I was coming, probably because of my brilliantly executed march up the stairs. He said something to me, but I couldn't hear him. I was frozen where I stood.

Karin was lying on the bed, mascara running down her cheeks, her eyes rimmed red and a smear of blood or lipstick across her cheek. Probably, it was both. Her black dress was ripped from the bottom up to her bellybutton. Her panties exposed. Maybe my march up the stairs had served a purpose after all. The noise was probably the reason that this guy wasn't already inside of her. Even then, with his gun trained on me, his eyes would shift back over to her, tracing the insides of her thighs with anticipation. He looked like an untrained dog at a family meal, so eager for the next scrap of food to fall on the floor that he could barely sit still.

"Turn the fuck around," he said loudly in a thick British accent.

Who would have expected that? It seemed impossible to fathom that someone born so far away, could have traveled so far with the purpose of ending up in my bedroom, killing me and raping my wife. The accent surprised me so much that I staggered trying to comply and almost released my bladder in fear that he was going to shoot me.

I faced the wall and his hard, quick footsteps raced up behind me. Immediately, my world went white as my nose exploded in pain. His grip on my hair was almost a soft touch when compared to the agony that spread through my nose and cheeks and mouth as he rammed my face again into the wall, leaving a huge smear of blood. I was suddenly on the floor and his gun filled up my vision as he leaned in over me, pushing the barrel into my already swelling left eye.

"You have a basement?"

"It's downstairs," I said, my mouth filled with blood.

"Be fairly odd if it were somewhere else, now wouldn't?"

Despite the situation, I would have smirked if I hadn't been afraid that I would lose teeth. He did have a point.

"Get the fuck up."

He took a few steps back from me and I slowly got myself to my feet. By the time I was up he had Karin standing next to me. She stared down at the floor, sobbing and shaking from head to toe.

“Go on then, lead the way.”

He walked behind us as I led the way helplessly down the stairs, through the dining room, through the kitchen and opened the door to the basement.

“Turn on the light.”

I flipped the switch on my right and the basement’s dim light came on. And then something happened. It’s hard for me to say exactly. I think that he went to shove me forward, but in the tightness of the doorway Karin had somehow managed to get behind him. She must have pushed him when he was coming forward to push me. His body weight hit me and I slammed into the wall as he went tumbling forward. For a moment I teetered and almost lost my balance. I felt like I was standing on the edge of the universe looking down and then my shirt pulled tight against my flabby midriff. Karin had caught my shirttail.

Down the stairs, he was conscious, trying to get his bearings. His gun, however, was only a few steps down from me. He had lost it in his failed attempt to grab the railing on his way down. I rushed to the gun and had it in my hands well before he had found his feet. I checked the side of it and found the red mark that meant that the safety was off. I had seen too many inept morons on television to let something like a safety ruin my moment of triumph.

And then it occurred to me. This wouldn’t be *my* moment of triumph. It had been Karin who pushed him down the stairs, Karin who had kept me from falling behind him. For the rest of my life, at dinner parties, barbecues, even sitting in the bleachers during our children’s sporting events, this story would be repeated. I would be ribbed and joked about, the silent humiliation creeping up my spine while I tried to smile through gritted teeth. They would say, “Don’t get bent out of shape, Gary” and “Oh, its all in good fun.” But maybe it wasn’t even this that really bothered me. I don’t know – maybe I just didn’t want to be some pathetic picture above the fucking computer.

“Karin, stay there.”

I walked down the stairs and pointed the gun at the kid that had broken into my house, that had traveled all the way from England to humiliate and kill me.

“Stand up.”

He stood.

“Don’t fucking move. You hear me? Don’t you goddamn move a muscle.”

I turned around and looked at Karin standing at the top of the stairs.

“Gary, what are you doing? Let’s call the police.”

“Not just yet, *honey*.”

The gun was so loud that I could barely hear the crash behind her as she smashed into the wall. By the time I turned toward him he was already looking around, searching for something to defend himself with. Maybe he spotted the bat bag against the wall. Maybe he saw the skateboard on the floor just a few feet from him. Maybe, in his panic, his eyes never locked onto any one object. I won’t ever know. I didn’t wait to ask him.

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Upstairs, I stood in front of the wall-mounted cordless phone for what seemed like an eternity trying to decide whether or not to call an ambulance. Finally, I decided against it. Too many questions would be asked and right then I just didn't think that I could come up with all the answers. If the police caught up to me later I would tell them that I had been in a state of shock and afterward I had been too afraid to go back. I looked at the clock and it read 11:11. Besides, it seems like a waste to warm the car up for nothing.

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