

From Here On

The garage door opened and Gary knew it was time. The slamming car door signalled that Susan would soon be entering the house. His stomach began to twist in knots. The door between the house and the garage popped opened and Susan flew in with a bag of groceries hanging off one of her arms. She hurried toward Gary, pecked him on the cheek and deftly swung the groceries onto the kitchen counter.

“Hi! How's your day been so far?” she asked cheerfully.

“Fine . . . just fine” replied Gary. His throat was dry and and he could feel his palms beginning to sweat.

“Well you're not going to believe this: Arlene announced today that she's stepping down as treasurer of our church group. Do you know what that means?” she paused.

Gary did not answer, instead choosing to wait for her to continue.

“There's an opening on the church board for a *treasurer* . . . you know, someone who's good with numbers” chimed Susan, singing the statement more than saying it.

Gary felt his stomach sink a little. He'd been saddled with crunching numbers all his life and it was definitely not something he wanted to do in his retirement.

“Naturally I hinted that I might know someone for the job” she went on. “I mean, you have been looking for something to get you out of the house.”

“You know it's funny you should mention that. I've been thinking . . .” Gary interjected.

To Gary Bowman, the Earth seemed to rotate more slowly these days and he was starting to feel it would soon come to a complete halt. Time, that most precious of commodities, was now something he had in abundance and the minutes pooled together like drops in a bucket – a bucket that, for Gary, was overflowing. Boredom had begun to eat away at his soul.

Gary had been a bookkeeper for most of his life, and it was this profession that had afforded him the opportunity to retire at age fifty-five. There was no more need to work every day, and since it was quite an accomplishment to be able to walk away from the working world at such an early age, that is what Gary had done.

But he had spent thirty-five years being *busy* as a bookkeeper. In doing so, he'd developed the habit of being constantly occupied with work, during tax time up to 14 hours a day.

"I've worked hard for thirty-five years" he'd exclaimed at his retirement party. "I've supported a family and paid my taxes for *thirty-five years* . . . and now it's *my* time". The small crowd of co-workers in attendance had chuckled at this, but all were secretly jealous of what they perceived to be his good luck.

Now, alone in his retirement, he was a rare and a solitary specimen. The troubled economy, which he'd shielded himself against by investing conservatively, had not been so kind to many of his acquaintances who now realized they'd still be working well beyond sixty. They still had jobs and they weren't home all day, and when they did get home at the end of the work day the last thing they wanted to do was go out for a drink with their retired friend.

"Not all of us can sleep 'til noon" was what his friend Ed Clark always said. Ed and Gary had worked together for close to twenty-two years, and Ed had planned to retire shortly after Gary. But Ed's investments took a hit after the market collapsed and so he was now looking at at least five more years. Although he tried desperately not to, he felt a hint of resentment towards his old buddy Gary.

Alone in domestic solitude, his first six months of retirement had been excellent. At first, waking up a little later than everyone else thrilled him and he would beam as he watched all the cars on the block leave their garages in unison each morning. After watching the morning news and finishing his two cups of coffee, he'd take care of the regular work around the house -- his was the nicest lawn on the block. Then, there were the odd jobs that had been neglected for so long. At last there was time to fix those leaky faucets and chips in the drywall. But after six months, all the drips and chips were fixed.

Gary hated golf, but this seemed to be the major activity that his peers occupied their spare time with. It wasn't that he wouldn't be good at it. In fact his lanky six-foot-two frame was perfectly suited to it.. What bothered him most was the cost. He couldn't fathom how his friends would spend a small fortune on new clubs and duds before they even got around to paying green fees. And now that he was on a fixed income, an expense like that was simply out of the question. Luckily, when he'd asked his wife Susan if she wanted to take it up, she answered "Why would I take up golf . . . at fifty-four years old? Why would I take up anything new at fifty-four?"

Susan still had her activities that she'd been involved in the whole time he'd been working - after his retirement she continued with these activities - so travelling was really out of the question. She had the church, the book club that met every other Thursday and the local library committee that met once a month, with the exception of July and August. For Susan, nothing had changed and the idea of dropping her established activities seemed absurd.

So after six months of retirement Gary realized he'd have to find his own way of keeping himself occupied. At the relatively young age of fifty-five he had nothing to do. He was bored.

Being alone with nothing to do does strange things to a person. There is only so much TV a person can watch. Inevitably, boredom leads to thinking. But without someone to bounce ideas off of, they can go astray and run out of control. Gary now found himself alone with his idle thoughts, and it was something he was not used to. The years of working with numbers had kept his mind occupied most of the day, and the mental exhaustion he experienced in the evenings gave him solace from mental wandering. Now there was nothing to bar its way. As he sat alone, drinking his coffee and staring out the kitchen window he couldn't help his mind from bouncing around to things he didn't want to think of – things like what the point of living actually was.

"I worked my ass off for thirty-five years for what? To sit around and watch CNN all day?" he thought. "Do I just sit here now and wait to die?"

He tried doing crossword puzzles, reading books, even tried baking, but the thought was still

there. What is the point of being alive if you have no purpose? Gary knew he'd have to find something to do.

He found the answer in the newspaper one morning – *theatre sports*. There it was, in the entertainment section of the paper. An advertisement explained how, for \$100 one could sign up for an eight-week course in improv. While working with a professional and other students, participants could come out of their shells while sharpening their sense of humour. It was perfect. And it was like nothing Gary had ever done.

Just reading the ad made him feel a little sick with nervousness. He pictured himself laughing and making others laugh. And it was something he'd never seen himself doing before. This was the opportunity he'd been waiting for . . . the opportunity to be something other than Gary Bowman, bookkeeper.

"I have nothing to lose" he thought. "What's the worst that could happen? I make a fool of myself. And if I do, what does it matter? I don't see my friends any more anyway". He called the number and registered. The course would begin in two weeks on Tuesday nights.

With that settled, he began to think of how he was going to tell Susan. It struck him as funny that after thirty-four years of marriage he was going to have to tell her something and had no idea how she would react. It wasn't even that big of a deal – just a silly little eight-week evening course. But because it was something *he'd* never done before, it was something *they'd* never done before. Everything one partner was shared and became something the other experienced vicariously. So the fact that he was taking them somewhere new in their relationship was as much her concern as it was his. He hoped Susan would be alright with it.

And now she was here standing before him. The moment had come to break the news.

As she began unpacking the groceries, Susan continued talking about the position that was now available. "I'll call this afternoon and spread the word to the board that you're our new treasurer. They'll be thrilled to have a real professional taking care of the books." The commotion she made was a stark

contrast the the silence of the home before she'd entered. Gary was almost stunned by the activity.

“That's . . . that's not exactly what I had in mind” he began nervously. He took a deep breath and gathered himself. He was shaken, but not deterred. “Susan, I've decided to try something. I registered for a course.”

She stopped her activity and looked at him. “A course? In what?”

“Well, it's not like anything I've ever done, but it's what I want to do”. He had left the newspaper open on the counter, and now he pushed it towards her and pointed at the ad. “After all, this is *my* time” he added.

Susan stared at the ad and read, and then re-read. She looked up at him and saw that his face had not changed. He wasn't joking. She looked down again and read once more.

“But . . . I don't . . . what is it?” she looked up once more.

“It's a class that teaches acting and stuff” explained Gary coolly.

“So you want to go be . . . an actor?” Susan asked, perplexed.

“Nah. I just want to do it for fun.”

“Oh Gary, what's the matter with you? I knew were cooped-up in this house too long” she said condescendingly.

“Susan, I just want to do something for fun. For thirty-five years I've had to be serious and worry about details . . . and numbers. Well now this is *my* time and I want to go do something where I don't have to be so serious” he explained.

Susan walked up to Gary and put one arm around his shoulder. With the other hand she began to stroke his shortly cropped, grey thinning hair. “Are you feeling okay sweetie?”

“I'm fine” he snorted. “Don't treat me like a kid, Susan. I'm a grown man and I know what I'm doing” he said, but didn't fully believe it himself.

“But . . . what will I tell the church board? Gary, honey, they'll laugh at you. They'll say you're going through a mid-life crisis”.

“What does it matter what people say. It's just a course!” Gary said, becoming more disgruntled.

“Who cares what people think? I've spent my life accommodating other people and now I want to do something for myself”.

“That's easy for you to say,” said Susan as she turned from Gary and went back to unpacking the groceries, “but what about me? I'm still going to have to face all these people.”

He thought of his wife and how she'd built herself up in the community through the years. He knew how cruel people are and he thought of how hard it was going to be for Susan to shrug off the side-long glances and low comments made behind her back. It made him angry and in that moment he wanted to sell everything and move somewhere far away where he could start fresh without social entanglements.

Gary walked over and took his wife in his arms. Thirty-four years of marriage had taught him well enough how to make peace. “Aw honey . . . look – this thing - it's just a silly eight-week course. I'll be done with it before you know it. And we don't even have to tell anyone -- no one will ever know.”

With this, Susan was placated. “You're not going to tell anyone?” She paused in thought. “Oh fine. Go have fun.” They embraced a little tighter. “But, I never thought you wanted to be an actor”.

“I don't . . .well, I don't know if I do” replied Gary.

He looked down at the ad again and realized how much of a struggle this was going to be, but he was invigorated because he had found a purpose.