

The Christmas Ring
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by Terry Austin

Idiot!

That's the only word Gus could think of to describe himself. After seventy-two years of experience dealing with people he should have known better. How could he let some punk kid take advantage of him so easily? Well, he really wasn't a kid, but still he was thirty or forty years younger than Gus. He knew his mind wasn't as sharp as it used to be but still, he should have seen this coming.

Now it was Christmas and he had nothing to give to his beloved Connie. All because of his own stupidity. All he wanted was to give her something special, to make this the best Christmas present he had ever given. Looking back, he knew his excitement over the opportunity had clouded his judgment and left him open to a shyster trying to make a quick buck. What an idiot!

This was a big deal for Gus because he was confident it would be the last Christmas he would share with Connie.

Everyone who knows Gus will tell you that Connie is the best thing that ever happened to him. His life has been hard, harder than most. He is a big, burly man. Tough, leathery skin tanned by decades of working in the sun and weather. Construction work, mostly building houses and small commercial structures. The pay is good when there is work but such is not always the case. Long periods of idle time, especially with a tough economy, left Gus without a huge nest egg for retirement. So, he keeps working, even though he is not physically able.

Don't misunderstand; Gus and Connie are financially comfortable. They make enough money to pay the bills and keep food on the table. They are not close to homelessness or anything like that. In fact, they have a nice home, even though it is quite small, a two bedroom bungalow on the east edge of the downtown area. Some would say it is on the wrong side of the tracks but Gus and Connie have never felt that way.

They take great pride in keeping the yard mowed and the leaves raked. The exterior paint has enough chips and cracks to warrant a new paint job but Gus will tell you he's a carpenter not a painter and hiring someone just seems like an unnecessary expense.

Maywood is a very quiet street where Gus and Connie have lived in this same house since they were married a little more than fifteen years ago. In fact, Gus bought the house and lived here by himself before he even met Connie. They know all the neighbors and are considered good folks by most everyone up and down the block.

Gus is one of those guys that you need to ignore the first impression. Initial opinion is that he is hard and uncaring, not someone you want to take the time to get to know. He is not especially tall but something about his appearance gives the illusion that he is large. Perhaps it's the huge barrel chest or the rippling forearms which cause his shirt sleeves to bulge. Even in his seventh decade, Gus has the physique of a man who still works hard every day. Whatever it is, the first sight of him suggests that you stay clear.

Yet, get him to talk and your impression quickly changes. His speech is shaped by care and concern for others in the conversation. You will not learn much about him because Gus rarely speaks about himself. Instead, you will find yourself talking about yourself, because that is his primary interest. He loves people.

That quality is what first attracted Connie. She was not seeking a relationship when she and Gus met. To be honest, a relationship with a man was not even on her wish list. More than a dozen years of being divorced had not been enough time to scrub the taste of bad marriage from her mouth. Abusive is not a descriptive enough term for Connie's first husband. He not only stole the most productive years

of her life, he left her scarred and bruised, hopeless about ever having a decent relationship with another man.

Even in her younger days, Connie had never been considered an extremely attractive woman. She had a couple of small scars on her left cheek, remnants of her first marriage, which she normally kept hidden with a little blob of makeup. She was shorter than average height and just portly enough to remind you of someone's grandma. It's a shame that she wasn't.

In addition to the emotional and a few physical scars, Connie's ex also gave her a son. He proved to be too much like his father and also disappeared from Connie's life. The last time she saw Scott was at the police station. He had called, for probably the umpteenth time, she had lost count, to post bail. Staring at him through a scratched glass barricade, she mustered the courage to tell him she was done, she would not help him get out of jail any more. He stood up, spat on the glass and walked away. That was twenty years ago and Connie had no idea if he was even still alive.

She met Gus when she hired a contractor to do some work on her roof. Gus arrived to make the repairs and in the two days that it took to fix the leaks, Connie and Gus had become fast friends. It didn't take long before it was obvious to everyone, Connie and Gus included, that they were meant for each other. It's a shame they did not meet thirty years earlier. Life would have been richer for both of them.

In spite of some hesitancy at first, caused by failed relationships in the past, Gus and Connie were pretty open and honest with each other, keeping very few secrets. Except lately, one that Gus did not want to share. A pain in his abdomen just wouldn't go away. It didn't hurt all the time, but upon occasion it would start to ache, not a sharp throbbing pain, but a steady burn. He almost always fought through illness without the aid of doctors and medicine and he certainly never complained to Connie. However, this pain kept getting worse so he finally snuck off to the doctor one day when Connie thought he was working late.

After some tests and a lecture from the doctor for waiting too long, the news was not good. He didn't understand everything the doctor said but the options were clear. Take a painful, debilitating round of treatments and live for six to eight months or do nothing and live five to six months. It only took Gus a few minutes to choose the do nothing plan. Christmas was less than a week away and once the festivities were complete he would sit down and tell Connie and make the necessary preparations. Until then, he was determined to make this the best Christmas ever.

On a shelf in the back of the garage, behind the wooden boxes where Gus kept the tools of his trade, he had a secret hiding place. It wasn't hard to find if you knew what you were looking for, Gus had a leather pouch, tied shut by two tattered straps and tucked under a tool belt he hadn't worn in years. Whenever he came into possession of a few extra bucks, he would quietly pull out the pouch and stash the money inside. Occasionally he had to take money out, like the time the transmission went out on Connie's car just a few days after they had replaced the hot water heater.

Earlier in the day, Gus had taken all the money from the pouch, a little over two thousand dollars, and stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans. He felt like a second grader gathering coins to buy a gift for mom and that's a good description of how he acted. When he and Connie got married, they did not have enough to buy a nice wedding ring for the bride and for years they talked about someday. Someday they would get her a ring, but someday never arrived. Now, on what Gus knew would be his last Christmas, he thought it was time.

It was Saturday, just five days before Christmas. Gus got out of bed early, not unusual, but he especially wanted to be quiet this morning, not waking Connie. He quickly dressed and carefully pulled the front door closed to keep from making a sound. As he grabbed the metal handle on the front door of his well worn Ford pickup, he got a reminder of just how cold the overnight had been. He was glad that he had recently lubricated the squeaky door hinge as he slipped behind the wheel.

Traffic was light, as you might expect for an early Saturday morning. The trip to north Twenty-Third Street took less than ten minutes. Perhaps the reason there were so few cars on the road is because they were already in the parking lot at the Merchant's Market where Gus planned to shop. It didn't take long to park because he didn't mind a good long walk in the brisk winter air. He wanted to be sure and enjoy everything about this day.

Merchant's Market was a conglomeration of independent vendors who rented floor space to sell their wares. A large canvas canopy covered a half acre of worn down grassland that was filled with tables and cases loaded with homemade, used, and even new items still in the manufacturers packaging. Gus was a frequent customer of Merchant's Market. It was where he found most of the tools in his garage.

Although jewelry was not on Gus' normal shopping list, he had noticed several vendors who were always well stocked and often overrun with women shoppers. He was confident that he could find the perfect ring for Connie that could be purchased with the two thousand dollars in his back pocket.

Casually strolling through the market, Gus heard the frequent, "Can I help you? numerous times. "Nah, just looking," was his usual reply.

He was in no hurry so occasionally a vendor would follow up and ask, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking at your wedding rings," Gus finally said to an old man leaning his wicker chair against a sturdy tent pole.

The old man tilted his makeshift recliner forward until all four legs were on the ground and then slowly rose to his feet. "Gonna make an honest woman of her," the old man joked.

"Naw," said Gus, "Just replacing the one I gave her fifteen years ago, 'bout time I gave her something nice."

The old man motioned for Gus to follow him to another glass display counter, giving the impression that he had something special. For the next fifteen minutes, he lifted up rings for Gus to examine, each with the same sales pitch, "Here's what you need."

Gus quickly tired of his worn out sales technique, but he did like the rings. One especially caught his eye and he kept going back to it, asking to see it several times. The old man, probably a better salesman than most people expected, realized Gus was a customer waiting to be sold. The next few minutes were spent bantering back and forth about price. Gus knew how much money was in his pocket and it was up to the old man to figure out how to get as much as he could. Finally they agreed. Gus had his ring and the old man had two thousand dollars.

The old man took a soft cloth and gave the ring a final polish before placing it inside a small plastic bag. "She's going to be one happy woman this Christmas."

Gus was eager to return to his pickup and start home but the old man insisted they fill out a receipt. "Just in case you have any problems," he said. "Besides, I need to keep Uncle Sam happy."

Gus provided his name and address although he specified that he was not interested in getting any more advertisements in the mail. The old man assured him that was not the case. They shook hands and Gus headed out toward the parking lot.

Less than twenty feet from the jewelry counter, Gus heard someone shouting his name. Obviously, he stopped and turned around and saw a young man, probably in his late thirty's walking toward him with his arm pointing in Gus' direction. "Wait a minute, my dad forgot to give you a box for the ring!" he said. "Here, let me take that and put it in a nice box."

With that, he snatched the plastic bag from Gus' hand and turned to walk back toward the jewelry vendor. Gus slowly followed, until he got back to the counter, assuming the man had gone back behind the counter to dig for a box. He waited a few minutes and then started to look around, growing impatient.

The old man saw Gus and said, "Hey friend, do you need another ring?"

“No,” said Gus, “I’m just waiting for your son. He’s getting a box for the ring.”

“I don’t have a son.”

“Sure you do, he said you were his dad,” Gus insisted, now starting to get a little worried.

“No I don’t. I’m the only one working this morning,” were the words Gus did not want to hear.

The man who took the ring, Connie’s wonderful Christmas present, was nowhere to be seen. Gus and the old man looked all around, Gus surveyed the entire Merchant’s Market but the man was gone. They even called the police and filed a report but the officer was not very hopeful.

The drive home was painful. Gus was not easily discouraged but this one did the trick. He would have to tell Connie now because that was all the money he had to spend on Christmas. This Christmas, his last one, would probably be the worst one of his entire life.

With feelings fluctuating between anger and despair, Gus worked hard to keep focused on the road despite the tears pooling in his eyes. As he wiped the moisture from his eyes with his big right hand, he noticed something he seldom paid attention to. At the end of Maywood Street, for some reason Gus noticed the church that he drove by every day with scarcely a thought. He pulled into the vacant parking lot of the church to take a few minutes and compose himself before facing Connie with all his bad news.

Being alone was not meant to be. Just a few minutes after parking his truck, several cars pulled into the parking lot and then quickly a few more. People were walking toward the church lawn just as a pickup pulling a flatbed trailer drove up. Gus watched as they began to unload several bales of hay, some obviously used lumber, and a few boxes filled with what appeared to be very colorful clothing.

Gus watched as they unloaded the trailer and began to arrange the hay and lumber on the front lawn of the church. It provided a few minutes of distraction as he pondered how to break his news to Connie. While deep in his thoughts, he heard a quick rapping on the window of his truck. Slightly startled, Gus turned to see a man standing, motioning for him to roll down the window.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” blurted out the man as the window was descending, “You here to help set up the nativity?”

“No. I’m sorry, I’m in the way, I’ll move,” replied Gus not wanting to be a bother.

“No, you’re fine, no problem. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Gus assured him that everything was fine that he just lived down the street and simply stopped for a few minutes to think through some things.

“Stay as long as you want,” the man said. “Hey, you can even help if you want. We never have too much of that.”

After Gus graciously declined the opportunity, the man said, “Say, we’re having a Christmas program tonight at the church. We’re going to start right here on the church lawn and then move inside for the rest of the evening, including some goodies. Why don’t you bring your family and join us?”

Although Gus said, “I might just do that!” he really had no intention of going to a Christmas program.

“If you come I’ll introduce you to folk. I haven’t been here very long myself but I do know a few people.” With that he started to walk away from the truck. “Oh, my name is Scott, and I’ll be lookin’ for you.”

The time had come and it had to be done. Gus drove the final two blocks to his house and pulled into the driveway. As he took a deep breath, he stepped out of his truck and walked the twenty feet up the brick driveway to the backdoor that he always used. Connie was just inside the door, standing at the kitchen sink putting together some sandwiches for lunch.

When Gus entered the room, Connie said, “Just in time. Sit down here and eat some lunch with me.”

Solemnly, Gus took a seat at the kitchen table and started nibbling on his turkey sandwich. The lettuce was crisp and Connie knew exactly how much cheese and mayonnaise Gus liked. Finally after finishing about half the sandwich, Gus mustered up the courage to tell Connie what was going on.

He laid it all out for her, holding nothing back. He told her about the recent doctor's visit and the discouraging prognosis. He also explained his choice of skipping the debilitating treatment and the expectation that he would not make it to summer. As you might expect, Connie first insisted that they visit another doctor, get a better opinion. Then she talked about overcoming the odds, refusing to accept that Gus was going to die in the near future. But, with the wisdom that only comes with age and the sensitivity that only comes with love, Gus was able to convince Connie the reality of their situation.

About ninety minutes into the conversation, Gus felt it was time to drop the last bomb. When he told her that he had been keeping a secret stash of money hidden in the garage, it was his turn to be surprised. She informed him that she had known about his hiding place for years. In fact, upon occasion when she had a few extra dollars, she put them in the pouch to add to his pot. They had a good chuckle about that.

Then he described the events of the morning when he went to purchase a new wedding ring, a very special final Christmas present for her. A steady stream of tears ran down her face as Gus explained how stupid he felt for letting some young thug take the ring from him. Connie stood up from the table, walked over to Gus' chair and sat on his lap, something she didn't do very often at her age. As she buried her face in his shoulder, she assured him that a new ring wasn't important to her. She let him know they had more significant things requiring their concern for the next few months.

They finished their conversation with a good long cry together. By this time both of them were emotionally drained. Gus needed to get outside and stretch his legs, perhaps spend a few hours in his workshop. Connie needed to stretch out on the bed and do some thinking. There was much to be done in the next few months and Christmas this year had become much less significant.

Late in the afternoon, after Gus finished tinkering in the workshop and returned to the house, there was a gentle knock on the front door. It was so tentative that if Gus had been in the back of the house he never would have heard. When he opened the door and saw a man, both of them were surprised.

"Hey, you're the guy in the church parking lot this morning," Scott was the first to speak. "Remember me? I'm Scott." He stuck out his right hand for a shake.

"Yeh, I remember," said Gus as he dutifully shook his new friend's hand. "I don't mean to be rude but we're not gonna be able to come to church tonight."

"Oh, that's not why I'm here," said Scott. "In fact, I'm surprised to see you at this address. Man, it's a small world sometimes."

"Whaddya mean?"

Scott slipped his hand into the front pocket of his jacket. He pulled out a small plastic bag and held it in front of Gus' face, "Is this yours?"

Gus looked at it for a few seconds then reached out and took it. Once he inspected it closer he realized it was the ring he had purchased earlier in the day. "Yah, that's mine, it's a ring I bought at the Merchant's Market this morning. It was stolen from me by some punk kid. How did you get it?"

"It's a rather long story. Have you got a minute?"

Gus invited Scott into the house and they both took a seat, Gus in his favorite easy chair and Scott sat uncomfortably on the corner of the large couch in the middle of the room. Scott immediately began talking, almost as if he had rehearsed a speech.

"I have an apartment not far from here, over on 15th Street," he said. "My roommate is having a difficult time. We met while we were in prison together and he's only been out for a couple of weeks."

"You were in prison?" Gus interrupted.

"Yah, I was really messed up and did some stupid things," responded Scott. "But I've changed," he quickly added. "You might say that I got religion, but it wasn't just to impress the parole board. I really got religion."

Scott spent the next few minutes talking about his new life including involvement in the church down the street from Gus and Connie. "The folks at church have sure been nice. My past life is no problem for them."

"What does all that have to do with my ring," chimed in Gus impatiently.

"I'm getting to that, sorry, sometimes I ramble," responded Scott.

"I met this young fella in prison. When he got released he looked me up needing a place to stay. I told him that he could sleep on my couch until he found a job and got on his feet. He has been with me for a couple of weeks. After we finished working at the church this morning, I went home and my friend was there. He told me how he had suckered some old man out of a ring and then he showed it to me."

"Let me tell you, I was really mad," added Scott. "He knew I wasn't into that stuff anymore and I let him know he couldn't stay with me if he was going to live like that."

"How did you find me," asked Gus.

"When I looked in the bag, I found a receipt with your name and address. I figured you were the one who lost the ring. I told my friend I was bringing it back and try to convince you to not go to the police. That's why I'm here."

At that moment, Connie entered the room.

"Connie, come in here," blurted out Gus as he stood up. She entered the room from behind the couch where Scott was sitting. "You need to meet this young man and you'll never believe what he brought with him."

Scott was also standing and he turned to face Connie as she walked around the couch. It seems that they saw one another at the exact same time and both had the identical stunned look. If he didn't know better, Gus would have thought they already knew one another.

"Connie, this is Scott," Gus was the first to speak.

"I know," said Connie, "What are you doing here?"

"Mom! Is that you? I had no idea..." stammered Scott.

Connie turned to Gus and said, "Gus, what is this all about?"

Gus was really confused. Mom? What is that about? He knew Connie had a son named Scott but he had no idea where he was. Could this really be him?

"Is this your son?" Gus asked. "I didn't know."

By this time, Connie and Scott had both taken a seat, Connie in Gus' easy chair and Scott back on the couch. Gus stood by himself with his confused thoughts.

Finally Scott broke the silence. "Mom, I've been wanting to talk to you but I didn't know how to find you or even what to say. This is so strange; I don't know where to start."

Connie listened but the last thing she needed after all the other bad news of the day was to have to deal with her dead beat son. "Scott, I don't know what you think you're going to get from me today, but I'm not interested. I told you that before!"

"Mom, I don't want anything from you. You don't owe me anything. In fact, I'm the one who's in debt to you."

Gus quickly figured it out and jumped in with an explanation of how he had met Scott at the church earlier in the day and how he happened to come across the ring and came to return it. He didn't know Scott but Gus felt like he was genuine, that he deserved an opportunity to make things right with his mother.

"That's right Mom," chimed in Scott. "I want to say how sorry I am for all the grief I caused you. I can still see your face in my dreams that day you walked away from me in jail and said you were

finished. At first I was angry, but the more I thought about it I realized how bad I treated you. I was just as bad as Dad. I was tryin' to be tough just like him. I'm so sorry!"

By this time, tears were running down Connie's cheeks. She stared at Scott just like she used to when he was a young boy. Even though his features were more distinct and his skin rougher, she could see the same little boy that she had adored.

"Oh Scott, I forgive you," she said as she rose to walk toward the couch.

He stood and they embraced each other as if they had not seen one another for twenty years.

Gus didn't know what to think. This was a good thing for sure but what do they do now? He had his Christmas gift back, Connie had her son back, Scott had his mother back.

While Connie and Scott chatted back and forth, remembering times past and catching up on the news of times present, Gus sat and listened. He noticed the small plastic bag sitting on the end table next to his favorite chair. He decided to pull it out and get a good look – he hadn't actually seen it since the old man at the Merchant's Mart packed it in the bag. He gently fingered the ring in his large hands, holding it up to the light to enjoy the sparkle of the diamond. A feeling of relief engulfed his body as he realized this would probably be the best Christmas ever.