



Change Your Life

By Stephen Gauer

Only a few men are born sad; most, like my friend Don, have sadness thrust upon them. Don used to work for one of the big accounting firms in the city, but the last recession chewed him up and spit him out; at fifty three he found himself unemployed and unemployable, with a wife and two teenagers to support, a mortgage to pay, two cars to run and stock market investments that kept him awake at night. So he went into business for himself, doing tax returns at a hundred bucks a shot for people like me and managing the books for small hi-tech companies who couldn't afford full-time help. He made a living, but just barely.

Examine Don carefully and you'll see the same scars of disappointment that mark most of the middle-aged men who shuffle off to work every weekday morning. His face bears the unmistakable pallor of a life spent in shadow. He wears his hair in a bad comb-over, and his

glasses are twenty years out of date. His clothes are mostly beige and brown, his briefcase scuffed and worn, his umbrella missing a spoke or two. Ask Don how he is, even on the sunniest, most beautiful day in our beautiful city, and he'll reply, "Can't complain, I guess."

I met Don through his younger brother Keith, who painted my new condo a few years back. The real estate agent said Keith would be fast, affordable and entertaining. She was right. Keith was fifty but looked forty. He was unmarried, and lived in an apartment in the West End. He'd never raised kids, never owned a new car or a suit, never worked in an office, never made more than thirty thousand dollars a year. On the other hand, he knew the lyrics to every Beatle song. He knew the complete film credits of Gene Hackman and Dustin Hoffman. He knew the titles and release dates of every Leonard Cohen, Paul Simon and Van Morrison album ever recorded. He knew boomer pop culture upside down, backwards and forwards, inside and out.

Keith won me over by praising my latest novel and quoting verbatim from a rave review of my third. Don, on the other hand, never read fiction. He preferred autobiographies of successful businessmen, travel books about the South Pacific, true crime anthologies and those pop histories about things like cod or pencils or the colour purple. He collected odd and useless numbers, like the speed of crude oil through a pipeline (3 mph), the percentage of Americans who believe the world will end in their lifetime (16 percent), the weight of a blue whale's heart (1000 pounds). Don not only lacked imagination, he lacked any interest in imagination. He was, however, a very competent accountant.

I hadn't seen Don in many months. His elderly mother had died and he'd been busy settling the estate. Then one day I ran into him on the way to the library. I could see storm clouds raging on his brow. I

offered to buy him lunch. When we sat down, the first thing he did was remove his glasses, place them on the table, and rub his eyes slowly with his hands. When he finished, he dropped his head and shook it slowly. "It's Keith," he said.

"Keith?" I said brightly. "How is he?"

Don glared at me.

"He's getting married," Don said.

"No!" I said.

"Yes." He sighed. We placed our orders.

Don and Keith's mother left them four hundred thousand dollars when she died. The amount was not a surprise; Don had been doing her taxes for years and knew almost to the penny her net worth, including the tidy little condo in Kitsilano that she'd bought when Don's father died back in the 1980s. She'd made it clear many times that the money would be divided equally between the two sons. Don was fine with this; he expected no special consideration just because he'd been more sensible than his brother.

Don and Keith never talked about the inheritance before their mother died. Don was a bit squeamish about death and usually changed the subject whenever it came up. Keith, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy talking about it, if only to annoy his brother. He had fond fantasies of what he would do in his next life; he'd recently begun reading about Buddhism and thought reincarnation made complete sense. He liked to speculate about what he would do in his next life, and in the life after that, and in the life after that life, and so on. Don thought reincarnation was nonsense and told Keith he needed to buckle down and make something of himself before it was too late. Did he really want to paint

houses for the rest of his life? Who would look after him when he was old? Keith looked at his brother and laughed when he talked like this.

Because Don knew some insider shortcuts he was able to settle his mother's estate in record time. Keith gave the condo a fresh coat of pale beige and Don put it on the market. One of his clients took a quick look at the place, made a reasonable offer and paid cash. Don put the money in the bank, wrote his brother a cheque for just over two hundred thousand dollars and then made a bet with his wife.

"He'll blow it all in six months," Don told her.

"Keith's not stupid," his wife said. "He'll do the right thing."

"Not when it comes to money."

"You're very hard on him."

"I see him the way he is, that's all."

"How much are we betting?"

"A dinner."

"Where?"

Don mentioned his favourite seafood restaurant, the one that overlooked Coal Harbour and featured two-for-one coupons every week in the paper.

"You're on," she said.

They shook hands. Don smiled at his wife because he knew he would win.

He'd worked out how he would spend his share of the inheritance. The first priority was paying off the mortgage. That left \$140,000. Then he would set aside \$20,000 for each of the boys for university. That left just over \$100,000. Now that he was self-employed, he had to be very diligent about setting aside money for retirement, so he put almost all of the remaining money in a very conservative bond fund

that had averaged 7.7% for the past twenty-five years. Stocks markets might be in flux, but bonds would always take care of him.

“So you didn’t treat yourself to a spurge?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, something impulsive, like a trip to New York or Paris.”

Don looked at me as though I had two heads. “No. Of course not. But I set aside money for a cruise. We’re finally doing Alaska next spring. Without the boys.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Still, two hundred thousand is a lot of money.”

“It isn’t, really,” Don said. “It’s not enough to change your life.”

Keith took the cheque from his brother and put it in the bank. He left it there for three weeks and then he began to spend it. He bought new clothes. He spent a thousand dollars in a book store. He gave away his acoustic guitar and bought a five-thousand-dollar Stratocaster. He took trips to places he’d always wanted to see: New York, Los Angeles, Sante Fe, New Orleans. He went to Clarksdale, Mississippi, home of the delta blues. He went to Liverpool to see the birthplace of the Beatles. He went to Peru to see the ruins at Machu Picchu. He sailed on a 46-foot ketch to Hawaii and caught a 90-pound bluefin tuna on the fourth day out. He flew to Argentina and took tourist passage on a research boat going to Antarctica because he’d always wanted to see the emperor penguins. He shot ten rolls of film and fell madly in love with a redheaded rocket scientist from the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. Then he came back to Canada and flew to the high Arctic where he sat in an authentic sealskin kayak and watched the midnight sun track across a cloudless summer sky.

Then he came home. He had a hundred thousand dollars left. He made prints of his best photographs and filled two walls of his apartment with them. He went to the bank and withdrew a large stack of twenties and walked up and down Granville Street for an afternoon giving out money to anyone who seemed to need it. The police were called at one point when a large crowd surrounded Keith in front of a jewellery store and the manager of the store grew frightened that a riot was in the making. Keith tried to give him a twenty but he refused.

Then Keith sat down and wrote out fifty cheques for a thousand dollars each. Half of these he mailed to charities that he respected, and the other half he distributed to friends who were trying to book recording time for CDs or self publish their own books or open art galleries in store fronts or start alternative theatre companies.

“So now he was down to just fifty thousand dollars,” I said.

“Yes,” Don said. “And he still had no retirement fund!”

“You tried to reason with him?”

“You don’t reason with Keith. He just laughs at you.”

“He’s generous.”

“To a fault. I don’t know where he gets it from. Mom and dad weren’t like that. I’m not like that.”

“Maybe he was switched at birth,” I said.

Don looked glum. He gathered the few remaining crumbs from his tuna fish sandwich into a small pile on the plate and then manoeuvred the pile into his mouth.

“Just think,” I said. “There’s probably a sensible fifty-year-old out there somewhere driving his parents nuts because he isn’t creative or eccentric.”

Don sighed again and continued his story.

Keith had a dream: to play in a rock and roll band, and blast out chords so powerful they would rattle every eardrum in the audience. He put an ad in the weekly paper stating that he was a well-financed baby boomer putting together a band to play classic sixties and seventies rock. The band would rehearse for six weeks and play for one night and one night only. Two hundred and sixty emails arrived; he auditioned twenty musicians and selected four: a singer, a drummer, a bass player and a lead guitarist. He called his group One Night Stand.

When the band was ready, he rented the big ballroom on Granville Street. Many famous rock bands and blues bands had performed there, including a few that were Keith's favourites. Instead of charging admission, he hired a dozen young women to walk up and down Granville Street and give out yellow t-shirts emblazoned with the name of the band; wear the t-shirt and you got in free and two free drinks as well.

The place filled up in no time. Keith and his band took to the stage and played non-stop for three hours. By all accounts, Keith acquitted himself pretty well for someone who'd only been playing a Stratocaster for six weeks. He missed a few chords on Twist and Shout, mangled the solo on My Guitar Gently Weeps, but aced the acoustic intro to Stairway To Heaven so no one minded. The place rocked, the dance floor was packed, and Keith was the happiest man on the planet.

"So what do you think happened afterwards?" Don asked me.

"Keith was broke again, sold the guitar, and went back to housepainting."

"No. I mean after the show."

“He gave away the rest of his money?”

“No.” Don sighed. “He met someone at the bar. A film student. Nice girl. I’ve met her—”

“But isn’t Keith a little old? I mean—”

“Would you let me finish, please? They started to talk about interior design and decoration, which Keith knows a little bit about.”

“She hired him to paint her apartment and they fell in love?”

“No.”

“What then?” Don was taking far too long to tell his story. Most people do.

“Well, it turned out that her mother needed someone to paint the house. It’s a rather large house. In Kerrisdale.”

“So the mother hired Keith?”

“Yes,” Don said.

“And then they fell in love?”

“Yes. They’re getting married next month.”

Don told me her name. I didn’t recognize it.

“But she used to have a different name,” he said. “From the first husband.”

He told me another name. This time I recognized it because it belonged to the only billionaire in town.

“The pre-nuptial was thrown out of court on a technicality when they divorced two years ago. Do you remember the story?”

I shook my head.

“She got half the value of the West Vancouver mansion plus a healthy percentage of his assets. I was surprised by the ruling. Bad legal advice, I guess.”

“So she’s quite rich?”

Don nodded sadly. "Most estimates are in the two hundred to two hundred and fifty range."

"That's millions," I said.

"Of course," Don said.

"Keith is about to marry a woman worth a quarter of a billion dollars."

"Yes."

"Because he spent his inheritance."

"Yes."

I was still laughing when Don left the restaurant, slamming the door behind him.