'You've got a lot of anniversaries coming up'
Milestones, changes hard on Michael and Clem, who goes on a first date

Wednesday, November 25, 1998

By CONNIE SCHULTZ
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

25th of 26 daily article

September 1998

C.J. walked over to his mother's grave and sat down.

"I got my clarinet today, Mom," he said.

He opened the case and started pulling out the various pieces, describing each one. "This is the mouthpiece protector," he said. "These are the two reeds, you slip one in under these bolts." With each description, he held the piece out toward her new gravestone, which arrived a couple of weeks earlier.

"Lisa Marie Barthello Hearey," the gray stone read. "O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console." It was the line from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi that most reminded Clem of Lisa. There were no dates on the stone.

That had surprised the woman who sold Clem the headstone, but he was clear. "I told her that putting dates on it seems so final and my wife continues to be with me and is a real presence for the boys, that I continue to learn from her and her soul lives. To date it means to close a chapter, when to me Lisa's death may just be a beginning."

The boys liked the stone, C.J. in particular.

When asked later why he showed her the clarinet at the cemetery, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know why I did it," he said, smiling, as he sat on the living room sofa. "I'm not sure. Usually I talk to her at night."

Clem overheard this from the kitchen and came to the doorway to listen.

"I tell her things I'm happy about, things I'm not happy about. I tell her in my head."

C.J. smiled patiently when asked if Lisa responds. "Of course, I get an answer. I feel something and I know it's Mom. That's how it works."

'This is just horrible'

While C.J. seemed increasingly focused and happy, Michael's world was derailing. With the beginning of the school year, his fear of separating from Clem increased dramatically.

Clem had wanted to leave Michael and Christopher at a neighbor's house in the mornings so that his workday could begin and end sooner. That experiment ended, though, after Michael chased
his car down the road screaming and crying and then refused to walk to school with the neighbor. Clem had to leave work to retrieve Michael and take him to school.

Leaving him at school was just as difficult. At first, Fernway Elementary's principal, George Cannon, physically held back Michael so Clem could leave, and then allowed Michael unlimited time to hang out in the office. One day he sat there until 1 p.m., curled up in a ball and sucking his thumb.

"Boy, I feel like hell," Clem said after leaving Michael at school. "Michael was hanging onto me, screaming after me. This is just horrible. I get to work and feel completely drained."

After two weeks of Michael's hanging around the office every morning, Cannon decided that he needed to lean harder on him to get him to stay in the classroom. Cannon got tough with Michael, encouraging Clem to leave right away and insisting Michael return to his classroom and stay there. On the first day of this new routine, Michael's anguished wails could be heard throughout the first floor of the school as Cannon gently but firmly led him back to his class. The principal returned to his office to find seven crying mothers waiting for him.

"A lot of mothers were standing around when it happened," said Lorene Rider, Cannon's secretary. "They have all wanted to mother Michael, and they were standing around crying and brainstorming on what they could do to make things better for Michael. But Michael had a mother and she is gone. He doesn't want another mother."

Rider understood their distress. There had been many times when she wanted to hold Michael and comfort him, but she knew that was not what he wanted.

"Michael is such a wise old man," she said. "He's an old soul. He's grieving all over again, and he's able to articulate his grief. If you try to tell Michael how to grieve, you're done with Michael. That's how he's wise. And a part of him realizes this is tough for the adults. One day he was in here sobbing, and I said to him, "I know you don't want me to hug you. I know that, since we're the adults, you think we are supposed to have all the answers. But we don't, Michael. We're trying so hard to help, but we don't always know how.""

Clem grew increasingly alarmed as he watched his middle son lash out, not just at school, but at home. He was picking fights with C.J. and hitting Christopher. Sometimes, he took his anger out on their dog, Jordi, the pet he usually adored. The first time he saw Michael kick Jordi, a mortified Clem yelled at him, sent him up to his room and then fought tears as he stood in the middle of his kitchen.

"It's like he wants to inflict pain," Clem said. "I blame myself for this. I should have seen this coming, I should have gotten him in counseling a long time ago."

Desperate to help Michael, Clem turned to a children's therapist. She quickly assured Clem that, while Michael's behavior was disturbing, it was not unusual for a 7-year-old boy facing a lot of change and milestones.

"She said, "You've got a lot of anniversaries coming up," " Clem said, sounding relieved. "We do, too. Lisa's birthday is this month, we just saw her gravestone, the anniversary of her death is next month. And he had to start school this year without his older brother there. She said Michael's aggressiveness is natural because he feels a loss of control. This will give him the opportunity to talk about things."
Michael enjoyed his sessions with the therapist. After one of them, he announced with a smile, "We had a sign tonight."

Clem walked in behind him and grinned. "Michael and I were walking in a parking lot when suddenly a woman walked by wearing Lisa's cologne, Georgio's "Wings.' I lifted Michael up and said, "Can you smell it?' He smiled and said, "Mom's perfume.'

"He looked so happy," Clem said.

Michael nodded his head. "We got a sign," he said again. "We got a sign from Mom."

'I feel torn'

Michael wasn't the only one bracing himself for a milestone. His father was about to go out on his first date.

"It's not a date, not really," Clem said when initially describing his first get-together with a 34-year-old corporate real estate broker. "My brother Bruce called and asked if it was OK to invite her to a clambake to meet me and I said OK."

A few days later, he conceded that, yes, it "might be called" a date since Dianne, Bruce's wife, chastised both men for thinking it was appropriate to expect the woman just to show up at the function and wait for Clem to appear. Clem, she said, should pick her up at her home.

"I left a message for her and I sounded like a complete idiot," Clem said. "I lost my train of thought, I sounded awkward." He let out a moan.

A few days before he met her, Clem started thinking about his wedding ring, which he continued to wear after Lisa's death. "I have to give this some thought," he said, looking down at his hand. "Maybe she'll think it's neat that I choose to remember my wife this way." He looked up sheepishly, raised his eyebrows. "Maybe not."

That night, Clem made a decision.

"I threw out Lisa's swimsuits, underthings, the stuff she wore on our wedding night, the stuff you can't give away. I felt kind of bad, and then I sensed Lisa's presence. I could feel her saying, "Just as I learned that belongings mean nothing, you need to understand that, too.'"

Clem also removed his wedding ring. "I feel torn," he said the next morning. "Part of me feels it's like finally getting the tombstone, like I'm really saying goodbye to Lisa and I'm not sure I'm ready to do that. I still feel her presence, I don't want that to end. But it would make this woman feel uncomfortable, as if I'm saying, "Yeah, I'm here but I don't really want to be.' That wouldn't be very nice."

'Maybe I'm not ready'

Clem watched Lisa as she worked the room, laughing and joking with everyone. She was very thin, but so alive, and he wanted so badly to talk to her but thought she was avoiding him. "I'm going for a walk," she told him. "If you want, I'll join you," he said, but she didn't respond and Clem felt hurt.

But then Lisa turned to Clem and smiled. "I really enjoyed seeing the videos of the kids and us again," she said. And then she leaned over and kissed Clem.
"It was the sweetest, most tender kiss," Clem said the morning after the dream. "It was the first time Lisa kissed me in a dream, and she mentioned the videos the boys and I had watched a couple nights ago."

Clem sighed. "The more I can let go of Lisa, the closer she gets to me in my dreams. It's so nice to be able to talk to her."

At the same time, he was taking baby steps toward a new social life. Dating was even harder than he imagined it would be. The woman he had met two weeks earlier was full of questions, including whether he would want more children and whether he would ever be there for her emotionally on a regular basis. She also told him he talked too much about Lisa.

"I guess it was the kick in the butt I needed," Clem said. "I apologized for talking about Lisa. But I did tell her, "You seem to be looking for someone to settle down with and I'm like a high school kid on his first date.' And I feel she needs to understand that our lives are very different. In the middle of the week, she's at a wine bar with friends listening to jazz; I'm at the dining room table helping three boys with homework.' "

He was going to slow down, he said. "She's a very nice person, but maybe I'm not ready for all this. I know it's hard to hear about Lisa. But what am I supposed to do? Pretend that part of my life never happened?"

'We're a team'

On Sept. 22, the air was crisp and cooler than the week before. Clem stood in his front yard and breathed in the last day of summer.

"The change of season really hit me," he said. "It brings it all back so vividly, everything that was going on from last year at this time." He shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, you have a good cry, and then you let it go, right?"

Clustered at his feet were several bags of supplies he picked up at lunchtime for the boys' commemoration of Lisa's birthday. They were going to plant tulip and daffodil bulbs for Mom, who would have been 42.

"They'll come up in the spring," Michael said, smiling. "Right around Mother's Day."

"That's right," said Clem. "And you boys know how much Mom loves flowers."

Before they began digging in the front bed, Michael put in a call to Lisa's parents in Virginia. When he got the answering machine, he left a message for Mary.

"Hi, Nana. We're really sad because it's Mommy's birthday, so we're planting flowers. I love you."

All three boys got into the act, and it was the typical Hearey boy funfest. Lots of yelling, lots of giggles. Dirt bombs flew and tempers flared as they nailed each other with clumps of sod.

The boys stopped goofing around when Clem dug a trench for them to drop in the bulbs and then cover them, first with bone meal and then topsoil.

"Whose bones is this?" Christopher asked as he sprinkled the white dust.
Clem pretended to read the ingredients on the bag: "Bodies of political prisoners . . ."

"Daaaad!" Christopher said.

The boys were enthusiastic, diligent, although at one point Clem admonished them to stop arguing.

"C'mon, guys, we're doing this together. It's a group project. We're a family."

Chris piped up. "Yeah, we're a team."

"And how do you spell team?" asked Clem.

Michael smiled. "T-e-a-m."

"And there's no "I" in team," added C.J.

Clem grinned, raised his eyebrows. "See? They're getting it."

Later, Clem sent an e-mail to the usual group of friends and relatives.

"Look for new beginnings," he wrote, "Be open to rebirth. Lisa's lessons were many, and as learners, we are trying.

"As I said at Lake Tahoe, I believe the following is a wish from Lisa, and now, at her birthday, I would like to share it again," he wrote, and then quoted from a book on grieving.

"Let yourself feel good again, laugh with friends, have fun. Living your life to the fullest is not betrayal of a memory but fulfillment of a promise to someone who would want only the best for you."

Messages for Connie Schultz can be left at (216) 999-4249, or send her e-mail to cschultz@plaind.com

©1998 THE PLAIN DEALER. Used with permission.