

Joshua Wilkes

SAFE

The enforced idleness of retirement does not agree with my wife, so we dig up the basement floor. I do the heavy work, breaking up the cement with a rented jackhammer. Susan shovels it out. Sometimes I have to get in there with a pick-ax. After a week there is a ragged, unprofessional hole in the foundation, six feet square. The soil underneath is damp red and smells of iron.

This is not my idea. The spring I retired from the mortgage game, Susan ordered a subscription to *Extreme Senior!*, a magazine full of teenage models disguised as old people doing things like refurbishing pianos and para-sailing. The editors like to admonish with words like “Retirement is a Time to Enjoy Life” and “Your Best Years are Ahead.” On these sage phrases my wife and I agree, but Susan cannot reconcile her cherished slogans with my own most deeply held imperative: retirement is a wonderful time precisely because it is the interval between gainful employment and death, during which time *one does no actual work*.

The “Your Own English Country Garden!” “Your Own Waterfall!” and “Your Own Gazebo!” were modest successes. We enjoyed ourselves outside and avoided serious injury. However, like most endeavors in consumer architecture, they were eventually finished, and Susan emerged from each more depressed and restless than before. The next issue of *Extreme Senior!* could not come quickly enough. She has always been ambitious that way, placing her hopes in progress. It was the same with our daughter, Rachel: ten pounds, three ounces, heavy with her mother’s expectations.

Personally, I've managed to get old without glossy advice. But I wonder if there are many men who, well past the healthy mid-point of their lives, awaken in the morning to reflect on what they would have been without their wives' ambition? God used to come to the men of Israel and make them prophets – I know this, because Bible study was last year's improvement. Those poor peasants, illiterate farmers and herdsmen every one, lined up to jump down the mouths of whales. "Oh, God, anyone but me. Choose anyone but your lowest, dumbest, dirt-grubbing, blissfully happy servant to proclaim Your word."

This princely home with its security system, heated garage, and unused bedrooms – this is the gospel I proclaim. Every morning I stand on my steps, the yard calm and uniform like a dead sea, to receive my newspaper. It is tribute paid to me, the aging retiree. I am a prophet king, the lowest and the highest in my house.

The September cover of *Extreme Senior!* depicts a happy couple inside the wine cellar they have dug without recourse to contractors or "gouging professionals." The index describes a number of related schemes, all involving serious amateur excavation. I am standing in the street in slippers and a bathrobe, past noon. Susan has been away all morning at her investment club, advancing like Rommel in defiance of the bear market. It's a weekday and the suburbs are silent all the way up into the shatterproof blue.

I take my cue and scurry behind the house to bury the September issue of *Extreme Senior!* deep inside "Your Own Sustainable Compost Heap!"

Later that night, while I linger at the edge of sleep, Susan whispers in my ear:

"Eric, we need a safe."

“A safe?” Susan has been aerating the compost heap again. Probably with our home-made auger as per instructions.

“*Extreme Senior!* says the market is going to get even worse. What about the portfolio? We’re supposed to convert a percentage of our assets into Kruggerands and keep them handy at home against economic fluctuations. They recommend a safe in the floor.”

“We’re diversified.” Before, *Extreme Senior!* told me to diversify. “We’re fine.”

“What if it’s a *big* fluctuation? What if we lose everything?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m not being silly, Eric. It happens all the time. They say it could be worse than the Great Depression. You know how your mother was, hoarding stale crackers? A year after the expiration date? That will be us.”

Clearly, *I’m* the one being silly because I don’t want to roll back the New Deal and put America back on the Gold Standard. “We’ll be fine. I thought you were the Kubla Kahn of the NASDAQ.”

Susan levers herself up on her elbow. I am dragging-ass again, like the time I passed on an early vice-presidency because it would have kept me away from home while my little girl was in high school. So what? The board was happy to save on my salary and the bank didn’t suffer. Was it silly to want to see the way a kid changes so fast? I guess so: as silly as pretending to be retired.

“I will not allow,” she begins, but swallows hard. Susan feels strongly enough about this for tears. “I will not allow us to lose everything we’ve worked so hard to build.”

Lose what – the house? The Gazebo? What have we built that’s so important? Me? I’m retired – if not an absolutely successful venture, at least a completed one. There is nothing else.

Our daughter Rachel is still unbuilt, still unfinished – but she is far out of reach and can't be our project anymore. Of course, I say none of this. I begin to think Susan might be talking about herself, the project of Fully Becoming Herself.

“Honey, maybe we need to think about why you—“

“I am *not* a child, Eric, and I am not being selfish. *You're* the one who retired – *you* could be a little more worried about how we'll stay comfortable and secure, let alone how we're supposed to move forward as two people in a loving relationship.” This, I think, must be a code for sex. “For that to happen we must feel secure. I think we need a safe – see, it's even the same word: ‘safe’. And something that's stable on the international market, like Kruggerands. This is the idea I'm contributing to the situation, which, so far, looks like this: we lie here every night while our money disappears. Then we're old and we have nothing, and it turns us crazy.”

“But we're fine,” I say, blindly, because it is what I say to my wife. In the end it is my one, walk-on role. “We're fine.”

She lowers herself to the bed and curls into an exasperated knot. “I swear, I am ready to give up unless something changes around here. Things used to be different. *You* used to be different. *You* used to try.”

In the morning, away from night terrors, Susan tries to be more reasonable.

“Really, even dogs bury bones to keep them safe. It's the most ordinary thing.”

As a precaution, I pound four masonry nails into the floor and connect them with string. Lest we become too ambitious in our zeal. Even I, old and reeking of BenGay, am tempted by the feel of a pick-ax. It's been a long time since I worked cement. There is a rented mixer in the garage and a pallet of Sacrete. We plan to ferry the wet cement through a low window via

galvanized culvert. The safe squats in the corner by the furnace. It is a burned-black cylinder with fins at the bottom to anchor it, and we will drag it into place with chains. I am worried about that part of it – the whole project, actually, reeks of potential disaster – but ever since we had the kitchen redone twenty years ago, Susan hates contractors and won't let them into the house. We were not so extreme, then, as we are now.

“Try to be optimistic,” she says. “We aren't doing this to create a problem – we're *solving* a problem. We're actively taking steps to safeguard our own security.”

The hole has to be of a certain depth, so we shovel soil into buckets and carry it upstairs. Susan is cheerful – she liked digging the garden especially and is happy and intense with tool and dirt. We rest often.

I sip iced-tea in the kitchen during a break. After a few minutes of solitude, Susan comes upstairs and strips her gloves off into the sink. Under the thick cotton gloves she still has long nails and delicate fingers. She cracks the window open over the sink and lights a cigarette – an ancient and only occasional vice which I never mention. Susan looks out into the yard, burning cigarette held high by her ear, her other arm supporting the elbow. Like women everywhere, smoking, my still-pretty wife.

“What do you suppose people think we're *doing* in here?” she asks.

“The neighbors must be used to it by now, after all the landscaping. Why?” I don't believe she can be embarrassed by the digging, not now.

She exhales into the screen. “Everybody in the world saw them drag that safe over the hedge and into the basement – there's probably someone watching the house with a telescope this very minute, waiting for us to go on vacation.”

So security can't be bought after all. My small victory puts me in a jovial mood. "No peace, I guess, but in the grave. I wonder why that wasn't one of the projects in this issue."

Susan shakes her head. "Don't be cruel. I needed it because I was nervous."

Candor like this is rare and unexpected. I stumble.

"Are you still? Nervous, I mean? Is it just about the money?"

"I get nervous when we don't keep busy."

I don't like to broach mental health with my wife. Enough of our contemporaries are already medicated for depression and anxiety, turning frantic in their empty nests. A few hoard suicide like a government bond, waiting for the market to turn. Why? They can't all have lost daughters.

Or maybe we lose everything, and sooner than we think. It doesn't matter: I will not number my wife among these people.

"Susan, home improvement can neither conjure nor dispel. It's just *work*."

She turns to regard me, viciously stamps-out her cigarette. It isn't often these days that she looks at me when I speak, so I am expectant.

"For God's sake, what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Maybe I read something sardonic in the paper this morning. I'm getting a back-ache."

We make lunch, cucumber sandwiches and a cold beer for me, and go back in the hole.

The next day, the spade shivers against something hard. While I imagine a geyser of untreated sewage shooting up at the rafters, Susan scrapes daintily with a garden trowel. The odor of decaying paper and plaster blooms around our heads.

We have unearthed the ends of rotting spruce studs and crumbling gypsum board, the interior wall of a buried house. On our knees, Susan and I follow its edge, brushing soil back until the outline of a room is revealed. I dig deeper into the room, handing pails of dirt up to my wife. She dumps them on the floor. I dig until the spade scrapes carpet.

I look back over my shoulder. Susan is searching the hole with her eyes.

“We don’t have to keep going.” I say this, hoping she’ll let me stop.

“No, do. We aren’t deep enough yet.”

Nausea wells-up in my body. I lean heavily on the spade.

It is my daughter Rachel’s old room. Soil clings to the yellow, flowered wallpaper and the café-style drapes. Rachel sits on her bed under the tattered, wet canopy. Her hair is saturated with dirt, thickened into brown tubes. Sue, my wife of that time, stands partially excavated in the doorway. Susan hands down a toothbrush, and I carefully remove the soil crusting my younger wife’s face. The earth has preserved her features, which were finer and sharper then. Sand comes away from her skin easily, it is so smooth.

Sue and Rachel are arguing, the last of an epic sequence of fissioning denunciations, before she finally escaped to college. On the bed are open suitcases filled with sand, and boxes stacked against the walls holding burst books and corroded tennis trophies. The occasion for this scene, this buried diamond, is my wife’s belief that Rachel is reasoning poorly, that this boy she thinks so much of will not make her happy for long, that she will have regrets over choosing the state school fifty miles away when she could have gone anywhere she wanted. Of course we had the money –why save at all, if not for this? I don’t even remember his name, the boy. He had a basketball scholarship and Rachel wanted to go with him.

Susan’s voice comes from above the hole:

“Wasn’t she pretty?”

Even with muddy tears dried to scale on their cheeks I can see it.

“You were both beautiful.”

My only daughter put all her things into the car with Tom. I remember his name, now, and meeting his parents when everything was over, how Sue couldn’t look at them. Rachel and Tom made it fifteen miles out of town before another car leaped the median and crushed them. It was not their fault, neither Rachel’s for her disobedience nor her boyfriend’s for his mediocrity in everything but basketball. It was not Sue’s fault. She didn’t shrivel up their bodies with the evil eye or lay them low with curses from her disappointed womb.

They just died, the way people die all the time.

My wife peers into the hole. The plans we sent away for, a curling white sheet gridded with blue lines, are in her hand. She scans the room critically and lowers a stone on a string until it touches the carpet.

“It needs to be deeper,” she says. “Think about all the things it will have to hold.”

Susan hands the pick-axe down and I go to work on the floor, tearing up the damp carpet and wretched plywood. Underneath is unblemished alluvial clay.

“Go deeper,” she says.

I section the clay out with the spade and stack it against the walls of Rachel’s bedroom. It encysts my hands in heavy, cracking knobs. Soon I have uncovered another, smaller room. Susan wants to see it, but the work has aggravated her knee and we have to get the ladder from the garage. We descend together, a rung at a time.

Susan and I scrape at the walls with our fingers, dragging clay from the peeling white paint. I find a window but no amount of wiping will clear it. We uncover the only piece of

furniture, a bed, and the two people. They are myself and my new wife, Sue. We are slick with clay, making love in our first tiny house. Her lips are to my ear because she is daring me to some feat, and I am trying hard to please. My wife. Maybe we are making Rachel, and in fact I can tell that we are because of my shoulders. It is the summer I worked so hard as a bricklayer's assistant, and my shoulders and back are eloquent, sculptured marble. Rachel will be born later that year, so in a sense we are all there in the tiny house, surrounded by the promise of every wonderful thing we expect.

Susan clears a place on the bed and lies down.

"This is deep enough," she says, and turns to the wall. "You should get busy filling the hole in. If we keep the cement mixer another day, they'll charge us a fee."

"Susan? Sue?"

Neither one answers. I climb out, coughing on dirt. There is light in the shifting dust, falling from the high basement windows into the hole. My wife is so far inside she cannot be seen.