

PARTY OF ONE by Clarice James  
Excerpt from Chapter Four (350 words of an 80,000-word novel)

In years past, like most wives and mothers, I savored solitude because I knew I'd be interrupted soon enough by my children Casey and Brady or my husband Nate. Now, with the kids grown and Nate gone, I don't have to tell anyone to turn the music down so I can think or shut the game off because supper is ready. I don't have to beg Nate to stop flipping through channels or talking about work. There's no one to ask, "Why can't you guys leave me alone for five whole minutes?"

This solitude is permanent.

Your whole perception of life is askew after losing someone you love . . . A friend complains about her job, and you outwardly sympathize, but what you think is: "Do you believe your bad day at work compares with the fact that my husband is dead?" Your co-worker talks about the latest blockbuster film. You say "Wow," but what you want to ask is: "Have you forgotten that my husband is dead?" You order a salad, and when the waitress asks what kind of dressing you want, you might say bleu cheese, but what you scream inside is: "Oh God, oh God, my husband is dead!"

Prior to Nate's death, for years on my way to work, I passed a little old man walking to the corner store for his morning paper. He was hunched over and needed a cane, yet strutted with a certain determination. His morning constitutionals inspired me. I searched for him daily; I worried when I didn't see him.

On my first day returning to work as a widow, I passed my same little old man. Anger and resentment erupted inside me at the sight of him. I felt if he'd only died when he was supposed to, Nate would still be alive. My feelings were senseless, but that didn't change them. And I didn't want to change them.

Weeks later, when I passed the old man and caught myself smiling, I knew my perception of life was returning to normal—if not by leaps and bounds, by inches.