

## Vegetarians

By Gloria Teague

It's just the truth that the recession hit some folks harder than others. Why, some people stooped so low as to sign up for food stamps. Not her or, God forbid, Joe! No, he'd just sit in that chair of his, the rubber on the tires worn nearly to the metal, complaining about the high cost of food, the skyrocketing utility bills. He'd hang his head then, choking out how sorry he was to be such a burden.

"Betchu never counted on an accident that would take away my legs, didja, Helen? Oh God, how I wish I had just died right there."

That would be followed by loud, fingernails-on-the-chalkboard sobbing. When he was once again calmed by her work-worn hands, his smile would be rueful. "How could I live without you, Helen? Lord, how did I get so lucky?"

In an instant her resentment would begin to melt. Her heart would grow leaden with sorrow and she'd lift his scrawny hand to place her lips to the blue veins that stood in sharp relief on his icy flesh. "Stop it or you'll get me to crying and then I'll be late for work."

"I'm sorry, Helen-girl. I never thought our lives would turn out like this. My job shoulda got us to retirement, at least to social security. I never dreamed it would turn out like this. I'm tellin' ya, I wouldn't blame ya if you left. This ain't no kind of life for a woman, working two jobs, dead on your feet, with a husband that can't even stand on his *own* two feet. You deserve a man that can put food on the table, something other than macaroni and butter, or boiled cabbage. It'd sure be nice to have meat more often, wouldn't it, Helen? A nice roast with small potatoes,

carrots, and that gravy you make.” He stared at the wall as if he could envision the food on the table. “Yeah, that’d sure be nice.”

“Joe, I’m doing the best I can, honey. What with paying the bills, getting your medicine, the doctors...I’m lucky to even put vegetables on the table. Besides, they say meat’s not good for us. Look at it that way, Joe, how healthy we’ll be because we don’t eat meat.”

“I know, sweetheart, how hard it is on you. I’m so sorry...”

“Oh, don’t start that again, honey. You know God will provide, Joe. I’ve got to run or be late for work. Old man Humphries will fire me if I’m late again.” She brushed her lips across his cheek as she passed his chair, on her way out.

Her hands may have been busy with pulling the parts out of the plastic molding machine but her mind lingered on her husband. He had such a lousy life, stuck in that chair after a drunk driver crashed into him on his way home from work one night. It wasn’t just the paralysis; his cheeks were so sallow, so hollowed, he looked more like a cadaver than a man, propped up by pillows to cushion those unpadded bones from digging into the plastic seat of the wheelchair. She thanked God he couldn’t feel the sores that had begun to erode on his back, his butt, or the ulcers that had started to form on his upper back.

The doctor had told her he needed supplements, vitamins. People that have money have no idea what it’s like to be so poor you have to make a choice between cans of potted meat and a loaf of bread or that damned bottle of vitamins. Unless they walked in her shoes or sat in Joe’s chair, they had no concept of how being dirt poor really felt.

She hadn’t told Joe when she lost the second job. She was afraid he couldn’t take the news so each night after she left the plastic factory; she walked around, killing time to fill the

four hours she used to work cleaning a small office building downtown. When the company went belly-up, she was the first to go.

Helen clocked out and began her four-hour journey into nowhere.

*I'll find another job; I just know I will. Sure, this'll make it even harder but we can get through it, like we get through everything else. It's just that Joe is already so down... If I had a few bucks to spare I'd buy him that roast, just to cheer him up. But who am I kidding? I might be able to buy a few potatoes and a small bag of carrots, but no way can I afford the meat. Huh, the only meat I can afford is a pack of bologna, then only if it's the generic, greasy brand. Last time I gave that to Joe he threw it back up, and his body can't afford to throw up food when we got so little and he needs the calories. Oh God, what am I going to do?*

Intent upon her own misery, her own desperation, Helen hadn't noticed that she'd wandered into Boxville, called that due to the homeless sleeping inside or beneath cardboard boxes. It was a part of town that not even poor people like her went.

She quickened her step, all the while trying to walk softly, to not attract attention. She heard groans of pain, grunts of nightmares, whooshing of intestinal afflictions and moans of... she didn't want to know what they were about. She didn't want to know what any of it was about. All she wanted was to get through this infernal alley and run home.

As she passed a box so soggy she was sure it had been someone's home for several days, a hand snaked out and grabbed her ankle. She was pulled to a halt in her forward motion and the fear of someone's hand on her caused her to fall to the ground, scraping her knees and both palms. Before she could turn over, a man loomed over her, and the cleanest thing about him was the glinting knife in his hand.

“Give me your money, bitch! All of it. If you hold back I’ll find it, and then I’ll really make you sorry.”

“Wait, wait! I have no money! I have a crippled husband and I work down at the plastic plant and it’s all I can do to pay our bills and my husband is very sick and his doctor said...” A hard slap across her cheek caused her words to come to a stuttering halt. She scooted backward on the filthy concrete, trying to put distance between her and the maniac who was now swinging his arm back and forth in a horrible slashing motion.

“Well then I guess I’ll just have to take what you do have, then. C’mere, you bitch.”

He pounced upon her, slamming her back against the pavement. She managed to emit a short scream but if anyone heard, they had no intention of getting involved. That was how it went down there in Boxville.

Helen pushed against him as he was forcing her arms above her head. He was forced to lay down the knife to shove her pants down around her ankles. She kept pulling her knees together, trying to block his entrance, and he kept shoving them apart. It was as he was shoving her left knee out of the way that Helen brought up her right knee into his crotch, using all the power she could muster. The would-be rapist fell onto his side, clutching his groin, lowly moaning as he rocked back and forth.

*I showed you, you bastard! I might be poor but I’m not trash. How dare you think that you can just take something like that from me, from any woman? This is for all of us that you may have raped in the past, will rape in the future, for all the ones you even consider violating!*

She grabbed the knife and in a rage such as she’d never known, she stabbed him over, and over, and over. She only stopped when she grew too weary to lift her arms again.

He would never try to rape another woman.

His shirt had bunched up as she hammered him with knife blows. It was as she stared at his dead body in disbelief of her own actions that the idea came to her.

Like a skillful chef, Helen then used the knife to remove a rather large chunk of flesh from the man's flank. Glancing around to see if anyone was watching, she dropped the meat into her purse.

She had no need to worry because no one sees anything in Boxville.

Joe wanted a roast and a roast he would have.

Bio: Gloria Teague is an award-winning author in both fiction and nonfiction, in magazines, newspapers and e-zines. She has four books and over 50 short stories and several articles published. She had a feature article in Woman's World in 2009 just before she was chosen as Tulsa NightWriter of the Year. Gloria is the former newsletter editor for the Tulsa NightWriters.

For more information about this author, you can visit her website at [www.gloriateague.com](http://www.gloriateague.com)