

The Empty Hours

The Empty Hours

Sometimes I think I should find a second job, one with weekend hours. Or perhaps a team or a club would be more fun. I've lost some weight since I laid off the beer and Pepsi and I feel like I could keep up without embarrassing myself. Maybe a weekly pick-up game or two would be good. I could stretch out the old pitching shoulder – there's a softball league some of the guys at work are in and Pete is always looking for another pitcher. I don't need extra money. No, I need the hours filled with a scheduled activity.

"Dad, you don't need a hobby, you need a companion!" My daughter Beth dismissed my solution to my loneliness with a shake of her head.

She continued, "It's been almost three years since Mom died. Don't you think it might be nice to date again? Have a partner?" Her voice was gentler, the look of exasperation gone.

I smiled at her and patted her hand, even though the thought of dating made my stomach clench and my armpits dampen. "Well, how else am I going to meet these women? Don't I need to get out and mingle?"

"How about online? Most people meet that way these days. That's how Jim and I met."

"Yes, but you and Jim are young. I'm an old dude. I barely can handle turning on a computer."

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“Not true! You know how to use Facebook and send texts. You’re practically a technical pro. Besides, it’s super easy. I can show you. Where’s the laptop?”

I laughed. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck now and my heart was pounding. “Now? I don’t think we need to...” But Beth was already on her way down the hall to my office.

She sat in my swivel desk chair and pulled a second chair next to her. I knew there was no stopping her once she got it in her mind that something needed to be done, so I sat. She loaded up the computer and typed in a webpage. An animated arrow flew across the screen and then a series of smiling faces flashed by.

“This is Cupid’s Arrow. There are a lot of people your age on this site. All we need to do is set up a profile for you and then you’ll be all set to meet some people, have a little fun.”

I wasn’t sure what a profile was, but it sounded like something one did when they were serious about these things. I still hadn’t had time to wrap my mind around the idea of dating again and here I was about to set up a profile?

Beth saw the hesitation in my face and reached over to pat me on the shoulder. “Just setting up a profile doesn’t mean you have to go out with anyone. It just gives you a means of connecting with people. Then you can always choose to meet someone in person, but only if you both want to.”

That sounded a little less frightening so I nodded. Beth took my nod as approval and plunged forward with profiling me. “First thing we need is a picture. Here, scroll through the ones on my phone and tell me if you think any of those would work.”

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I took her phone and began to scroll through her photo gallery. There were seemingly hundreds of my grandson. Jordan sleeping, Jordan playing in the yard, Jordan smiling, Jordan running, everything. It reminded me of when Beth was little. Pam and I tried to capture every moment of her childhood on film, although we had actual pictures, not just images on a phone screen. I wondered what would happen if Beth were to lose her phone. Would Jordan's whole childhood be wiped out?

Finally, I scrolled far enough to reach some of a family wedding from three years ago. "How about this one?"

Beth reached for the phone and narrowed her eyes. "Dad, I don't think you should use that picture." She scrolled around and showed me the screen. "How about this one instead?"

Beth handed me her phone. Just me, sweaty, standing over the grill in the backyard, smoke clouding around my shoulders. My sunglasses were perched on my head and wrinkles flooded from the corners of my eyes as I squinted into the sun.

"Who's that old man? What's wrong with this one?" I asked, scrolling back to my initial choice. Me and Pam, at my nephew's wedding. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes clear. My tie was crooked, but I was smiling. "I look much snazzier and younger. And if you're making me a profile, shouldn't I look nice?"

Beth reached over and patted my hand. "You look very nice, but I don't think a picture of you and mom is the best choice for your profile for a dating website."

Later that evening, after Dan1957 had been pushed into the world of online dating, I stood in the bathroom and studied myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth. The little hair I had left was the color of rain clouds. The wrinkles I had thought were

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from squinting when I saw them in pictures were even more pronounced in my dimly lit bathroom. My chin was starting to sag and my gut still pouched over my pants a little. When did I get so old? At least my eyes were still a nice clear blue.

I rinsed and spit the foamy water into the sink. I slid my toothbrush back into the holder and let my index finger rest for a moment on the bristles of the second toothbrush in the slot next to mine. Beth and I had cleaned out all of Pam's things in the weeks after she died, but somehow we had overlooked the purple and white toothbrush. Now I couldn't throw it out. Of all the clutter one fills their house with, nothing signals that there are two people living in a home like two toothbrushes.

I left the bathroom and did my final nighttime tour through the house. We had left the light on in the office downstairs. I went over to the desk to turn it off but stopped with my finger on the switch. I sat down, opened the laptop, and pulled up my email just to make sure there was nothing from work. I opened my inbox and almost fell out of my chair. There wasn't anything from them, but I did have two new emails. Both were from Cupid's Arrow. *MaryKat left you a message* and *JuliaH71 left you a message*.

I stared at the screen until it began to dim and then tapped it again to wake it up. What was I supposed to do now? I hadn't really expected to have to interact with anyone. I figured the effort to set up the profile would be sufficient to show Beth I was moving on, living my life, willing to meet new people.

I took a deep breath and clicked on the email with the message from MaryKat. Inside the email was a link that connected me to my profile. I clicked that too and my sweaty face filled the screen. Yuck. Why did I let her talk me into using that picture? I quickly scrolled down away from my face. Where were the messages?

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I scrolled back up and there, at the top of the screen, was a little blue conversation bubble with a red number “2” over it. I clicked on the icon and two women’s pictures appeared with text next to each. MaryKat’s was short, *Hi!* I looked at her picture. Maybe a little younger than me, light brown hair cut in a bob, round face, wide green eyes.

JuliaH71 was a bit wordier. *Hi! I see that you like funny movies. Have you seen Death at a Funeral? It’s one of my favorites. Like to chat with you when you have time, maybe over coffee?* Her age was a little more difficult to gauge. Her face was unlined but her hair was a cascade of steel grey curls. Her eyes were an icy blue. She had a nice smile, even white teeth.

I reread the message. Was she asking me out? Clearly I had been out of the dating pool for a long time because, in my day, women never asked out men. What else didn’t I know? Maybe this was a terrible idea. I was too old for this. I didn’t need to meet another woman. I had my job, my family. I was fine. Why bother with the hassle of relearning how to date? I shut the laptop, switched off the office light, and went up to bed.

I hated coffee, anyway.

The next morning was a Saturday. Beth and Jim had taken Jordan up to the lake for the weekend. She had invited me, but I had been spending a lot of time with them lately and thought they might want some private family time. I sat at the kitchen table with a glass of orange juice and a piece of toasted rye. The click of each minute passing by echoed from the clock in the hallway. I flipped on the TV to drown out the silence.

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After watching the thirty minute *Sports Center* twice, it was only 8:30. The entire day stretched in front of me. Empty.

I carried my juice with me into my office and opened the laptop. My inbox was still open on the screen. I opened the message from MaryKat and stared at the single word there. Two letters, completely unimimidating. Free of expectations or pressure. I hit the reply button and typed.

Hi MaryKat. Nice to hear from you. I hope you are enjoying this nice Saturday morning.

I hit send before I could chicken out.

I drank the rest of my juice and went back upstairs. As I stood drying myself off after my shower, I talked to Pam. “Beth made me sign up for this dating thing. She thinks I’m lonely.” The toothbrush remained silent, bristles facing the mirror. The blue bristles in the center made a circle that looked like an eye.

“And within a few hours I had 2 messages. One lady even asked me out in her first message. Can you believe it?” I kept my eyes on the blue circle as I continued to talk. “You never would have done that, Pammy. Remember how long it took for you to even agree to go out to a movie with me? Months.”

I wiped my face with the towel. Pam and I had gone to high school together. I had a crush on her, but she was dating one of my friends so I kept my love a secret. When she and Tim broke up, I waited until graduation, nearly five months later, to make my move. Her rejection was immediate and emphatic.

“Absolutely not. Sorry, Dan, but you’re not my type.”

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I ran into her at the beach and a few parties over the summer, we floated within the same circle of friends, but every time I tried to talk to her she would turn to chat with someone else or duck away. At the end of the summer, most of our friends went off to college or to work. Pam and I both ended up going to the same community college, though, and when she walked into our freshman English class and saw me there, she took the seat next to mine.

“I’m sorry, Dan. It was just the whole thing with Tim. I didn’t want to upset him or make you uncomfortable.” Tim was one of the friends who had gone away to college, all of the way across the country to UCLA. “But if the movie offer is still open, I might be able to go next weekend.”

I stared at her, bottom lip sagging in a silly grin. She looked away, cheeks bright pink. I pulled myself together enough to close my mouth and form words. “Well, I guess it’s still open. Pick you up Saturday at 7?”

She nodded and the rest, as they say, is history.

The pull of my laptop was like a magnet. I couldn’t walk past my office without opening it to check my messages. This time I went straight to the Cupid’s Arrow site and there was another message. MaryKat already? I checked and it was.

Hello, Dan. It is a lovely Saturday. What do you like to do on days like this?

I pushed my chair back and studied my laptop screen. What did I like to do on nice Saturdays? Wander around the house? Clean? If Beth needed a babysitter I liked to spend time with Jordan, but when I was left to my own devices I never quite knew what to do with myself.

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How honest did people really have to be on these things? It wasn't like I had any intention of actually meeting anyone in person. Maybe I should come up with a more exciting answer than the truth. I left the office and embarked on the day's cleaning tasks. After I had vacuumed the entire house, dusted, and cut the lawn, it was lunch time. Morning successfully filled. I made myself a ham sandwich and wandered back to the office. I wasn't very creative anyway so what was the point in lying?

I usually clean, do yard work, or babysit my grandson. How about you?

Her reply came later that evening. I resisted checking until I was ready to settle on to the couch for the Cubs game.

Much of the same. I had my granddaughter over this afternoon and we planted some flowers in the yard. She's 7 and loves dirt. How old is your grandson?

I made myself wait until the fourth inning so that I didn't appear too eager. *He is 5. He too very much enjoys the dirt. What kind of flowers did you plant?"*

I went back to the couch and watched the rest of the game, but had a hard time concentrating on what was happening on the screen. The next morning, I rushed to my office and my stomach tightened a bit when I saw there were no new messages. I went back upstairs and into the bathroom. I let the water get good and hot before I stepped into the shower. I stood there for a long time, letting the steamy water splash off my shoulders. Why did I care that I didn't have a message from some lady that I didn't even know? This was ridiculous. I was a busy guy. I had things I needed to get done that day. I finally turned the water off, dried off and got dressed.

Resolved to continue on with my day, I went back downstairs. I walked past the office door and didn't stop. I didn't need silly messages from strangers. I walked around

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the entire downstairs, out into the yard, and back in again. Without consciously deciding to end up there, I found myself seated at the computer desk. I tapped the mouse pad to wake up the screen and closed my eyes. My heart was tap dancing inside my chest. When I opened my eyes, it sped up a little more at the sight of the message icon.

Roses in the front yard, lilies on the side of the house. We also tried a few seeds of Blue Butterfly Bushes. My late husband and I took my granddaughter to Hawaii two summers ago and she loved all the flowers. We tried some orchids last summer but they didn't grow – too cool. So we're trying these this summer. Have you taken any good vacations lately?

I pushed my chair back a bit and stared out of the window at the weeping willow in the back yard. So she was a widow. I thought about vacations. When was our last trip? Oh, yes, to the Grand Canyon. The tumor had nearly taken complete control of Pam's brain by that time. She told me that, if I loved her, I would push her over the edge of the canyon so that she wouldn't have to live like that anymore, wouldn't have to suffer. The memory opened something in my chest that I thought I had buried with Pam. What was I doing here? Talking to another woman who wasn't my wife. I hadn't loved Pam enough to end her suffering, had stood by and encouraged her to take the drugs that destroyed her body and her mind with no hope that they would result in any kind of recovery. I took her on trips wherever she wanted, even though I knew she wouldn't be able to enjoy them the way she thought she could. I shouldn't be doing this now.

I reached up to scratch my cheek and was surprised to find that it was wet. I closed the laptop and went back to the kitchen to make a grocery list. I was going to make spaghetti. Beth, Jim, and Jordan were coming back that day and had promised to

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come over for dinner. Spaghetti was an easy crowd pleaser that even Jordan would eat. Maybe they'd want dessert too. I added ice cream to my list. The methodical task of list-making calmed me and, before I headed out to the store, I made a quick stop at the computer.

The last trip we took before my wife died was to the Grand Canyon. It was beautiful. I just Googled those flowers, by the way. They look interesting. I hope they grow for your granddaughter. Do you have any plans for your Sunday?

As I walked out of the door, I was surprised to realize that the heaviness in my chest had lessened.

I resisted the urge to check for messages until I had returned from the store, the groceries were put away, and a pot of thick red sauce was bubbling on the stove.

I went out for coffee with some friends this morning and now I am going to be lazy and sit on the porch to catch up on some reading. I have a busy week of work ahead. I'm a children's librarian and the Summer Reading program starts this week. What do you do for work?

I replied right away. *I'm a postmaster. It's a pretty good job. Busy. People say that there isn't any mail anymore and that we're not needed. I'd like them to come work with me for a day and then see how they feel! My grandson loves books, especially anything science or dinosaur related. Anything you'd recommend for a five year old to read this summer?*

Beth, Jim, and Jordan arrived as I hit send. I closed the laptop and went out to the living room to greet them.

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“How’s the plan going, Dad?” Beth asked with a smile, her eyes curious.

“Anything good happening?”

I hesitated for a second but then decided not to tell her about MaryKat. It was really nothing and there was no sense in making a big deal about it with Beth. “No, nothing exciting.” I turned to Jordan. “You ready for dinner, buddy? I made your favorite.”

Later that evening, after Beth, Jim, and Jordan had left, I read MaryKat’s reply. She had recommended five different books. I looked them up on Amazon and ordered three of them. I got dressed for bed and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

“I don’t know what to do, Pammy. Should I ask to meet her? She lost her husband too. Maybe she would understand what it was like, what this is like. Would you be mad at me?”

The blue circle of bristles stayed still, unblinking, silent. I reached out and stroked the back of the brush with my finger. I kept my hand on it while I spat out the toothpaste in my mouth and rinsed. After I slid my brush into the slot next to hers, I closed my fist over the purple and white brush and pulled it slowly out of the holder. I turned it over in my hand. I leaned down and pressed my lips to the bristles and breathed in deeply. Then I went to my closet and pulled down an old cigar box that had belonged to my dad from the top shelf. Inside were Beth’s lost teeth, claimed by the Tooth Fairy, a lock of dusty blonde hair from her first haircut, a stack of mass cards from funerals: both of my parents, my older brother, Pam. My mom’s wedding ring, my dad’s police badge. I cleared a space between the trinkets but couldn’t bring myself to lay the toothbrush in

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the box. I shut my eyes and gently shut the lid of the box. I pushed it back up on the shelf, out of sight, left the closet, and shut the door.

I went back to the bathroom and slid Pam's toothbrush back into its slot. Then I took my own and pitched it into the trashcan. I went downstairs to send one more message, an email this time, before bed.

Hey Pete,

Any chance you still need a pitcher for the Sunday league? If you do, I'm ready to throw.

-Dan