

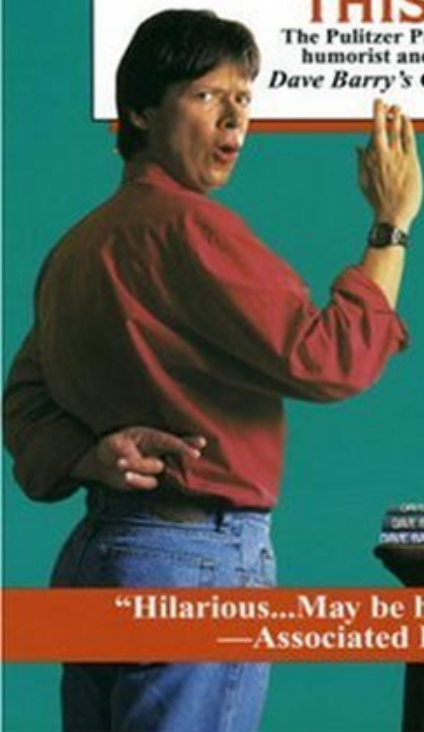
Dave Barry's Anthology



THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

DAVE BARRY IS NOT MAKING THIS UP

The Pulitzer Prize-winning
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Dave Barry's Greatest Hits



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Dave Barry Is Not Making This Up

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Dave Barry.

Dave Barry Is Not Making This Up

Dedication

To Earnest, who was a big help; and to Zippy, who was a small emergency backup help

Introduction

People often say to me: “Dave, you are a leading journalism professional and not as short as I expected. What is your secret of success?”

The answer is that, throughout my career, I have always kept one vital journalistic principle foremost in my mind: try not to leave the house. A journalist who leaves his or her house can run into all kinds of obstacles, including:

- * Editors.
- * Members of the public.
- * News events involving actual facts.

All of these obstacles can seriously interfere with the basic work of journalism, which is sitting around and thinking stuff up. This is what I mainly do, which is why I have been able to achieve a level of high-quality journalistic productivity, as measured in booger jokes, that a guy like David Broder can only dream about.

Nevertheless, every now and then a situation will come up wherein a story of major importance is breaking somewhere other than in my office, and I have no choice but to go and cover it. For example, in this book you will find a column concerning an incident in 1992 when I left my house and traveled, without regard for my personal convenience or safety, all the way to my yard, to see the World's Fastest Lawn Mower. That's the kind of dedicated professional I am.

The result is that this book contains a number of columns based on real events. There are also some longer articles, most of which originally appeared in the Miami Herald's Sunday magazine, *Tropic*; these also contain an unusually high (for me) level of factual content. That's why this book is called *Dave Barry Is Not Making This Up*.^[2] I want to stress, however, that this title does not mean that this is a serious book. This book also contains a lot of “tongue-in-cheek” social commentary and satire, by which I mean lies. I hope you don't find this mixture of fact and fiction to be confusing. If, in reading the following pages, you are uncertain as to whether a specific statement is meant seriously or not, simply apply this rule of thumb: If the statement makes you consider filing a lawsuit, I was kidding. Ha

ha!

Reader Alert

The following section, which is mostly about family stuff, contains the article that pretty much launched my writing career: the story of my son's "natural" birth. When I wrote it back in 1981, Beth and I were living in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, and I had a job teaching effective business-writing seminars.[3] I wrote the article for the Philadelphia Inquirer, and it got reprinted in many other newspapers, including the Miami Herald, which ended up hiring me. So in a way you could say that I owe my job to my son. Although if you consider the amount of money I wound up spending just on He-Man action figures, I have more than paid him back.

Food For Thought

It's getting late on a school night, but I'm not letting my son go to bed yet, because there's serious work to be done.

"Robert!" I'm saying, in a firm voice. "Come to the kitchen right now and blow-dry the ant!"

We have a large ant, about the size of a mature raccoon, standing on our kitchen counter. In fact, it looks kind of like a raccoon, or possibly even a mutant lobster. We made the ant out of papier-mach, a substance you create by mixing flour and water and newspapers together into a slimy goop that drips down and gets licked up by your dogs, who operate on the wise survival principle that you should immediately eat everything that falls onto the kitchen floor, because if it turns out not to be food, you can always throw it up later.

The ant, needless to say, is part of a Science Fair project. We need a big ant to illustrate an important scientific concept, the same concept that is illustrated by all Science Fair projects, namely: "Look! I did a Science Fair project!"

(I know how we can solve our national crisis in educational funding: Whenever the schools needed money, they could send a letter to all the parents saying: "Give us a contribution right now, or we're going to hold a Science Fair." They'd raise billions.)

Our Science Fair project is due tomorrow, but the ant is still wet, so we're using a hair dryer on it. Science Fair judges hate a wet ant. Another problem is that our ant is starting to sag, both in the front (or, in entomological terms, the "prognosis") and in the rear (or "butt"). It doesn't look like one of those alert, businesslike, "can-do" ants that you see striding briskly around. It looks depressed, like an ant that has just been informed that all 86,932 members of its immediate family were crushed while attempting to lift a Tootsie Roll.

While Robert is drying the ant, I get a flashlight and go outside to examine the experiment portion of our project, which is entitled "Ants and Junk Food." On our back fence we put up a banner that says, in eight-inch-high letters, WELCOME ANTS. Under this is a piece of cardboard with the following snack substances scientifically arranged on it: potato chips, a spicy beef stick, a doughnut, a Snickers candy bar, chocolate-filled cookies, Cheez Doodles, Cocoa Krispies, and Screaming Yellow Zonkers. If you were to eat this entire experiment, you would turn into a giant pimple and explode.

We figured this experiment would attract ants from as far away as Indonesia, and we'd note which junk foods they preferred, and this would prove our basic scientific point ("Look! I did a Science Fair project!"). Of course you veteran parents know what actually happened: The ants didn't show up. Nature has a strict rule against cooperating with Science Fair projects. This is why, when you go to a Science Fair, you see 200 projects designed to show you how an electrical circuit works, and not one of them can actually make the little bulb light up. If you had a project that was supposed to demonstrate the law of gravity using heavy lead weights, they would fall up. So when the ants saw our banner, they said: "Ah-hah! A Science Fair project! Time for us to act in a totally unnatural manner and stay away from the food!"

The irony is, I knew where some ants were: in my office. They live in one of the electrical outlets. I see them going in there all day long. I think maybe they're eating electrons, which makes me nervous. I seriously considered capturing one of the office ants and carrying it out to the science experiment, and if necessary giving it broad hints about what to do ("Yum! Snickers! "). But I was concerned that if I did this, the ants might become dependent on me, and every time they got hungry they'd crawl onto my desk and threaten to give me electrical stings if I didn't carry them to a snack.

Fortunately, some real outdoor ants finally discovered our experiment, and we were able to observe their behavior at close range. I had been led to believe, by countless public-television nature shows, that ants are very organized, with the colony divided into specialized jobs such as drones, workers, fighters, bakers, consultants, etc., all working together with high-efficiency precision. But the ants that showed up at our experiment were total morons. You'd watch one, and it would sprint up to a Cocoa Krispie, then stop suddenly, as if saying: "Yikes! Compared with me, this Cocoa Krispie is the size of a Buick!" Then it would sprint off in a random direction. Sometimes it would sprint back; sometimes it would sprint to another Cocoa Krispie and act surprised again. But it never seemed to do anything. There were thousands of ants behaving this way, and every single time two of them met, they'd both stop and exchange "high-fives" with their antennas, along with, I assume, some kind of ant pleasantries ("Hi Bob!" "No, I'm Bill!" "Sorry! You look just like Bob!"). This was repeated millions of times. I watched these ants for two days, and they accomplished nothing. It was exactly like highway construction. It wouldn't have surprised me if some ants started waving orange flags to direct other insects around the area.

But at least there were ants, which meant we could do our project and get our results. I'd tell you what they were, but I really think you should do your own work. That's the whole point of a Science Fair, as I keep telling my son, who has gone to bed, leaving me to finish blow-drying the ant.

Father Faces Life: A Long-Overdue Attack on Natural Childbirth

Let's take just a quick look at the history of baby-having. For thousands of years, only women had babies. Primitive women would go off into primitive huts and groan and wail and sweat while other women hovered around. The primitive men stayed outside doing manly things, such as lifting heavy objects and spitting.

When the baby was born, the women would clean it up as best they could and show it to the men, who would spit appreciatively and head off to the forest to throw sharp sticks at small animals. If you had

suggested to primitive men that they should actually watch women have babies, they would have laughed at you and probably tortured you for three or four days. They were real men.

At the beginning of the 20th century, women started having babies in hospital rooms. Often males were present, but they were professional doctors who were paid large sums of money and wore masks. Normal civilian males continued to stay out of the baby-having area; they remained in waiting rooms reading old copies of *Field and Stream*, an activity that is less manly than lifting heavy objects but still reasonably manly.

What I'm getting at is that, for most of history, baby-having was mainly in the hands (so to speak) of women. Many fine people were born under this system. Charles Lindbergh, for example.

Things changed, though, in the 1970s. The birth rate dropped sharply. Women started going to college and driving bulldozers and carrying briefcases and freely using such words as "debenture." They just didn't have time to have babies. For a while there, the only people having babies were unwed teenage girls, who are very fertile and can get pregnant merely by standing downwind from teenage boys.

Then, young professional couples began to realize their lives were missing something: a sense of stability, of companionship, of responsibility for another life. So they got Labrador retrievers. A little later, they started having babies again, mainly because of the tax advantages. These days you can't open your car door without hitting a pregnant woman. But there's a catch: Women now expect men to watch them have babies. This is called "natural childbirth," which is one of those terms that sounds terrific but that nobody really understands. Another one is "ph balanced."

At first, natural childbirth was popular only with hippie-type, granola-oriented couples who lived in geodesic domes and named their babies things like Peace Love World Understanding Harrington-Schwartz. The males, their brains badly corroded by drugs and organic food, wrote smarmy articles about what a Meaningful Experience it is to see a New Life Come Into the World. None of these articles mentioned the various other fluids and solids that come into the world with the New Life, so people got the impression that watching somebody have a baby was just a peck of meaningful fun. At cocktail parties, you'd run into natural-childbirth converts who would drone on for hours, giving you a contraction-by-contraction account of what went on in the delivery room. They were worse than Moonies or people who tell you how much they bought their houses for in 1973 and how much they're worth today.

Before long, natural childbirth was everywhere, like salad bars; and now, perfectly innocent civilian males all over the country are required by federal law to watch females have babies. I recently had to watch my wife have a baby.

First, we had to go to 10 evening childbirth classes at the hospital. Before the classes, the hospital told us, mysteriously, to bring two pillows. This was the first humiliation, because no two of our pillowcases match and many have beer or cranberry-juice stains. It may be possible to walk down the streets of Kuala Lumpur with stained, unmatched pillowcases and still feel dignified, but this is not possible in American hospitals.

Anyway, we showed up for the first class, along with about 15 other couples consisting of women who were going to have babies and men who were going to have to watch them. They all had matching pillowcases. In fact, some couples had obviously purchased tasteful pillowcases especially for childbirth class; these were the trendy couples, wearing golf and tennis apparel, who were planning to have wealthy babies. They sat together through all the classes, and eventually agreed to get together for brunch.

The classes consisted of sitting in a brightly lit room and openly discussing, among other things, the uterus. Now I can remember a time, in high school, when I would have killed for reliable information on the uterus. But having discussed it at length, having seen actual full-color diagrams, I must say in all honesty that although I respect it a great deal as an organ, it has lost much of its charm.

Our instructor was very big on the uterus because that's where babies generally spend their time before birth. She also spent some time on the ovum, which is near the ovaries. What happens is the ovum hangs around reading novels and eating chocolates until along comes this big crowd of spermatozoa, which are very tiny, very stupid one-celled organisms. They're looking for the ovum, but most of them wouldn't know it if they fell over it. They swim around for days, trying to mate with the pancreas and whatever other organs they bump into. But eventually one stumbles into the ovum, and the happy couple parades down the Fallopian tubes to the uterus.

In the uterus, the Miracle of Life begins, unless you believe the Miracle of Life does not begin there, and if you think I'm going to get into that, you're crazy. Anyway, the ovum starts growing rapidly and dividing into lots of little specialized parts, not unlike the federal government. Within six weeks, it has developed all the organs it needs to drool; by 10 weeks, it has the ability to cry in restaurants. In childbirth class, they showed us actual pictures of a fetus developing inside a uterus. They didn't tell us how these pictures were taken, but I suspect it involved a great deal of drinking.

We saw lots of pictures. One evening, we saw a movie of a woman we didn't even know having a baby. I am serious. Some woman actually let movie-makers film the whole thing. In color. She was from California. Another time, the instructor announced, in the tone of voice you might use to tell people they had just won free trips to Hawaii, that we were going to see color slides of a cesarean section. The first slides showed a pregnant woman cheerfully entering the hospital. The last slides showed her cheerfully holding a baby. The middle slides showed how they got the baby out of the cheerful woman, but I can't give you a lot of detail here because I had to go out for 15 or 20 drinks of water. I do remember that at one point our instructor cheerfully observed that there was "surprisingly little blood, really." She evidently felt this was a real selling point.

When we weren't looking at pictures or discussing the uterus, we practiced breathing. This is where the pillows came in. What happens is that when the baby gets ready to leave the uterus, the woman goes through a series of what the medical community laughingly refers to as "contractions." If it referred to them as "horrible pains that make you wonder why the hell you ever decided to get pregnant," people might stop having babies and the medical community would have to go into the major-appliance business.

In the old days, under President Eisenhower, doctors avoided the contraction problem by giving lots of drugs to women who were having babies. They'd knock them out during the delivery, and the women would wake up when their kids were entering the fourth grade. But the idea with natural childbirth is to try to avoid giving the woman a lot of drugs, so she can share the first, intimate moments after birth with the baby and the father and the obstetrician and the pediatrician and the stand-by anesthesiologist and several nurses and the person who cleans the delivery room.

The key to avoiding drugs, according to the natural childbirth people, is for the woman to breathe deeply. Really. The theory is that if she breathes deeply, she'll get all relaxed and won't notice that she's in a hospital delivery room wearing a truly perverted garment and having a baby. I'm not sure who came up with this theory. Whoever it was evidently believed that women have very small brains. So, in childbirth classes, we spent a lot of time sprawled on these little mats with our pillows while the women

pretended to have contractions and the men squatted around with stopwatches and pretended to time them. The trendy couples didn't care for this part. They were not into squatting. After a couple of classes, they started bringing little backgammon sets and playing backgammon when they were supposed to be practicing breathing. I imagine they had a rough time in actual childbirth, unless they got the servants to have contractions for them.

Anyway, my wife and I traipsed along for months, breathing and timing, respectively. We had no problems whatsoever. We were a terrific team. We had a swell time. Really.

The actual delivery was slightly more difficult. I don't want to name names, but I held up my end. I had my stopwatch in good working order and I told my wife to breathe. "Don't forget to breathe," I'd say, or, "You should breathe, you know." She, on the other hand, was unusually cranky. For example, she didn't want me to use my stopwatch. Can you imagine All that practice, all that squatting on the natural-childbirth classroom floor, and she suddenly gets into this big snit about stopwatches. Also, she almost completely lost her sense of humor. At one point, I made an especially amusing remark, and she tried to hit me. She usually has an excellent sense of humor.

Nonetheless, the baby came out all right, or at least all right for newborn babies, which is actually pretty awful unless you're a fan of slime. I thought I had held up well when the doctor, who up to then had behaved like a perfectly rational person, said, "Would you like to see the placenta?" Now let's face it: That is like asking, "Would you like me to pour hot tar into your nostrils?" Nobody would like to see a placenta. If anything, it would be a form of punishment:

JURY: We find the defendant guilty of stealing from the old and the crippled. JUDGE: I sentence the defendant to look at three placentas.

But without waiting for an answer, the doctor held up the placenta, not unlike the way you might hold up a bowling trophy. I bet he wouldn't have tried that with people who have matching pillowcases.

The placenta aside, everything worked out fine. We ended up with an extremely healthy, organic, natural baby, who immediately demanded to be put back into the uterus.

All in all, I'd say it's not a bad way to reproduce, although I understand that some members of the flatworm family simply divide into two.

Pumped Up

You want to know what's wrong with America? I'll tell you what's wrong: too many kinds of sneakers.

This problem was driven home to me dramatically when my 10-year-old son decided to join a track club. At first I was in favor of this, because I was a track man myself back at Pleasantville High School, where in 1965—and I hope I do not sound too boastful here—I set a New York State record for Shortest Time on a Track Team Before Quitting.

My original goal was to obtain a varsity letter. I needed one because at the time I was madly in love with Ann Weinberg, who would have been the ideal woman except for one serious flaw: She was an excellent athlete. On an average afternoon she would win the state championship in about nine sports. When we had the annual school awards assembly, various teams would troop on and off the auditorium stage, but Ann would just remain up there, getting honored, until all you could see was a large, Ann-shaped mound of trophies. This caused painful feelings of inadequacy in me, a small, chestless, insecure male whose only recognized high-school athletic achievement was the time when, through an amazing

physical effort, I managed to avoid ralphing directly onto the shoes of the principal as he was throwing me out of a pep-rally dance for attempting to sleep under the refreshments table. Unfortunately this is not the kind of achievement for which you get a varsity letter.

So in a desperation effort to impress Ann, I joined the track team. This meant I had to go into the locker room with large, hairy jocks who appeared way too old for high school. I bet you knew guys like that. At the time I thought that they had simply matured faster than I had, but I now realize that they were actually 40-year-old guys who chose to remain in high school for an extra couple of decades because they enjoyed snapping towels at guys like me. They are probably still there.

I was under the impression that all you had to do, to obtain your varsity letter, was spend a certain amount of time in the locker room, but it turned out that they had a picky rule under which you also had to run or jump or hurl certain objects in an athletic manner, which in my case was out of the question, so I quit.

However, during my brief time on the team I did learn some important lessons that have stayed with me throughout life, the main one being that if you are on the track-team bus, and the coach comes striding down the aisle and demands to know which team member hurled the “moon”—which is NOT one of the approved objects that you hurl in track—out the bus window at the police officer who is now threatening to arrest the entire team, you should deny that you saw anything, because it’s better to go to jail than to betray the sacred trust of your teammates and consequently be forced to eat a discus.

So I was glad that my son became interested in this character-building sport, until he announced that he needed new sneakers. This troubled me, because he already HAD new sneakers, which cost approximately as much as an assault helicopter but are more technologically advanced. They are the heavily advertised sneakers that have little air pumps inside. This feature provides an important orthopedic benefit: It allows the manufacturer to jack the price way up. Also it turns the act of walking around into a highly complex process. “Wait!” my son will say, as we’re rushing off to school, late as usual. “I have to pump more air into my sneakers!” Because God forbid you should go to school underinflated.

So I figured that high-powered sneakers like these would be fine for track, but both my wife and my son gently informed me that I am a total idiot. It turns out you don’t run in pump sneakers. What you do, in pump sneakers, is PUMP your sneakers. For running, you need a completely different kind of sneakers, for which you have to pay a completely different set of U.S. dollars.

Not only that, but the sneaker salesperson informed me that, depending on the kind of running my son was going to do, he might need several kinds of sneakers. The salesperson’s tone of voice carried the clear implication that he was going to call the Child Abuse Hotline if I didn’t care enough, as a parent, to take out a second mortgage so I could purchase sufficient sneakerage for my son.

I have done a detailed scientific survey of several other parents, and my current estimate is that sneakers now absorb 83 percent of the average U.S. family income. This has to stop. We need Congress to pass a law requiring the sneaker industry to return to the system we had when I was growing up, under which there was only one kind of sneakers, namely U.S. Keds, which were made from Army surplus tents and which cost about \$10, or roughly \$1 per pound. This simple act would make our nation strong again. Slow, but strong. Probably your reaction is, “Dave, that’s an excellent idea, and you should receive, at minimum, the Nobel Prize.” Thank you, but as an American, I am not in this because I seek fame and glory. All I seek, as an American, is a varsity letter.

Dirty Dancing

My son, who is 11, has started going to dance parties. Only minutes ago he was this little boy whose idea of looking really sharp was to have all the Kool-Aid stains on his He-Man T-shirt be the same flavor; now, suddenly, he's spending more time per day on his hair than it took to paint the Sistine Chapel.

And he's going to parties where the boys dance with actual girls. This was unheard of when I was 11, during the Eisenhower administration. Oh, sure, our parents sent us to ballroom-dancing class, but it would have been equally cost-effective for them to simply set fire to their money.

The ballroom in my case was actually the Harold C. Crittenden junior High School cafeteria. We boys would huddle defensively in one corner, punching each other for moral support and eyeing the girls suspiciously, as though we expected them at any moment to be overcome by passion and assault us. In fact this was unlikely. We were not a fatally attractive collection of stud muffins. We had outgrown our sport coats, and we each had at least one shirttail elegantly sticking out, and the skinny ends of our neckties hung down longer than the fat ends because our dads had tied them in the only way that a person can tie a necktie on a short, fidgety person, which is by standing behind that person and attempting several abortive knots and then saying the hell with it. Many of us had smeared our hair with the hair-smear of choice in those days, Brylcreem, a chemical substance with the natural look and feel of industrial pump lubricant.

When the dance class started, the enemy genders were lined up on opposite sides of the cafeteria, and the instructor, an unfortunate middle-aged man who I hope was being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars, would attempt to teach us the Fox Trot.

"ONE two THREE four ONE two THREE four," he'd say, demonstrating the steps. "Boys start with your LEFT foot forward, girls start with your RIGHT foot back, and begin now ONE ..."

The girls, moving in one graceful line, would all take a step back with their right foot. At the same time, on the boys' side, Joseph DiGiacinto, who is now an attorney, would bring his left foot down firmly on the right toe of Tommy Longworth.

"TWO," the instructor would say, and the girls would all bring their left foot back, while Tommy would punch Joe sideways into Dennis Johnson.

"THREE," the instructor would say, and the girls would shift their weight to the left, while on the other side the chain reaction of retaliation had spread to all 40 boys, who were punching and stomping on each other, so that our line looked like a giant centipede having a Brylcreem-induced seizure.

This was also how we learned the Waltz, the Cha Cha, and—this was the instructor's "hep cat" dance step—the Lindy Hop. After we boys had thoroughly failed to master these dances, the instructor would bring the two lines together and order the boys to dance directly with the girls, which we did by sticking our arms straight out to maintain maximum separation, lunging around the cafeteria like miniature sport-coat-wearing versions of Frankenstein's monster.

We never danced with girls outside of that class. At social events, girls danced the Hop with other girls; boys made hilarious intestinal noises with their armpits. It was the natural order of things.

But times have changed. I found this out the night of Robby's first dance party, when, 15 minutes before it was time to leave for the party, he strode impatiently up to me, wearing new duds, looking perfect in the hair department, and smelling vaguely of—Can it be? Yes, it's Right Guard!—and told me

that we had to go immediately or we'd be late. This from a person who has never, ever shown the slightest interest in being on time for anything, a person who was three weeks late to his own birth.

We arrived at the dance-party home at the same time as Robby's friend T.J., who strode up to us, eyes eager, hair slicked.

"T.J.!" I remarked. "You're wearing cologne!" About two gallons, I estimated. He was emitting fragrance rays visible to the naked eye.

We followed the boys into the house, where kids were dancing. Actually, I first thought they were jumping up and down, but I have since learned that they were doing a dance called the jump. We tried to watch Robby, but he gestured violently at us to leave, which I can understand. If God had wanted your parents to watch you do the Jump, He wouldn't have made them so old.

Two hours later, when we came back to pick him up, the kids were slow-dancing. Of course the parents weren't allowed to watch this, either, but by peering through a window from another room, we could catch glimpses of couples swaying together, occasionally illuminated by spontaneous fireballs of raw hormonal energy shooting around the room. My son was in there somewhere. But not my little boy.

A Left-Handed Compliment

I was feeling good that morning. I woke up to the happy discovery that not a single one of our major home appliances had broken during the night and we still had running water, which is highly unusual in our household. Then I got both dogs all the way outside without getting the Wee-wee of joy on my feet. It looked like it was going to be a great day.

Then, like a fool, I picked up the newspaper. You should never pick up a newspaper when you're feeling good, because every newspaper has a special department, called the Bummer Desk, which is responsible for digging up depressing front-page stories with headlines like DOORBELL USE LINKED TO LEUKEMIA and OZONE LAYER COMPLETELY GONE DIRECTLY OVER YOUR HOUSE.

On this particular morning the story that punched me right in the eyeballs was headlined: LEFTIES' LIVES SHORTER STUDY SAYS SO. YOU probably read about this. Researchers did a study showing that left-handed people live an average of nine years less than right-handed people. This was very alarming to me because I'm left-handed, along with 10 percent of the population, as well as many famous historical figures such as Napoleon, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandy Koufax, Speedy Alka-Seltzer, and Flipper. President Bush is also left-handed, which has raised a troublesome constitutional issue because every time he signs a bill into law he drags his hand through his signature and messes it up. Nobody knows whether this is legal. "This doesn't look like a signature," observed the Supreme Court, in one recent case. "This looks like somebody killed a spider on the Federal Highway Authorization Act."

Because of the way we write, most of us lefties go through life with big ink smears on the edges of our left hands. In fact, when I first saw the newspaper article about lefties dying sooner, I thought maybe the cause would be ink absorption. Or maybe it would be related to the fact that we spent our entire academic careers sitting with our bodies twisted clockwise so we could write on those stupid right-hand-only desks. I have this daydream wherein the inventor of those desks is shipwrecked on a remote island, and some natives come out of the jungle, and he waves at them in what he thinks is a friendly manner, unaware that this is the fierce Wagoondi tribe, and if you wave at them with your left hand, they treat

you like a god, but if you wave with your right hand, they play the Happy Snake Game with your intestines. Not that I am bitter. Nor am I bitter about the fact that I always got bad grades in art class because I couldn't work scissors designed for right-handed people. On Parents' Night, when all the children's art projects were put up for display, mine was the one that looked as though the paper had been chewed to pieces by shrews.

Nor am I bitter about gravy ladles. And if you don't understand why I'm not bitter about gravy ladles, just try using one with your left hand.

But I have to admit that I AM a little bitter about this business of dying nine years early. According to the researchers, a major reason for this is that left-handers have a lot more accidents than right-handers. I know why this is: We read books backward. Really. When left-handers pick up books, they tend to start reading from the last page. This saves us a lot of time with murder mysteries, but it's a bad habit when we're reading, say, the instructions for operating a barbecue grill, and we begin with "STEP 147: IGNITE GAS."

I myself have always been accident-prone, especially when I attempt to use tools designed for right-handed people, the extreme example being chain saws, which should not even be legal to sell to left-handers. I had one back during the Energy Crisis, when I had installed a wood-burning stove in our fireplace in an effort to reduce our energy consumption by covering the entire household with a thick, insulating layer of soot. Near our house was a large tree, which I realized could supply our soot needs for the better part of the winter. So one day I strode out and, drawing on my skills as an English major, started making strategic cuts designed to cause the tree to fall away from the house. I even called my wife out to watch the tree fall, and of course those of you who are familiar with situation comedies have already figured out what happened: The tree, which was clearly right-handed, fell in the exact wrong direction, chuckling audibly all the way down and missing the living room by maybe six inches.

My wife, who thought I had planned to have the tree do this, said, "That was great!" And I replied, "Wurg," or words to that effect, because my brain was busy trying to get my heart going again. Speaking of which: Some scientists think that left-handed people's brains work completely differently from right-handed people's brains. I read an article once that theorized that left-handers are a different species from right-handers. Isn't that silly? As if we were aliens or something. What nonsense! Planet foolish this over take will we day one.

Reader Alert

What follows is a story I wrote in 1988 about a spate of UFO sightings in the town of Gulf Breeze, Florida. The sightings eventually gained national attention, and there are still a lot of people in the UFOlogy community who believe that Gulf Breeze is frequented by extraterrestrials. The guy I identified only as "Ed" in this story is Ed Walters; he became a big name on the UFO circuit and wrote a book. A number of people have claimed that Walters perpetrated a hoax; in 1990, a man living in Walters's former house said he found a model of a UFO—which looked like the one in Walters's photos—in the attic.

A Space Odyssey

OK, there is definitely something strange going on in Gulf Breeze, Florida. The two most likely explanations are:

1. Somebody is perpetrating a hoax and a bunch of other people, through inexperience, imagination, or ignorance, are falling for it.
2. Intelligent beings from elsewhere in the universe, driving craft with fantastic capabilities, have come to Earth, and they are observing us, and they have a Paralysis Ray and—this is going to make some South Floridians nervous—they apparently speak Spanish.

After spending a few days in Gulf Breeze checking things out, I've decided for myself which of these two possible explanations is closest to the truth. Here's the story as far as I know it; see what you think.

THE WIRE STORY

On December 3, the Herald published this item in a roundup of wire-service stories from around the state:

GULF BREEZE—Pictures of what was labeled as a glowing unidentified flying object published in the November 18 edition of the Sentinel of Gulf Breeze have prompted a half-dozen residents to report similar sightings.

Duane B. Cook, editor and publisher of the weekly, said the object looks like the top of the Space Needle in Seattle, but he hopes it's an alien spacecraft. He said the state's Mutual UFO Network will examine the three photos taken November 11 near the town that appeared with a letter written by the anonymous photographer.

Here at Tropic we are always on the lookout for stories of potentially intergalactic significance, so I immediately checked the Herald files to see if any other strange unexplained phenomena had been reported in the Gulf Breeze area. You can imagine how my pulse quickened when I discovered that:

On December 5, at The Zoo, a privately operated zoo in Gulf Breeze, a wedding ceremony was held for giraffes. This really happened. Their names are Gus and Gigi.

On August 19, a Gulf Breeze man was bitten by a pygmy rattlesnake as he

(the man) examined a potted plant in the garden shop of the Wal-Mart store in nearby Fort Walton Beach. Just two days later, at a Wal-Mart in North Fort Myers, a woman examining a potted hibiscus was bitten by another pygmy rattlesnake. Wal-Mart officials were unable to explain this rash of pygmy-rattler attacks and described it as "unusual."

Well, of course, I needed no further convincing. I grabbed my camera—you have to be ready—hopped on a plane and was off to conduct my investigation.

THE TOWN OF GULF BREEZE

Gulf Breeze is a small residential community just across a bridge from Pensacola, way at the far western end of Florida, almost in Alabama. It is the opposite of Miami, geographically and in many other ways. It is not even in the same time zone as Miami. Miami is in the Eastern Time Zone and Gulf Breeze is in about 1958. In Gulf Breeze, when you buy something at a store, the counterperson usually smiles and says, "Y'all come back 'n' see us now, n'kay?" Whereas in Miami, the counterperson doesn't usually say anything because he or she is having a very important personal telephone conversation that cannot be interrupted just for some idiot customer.

I begin my investigation by driving through downtown Gulf Breeze. Even at slow speed, this takes less than five minutes. It appears to be a normal beach-oriented town, very quiet in the off-season. There are a lot of things in the sky, because this is an area of extremely heavy air traffic: Nearby, besides the commercial airport in Pensacola, are the Pensacola Naval Air Station, Eglin Air Force Base, and several

other airfields. Almost any time you look up, you see a plane or a helicopter. In looking around, however, the only phenomenon I notice that does not seem to have an obvious earthly explanation is a bumper sticker that says BUSH 88.

But you never can tell. As you know if you ever watched “The Twilight Zone,” there are times when everything seems to be perfectly normal, and then suddenly, without warning, something happens, something that you know is somehow ... wrong, and you start to hear that piercing high-pitched electronic-sounding “Twilight Zone” music—deedeedeedee deedeedeedee—and the hairs on the back of your neck, even if you use extra-hold styling mousse, stand on end.

Little do I realize, as I drive through the quiet town of Gulf Breeze, that before I leave, I am going to experience that very feeling. More than once.

The Newspaper

My first stop is the Gulf Breeze Sentinel. The Sentinel is a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 3,500, soaring to 4,500 in the summer. It is not the kind of paper that practices the kind of snide, cynical, city-slicker style of journalism exemplified by this article. It’s the kind of newspaper where many stories consist mostly of local people’s names. You can get into the Sentinel merely by having your birthday. Also there are many photographs of local boards, clubs, civic groups, etc., engaging in planning activities. In the November 19 issue, there’s a front-page photograph of a man smiling and holding up, for no apparent reason, bags of Hershey’s Kisses, accompanied by the caption:

Dave Bozeman, manager of the Piggly Wiggly, is planning now for the Annual Gulf Breeze Christmas Parade. Piggly Wiggly plans to have several entries, including the Folgers Race Cars and, of course, the Pig!

In short, the Sentinel seems to be your basic small hometown paper doing hometown stories about hometown people. Except that in the same November 19 issue, right above the Piggly-Wiggly manager, is a story headlined:

UFO SIGHTED OVER GULF BREEZE

Below this are three photographs of this thing, shaped roughly like a fat disk with a glowing, tapered bottom and a small, glowing protrusion on top. There are regularly spaced dark marks going around the side. The thing is in fairly clear focus. It appears to be hovering in the evening sky; you can see the dark blurred shapes of trees in the foreground.

The “story” accompanying the photographs consists entirely of the text of an anonymous letter to the newspaper, allegedly written by the photographer, who says he took five Polaroid pictures of the thing from his yard on the night of November 11.

“I was reluctant at first to show [the photographs] to any one, says the letter, but my wife convinced me to show them to Ed. Ed in turn said that the photos should be shown to the press. ... I am a prominent citizen of the community, however, and need anonymity at this time. I know what I saw and would feel much better if I knew I was not alone.

“Let me reassure you that this is not a hoax.”

It was “Ed” who brought the photographs to the Sentinel, according to Duane Cook, the editor and publisher. Cook, 43, is a former computer salesman who took over the paper from his stepfather in 1980. Cook thought the pictures looked convincing, and “Ed,” whom Cook knows, said the

photographer was responsible. So Cook decided to go ahead with the story, but he was still “nervous a little” about it until the morning of November 19, when the paper was just about to go to press. On that day Cook’s stepfather and predecessor as editor, Charles Somerby, and his wife (Cook’s mother), Doris Somerby, stopped by the paper. Cook showed them the Polaroids.

They did not act surprised. They said they had seen the same object. On the same night.

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“I lost all fear of going to press with it,” Cook says.

The Witnesses

If you called up Central Casting and asked for two people to play the parts of the Reliable Witnesses, they would send you Charlie and Doris Somerby. He’s 69 and, before his newspaper career, served as a naval communications officer in World War II and Korea. She’s 67 and holds the world indoor record for grandmotherliness (when I visit their home to interview them, she has an actual apple pie cooling on the kitchen table).

The Somerbys say that on November 11, while taking a walk at sundown, they saw an object out over the bay headed toward Gulf Breeze. It made no sound, they say, and it did not look like any kind of aircraft they had ever seen. They watched for some mention of it on the evening TV news, but there was none. Until Cook showed them the photographs, they had not planned to say anything about it.

I ask them, several times and in several ways, if they’re sure that the thing they saw over the bay looks the same as the object in the photographs. They say they’re sure. Driving away, I am convinced they’re telling the truth.

The Story Spreads

When the Sentinel published the UFO pictures, people started calling. “We got a half a dozen calls from people who saw something that night,” says Cook. His staff started collecting these reports, and ran them as a front-page story in the November 25 issue. A local TV station did a story about the UFO, showing one of the Polaroids blown way up. “That was impressive,” says Cook.

Then another local TV station did a story about it.

Then United Press International did a story about it.

And then it happened, the event that distinguishes an interesting but basically local story from a story with potentially shocking Worldwide Implications: The National Enquirer called.

Yes. The paper that is frequently way ahead of the media pack on major Hollywood divorces; the paper that obtained and published the now-historic photograph showing Donna Rice sitting on Gary Hart’s lap because he was too much of a gentleman to push her off; the paper that once offered a reward of \$1 million for “positive proof” that extraterrestrial spacecraft are visiting the Earth; this paper was now calling Duane Cook of the Breeze Sentinel.

The Enquirer sent a reporter, who wanted to take the photographs back to the paper’s home base in Lantana, Florida, for further analysis. But by that point Cook had been in touch with the state director of the Mutual UFO Network (more on this later), who had advised Cook that these photographs could be very valuable and he should not let them out of his sight. So the Enquirer flew Cook down to Lantana,

where, Cook says, “They gave [the photographs] the most thorough going-over, and they couldn’t find any flaws.” They made Cook an offer: \$5,000 for the right to publish the photographs before anybody else—if the Enquirer decided to use them. But before they made that decision, they wanted a second opinion. So they flew Cook and his photographs all the way to the world-famous NASA Jet Propulsion laboratory at Cal Tech in Pasadena, California. There, Cook says, “they took a series of photographs of the photographs,” the idea being that they would analyze them further and give the results to the Enquirer.

Five thousand dollars. NASA. This was getting very exciting. And there was more to come.

The New Evidence

Two more photographs arrived at the Sentinel. These were taken with a 35mm camera, and although the quality is worse than that of the Polaroids, they appear to show the same object. An anonymous letter claims the photographs were taken in June of 1986—over a year before the Polaroids were allegedly taken.

Then somebody stuffed a manila envelope into the Sentinel mailbox containing nine more photographs; again the quality is poor, but they appear to show the same object. The accompanying letter is signed “Believer Bill,” who claims he took the pictures with a toy camera—which also was stuffed into the envelope—that his children had left in his car.

Then “Ed”—remember “Ed”? The one who brought in the original photographs—gave the Sentinel a very clear Polaroid that he says he took in his backyard; it shows, very clearly, three of the objects.

At this point the Sentinel was turning into the Galactic Clearing House for UFO Evidence. The photographs had become so common that the last two sets, which seemed to suggest that a regular alien invasion was going on right there in Gulf Breeze, ran on page four of the December 24 issue. The page-one story was the Christmas parade.

But Duane Cook, the editor, is hoping that the UFO story isn’t over.

“I would be delighted if, whoever they are, they have decided to communicate, because they’ve been watching us for some time now,” he tells me. “My main fear is that we won’t be adult enough to welcome them. My contribution would be to condition people’s minds to the possibility that they do exist, so that we can learn from them. In fact, maybe ...”—Cook pauses, then shakes his head. “No, that sounds grandiose.”

“What?” I ask.

“Well,” he says, looking at me carefully, “maybe that’s why I’m here.”

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The Ufo People

Duane Cook is not alone. A lot of people are convinced that extraterrestrials are watching us. There are more than 200 UFO-oriented organizations worldwide, according to The UFO Encyclopedia, which bills itself as “a comprehensive A-to-Z guide to the UFO phenomenon” and which cheerfully and uncritically passes along all kinds of fascinating UFO stories. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the entry about a “contactee”—a person who claims to receive regular visits from extraterrestrials—named

Howard Menger:

According to Menger, a rash of sightings around his New Jersey home was followed by regular social visits from the Space People. He performed favors for his alien friends and even acted as their barber, cutting their long blond hair in order that they could pass unnoticed among the earthlings. Menger was rewarded with a trip to the moon, where he breathed easily in a surface atmosphere similar to Earth's. He brought back some lunar potatoes, which reportedly contained five times the protein found in terrestrial potatoes. Their nutritive value could not be proved, however, because Menger had supposedly handed them over to the U.S. government, which was keeping them a secret.

Not all the UFO believers, however, are Froot Loops. A lot of people who definitely qualify as Responsible Citizens have claimed they saw something strange in the sky. In 1973, Jimmy Carter, then the governor of Georgia, reported that he had seen a UFO in 1969, just before a Lions Club meeting (although we should bear in mind that, as president, Carter claimed he was attacked by a large swimming rabbit). Other celebrities who, according to The UFO Encyclopedia, have reported UFO sightings include: Jackie Gleason, Muhammad Ali, John Travolta, Elvis Presley, Orson Bean, and, of course, William Shatner.

Many "sightings" have turned out to be hoaxes. Many others have turned out to be man-made or natural objects—airplanes, weather balloons, satellites, planets, stars, etc. And some remain unexplained. The mainstream scientific community tends to believe these are probably ordinary phenomena that could, with sufficient information, be identified. The UFOlogists tend to believe they are evidence that extraterrestrials are here. The debate rages on.

The federal government has, reluctantly, played a major role in the UFO controversy. The Air Force, in an operation called Project Blue Book, collected and investigated UFO reports from 1948 until 1969, when the project was dropped because, the government says, it was a waste of time. Many UFOlogists, however, argue that the government wasn't really trying to solve the mystery but to discredit the witnesses, and is now engaged in a massive conspiracy to cover up evidence of extraterrestrial visits, just as it has refused to release the lunar potatoes. Some of the conspiracy theories are pretty spooky, as we will see.

The Man From Mufon

On my second day in Gulf Breeze, I drive out to Fort Walton Beach, about 40 miles east, to visit Donald Ware, the Florida state director for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). MUFON describes itself as "an international scientific organization composed of people seriously interested in studying and researching" in an effort to provide "the ultimate answer to the UFO enigma."

Ware, who spent 26 years in the Air Force and flew two combat tours as a fighter pilot, appears to be a very straight arrow, a serious man with serious eyes. And he takes the Gulf Breeze sightings very seriously. After a MUFON field investigator—there are more than 50 in the state—examined the Polaroids and interviewed some of the witnesses, MUFON released a "preliminary evaluation" stating that the Polaroids show "an unknown of great significance."

Ware tells me that this is going to be "an important case that will be discussed by UFOlogists all over the world." As he talks, he backs up various points by pulling papers from his files, which he began amassing back in 1952, when he saw lights over Washington, D.C., in what turned out to be a famous

UFO incident.

“After 12 years of study,” he says, “I decided that somebody was watching us. After 10 more years of study, I concluded that someone in our government has known this since 1947.”

Solemnly, Ware hands me a book containing a reproduction of what are alleged to be Top Secret U.S. government documents. These documents state that in 1947, near Roswell, New Mexico, the U.S. government secretly recovered a crashed flying saucer and four alien bodies.

And President Harry Truman set up a secret group of top scientists, called “Majestic 12,” to study the aliens and their craft.

And this whole thing has been kept secret ever since.

Ware is looking at me intently.

“Well!” I say brightly. “Thanks very much for your help!”

The Key Here

I’m sitting in my motel room, thinking. The more I think, the more it seems to me that, whatever is going on in Gulf Breeze, the Key Figure is “Ed.” He’s the one who brought the first set of Polaroids to the Sentinel, allegedly on behalf of the photographer. He’s the one, according to Duane Cook, who took the later Polaroid showing three objects. He’s the only photographer who isn’t totally anonymous. I decide I need to talk to him. I call Cook, the Sentinel editor, and ask him to ask “Ed” to please get in touch with me.

Less than an hour later, I hear a tapping at my motel window.

The Visit

“Ed” does not introduce himself, except to say: “I’m the guy you’re looking for.” He’s about my age, 40. He’s articulate, mechanically inclined, and very sharp.

We talk for about an hour. Right away he admits he took the first set of Polaroids. He says he invented the story about being the intermediary because he was afraid that if his name got in the paper, he’d be ridiculed. “I have a family,” he says. “I’m a successful businessman. Everyone in this town knows me.”

“I know what I saw is real,” he says.

He becomes more agitated as he talks. He tells me he has seen the UFO six times. He says that what has been published in the Sentinel is only the beginning of the story.

“There is more,” he says. “But it’s scary.”

He leans forward.

“There is this thing,” he says, “and it can shoot a blue beam out of it. I got a picture of it doing it.”

He shows me the picture. It’s another Polaroid, showing the now-familiar object, with what appears to be a faint bluish ray of light coming out of the hole in the bottom.

Now the conversation gets weird. “Ed” says he was once trapped in the beam. Frozen. Paralyzed. Couldn’t move a muscle.

While he was in the beam, “Ed” believes, the UFO beings put some kind of “mental input” into his brain, so they could communicate with him, but something—jets, maybe—scared them off, and now the beings keep coming around because they’re trying to get the mental input back. He knows when they’re

nearby. “I can hear a hum,” he says.

He also hears voices, speaking in Spanish and some kind of strange “consonant language.” He has heard the voices at night, near his house, out by his pool pump. He wishes that, whoever they are, they would hurry up and take their mental input back and leave him alone.

“This has f-ed up the last two months of my life,” he says.

I tell him that a lot of people would say he was crazy, or lying.

He says he knows that, but he has something that will shut everybody up.

He says he has a videotape.

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The Videotape

Later that day, shortly past dusk, a Herald photographer and I go to see “Ed.” He lives in a comfortable suburban house in a tidy development. His wife is in the kitchen, cooking dinner. She doesn’t come out to greet us. I get the impression she’s not thrilled that we’re there.

“Ed,” on the other hand, is very cordial. He laughs a lot. He bustles around, showing us a drawing he made of the UFO and getting out more photographs of it. He seems to have a lot more of them. He shows us the camera he uses, an old, battered Polaroid held together with tape.

Then the three of us sit on his living room floor, and he shows us the videotape, which he shot with his Sony home video camera. The tape was apparently taken in his backyard, from behind some bushes, which can be heard rustling as the photographer moves around. The tape shows the same object, just above the tree line, moving kind of jerkily from right to left, then back again. It lasts only a minute or two.

“Ed” shows it to us again, then looks at us.

“That’s incredible,” we say, almost simultaneously.

The Questions

As soon as we leave, the photographer tells me that something is wrong. The film “Ed” uses in his Polaroid has an ASA rating of 80, which means it is relatively slow to react to light. This means that the shutter must stay open a relatively long time, especially in low light. And this in turn means that a moving object, even if photographed by a skilled photographer, would look blurred. “Ed” has stated repeatedly that the object moves almost constantly—as it does in the videotape—and yet in almost all of his photographs, the object is in fairly sharp focus.

“It just doesn’t look right,” says the photographer.

Neither does the videotape, at least to my eyes. The jerky motion of the object makes it appear small, almost toy-like, and fairly close, although “Ed” insists it is “as big as a house.”

Some other things are strange. Why, if “Ed” could sense the impending arrival of the object, didn’t he ever call his neighbors to be witnesses? And why, when he realized the object was visiting repeatedly, didn’t he get a better camera? I asked him both of these questions several times; he never really answered.

But the most troubling evidence is “Ed” himself. He acts agitated, manic. Not to put too fine a point on

it, he acts a little crazy. Of course, maybe this is normal behavior if aliens have put a mental input in your head. But still, I am getting skeptical. And I am not alone.

The Skeptic

Philip Klass is the nation's, if not the world's, leading UFO skeptic. The UFOlogists do not like him (MUFON's Donald Ware suggested to me that Klass has a "mental problem"). Klass retired last year after 35 years as senior electronics editor of Aviation Week magazine, but his involvement with UFOs is through an organization called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, of which he is chairman of the UFO subcommittee. In that capacity, he has spent a lot of time debunking various UFO claims. For example, he recently issued a report charging that the "Majestic 12" documents—the ones that allegedly prove that the government has dead aliens stashed away—are obvious forgeries. I must admit I found that story a tad hard to believe myself. It's not that I don't believe the government would try to hide dead aliens; it's that I don't think the government would succeed, since every time the government tries to do anything secretly, as in the Iran-contra arms deal, it winds up displaying all the finesse and stealth of an exploding cigar at a state funeral. If there really were dead aliens, I figure, there also would be daily leaks about it from High-Level Officials, and huge arguments among influential congresspersons over whose district the multimillion-dollar Federal Dead Alien Storage Facility would be located in.

Anyway, Klass, as you might imagine, is very dubious about the claim that UFOs are extraterrestrial visitors.

"I can think of no more exciting story," he says, "than to say I have investigated a UFO case for which there was no earthly explanation. In the 22

years I have been investigating, I have never found a single such case."

But what about the photographs?

"Photographs are the easiest things in the world to fake," says Klass. "Even the UFO believers are very, very skeptical of them." Klass is especially suspicious of Polaroids, because they have no negatives, which are often useful in the detection of hoaxes. He thinks it's suspicious that no negatives were included with any of the photographs anonymously submitted to the Sentinel.

"The odds against those photographs being authentic are jillions to one," he says.

But what about the witnesses?

"Once the report gets out that there are UFOs in the area, you get all kinds of me-tooers," Klass says. "Ninety-eight percent of all people who report seeing UFOs are trying to be honest. But we've been brainwashed by what we've read and been told. And eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable."

That's also the opinion expressed by astronomer Robert Young in a letter to the newsletter of the Astronomical League. Young says that, having investigated "a couple of hundred UFO reports"—all of which turned out to have prosaic explanations—he has concluded that "no eyewitness report of a UFO can be taken at its face value." He adds that "waves" of UFO sightings "end when editors tire of them. ... My experience is that when news stories stop, the calls stop too."

The Jet Propulsion Laboratory

I call Dr. Robert Nathan at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. He's the one the Enquirer flew the Polaroids, Duane Cook and all, out to see. He's the one who's supposed to be doing the scientific photographic analysis. Only he's not. He says he's suspicious of the photographs, both because of the way they look and because more than one set of them came from the same source.

"I'm way off in the nonbeliever corner on this one," says Dr. Nathan. "Unless something changes, I don't care to use government equipment on this. I have the feeling that somebody is perpetrating a hoax."

The Ray People

If it is a hoax, the question is, Why? I am no psychiatrist, but I think the answer is suggested by John Keel, author of several UFO books. Keel argues that the modern era of UFO sightings was launched by a pulp science-fiction magazine called *Amazing Stories*, edited by a man named Raymond Palmer. In 1947, Palmer published a story about fiendish alien beings controlling life on Earth through the use of rays. Suddenly, *Amazing Stories* was deluged with mail from readers who insisted that the story was true, because they had been affected by the beings.

"Palmer had accidentally tapped a huge, previously unrecognized audience," writes Keel. "Nearly every community has at least one person who complains constantly to the local police that someone—usually a neighbor—is aiming a terrible ray gun at their house or apartment. This ray, they claim, is ruining their health, causing their plants to die, turning their bread moldy, making their hair and teeth fall out and broadcasting voices into their heads. Psychiatrists are very familiar with these 'ray' victims and relate the problem with paranoid schizophrenia.

"In earlier times, [the paranoiacs] thought they were hearing the voice of God and/or the devil. Today they often blame the CIA or space beings for their woes. ... Ray Palmer unintentionally gave thousands of these people focus for their lives."

The Call

Back in Miami, I call "Ed" one morning. I tell him my theory, which is that he really does think he's being hounded by aliens but that he has faked all the photographs, using different cameras, in an effort to get others to believe him.

"Ed" tells me that since I last saw him, he was attacked by the beam while he was driving alone. "I was blown off the road and had to crawl underneath the truck," he says. He says he gave a full report on this to the people at MUFON, for their ever-growing data bank.

He also says that two armed men from the "Special Security Services" of the Air Force (he didn't get their names) came around with a "material seizure warrant" and demanded his photographs. He says he didn't want to send them to Duane Cook, so he told them he gave the photographs to me.

So that's the situation in Gulf Breeze, as far as I know it. Of course, there are some unanswered questions. For example, if "Ed" is faking the photographs, how is he doing it? And—this one still bothers me—what did the Somerbys see?

As of this writing, I haven't seen anything about this in the *National Enquirer*. I also haven't heard from the Air Force.

I expect, however, that I'll hear from you out there in Readerland. One thing nobody disputes is that stories about UFOs generate reports about UFOS. But listen: If you have anything to report, the place to send it is:

The Miami UFO Center P.O. Box 313

Opa-Locka, Fl, 33054

The important thing is: Don't call me. OK. It's not that I don't believe you. It's that my life is already filled with bizarre, inexplicable phenomena, such as the way the right rear speaker in my car never works except when they play songs I hate. Deedeedeedee deedeedeedee

Reader Alert

This next section is mostly columns about Amazing but True things that I found out about thanks to mail from alert readers. One of these readers, as you will see, is a member of the U.S. Supreme Court, who alerted me about a ground-breaking new antifatulence product called Beano. This resulted in a column that some newspapers found too offensive to print, a fact that resulted in another column, which was either about censorship or circumcision, I am still not sure which.

This section also contains vital information about an issue that everybody needs to think about more, namely, toilet snakes.

Plumber's Helper

Here at the Bureau of Animal Alarm we have received a disturbing Associated Press photograph sent in by alert journalist Russ Williams of the Asheville, North Carolina, Citizen-Times (motto: "A Newspaper Whose Staff Has Too Much Spare Time"). This photo shows a goat, looking fairly calm under the circumstances, hanging by its horns from a rope going through a pulley attached to the side of a building. Two men in a window are holding the other end of the rope. Here is the caption, which we are not making up:

SPAIN—A goat hangs by his horns from the bell tower of the church in Mangeses de la Polvorosa, some 200 miles northwest of Madrid. Villagers, who open the religious festival of St. Vincent by dropping a goat from the church belfry, attacked police who tried to block the tradition. The goat was uninjured as villagers caught the goat with a tarp.

As sensitive and broad-minded humans, we must never allow ourselves to be in any way judgmental of the religious practices of other people, even when these people clearly are raving space loons. We are sure that the people of Mangeses de la Polvorosa would be amused by some common American religious practices.

"We may drop goats from belfries," they'd probably say, "but at least we don't thank the Lord for touchdowns."

Nevertheless, we here at the Bureau feel that the Immigration authorities should keep a sharp lookout for Mangeses de la Polvorosa tour groups coming to the United States, particularly New York. Because they might decide to visit the Empire State Building, and while they're up on the observation deck they might suddenly smack their foreheads and realize that it's time to open the

festival of St. Vincent, and the next day's New York Post might print the following tragic headline:
TERRIFIED CROWD FLEES 120 MPH DEATH BUTT

Another animal menace that we all need to be more concerned about is giant toilet snakes. This is a growing problem, as can be seen by the following statistics:

Number of Articles About Giant Toilet Snakes We Received Prior to 1992: Zero. Number of Articles About Giant Toilet Snakes We Have Received in 1992: One.

Statistically, this represents an increase of infinity percent in the number of giant toilet-snake reports. The most recent one, sent by alert reader Jack Sowers, was written by reporter Mike Leggett for the Austin (Texas) American Statesman. It concerns a man named Steve Ashenfelter, who used to manage an Oklahoma hunting and fishing club. One day he went into the clubhouse bathroom, and, in his words, "there was a big snake lying in the toilet. As soon as he saw me he just swirled around and went down the pipes."

So Ashenfelter did exactly what you would do; namely, he moved to another continent.

No, really, he followed standard toilet-snake procedure, which is to go around flushing the three clubhouse toilets in an effort to get the snake to come out.

"I went in the bathroom upstairs, and there he was, lying in the toilet up there," Ashenfelter recalled. "So I went and flushed all the toilets, and he came back up in the toilet where I saw him the first time."

Eventually, Ashenfelter got the snake, but it took him two days, and he ended up using—we are still not making this up—two fishing poles, chlorine bleach, muskrat traps in all three toilets, an eight-foot piece of lumber, rope, and heavy metal hooks. The snake turned out to be over seven feet long.

We do not wish to create a nationwide panic, but apparently there is a new breed of large, commode-dwelling snakes that have figured out how to move from toilet to toilet, which means they could easily travel across the country via the Interstate Plumbing System. This has serious ramifications, especially if you're a parent trying to potty-train a small child. Psychologists agree that the best way to handle this situation is: lie. "Don't worry!" you should tell the small child many times, "A big snake won't come out of the toilet!" This is the approach Mister Rogers is taking.

Meanwhile, however, something must be done. One practical approach would be for the government to require all U.S. citizens to put muskrat traps in their commodes. The only problem here is that if the trap is not removed prior to commode usage, there could be severe consequences for guys of the male gender. On the other hand, many women might view this as a fair punishment for all the billions of times that guys have left the seat up. It's definitely something to think about as each of us, in his or her own way, prepares to celebrate the festival of St. Vincent.

Watch Your Rear

As you are aware if you follow international events, over the past year I have written a number (two) of columns about the worldwide epidemic of snakes in toilets. As a result I have received many letters from people who have had personal toilet-snake encounters, to the point where I now consider it newsworthy when somebody reports NOT finding a snake in a toilet.

But now I am getting nervous. I say this because of a recent alarming incident wherein a woman, attempting to use her commode, was attacked in an intimate place—specifically, Gwinnett County,

Georgia—by a squirrel. I have here an article from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, written by Gail Hagens and sent in by a number of alert readers. The headline—a textbook example of clear journalism—states: Squirrel somehow makes way into commode, scratches Gwinnett woman's behind. I am not making this headline up.

The woman is quoted as follows: “I went to the bathroom and lifted the lid and sat down. That's when I felt something scratching my behind.”

So, following the recommended “Jump, Slam, Call, and Tell” emergency procedure, she jumped up, slammed the lid down, called her husband at work, and told him to come home immediately, which he of course did. We may live in an age of gender equality, but men have a protective instinct that dates back millions of years, to when they would have had to defend their mates from such vicious predators as the saber-toothed tiger and the mastodon (toilets were much bigger in those days).

Unfortunately, by the time the husband got home, the squirrel had drowned, forcing us to once again ask WHEN the failed Clinton administration will demand that ALL commodes be equipped with tiny life preservers. But that is not the issue at hand. The issue at hand is that the squirrel apparently got into the plumbing system via a roof vent, which means that if you, like so many people, have a roof, your toilet is vulnerable to any organism with a long, narrow body, including (but not limited to) otters, weasels, dachshunds, squids, and international fashion models with only one name, such as Iman.

But that is by no means the only major toilet development. There is also the Mystery Toilet in Texas that produces ballpoint pens. I am not making this up, either. According to a story in the Wichita Falls (Texas) Times/Record News, written by Steve Clements and sent in by several alert readers, a man named David Garza of Henrietta, Texas, has fished 75 Paper Mate ballpoint pens out of his toilet over the past two years, sometimes as many as five pens per day. Garza has no idea where they're coming from, and neither do the local sewer authorities.

The story was accompanied by a photograph of Garza sitting on the bathtub next to the Mystery Toilet, holding a pen, looking like a successful angler. I called him immediately. “What's the status of the toilet” I asked.

“It's still a mystery,” he said. He said he hadn't found any new pens since the newspaper story, but that he has become something of a celebrity. This is understandable. People naturally gravitate to a man who has a Mystery Toilet.

“Everywhere I go,” he said, “people say to me, ‘Have you got a pen?’”

I asked him if the pens still write, and he said they do.

“Paper Mate ought to make a commercial out of this,” he said. “The slogan could be, ‘We come from all over and write anywhere.’ You know, like Coca-Cola, ‘It's there when you need it.’”

Actually, I don't think that's Coca-Cola's slogan. But Garza's statement got me to thinking about a possible breakthrough TV commercial wherein an athlete is standing in the locker room, sweating, thirsty as heck, and the toilet gurgles, and up pops a nice refreshing can of Coke. Yum! A commercial like that might be exactly what Coca-Cola needs to counteract all the free media attention Pepsi got recently with the syringe thing.

But the question is: Why are Paper Mate pens showing up in this toilet? There's only one logical explanation—I'm sure you thought of it—alien beings. David Garza's toilet is apparently connected to some kind of intergalactic sewage warp, through which aliens are trying to establish communication by sending Paper Mate pens (which are for sale everywhere). Probably they want us to write down our phone number on a piece of Charmin and flush it back to them.

Speaking of toilets and communication, you need to know about a TV-review column from the Daily Yomiuru, an English-language newspaper published in Japan. The column, sent in by alert reader Chris Graillat, states that there's a children's TV show in Japan called "Ugo Ugo Ruga," which features—I am still not making this up—an animated character with heavy eyebrows called Dr. Purl Purl (Dr. Stinky), a piece of talking excrement that keeps popping up from the toilet bowl to express strange platitudes only an adult can fathom.

You're thinking: "Hey! Sounds like Henry Kissinger!"

No, seriously, you're thinking that there are indeed some scary worldwide developments occurring in toilets, and the international authorities had better do something about it. And then they'd better wash their hands.

It's A Gas

Recently, I received a letter from a justice of the United States Supreme Court concerning a product called Beano.

I absolutely swear I am not making this up. The letter, written on official U.S. Supreme Court stationary, comes from Justice John Paul Stevens, who states:

"Having long been concerned about the problem of exploding cows, it seemed imperative to pass on to you the enclosed advertisement, the importance of which I am sure will be immediately apparent to you." Justice Stevens enclosed an advertisement from Cooking Light magazine for Beano, which, according to the manufacturer, "prevents the gas from beans." The advertisement includes pro-Beano quotations from various recognized intestinal-gas authorities, including (I am still not making this up) the New York Times, the Idaho Statesman, and Regis Philbin. The advertisement calls Beano "a scientific and social breakthrough," and states: "It's time to spill the Beano."

I was already aware of this product. I don't wish to toot my own horn, so to speak, but thanks to the efforts of hundreds of alert readers, my office happens to be the World Clearinghouse for information relating to gas buildups that cause explosions in animals, plants, plumbing, humans, etc. In recent months I've received newspaper reports of explosions involving a flounder, a marshmallow, a mattress, two wine bottles, several pacemakers (during cremation), countless toilets, a flaming cocktail called a "harbor light," chicken livers, snail eggs, a turkey, a tube of Poppin' Fresh biscuits, a raccoon, and a set of breast implants.

So needless to say, many readers had already alerted me about Beano. Several of them had sent me actual samples of Beano, which comes in a small plastic bottle, from which you squirt drops onto your food. But until I got Justice Stevens's letter, I had not realized that this was a matter of concern in the highest levels of government. When you see the Supreme Court justices, they always appear to be extremely solemn, if not actually deceased. It never occurs to you that, under those robes, they have digestive systems, too. But they do, as can be seen by a careful reading of the transcript of a recent court hearing:

CHIEF JUSTICE REHNQUIST: Is the court to understand, then, that the counsel's interpretation of the statute is ... All right! Who sliced the Limburger? (He glares at the other justices.)

JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, I am not naming names, but I happened to be glancing at the liberal wing of the court, and I definitely saw some robes billow, if you catch my drift.

JUSTICE BLACKMUN: Oh, sure, and I suppose the conservative wing doesn't sound like the All-Star Kazoo Band over there. My opinions are blowing off the bench.

JUSTICE O'CONNOR: Oh, yeah? Well, why don't you take your opinions and ...

This is bad for America. We need our highest judicial body to stop this childish bickering and get back to debating the kinds of weighty constitutional issues that have absorbed the court in recent years, such as whether a city can legally force an exotic dancer to cover her entire nipple, or just the part that pokes out.

So I decided, as a tax-deductible public service, to do a Beano Field Test. To make sure the test was legally valid, I asked a friend of mine, Paul Levine, who's a trained attorney as well as an author, if he'd participate. Paul is a selfless, concerned citizen, so I was not surprised at his answer.

"Only if you mention that my critically acclaimed novel *To Speak for the Dead* is now available in paperback," he said.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," I said. But Paul agreed to participate in the Field Test anyway, because that is the kind of American he is. My wife, Beth, also agreed to participate, although I want to stress that, being a woman, she has never, ever, in her entire life, not once, produced any kind of gaseous digestive byproduct, and when she does she blames it on the dogs.

To make this the most demanding field test possible, we went to a Mexican restaurant. Mexican restaurants slip high-octane beans into virtually everything they serve, including breath mints. It is not by mere chance that most of Mexico is located outdoors.

Paul, Beth, and I applied the Beano to our food as directed—three to eight drops per serving—and we ate it. For the rest of the evening we wandered around to various night spots, awaiting developments. Other people at these night spots were probably having exciting, romantic conversations, but ours went like this:

ME: So! How's everyone doing? BETH: All quiet! PAUL: Not a snap, crackle, or pop!

Anyway, the bottom line is that Beano seems to work pretty well. Paul reported the next day that all had been fairly calm, although at 3:30 A.m. he was awakened by an outburst. "You're familiar with the Uzi?" was how he put it. I myself was far safer than usual to light a match around, and Beth reported that the dogs had been unusually quiet.

So this could be an important product. Maybe, when you go to a restaurant, if you order certain foods, the waiter should bring Beano to your table, instead of those stupid utility-pole-sized pepper grinders. "Care for some Beano?" the waiter could say. "Trust me, you'll need it."

And getting back to Justice Stevens's original concern, I think federal helicopters should spray massive quantities of Beano on the nation's dairy farms, to reduce the cow methane output. And of course it should be mandatory in the dining rooms of the United States Congress. I'm sure the Supreme Court will back me up on this.

The Unkindest Cut Of All

I want to warn you right away that today's topic involves an extremely mature subject matter that might offend your community standards, if your community has any.

I became sensitive about community standards recently when, at the suggestion of no less than a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, I wrote a column about a ground-breaking antifatulence product called

Beano. Some newspapers—and I do not wish to name names, but two of them were the Portland Oregonian and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch—refused to print this column on the grounds that it was tasteless and offensive. Which of course it was, although it was nothing like the disgusting trash you hear from the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Anyway, those readers who have community standards should leave the room at this time, because today's topic is: circumcision. This is a common medical procedure that involves—and here, in the interest of tastefulness, I am going to use code names—taking hold of a guy's Oregonian and snipping his Post-Dispatch right off. This is usually done to tiny guy babies who don't have a clue as to what is about to happen. One minute a baby is lying happily in his little bed, looking at the world and thinking what babies think (basically, “Huh?”), and suddenly along comes a large person and snip WAAAAHHH the baby is dramatically introduced to the concept that powerful strangers can fill his life with pain for no apparent reason. This is excellent training for dealing with the Internal Revenue Service, but it's no fun at the time.

Most of us guys deal with this unpleasant experience by eventually erasing it from our conscious minds, the way we do with algebra. But some guys never get over it. I base this statement on a San Jose Mercury News article, written by Michael Oricchio and mailed to me by many alert readers, concerning a group of men in California who are very upset about having been circumcised as babies. They have formed a support group called RECAP. In the interest of good taste I will not tell you what the P in RECAP stands for, but the “RECA” part stands for “Recover A.”

According to the article, the members (sorry!) of RECAP are devoted to restoring themselves to precircumcision condition “through stretching existing skin or by surgery.” I swear I am not making this up. Here is a quotation from RECAP co-founder R. Wayne Griffiths:

“There are a lot of men who are enraged that they were violated without their consent and they want to do something about it. I've always been fascinated by intact men. I just thought it looked nicer. I had friends growing up who were intact. I thought, ‘Gee, that's what I'd like to be.’”

The article states that, to become intact again, Griffiths invented a 7-1/2-ounce skin-stretching device that “looks like a tiny steel barbell,” which he taped to the end of his Oregonian and wore for “four to 12 hours every day, except weekends, for a year.” Using this method, he grew himself an entirely new Post-Dispatch. Other RECAP members are involved in similar efforts. They meet regularly to discuss technique and review their progress.

I'm not sure how I feel about all this. I'm a middle-age white guy, which means I'm constantly reminded that my particular group is responsible for the oppression of every known minority PLUS most wars PLUS government corruption PLUS pollution of the environment, not to mention that it was middle-age white guys who killed Bambi's mom. So I'm pleased to learn that I myself am an oppressed victim of something. But no matter how hard I try, I can't get enraged about it. I've asked other guys about this.

“Are you enraged about being circumcised?” I say.

“What?” they say.

So I explain about RECAP.

“WHAT??” they say.

I have yet to find a guy who's enraged. And nobody I talked to was interested in miniature barbells, let alone surgery. Most guys don't even like to talk about medical procedures involving the Oregonian region. One time my wife and I were at a restaurant with two other couples, and one of the women,

Susan, started describing her husband Bob's vasectomy, which she had witnessed.

"NO!" we guys shouted, curling our bodies up like boiled shrimp. "Let's not talk about that!"

But our wives were fascinated. They egged Susan on, and she went into great detail, forcing us guys to stick wads of French bread in our ears and duck our heads under the table. Periodically, we'd come up to see if the coast was clear, but Susan would be saying, "And then the doctor picked up this thing that looked like a big crochet needle ..." And BONK we guys would bang our heads together ducking back under the table.

So Post-Dispatchwise, I think I'm going to remain an oppressed victim. But don't let me tell the rest of you guys what to think; it's your decision. This is a free country. In most communities.

Tarts Afire

The thing I like best about being a journalist, aside from being able to clip my toenails while working, is that sometimes, through hard work and perseverance and opening my mail, I come across a story that can really help you, the consumer, gain a better understanding of how you can be killed by breakfast snack food.

This is just such a time. I have received, from alert reader Richard Rilke, an alarming article from the New Philadelphia (Ohio) Times headlined: OVERHEATED POPTARTS CAUSE DOVER HOUSE FIRE, OFFICIALS SAY. The article states that fire officials investigating a house fire in Dover, Ohio, concluded that "when the toaster failed to eject the Pop-Tarts, they caught fire and set the kitchen ablaze."

According to the article, the investigators reached this conclusion after experimenting with Pop-Tarts and a toaster. They found that "strawberry Pop-Tarts, when left in a toaster that doesn't pop up, will send flames 'like a blowtorch' up to three feet high."

Like most Americans, I have long had a keen scientific interest in combustible breakfast foods, so I called up the Dover Fire Department and spoke to investigator Don Dunfee. He told me that he and some other investigators bought a used toaster, rigged it so it wouldn't pop up, put in some Kellogg's strawberry Pop-Tarts, then observed the results.

"At five minutes and 55 seconds," he said, "we had flames shooting out the top. I mean large flames. We also tried it with an off-brand tart. That one broke into flames in like 3-1/2 minutes, but it wasn't near as impressive as the Kellogg's Pop-Tart."

A quality you will find in top investigative journalists such as Woodward and Bernstein and myself is that before we publish a sensational story, we make every effort to verify the facts, unless this would be boring. So after speaking with Dunfee I proceeded to my local K-mart, where I consulted with an employee in the appliance sector.

ME: What kind of toaster do you recommend for outdoor use? EMPLOYEE: A cheap toaster.

I got one for \$8.96. I already had Kellogg's strawberry Pop-Tarts at home, because these are one of the three major food groups that my son eats, the other two being (1) pizza and (2) pizza with pepperoni.

Having assembled the equipment, I was ready to conduct the experiment.

WARNING: DO NOT ATTEMPT THE FOLLOWING EXPERIMENT YOURSELF. THIS IS A DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT CONDUCTED BY A TRAINED HUMOR COLUMNIST UNDER CAREFULLY CONTROLLED CONDITIONS, NAMELY, HIS WIFE WAS NOT HOME.

I conducted the experiment on a Saturday night. Assisting me was my neighbor, Steele Reeder, who is a Customs broker, which I believe is a mentally stressful occupation, because when I mentioned the experiment to Steele he became very excited, ran home, and came back wearing (this is true) a bright yellow rubber rain suit, an enormous steel hat, and a rope around his waist holding a fire extinguisher on each hip, gun-slinger-style. He also carried a first-aid kit containing, among other things, the largest tube of Preparation H that I have ever seen.

Also on hand was Steele's wife, Babette, who pointed out that we had become pathetic old people, inasmuch as our Saturday Night Action now consisted of hoping to see a toaster fire.

Using an extension cord, we set the toaster up a safe distance away from the house. I then inserted two Kellogg's strawberry Pop-Tarts ("With Smucker's Real Fruit") and Steele, wearing thick gloves, held the toaster lever down so it couldn't pop up. After about two minutes the toaster started to make a desperate rattling sound, which is how toasters in the wild signal to the rest of the herd that they are in distress. A minute later the Pop-Tarts started smoking, and at 5 minutes and 50 seconds, scary flames began shooting up 20 to 30 inches out of both toaster slots. It was a dramatic moment, very similar to the one that occurred in the New Mexico desert nearly 50 years ago, when the awe-struck atomic scientists of the Manhattan Project witnessed the massive blast that erupted from their first crude experimental snack pastry.

We unplugged the extension cord, extinguished the blaze, and determined that the toaster's career as a professional small appliance was over. It was time to draw conclusions. The obvious one involves missile defense. As you are aware, President Clinton has decided to cut way back on Star Wars research, so that there will be more money available for pressing domestic needs, such as creating jobs and keeping airport runways clear for urgent presidential grooming. But by using currently available electronic and baking technology, we could build giant toasters and place them around the U.S., then load them with enormous Pop-Tarts. When we detected incoming missiles, we'd simply hold the toaster levers down via some method (possibly involving Tom and Roseanne Arnold) and within a few minutes WHOOM the country would be surrounded by a protective wall of flames, and the missiles would either burn up or get knocked off course and detonate harmlessly in some place like New Jersey.

Anyway, that's what I think we should do, and if you think the same thing, then you have inhaled too many Smucker's fumes.

Insect Aside

Recently, I had to pay several hundred dollars to get my car started, and do you want to know why? Nature, that's why. It's getting out of control.

Now before I get a lot of angry mail on recycled paper, let me stress that, generally, I'm in favor of nature. I'm even in favor of scary nature, such as snakes, because I know that snakes play a vital role in the ecosystem (specifically, the role of Boonga the Demon Creature).

But nature should stay in its proper context. For example, the proper context for snakes is Asia. A snake should not be in your yard unless it has your written permission. A snake should definitely not be climbing your trees, although this is exactly what one was doing outside my window a few days ago. I looked out and there it was, going straight up the trunk, looking casual, Mr. Cool-Blooded. It was impressive. I'm always amazed that snakes can move on the ground, without arms or legs. You try lying

on your stomach and moving forward merely by writhing. My friend Buzz Burger and I did this for an hour at the MacPhersons' 1977 New Year's Eve party and never got out of the kitchen.

Nevertheless I was alarmed to see the snake, because according to top snake scientists, there's only one known scientific reason why a snake would go up a tree, namely, so it can leap onto your head and strangle you.

This particular snake had been watching me for several days. I'd seen it on the lawn earlier when I was out with my two dogs, Earnest and Zippy, who were trotting in front, looking alert and vigilant, providing protection. The snake was holding very still, which is a ploy that a snake will use to fool the observer into thinking that it's a harmless object, such as a garden hose or a snake made out of rubber. This ploy is effective only if the observer has the IQ of a breath mint, so it worked perfectly on my dogs, who vigilantly trotted right past the snake. Earnest actually stepped over part of the snake.

Of course, if the snake had been something harmless, the dogs would have spotted it instantly. Zippy, for example, goes into a violent barking rage whenever he notices the swimming-pool chlorine dispenser. This is a small, benign plastic object that floats in the pool and has never made a hostile move in its life. But Zippy is convinced that it's a malignant entity, just waiting for the right moment to lunge out of the water, jaws-like, and dispense lethal doses of chlorine all over its helpless victims.

I tried to notify the dogs about the snake. "Look!" I said, pointing. "A snake!" This caused the dogs to alertly trot over and sniff my finger in case there was peanut butter on it. The snake, continuing to hold still, was watching all this, thinking: "This person will be easy to strangle."

So now I find myself glancing up nervously whenever I walk across my yard. I'm thinking maybe I should carry an open umbrella at all times, as a Snake Deflector. But that is not my point. By now you have forgotten my point, which involves my car. One day it wouldn't start, and it had to be towed to our garage, which has two main characters: Bill, who is responsible for working on the car; and Sal, who is responsible for giving you a dramatic account of what was wrong.

"At first we thought it was the (something)," Sal told me, when it was all over. "But when we tried to (something) the (something), all we got was (something)! Can you believe it?"

"No," I assured him.

"So then," said Sal, starting to gesture, "we tested the (something), but ..."

He continued for 10 minutes, attracting a small but appreciative audience. Finally, he reached the crucial dramatic moment, where Bill had narrowed the problem down to a key car part, called the "something." Carefully, Bill removed this part. Slowly, he opened it up. And there, inside, he found: ants.

Yes. An ant squadron was living in my car part and eating the wires. I am not making this up.

"Oh, yes," said Sal. "Ants will eat your wires."

This gave me a terrible feeling of what the French call *doi vu*, meaning "big insect trouble." Because just a month earlier, the water in our house stopped running, and a paid professional plumber came out and informed us that—I am still not making this up—there were ants in our pump switch.

This is what I mean by nature getting out of hand. It's not natural for ants to eat car and pump parts. Ants should eat the foods provided by the ecosystem, such as dropped Milk Duds. Something is wrong.

And here's another scary but absolutely true fact: Lately, I've noticed ants going into the paper slot of my computer's laser printer. Ask yourself. What natural business would ants have with a laser? You can bet that whatever they're up to, it's not going to benefit mankind, not after all the stuff I've sprayed on

them.

So I'm worried. I'm worried in my car; I'm worried in my house; and above all I'm worried when I cross my yard. I'm afraid that one day I'll disappear, and the police will search my property, and all they'll find will be a snake who obviously just ate a large meal and is pretending to be a really fat garden hose; and maybe some glowing ants munching on, say, the microwave oven; and of course Zippy, Mr. Vigilant, barking at the chlorine dispenser.

Invasion Of The Money Snatchers

Sometimes, even though we love America, with its amber waves of purple mounted majesties fruiting all over the plains, we get a little ticked off at our government. Sometimes we find ourselves muttering: "All the government ever seems to do is suck up our hard-earned money and spew it out on projects such as the V-22 Osprey military aircraft, which the Pentagon doesn't even want, and which tends to crash, but which Congress has fought to spend millions on, anyway, because this will help the reelection efforts of certain congresspersons, who would cheerfully vote to spend millions on a program to develop a working artificial hemorrhoid, as long as the money would be spent in their districts."

I mutter this frequently myself But we must not allow ourselves to become cynical. We must remember that for every instance of the government's demonstrating the intelligence of a yam, there is also an instance of the government's rising to the level of a far more complex vegetable, such as the turnip.

Today I'm pleased to tell you the heartwarming story of a group of 10 men whose lives have been changed, thanks to prompt, coordinated government action. I got this story from one of the men, Al Oliver, a retired Navy chaplain. In fact, all 10 are retirees (or, in Al Oliver's words, "chronologically disadvantaged").

The men live in the Azalea Trace retirement center in Pensacola, Florida. For years they've gathered every morning to drink coffee and talk. In 1988, they formed a pact: Each would buy a Florida lottery ticket every week, and if anybody won, they'd all split the money. They called themselves the Lavender Hill Mob, and stamped that name on their lottery tickets.

For three years they won nothing. Then, in 1991, one of their tickets had five out of six winning numbers, for a prize of \$4,156. Oliver took the ticket to the state lottery office in Pensacola, where he had to fill out Form 5754, indicating who was to get the money. He wrote down "Lavender Hill Mob."

A while later, he got the form back from the state, along with a letter informing him that the Lavender Hill Mob was a partnership and could not be paid until it obtained an Employer Identification Number, or EIN, from (ominous music starts here) ... the Internal Revenue Service.

At this point you readers are like an audience watching the scene in a horror movie wherein the woman trapped alone in the house at night is about to go down into the basement.

"NO! NO!" you're shouting to Al Oliver. "Don't get involved with the IRS! Better to just throw the ticket away!"

But Oliver went to an IRS office and applied for the EIN by filling out Form SS-4. "I had to list everything on all 10 of us except I believe our cholesterol count," he recalls. The IRS then gave him the EIN, which he sent along with Form 5754 to the state lottery, which sent him the check, which he took to the bank, which, after balking a little, finally gave him 10 cashier's checks for the Lavender Hill Mob

members.

Now you're thinking: "OK, so it was an annoying bureaucratic hassle, but everything turned out fine."

Please try not to be such a wienerhead. Of COURSE everything did not turn out fine. In February, Oliver began receiving notices from the IRS demanding to know where exactly the hell were the Lavender Hill Mob's 1065

forms showing partnership income for 1989, 1990, and 1991. So Oliver went to his CPA, who filled out the forms with zeros and sent them in.

Of course this only angered the IRS, because here the Lavender Hill Mob was just now getting around to filing forms for as far back as 1989, which means these forms were LATE. You can't allow that kind of flagrant disregard for the law. You let the Mob members slide on that, and the next thing you know they're selling crack on the shuffleboard court.

So in June the IRS notified the Mob members that, for failing to file their 1989 Form 1065 on time, they owed a penalty of \$2,500. Oliver's CPA, who is not working for free, wrote a letter to the IRS attempting to explain everything. Then in July the Mobsters got another notice, informing them that they owed \$2,500 PLUS \$19.20 in interest charges, which will of course continue to mount. The notice states that the government may file a tax lien against the Mobsters and adds: "wE MUST ALSO CONSIDER TAKING YOUR WAGES, PROPERTY OR OTHER ASSETS."

That's where it stood when I last heard from Oliver. Since this whole thing is obviously a simple misunderstanding, we can safely assume that it will never be resolved. The wisest course for the Mobsters would be to turn all their worldly goods over to the government right now. Because if they keep attempting to file the correct form, they're going to wind up in serious trouble, fleeing through the swamps around Pensacola, pursued by airborne IRS agents in the new V-22 Osprey, suspended via steel cables from some aircraft that can actually fly.

Reader Alert

This next section is more or less about traveling. It includes an account of my visit to Communist China, where I spent almost an entire day, thereby qualifying as an authority.

There's also a column I wrote about people who are obnoxious on airplanes. This column was very popular with flight attendants; for quite a while after it was published, whenever I'd take a plane, the attendants would give me free beers. That's why I got into journalism in the first place: to help people.

Hell On Wings

I'm in an airplane, strapped into my seat, no way to escape. For an hour we've been taxiing around Miami International Airport while lightning tries to hit us. Earlier I was hoping that the plane might at some point actually take off and fly to our intended destination but now I'm starting to root for the lightning, because a direct strike might silence the two women sitting in front of me. There's only one empty seat between them, but they're speaking at a decibel level that would be appropriate if one of them were in Cleveland. Also, they both have Blitherers Disease, which occurs when there is no filter attached to the brain, so that every thought the victim has, no matter how minor, comes blurting right

out. This means that the rest of us passengers are being treated to repartee such as this:

FIRST WOMAN: I PREFER A WINDOW SEAT. SECOND WOMAN: OH, NOT ME. I ALWAYS PREFER AN AISLE SEAT. FIRST WOMAN: THAT'S JUST LIKE MY SON. HE LIVES IN NEW JERSEY, AND HE ALWAYS

PREFERS AN AISLE SEAT ALSO. SECOND WOMAN: MY SISTER-IN-LAW WORKS FOR A DENTIST IN New Jersey. HE'S AN

EXCELLENT DENTIST BUT HE CAN'T PRONOUNCE HIS R'S. HE SAYS, "I'M AFRAID YOU NEED A WOOT CANAL." FIRST WOMAN: MY BROTHER-IN-LAW JUST HAD THAT ROOT CANAL. HE WAS BLEEDING ALL

OVER HIS NEW CAR, ONE OF THOSE JAPANESE ONES, A WHADDYACALLEM, LEXIT. SECOND WOMAN: I PREFER A BUICK, BUT LET ME TELL YOU, THIS INSURANCE, WHO CAN

AFFORD IT? FIRST WOMAN: I HAVE A BROTHER IN THE INSURANCE BUSINESS, WITH ANGINA. HE

PREFERS A WINDOW SEAT. SECOND WOMAN: OH, NOT ME. I ALWAYS PREFER AN AISLE. NOW MY DAUGHTER ...

And so it has gone, for one solid hour, a live broadcast of random neural firings. The harder I try to ignore it, the more my brain focuses on it. But it could be worse. I could be the flight attendant. Every time she walks past the two women, they both shout "MISS?" It's an uncontrollable reflex.

"MISS?" they are shouting. "CAN WE GET A BEVERAGE HERE?" This is maybe the fifth time they have asked this.

"I'm sorry," says the flight attendant, with incredible patience. "We can't serve any beverages until after we take off."

This answer never satisfies the women, who do not seem to be fully aware of the fact that the plane is still on the ground. They've decided that the flight attendant has a bad attitude. As she moves away, they discuss this in what they apparently believe is a whisper.

"SHE'S VERY RUDE," they say, their voices booming through the cabin, possibly audible in other planes. "THEY SHOULD FIRE HER."

"YES, THEY SHOULD."

"THERE'S SUPPOSED TO BE BEVERAGE SERVICE."

"MISS??"

It's a good thing for society in general that I'm not a flight attendant, because I would definitely kill somebody no later than my second day. Recently, I sat on a bumpy, crowded flight and watched a 40-ish flight attendant, both arms occupied with a large stack of used dinner trays, struggling down the aisle, trying to maintain her balance, and a young man held out his coffee cup, blocking her path, and in a loud, irritated voice said, quote: "Hon? Can I get a refill Like maybe today, Hon?"

She smiled—not with her eyes—and said, "I'll be with you as soon as I can, sir."

Sir.

Oh, I'd be with him soon, all right. I'd come up behind him and strangle him with the movie-headphone cord. "Is that tight enough for you, sir" would be the last words he'd ever hear. Then I'd become a legendary outlaw flight attendant. I'd hide in the overhead luggage compartment and watch for problems, such as people flying with small children and making no effort to control them, people who think it's cute when their children shriek and pour salad dressing onto other passengers. When this

happened, BANG, the luggage compartment would burst open and out would leap: the Avenging Flight Attendant of Doom, his secret identity concealed by a mask made from a barf bag with holes in it. He'd snatch the child and say to the parents, very politely, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations require me to have this child raised by somebody more civilized, such as wolves." If they tried to stop him, he'd pin them in their seats with dense, 200-pound airline omelets.

Insane? Yes, I'm insane, and you would be, too, if you were listening to these two women.

"MISS??" they are saying. "IT'S TOO HOT IN HERE."

"CAN WE GET SOME BEVERAGE SERVICE?"

"MISS?"

And now the pilot is making an announcement. "Well, folks" is how he starts. This is a bad sign. They always start with "Well, folks" when they're going to announce something bad, as in: "Well, folks, if we dump the fuel, we might be able to glide as far as the mainland."

This time the pilot announces that—I swear I am not making this up—lightning has struck the control tower.

"We could be sitting here for some time," he says.

"MISS?????" say the women in front of me.

No problem. I can handle it. I'll just stay calm, reach into the seat pocket, very slowly pull out the headphone cord ...

The Great Mall Of China

The World's Great Capitalists Market to the Old Butchers Who Run China.

They've Promised to Be Nice.

If you listen hard, as you wander around Hong Kong, you can almost hear the clock.

Tick tick tick tick tick, it says, over the rushed city sounds of the traffic, the boats, the people.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

Get ready. It's coming.

Midnight, June 30, 1997. This will be a very big day for Hong Kong. The biggest ever. Hotel space is already selling out. A lot of people want to be there, to remember what Hong Kong was, to get a glimpse of what it will be.

Then the sightseers will check out and go home, leaving Hong Kong to face ... whatever comes next. Nobody knows for sure what it will be. But it's coming.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

Some background. Although Hong Kong is geographically part of China, right now it's a colony of Great Britain. This arrangement dates back to the 19th-century Opium Wars, which you recall from your high school World History class.

You liar. Probably the only event you remember from World History class is the time Jeffrey Brunderman made a spitball so large that he couldn't get it out of his mouth without emergency medical assistance. To refresh your memory: In the early 19th century, British traders were making big money getting opium from India and selling it, illegally, in China. In 1839, the Chinese emperor tried to put a stop to this. Britain, which at the time had a vast empire and a major butt-kicking navy, was outraged that some pissant emperor would dare to interfere with the activities of legitimate British businessmen

just because they were smuggling drugs.

So Britain sent a fleet to attack. The Chinese were quickly defeated and forced to sign a treaty under which, among other things, Britain got Hong Kong. Over the years Britain added more land to the Hong Kong colony which is ruled by a governor appointed by the crown. Historically, the Hong Kong residents, who are overwhelmingly Chinese, have had virtually no say in their government.

But for a long time Hong Kong didn't concern itself much with politics, because there was a lot of money to be made. There still is. Hong Kong today is a major international trade and financial center. It's a busy place—410

square miles supporting six million people, most of them jammed together around the spectacular, hard-working Hong Kong harbor, which we travel writers are required, by law, to describe as “teeming.”

And it is teeming. All day, all night, the dirty brown water is churned

by boats, all sizes and shapes, barely missing each other as they bustle in all directions on urgent boat errands. Many are ferryboats, which cross the harbor constantly, carrying the teeming masses of people—mostly well-dressed, prosperous-looking people—to and from the downtown business district, which looks like a full-size version of an Epcot Center scale model of the City of Tomorrow: dozens of breathtakingly tall, shiny, modernistic buildings, none of which appears to be more than a few days old, with newer ones constantly going up. Connecting these buildings, over the teeming streets, are teeming walkways, which lead to vast, staggeringly opulent shopping centers with gleaming floors and spotless stores teeming with cameras, electronics, silks, jewelry, and other luxury items of all kinds.

This is not a place for quiet reflection. This is the Ultimate Shopping Mall. This is a place where everything is for sale, and you can bargain your brains out. This is a place where you can feel your credit cards teeming in your wallet, hear their squeaky little plastic voices calling, “Let us out! Let us OUT!!” This is a place so rich and modern and fast-paced and sophisticated that it makes New York seem like a dowdy old snooze of a town.

In short, this is a place that screams: “We’re RICH, SUCCESSFUL CAPITALISTS, and we’re DAMNED PROUD OF IT!”

And on June 30, 1997, Britain is going to give it all—the whole marvelous money machine, and all its human dependents—to the People’s Republic of China. China has long claimed that Britain has no right to Hong Kong, and in 1984, after much negotiation between the two nations, Britain agreed to get out in 1997.

So in a little over five years, the people of Hong Kong—Who never got to vote on any of this—will simply be handed over to China, as though they were some kind of commodity, nothing but a load of pork bellies being traded. The Chinese leaders have promised that they won’t make any drastic changes in Hong Kong, but nobody believes this. These are, after all, the same fun dudes who gave us the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

So today Hong Kong is nervous. People with money or connections are fleeing by the thousands. But millions more can’t leave, or don’t want to abandon their homeland. They’re staying, and waiting. Nobody is sure what’s coming, but it’s definitely coming. Five years. About 2,000 days, and counting. This knowledge hangs over Hong Kong like a fog, giving the city an edgy, quietly desperate, Casablanca-like feel.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

Or maybe not. Maybe my imagination was just hyperactive from drinking San Miguel beer on a

moody gray day and watching the harbor being whipped into whitecaps by a typhoon named-really-Fred. The truth is that, most of the time, daily Hong Kong life seemed pretty normal. People were teeming and working and shopping and eating and laughing just the way people would if they weren't doomed to be turned over to a group of hard-eyed old murderers.

While my family and I were there, in August, the big news story, aside from Typhoon Fred, was the trial of Hong Kong businessman Chin Chiming, accused of blackmailing actresses into having sex with him. The Hong Kong media was covering the heck out of this trial. Here's an excerpt from the South China Morning Post story concerning a witness identified as "Mrs. D" being cross-examined by defense attorney Kevin Egan:

Mr. Egan started by asking Mrs. D if she had noticed whether Chin's organ was erect while they were in bed. The witness said it was.

Mr. Egan then asked if it was "fully" erect, but prosecutor, Mr. Stuart Cotsen, objected to the question on the grounds that the witness could not be expected to know.

Mr. Egan said the objection meant he had to ask the witness to describe Chin's sexual organ as fully as possible.

So apparently life goes on in Hong Kong. I highly recommend it as a travel destination, at least until 1997, although you may feel a little intimidated by the crowds until you learn how to teem. You have to get your elbows into it. I learned this one afternoon when we decided to take a ferry to Macao, which is the other non-Communist territory in China, about 40 miles west of Hong Kong. Macao is an old colony belonging to Portugal, which will turn it over to China in 1999. Gambling is legal in Macao, and a lot of Hong Kong residents regularly teem over there on ferries and go to the casinos.

One day we went over, and when our ferry landed, the other passengers tried to kill us. OK, technically they weren't trying to kill us; they were trying to be first in line to get through Immigration and Customs. But they did not hesitate to shove us violently out of the way. We were bouncing around like kernels in a popcorn maker and quickly became separated. Occasionally, through the crowd, I'd see my wife and son, expressions of terror on their faces, being jostled off in the general direction of the Philippines.

I tried being polite. "Hey!" I said to a middle-age, polite-looking man behind me who was thoughtfully attempting to hasten my progress by jabbing me repeatedly in the spine with his umbrella tip. "Excuse me! I SAID EXCUSE ME, DAMMIT!"

But we quickly learned that the only way to function in these crowds was to teem right along with everybody else. When it came time to purchase return ferry tickets, I was practically a professional. I got into the "line," which was a formless, milling mass of people, and I leaned hard in the general direction of the ticket window. I finally got close to it, and it was clearly my turn to go next, when an old man—he had to be at least 75—started making a strong move around me from my left. I had a definite age and size advantage, but this man was good. He shoved his right elbow deep into my gut while he reached his left arm out to grasp the ticket window ledge. I leaned hard on the man sideways, and then—you can't teach this kind of thing; you have to have an instinct for it—I made a beautiful counterclockwise spin move that got me to the window inches ahead of him. I stuck my face smack up against the window, confident I had won, but then the old man, showing great resourcefulness, stuck his head under my arm and shoved his face into the window, too. We were cheek to cheek, faces against the glass, mouths gaping and eyes bulging like two crazed carp, shouting ticket orders. Unfortunately he was shouting in Chinese, which gave him the advantage, and he got his ticket first. But I was definitely making progress.

However, I never really did adjust to Chinese food. I like Chinese food the way they make it here in the U.S., where you order from an English menu and the dishes have reassuring names such as “sweet and sour pork” and you never see what the food looked like before it was killed and disassembled. This is not the kind of Chinese food that actual Chinese people eat. For one thing, before they order something at a restaurant, they like to see the prospective entree demonstrate its physical fitness by swimming or walking around.

One afternoon we were wandering through the narrow, zigzagging (and of course teeming) side streets of Macao, and we came to a group of small stalls and shops; in front of each one were stacks of big glass tanks containing murky water filled with squirming populations of fish, eels, squids, turtles, etc. At first we thought we’d entered the Aquarium Supplies District, but then we saw tables behind the tanks, and we realized that these were all restaurants. People were eating these things. You, the diner, would select the eel that you felt best exemplified whatever qualities are considered desirable in an eel, such as a nice, even coating of slime, and the restaurant owner would haul it out of the tank so you could take a closer look, and if it met with your approval—WHACK—dinner would be served.

We walked by one restaurant just as a man reached into a tank and hauled out what looked like the world’s biggest newt. It had legs and a tail and buggy eyes, and I swear it was the size of a small dog. The man displayed it to some diners, who looked at this thing, thrashing around inches from their faces, and instead of sprinting to a safe distance, as I definitely would have, they were nodding thoughtfully, the way you might approve a bottle of Chablis.

A few minutes later, we came to a larger restaurant that had an elaborate window display, with colored spotlights shining on an arrangement of strange, triangular, withered, vaguely evil-looking things.

Shark fins,” said my wife, who reads all the guidebooks. “They’re very popular.”

At least they were dead. Around the corner we found another restaurant window display, consisting of a jar full of—I am not making this up—snakes.

“Come on in!” was the basic message of this display. “Have some snake!”

So as you can imagine we were a tad reluctant to eat local cuisine. But one night in Hong Kong we decided to give it a try, and we asked a bouncer outside a bar to recommend a medium-priced Chinese restaurant. He directed us down a side street to a little open-air place decorated in a design motif that I would call “about six old card tables.” Several men were eating out of

bowls. We sat down, and the waitress, a jolly woman who seemed vastly amused by our presence, rooted around and found a beat-up hand-written English menu for us. Here are some of the entrees it listed:

Ox Offal and Noodle Sea Blubber Sliced Cuttle Fish Sliced Pork’s Skin Pig’s Trotters Clam’s Meat Goose’s Intestines Preserved Pig’s Blood

Using our fluent gesturing skills, we communicated that we wanted chicken, beef, and pork, but definitely not Preserved Pig’s Blood. We also ordered a couple of beers, which the waitress brought out still attached to the plastic six-pack holder. Our food arrived maybe a minute later, and the waitress stayed to watch us eat it. Several of the other diners also got up and gathered around, laughing and gesturing. We were big entertainment.

My dish, which was probably pork, tasted pretty good. My son refused to eat his dish, which I would describe as “chicken parts not really cooked.” My wife’s dish was apparently the beef; she said it was OK, although it was very spicy and caused her nose to run. There were no napkins, but the restaurant did provide a tabletop roll of toilet paper in a nice ceramic dispenser, which we thought was a classy

touch. The whole meal, including a generous tip, cost about eight U.S. dollars. We were glad we hadn't asked the bouncer to recommend an inexpensive restaurant.

I should stress here that Hong Kong is famous for fine dining, and has a mind-boggling array of restaurants offering a vast variety of cuisines, including many that even provincial wussies like ourselves can eat. I should also stress that there are other things to do in Hong Kong besides eat and shop. You can ride the ferries, which are cheap and romantic and exciting. You can teem around the streets and pretend that you are some kind of slick international businessperson. You can take a tram that seems to go straight up the side of a mountain—in the old days, Chinese servants used to carry their British masters up this mountain on sedan chairs—and look down on an indescribably glorious view of the city and harbor, and be moved to say, in unison with 350 other tourists, “Look at that VIEW!” And you can take a day trip to the People's Republic of China, future landlords of Hong Kong. We took such a trip. Here's how it went:

HONG KONG, 7 A.M.

The tour-company bus picks us up at our hotel early on a day that promises to be rainy and blustery, thanks to the tail end of Typhoon Fred. We're each given a sticker to wear on our clothing; it has the name of the tour company and the words “IF NOT PICKED, CALL 544-5656.” At various other hotels we gather the rest of our group, about 20 people from the U.S., Australia, and England. We're taken to a ferry terminal, where we stand next to a sign that says BEWARE YOUR OWN PROPERTY, waiting for our guide.

“Don't lose your sticker,” an American man is saying to his family. “If you lose your sticker, you have to stay in China.” This is of course a joke, we hope.

Finally, our guide arrives—a very tall, thin, easygoing young Hong Kong man who says we should call him Tommy. (We found that guides identified themselves to us by Western nicknames, on the assumption, no doubt correct, that we'd have trouble pronouncing their real names.) Tommy briefs us on our itinerary.

“Because we have only one day to see China, maybe our tour will be a little bit rushed,” he points out.

After an hour's ride on a hydrofoil ferry, we arrive in the People's Republic at a city called Shekou, which Tommy tells us means “mouth of the snake.” We line up to go through Immigration and Customs, next to signs warning us not to try to bring in any hot peppers or eggplants. I personally would not dream of attempting such a thing. God knows what this country does to eggplant smugglers.

Next to the Immigration area is a counter where you can buy duty-free cognac and American cigarettes. This strikes us as a pretty decadent enterprise for the People's Republic to be engaging in.

Outside Customs Tommy introduces us to another guide, John, who'll be escorting us around the People's Republic in an aging bus driven by Bill. John is an earnest young man who possesses many facts about the People's Republic and an uncontrollable urge to repeat them. He tells us that our first stop is a museum where we'll see the World Famous Terra Cotta Warriors and Horses, which have been called—at least 20 times in our tour bus alone—“The Eighth Wonder of the World.” These are life-size clay statues of horses and warriors; 8,000 of these statues were buried with a Chinese emperor in 221 B. C., to protect him. This was before the invention of burglar alarms.

A few dozen statues have been placed on display in the Shekou museum, which is actually the second floor of a commercial-type building. On the first floor is a store that sells industrial equipment; the window has a nice display entitled “Compressed Air Breathing Apparatus.”

The museum itself, in terms of space allocation, is about 25 percent exhibit and 75 percent gift

shops. Aside from our group, the only visitors are sticker-wearing tourists from other tour buses. We look briefly at the exhibit of World Famous Terra Cotta Warriors and Horses, then browse through a half-dozen shops selling jewelry, silks, jade, souvenirs, postcards, and other authentic cultural items. Your money or credit cards are more than welcome here in the People's Republic.

Back on the bus, John informs us, over and over, that Shekou is part of a Special Economic Zone that the People's Republic has set up to encourage economic development. The relatively few Chinese who are lucky enough to live inside the Special Economic Zone, he says, are allowed to engage in all kinds of wild and crazy economic activities such as actually choosing their own jobs and maybe even own small businesses—in short, they're totally free to do just about anything except say or do the wrong thing, in which case they'll be run over by tanks. (John doesn't state this last part explicitly.)

John also discusses the plan for the “recovery” of Hong Kong in 1997.

“Hong Kong will enjoy a high degree of autonomous,” he assures us.

Our next stop is what John calls the “free market,” which turns out to be a line of about 25 fruit vendors who are aiding in the development of the Chinese economy by selling apples and pears to busloads of sticker-wearing tourists for what I suspect is 10 times the local price. We dutifully file off the bus in a pelting rain and walk over to the vendors, who are attracting us via the marketing technique of waving pieces of fruit and shouting “Hello!” Being a savvy free-market Westerner, I am able, using shrewd bargaining techniques, to purchase an apple for what I later calculate is two American dollars.

Back on the bus, John starts reviewing the concept of the Special Economic Zone for the benefit of those who missed it the first five or six times. This gives me an opportunity to stare out the window in terror at the traffic. China has achieved a totally free-market traffic system, as far as I can tell. There are virtually no traffic lights, and apparently anybody is allowed to drive anywhere, in any direction. Everybody is constantly barging in front of everybody else, missing each other by molecules. The only law seems to be that if your horn works, you have to provide clear audible proof of this at least once every 30 seconds.

If you didn't know that Shekou was a Special Economic Zone, you probably wouldn't be very impressed by it. The buildings are mostly grim, industrial, and dirty; many seem to be crumbling. The roads are uneven, sometimes dirt, always potholed. But this area is turning into a manufacturing monster. Encouraged by the Chinese government, many foreign companies have located factories here, and China now exports more than \$60 billion worth of goods a year. The United States buys a quarter of this, all kinds of items, including a tenth of our shoes and a third of our toys. They are big-time, Most-Favored-Nation trading partners of ours, the Chinese.

Our tour does not include a manufacturing stop. Instead we go to what John says is the largest kindergarten in Shekou, where we're going to see the children put on a show. We arrive just as another group of sticker-wearers is leaving. We sit on tiny chairs, and a dozen heart-rendingly cute children, even cuter than the animated figures in the It's a Small World After All boat ride, play instruments and dance for us while we take pictures like crazy. Fond memories of the People's Republic.

As we leave, we learn that school isn't actually in session; the children are here just to entertain the tourists.

Getting back on the bus, my son has an insight. “Really,” he says, “all kids are in a communism country, because they have to obey orders and they get pushed around.”

I agree that this is true, but he will still have to take out the garbage.

Now John is telling us how this city came to be called “the mouth of the snake.” It's a long, old legend

involving a snake that came here on a rainy day and turned into a beautiful woman (why not?), and a man lent her his umbrella, and they fell in love, and then needless to say this attracted the attention of the Underwater Dragon King. It's a very complex legend, and I hope there isn't going to be a quiz. Outside the window we see a large group of dogs, all tethered to a post, looking around with the standard earnest, vaguely cheerful dog expression. Some men are looking the dogs over, the way supermarket shoppers look over tomatoes. John is back on the endlessly fascinating topic of the Special Economic Zone, telling us how many square kilometers it is. This is not what I'm wondering about. What I'm wondering is: Are they going to eat those dogs? But I don't ask, because I don't really want to know. Now we're going through a security checkpoint, leaving the Special Economic Zone and its many freedoms. Now we're in the real People's Republic, which makes the Special Economic Zone look like Epcot Center. Everywhere there are half-finished buildings, seemingly abandoned years ago in midconstruction, some of them with laundry hanging in them. There are also people everywhere, but nobody seems to be doing anything. I admit this is purely an impression, but it's a strong one. The primary activities seem to be:

1. Seeing how many bundles you can pile on a bicycle and still ride it, and
2. Sitting around.

We go through a line of tollbooths—our booth was manned by six people—and get on an extremely surreal expressway. Picture a major, semi-modern, four-lane, interstate-type highway, except that it has every kind of vehicle—mostly older trucks and buses, but also motorcycles, tractors, bicycles with bundles piled incredibly high, even hand-drawn carts. Also you come across the occasional water buffalo, wandering along. Yes! Water buffalo! On the interstate! Bear in mind that this is the industrially advanced region of China.

Of course, all the vehicles, including the water buffalo, freely use both lanes. So our bus is constantly weaving and honking, accelerating to a top speed of about 45 miles per hour, then suddenly dropping to zero. We pass a truck with a flat tire; somebody has removed the wheel and thoughtfully left it in the traffic lane. We pass an overturned pig truck, with the pigs still in it, looking concerned. A group of people has gathered to sit around and watch. We pass two more overturned trucks, each of which has also attracted a seated audience. Maybe at some point the trucks here just spontaneously leap up and right themselves, and nobody wants to miss it.

All the while, John is talking about square kilometers and metric tons, but we tourists are not paying attention. We're staring out the window, fascinated by the highway drama.

After about an hour we arrive in Dongguang, where we're going to stop for lunch.

"People here like to eat poisonous snakes," John informs us. This makes me nervous about what we're having for lunch, especially after the scene with the dogs. Plus, I can't help thinking about an alarming development in Chinese cuisine that I read about a few days earlier in a newspaper story, which I will quote from here:

Beijing (AP)—Health officials closed down 92 restaurants in a single city (Luoyang) for putting opium poppy pods in food served to customers, an official newspaper has reported ... in an attempt to get customers addicted to their food ... health officials started getting suspicious when they saw that some noodle shops and food stalls were attracting long lines of customers while others nearby did little business.

So I'm concerned that they're going to offer us some delicacy whose name translates to "Poodle and Viper Stew with 'Can't Say No' Noodles." I'm relieved when John tells us we're having Peking

Duck. We pull up to a hotel and enter the dining room, where, lo and behold, we find that we'll be dining with the very same sticker-wearing people that we encountered at the museum, the free market, and the kindergarten. This is indeed an amazing coincidence, when you consider how big China reportedly is.

The Peking Duck is pretty good, but not plentiful, only a couple of small pieces per person. John informs us that in China, when you eat Peking Duck, you eat only the skin.

"Sure," mutters an Australian woman at our table. "And they'll tell the next group that you eat only the meat."

After lunch we're back on the bus, on the road to the major city of Guangzhou, which most Westerners know as Canton. John is pointing out that we are passing many shops, which is true, but the vast majority of them seem to be either (a) permanently under construction or (b) selling used tires.

In a few minutes we encounter dramatic proof that China's population is 1.1 billion: At least that many people are in a traffic jam with us. I have never seen a traffic jam like this—a huge, confused, gear-grinding, smoke-spewing, kaleidoscopic mass of vehicles, on the road and on the shoulders, stretching for miles and miles, every single driver simultaneously honking and attempting to change lanes. Our driver, Bill, puts on a wondrous show of skill, boldly bluffing other drivers, displaying lightning reflexes and great courage, aiming for spaces that I would not have attempted in a go-kart. Watching him, we passengers become swept up in the drama, our palms sweating each time he makes yet another daring, seemingly impossible move that will, if it succeeds, gain us maybe two whole feet.

We pass an exciting hour and a half this way, finally arriving at the source of the problem, which is, needless to say, a Repair Crew. Providing security are a half-dozen men who look like police officers or soldiers, standing around smoking and talking, ignoring the crazed traffic roiling past them. The work crew itself consists of eight men, seven of whom are watching one man, who's sitting in the middle of the highway holding a hammer and a chisel. As we inch past, this man is carefully positioning the chisel on a certain spot on the concrete. It takes him a minute or so to get it exactly where he wants it, then, with great care, he raises the hammer and strikes the chisel. I can just barely hear the ping over the sound of the honking. The man lifts the chisel up to evaluate the situation. I estimate that, barring unforeseen delays, this particular repair job should easily be completed in 12,000 years. These guys are definitely qualified to do highway repair in the U.S.

We are running late when we get to Canton, where we have a happy reunion with our fellow sticker-wearing, museum-going duck-skin-eaters from the other buses at the Canton Zoo. I don't want to sound like a broken record here, but this is a grim and seedy zoo, an Animal's Republic of China, all cracked concrete and dirty cages. The other zoo-goers seem more interested in us tourists than in the animals, staring as we pass. We're shepherded to the pandas and the monkeys, then into a special, foreigners-only area to buy souvenirs. I buy my son a little green hat styled like the one Chairman Mao used to wear, with a red star on the front. Radical chic.

Back on the bus, we drive through Canton's streets, which are teeming with people on bicycles, forming major bicycle traffic jams. Imagine all the bicycles in the world, then double this amount, and you have an idea of Canton at rush hour. We pass a large market, where, John assures us, you can buy any kind of snake you want. Fortunately, we don't stop; we're going to see the Temple of the Six Banyans, which no longer has any banyans, although it does have three large brass statues of Buddha, which John claims are the largest brass Buddha statues in Guangzhou Province, and I don't doubt it for a minute. Next we head for the Dr. Stin Yat-Sen Memorial Hall, which is quite impressive and which

boasts the largest brass statue of any kind in Guangzhou Province. Out front is a sign recounting the hall's history in English, including this mysterious sentence: "In 1988, the Guangzhou municipality had allocated funds for get rid of the hidden electrical danger in the hall Comprehensively."

Next we're scheduled to see the Statue of the Five Goats, but we're running out of time, which is a shame because I'm sure it's the largest statue of the five goats in Guangzhou Province. Instead we go to the Hotel of the Western-Style Toilets, the lobby of which is bustling with sticker-wearers rushing to get to the restrooms and back to the buses. There's only one more train back to Hong Kong tonight, and nobody wants to miss it.

We reach the train station in a heavy downpour. Led by our Hong Kong guide, Tommy, we press our way through the crowds to the security checkpoint, then board Train No. 97 for Hong Kong. It's a fascinating train, a long way from the sterile, snack-bar ambience of Amtrak. Train No. 97 has funky old coaches with wide aisles, through which women push carts offering food, drinks, snacks, and duty-free cognac. The train also has a crowded, smoky dining car, a kitchen, people in uniform watching you, people who are not in uniform but are still watching you, and various little rooms and passages with people going in and out. It's a mysterious little world unto itself, Train No. 97. Walking through the rocking cars as night falls over the rice paddies outside, I feel like a character in a melodrama. The Last Train to Hong Kong. Two of my fellow sticker-wearers walk past me, smiling, one of them wearing a souvenir Mao-style hat. This is cool, being on a train in Red China. As long as you can get out.

In three hours we're back in Hong Kong, which felt so foreign this morning but which now feels familiar and safe, like Des Moines. I rip my sticker off, a free man. I still don't know anything about China. I'm just one more superficial sheep-like bus-riding tourist. But I know this: I don't want to be in Hong Kong after June 30, 1997.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

As we're saying good-bye to Tommy, I ask him what he's going to do. He answers instantly.

"I'm going to marry a Westerner and get out of here," he says. He's laughing, but I'm not sure that he's kidding.

The next morning we read in the Hongkong Standard about two things that happened on the day we were in China:

* The chief of public security for the area we visited was executed. He'd been found guilty of corruption the previous day (none of those pesky appeals in the People's Republic). Among other things, he accepted bribes in exchange for letting people get out of China.

* In Beijing, the People's Daily ran a front-page editorial calling for a "great wall of iron" to protect China from "hostile forces," particularly democracy. The editorial said that if China's 1989 prodemocracy movement had succeeded, it would have been a catastrophe for the people and a step back for history."

Those wild and crazy Chinese leaders! Those happy-go-lucky, fun-loving, Most-Favored-Nation guys! They're going to have a ball with Hong Kong. My advice is, see it while you can.

Tick tick tick tick tick ...

And if anybody out there is in the market for a tall, likable English-speaking Chinese husband, I know of a guy who might be available.

Haute Holes

You'll be pleased to learn that I have thought up yet another way to revive our nation's sagging economy by making myself rich.

To understand my concept, you need to be aware of an important fashion trend sweeping the entire nation (defined as "parts of New York and San Francisco"). Under this trend, sophisticated urban persons, seeking leisure wear, are purchasing used, beat-up, worn, ripped, raggedy cowboy garments that were previously owned by actual cowboys. People are actually paying more for damaged cowboy jeans than for new ones.

I found out about this trend through the alertness of reader Suzanne Hough, who sent me an article by Maria Recio of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. The article states that used cowboy jeans are selling briskly at \$50 a pair in San Francisco and \$65 a pair in New York. The ones with holes are considered most desirable. Here are two quotes about this trend from the article:

FROM THE OWNER OF A NEW YORK CITY STORE THAT SELLS THE JEANS: "It gives a bit of romance."

FROM AN ACTUAL TEXAS COWBOY: "It sounds pretty stupid."

Of course it is exactly this shortsighted lack of fashion consciousness on the part of cowboys that keeps them stuck in dead-end jobs where they must become involved with actual cows. Meanwhile your fashion visionaries such as Mr. Ralph "Hombre" Lauren—people who truly understand the spirit of the West—have made so much money in recent years selling designer lines of Pretend Cowboy clothing that they can afford to build large tasteful pretend ranch estates with color-coordinated sagebrush.

But now we have gone, as a nation, beyond Pretend Cowboy fashions, and into Formerly Real Cowboy fashions. I called several stores, and they told me the demand for used jeans is very strong.

"People want holes in the knees, crotch, and buns," stated Murray Selkow, a Philadelphia native who now owns the Wild Wild West store in San Francisco. "What's very popular is two tears right at the bottom of the buns."

To locate the source of cowboy jeans I called Montana, a large cow-intensive state located near Canada. I spoke with Judy MacFarlane, who owns a company called Montana Broke, located outside a small town called (really) Manhattan. She buys used jeans from cowboys and sells them to stores such as Wild Wild West.

"I will not accept any jeans unless they're from a bona fide cattle rancher, rodeo rider, or sheriff's posseman," she told me. She said each pair of Montana Broke jeans comes with a label explaining the occupation of the cowboy who owned it, plus a "Tracking Guide," which shows the purchaser how to figure out which specific cowboy activities caused the various holes, stains, and worn spots on the jeans. I'm sure this provides hours of enjoyment for urban professionals, who, after a hard day of wrangling sales reports, can mosey back to their condominiums, rustle up a mess o' sushi, and spend an old-fashioned Western-style evening analyzing their jean damage. ("Oh, look, Jennifer! This brown mark on the knee occurred when the cowboy branded a calf! Or fell into a cow pie!" "Oh, Brad! That just makes me want to roll back the Oriental rug and initiate a hoedown!")

This trend is not limited to jeans. The store owners I talked to said there is also a strong demand for used cowboy jackets, shirts, boots, and hats. This leads me to my money-making idea, which is going to seem so obvious when I tell you that you're going to smack yourself in the forehead for not thinking of it first. My idea is to sell used cowboy underwear by mail. Don't laugh. This is the logical next step, and I'm going to be out front on it. My brand will be called: Buckaroo Briefs. Each brief will come with an authentic piece of old-looking paper with a diagram explaining how the briefs came to look the way they

do (“This particular stain occurred when the cowboy got chased by a bull”).

The only problem I see, looking ahead, is that with the increasing big-city demand for authentic Western garments of all kinds, and the relatively small number of actual rural Westerners, we’re going to reach a point fairly soon where the entire population of Montana is running around naked. Fortunately, I’ve thought of a way to solve this problem via ANOTHER money-making concept, namely: Sell urban professionals’ used business attire to cowboys. Why not? Cowboys in suits! Carrying their lassos in briefcases! It might catch on. You could probably even charge them more for the suits with really exciting histories (“This rip occurred when Thad, rushing to an important budget meeting, caught his sleeve on the fax machine”).

Pretty sharp idea, huh? I don’t see how it can miss. The only possible flaw is that cowboys are not nearly stupid enough to pay extra for somebody else’s used and damaged clothing. I doubt that even the cows are.

Courtroom Confessions

Like most people, I can always use an extra \$7 or \$8 million, which is why today I have decided to write a blockbuster legal thriller.

Americans buy legal thrillers by the ton. I was in many airports over the past few months, and I got the impression that aviation authorities were making this announcement over the public-address system: “FEDERAL REGULATIONS PROHIBIT YOU FROM BOARDING A PLANE UNLESS YOU ARE CARRYING THE CLIENT BY JOHN GRISHAM.” I mean, everybody had this book. (“This is the captain speaking. We’ll be landing in Seattle instead of Detroit because I want to finish *The Client*.”)

The ironic thing is that best-selling legal thrillers generally are written by lawyers, who are not famous for written communication. I cite as Exhibit A my own attorney, Joseph DiGiacinto, who is constantly providing me with shrewd advice that I cannot understand because Joe has taken the legal precaution of translating it into Martian. Usually, when people send you a fax, they send a cover page on top of it, which conveys the following information: “Here’s a fax for (your name).” But Joe’s cover page features a statement approximately the length of the U.S. Constitution, worded so legally that I can’t look directly at it without squinting. It says something like: “WARNING: The following document and all appurtenances thereto and therein are the sole and exclusionary property of the aforementioned (hereinafter ‘The Mortgagee’) and may not be read, touched, spindled, fondled or rebroadcast without the expressively written consent of Major league Baseball, subject to severe legal penalties (hereinafter ‘The Blowtorch Noogie’) this means YOU.”

And that’s just Joe’s cover page. Nobody has ever dared to read one of his actual faxes, for fear of being immediately thrown into prison.

Nevertheless, some lawyers are hugely successful writers, and I intend to cash in on this. I am not, technically, a lawyer, but I did watch numerous episodes of “Perry Mason,” and on one occasion, when I got a traffic ticket, I represented myself in court, successfully pleading *nolo contendere* (Latin, meaning “Can I pay by check?”). So I felt well qualified to write the following blockbuster legal thriller and possible movie screenplay:

Chapter One

The woman walked into my office, and I instantly recognized her as Clarissa Fromage, charged with murdering her late husband, wealthy industrial polluter A. Cranston “Bud” Fromage, whose death was originally reported as a heart attack but later ruled a homicide when sophisticated laboratory tests showed that his head had been cut off.

“So,” she said. “You’re a young Southern lawyer resembling a John Grisham protagonist as much as possible without violating the copyright.”

“That’s right,” I replied. “Perhaps we can have sex.”

“Not in the first chapter,” she said.

Chapter Two

“Ohhhhhhh,” she cried out. “OOOHMIGOD.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but that’s my standard hourly fee.”

Chapter Three

The courtroom tension was so palpable that you could feel it.

“Detective Dungman,” said the district attorney, “please tell the jury what you found inside the defendant’s purse on the night of the murder.”

“Tic-Tacs,” said Dungman.

“Was there anything else?”

“No, I can’t think of ... Wait a minute. Now that you mention it, there was something.”

“What was it?”

“A chain saw.”

A murmur ran through the courtroom and, before the bailiff could grab it, jumped up and bit Judge Webster M. Tuberhonker on the nose. “That’s going to hurt,” I told my client.

Chapter Four

With time running out on the case, we returned to my office for a scene involving full frontal nudity.

Chapter Five

A hush fell over the courtroom, injuring six, as I approached the witness.

“Dr. Feldspar,” I said. “You are an expert, are you not?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“And you are familiar with the facts of this case, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“And you are aware that, as a trained attorney, I can turn statements into questions by ending them

with ‘are you not,’ are you not?”

“Yes.”

“And is it not possible that, by obtaining genetic material from fossils, scientists could clone NEW dinosaurs?”

“OBJECTION!” thundered the district attorney. “He’s introducing the plot from the blockbuster science thriller and motion picture Jurassic Park!”

The judge frowned at me over his spectacles. “In the movie,” he said, “whom do you see playing the defendant in Chapter Four?”

“Sharon Stone,” I answered.

“I’ll allow it.”

Chapter Six

“And so, ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” I said, “only ONE PERSON could have committed this murder, and that person is ...”

The guilty party suddenly jumped up, causing the courtroom to nearly spit out its chewing gum.

“THAT’S RIGHT!” the guilty party shouted. “I DID IT, AND I’M GLAD!”

It was Amy Fisher.

Reader Alert

Except for the column about zebra mussels clinging to the giant brassiere, this next section is about boating. I own a motorboat, named Buster, who appears a couple of times in this section. In fact, Buster appears in this section considerably more often than he appears in the actual water. Buster spends most of his time sitting in my driveway. Every now and then I’ll try to start him, thereby causing a couple of his key engine parts to fall off. Then I call the smiling mechanic, who tows Buster away, fixes him, and tows him back to my driveway, where he (Buster) sits for a couple of months, chuckling softly and slowly working his engine parts loose for the next time that I try to start him. The sea: It’s my life.

Over His Head

Summer is here again, and as the official spokesperson for the recreational boating industry, I’ve been asked to remind you that boating is a fun and relaxing family activity with very little likelihood that your boat will sink and you’ll wind up bobbing helplessly in the water while sharks chew on your legs as if they were a pair of giant Slim Jims, provided that you follow proper nautical procedures.

Fortunately, I can tell you what these procedures are, because I am a veteran “salt” and the owner of a small motorboat, named Buster Boat. I spend many happy hours at Buster’s helm, and I always feel totally safe, because I know that (a) most nautical dangers can be avoided through careful preparation, good seamanship, and common sense; and (b) Buster is sitting on a trailer in my yard. The biggest danger there is spiders, which like to make webs on Buster’s seats because they’ve figured out that,

statistically, Buster is less likely to wind up in the water than our house is.

Sometimes, when I'm sitting at the helm, killing spiders with the anchor, scanning the horizon of my yard for potential boating hazards, I turn on Buster's radio and listen to the Marine Forecast, which is always saying things like: "Barometer leaning to the southwest at 15 to 37 knots." As a recreational boater, you should be familiar with these nautical terms. For example, a "knot" means about a mile an hour." There is a sound nautical reason why they don't come right out and say "about a mile an hour," namely, they want you, the recreational boater, to feel stupid. They used to be less subtle about it: In the old days, the Marine Forecast consisted entirely of a guy telling recreational-boater jokes. ("How many recreational boaters does it take to screw in a light bulb?" "They can't! Sharks have chewed off their arms!")

The Marine Forecast is always telling you obvious things, such as which way the wind is blowing, which you can figure out for yourself just by watching the motion of your spider webs. They never tell you about the serious boating hazards, which are located—write down this Boating Safety Tip—under the water. It turns out that although the water is basically flat on top, underneath there are large hostile objects such as reefs and shoals (or "forecastles") that have been carelessly strewn around, often smack-dab in the path of recreational boaters.

I discovered this shocking fact recently when some friends visited us in Miami, and in a foolish effort to trick them into thinking that we sometimes go out on our boat, we actually went out on our boat. It was a good day for boating, with the barometer gusting at about 47 liters of mercury, and we had no problems until I decided to make the boat go forward. For some reason, motorboats are designed to go at only two speeds: "Virtually Stopped" and "Airborne." We were traveling along at Virtually Stopped, which seemed inadequate—barnacles were passing us—so I inched the throttle forward just a teensy bit and WHOOOOMM suddenly we were passengers on the Space Shuttle Buster. Every few feet Buster would launch himself completely out of the water and attain such an altitude that at any moment you expected flight attendants to appear with the beverage cart, and then Buster would crash down onto a particularly hard patch of water, causing our food and possessions and spiders to bounce overboard, forming a convenient trail for the sharks to follow. ("Look!" the sharks were saying. "A set of dentures! It won't be long now!")

In this relaxing and recreational manner we lurched toward downtown Miami, with me shouting out the various Points of Interest. "I THINK THAT'S A DRUG DEALER!" I would shout. Or: "THERE GOES ANOTHER POSSIBLE DRUG DEALER!" I was gesturing toward these long, sleek motorboats with about 14 engines apiece that you see roaring around the Miami waters driven by men with no apparent occupation other than polishing their neck jewelry.

So it was a pleasant tropical scene, with the wind blowing and the sea foaming and the sun glinting off the narcotics traffickers. As the captain, I was feeling that pleasant sense of well-being that comes from being in total command and not realizing that you are heading directly toward a large underwater pile of sand. I would say we hit it at about 630 knots, so that when Buster skidded to a cartoon-style stop, we were in about six inches of water, a depth that the U.S. Coast Guard recommends for craft classified as "Popsicle sticks or smaller." This meant that, to push Buster off the sand, my friend John and I had to go into the water, which lapped threateningly around our lower shins. Probably the only thing that saved our lives was that the dreaded Man-Eating But Really Flat Shark was not around.

So we did survive, and I'm already looking forward to our next recreational boating outing, possibly as soon as the next century. Perhaps, if you're a boater, you'll see me out there! I'll be the one wearing shin

guards.

Moby Dave

You can't explain it, this need that men have to go to sea. I sure can't explain it. One day it just seized me, like a case of the hives.

"Beth," I said to my wife. "Let's take Buster to Bimini."

Buster is our boat. It usually sits on a trailer in our backyard, forming an ideal natural habitat for spiders. Spiders come from as far away as Brazil to make their homes on Buster.

Bimini is a place out in the Atlantic Ocean. The main thing I knew about Bimini was that it was where Gary Hart went to establish himself as a leading former presidential contender. I wasn't even 100 percent sure what country, legally, Bimini belonged to. But I did know that people regularly went there from Miami in their boats. When I announced that I was going to Bimini, many people felt compelled to tell me confidence-building anecdotes about their trips.

"Oh, yeah," they'd say. "One time I was halfway there, and this storm came up and the wind was 83 miles an hour and there were 27-foot waves and the engine conked out and the radio broke and we all got sick and my wife suddenly went into labor even though she wasn't even pregnant and a huge tentacle came out of the water and snatched Ashley and ..."

The reason this kind of thing can happen is that, even though Bimini is only about 50 miles from Miami, to get to it you have to go right through the famous Bermuda Triangle, which is formed by drawing lines between Bermuda, the Bahamas, and my driveway. Terrible things happen constantly in this area, with I-95 being only one example. Also, flowing right through the Bermuda Triangle, between Miami and Bimini, is the famous Gulf Stream, which serves as a giant, natural rapid mass-transit system for sharks.

So I knew that, before I attempted to cross to Bimini, I had to get Buster Boat into shape. Step one was to take him to a mechanic, because several things had gone wrong with him while he'd been sitting on his trailer. This is normal. A major law of physics is that things decay faster on a boat than in any other environment. Scientists have attempted to measure this phenomenon, but their instruments keep breaking. If a screw falls off your boat, and you go to a marine-supply store to buy a replacement—which will cost you several times as much as an ordinary civilian screw, because of course it has to be a marine screw—you can sometimes see your new screw actually dissolving on the counter while you're still paying for it.

So I took Buster to the mechanic, Dan, and he got everything working, and while I was writing the check I mentioned that I was going to Bimini.

Dan gave me a concerned look.

"You're going to Bimini?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, over the sound of Buster decaying in the background.

"You better get some spare parts," he said. He started naming things like "transgressor nodule" and "three-sixteenths retribution valve." I wrote it all down, went to the marine-supply store, and dutifully purchased every item on the list, although it would have been simpler to just pick up the Big Economy Box O' Random Parts, because my mechanical skills are limited to annually installing the new registration decal on my car license plate. If Buster conked out in the Gulf Stream, I would sit in the

exact center of the boat and throw engine parts at the sharks.

But I was as ready as I was going to get. So early one Friday morning in July, Beth and I arose and—as bold seafaring people have done for thousands of years—went to a bakery. “Never attempt to cross the Gulf Stream without fresh pastries” is one of the Coast Guard’s Rules for Safe Boating. Then we drove to where we’d put Buster into the water earlier, climbed aboard, and headed out to sea, with fear in our hearts and crumbs in our laps.

At this point I need to get technical for a moment and explain how to navigate to Bimini. Bimini is roughly east of Miami, so the simplest approach would be to steer a compass course of approximately 90 degrees Fahrenheit longitude. However, you also have to consider the fact that the Gulf Stream flows northward at an average of 2.5 amps, although this varies in certain areas depending on local shark motion. And then there are your winds, your tides, your barometric pressure, your jellyfish, your big, disgusting wads of floating seaweed, and your solar eclipses, one of which had occurred the day before we left. Taking all of these factors into consideration, I examined the charts, did a few navigational calculations, and decided that the best way to get to Bimini would be to follow Steele’s boat.

Steele is Howard Steele Reeder II, a friend of ours who had graciously agreed to lead us to Bimini. He’s a boating enthusiast, although that phrase seems too weak to describe the level of his interest, kind of like describing someone as a “heroin fancier.” Steele, like most boating enthusiasts, is always in the process of simultaneously (a) fixing something on his current boat and (b) thinking about trading it in for another boat with a new and different set of decaying parts. For the Bimini voyage, he had to borrow his brother’s boat, because his own boat, which he had just bought, had already broken. Soon the marine industry will develop a boat that is prebroken right at the factory. When they finish building it, they’ll just tow it out into the middle of the Gulf Stream and sink it, then hand you the bill of sale. Boating enthusiasts will be in heaven.

On board with Steele were his wife, Babette, and another couple, Linda and Olin McKenzie. Olin is a dentist. “Never attempt to cross the Gulf Stream without a qualified dentist” is another one of the Coast Guard’s Rules for Safe Boating. Too many maritime tragedies could easily have been avoided if the victims had been more aware of the insidious dangers of plaque formation.

But the most important passenger on Steele’s boat was the Loran unit. This is a little electronic device that somehow, we think by magic, knows where Bimini is. “It’s over there!” says the Loran, via little electronic arrows. This is a truly wonderful navigational aid, and I hope that someday it will be installed in every automobile, because it would be pretty funny to see thousands of cars driving 55 miles per hour into the Atlantic Ocean.

So Steele followed the Loran, and we followed Steele, bouncing along in Buster. Buster is not one of those big, heavy, Orson Welles-style boats that plow sedately through the sea. Buster is a small, light, Richard Simmons-style boat that likes to skip gaily across the tops of the waves, churning your internal organs into pudding.

So we bounced through Biscayne Bay and out into the Atlantic. The tall buildings of downtown Miami grew smaller and smaller behind us (actually, they stayed the same size; they only appeared to get smaller, because of the Greenhouse Effect). There was nothing in front of us except water, which was dark blue, because the Gulf Stream is approximately 23.6 million feet deep. Anything could be lurking down there. There could be things down there with eyeballs the size of your entire boat. It’s best not to think about it. It’s best not to look ahead, either, because there’s an alarming quantity of nothing out there. It’s best to look wistfully back at Miami, getting smaller and smaller and smaller. At times, in the

past, I had been critical of Miami, but out there at sea I was becoming a major civic booster. I was realizing that Miami has a lot of excellent qualities, the main one being that it is not located in the Gulf Stream. If your engine breaks down in Miami, all you have to do is pull your car over to the side of the road, put the hood up, and wait for a passing motorist to take a shot at you. But that seemed safer than being out in the ocean, relying entirely on two smallish boats and a little electronic device. What if the Loran wasn't pointing us to Bimini at all? What if Steele's brother forgot to pay his loran bill, and the device, chuckling electronically to itself, was steering us to Iceland?

These thoughts ran through my mind as I munched pensively on a poppy-seed muffin and Miami got smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and finally ... Miami was gone. There was nothing behind us, nothing ahead of us, nothing on either side, except water. I didn't look down because I didn't want to catch even a glimpse of a giant eyeball. I kept my eyes Krazy Glued to the back of Steele's boat, trusting that he would ... HEY. What the hell is Steele doing? He's STOPPING! Out HERE!! "WHAT IS IT?" I shouted. "FISH!" Steele said.

That's right: There we were, in extremely deep water, completely out of sight of civilization, probably miles off course, possibly with icebergs drifting our way, and Steele and Olin had decided to try to catch fish, which are readily available in cooked form at any decent restaurant. So for the longest 10 minutes of my life, Steele and Olin fished while I circled them. I didn't dare stop Buster, for fear that he'd decide the trip was over and refuse to go again.

Finally, thank God, Olin caught a fish, which he released because it was too small. Your true sportsperson prefers a fish that is large enough so that when you cut it open, it spews slime all over the entire boat. But the fish had satisfied Olin's and Steele's urge to angle, and soon we were off again.

We bounced along for another hour, with nothing appearing on the horizon. At one point, Steele and Olin went through an elaborate pantomime for my benefit: They got out a chart, looked at it, shrugged elaborately, pointed in opposite directions, and had a big arm-waving argument. This was of course highly entertaining to me. "What a pair of wacky cut-ups!" I said to myself. "If we ever reach land, I will kill them with my emergency signal flare gun!"

Finally, after 21½ hours, which in a small, bouncing boat feels approximately as long as the Reagan administration, Steele pointed to the horizon ahead. I looked out, and experiencing the same emotion that Columbus must have felt when he first caught sight of the Statue of liberty, I saw: nothing. But a few minutes later I thought I saw something dark and low against the sky, so I strained my eyeballs and ... Yes! There it was! Bimini! Or possibly Iceland! I didn't care. At least we were somewhere.

"Good boy, Buster," I said, patting him on his compass. Praise is crucial to proper boat maintenance.

A half hour later we reached Bimini harbor, arriving at the same time as a Chalk's seaplane, which got there from Miami in about 25 minutes (this is known, among us nautical sea salts, as the Wussy Method). The harbor was full of huge recreational boats that cost millions of dollars and burn hundreds of gallons of fuel per afternoon so that sportspersons, equipped with thousands of dollars worth of tackle and tens of thousands of dollars worth of electronic equipment, can locate and sometimes even catch fish worth up to \$3.59 per pound.

A lot of people go to Bimini to find fish, especially the wily bonefish. There are many local guides who will take you out looking for bonefish; they're all nicknamed "Bonefish," as in Bonefish Willie, Bonefish Sam, Bonefish Irving, Bonefish E.E. Cummings, etc. While in Bimini I tried hard to get my traveling companions to refer to me as "Bonefish Dave," but it never caught on.

It turns out that Bimini is part of the Bahamas, which is, technically, a completely different

country. This meant that we had to go through Immigration and Customs. I have never understood the point of this process. I assume they want to make sure you're not bringing in bales of cocaine, or an undesirable person such as Charles Manson, or some agricultural threat such as the Deadly Bonefish Rot. But in most places they hardly even look at you. In Bimini they didn't even look at our boats. Instead they handed us a bunch of forms, which we spent about an hour and a half filling out and getting stamped by various uniformed officials. (They're big on stamping things; I imagine that about once a week a big ink tanker steams into the harbor to replenish the supply.)

If I designed Customs forms, they'd have questions like:

1. Are you bringing in any cocaine?
2. How about Charles Manson?

And so on. But the Bahamas' forms didn't ask anything like this. Instead, they asked—this is a real question—“Has plague occurred or been

suspected among rats or mice on board during the voyage, or has there been unusual mortality among them?” How are you supposed to answer a question like that? Go down into the bowels of the boat, locate a spokesrat or spokesmouse, and say, “Any unusual mortality around here?” So I answered: No. I figured that if Buster contained any kind of animal life, it would be spiders, and they would be too severely vibrated to cause any problems.

The worst part of the Bimini Customs and Immigration procedure was that periodically one of the officials would ask me, in front of other boaters, the name of my boat (or, as they put it, my “vessel”). The other boaters all had bold masculine boat names like Sea Biceps and Testosterone Torpedo, so I felt inadequate:

CUSTOMS OFFICIAL: What is the name of the vessel? ME (quietly): Buster Boat. CUSTOMS OFFICIAL (loudly): Buster Boat? ME (very quietly): Yes. CUSTOMS OFFICIAL: And you are the master of the vessel? ME: Well, I was steering it, yes, but I was basically following Steele, because ... CUSTOMS OFFICIAL: What is the name of the vessel again?

Finally they decided that we were not a serious threat to the Bahamian national security, so they let us in. And I'm glad they did, because Bimini is wonderful. The most wonderful thing about it is that, because of the prevailing winds, currents, tides, rum supply, etc., Bimini is located smack-dab in the center of what scientists believe to be the world's most powerful Lethargy Zone. It is extremely difficult to remain tense there. The moment you arrive, lethargy waves start washing over you, seeping into your body, turning your skeletal system into taffy. You stop worrying about things like your job, your mortgage, your kids, whether the recession will last, whether your fly is unzipped, etc. You function on a more basic level, concerning yourself with issues such as: Should I scratch my armpit now? Or later? If you stand in one place too long, you can become so relaxed that you sink to the ground and form a very carefree puddle.

“See that puddle over there?” people will say, pointing to a blob of flesh on the dock. “That used to be the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. He was supposed to stop in Bimini for just a couple of hours—this was in 1958—but the lethargy got to him before he even got off the dock. We think there's still a pair of wing-tipped shoes under there somewhere. Twice a day we pour a pitcher of daiquiris on him, and he's happy.”

If you want objective proof of the Lethargy Zone's effects, take a look at the famous photograph of Gary Hart in Bimini, sitting against a dock piling with Donna Rice on his lap. Notice how relaxed his body is. Notice the goofy smile on his face. Here's a guy thinking, “OK, on the one hand, I have a

serious shot at becoming president of the United States, leader of the Free World, the most powerful person on the face of the Earth; on the other hand, I can sit here with a hot babe on my lap.” On Bimini, this is an easy choice.

Geographically, Bimini is divided into two major parts:

1. The water.
2. The land.

The water is clear and warm and blue and beautiful. It contains numerous scenic fish as well as some highly relaxed conchs and the occasional airplane that crashed while attempting to bring in illegal narcotics at night back in the Bad Old ‘80s, before the government cracked down, when smuggling was a major local industry. (I wonder what those pilots put on their Customs questionnaires? Maybe: “There was unusual mortality among the mice and rats caused by the plane hitting the water at 120 mph.”)

But the land is my favorite part. It’s really just a few little islands, altogether less than 10 square miles, with about 1,500 residents, 75 liquor licenses, and a group of friendly, casual, closely related dogs. Most of the development is on North Bimini, along a strip of land narrow enough that you could probably throw a rock from one side to the other, if you weren’t feeling so lethargic. At the south end of the island is Bimini’s metropolitan hub, Alice Town, which consists of a few dozen stores, T-shirt stands, restaurants, and Hat-out bars. Most of the buildings’ front doors open right onto the narrow street, which has no sidewalk, so that when you step outside, you’re basically standing in the middle of the main island road. “Never step out of a bar in Bimini without carefully looking both ways, especially if you have been drinking the legendary Bahama Mama rum drink,” is one of the Coast Guard’s Rules for Walking Around Bimini.

Fortunately, there’s not much traffic, and the drivers, many of them on motor scooters, cheerfully weave and beep their way through the pedestrians, usually missing everybody, which is a lot more than you can say for drivers in Miami. People in Bimini are friendly. This is a generalization, but it’s true, anyway. People tend to say hi to you even if you’re a flagrant tourist.

The Bimini stores give new meaning to the term “small business.” Some of them could easily fit into a dressing room at Bloomingdale’s. The window displays are eclectic—Bimini mugs, T-shirts, conch shells, a roll of film manufactured during the Carter administration—generally covered with a nice, relaxed layer of dust. A number of buildings are boarded up or missing key architectural elements such as a roof. Men were working inside one bright blue building called The Chic Store (“Bimini’s Oldest, Established 1935”). A hand-lettered sign in the window said: SORRY FOR ANY INCONVENIENCE. CLOSED FOR RENERVATIONS.

The Chic Store was just down the street from Melvin’s Fashion Center, which featured a nice selection of T-shirts, and Priscilla’s Epicurean Delights (“To Thrill the Gourmet Palate”), which featured conch. Conch is one of Bimini’s major palate thrills, served in fritters and salads, or as a main course. It’s delicious, especially if you don’t think about what it looked like before they cooked it. “Never think about the fact that a conch is basically a large underwater snail” is one of the Coast Guard’s Rules for Eating Conch. Bimini also has a locally baked bread, sweet and heavy and highly addictive.

My favorite spot in downtown Bimini is an arch erected on the side of the road. It says:

BIMINI—GATEWAY TO THE BAHAMAS
THE YOUTH DEPARTMENT
THE ORDER OF ELKS OF THE

WORLD (I.B.P.O.E. OF W.)
WELCOMES THE TOURIST
TO BIMINI

Underneath the arch is a little shrine-like display, featuring an arrangement of conch shells surrounding a toy rake, shovel, and hoe, pointing aloft. Next to this display is a small, mysterious sign that says:

TO BE AWARDED TROPHY FOR BEST KEPT YARD.

To one side is a rusting antique hand fire-fighting pump. (Why not?) Across the street is a sign that says:

GLENDAS SCOOTER RENTAL AND THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

Yes. Not only does Bimini have scooter rentals, but the Fountain of Youth is located there, over on South Bimini, according to legend. You can take tours to it. We didn't bother, because of being in the Lethargy Zone. We figured, hey, if we got young again, we'd have to go through young adulthood again—zits, career-building, etc.—and it just sounded so tiring that we decided to skip eternal youth and have some beers and conch fritters instead. We did this at one of Bimini's most famous social spots, the Compleat Angler hotel and bar, which is where famed novelist and macho hombre Ernest Hemingway used to hang out. One room is a sort of museum, with pictures of Hemingway all over the walls, including one with the following caption: "ERNEST HEMINGWAY SHOOTING THOMPSON MACHINE GUN, BIMINI DOCK." He liked to shoot guns at sharks. One time he got so excited, shooting at a shark, that—this is true—he shot himself in both legs. That's the kind of sportsperson Ernest was.

I have not begun to describe all the things you can see and do just in metropolitan Bimini. I have not mentioned the plaque commemorating the late congressperson Adam Clayton Powell, who spent a great deal of time in Bimini, drinking scotch and milk and no doubt thinking up ways to better represent his New York City constituents; or the Chalk's Seaplane Terminal with the antenna that looks like a Science Fair project made from coat hangers, where you can watch the plane come in and taxi right across the main road to discharge its passengers; or the End of the World Bar, whose floor is sand and whose walls seem to be made entirely of graffiti; or the Bimini bus, a van equipped with numerous bumper stickers and what appears to be a radar antenna. What with all the things to see, plus the lethargy factor, plus the beer, it took us a little over four hours to walk through Alice Town and back, a distance of several hundred yards. Of course, on the way back we were fighting a strong tide of passengers who had been released from the SeaEscape cruise ship for the afternoon and were sweeping down the island, snorkeling up rum and T-shirts.

Bimini attracts all kinds of people. One morning we watched as three men pulled up to a dock in a looooooong motorboat, the kind shaped like a floating marital aid with numerous large engines on the back. They picked up a young woman wearing a practical nautical outfit consisting of an extremely tight, extremely short dress and spike-heeled shoes. She could barely move. She couldn't climb into the boat without causing her undergarments to be visible from Fort Lauderdale, so one of the men had to lift her into the boat like a large, high-heel-wearing sausage. Then off they roared, out to sea. Probably planning to do some snorkeling.

Bimini offers a wide range of nightlife activities. You can eat. You can drink. You can walk around the docks and watch sportspersons on large expensive boats slice fish apart and get slime and flies all over themselves and seem genuinely happy. You can eat some more. You can, if you are very fortunate,

see Steele Reeder do his impression of how a conch looks at you when you have removed it from its shell (“Now what” the conch says). You can drink some more. You can dance, with or without a partner, in a bar or right on the street.

On Saturday night Olin and I were sitting at an outdoor bar, listening to a band called Glenn Rolle and the Surgeons. Three young women were dancing with each other. A man came dancing in off the street, nattily attired in shorts and an artificial leg. He danced up and joined the women, smiling blissfully. The four of them danced for a minute, then the man danced off, waving his artificial leg around in a manner that can only be described as joyful.

“There’s a short story in there somewhere,” remarked Olin.

I was so impressed by Glenn Rolle and the Surgeons that I went up to Rolle and asked if they had any record albums, and he sold me one for \$5. When I got back to my table, I sensed that the album might be defective, inasmuch as it had a big bend in the middle, so you could easily fold it in half. Rolle cheerfully exchanged it for a new one, which I played when I got home. The album is called *Steal Away*. Side One consists of one song, called “Steal Away, which is a little over six minutes long. Side Two is also “Steal Away,” but it’s the instrumental version, which is identical to Side One but without the vocals. All in all, I think *Steal Away* is an excellent name for this album.

We honestly had planned to do more than just eat and drink and swim and laze on the beach and buy straw hats and walk around very slowly while burping during our stay in Bimini. We honestly intended to do some serious research on local points of interest, such as the Mysterious Underwater Thing Possibly Built by Aliens from Space. I am not making this point of interest up. It’s called the Bimini Road, and it consists of hundreds of big, flat rocks forming a half-mile-long, fairly regular pattern, shaped like a backward J in 18 feet of water a half mile from Bimini. It was discovered in 1968, and many respected loons think that it has something to do with the Lost Continent of Atlantis. Others think it must have been aliens from space. It’s a big mystery. How did it get there? What is it for?

My theory is that the space aliens were going to write a giant under-water backward message of advice for humanity starting with J, possibly “JUST DO IT.” But after a short while in the Lethargy Zone they decided to knock off, maybe have a Bahama Mama, and before they knew it a couple of million years had passed and they had to return to their planet, leaving the message unfinished. Closed for renovations.

We were in a similar situation. Before we knew it, it was Sunday, time to head back to Miami, assuming that Miami still existed. There was no way to know for sure, because the Bimini phone system had been out of order the whole time we were there. I’m not sure telephones would have been all that effective, anyway. The speed of electricity on Bimini is probably around 10 miles per hour.

Anyway, we had children and jobs to get back to, and we were getting dangerously close to forming permanent flesh puddles. So after a well-balanced breakfast of about 17,000 pieces of Bimini-bread toast, we set out for home, with me, Master of the Vessel Buster, once again following Bonefish Howard Steele Reeder II, who was once again following the Loran.

In a couple of hours, Miami was on the horizon again, apparently intact, but I didn’t dare to relax, because I knew that ahead of us lay the greatest maritime challenge of all, a hazard so dangerous that no sane boatperson would dream of attempting it: Biscayne Bay on a Sunday afternoon. You know how sometimes you’re driving on I-95 in heavy traffic, and some substance abuser driving a car whose windows are tinted with what appears to be roofing tar weaves past you at 127 miles per hour, using all available lanes plus the median strip, and you say to yourself: “Why don’t they get that lunatic OFF

THE ROAD??” Well, trust me, on Sunday afternoon he is off the road. He and all his friends from the South Florida Maniac Drivers Club are all out on Biscayne Bay, roaring around in severely overpowered boats, looking for manatees to turn into Meatloaf of the Sea.

But we made it through without getting killed, which was too bad because it meant we had to go through the U.S. Customs procedure, which is even sillier than the Bahamian one. It was developed by the hardworking Federal Bureau of Irritating Procedures That May Seem Pointless But Actually Accomplish Nothing. The way it works is, you have to report in from a special U.S. Customs telephone. The phone we went to is right next to a dock at the Crandon Park marina. But you can’t stop at the dock unless you’re buying fuel there. So the boat pulls up, and the captain gets off, and the boat has to leave—ideally with somebody driving it—and drift around the marina with all the other incoming motorboats, sailboats, Cuban refugee rafters, etc., while the captain gets in line to wait for the phone. It can take an hour or more for your turn, and when you finally get to talk to the Customs people, they want to know things like your Social Security number and birth date. How this information helps them protect the borders is beyond me. I suppose that if

you have something really important to tell them, such as that you’re carrying illegal aliens or a bale of hashish, it’s your responsibility to blurt this information out. Then I imagine you’re supposed to put handcuffs on yourself, take a taxi to a federal prison, ring the bell, and wait until they find time to let you in.

Eventually, they decided that our Social Security numbers had enough digits, or whatever criterion they use, and they let us back into the United States, and we went home. But we’ve already decided we’re going back to Bimini. I think everybody should go to Bimini from time to time. I think President Bush and whoever is governing the Soviet Union this afternoon should meet there. They would definitely have a more relaxed kind of summit.

A NICE TOWN, BAHAMAS—IN a surprise development, the leaders of the two superpowers announced today that they have learned all the words, in English AND Russian, to “Conch Ain’t Got No Bone.”

Maybe you should go to Bimini, too. Maybe I’ll even see you there, and we can wave to each other, if we’re not feeling too lethargic. Please address me as “Bonefish Dave.”

Shark Bait

It began as a fun nautical outing, 10 of us in a motorboat off the coast of Miami. The weather was sunny and we saw no signs of danger, other than the risk of sliding overboard because every exposed surface on the boat was covered with a layer of snack-related grease. We had enough cholesterol on board to put the entire U.S. Olympic team into cardiac arrest. This is because all 10 of us were guys.

I hate to engage in gender stereotyping, but when women plan the menu for a recreational outing, they usually come up with a nutritionally balanced menu featuring all the major food groups, including the Sliced Carrots group, the Pieces of Fruit Cut into Cubes Group, the Utensils Group, and the Plate group. Whereas guys tend to focus on the Carbonated Malt Beverages Group and the Fatal Snacks Group. On this particular trip, our food supply consisted of about 14 bags of potato chips and one fast-food fried-chicken Giant Economy Tub o’ Fat. Nobody brought, for example, napkins, the theory being that you could just wipe your hands on your stomach. Then you could burp. This is what guys on all-guy boats

are doing while women are thinking about their relationships.

The reason the grease got smeared everywhere was that four of the guys on the boat were 10-year-olds, who, because of the way their still-developing digestive systems work, cannot chew without punching. This results in a lot of dropped and thrown food. On this boat, you regularly encountered semignawed pieces of chicken skittering across the deck toward you like small but hostile alien creatures from the Kentucky Fried Planet. Periodically a man would yell “CUT THAT OUT!” at the boys, then burp to indicate the depth of his concern. Discipline is vital on a boat.

We motored through random-looking ocean until we found exactly what we were looking for: a patch of random-looking ocean. There we dropped anchor and dove for Florida lobsters, which protect themselves by using their tails to scoot backward really fast. They’ve been fooling predators with this move for millions of years, but the guys on our boat, being advanced life forms, including a dentist, figured it out in under three hours.

I myself did not participate, because I believe that lobsters are the result of a terrible genetic accident involving nuclear radiation and cockroaches. I mostly sat around, watching guys lunge out of the water, heave lobsters into the boat, burp, and plunge back in. Meanwhile, the lobsters were scrabbling around in the chicken grease, frantically trying to shoot backward through the forest of legs belonging to 10-year-old boys squirting each other with gobs of the No. 191,000,000,000 Sun Block that their moms had sent along. It was a total Guy Day, very relaxing, until the arrival of the barracuda.

This occurred just after we’d all gotten out of the water. One of the men, Larry, was fishing, and he hooked a barracuda right where we had been swimming. This was unsettling. The books all say that barracuda rarely eat people, but very few barracuda can read, and they have far more teeth than would be necessary for a strictly seafood diet. Their mouths look like the entire \$39.95 set of Ginsu knives, including the handy Arm Slicer.

We gathered around to watch Larry fight the barracuda. His plan was to catch it, weigh it, and release it with a warning. After 10 minutes he almost had it to the boat, and we were all pretty excited for him, when all of a sudden ...

BA-DUMP ... BA-DUMP ...

Those of you who read music recognize this as the soundtrack from the motion picture Jaws. Sure enough, cruising right behind Larry’s barracuda, thinking sushi, was: a shark. And not just any shark. It was a hammerhead shark, perennial winner of the coveted Oscar for Ugliest Fish. It has a weird, T-shaped head with a big eyeball on each tip, so that it can see around both sides of a telephone pole. This ability is of course useless for a fish, but nobody would dare try to explain this to a hammerhead.

The hammerhead, its fin breaking the surface, zigzagged closer to Larry’s barracuda, then surged forward.

“Oh ****!” went Larry, reeling furiously.

CHOMP went the hammerhead, and suddenly Larry’s barracuda was in a new weight division.

CHOMP went the hammerhead again, and now Larry was competing in an entirely new category, Fish Consisting of Only a Head.

The boys were staring at the remainder of the barracuda, deeply impressed.

“This is your leg,” said the dentist. “This is your leg in Jaws. Any questions?”

The boys, for the first time all day, were quiet.

Captains Uncourageous

There comes a time in a man's life when he hears the call of the sea. "Hey, YOU!" are the sea's exact words.

If the man has a brain in his head, he will hang up the phone immediately. That's what I should have done recently when I was called to sea by my friends Hannah and Paddy, who had rented a sailboat in the Florida Keys. They love to sail. Their dream is to quit their jobs and sail around the world, living a life of carefree adventure until their boat is sunk by an irate whale and they wind up drifting in a tiny raft and fighting over who gets to eat the sun block. At least that's the way I see it turning out. The only safe way to venture onto the ocean is aboard a cruise ship the size of a rural school district. Even then you're not safe, because you might become trapped in your cabin due to bodily expansion. Cruise ships carry thousands of tons of high-calorie food, and under maritime law they cannot return to port until all of it has been converted into passenger fat. So there are at least eight feedings a day. Crew members often creep into cabins at night and use high-pressure hoses to shoot cheesecake directly down the throats of sleeping passengers.

But on cruise ships you rarely find yourself dangling from poles, which is more than I can say for the sailboat rented by Hannah and Paddy. The captain was a man named Dan, who used to be a race-car driver until he had heart trouble and switched from fast cars to sailboats, which are the slowest form of transportation on Earth with the possible exception of airline flights that go through O'Hare. Sometimes I suspect that sailboats never move at all, and the only reason they appear to go from place to place is continental drift.

Nevertheless, we were having a pleasant day on Captain Dan's boat, the Jersey Girl, doing busy nautical things like hoisting the main stizzen and mizzening the aft beam, and meanwhile getting passed by other boats, seaweed, lobsters, glaciers, etc. The trouble arose when we attempted to enter a little harbor so we could go to a bar featuring a band headed by a large man named Richard. This band is called—really—Big Dick and the Extenders. We were close enough to hear them playing when the Jersey Girl plowed into what nautical experts call the "bottom."

The problem was an unusually low tide. Helpful people in smaller boats kept telling us this.

"It's an unusually low tide!" they'd shout helpfully as they went past. They were lucky the Jersey Girl doesn't have a cannon.

We'd been sitting there for quite a while when Captain Dan suggested, with a straight face, that if some of us held on to a large pole called the boom and swung out over the water, our weight might make the boat lean over enough to get free. I now realize that this was a prank. Fun-loving sailboat captains are probably always trying to get people out on the boom, but most people aren't that stupid.

We, however, had been substantially refreshed by beverages under a hot sun, so we actually did it. Four of us climbed up, hung our stomachs over the boom, kicked off from the side of the boat, and NOOOOOO ...

Picture a giant shish-kebab skewer sticking out sideways from a boat 10

feet over the water, except instead of pieces of meat on it, there are four out-of-shape guys, faces pale and sweating, flabby legs flailing, ligaments snapping like rifle shots. We instantly became a tourist attraction. A crowd gathered on shore, laughing and pointing. Some of them were probably sailboat captains.

“Look!” they were probably saying. “Captain Dan got FOUR of them out on the boom! A new record!”

Meanwhile, next to me, Paddy, a middle-aged attorney who is not, let’s be honest, built like an Olympic gymnast, who is in fact built a lot like a gym, was saying, in an unusually high voice, “We better bring the boom back now. OK? Now? OK?? WE BETTER BRING THE BOOM BACK NOW! BRING-THE-BOOM-BACK-NOW!! I SAID ...”

“HANG ON!” Captain Dan was shouting. “She’s about to move!”

People on shore were now taking pictures.

“IT’S AN UNUSUALLY LOW TIDE!” a helpful boater was shouting.

“Please,” Paddy was saying, very quietly now.

“I think she’s moving!” Captain Dan sang out.

In fact, the Jersey Girl was exhibiting no more flotation than central Nebraska. As I clung to the boom, listening to Paddy whimper, two thoughts penetrated my pain: (1) He was paying for this experience; and (2) If you have to die, you want it to be for a noble cause. You don’t want it to be for Big Dick and the Extenders.

It turned out we didn’t die. We finally got swung back onto the boat and began thinking about leading our lives without moving any muscles ever again. And eventually Captain Dan got the boat unstuck. He needed the help of a motorboat. I am certain this was also true of Columbus.

The Living Bra

I had hoped that we could get the new year under way without any reports of ecologically dangerous shellfish attacking women’s undergarments, but I see now that I was a fool.

I have here an alarming news article written by Christopher Taylor of the Watertown (New York) Daily Times and sent in by several alert readers. The headline, which I am not making up, says: LARGE COLONY OF ZEBRA MUSSELS FOUND CLINGING TO BIG BRASSIERE.

In case you haven’t heard, the zebra mussel is a hot new environmental threat. Forget the killer bees. Oh, sure, they got a lot of scary headlines—KILLER BEES SIGHTED IN MEXICO; KILLER BEES SIGHTED IN TEXAS; KILLER BEES BECOME AMWAY DISTRIBUTORS—but they never lived up to their potential. Whereas at this very moment, the zebra mussel is raging out of control in the Great Lakes region. Well, OK, maybe “raging” is a strong term. As a rule, mussels don’t rage. You rarely hear swimmers being advised: “If you see a mussel, try to remain calm, and whatever you do, don’t provoke it.”

Nevertheless, we have reason to fear the zebra mussel, which gets its name from the fact that it roams the plains of Africa in giant herds.

No, seriously, it gets its name from the fact that it has a striped shell, which grows to about an inch long. About five years ago a group of zebra mussels, possibly carrying forged passports, came from Europe to the Great Lakes in the bilge water of a European ship, and they’ve been reproducing like crazy ever since. They are the Sex Maniacs of the Sea. Here’s a quote from an August 1991 Washington Post article:

“Each female can produce 30,000 eggs a year, leading to huge colonies of billions of the animals clinging to every available surface. Recently, marine biologists have discovered concentrations reaching 700,000 mussels a cubic yard. ...”

So apparently spaying them on an individual basis is out of the question. But something has to be done, because zebra mussels are clogging up water-supply pipes, and they're spreading fast. Controlling them could cost billions of dollars—money that will have to come out of the pockets of the scumballs who wrecked the savings-and-loan industry.

No! That was another joke! The money will of course come from low-life taxpayers such as yourself, which is why you need to stay informed about this story, especially the giant-brassiere angle. Here are the key quotes from the Watertown Daily Times story:

A large brassiere pulled from waters near the Genesee River at Rochester was carrying the largest colony of zebra mussels found so far in Lake Ontario. ...

The brassiere—and the mussels—are now under observation at the Department of Environmental Conservation Fisheries Research Station at Cape Vincent.

DEC Supervisory Aquatic Biologist Gerard C. LeTendre said the bra was scooped up while DEC staff were trawling for dead lake trout near the Genesee River ... Because of the size of the garment, Mr. LeTendre said, more than 100 mussels had managed to attach themselves to it.

“Whoever that bra belonged to was of large proportions,” Mr. LeTendre said. “It was huge.”

This episode raises a number of troubling questions, including:

- * They were trawling for dead trout?

- * Is that sporting?

- * Could it possibly be that the zebra mussels have become carnivorous and ate the original bra occupant?

- * Has anybody seen Dolly Parton in person recently?

In an effort to get to the bottom of this, I called the research station and grilled Gerard LeTendre.

“Is it true,” I said, “that you have a large brassiere under observation?”

“It’s really just in a box in my office,” he said. “The newspaper made it sound like we have it in an aquarium.”

He also said they still don’t know who owns the bra.

“We know it’s a four-hook bra,” he said. “But it didn’t belong to a large person. It was just a very well-endowed person.

He said that many people have offered suggestions about what to do with the bra, including “holding a Cinderella-type contest to see who it fits.”

For now, however, the mystery remains unsolved. Meanwhile, the zebra mussels continue to multiply. Even as you read these words, a huge colony of them could be clustering ominously around a Sears catalog that fell overboard, nudging it open to the foundation-garments section. It is a chilling thought, and until the authorities come up with a plan of action, I am urging everybody to take the sensible precaution of developing a nervous facial tic. Also, if you must wear a brassiere, please wear it on the outside, where the Department of Environmental Conservation can keep an eye on it. Thank you.

Reader Alert

This section contains several true-life adventures, including the incident wherein Calvin Trillin and I came within inches of being savagely attacked by a dangerous and heavily armed criminal. Or possibly not. (I should note for the record that Trillin claims he acted much more heroically than the way he is

depicted in this column; my feeling about that is, if he wants to appear heroic, he should write his own column about it.)

This section also contains the column I wrote about my first encounter with the world-famous Lawn Rangers precision lawnmower drill team of Arcola, Illinois. Since then I've returned to Arcola twice to march with this proud unit in the annual Broom Corn parade, a wonderful small-town, heartland event that features a tremendous outpouring of what can only be described as "beer."

Crime Busters

Somebody has got to do something about crime in the streets. Every day it seems as though there are more criminals running loose out there, and the quality of their work is pathetic.

I base this statement on a crime experience I had recently in the streets of New York City while visiting Calvin Trillin, who lives in New York and divides his time pretty much equally between being a well-known writer and trying to park his car. This experience, which I am not making up, occurred as we were returning to Calvin's house at about 1 A.M. after an evening of business-related nonpersonal tax-deductible literary research. Just as we reached his door, a criminal appeared from out of the darkness and attempted to rob us. Up to that point, I have no criticism of the criminal's technique. He had done an excellent job of victim selection: In terms of physical courage, Calvin and I were probably the two biggest weenies abroad in Manhattan at that hour. A competent criminal, armed with any plausible weapon, including a set of nail clippers, could have had us immediately begging for mercy and handing over our wallets and promising to raise additional cash first thin in the morning by applying for second mortgages.

But this criminal had a terrible plan of action. He had both hands in his jacket pockets, and he was thrusting the jacket material out toward us, the way the bad guy's jacket sticks out on TV when he has a gun in his pocket and he doesn't want everybody to see it. Clearly Calvin and I were supposed to think that the criminal had two guns pointing at us.

Here's what the criminal said: "I'll blow both of your heads off."

Later on, in our detailed post-crime critique, Calvin and I found numerous flaws in this approach. For one thing, if the criminal really had two guns, why on earth would he hide them? As Calvin pointed out: "You would definitely want to show your guns to a couple of schlubs like us."

Also, two guns was definitely overkill. According to my calculations, two guns figures out to one gun per hand, which raises the question: How was the criminal planning to take our wallets? Was he going to ask us to hold one of his guns for him? Was he going to have us stick the wallets in his mouth? If so, he would have had trouble giving us our post-robbery instructions, such as "Don't try following me!" or "Don't try anything funny!"

CRIMINAL (with his hands in his pockets and our wallets in his mouth): Donghh ghry angyghing ghunny! ME: What CRIMINAL (getting angry): DONGHH GHRY ANGYGHING GHUNNY!

CALVIN: I think he's saying "Don't I have a big tummy." ME (hastily): No! You're very sueve! Really! Sir!

But the criminal's silliest move, in my opinion, was threatening to blow both of our heads off. That would be an absurd waste of bullets. A much more efficient way to gain our cooperation would have been to simply blow Calvin's head off. I would then have cooperatively handed over Calvin's wallet.

So it was a very poorly planned robbery. I would like to say that Calvin and I, even as we were staring down the menacing barrels of the criminal's jacket pockets, instantly detected all the flaws with our computerlike brains. But frankly, due to the amount of literary research we had done that evening, our brains were not so much in computer mode as in Hubble Space Telescope mode, if you get my drift.

Nevertheless, I'm very proud of how we handled the situation. Actually, it was Calvin who took charge. You never really know what kind of gumption a man has, what kind of spine, what kind of plain old-fashioned "guts," until you see how he handles himself when the chips are down and all the marbles are on the line. Calvin looked at the criminal and he looked at me, and then, drawing on some inner reserve of strength and courage, he pressed the intercom button and said, "Alice, let us in."

Alice is Calvin's wife. She buzzed the door lock, and we opened the door and went inside, leaving the criminal out there with his jacket pockets still pointing at us. He never did blow our heads off, although the next morning I wished that he had.

Anyway, it was a pretty sorry performance, and if he is in any way representative of the criminals out there today, this is yet another area where the United States is heading down the tubes. I hope that the criminal, if he is reading this, has enough self-respect to learn from the criticisms I've outlined here and get his act together. Although in all fairness I should warn him that Calvin and I have given our performance some thought, and if this criminal ever tries to rob us again, he might be in for a little surprise. Because next time we're going to take strong, decisive action. Next time we're going to have Alice come out and give him a piece of her mind.

False Alarm

The man was standing right outside our master bathroom. He couldn't see Beth and me, standing in the hallway, but we could see him clearly. His face was covered with a stocking mask, which distorted his features hideously. He was dressed all in black, and he had a black plastic bag stuck in his back pocket.

He was using a screwdriver to open our sliding glass door.

You always wonder what you're going to do in a situation like this. Run? Fight? Wet your pants?

I'm not experienced with physical violence. The last fight I had was in eighth grade, when I took on John Sniffen after school because he let the air out of my bike tires. Actually, I didn't know that he did this, but he was the kind of kid who would have, and all the other suspects were a lot larger than I was.

The man outside our house was also larger than I am. He jerked the screwdriver sideways and opened the door. Just like that, he was inside our house, maybe six feet from where Beth and I were standing.

Then he saw us. For a moment, nobody spoke. "CUT!" yelled the director.

"Way to go, Ozzie!" I said to the stocking-masked man. "Looking good! Looking criminal!"

"I'm wondering if his bag is too dark to show up," said Beth.

Everybody wants to be a director.

Anyway, as you have guessed, Ozzie wasn't a real burglar. He was part of a production crew that was using our house to shoot a promotional video for the company that installed our burglar alarm. Here in South Florida it's standard procedure to have burglar alarms in your house, your car, your workplace, and, if you've had expensive dental work, your mouth.

I like having an alarm in our house, because it gives me the security that comes from knowing that

trained security personnel will respond instantly whenever I trigger a false alarm. I do this every day at 6 A.M., when I get up to let out our large main dog, Earnest, and our small emergency backup dog, Zippy. I'm always in a big hurry, because Zippy, being about the size of a hairy lima bean (although less intelligent), has a very fast digestive cycle, and I need to get him right outside.

So I fall out of bed, barely conscious, and stagger to the back door, where both dogs are waiting, and I open the door and realize that I have failed to disarm the alarm system.

Now I have a problem. Because, within seconds, the voice of the Cheerful lady at the alarm company is going to come out of the alarm control panel, asking me to identify myself, and unless I give her the Secret Password, she's going to cheerfully notify the police. So I stagger quickly over to the panel. But this leaves Earnest and Zippy alone out on the patio. Theoretically, they can get from the patio to our backyard all by themselves. They used to be prevented from doing this by a screen enclosure around the patio, but thanks to Hurricane Andrew, most of this enclosure is now orbiting the Earth. The hurricane did NOT blow away the screen door, however. It's still standing there, and the dogs firmly believe that it's the only way out. So—I swear I'm not making this up—instead of going two feet to the left or right, where there's nothing to prevent them from simply wandering out into the yard, they trot directly to the door, stop, then turn around to look at me with a look that says “Well?”

“GO OUTSIDE!” I yell at them as I lunge toward the alarm control panel. “THERE'S NO SCREEN ANYMORE, YOU MORONS!”

“I beg your pardon?” says the Cheerful Alarm lady, because this is not the Secret Password.

“Bark,” says Earnest, who is trotting back toward the house, in case I am telling her that it's time to eat.

“Grunt,” says Zippy, as his internal digestive timer reaches zero and he detonates on the patio.

We do this almost every morning. We're very dependable. In fact, if some morning I DIDN'T trigger a false alarm, I think the Cheerful Alarm lady would notify the police.

“You'd better check the Barry residence,” she'd say. “Apparently something has happened to Mr. Barry. Or else he's strangling one of his dogs.”

So the alarm people have been very nice to us, which is why we let them use our house for the video. It had a great Action Ending, wherein Ozzie runs out our front door, and an armed security man drives up, screeches to a halt, leaps out, puts his hand on his gun, and yells “FREEZE!” This is Ozzie's cue to freeze and look concerned inside his stocking. They shot this scene several times, so there was a lot of commotion in our yard. Fortunately, in South Florida we're used to seeing people sprint around with guns and stocking masks, so the activity in our yard did not alarm the neighbors. (“Look, Walter, the Barrys planted a new shrub.” “Where?” “Over there, next to the burglar.”)

Anyway, the point is that our house is well protected. The alarm system is there in case we ever need it, which I doubt we will, because—thanks to Zippy—only a fool would try to cross our patio on foot.

The World's Fastest Lawn Mower

When I hear some loudmouth saying that the United States is no longer a world technology leader, I look him in the eye and say: “Hey! There's a worm pooping on your shirt!” Then, when he looks down, I spit on the top of his head and sprint away. I'm not about to stand still while somebody knocks my country, not when we're still capable of achievements such as the World's Fastest Lawn Mower.

That's right: The World's Fastest Lawn Mower is produced right here in the U.S.A. by Americans just

like yourself except that you are probably normal, whereas they put a jet-powered helicopter engine on a riding lawn mower. I know this is true because—call me a courageous journalism pioneer if you must—I drove it on my own personal lawn.

This event was arranged by Ken Thompson, a Miami-based sales representative for the Dixie Chopper brand of lawn mower. He wrote me a letter saying that the Dixie Chopper people had a special customized jet-powered model touring around the country making personal appearances, and it would be in my area, and he thought it would be a good idea if they brought it to my house in a sincere humanitarian effort to get free publicity. As a professional journalist trained to be constantly on the alert for stories that I can cover without leaving home, I said sure.

I've had an interest in lawn mowers since I was 10 years old, and I used to earn money attempting to mow neighbors' lawns with our lawn mower, which was powered by the first gasoline engine ever built. I believe this was actually a stone engine. The only person who could start it consistently was my father, and he could do this only by wrapping the rope around the starter thing and yanking it for the better part of the weekend, a process that required more time and energy than he would have expended if he'd cut the entire lawn with his teeth.

By about the 1,000th yank, he'd be dripping with sweat, ready to quit, and the lawn mower, sensing this, would go, and I quote: Putt. Just once. But that was enough to goad my father into a furious yanking frenzy, transforming himself, wolf-man-like, from a mild-mannered, gentle Presbyterian minister into a violent red-faced lunatic, yanking away at this malevolent stone, which continued to go putt at exactly the right tactical moment, until finally it got what it wanted, which was for my father to emit a burst of extremely mild profanity. Then the lawn mower, knowing that it now had a funny story to tell down at the Lawn Mower Bar, would start.

Sometimes, in an effort to earn money, I'd push the stone lawn mower next door and ask Mrs. Reed if she wanted me to mow her lawn. She'd say yes, and I'd yank on the starter thing for a while, then sit down, exhausted and discouraged, and Mrs. Reed, who had been watching from her kitchen, would come out and give me a quarter. It was a living. Lawn mower technology has come a long way since then, as I discovered when the Dixie Chopper trailer pulled up at my house and the crew wheeled out the World's Fastest Lawn Mower. It's a normal-looking commercial riding lawn mower except that it has what looks like a large industrial coffee-maker mounted horizontally on the back. This is a 150-horsepower turbine engine from a U.S. military Chinook helicopter. According to the crew, Warren Evans and Mark Meagher, it can easily make the lawn mower go more than 60 miles per hour. God alone knows what it could do in a Cuisinart.

After briefing me on the controls, the crew started the engine, which sounded like a giant vacuum cleaner, getting louder and louder like this: whooOOOMMMM until it was shrieking and shooting flames out the back and causing all the wildlife creatures in South Florida to start fleeing north, which is fine with me because most of them sting, anyway. Then I put on some ear protectors, climbed into the driver's seat, pushed the controls forward, and NMOOOAAAAA ...

Let me say, in all journalistic objectivity, that I have never before experienced that level of acceleration in a lawn mower, or for that matter a commercial aircraft. Rocketing around my yard, watching concerned Dixie Chopper people leap out of the way, I was thinking: This is GREAT! I want to take this baby out on the INTERSTATE! I want to ... WHUMP.

OK, so I hit a tree. But the mower was undamaged, and so was I, and the tree is expected to recover. The bottom line is, if you're interested in extremely high-speed lawn care, this is the lawn

mower for you. The Dixie Chopper people said they'll make one for you just like it for only \$29,000, which, according to my calculations, you could easily earn by simply not mowing Mrs. Reed's lawn 1 1 6,000 times.

WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN?

Recently I had the honor of marching with the world-renowned Lawn Ranger precision power lawn-mower drill team at the famous Arcola Broom Corn Festival. Just in case you never heard of this famous event, let me explain that Arcola is a town in Illinois, just north of Mattoon. Arcola (slogan: "Amazing Arcola") claims the proud distinction of having formerly been "one of the nation's top producers of broom corn, the primary ingredient in brooms." The town is still a major power in the broom industry.

Each September Arcola holds the Broom Corn Festival, featuring, among other events, a parade. For 11 years one of the key marching units has been the lawn Rangers, who are considered by many observers who have had a couple of beers to be the finest precision lawn-mower drill team in the world.

When the Rangers invited me to march this year, I accepted eagerly, although I was concerned about being able to live up to the unit's high standards, as explained in this excerpt from the official Ranger newsletter, written by Ranger co-founder Pat Monahan:

"As always, we will be living our motto, 'You're only young once, but you can always be immature.' This is a fine motto, but it can be carried to excess. Here I am thinking of Pee-wee Herman."

On the day of the parade, Monahan picked me up at the Champaign, Illinois, airport and drove me through large quantities of agriculture to Arcola. In addition to some nice grain elevators, Arcola boasts the nation's largest collection of antique brooms and brushes, as well as an establishment called the French Embassy, which is a combination gourmet restaurant and 12-lane bowling alley. I swear I am not making any of this up.

En route, Monahan explained the philosophy of the Lawn Rangers, which is that it is possible for a group of truly dedicated men to have a lot of fun yet at the same time do absolutely nothing useful for society. The Rangers' arch-enemy marching organization is the Shriners, who engage in worthwhile activities and are therefore regarded by the Rangers as being dangerously responsible.

Ranger Orientation took place in the garage of Ranger Ted Shields. About 50 Rangers were gathered around a keg, engaging in intensive mental preparation as well as "shanking," which is when you sneak up behind somebody and yank down his shorts. Next we had the annual business meeting, which I can't describe in a family newspaper except to say that at one point a Ranger, using a strategically placed ear of corn, gave a dramatic interpretation of the song "Shine On, Harvest Moon" that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Then it was time for Rookie Camp. We rookies were each given a power lawn mower and a broom and told to line up on the street, where we received intensive instruction in precision-drill maneuvers.

"LISTEN UP, YOU GRAVY-SUCKERS!" shouted our Column Leaders, who carried long-handled toilet plungers to denote their rank. "ALL MANEUVERS WILL START WITH THE BROOMS-UP POSITION! THE BROOMS WILL ALWAYS COME UP ON THE CURB SIDE!"

We learned two maneuvers: Walking the Dog, which is when you hold your broom up while turning your lawn mower in a circle; and Cross and Toss, which is when you cross paths with another Ranger, then each of you tosses his broom to the other. These maneuvers require great precision, and we rookies were forced to train in the grueling sun for nearly two full minutes before we could perform them to the Rangers' exacting standards.

Finally it was time to march. We formed two columns, each of us wearing a cowboy hat and a Lone

Ranger-style mask. We were pushing a wide variety of customized lawn mowers, one of which had a toilet mounted on it. As we neared the main parade street, we stopped, gathered together, and put our hands into a huddle, where Monahan delivered an inspirational speech that beautifully summed up the meaning of Rangerhood:

“Remember,” he said, “you guys are NOT SHRINERS.”

Thus inspired, we turned down the parade route, went to the brooms-up position, and executed the Cross and Toss with total 100 percent flawless perfection except for a couple of guys dropping their brooms. Some onlookers were so awed by this electrifying spectacle that they almost fell down.

When it was over I stood with my fellow Rangers, engaging in further mental preparation and accepting the compliments of the public (“Do you guys have jobs?”). At that moment I knew that I was part of something special, something important, something that someday, I hope, can be controlled by medication. But until then, Amazing Arcola, Illinois, will serve as a shining example of why America is what it is. Whatever that may be.

Reader Alert

This section is about music. It starts with a semiserious piece about Elvis and the mystery of why his fans feel as deeply about him as they do. It then moves to my experience in the Rock Bottom Remainers, a group of authors who discovered that, even though they had very little musical training, they were nevertheless able, with a little practice and a lot of heart, to turn themselves into a profoundly mediocre band.

Speaking of bad music: This section also presents the results of my Bad Song Survey, which attracted more mail than anything else I’ve ever written. People are still writing to tell me how much they hate, for example, “Running Bear.” As you read this section, please bear in mind that the survey is over, OK. We already have our winners, so there is no need to write to me. Just read the results and get the bad songs stuck inside your brain so you can quietly hum them over and over until you go insane. Thank you.

Hearts That Are True

When he was alive, they lived at the gates of Graceland. It didn’t matter whether he was there or not. They’d go, anyway, to be with each other, to talk about him, to be close to the place he loved. If he was there, they’d synchronize their lives with his: sleeping by day, when he slept, so they could be at the gates at night, in case he came out.

Sometimes he’d just drive by, on a motorcycle or in one of his spectacular cars, waving, and they’d try to follow him, and it might turn into an elaborate motorized game of hide-and-seek on the roads around Memphis. Sometimes he and his entourage, his guys, would be having one of their fireworks fights, and they’d roar down and attack the gate regulars, scaring them, thrilling them. And sometimes he’d come down to the gate and talk, sign autographs, get his picture taken, just be with them. Those were the best times, although they didn’t happen much near the end.

Some of the gate people had jobs, but only so they could afford food and a place to sleep. Their real job, their purpose, was to be at the gates. They helped the guards—who knew them well—keep an eye

on the wild fans, the nonregulars, who sometimes tried to get up to the front door.

“We were really his best security,” says Linda Cullum, “because we would have killed anybody who we thought would have done anything to him.”

Cullum arrived in 1964. She was in the Navy, and she had asked to be stationed in Memphis. “I didn’t even know if they had a base here,” she says. “I just knew he was here.” She’s 44 now, and she still lives nearby, as do others who were drawn to the gates in the good times. But they rarely go there anymore. These days the gates are for tourists: standing out front, getting their pictures taken, smiling the same way they’d smile in front of any other tourist attraction. You don’t see it in their eyes, the thing that haunts the eyes of the gate people, the shining sweet sadness, the burning need that still consumes 10 years after they lost him.

“I still feel like I need to protect him,” says Cullum. “Because, you know, there’s so much you hear, so much that people say.”

Elvis fans. A species unto themselves. A large species. The ones like Linda Cullum, the gate people, are among the most dedicated, but there are a lot more, counting the ones—and, believe me, they are all around you—who don’t talk about it. Because you might laugh. Because you don’t understand.

These are not people who merely liked Elvis. A lot of us liked Elvis, especially when he was lean and sexy and strange and really bothered people. But then we moved on to the Beatles and the Stones and a lot of other (to us) hipper people, and Elvis, getting less scary and less lean all the time, faded into a ‘50s memory, and eventually he became, to many, a sad joke. But don’t laugh too soon, hip people. Think about this: Over a billion Elvis records have been sold. Nobody is in second place. And think about this: Today—10

years after he died, more than 20 years after he dominated rock—there are tens of thousands of people, from all over the world, gathered in Memphis to pay tribute to him, to visit Graceland, to walk the halls of his old high school, to take bus trips down to his Mississippi birthplace, to relive and explore and discuss and celebrate every tiny detail of his life. It isn’t a one-time thing: The fans were there last year, and they’ll be there next year. This doesn’t happen for the Beatles; it doesn’t happen for Frank Sinatra; it doesn’t happen for Franklin D. Roosevelt. It doesn’t happen for anybody, that I can think of, who is not the focal point of a major religion. Just Elvis. Bruce Springsteen comes and Michael Jackson goes, but Elvis endures. His fans, his vast, quiet flock, make damn sure of that. They have heard all the stories about him, all the exposes and the Shocking Revelations about his appetites, his kinkiness, his temper, his pills. They know all about his problems. They know more about them than you do. And it makes no difference, except maybe to make them love him more, the way you draw closer, in time of trouble, to a brother or a lover. Which is what Elvis was to them. Which he still is.

And the hell with what people say.

The fans know what their public image is, too: fat, weeping, heavily hair-sprayed, middle-aged housewives wearing polyester pantsuits festooned with “I Love Elvis” buttons. That’s all that gets on TV, the fans say. That’s all the press sees.

“Ah, the press,” sighs Karen Loper, 42, president of the Houston-based fan club. She was watching the Iran-contra hearings when I called her a couple of weeks ago. Like the other fan club presidents I talked to, she was very articulate. She does not wear polyester pantsuits.

“The media—especially the TV people—always do the obligatory story,” she says. “They pick the most unflattering person, the one with a black bouffant hairdo, and they show her at the graveside crying. It’s so superficial, and nobody ever looks beyond it. But hey, I’m used to it. I’ve been putting up

with this crap since I was 12 years old. First my father, always telling me Elvis wasn't gonna last, Elvis can't sing. Now the media. It used to bother me. I used to try to defend him. But now I realize: He doesn't need defending."

This is a recurring theme with Elvis fans: They're tired of explaining themselves. If you don't hear what they hear, feel what they feel, that's your misfortune. If you want, they'll talk to you about it, but they don't expect you to understand.

Shirley Connell, 39, was one of the early gate people, back in the '60s. She had two big advantages:

1. Her family's backyard adjoins Graceland's.
2. Her mama loved Elvis, too.

Which meant young Shirley was allowed to spend virtually all her waking time, except for school, at the gates. And, like other regulars, she

sometimes got invited along on the outings Elvis organized. Which is how it happened that one year she and her mama went to the movies all night, almost every night, from November through March.

Elvis regularly rented a downtown Memphis movie theater so he and his entourage could watch first-run movies (never his own, most of which embarrassed him). For years, his fans, the regulars, were allowed to join him. They weren't exactly with him, but they were in the same room with him, and that was enough.

"The schedule was," Connell recalls, "he'd come in, and we'd watch anywhere from three to five movies, and he'd leave. Then I'd go home, and if given enough time, I'd catch a nap, and if not, I'd go straight to school. Then I'd come home from school at 2:30 in the afternoon, do my homework, and go straight to bed. Then I'd get up at 10 o'clock and find out what time the movie was.

"We saw The Nutty Professor 14 times. The Great Escape was 10. Doctor Strangelove was 12. Mama would go to sleep. ... I went out and ate one time, during The Nutty Professor, I couldn't stand it anymore. But I was just gone long enough to eat. I didn't dare leave."

if you ask her why, it shows you could never understand.

Connell still lives in the same modest ranch house. She has pictures of Elvis on the walls, and a lot of souvenirs, including one of Elvis's custom-made silk shirts and an RCA portable radio Elvis gave her for Christmas in 1963. She has the box, the wrapping paper, the original long-dead battery.

She took me out to her backyard one evening and dragged out a rickety old ladder so I could climb up and look over the wooden fence into the manicured grounds of Graceland. Two of Elvis's horses were grazing there. She hasn't looked over that fence in years.

Graceland today is a business, a tourist attraction operated by the Presley estate. The mansion, built in 1939, sits on a small hill overlooking Route 51, which in Memphis is Elvis Presley Boulevard. When Elvis, then 22, bought Graceland in 1957 for \$100,000 the area was mostly country; now the boulevard is a semi-sleazy strip, lined with car dealerships and fast-food places. (Not that this is inappropriate, cars and fast food being two things Elvis consumed in vast quantities.)

Half a million people visit Graceland each year, but most of them are tourists, as opposed to True Fans. Most go for the same reason they would go

to see a man wrestle an alligator: curiosity. Sure, they like Elvis, or they wouldn't be there. But when they go through the house, stand where he stood, look at the things he owned and touched, they're not moved. Some are even amused.

And, Lord knows, there is plenty to be amused about. The decor is stunningly, at times hilariously, tacky, representing the Let's-Not-Leave-a-Single-Square-Inch-Anywhere-Including-the-Ceiling-

Undecorated school of interior design, featuring electric-blue drapes, veined wall mirrors, carpeting on the ceiling, etc. And it's hard not to laugh at the earnest speeches of the clean-cut, relentlessly perky young guides, describing, say, Elvis's collection of police badges, as though these were artifacts at Monticello.

Scene from the tour: We're in the TV room, which has mirrors on the ceiling and a squint-inducing navy-blue-with-bright-yellow color scheme. "You'll notice the three TVs in front of you," the guide says. "This is an idea Elvis got from Lyndon Johnson."

Now we're in an outbuilding, originally built for Elvis's extensive model-racing-car layout (which he quickly got bored with and gave away) and now housing a memorabilia display. We pause before a display of extravagantly over-decorated jumpsuit costumes. "Elvis found the fringe to be a problem onstage," the guide is saying, "so he moved on to outfits that were more studded."

The tour ends when, in a bizarre juxtaposition, we move from Elvis's racquetball court to his grave, out by the swimming pool. This is where the True Fans often break down.

The tourists, though, usually just take pictures, then head back across the street to the plaza of stores selling licensed souvenirs. This is a place where good taste never even tries to rear its head. Just about anything they can put a likeness of Elvis on and sell, they do. You can get, for \$2.95, a decanter shaped like Elvis wearing a karate uniform. You can get some Love Me Tender Conditioning Rinse. If you like to read, you can get a copy of *I Called Him Babe—Elvis Presley's Nurse Remembers*. You can get sick.

But here's the thing: the True Fans don't much like this, either. Most of them accept it, because they know that without the tourists and the souvenir dollars Graceland would have to close, and they'd lose a strong link with him. But they don't like it. They don't want a souvenir manufactured in Taiwan 10 years after Elvis died; they want something real.

Like Elvis's cigar butt. Tom Kirby got one. His friend and fellow gate regular, Debbie Brown, recalls how this came about:

"We were good friends with Jo Smith, who was married to Elvis's cousin, and she had always been real thoughtful, especially as far as Tom was concerned, because he had always been such a good fan. ... So they were playing racquetball or something, and [Elvis] laid his cigar down, half smoked, and then he walked out. So she picked it up, and she thought it would be a real neat souvenir for Tom. So she brings this cigar to Tom—she wrapped it up in a little tinfoil paper—and Tom is so excited, he runs over in the middle of the night, pounds on the door, and I go, 'What,' and he says, 'look

what Jo's given me.' And he unwraps the precious little tinfoil holding his cigar, and he goes, 'God, Elvis's cigar. It's just fresh, she got it to night.' And I go, 'God, let me see it.' And I grab it and stick it right in my mouth, because I know it's been in his mouth. And Tom goes, 'But I haven't even put it in my mouth yet!'"

An even more wonderful thing happened in Atlanta, where Brown, Kirby, and some other gate people went to see Elvis in concert, and where they managed to get into his actual hotel room, after he had left for his last show.

"The keys were hanging in the presidential suite, in the door," Brown recalls. "We instantly took the keys out, went inside, and shut the door. We went through the wastepaper cans. ... We were running around, jerking open cabinets. There was a cart there, and it had a big giant urn of the most horrible black coffee—that's the way he liked his coffee—and the bacon there was on a large platter, and it was burned to a crisp—that's the way he ate his bacon. Instantly we knew we had success, and we just grabbed this bacon—Elvis had this!—and we went [she makes gobbling sounds]. You know, so we can

say we ate with him. He just wasn't there, but we ate off his tray.

"Then my girlfriend and I looked at each other, and we thought—the bed! So I ripped the sheets back, and she said, 'What are you doing?' And I said, 'I'm looking!' And she said, 'For what?' I said, 'A pubic hair!'

"You'd have to be a die-hard fan to appreciate that. I mean, I know it sounds sick, but wouldn't that be the ultimate, for a female?"

I'm driving the 93 miles down Highway 78 from Memphis to Tupelo, Mississippi, where Elvis was born and lived for 13 years, to see if maybe I can get a clue as to what this is all about.

The drive feels very Rural Southern. Kudzu vines swarm everywhere. Corn is \$1 a dozen. A preacher is talking on the radio.

"I've been down that Long Road of Sin," he says. "I went out and just ate the world."

Election campaigns are under way, in the form of signs in people's yards.

RE-ELECT ZACK STEWART

HIGHWAY COMMISSIONER

Jimmy Dale Green Sheriff

"Sometimes," the preacher says, "we all get in that old carnality way."

The Birthplace is at the end of a short street lined with extremely modest homes. Shacks, really. The Birthplace is a shack, too, only it has been fixed up nice and moved a short distance to a little park, which also has a modern building where you can buy souvenirs.

The Birthplace has only two rooms, furnished with donated items. The most authentic item there is Laverne Clayton, who sits in the bedroom and charges you \$1 admission. She was born in 1935, same as Elvis; she lived next door to him for 10 years, went to school with him.

"He liked K-Aro syrup and butter and biscuits," she says. "He liked to play Roy Rogers. I was in the schoolroom, third grade, when he sang 'Old Shep.' We thought he was silly. We didn't pay him no mind."

And now she collects money from people who come from Japan just to see where he was born. And she doesn't understand, any more than I do, why.

"A lot of the people don't believe Elvis is dead," she says, shaking her head. "They tell me he's on an island somewhere."

"You don't argue with real Elvis fans. You just let them talk."

At the Birthplace I buy a book called *Elvis Now—Ours Forever*, a collection of reminiscences from *True Fans* edited by Bob Olmetti and Sue McCasland, who was a gate person in the mid-'70s. The book almost throbs in your hands with the intensity of the fans' devotion.

Jan Lancaster, Tupelo, Mississippi: "Every time I went to Memphis, I went by [Graceland]. ... Like I was eight months pregnant, and my girlfriend and I went up there with our husbands. They went to a skin flick, dropped us off, and I had a coat on so if ELvis sees me he won't know I'm pregnant. We sat all night long—it was 22 degrees. ..."

Linda Horr, Richmond, Indiana: "I don't think any fan could love Elvis as much as I do, except maybe, to the fans who have actually met him, the hurt is worse. If that is so, then I thank God for sparing me that kind of pain—for the loss I feel is bad enough."

Part of it, of course, is his music. He really could sing, and except for a sterile period in the '60s when he was acting in mostly awful movies with mostly awful soundtracks, he made a whole lot of good records—"Jailhouse Rock," "Heartbreak Hotel," "Suspicious Minds" ... "Burnin' Love," and many more that don't get played much on the radio. Elvis croons continuously over the P.A. system at the souvenir-store plaza across from Graceland, and as you wander around you often find yourself thinking when a new song comes on, Yeah, that was a pretty good one, too.

Part of it was his lack of pretense. I realize that seems like an odd way to talk about a pampered, insulated superstar who performed in spangled jumpsuits, but if you watch tapes of him in concert, what strikes you—what strikes me, anyway—is that, unlike his preening, pouting, self-important impersonators, the real Elvis never seemed to take himself particularly seriously. He laughed a lot, and most of his jokes were at his own expense—muttered throwaway lines about the legendary Pelvis, the Leer, and (near the end) the Paunch. He seemed to find the adulation as inexplicable as many of the rest of us do. Watching him, I found it hard not to like him.

"Elvis," says Linda Cullum, veteran of many years at the gates, "was always a regular person."

And indeed he was, in some ways. He got very famous, and he got very rich, but he didn't move to Monaco, didn't collect Mause, didn't hang out with Society. He was a boy from the South, and he stayed in the South, and when he made it, he brought his daddy and mama and relatives and friends to live with him in and around his mansion. To the end, he hung out with good old boys, and he did the things a good old boy does, only more so.

There's a long-standing tradition in the American South in which getting drunk and/or stoned and chasing women and shooting off pistols and racing cars around for the sheer hell of it are normal, everyday male activities, generally accepted with a resigned or amused shrug by much of Southern society. In the show business part of this society they called this "roarin' with the 'billies [hillbillies]." In country music, tradition practically dictated that as soon as you got a little money, you went out and spent it on cars, clothes, rings and women, all flashy. Many in rock and roll adhered to this self-indulgent philosophy.

Elvis was a product of this culture and when you traveled with Elvis, you were roarin' with the No. 1 Billy.—Elvis: the final Years, by Jerry Hopkins

The cars, the guns, the jewelry, the wild parties, the binges, the famous plane trip from Memphis to Denver in the dead of night solely to buy peanut butter sandwiches—none of this bothers the fans. Hey, it was his money. He earned it.

Another part of it—a big part, the shrinks say—is sexual: repressed longings released by this exotic, sensual stud who dared to thrust his hips at the Wonder Bread world that was white American pop culture in the '50s. But that was a long time ago, and there have been plenty of sex symbols since. Why do these people remain so loyal to Elvis? Why does it seem as though their ardor has intensified, rather than cooled, since his death?

And why are their feelings so personal, for a man some of them never saw in person, and many of them never met? Talk to a True Fan, and odds are she won't talk about Elvis's art, his genius, the way fans of, say, Bob Dylan will talk. Odds are she'll tell you how, when he performed, he always seemed to be looking at her, singing to her. The True Fans really believe that Elvis loved them, just as much as they love him. They talk about how much he cared for them, how much he gave them, how, in a way, he died for them. He was under so much pressure, the True Fans say; he worked so hard to meet the demands of his public. No wonder he was sick. No wonder he turned to drugs. In some fans you sense a distinct

undercurrent of guilt: If only he hadn't kept his pain so private, if only I had known, maybe I could have helped. ...

This devotion gets more and more confusing the longer I try to understand it. I've been reading books, listening to records, watching tapes, talking to fans, talking to Graceland officials. I have two notebooks full of quotes from people trying to explain the Elvis Thing. They can't, and neither can I.

But I'm not laughing at it, the way I used to.

There's a painful scene near the end of the documentary "This Is Elvis" showing Elvis in one of his final concerts, six weeks before he died. His appearance is shocking: This is a bloated, obviously sick man, his belly hanging out over the gaudy belt of his jumpsuit. He sings "Are You Lonesome Tonight," and when he gets to the talking part in the middle, he forgets the words; forgets the words to a song he must have sung a thousand times. He keeps going, stumbling and slurring, not looking at the audience, giggling to himself as he blows line after line, finally giving up.

When, mercifully, the song ends, Elvis introduces his father, Vernon, who looks only slightly older than his son, and much healthier. And then Elvis sings "My Way," holding a piece of paper, in case he forgets the words.

"Sometimes," says Debbie Brown, "I'll drive by the gates at about 3 in the morning—that was his time—and I'll turn my back on all the souvenir stores, and just look at the house, and it reminds me a little bit of what it was like. But I don't really like to do that too much, because it reminds me of how empty it is now. It's over. The fantasy's over.

"But just for a little time, I was part of something special. And I was special."

After Shirley Connell let me look over her back fence at Elvis's horses, she showed me her photo album. It's thick with snapshots of Elvis, many taken at the gates. Sometimes it's just Elvis; sometimes she's in the background; sometimes he has his arm around her. The two of them change, as you flip through the pages, he from bad-ass motorcycle rocker to Vegas headliner, she from girl to woman, the two of them growing older together.

"I try not to even drive by the gates anymore," she says.

Now That's Scary

Recently I played lead guitar in a rock band, and the rhythm guitarist was—not that I wish to drop names—Stephen King. This actually happened. It was the idea of a woman named Thi Goldmark, who formed a band consisting mostly of writers to raise money for literacy by putting on a concert at the American Booksellers Association convention in Anaheim, California.

So she called a bunch of writers who were sincerely interested in literacy and making an unbelievable amount of noise. Among the others who agreed to be in the band were Tad Bartimus, Roy Blount, Jr., Michael Dorris, Robert Fulghum, Matt Groaning, Barbara Kingsolver, Ridley Pearson, and Amy Tan.

I think we all said yes for the same reason. If you're a writer, you sit all day alone in a quiet room trying to craft sentences on a word processor, which makes weenie little clickety-click sounds. After years and years of crafting and clicking, you are naturally attracted to the idea of arming yourself with an amplified instrument powerful enough to be used for building demolition, then getting up on a stage with other authors and screaming out songs such as "Land of 1,000 Dances," the lyrics to which express the following literary theme:

Na, na na na na, na na na na Na na na, na na na, na na na na

So we all met in Anaheim, and for three days we rehearsed in a Secret Location under the strict supervision of our musical director, the legendary rock musician Al Kooper. This was a major thrill for me, because Kooper had been my idol when I was at Haverford College in the late 1960s. Back then I played guitar in a band called The Federal Duck, and we tried very hard to sound like a band Al Kooper was in called The Blues Project. Eventually The Federal Duck actually made a record album, which was so bad that many stereo systems chose to explode rather than play it.

Anyway, I could not quite believe that, 25 years later, I was really and truly in a band with Al Kooper, and that he was actually asking for my opinion on musical issues. “Do you think,” he would ask, “that you could play in the same key as the rest of us?”

So, OK, skillwise I’m not Eric Clapton. But I was louder than Eric Clapton, as well as many nuclear tests. I had an amplifier large enough to serve as public housing. It had a little foot switch, and when I pressed it, I was able to generate sound waves that will affect the global climate for years to come. We can only hope that Saddam Hussein is not secretly developing a foot switch like this.

We practiced six long hours the first day, and at the end, Al Kooper called us together for an inspirational talk.

“When we started this morning, we stunk,” he said. “But by this afternoon, we stunk much better. Maybe eventually we can be just a faint odor.”

In the evenings we engaged in literary activities such as going to see the movie *Alien*. I was concerned about this, because when I watch horror movies I tend to whimper and clutch the person sitting next to me, who in this particular case was Stephen King. But as it turned out, the alien didn’t scare me at all; I live in Miami, and we have cockroaches that are at least that size, but more aggressive. The only scary part was when Sigourney Weaver got injected with a hypodermic needle, which on the movie screen was approximately 27 feet long. This caused me to whimper and clutch Stephen King, but I was pleased to note that he was whimpering and clutching his wife, Tabitha.

But the real thrill came when our band finished practicing and actually played. The performance was in a big dance hall called the Cowboy Boogie, where hundreds of booksellers and publishing-industry people had drunk themselves into a highly literary mood. The show went great. The audience whooped and screamed and threw underwear. Granted, some of it was extra-large men’s Jockey briefs, but underwear is underwear. We belted out our songs, singing, with deep concern for literacy in our voices, such lyrics as:

You got to do the Mammer Jammer If you want my love.

Also a group of rock critics got up with us and sang a version of “Louie Louie” so dirty that the U.S. Constitution should, in my opinion, be modified specifically to prohibit it.

Also—so far this is the highlight of my life—I got to play a lead-guitar solo while dancing the Butt Dance with Al Kooper. To get an idea how my solo sounded, press the following paragraph up against your ear:

BWEEEEOOOOOAAAAPPPPPP

Ha ha! Isn’t that great? Your ear is bleeding.

Mustang Davey

Recently, I was chosen to serve as a musical consultant to the radio industry.

Actually, it wasn't the entire industry; it was a woman named Marcy, who called me up at random one morning while I was picking my teeth with a business card as part of an ongoing effort to produce a column.

"I'm not selling anything," Marcy said.

Of course when callers say this, they usually mean that they ARE selling something, so I was about to say "No thank you" in a polite voice, then bang the receiver down with sufficient force to drive phone shards deep into Marcy's brain, when she said she was doing a survey for the radio industry about what songs should be played on the air.

That got my attention, because radio music is an issue I care deeply about. I do a lot of singing in the car. You should hear Aretha Franklin and me perform our version of "I Say a little Prayer for You," especially when our voices swoop way up high for the ending part that goes, "My darling BELIEVE me, for me there is nooo WAHHHHHAAANNNN." My technique is to grip the steering wheel with both hands and lift myself halfway out of the seat so that I can give full vocal expression to the emotion that Aretha and I are feeling, which is a mixture of joyous hope and bittersweet longing and the horror of realizing that the driver of the cement truck three feet away is staring at me, at which point I pretend that I am having a coughing seizure while Aretha finishes the song on her own.

I think they should play that song more often on the radio, along with "Brown-Eyed Girl," "Sweet Home Alabama," and of course the Isley Brothers' version of "Twist and Shout," which, if you turn it up loud enough, can propel you beyond mere singing into the stage where you have to get out of the car and dance with tollbooth attendants.

On the other hand, it would not trouble me if the radio totally ceased playing ballad-style songs by Neil Diamond. I realize that many of you are huge Neil Diamond fans, so let me stress that in matters of musical taste, everybody is entitled to an opinion, and yours is wrong. Consider the song "I Am, I Said," wherein Neil, with great emotion, sings:

I am, I said To no one there And no one heard at all Not even the chair.

What kind of line is that? Is Neil telling us he's surprised that the chair didn't hear him? Maybe he expected the chair to say, "Whoa, I heard THAT." My guess is that Neil was really desperate to come up with something to rhyme with "there," and he had already rejected "So I ate a pear," "Like Smokey the Bear," and "There were nits in my hair."

So we could do without this song. I also believe that we should use whatever means are necessary—and I do not exclude tactical nuclear weapons—to prevent radio stations from ever playing "Honey," "My Way," "I Write the Songs," "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden," and "Watchin' Scottie Grow." I have holes in my car radio from stabbing the station-changing button when these songs come on. Again, you may disagree with me, but if you know so much, how come the radio industry didn't randomly survey you?

The way the survey worked was, Marcy played two-second snippets from about two dozen songs; after each snippet I was supposed to say whether I liked the song or not. She'd play, for example, "Don't Worry, Baby" by the Beach Boys and I'd shout "YES! PLAY THE WHOLE THING!" and she'd say, "OK, that's a 'like.' Or she'd play "Don't You Care" by the Buckingham, and I'd make a noise like a person barfing up four feet of intestine, and Marcy would say, "OK, that's a 'don't like.'"

The problem was that I wasn't allowed to suggest songs. I could only react to the generally mediocre candidates that were presented. It was just like the presidential elections. This is too bad, because there

are a lot of good songs that never get played. My wife and I are constantly remarking on this. I'll say, "Do you remember a song called 'Boys'?" And Beth, instantly, will respond, "Bop shoo-bop, boppa boppa SHOO-bop." Then both of us, with a depth of emotion that we rarely exhibit when discussing world events, will say, "They NEVER play that!"

I tried suggesting a couple of songs to Marcy. For example, after she played the "Don't Worry, Baby" snippet, I said, "You know there's a great Beach Boys song that never gets played called "Custom Machine." The chorus goes:

Step on the gas, she goes WAA-AAA-AAHH I'll let you look But don't touch my custom machine!

I did a good version of this, but Marcy just went "Huh" and played her next snippet, which was "I Go to Pieces" by a group that I believe is called Two British Weenies. I don't care for that song, and I told Marcy as much, but I still keep hearing it on the radio. Whereas I have yet to hear "Custom Machine." It makes me wonder if the radio industry really cares what I think,

or if I'm just a lonely voice crying out, and nobody hears me at all. Not even the chair.

The Whammies

In a recent column I noted that certain songs are always getting played on the radio, despite the fact that these songs have been shown, in scientific laboratory tests, to be bad. One example I cited was Neil Diamond's ballad "I Am, I Said," in which Neil complains repeatedly that nobody hears him, "not even the chair." I pointed out that this does not make a ton of sense, unless Neil has unusually intelligent furniture. ("Mr. Diamond, your BarcaLounge is on line two.")

Well, it turns out there are some major Neil Diamond fans out there in Readerland. They sent me a large pile of hostile mail with mouth froth spewing out of the envelope seams. In the interest of journalistic fairness, I will summarize their main arguments here:

Dear Pukenose: just who the hell do you think you are to blah blah a great artist like Neil blah blah more than 20 gold records blah blah how many gold records do YOU have, you scum-sucking wad of blah blah I personally have attended 1,794 of Neil's concerts blah blah What about "Love on the Rocks" Huh? What about "Cracklin' Rosie"? blah blah if you had ONE-TENTH of Neil's talent blah blah so I listened to "Heart Light" 40 times in a row and the next day the cyst was GONE and the doctor said he had never seen such a rapid blah blah. What about "Play Me"? What about "Song Sung Blah"? Cancel my subscription, if I have one.

So we can clearly see that music is a matter of personal taste. Person A may hate a particular song, such as "Havin' My Baby" by Paul Anka (who I suspect is also Neil Sedaka), and Person B might love this song. But does this mean that Person B is wrong? Of course not. It simply means that Person B is an idiot. Because some songs are just plain bad, and "Havin' My Baby" is one of them, and another one is "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown."

That's not merely my opinion: That's the opinion of many readers who took time out from whatever they do, which I hope does not involve operating machinery, to write letters containing harsh remarks about these and other songs. In fact, to judge from the reader reaction, the public is a lot more concerned about the issue of song badness than about the presidential election campaign (which by the way is over, so you can turn on your TV again).

And it's not just the public. It's also the media. I put a message on the Miami Herald's computer

system, asking people to nominate the worst rock song ever, and within minutes I was swamped with passionate responses. And these were from newspaper people, who are legendary for their cold-blooded noninvolvement (“I realize this is a bad time for you, Mrs. Weemer, but could you tell me how you felt when you found Mr. Weemer’s head”). Even the managing editor responded, arguing that the worst rock song ever was “whichever one led to the second one.”

Other popular choices were “A Horse with No Name,” performed by America; “Billy, Don’t Be a Hero,” by Bo Donaldson and the Heywoods; “Kung Fu Fighting,” by Carl Douglas; “Copacabana,” by Barry Manilow; “Me and You and a Dog Named Boo,” by Lobo; “Seasons in the Sun,” by Terry Jacks; “Feelings,” by various weenies; “Precious and Few” by some people who make the weenies who sang “Feelings” sound like Ray Charles; “The Pepsi Song,” by Ray Charles; “Muskrat Love,” by The Captain and Tennille; every song ever recorded by Bobby Goldsboro; and virtually every song recorded since about 1972.

“It’s worse than ever” is how my wife put it.

Anyway, since people feel so strongly about this issue, I’ve decided to conduct a nationwide survey to determine the worst rock song ever. I realize that similar surveys have been done before, but this one will be unique: This will be the first rock-song survey ever, to my knowledge, that I’ll be able to get an easy column out of.

So I’m asking you to consider two categories: Worst Overall Song and Worst lyrics. In the second category, for example, you might want to consider a song I swear I heard back in the late 1950s, which I believe was called “Girls Grow Up Faster Than Boys Do.” I’ve been unable to locate the record, but the chorus went:

Won’t you take a look at me now
You’ll be surprised at what you see now
I’m everything a girl should
be now
Thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-Five!

I’m sure you can do worse than that.

Send your card today. Be in with the “in” crowd. We’ll have joy, we’ll have fun. So Cracklin’ Rosie, get on board, because Honey, I miss you. AND your dog named Boo.

The Worst Songs Ever Recorded

BAD SONG SURVEY

PART ONE

Before I present the results of the Bad Song Survey, here’s an important BRAIN TAKEOVER ALERT: Be advised that this column names certain songs that you hate and have tried to suppress, but as soon as you read their names your brain will start singing “Yoouunngg girl, get out of my mind; my love for you is way out of line” ... over and over AND YOU CAN’T STOP IT AIEEEEEEE. Thank you.

First, I have NEVER written a column that got a bigger response than the one announcing the Bad Song Survey. Over 10,000 readers voted, with cards still coming in. Also, wherever I went people expressed their views to me, often gripping my shirt to emphasize their points. (“You know that song about

pina coladas? I hate that song. I HATE IT!”) Song badness is an issue that Americans care deeply about. Second, you Neil Diamond fans out there can stop writing irate unsigned letters telling me that I am not worthy to be a dandruff flake on Neil’s head, OK? (Not that I am saying Neil has dandruff.)

Because you have convinced me: Neil Diamond is GOD. I no longer see anything but genius in the song where he complains that his chair can't hear him. Unfortunately, a lot of survey voters are not so crazy about Neil's work, especially the part of "Play Me" where he sings: ... song she sang to me, song she brang to me ...

Of course I think those lyrics are brilliant; however, they brang out a lot of hostility in the readers. But not as much as "Lovin' You," sung by Minnie Riperton, or "Sometimes When We Touch," sung by Dan Hill, who sounds like he's having his prostate examined by Captain Hook.

Many people still deeply resent these songs. Many others would not rule out capital punishment for anyone convicted of having had anything to do with Gary Puckett and the Union Gap ("Woman," "Young Girl," and "This Girl Is a Man Now," which some voters argue are all the same song).

Likewise there are boiling pools of animosity out there for Barry "I Write the Songs" Manilow, Olivia "Have You Never Been Mellow" Newton-John, Gilbert "Alone Again, Naturally" O'Sullivan, The Village "YMCA" People, Tony "Knock Three Times" Orlando, and of course Yoko "Every Song I Ever Performed" Ono. And there is no love lost for the Singing Nun.

The voters are ANGRY. A typical postcard states: "The number one worst piece of pus-oozing, vomit-inducing, camel-spitting, cow-phlegm rock song EVER in the history of the solar system is 'Dreams of the Everyday Housewife.'" (Amazingly, this song was NOT performed by Gary Puckett and the Union Gap.)

Here are some other typical statements:

- * "I'd rather chew a jumbo roll of tinfoil than hear 'Hey Paula' by Paul and Paula."

- * "Whenever I hear the Four Seasons' 'Walk Like a Man,' I want to scream, 'Frankie, SING like a man!'"

- * "I wholeheartedly believe that 'Ballerina Girl' is responsible for 90 percent of the violent crimes in North America today."

- * "I nominate every song ever sung by the Doobie Brothers. Future ones also."

- * "Have you noticed how the hole in the ozone layer has grown progressively larger since rap got popular?"

Sometimes the voters were so angry that they weren't even sure of the name of the song they hated. There were votes against "These Boots Are Made for Stomping"; the Beach Boys' classic "Carolina Girls"; "I'm Nothing But a Hound Dog"; and "Ain't No Woman Like the One-Eyed Gott." A lot of people voted for "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," offering a variety of interpretations of the chorus, including: "Weem-o-wep," "Wee-ma-wack," "Weenawack," "A-ween-a-wap," and "Wingle whip."

Many readers are still very hostile toward the song "Wildfire," in which singer Michael Murphy wails for what seems like 97 minutes about a lost pony. (As one voter put it: "Break a leg, Wildfire.") Voter Steele Hinton particularly criticized the verse wherein there came a killing frost, which causes Wildfire to get lost. As Hinton points out: ... 'killing' in 'killing frost' refers to your flowers and your garden vegetables, and when one is forecast you should cover your tomatoes ... Nobody ever got lost in a killing frost who wouldn't get lost in July as well."

There was also a solid vote for Gordon Lightfoot's "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," a real fun party song. Several voters singled out the line: "As the big freighters go, it was bigger than most."

Speaking of bad lyrics, there were votes for:

- * Cream's immortal "I'm So Glad," which eloquently expresses the feeling of being glad, as follows: "I'm so glad! I'm so glad! I'm glad, I'm glad,

I'm glad!" (Repeat one billion times.)

* "La Bamba," because the lyrics, translated, are: "I am not a sailor. I am a captain, I am a captain, I am a captain." And he is probably glad.

* "Johnny Get Angry," performed by Joanie Sommers, who sings: "Johnny get angry, Johnny get mad; Give me the biggest lecture I ever had; I want a BRAVE man, I want a CAVE man ..."

* "Take the Money and Run," in which Steve Miller attempts to rhyme "Texas" with "what the facts is," not to mention "hassle" with "El Paso."

* "Torn Between Two lovers." (Reader comment: "Torn, yes, hopefully on the rack.")

* "There Ain't Enough Room in My Fruit of the Looms to Hold All My Love for You." (This might not be a real song, but I don't care.)

Certainly these are all very bad songs, but the scary thing is: Not one song I've named so far is a winner. I'll name the winners next week, after your stomach has settled down. Meanwhile, here are some more songs you should NOT think about: "Baby I'm-a Want You," "Candy Man," "Disco Duck," "I Am Woman," "Itsy-Bitsy Teeny-Weeny Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini," "Last Kiss," "Patches," "The Night Chicago Died," "My Ding-a-Ling," and "My Sharona." Just FORGET these songs. Really.

P.S. Also "Horse with No Name."

And The Winner Is ...

BAD SONG SURVEY

PART Two

I hope you haven't had anything to eat recently, because, as promised last week, today I am presenting the winners of the Bad Song Survey.

In analyzing these results, I had to make a few adjustments. For example, the Bob Dylan song "Lay Lady Lay" would have easily won as Worst Overall Song, with 17,006 votes, except that I had to disallow 17,004 votes on the grounds that they were cast by my Research Department, Judi Smith, who tabulated the votes and who HATES "Lay Lady Lay."

To win, a song had to be known well enough so that a lot of people could hate it. This is a shame in a way, because some obscure songs that people voted for are wonderfully hideous. One reader sent a tape of a song called "Hooty Sapperticker," by a group called Barbara and the Boys. This could be the worst song I've ever heard. It consists almost entirely of the Boys singing "Hooty! Hooty! Hooty!" and then Barbara saying: "Howdy Hooty Sapperticker!"

Several readers sent in an amazing CD from Rhino Records called Golden Throats, which consists of popular actors attempting to sing popular music, including William Shatner attempting "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," Leonard Nimoy attempting "Proud Mary," Mae West attempting "Twist and Shout," Eddie

Albert attempting "Blowin' in the Wind," and—this is my favorite—jack "Mr. Soul" Webb attempting "Try a Little Tenderness." You need this CD.

But now for our results. Without question, the voters' choice for Worst Song—in both the Worst Overall AND Worst Lyrics category—is ... (drum roll ...

"MacArthur Park," as sung by Richard Harris, and later remade, for no comprehensible reason, by

Donna Summer.

It's hard to argue with this selection. My 12-year-old son Rob was going through a pile of ballots, and he asked me how "MacArthur Park" goes, so I sang it, giving it my best shot, and Rob laughed so hard that when I got to the part about leaving the cake out in the rain, and it took so long to bake it, and I'll never have that recipe again, Rob was on the floor. He didn't believe those lyrics were real. He was SURE his wacky old humor-columnist dad was making them up.

The clear runner-up, again in both categories, is "Yummy Yummy Yummy (I Got Love in My Tummy)," performed by Ohio Express. (A voter sent me an even WORSE version of this, performed by actress Julie London, who at one time—and don't tell me this is mere coincidence—was married to Jack Webb.)

Coming in a strong third is "(You're) Having My Baby" by Paul Anka. This song is deeply hated. As one voter put it: "It has no redeeming value whatsoever—except my friend Brian yelled out during the birth scene in the sequel to The Fly, in full song, 'Having my maggot!'"

Honorable mention goes to Bobby Goldsboro, who got many votes for various songs, especially "Honey." One voter wrote: "why does everybody hate Bobby Goldsboro's 'Honey'? I hate it too, but I want to know why."

Why? Consider this verse: "She wrecked the car and she was sad; And so afraid that I'd be mad, but what the heck; Tho' I pretended hard to be; Guess you could say she saw through me; And hugged my neck."

As one reader observed: "Bobby never caught on that he could have bored a hole in himself and let the sap out."

A recent song that has aroused great hostility is "Achy Breaky Heart," by Billy Ray Cyrus. According to voter Mark Freeman, the song sounds like this: "You can tell my lips, or you can tell my hips, that you're going to dump me if you can; But don't tell my liver, it never would forgive her, it might blow up and circumcise this man!"

Many voters feel a special Lifetime Bad Achievement Award should go to Mac Davis, who wrote "In the Ghetto," "Watchin Scotty Grow," AND "Baby Don't Get Hooked on Me," which contains one of the worst lines in musical history: "You're a hot-blooded woman, child; And it's warm where you're touching me." That might be as bad as the part in "Careless Whisper" where George Michael sings: "I'm never gonna dance again; Guilty feet have got no rhythm."

Speaking of bad lyrics, many voters also cited Paul McCartney, who, ever since his body was taken over by a pod person, has been writing things like: "Someone's knockin' at the door; Somebody's ringin' the bell; (repeat); Do me a favor, open the door, and let him in."

There were strong votes for various tragedy songs, especially "Teen Angel" ("I'll never kiss your lips again; They buried you today") and "Timothy," a song about—really—three trapped miners, two of whom wind up eating the third.

Other tremendously unpopular songs, for their lyrics or overall badness, are: "Muskrat Love," "Sugar Sugar," "I'm Too Sexy," "Surfin' Bird," "I've Never Been to Me," "In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida," "Afternoon Delight," "Feelings," "You Light Up My Life," and "In the Year 2525" (violent hatred for this song).

In closing, let me say that you voters have performed a major public service, and that just because your song didn't make the list, that doesn't mean it isn't awful (unless you were one of the badly misguided people who voted for "The Tupperware Song"). Let me also say that I am very relieved to learn that there are people besides me who hate "Stair-way to Heaven." Thank you. P.S. Also "I Shot the Sheriff."

Reader Alert

This is the last section; like the first one, it's mostly family stuff. It includes a column I wrote when my son got hit by a car, which was very scary; and one about his reaching adolescence, which veteran parents have assured me will be even scarier. There is also some important advice in here for young people, who represent our nation's Hope for the Future. I myself plan to be dead.

The Old-Timers Game

My son got his ear pierced. He's 12. For 12 years I worked hard to prevent him from developing unnatural bodily holes, then he went out and got one on purpose. At a shopping mall. It turns out that minors can have their earlobes assaulted with sharp implements by shopping-mall-booth personnel who, for all we know, have received no more formal medical training than is given to burrito folders at Taco Bell. And the failed Clinton administration is doing nothing.

You're probably saying: "Don't blame the government! As a parent, YOU must take responsibility! You and your wife, Beth, should sit your son down and give him a stern reprimand."

Listen, that's a great idea, except for one teensy little problem, which is that BETH IS THE PERSON WHO DROVE HIM TO THE PIERCING PLACE. This is the same woman who, when Rob was 6, allowed him to get a "punk" style haircut that transformed him in just a few minutes from Christopher Robin into Bart Simpson; the same woman who indulges his taste for clothes that appear to have been dyed in radioactive Kool-Aid.

No, Beth is not on my side in the ongoing battle I have waged with my son to keep him normal, defined as "like me, but with less nose hair."

Now you're probably saying: "Who are YOU to be complaining? When you were young, didn't YOU feel you had the right to do things that your parents disapproved of?" Perhaps you are referring to the time in ninth grade when Phil Grant, Tom Parker, and I decided that pipe-smoking was cool, so we got hold of some pipes and stood around spewing smoke, thinking we looked like urbane sophisticates, when in fact we looked like the Junior Fred MacMurray Dork Patrol. I will admit that when my parents found out about this (following a minor desk fire in my room) and told me to stop, I went into a week long door-slamming snit, as though the right of ninth graders to smoke pipes was explicitly stated in the U.S. Constitution.

But we cannot compare these two situations. In the case of my pipe-smoking, my parents were clearly overreacting, because the worst that could have happened was that I would have burned the house down and got cancer. Whereas I have a very good reason to object to Rob's earlobe hole: It makes me feel old. Rob wears a little jeweled ear stud, and it's constantly winking at me and saying: "Hey there, old-timer! YOU'D never wear an ear stud! And neither would Grandpa Walton!"

I am also being rapidly aged by Rob's choice of radio stations. The one he now prefers is operated by one of the most dangerous and irresponsible forces on Earth, college students. I was concerned about what they might be playing, so I tuned it in on my car radio. The first song I heard didn't sound so bad, and I said to myself. "Hey! Perhaps I am still fairly hip after all!" And then the deejay came on and said, apologetically: "I realize that song was mainstream." He said "mainstream" the way you would say

“composed by Phoenicians.” Then he played a song entitled—I am not making this up—”Detachable Penis.”

Yes, college students are in on the plot with my son to make me feel old. Not long ago I was sitting on a beach near a group of male college students who were talking about a bungee-jumping excursion they had taken. They were bragging about the fact that they had leaped off the tower in the only cool way, which is headfirst and backward. They spoke with great contempt about a group of fathers—that’s the term they used, “fathers,” making it sound as though it means “people even older than Phoenicians”—who had jumped off feet-first, which the college students considered to be pathetic.

This made me feel extremely old, because I personally would not bungee-jump off the Oxford English Dictionary. My son, on the other hand, would unhesitatingly bungee-jump off the Concorde. And he’s only 12. Who KNOWS how old he’ll make me feel by the time he’s 14. What if he wants a nose ring? I won’t allow it! I’m going to put my foot down! I’m going to take charge!

I’m going to steal Beth’s car keys.

Breaking The Ice

As a mature adult, I feel an obligation to help the younger generation, just as the mother fish guards her unhatched eggs, keeping her lonely vigil day after day, never leaving her post, not even to go to the bathroom, until her tiny babies emerge and she is able, at last, to eat them. “She may be your mom, but she’s still a fish” is a wisdom nugget that I would pass along to any fish eggs reading this column.

But today I want to talk about dating. This subject was raised in a letter to me from a young person named Eric Knott, who writes:

I have got a big problem. There’s this girl in my English class who is really good-looking. However, I don’t think she knows I exist. I want to ask her out, but I’m afraid she will say no, and I will be the freak of the week. What should I do?

Eric, you have sent your question to the right mature adult, because as a young person I spent a lot of time thinking about this very problem. Starting in about eighth grade, my time was divided as follows:

Academic Pursuits: 2 percent. Zits: 16 percent. Trying to Figure Out How to Ask Girls Out: 82 percent.

The most sensible way to ask a girl out is to walk directly up to her on foot and say, “So, you want to go out? Or what?” I never did this. I knew, as Eric Knott knows, that there was always the possibility that the girl would say no, thereby leaving me with no viable option but to leave Harold C. Crittenden Junior High School forever and go into the woods and become a bark-eating hermit whose only companions would be the gentle and understanding woodland creatures.

“Hey, ZITFACE!” the woodland creatures would shriek in cute little Chip ‘n’ Dale voices while raining acorns down upon my head. “You wanna DATE? HAHAAHAHAHA.”

So the first rule of dating is: Never risk direct contact with the girl in question. Your role model should be the nuclear submarine, gliding silently beneath the ocean surface, tracking an enemy target that does not even begin to suspect that the submarine would like to date it. I spent the vast majority of 1960 keeping a girl named Judy under surveillance, maintaining a minimum distance of 50 lockers to avoid the danger that I might somehow get into a conversation with her, which could have led to disaster:

JUDY: Hi. ME: Hi. JUDY: JUST in case you have ever thought about having a date with me, the answer is no. WOODLAND CREATURES: HAHAAHAHA.

The only problem with the nuclear-submarine technique is that it's difficult to get a date with a girl who has never, technically, been asked. This is why you need Phil Grant. Phil was a friend of mine who had the ability to talk to girls. It was a mysterious superhuman power he had, comparable to X-ray vision. So, after several thousand hours of intense discussion and planning with me, Phil approached a girl he knew named Nancy, who approached a girl named Sandy, who was a direct personal friend of Judy's and who passed the word back to Phil via Nancy that Judy would be willing to go on a date with me. This procedure protected me from direct humiliation, similar to the way President Reagan was protected from direct involvement in the Iran-contra scandal by a complex White House chain of command that at one point, investigators now believe, included his horse.

Thus it was that, finally, Judy and I went on an actual date, to see a movie in White Plains, New York. If I were to sum up the romantic ambience of this date in four words, those words would be: "My mother was driving." This made for an extremely quiet drive, because my mother, realizing that her presence was hideously embarrassing, had to pretend she wasn't there. If it had been legal, I think she would have got out and sprinted alongside the car, steering through the window. Judy and I, sitting in the backseat about 75

feet apart, were also silent, unable to communicate without the assistance of Phil, Nancy, and Sandy.

After what seemed like several years we got to the movie theater, where my mother went off to sit in the Parents and Lepers Section. The movie was called North to Alaska, but I can tell you nothing else about it because I spent the whole time wondering whether it would be necessary to amputate my right arm, which was not getting any blood flow as a result of being perched for two hours like a petrified snake on the back of Judy's seat exactly one molecule away from physical contact.

So it was definitely a fun first date, featuring all the relaxed spontaneity of a real-estate closing, and in later years I did regain some feeling in my arm. My point, Eric Knott, is that the key to successful dating is self-confidence. I bet that good-looking girl in your English class would LOVE to go out with you. But YOU have to make the first move. So just do it! Pick up that phone! Call Phil Grant.

Consumers From Mars

Recently I was watching TV, and a commercial came on, and the announcer, in a tone of voice usually reserved for major developments in the Persian Gulf, said: "Now consumers can ask Angela Lansbury their questions about Bufferin!"

As a normal human, your natural reaction to this announcement is: "Huh?" Meaning: "What does Angela Lansbury have to do with Bufferin?" But this commercial featured several consumers who had apparently been stopped at random on the street, and every one of them had a question for Angela Lansbury about Bufferin. Basically what they asked was, "Miss Lansbury, is Bufferin a good product that I should purchase, or what?" These consumers seemed very earnest. It was as if they had been going around for months wringing their hands and saying, "I have a question about Bufferin! If only I could ask Angela Lansbury!"

What we are seeing here is yet another example of a worsening problem that has been swept under the rug for too long in this nation: the invasion of Consumers from Mars. They look like humans, but they don't act like humans, and they are taking over. Don't laugh. We know that Mars can support life. We know this because Vice President for Now Dan Quayle, who is the administration's No. 1 Man in the

space program, once made the following famous statement, which I am not making up:

“Mars is essentially in the Same orbit ... somewhat the same distance from the Sun, which is very important. We have seen pictures where there are canals, we believe, and water. If there is water, that means there is oxygen. If oxygen, that means we can breathe.”

You cannot argue with that kind of logic. You can only carry it to its logical conclusion, which is that if there are canals, that means there are boats, and if there are boats, that means there are consumers, and apparently they are invading the Earth and getting on TV commercials.

I saw another commercial recently wherein a middle-age man gets off an airplane and is greeted by his wife, who says something like: “What did you bring back from your trip?” And the man replies: “Diarrhea.” Yes. He probably hasn’t seen his wife in a week, and the first thing out of his mouth, so to speak, is “Diarrhea.” Is this the behavior of a regular (ha ha!) human? Of course not. This is clearly another invading consumer from Mars, just like the ones that are always striding into drugstores and announcing at the top of their lungs that they have hemorrhoids.

The worst thing is that, as Martian consumers take over, they’re starting to influence the way businesses think. I received chilling evidence of this recently from alert reader Rick Johansen, who sent me an Associated Press article by David Kalish about food manufacturers who are putting less food into packages, but not reducing prices. One example was Knorr brand leek soup and recipe mix: The old box contained four eight-ounce servings, but the new box, which is slightly larger, contains only three eight-ounce servings. The story quotes a spokesperson for the manufacturer, CPC International, as saying that this change was made because—pay close attention here—there were “a lot of complaints from American consumers that we were giving them too much in the box.”

Sure! We believe that! We believe that all over America, consumers were sitting around their dinner tables, saying, “You know Ralph, I am sick and tired of getting so much soup in a box. I’m going to write in and demand that they put less in without lowering the price.”

“Good idea!” Ralph would answer, pounding his fist on the table. “And then let’s tell Angela Lansbury about our hemorrhoids!”

No, those were not American consumers who complained to CPC International; those were Martians. Also, most product instructions are now written for Martians. Alert reader Mark Lindsay sent me the instructions for the Sunbeam Dental Water jet; under the heading IMPORTANT SAFEGUARDS is the statement—I am still not making this up—”Never use while sleeping.” Don’t try to tell me that’s for Earthlings.

And how about all those manufacturers’ coupons featuring Exciting Offers wherein it turns out, when you read the fine print, that you have to send in the coupon PLUS proof of purchase PLUS your complete dental records by registered mail to Greenland and allow at least 18 months for them to send you ANOTHER coupon that will entitle you to 29 cents off your next purchase of a product you don’t really want? Do you think anybody besides extraterrestrials ever actually does that?

I have here a package sent in by alert reader Roger Lyons, who purchased a Revlon Pedi-Care Toe Nail Clip device for \$2.19 at a Giant Supermarket in Washington, D.C. On the package is Revlon’s Full Lifetime Guarantee, which states that if you find any defects, you should follow this procedure:

Wrap securely in a box or mailing tube ... Mail insured and POSTAGE PAID ... Notify us within six months if implement is not returned ... GUARANTEE IS NOT APPLICABLE if implement has been serviced by other than Revlon, has been abused or allowed to rust. Keep lightly oiled in a dry place to avoid rusting ...

And so on. Who would DO this? Who would ever think of saving the package so he or she would know HOW to do this? Only Martians! Face it, human consumers: They have taken over. It's too late to do anything about it. Your best bet is to stay calm, remain indoors, maybe oil your toenail clippers. Me, I have to set up the landing lights on my lawn. Zorkon is bringing in a new group tonight.

Say Uncle

Summer vacation is almost over, so today Uncle Dave has a special back-to-school “pep talk” for you young people, starting with these heart-felt words of encouragement: HA HA HA YOU HAVE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL AND UNCLE DAVE DOESN'T NEENER NEENER NEENER.

Seriously, young people, I have some important back-to-school advice for you, and I can boil it down to four simple words: “Study Your Mathematics.”

I say this in light of a recent alarming Associated Press story stating that three out of every four high-school students—nearly 50 percent—leave school without an adequate understanding of mathematics. Frankly, I am not surprised. “How,” I am constantly asking myself, “can we expect today's young people to understand mathematics when so many of them can't even point their baseball caps in the right direction?”

I am constantly seeing young people with the bills of their baseball caps pointing backward. This makes no sense, young people! If you examine your cap closely, you will note that it has a piece sticking out the front called a “bill.” The purpose of the bill is to keep sun off your face, which, unless your parents did a great many drugs in the '60s (Ask them about it!), is located on the FRONT of your head. Wearing your cap backward is like wearing sunglasses on the back of your head, or wearing a hearing aid in your nose. (Perhaps you young people are doing this also. Uncle Dave doesn't want to know.)

So to summarize what we've learned: “FRONT of cap goes on FRONT of head.” Got it, young people? Let's all strive to do better in the coming school year!

But also we need to think about getting these math scores up. A shocking number of you young people are unable to solve even basic math problems, such as the following:

A customer walks into a fast-food restaurant, orders two hamburgers costing \$2 apiece, then hands you a \$5 bill. How much change should you give him? a. \$2 b. \$3 c. None, because the question doesn't say you WORK there. You could just take the money and run away.

The correct answer, of course, is that you should give the customer: d. Whatever the computerized cash register says, even if it's \$154,789.62.

You young people must learn to handle basic mathematical concepts such as this if you hope to ever become a smug and complacent older person such as myself. I was fortunate enough to receive an excellent mathematical foundation as a member of the Class of 196.5 Billion Years Ago at Pleasantville High School, where I studied math under Mr. Solin, who, in my senior year, attempted to teach us calculus (from the ancient Greek words calc, meaning “the study of,” and ulus, meaning “something that only Mr. Solin could understand”).

Mr. Solin was an excellent teacher, and although the subject matter was dry, he was able to keep the class's attention riveted on him from the moment the bell rang until the moment, several minutes later, when a large girls' gym class walked past the classroom windows, every single day, causing the heads of

us male students to rotate 90 mathematical degrees in unison, like elves in a motorized Christmas yard display. But during those brief periods when we were facing Mr. Solin, we received a solid foundation in mathematics, learning many important mathematical concepts that we still use in our professional lives as employees of top U.S. corporations. A good example is the mathematical concept of “9,” which we use almost daily to obtain an outside line on our corporate telephones so that we can order Chinese food, place bets, call 1-900-BOSOMS, and perform all of the other vital employee functions that make our economy what it is today.

You young people deserve to have the same advantages, which is why I was so pleased to note in the Associated Press story that some university professors have received a \$6 million federal grant to develop new ways to teach math to high-school students. The professors know this will be a challenge. One of them is quoted as saying: “There is a mentality in this country that mathematics is something a few nerds out there do and if you don’t understand mathematics, it’s OK—you don’t need it.”

This is a bad mentality, young people. There’s nothing “nerdy” about mathematics. Contrary to their image as a bunch of out-of-it huge-butted Far Side-professor dweebs who spend all day staring at incomprehensible symbols on a blackboard while piles of dandruff form around their ankles, today’s top mathematicians are in fact a group of exciting, dynamic, and glamorous individuals who are working to solve some of the most fascinating and challenging problems facing the human race today (“Let’s see, at \$2.98 apiece, with a \$6 million federal grant, we could buy ... OA! That’s 2,013,422.82

POCKET PROTECTORS!”).

So come on, young people! Get in on the action! Work hard in math this year, and remember this: If some muscle-bound Neanderthal bullies corner you in the bathroom and call you a “nerd” you just look them straight in the eye and say, “Oh YEAH? Why don’t you big jerks ... LET GO! HEY. DON’T PUT MY HEAD IN THE TOILET! HEY!” And tell them that goes double for your Uncle Dave.

PUNCTUATION ‘R’ EASY

It’s time for another edition of “Ask Mister Language Person,” the column that answers your questions about grammar, vocabulary, and those little whaddyacallem marks.

Q. What are the rules regarding capital letters?

A. Capital letters are used in three grammatical situations:

1. At the beginning of proper or formal nouns. EXAMPLES: Capitalize “Queen,” “Tea Party,” and “Rental Tuxedo.” Do NOT capitalize “dude,” “cha-cha,” or “boogerhead.”
2. To indicate a situation of great military importance. EXAMPLE: “Get on the TELSAT and tell STAFCON that COMWIMP wants some BBQ ASAP.”
3. To indicate that the subject of the sentence has been bitten by a badger. EXAMPLE: “I’ll just stick my hand in here and OUCH!”

Q. Is there any difference between “happen” and “transpire”?

A. Grammatically, “happen” is a collaborating inductive that should be used in predatory conjunctions such as: “Me and Norm here would like to buy you two happening mommas a drink.” Whereas “transpire” is a suppository verb that should always be used to indicate that an event of some kind has transpired. wRONG: “Lester got one of them electric worm stunners. RIGHT: “What transpired was, Lester got one of them electric worm stunners.”

Q. Do you take questions from attorneys?

A. Yes. That will be \$475.

Q. No, seriously, I'm an attorney, and I want to know which is correct: "With regards to the aforementioned" blah blah blah. Or: "With regards to the aforementioned" yak yak yak.

A. That will be \$850.

Q. Please explain the expression: "This does not bode well."

A. It means that something is not boding the way it should. It could be boding better.

Q. Did an alert reader named Linda Bevard send you an article from the December 19, 1990, Denver Post concerning a Dr. Stanley Biber, who was elected commissioner in Las Animas County, and who is identified in the article as "the world's leading sex-change surgeon"?

A. Yes.

Q. And what did Dr. Biber say when he was elected?

A. He said, quote: "We pulled it off."

Q. Please explain the correct usage of "exact same."

A. "Exact same" is a corpuscular phrase that should be used only when something is exactly the same as something. It is the opposite (or "antibody") of "a whole nother."

EXAMPLE: "This is the exact same restaurant where Alma found weevils in her pie. They gave her a whole nother slice."

Q. I am going to deliver the eulogy at a funeral, and I wish to know whether it is correct to say: "Before he died, Lamont was an active person." Or: "Lamont was an active person before he died."

A. The American Funeral Industry Council advises us that the preferred term is "bought the farm."

Q. Where should punctuation go?

A. It depends on the content.

EXAMPLE: Hi Mr Johnson exclaimed Bob Where do you want me to put these punctuation marks Oh just stick them there at the end of the following sentence answered Mr Johnson OK said Bob

The exception to this rule is teenagers, who should place a question mark after every few words to make sure people are still listening.

EXAMPLE: "So there's this kid at school? Named Derrick? And he's like kind of weird? Like he has a picture of Newt Gingrich carved in his hair? So one day he had to blow his nose? like really bad? But he didn't have a tissue? So he was like sitting next to Tracy Steakle And she had this sweater? By like Ralph Lauren? So Derrick takes the sleeve? And he like ..."

PROFESSIONAL WRITING TIP: In writing a novel or play, use "foreshadowing" to subtly hint at the outcome of the plot.

WRONG: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" RIGHT: "O Romeo, Romeo! I wonder if we're both going to stab ourselves to death at the end of this plot?"

You've Gotta Be Kidding

Today's scary topic for parents is: What Your Children Do When You're Not Home.

I have here a letter from Buffalo, New York, from working mom Judy Price, concerning her 14-year-old son, David, "who should certainly know better, because the school keeps telling me he is a genius, but I have not seen signs of this in our normal, everyday life."

Judy states that one day when she came home from work, David met her outside and said: "Hi, Mom. Are you going in?"

(This is a bad sign, parents.)

Judy says she considered replying, “No, I thought I’d just stay here in the car all night and pull away for work in the morning.”

That actually would have been a wise idea. Instead, she went inside, where she found a large black circle burned into the middle of her kitchen counter. “DAVID,” she screamed. “WHAT WERE YOU COOKING?”

The soft, timid reply came back: “A baseball.”

“A baseball,” Judy writes. “Of course. What else could it be? How could I forget to tell my children never to cook a baseball? It’s my fault, really.”

It turns out that according to David’s best friend’s cousin—and if you can’t believe HIM, who CAN you believe?—you can hit a baseball three times as far if you really heat it up first. So David did this, and naturally he put the red-hot pan down directly onto the countertop, probably because there was no rare antique furniture available.

For the record: David claims that the heated baseball did, in fact, go farther. But this does NOT mean that you young readers should try this foolish and dangerous experiment at home. Use a friend’s home.

No, seriously, you young people should never heat a baseball without proper adult supervision, just as you should never—and I say this from personal experience—attempt to make a rumba box.

A rumba box is an obscure musical instrument that consists of a wooden box with metal strips attached to it in such a way that when you plunk them, the box resonates with a pleasant rhythmic sound. The only time I ever saw a rumba box was in 1964, when a friend of my parents named Walter Karl played one at a gathering at our house, and it sounded great. Mr. Karl explained that the metal strips were actually pieces of the spring from an old-fashioned wind-up phonograph. This gave my best friend, Lanny Watts, an idea. Lanny was always having ideas. For example, one day he got tired of walking to the end of his driveway to get the mail, so he had the idea of hanging the mailbox from a rope-and-pulley system strung up the driveway to his porch, where he hooked it up to a washing-machine motor. When the mailman came, Lanny simply plugged in the motor, and whoosh, the mailbox fell down. The amount of time Lanny spent unsuccessfully trying to get this labor-saving device to work was equivalent to approximately 5,000 trips to get the actual mail, but that is the price of convenience.

So anyway, when Lanny heard Mr. Karl explain the rumba box, he realized two things:

1. His parents had an old-fashioned wind-up phonograph they hardly ever used.
2. They both worked out of the home.

So Lanny and I decided to make our own rumba box. Our plan, as I recall it, was to take the phonograph apart, snip off a bit of the spring, then put the phonograph back together, and nobody would be the wiser. This plan worked perfectly until we removed the metal box that held the phonograph spring; this box turned out to be very hard to open.

“Why would they make it so strong?” we asked ourselves.

Finally, recalling the lessons we had learned about mechanical advantage in high-school physics class, we decided to hit the box with a sledge hammer.

Do you remember the climactic scene in the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark, when the Nazis open up the Ark of the Covenant and out surges a terrifying horde of evil fury and the Nazis’ heads melt like chocolate bunnies in a microwave? Well, that’s similar to what happened when Lanny sledge-hammered the spring box. It turns out that the reason the box is so strong is that there is a really powerful, tightly wound, extremely irritable spring in there, and when you let it out, it just goes berserk, writhing and

snarling and thrashing violently all over the room, seeking to gain revenge on all the people who have cranked it over the years.

Lanny and I fled the room until the spring calmed down. When we returned, we found phonograph parts spread all over the room, mixed in with approximately 2.4 miles of spring. We realized we'd have to modify our Project Goal slightly, from making a rumba box to being in an entirely new continent when Lanny's mom got home.

Actually, Mrs. Watts went fairly easy on us, just as Judy Price seems to have been good-humored about her son's heating the baseball. Moms are usually pretty good that way.

But sometimes I wonder. You know how guys are always complaining that they used to have a baseball-card collection that would be worth a fortune today if they still had it, but their moms threw it out? And the guys always say, "Mom just didn't know any better."

Well, I wonder if the moms knew exactly what they were doing. Getting even.

Sexual Intercourse

Today's Topic for Guys is: Communicating with Women.

If there's one thing that women find unsatisfactory about guys—and I base this conclusion on an extensive scientific study of the pile of Cosmopolitan magazines where I get my hair cut—it is that guys do not communicate enough.

This problem has arisen in my own personal relationship with my wife, Beth. I'll be reading the newspaper and the phone will ring; I'll answer it, listen for 10 minutes, hang up, and resume reading. Finally Beth will say: "Who was that?" And I'll say, "Phil Wonkerman's mom." Phil is an old friend we haven't heard from in 17 years. And Beth will say, "Well?" And I'll say, "Well what?" And Beth will say, "What did she SAY?"

And I'll say, "She said Phil is fine," making it clear by my tone of voice that, although I do not wish to be rude, I AM trying to read the newspaper here, and I happen to be right in the middle of an important panel of "Calvin and Hobbes."

But Beth, ignoring this, will say, "That's all she said?"

And she will not let up. She will continue to ask district attorney-style questions, forcing me to recount the conversation until she's satisfied that she has the entire story, which is that Phil just got out of prison after serving a sentence for a murder he committed when he became a drug addict because of the guilt he felt when his wife died in a freak submarine accident while Phil was having an affair with a nun, but now he's all straightened out and has a good job as a trapeze artist and is almost through with the surgical part of his sex change and just became happily engaged to marry a prominent member of New Kids on the Block, so in other words he is fine, which is EXACTLY what I told Beth in the first place, but is that enough? No. She wants to hear every single detail.

We have some good friends, Buzz and Libby, whom we see about twice a year. When we get together, Beth and Libby always wind up in a conversation, lasting several days, during which they discuss virtually every significant event that has occurred in their lives and the lives of those they care about, sharing their innermost feelings, analyzing and probing, inevitably coming to a deeper understanding of each other, and a strengthening of a cherished friendship. Whereas Buzz and I watch the playoffs.

This is not to say Buzz and I don't share our feelings. Sometimes we get quite emotional.

“That’s not a FOUL??” one of us will say.

Or: “YOU’RE TELLING ME THAT’S NOT A FOUL???”

I don’t mean to suggest that all we talk about is sports. We also discuss, openly and without shame, what kind of pizza we need to order. We have a fine time together, but we don’t have heavy conversations, and sometimes, after the visit is over, I’m surprised to learn—from Beth, who learned it from Libby—that there has recently been some new wrinkle in Buzz’s life, such as that he now has an artificial leg.

(For the record, Buzz does NOT have an artificial leg. At least he didn’t mention anything about it to me.)

I have another good friend, Gene, who’s going through major developments in his life. Our families recently spent a weekend together, during which Gene and I talked a lot and enjoyed each other’s company immensely. In that entire time, the most intimate personal statement he made to me is that he has reached level 24 of a video game called Arkanoid. He has even seen the Evil Presence, although he refused to tell me what it looks like. We’re very close, but there is a limit.

I know what some of you are saying. You’re saying my friends and I are Neanderthals, and a lot of guys are different. This is true. A lot of guys don’t use words at all. They communicate entirely by nonverbal methods, such as sharing bait.

But my point, guys, is that you must communicate on a deeper level with a woman, particularly if you are married to her. Open up. Don’t assume that she knows what you’re thinking. This will be difficult for guys at first, so it would help if you women would try to “read between the lines” in determining what the guy is trying to communicate:

GUY STATEMENT: “Do we have any peanut butter?” INNER GUY MEANING: “I hate my job.”

GUY STATEMENT: “Is this all we have? Crunchy?” INNER GUY MEANING: “I’m not sure I want to stay married.”

If both genders work together, you can have a happier, healthier relationship, but the responsibility rests with you guys, who must sincerely ... Hey, guys, I’m TALKING to you here. Put down the sports section, OK? HEY! GUYS!

Nerds ‘R’ Us

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS TO THE HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS OF 1992: As I look out over your shining faces, I am reminded of the Bartlett’s familiar quotation by the great Greek philosopher Socrates, who said, “Eventually your skin will clear up and your faces won’t shine so much.”

As is so often the case with great philosophers, he was lying. Your skin is a lifelong enemy, young people. It has millions of hardy zit cells that will continue to function perfectly, long after the rest of your organs have become aged and decrepit. Remember Ronald Reagan? No? Well, he used to be the president, off and on, and in 1985, after undergoing a medical procedure on his nose, he met with the press and made the following two statements, which I swear to you young people that I am not making up:

1. “It is true I had—well, I guess for want of a better word—a pimple on my nose.”
2. “I violated all the rules. I picked at it and I squoze it and so forth and messed myself up a little.”

And President Reagan was no spring chicken at the time. I believe that, at one point in his acting career, he actually was in a movie with Socrates. The point I am making, young people, is that your skin will never “clear up.” People have been known to break out with embarrassing blemishes at their own funerals.

But postmortem acne is not what you young people should be thinking about today as you prepare to go out into the world, leaving behind the hallowed halls of your school, but not before sticking wads of gum on virtually every hallowed surface. Perhaps you think you have gotten away with this. You may be interested to learn that, thanks to a Used Gum Tracing procedure developed by the FBI, school authorities can now analyze the DNA in the dried spit molecules and, by cross-referencing with your Permanent Record, determine exactly who was chewing every single wad. This means that someday in the future—perhaps at your wedding—burly officers of the Gum Police will come barging in and arrest you and take you off to harsh prisons where you will be forced to eat food prepared by the same people who ran your high-school cafeteria.

Yes, young people, modern technology promises an exciting future. But you must also learn from the wisdom of your elders, and if there is one piece of advice that I would offer you, it is this: Burn your yearbook right now. Because otherwise, years from now, feeling nostalgic, you’ll open it up to your photo, and this alien GEEK will be staring out at you, and your children will beg you to tell them that they’re adopted.

it is a known science fact that, no matter how good your yearbook photo looks now, after 15 years of being pressed up against somebody else’s face in the dark and mysterious yearbook environment, it will transmute itself into a humiliating picture of a total goober. This is true of everybody. If, in

early 1991, the U.S. government had quietly contacted Saddam Hussein and threatened to publish his yearbook photo in the New York Times, he would have dropped Kuwait like a 250-pound maggot.

Yes, young people, old yearbook photos can be a powerful force for good. Yet the horrifying truth is that sometimes newspapers publish the yearbook photos of totally innocent people. Yes! In America! I know what I’m talking about, young people, because it happened to me. The March 1992 issue of Panther Tracks, the newspaper of my alma mater, Pleasantville (New York) High School, has an article about me, and although I definitely remember looking normal in high school, there’s a photograph of this solemn little junior Certified Public Accountant wearing glasses sold by Mister Bob’s House of Soviet Eyewear.

People I hadn’t heard from in years mailed me this picture, along with heartwarming and thoughtful notes.

“Dave!” they’d say. “I forgot what a Dweeb you were!”

Or: “Who styled your hair? Bigfoot?”

This is unfair, Class of ‘92. Let me assure you that I was very “hip” in high school. I distinctly remember an incident in 1964, when Lanny Watts and I got a stern lecture from the assistant principal, Mr. Sabella, because we showed up at a school dance with our sport-jacket collars turned under, so the jackets looked like they didn’t HAVE collars, because this was the style worn by the Dave Clark Five. Remember the Dave Clark Five, young people? No? Sure you do! You must! They had that big hit with the drum part that went: NAIHOMPA NAIHOMPA OMPA. Wasn’t that a great song, young people? Hey, are you laughing at me? STOP LAUGHING AT ME, YOU LITTLE ZITFACES!

Thank you.

Uneasy Rider

It's 6 P.m., and we're waiting for our 12-year-old son, Rob, to return from a quick bike ride. We're going to go out to dinner to celebrate the fact that, for the 1,000th consecutive night, we have figured out an excuse to not cook at home.

We're locking up the house when a young man comes to the door and asks if we have a son. "There's been an accident," he says.

"Is it bad?" Beth asks.

"There's blood everywhere," he says.

Sometimes I wonder if parenthood is such a good idea. Sometimes I envy fish and frogs and lobsters and other animals that just emit their young in egg form, then swim or hop or lobster-scoot away from the scene, free of responsibility, immune from anguish. I can remember when there was nobody in my world as important to me as me. Oh, I loved other people—my wife, my

family, my friends—and I would have been distraught if something bad happened to them. But I knew I'd still be here. And that was the really important thing.

Rob changed that. Right at birth. When he came out, looking like a cranky old prune, he didn't cry. Beth, instantly a mom, kept saying, through her haze of labor pain, "Why isn't he crying? Why isn't he crying?" The nurse said sometimes they don't cry, but I could see that the doctor thought something was wrong, because he was trying to do something with Rob's mouth, and he was having trouble. He whispered something to the nurse and took Rob away, and the nurse kept saying this was routine, but we knew it wasn't. I stood there, wearing my goofy hospital outfit, holding Beth's hand, trying to cope with two staggering thoughts: First, I had a child—I had a child—and second, maybe my child was in trouble.

That was the most sickeningly vulnerable feeling I'd ever felt. And I didn't even know Rob yet.

It turned out he was OK—just a little blockage. The doctor gave him back to us, and we quickly became traditional first-time parents, wrapped in a woozy cocoon of joy and exhaustion, taking a genuine intellectual interest in poop, marveling at the thrill we felt, the connection, when our son's tiny hand squeezed our fingers.

But the feeling of vulnerability didn't go away. It only got worse, always lurking inside, forcing me to accept that I wasn't in control anymore, not when I knew my universe could be trashed at any moment because of unpredictable, uncontrollable developments on this newborn comet, zooming through. When he was happy, I was happier than I'd ever been; but when he was in trouble ... I can remember every detail of the time when, at 10 months, he got a bad fever, 106 degrees, his tiny body burning, and I carried him into the hospital, thinking I can't take this, please, let me be able to stop this, please, give me this fever, take it out of this little boy and put it in me, please....

But you can't do that. You can't make it happen to you. You have to watch it happen to your child, and it never gets any easier, does it?

Now Beth and I are in the car, and I'm driving too fast, but I have to; I have to see what I don't want to see. Up ahead some people are gathered on the side of the road, and a woman is kneeling—she has blood on her dress, a lot of blood—and lying in front of her, on his back, his face covered with blood is ...

"Oh God," says Beth. "Oh God."

This is where it ends, for some parents. Right here, on the roadside. My heart breaks for these

parents. I don't know that I could survive it.

Now I'm opening the door, stumbling out of the car toward Rob. He's moving his right hand. He's waving at me. He's giving me a weak, bloody smile, trying to reassure me.

"It's my fault," he's saying. "I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"It's OK!" I'm saying. "It's OK!"

Please let It be OK.

"I'm sorry," the bloody-dress woman is saying. "I'm so sorry." She was driving the car that collided with Rob. He went through the windshield, then was thrown back out onto the road, 40 feet, according to the ambulance guys.

"This is my worst nightmare," the woman is saying.

"I'm sorry," Rob is saying.

"It's OK!" I'm saying. "You're going to be OK!"

Please.

He was OK. A broken leg, some skin scraped off, a lot of stitches, but nothing that won't heal. He'll be getting out of his cast in a couple of months, getting on with his ever-busier life, his friends, his school, his stuff, he'll be growing bigger, moving faster, this bright comet-boy who streaked into my universe 12 years ago and is already starting to arc his way back out, farther from me, from my control, from my sight.

But that little hand will never let go of my finger.

I'm sorry. This was supposed to be a hilarious column about how Beth and I were getting ready to go out for a nice dinner at 6 P.m. and wound up eating lukewarm cheeseburgers at 11 P.m. on a table in the Miami Children's Hospital emergency room; and how Rob, after politely thanking a very nice nurse for helping him sit up, threw up on her; and other comical events. But this is how the column turned out. Next week I promise to return to Booger journalism.

In closing, here's a Public Service Message for you young readers from Rob Barry, who won't be walking for a while but can still operate a keyboard:

I know that bike helmets look really nerdy, and that was my argument. But I don't think I'll ever say that again. Make SURE you wear your helmets. And WATCH OUT FOR CARS.

Dave's Real World

The reason I agreed to be in an episode of a TV situation comedy was that the role was perfect for me. You want to choose your roles carefully, as an actor. You want to look for roles in which you can display the range, the depth, the infinitely subtle nuances of your acting talent.

"It's just one word," the director said. "You say 'Howdy.'"

"I'll do it," I said. A role like that comes along once in a lifetime.

The TV show—which might even still be on the air as you read this—is called "Dave's World." It's loosely based on a book and some columns I wrote. I use the term "loosely" very loosely. There's no way they could just take my columns and turn them directly into a TV series; every episode would last four minutes, and end with all the major characters being killed by an exploding toilet. So they have professional writers supplying dramatic elements that are missing from my writing, such as plots, characters, and jokes that do not involve the term "toad mucus."

(Lest you think I have “sold out” as an artist, let me stress that I have retained total creative control over the show, in the sense that, when they send me a check, I can legally spend it however I want.)

I worked hard on “Howdy,” memorizing it in just days. Depending on the scene, I could deliver the line with various emotional subtexts, including happiness (“Howdy!”), sorrow (“Howdy!”), anger (“Howdy!”), and dental problems (“Hmpgh!”).

Then, just before I flew to Los Angeles for the filming, the director called to tell me that they had changed my role. In my new role, I played a man in an appliance store who tries to buy the last air conditioner but gets into a bidding war for it with characters who are based, loosely, on me and my wife, played by Harry Anderson and DeLane Matthews. (Harry Anderson plays me. Only taller.)

In my new role, I had to say 17 words, not ONE of which was “Howdy!” I was still memorizing my part when I got to the studio. It was swarming with people—camera people, light people, sound people, bagel people, cream-cheese people, people whose sole function—this is a coveted union job, passed down from father to son—is to go “SSHHH!” You, the actor, have to say your lines with all these people constantly staring at you, plus the director and the writers keep changing the script. The actors will do a scene, and the director will say, “OK, that was perfect, but this time, Bob, instead of saying ‘What’s for dinner?’ you say, ‘Wait a minute! Benzene is actually a hydrocarbon!’ And say it with a Norwegian accent. Also, we think maybe your character should have no arms.”

My lines didn’t change much, but as we got ready to film my scene, I was increasingly nervous. I was supposed to walk up to the appliance salesman and say: “I need an air conditioner.” I had gone over this many times, but as the director said “Action!” my brain—the brain is easily the least intelligent organ in the body—lost my lines, and began frantically rummaging around for them in my memory banks. You could actually see my skull bulging with effort as I walked onto the set, in front of four TV cameras, a vast technical crew, and a live Studio Audience, with no real idea what I was going to say to the appliance salesman (“I need a howdy”).

But somehow I remembered my lines. The director seemed satisfied with my performance, except for the last part, where Harry Anderson, outbidding me for the air conditioner, hands the salesman some takeout sushi and says, “We’ll throw in some squid,” and I become disgusted and say, “Yuppies.” (If you recognize this dialogue, it’s because it’s very similar to the appliance-buying scene in Hamlet.)

“That was perfect, Dave,” said the director. (This is what directors say when they think it sucked.) “But when you say ‘yuppies,’ make it smaller.”

So we redid the scene, and as we approached my last line, I was totally focused on doing a smaller “yuppies.” Then I noticed that (a) the other actors weren’t saying anything, and (b) everybody in the studio was staring at me, waiting. I had clearly messed up, but I had no idea how. This was a time to think fast, to improvise, to come up with a clever line that would save the scene. So here’s what I did: I fell down. (It’s a nervous habit I have. Ask my wife.)

When I got up, I explained that I’d been waiting for Harry to say the squid line.

“They took that out,” somebody said.

“They took out the squid?” I said. “The squid is gone?”

It turned out that everybody else knew this, including probably the Live Studio Audience. So we had to do that part again, with my brain feverishly repeating “No squid! Smaller yuppies!” (This would be a good slogan for a restaurant.)

That time we got through it, and my television career came to an end, and I went back to being, loosely, a newspaper columnist. I have not, however, ruled out the possibility of starring in a spinoff. I

am thinking of a dramatic action series about a hero who, each week, tries to buy an air conditioner. I have a great line for ending this column, but I can't remember what it is.

A Failure To Communicate

Now that my son has turned 13, I'm thinking about writing a self-help book for parents of teenagers. It would be a sensitive, insightful book that would explain the complex, emotionally charged relationship between the parent and the adolescent child. The title would be: I'm a jerk; You're a jerk.

The underlying philosophy of this book would be that, contrary to what you hear from the "experts," it's a bad idea for parents and teenagers to attempt to communicate with each other, because there's always the risk that one of you will actually find out what the other one is thinking.

For example, my son thinks it's a fine idea to stay up until 3 A.m. on school nights reading what are called "suspense novels," defined as "novels wherein the most positive thing that can happen to a character is that the Evil Ones will kill him before they eat his brain." My son sees no connection between the fact that he stays up reading these books and the fact that he doesn't feel like going to school the next day.

"Rob," I tell him, as he is eating his breakfast in extreme slow motion with his eyes completely closed, so that he sometimes accidentally puts food into his ear, "I want you to go to sleep earlier."

"DAD," he says, using the tone of voice you might use when attempting to explain an abstract intellectual concept to an oyster, "you DON'T UNDERSTAND. I am NOT tired. I am ... PLOOS!" (sound of my son passing out facedown in his Cracklin' Oat Bran).

Of course psychologists would tell us that falling asleep in cereal is normal for young teenagers, who need to become independent of their parents and make their own life decisions, which is fine, except that if my son made his own life decisions, his ideal daily schedule would be:

Midnight to 3 A.m.—Read suspense novels. 3 A.M. to 3 P.m.—Sleep. 3:15 P.m.—Order hearty, breakfast from Domino's Pizza and put on loud hideous music recorded live in hell. 4 P.m. to midnight—Blow stuff up.

Unfortunately, this schedule would leave little room for, say, school, so we have to supply parental guidance ("If you don't open this door RIGHT NOW I will BREAK IT DOWN and CHARGE IT TO YOUR ALLOWANCE"), the result being that our relationship with our son currently involves a certain amount Of conflict, in the same sense that the Pacific Ocean involves a certain amount of water.

At least he doesn't wear giant pants. I keep seeing young teenage males wearing enormous pants; pants that two or three teenagers could occupy simultaneously and still have room in there for a picnic basket; pants that a clown would refuse to wear on the grounds that they were too undignified. The young men wear these pants really low, so that the waist is about knee level and the pants butt drags on the ground. You could not be an effective criminal wearing pants like these, because you'd be unable to flee on foot with any velocity.

POLICE OFFICER: We tracked the alleged perpetrator from the crime scene by following the trail of his dragging pants butt. PROSECUTOR: And what was he doing when you caught up with him?

POLICE OFFICER: He was hobbling in a suspicious manner.

What I want to know is, how do young people buy these pants? Do they try them on to make sure they DON'T fit? Do they take along a 500-pound friend, or a mature polar bear, and buy pants that fit HIM?

I asked my son about these pants, and he told me that mainly “bassers” wear them. “Bassers” are people who like a lot of bass in their music. They drive around in cars with four-trillion-watt sound systems playing recordings of what sound like above-ground nuclear tests, but with less of an emphasis on melody.

My son also told me that there are also people called “posers” who DRESS like “bassers,” but are, in fact, secretly “preppies.” He said that some “posers” also pose as “headbangers,” who are people who like heavy-metal music, which is performed by skinny men with huge hair who stomp around the stage, striking their instruments and shrieking angrily, apparently because somebody has stolen all their shirts.

“Like,” my son said, contemptuously, “some posers will act like they like Metallica, but they don’t know anything about Metallica.”

If you can imagine.

I realize I’ve mainly been giving my side of the parent-teenager relationship, and I promise to give my son’s side, if he ever comes out of his room. Remember how the news media made a big deal about it when those people came out after spending two years inside Biosphere 2? Well, two years is nothing. Veteran parents assure me that teenagers routinely spend that long in the bathroom. In fact, veteran parents assure me that I haven’t seen anything yet.

“Wait till he gets his driver’s license,” they say. “That’s when Fred and I turned to heroin.”

Yes, the next few years are going to be exciting and challenging. But I’m sure that, with love and trust and understanding, my family will get through them OK. At least I will, because I plan to be inside Biosphere 3.

About The Author

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dave Barry’s best-selling books Include: Dave Barry Does Japan, Dave Barry Is Not Making This Up, and Dave Barry Turns 40. Championed by the New York Times as “the funniest man In America,” Barry’s syndicated column for The Miami Herald now reaches over 250 newspapers across the country. Television has even succumbed to his wit—the popular sitcom “Dave’s World” is based on his life and columns.

"Read it and die laughing." —New York Daily News

DAVE BARRY'S

ONLY

TRAVEL GUIDE YOU'LL EVER NEED



THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING HUMORIST
AND AUTHOR OF
DAVE BARRY IS FROM MARS AND VENUS

Dave Barry's Only Travel Guide You'll Ever Need

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry's Only Travel Guide You'll Ever Need

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Wilbur and Orville Wright, without whom air sickness would still be just a

dream.

Introduction

Mankind has always had a yen to travel. Millions of years ago, Mankind would be sitting around the cave, eating raw mastodon parts, and he'd say, "Marge, I have a yen to travel." And Marge would agree instantly, because she had frankly reached the point where if she saw one more mastodon part, she was going to scream. So off they'd go, these primitive tourists, exploring new territory, seeing new sights, encountering new cultures, and eventually having their skulls bashed into tiny fragments by the Big Rock Tribe.

But that has not stopped us. No, the human race is far too stupid to be deterred from tourism by a mere several million years of bad experiences, and today we're traveling in larger numbers than ever. We travel because, no matter how comfortable we are at home, there's a part of us that wants—that needs—to see new vistas, take new tours, obtain new traveler's checks, buy new souvenirs, order new entrees, introduce new bacteria into our intestinal tracts, learn new words for "transfusion," and have all the other travel adventures that make us want to French-kiss our doormats when we finally get home.

Of course, traveling is much easier today than it used to be. A hundred years ago, it could take you the better part of a year to get from New York to California, whereas today, because of equipment problems at O'Hare, you can't get there at all. Also, in the olden days a major drawback to traveling was the fact that much of the world was occupied by foreign countries, which had no concept whatsoever of how a country is supposed to operate. Many of them did not accept major credit cards. Sometimes the people would not understand plain English unless you spoke very loud. A few of these countries—it's hard to believe this was even legal—did not have television in the hotel rooms.

So as you can imagine, traveling was often a harsh and brutal experience. In one case, a group of innocent American tourists was taken on a tour bus through a country the members later described as "either France or Sweden" and subjected to three days of looking at old, dirty buildings in cities where it was not possible to get a cheeseburger. It reached the point where the U.S. government was considering having U.S. troops, with special military minibars strapped to their backs, parachute into these countries to set up emergency restaurants.

Fortunately, however, most of these countries eventually realized the marketing advantages of not being so foreign. Today you can go to almost any country in the world and barely realize that you've left Akron, Ohio, unless of course you are so stupid as to go outside the hotel. "Never go outside the hotel": this is one of the cardinal rules of travel. Another one is: "Never board a commercial aircraft if the pilot is wearing a tank top."

These are just two of the many vital nuggets of information you'll find throughout this book. Another good thing about this book is, it doesn't mince words. The problem with most so-called experts in the travel industry is that they are—no offense—lying scum. These people want you to travel. That's how they make money. That's why they're called "the travel industry." So naturally they're going to tell you whatever they think you want to hear.

You: So, are there modern hotels in Latvia? TRAVEL AGENT: Oh, yes. Very modern. Extremely modern. YOU: Have you been there? TRAVEL AGENT: Not technically, no, but I have perused almost all the way through a brochure about it, and I can assure you that the modernity of Latvian hotels is

pretty much of a legend. “As modern as a Latvian hotel” is an expression that we frequently bandy about, here in the travel industry.

And then, of course, when you get there, you discover that the hotel elevator is powered by oxen, and you have to share a communal bathroom with several Baltic republics, and the toilet paper could be used to deflect small-arms fire. But at that point there are no representatives of the travel industry within a thousand miles. You'll never find them in Latvia. They spend their vacations at the mall.

Most travel guidebooks are the same way. For one thing, most of these books are filled with information that was gathered during the Truman administration. The writers never have time to update the information, because they're too busy cranking out next year's edition (NEW! REVISED! HIGHLY INACCURATE!). Also, no matter what destination these books are talking about, they'll tell you it's wonderful: “Even the most demanding traveler is bound to feel a warm glow after only a few days in Chernobyl ...”

This is not that kind of travel book. We call them as we see them. If we think a country is awful, we're going to say so, even if we've never been to this country and know virtually nothing about it. That's the kind of integrity we have. Right off the bat, for example, we're rejecting Paraguay as a destination. “Stay the hell out of Paraguay” is another one of the cardinal rules of travel, and we'll be giving you many, many more of these time-tested axioms as we think them up.

And what qualifies us as a travel expert? For one thing, we frequently refer to ourselves in the plural. For another thing, we have been traveling for many years, dating back to when we were a young boy in the early 1950's and our father used to drive our entire family from New York to Florida in a car that actually got smaller with every passing mile, so that by the time we got to Georgia the interior was the size of a standard mailbox, but not as comfortable, and the backseat hostility level between our sister and us routinely reached the point where any object placed between us would instantly burst into flame.

Yes, we have many fond travel memories. You are going to read about every damned one of them. Also, we may decide to make you look at the color slides we took of our trip to the Virgin Islands, featuring nearly two dozen shots of the airplane wing alone.

But mostly this book is intended to help you, the modern traveler, plan and carry out your business and vacation travel adventures with a minimum of unpleasantness and death. Throughout this effort, we will try to remember the famous thirteenth century tourist Marco Polo, who, having managed against all odds and with great effort to cross Persia, the plateau of the Pamir, the forbidden regions of Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan, and the Gobi Desert, finally arrived at the legendary Kublai Khan's palace at Shang-tu, where he uttered the words that have served as an inspiration for travelers ever since: “What do you mean, you don't have my reservation?”

Chapter One. Planning Your “Trip To Paradise,” Or Possibly Beirut

Planning is a very important part of travel. Just ask Amelia Earhart, the famous woman aviatrix (“Aviatrix” means “deceased person”) who in 1937

attempted to fly around the world in a twin-engine Lockheed and disappeared somewhere in the South Pacific and was never heard from again. This kind of thing can really put a damper on your vacation, yet it can easily be prevented if you do a little advance research by asking some basic travel questions, such

as:

1. Will you be flying on a twin-engine Lock—heed?
2. Will you ever be heard from again?
3. Will there be meal service?

Oh, I realize that not everybody likes to plan every step of a vacation. Some people would rather just grab a backpack and a sleeping bag, stick out their thumbs and start hitchhiking down the highway, enjoying the fun and adventure of not knowing “what’s around the bend.” Most of these people are dead within hours. So planning is definitely the way to go.

Step One is to decide on a destination. The two most popular travel destinations are:

1. Domestic
2. Foreign

The major advantage of domestic travel is that, with a few exceptions such as Miami, most domestic locations are conveniently situated right here in the United States. This means that, on a domestic vacation, you are never far from the convenience of American culture in the form of malls, motels, Chicken McNuggets, Charming Bathroom Tissue, carwindow suction-cup Garfield dolls, lawyers, etc. Also, the United States contains an enormous amount of natural beauty, although I do not personally prefer Nature as a vacation destination, because of various factors such as the Dirt Factor, the Insect Factor, and, of course, the Snake Factor (see Chapter Eight, “Camping: Nature’s Way of Promoting the Motel Industry”).

The United States also contains some history, most of which is located in special humidity-controlled rooms in Washington, D.C., heavily guarded by armed civil servants. Or, if you prefer to get “off the beaten path,” you can simply hop in the car and travel the highways and byways of this great land of ours, visiting its many proud little dirtbag towns:

Dweebmont, Ohio

“Styptic Pencil Capital of the World

Often there will be local fairs and festivals where the kids can ride on the Whirl-’n’-Puke while Mom and Dad enjoy tasty local cuisine such as french fried potatoes, fried chicken, fried onion rings, fried dough, and fried frying oil fried with fried sugar.

Of course, if rides are what you’re after, you’ll definitely want to visit one of the major Themed Attractions, such as Six Flags over a Large Flat Region, or the world-famous Walt Disney World of Hot Irritable Popcorn-Bloated Families Waiting in Enormous Lines (see Chapter Four, “Disney World on \$263,508 a Day”). Many of these attractions feature exhibits simulating foreign nations such as Europe, thus enabling you to experience exactly what it would be like to be in another country, provided that it was a foreign country staffed by Americans and located inside a Themed Attraction.

But if you prefer the “real thing,” you’ll want to choose a foreign travel destination. The major problem here, as I mentioned in the Introduction, is that foreign destinations tend to contain enormous quantities of foreigners (In the form of Japanese tourists). There’s nothing you can do about this except grin and bear it, unless you’re in some foreign country where grinning is considered rude and is punishable by death, in which case you should frown and bear it. or stick a finger up each nostril and bear it, or whatever they do when they bear it in that country.

But that’s exactly the problem. As an American who was raised in America and attended American schools—where, despite years of instruction, the only thing you learned how to say in a foreign language is “The dog has eaten my brother”—you will often find yourself totally disoriented in foreign

situations. Europe, for example, is filled with knots of confused Americans, squinting at menus with no more comprehension than a sea gull examining the Space Shuttle (“What the hell does this mean?” “I think it means ‘Chicken of the Hot Trouser Parts.’”).

Also, you will have to accept the fact that, in foreign countries, you will never have the vaguest idea how much anything costs. All foreign countries have confusing money, with names like the Pound, the Yen, the Libra, the Mark, the Frank, the Duane, the Doubloon, and the Kilometer, all of which appear to have been designed by preschool children. Not one of these monetary units is equal to a dollar, or anything else, and all of them change in value on an hourly basis. This is all a result of the Marshall Plan, which was set up by General Marshall Plan after World War II as a means of making the entire rest of the world rich at our expense, the idea being that Americans traveling abroad would be so disoriented by foreign currency that every now and then one of them will buy a single croissant and leave a tip large enough to enable the waiter to retire for life.

But that’s the fun of traveling abroad: the sense of romance and mystery that comes from being an out-of-it bozo, from not knowing for sure whether the sign you’re looking at says PUBLIC PARK or RADIOACTIVE WASTE AREA. One time I was with a group of five people driving around Germany, and it took us an entire week to figure out that “Einbahnstrasse” meant “One-Way Street.” We’d be driving around some German city, frowning at our map, scratching our pointy American heads and saying, “Geez! We’re on Einbahnstrasse again!” Ha ha! What a bunch of gooberheads we were! Fortunately, everybody in Germany, including domestic animals, speaks English better than the average U.S. high school graduate. So we were able to get clear directions from passing pedestrians. At times like these, you might tend to feel culturally inferior, as an American, but it’s always heartening to remember that, no matter what country you’re in, it probably doesn’t rank anywhere near the U.S.A. in the nuclear-warhead department (also we have Wayne Newton).

Planning Your Travel Budget

The standard formula for computing travel costs is to figure out the total amount of available money you have, total, then multiply this by at least six. But even this formula is probably going to give you a low estimate, because you usually have unexpected expences. I do want to stress that, whatever amount it was, I am certain the nun turned it directly over to the church (Or she bought a Ferrari). My point is that whenever and wherever you travel, you’re going to have unanticipated expenses, and you need to anticipate them. Fortunately the Visa and MasterCard people have a fine program for travelers, under which you can charge everything, and then when you get back, you simply pay them small convenient amounts for several years, which turns out to be nowhere near enough, so they confiscate your children, which is not entirely a bad thing (see Chapter Four, “Traveling as a Family”).

Traveler's Checks

Travelers checks are very impressive pieces of paper that are backed by the full faith and credit of actor Karl Malden. They are accepted at thousands of shopping locations around the world, although almost never the location that you personally are shopping in. Nevertheless, traveler’s checks are very popular with those travelers who have the brains of frozen vegetables. You’ve seen these people in those

American Express traveler's check commercials:

FIRST TRAVELER: Oh no!

SECOND TRAVELER: What's wrong!

FIRST TRAVELER: I left my wallet unguarded on a cafe table here in the middle of this squalid, poverty-ridden, crime-infested foreign city, and now it's gone!

SECOND TRAVELER: But that's impossible!

KARL MALDEN (to camera): Hi, I'm Karl Malden.

FIRST TRAVELER: Look! It's Raymond Burr!

KARL MALDEN: If you lose your American Express traveler's checks, you can call for an immediate refund.

FIRST TRAVELER: But we don't even know how to operate a telephone!

SECOND TRAVELER: I don't even remember which Traveler I am! I think I'm the Second Traveler!

FIRST TRAVELER: No! I'm the Second Traveler!

KARL MALDEN (to camera): American Express traveler's checks. A lot of people never even figure out how to cash them.

Working With A Travel Agent

You should definitely have a travel agent. Why go through all the hassle of dealing with airlines, hotels, and rental-car agencies yourself, only to see the arrangements get all screwed up, when with just a single phone call you can have a trained professional screw them up for you?

No, seriously, travel agents are wonderful. At least mine is. Her name is Ramona, and I'd literally be lost without her. I'll be on a business trip, and I'll wake up in a strange hotel room in bed with traces of minibar cheeses (At \$127.50 per ounce) in my hair, and in a disoriented panic I'll call Ramona, and we'll have the following conversation:

ME: Where am I? RAMONA (checking her computer): You're in Houston. ME (alarmed): Why? RAMONA: You're on a business trip.

ME: Can I come home yet?

RAMONA (checking her computer): No. You have to go to Detroit.

ME (very alarmed): Detroit?

RAMONA (checking her computer): And get that cheese out of your hair.

I always do what Ramona says, because she has the computer. Ramona could ship me off to the Falkland Islands if she felt like it.

Ramona also is good at attempting to explain the airline fare system, which is governed by a powerful, state-of-the-art computer that somebody apparently spilled a pitcher of Hawaiian Punch into the brain of, and it has been insane ever since. I base this statement on the fact that if I fly from Miami to, for example, Tampa, the round-trip fare is often hundreds of dollars more than what it costs to fly from Miami to, say, Singapore. This makes no sense. Singapore is in a completely different continent (Possibly Africa), whereas Tampa is so close to Miami that our stray bullets frequently land there. And what is worse, there is never just one fare to Tampa. There are dozens of them, and they are constantly mutating. and the more Ramona explains them to me, the more disoriented I become.

ME: I need to go to Tampa on Thursday.

RAMONA (checking her computer): No, not Thursday.

ME: No?

RAMONA: No, because there's a \$600 penalty if you fly on a Thursday during a month whose name contains two or more vowels following two straight quarters of increased unemployment unless you are a joint taxpayer filing singly with two or more men on base provided that you spend at least one Saturday night in a hotel room within twelve feet of a malfunctioning ice machine and you undergo a ritual initiation ceremony wherein airline ticket agents dance around you and put honey-roasted peanuts up your nose. me: Book me on the Singapore flight.

Renting A Car

Renting a car offers many attractive advantages to the traveler: independence, convenience, dependability, and a sudden, massive lowering of the IQ. I know what I'm talking about here. I live in Miami, and every winter we have a huge infestation of rental-car drivers, who come down here seeking warm weather and the opportunity to make sudden left turns without signaling across six lanes of traffic into convenience stores (No, not into the parking lots. Into the stores). My wife and I have affectionately nicknamed these people "Alamos," because so many of them seem to rent their cars from Alamo, which evidently requires that every driver leave several major brain lobes as a deposit. We'll be driving along, and the driver in front of us will engage in some maneuver that is boneheaded even by the standards of Miami (official motoring motto: "Death Before Yielding"), and we'll shout, "Look out! Alamos!" We're tempted to stay off the highways altogether during tourist season, just stockpile food and spend the entire winter huddled in our bedrooms, but we're not sure we'd be safe there.

Not that I feel superior to the Alamos. I've rented many cars myself, and I have to admit that as soon as I get behind the wheel, I go into Bozo Mode. For one thing, I am instantly lost, and the only guidance I have is the rental-car-agency map, the sole function of which apparently is to show you the location of the rental-car agency. So I'm disoriented, plus I'm constantly trying to adjust the mirrors, seat, air conditioning, steering wheel, etc., plus—this is the most important part—I have to find a good radio station. This means I am devoting only about 2 percent of my brain to actually driving the car. And thus I—a person who tends to be extremely critical of other people's driving—am transformed into an Alamo, drifting along at 27 miles per hour in the left lane of the interstate, with my left blinker on, trying to locate the FM button. Maybe, as a warning to other drivers, the federal government should require that all rental cars must have giant orange question marks sticking up out of their roofs.

Choosing A Car-Rental Company

The car-rental industry is extremely competitive, and often you can find some really good "deals" by keeping your eyes "peeled" for advertisements that look like this:

Why Pay More? Rent a Car for Just \$3.99 a Week!! Including Unlimited Mileage!! Big Bob's Car Rental & Miniature Golf & Full-Body Massage

Certain restrictions apply to this offer, such as to get the actual car you have to ride our "Courtesy Van," which runs only during Lent, from the airport to our rental facility, which is in the Soviet Union, where you will have to wait in line behind people who have been there since the Ford administration

because our rental fleet consists of a 1971 Plymouth Valiant with a tendency to catch fire, so we definitely recommend the insurance.

As a “smart shopper,” you will definitely save “big money” by taking advantage of bargains such as these, although you should of course insist that the agency person explain the terms of the rental agreement before you sign it:

You: What does this mean?

AGENCY PERSON: What does what mean?

YOU: This part here, where it says, “Renter agrees that we get to keep his house.”

AGENCY PERSON: Oh, that. Nothing. You (relieved): Whew.

Types Of Luggage

The type of luggage you carry says a lot about you. For example, if you're carrying somebody else's luggage, it says you're a thief.

No, seriously, luggage is important, which is why most frequent travelers spend their entire lives looking for Exactly the Right Piece of Luggage, the one that is nice and compact but holds a lot of stuff. This is a waste of time, of course, because the truth is that a piece of luggage is nothing but a bag or a box with a handle on it, and under the laws of physics, which are strictly enforced in luggage, the size of the bag or the box determines how much it will hold, as can be seen in the following chart:

Size Of Luggage Unit Amount Of Stuff Luggage Unit Will Hold

Small Small amount

Medium Medium amount

Large Large amounts But still not enough

The infrequent traveler generally accepts these limitations and purchases one of those enormous, hard-sided suitcases that have wheels and weigh about 87 pounds even when they're empty. But your frequent traveler never abandons the quest to find a miracle luggage unit that can hold more than it can actually hold. Over the course of a lifetime the frequent traveler will purchase dozens of luggage units, frequently from advertisements in airline in-flight magazines. You've probably seen the advertisements. There's a picture of what appears to be an ordinary carry-on suitcase, underneath which are about 70,000 words, which begin:

AMAZING LUGGAGE BREAKTHROUGH!

A recent scientific discovery by researchers at the Stanford University School of Luggage Science has made possible the REVOLUTIONARY new Laser 3000X Total Carry-on Wardrobe Unit! Although smaller than a standard clarinet case, this incredible unit, thanks to advanced luggage technology, can easily hold: Eight men's suits OR 14

women's full-length evening gowns PLUS All the shirts, socks, ties, underwear, and clothing accessories you would need for two terms in Congress PLUS All your toiletries

PLUS An actual working toilet And that's not all! How many times have you said to yourself, as a busy business traveler: “Why can't they design a carry-on bag with a space for my tennis rackets, golf clubs, skis, and volleyball equipment?” Well, look no farther, because the Laser 3000X ...

And so on. Ordinarily you would take one look at this kind of advertisement and say, hey, get serious. But in the airplane environment, where you have nothing else to do except watch the movie,

(Rocky XVII, the one where he has surgery so his eyelids can open all the way) you find yourself reading all the way through it, and by the time you're on your third Bloody Mary, and you've reached the part where the advertisement claims that this suitcase will do your tax returns for you, you're thinking, "Hey! This could be the answer to my luggage needs!" So you whip out your Visa or MasterCard and fill out the order form, and six to ten weeks later you receive: a bag with a handle. A small bag with a handle. Which, if you really pack it right, will hold two pairs of socks PLUS your dental floss. I know what I'm talking about! I have seventeen of these things!

How Much Luggage You Can Carry On A Commercial Airline Flight

Federal Airline Administration regulations state that each passenger may have up to 17,000 pounds of carry-on luggage provided that he or she can jam it all into the overhead baggage compartment. I am a veteran traveler, but I am still amazed at how much stuff some people will try to get up there. Entire households, sometimes. These people are always directly in front of me. "What do you mean, I can't carry this on?!" they'll say to the airline personnel. "I ALWAYS carry this on!"

"Sir," the airline personnel will say, "that's a lawn tractor.

"But look!" the person will say. "It fits in the overhead baggage compartment!" And the person will actually attempt to shove it in there, which is of course impossible because (a) the tractor is too large, and (b) the compartment already contains some other passenger's upright piano. But this will not stop the person from trying. No human emotion is more powerful than the grim determination of an airline passenger attempting to shove an inappropriate object into the overhead baggage compartment.

What To Pack

There are two major schools of thought on how to pack for traveling. These are known technically as "my school" and "my wife's school." My school of packing is that you should never carry more things than you can fit into a standard sandwich bag. This way you never put yourself in a position where you have to turn your belongings over to a commercial airline's crack Luggage Hiding Department (traces of airline luggage have been found on Mars). So I travel very light, and I've found that this is really not a problem, once I get adjusted to the stench resulting from wearing the same shirts and socks and, of course, underwear for as long as two weeks running. The advantage of this is that I get plenty of room to stretch out on airplanes, because nobody will sit near me. The disadvantage is that the flight attendants also stay away, preferring to serve my dinner entree by flipping it at me Frisbee-style from as far as 25 feet away, and some of those airline entrees are hard enough to kill a person (Such as lasagna).

My wife, on the other hand, would not think of leaving the house for even a half hour without sufficient possessions in her purse alone to establish a comfortable wilderness homestead. So when we travel, she packs many, many items. She buys these giant suitcases, manufactured by shipbuilders, and she packs them with items for every conceivable contingency. Like, if we're going someplace in the tropics, she'll naturally pack an entire set of lightweight outfits, but she'll also pack an entire set of medium-weight outfits, in case we have a cool snap; and a set of heavy outfits, in case we get locked

inside a meat freezer; and a waffle iron, in case we get hungry for waffles while we're in there; and so on. So we generally arrive at the airport with virtually all of our worldly possessions, looking like Cambodian refugees, except that we appear to be actually taking Cambodia with us. Our carry-on luggage alone is enough to prevent many planes from ever leaving the ground. They'll taxi down the runway, gaining speed, then, after a violent grunting effort to take off, they'll continue right on taxiing, sometimes right into a harbor. This doesn't worry us, however, because my wife always brings plenty of scuba equipment.

Bonus Packing Tip: How To Pack A Suit So It Won't Come Out Wrinkled

Lay the suit on its back on a flat surface such as a tennis court. Take the sleeves and place them at the side. Take the left sleeve and place it on the suit's hip, and hold the right sleeve over the suit's head as though the suit is waving in a jaunty manner. Now put both sleeves straight up over the suit's head and shout, "Touchdown!" Ha ha! Isn't this fun? You may feel stupid, but trust me, you're not half as stupid as the people who think they can fold a suit so it won't come out wrinkled.

Chapter Two. How To Speak A Foreign Language In Just 30 Minutes

Without Necessarily Having Any Idea What You Are Saying

One of the great things about being an American, aside from the constitutionally guaranteed freedom to have obscene bumper stickers, is that so many foreign people speak our language (English). You can walk the streets of just about any major city in the world, and as soon as the natives realize that you're an American, they'll make you feel right at home.

"Stick them up!" they'll say. "Please to be handing over your American Express traveler's checks! Don't leave home without them!"

Yes, they are clever, those natives. Nevertheless, you may sometimes find yourself in a foreign situation wherein members of the local population, because of a poor educational system or sheer laziness, have not learned to speak your language fluently. This can lead to serious problems, as when for example you're in Spain, attempting to obtain a chicken-salad sandwich, and you wind up with a dish whose name, when you look it up in your Spanish/English dictionary, turns out to mean "Eel with the Big Abscess." This is why I strongly recommend that before you travel abroad, you learn to speak a foreign language, ideally the same one that is spoken in whatever country you're going to.

Of course you probably think it's hard to learn another language, because you spent years studying foreign languages in high school, and all you can remember is being forced to confiscate verbs and memorize those moronic dialogues wherein everybody seemed to be obsessed with furniture:

PIERRE: Voici le bureau de mon oncle. ("Here is the bureau of my uncle.")

JACQUES: Le bureau de votre oncle est right prochain de la table de ma tante. (“The bureau of your uncle is right next to the table of my aunt.”)

MARIE: Qui donne un merde? (“Who gives a shit?”)

I took an estimated two thousand years of high school French, and when I finally got to France, I discovered that I didn't know one single phrase that was actually useful in a real-life French situation. I could say, “Show me the fish of your brother Raoul,” but I could not say, “Madame, if you poke me one more time with that umbrella I am going to jam it right up one of your primary nasal passages,” which would have been extremely useful.

So what you need, as a traveler, is to learn practical foreign expressions. Let's say you're in a very swanky Paris restaurant that has earned the coveted “Five-Booger” ranking from the prestigious Michelin Guide to How Snotty a Restaurant Is. You cannot be asking these people to show you the fish of their brother Raoul. You will want to use simple, foolproof phrases such as the following.

Practical French Restaurant Phrases

Garr,on! Je suis capable de manger un cheval! (“Waiter! I could eat a horse!”) Apportez-moi quelques aliments franqaise ici pronto sur la double! (“Bring me some French food immediately!”) Mettez-le smaue dabbe sur la table. (“Put it smack dab on the table.”) Attendez une minute au jus dernier! (“Wait just a darned minute!”) Qu'est-ce l'enfer que c'est? (“What is this the hell that this is?”) Attempte-vous A yanquer ma chaine, boudet? (“Are you trying to yank my chain, buddy?”) Je donne madam CHAT plus viande que cette! (“I give my damn CAT more meat than this!”) Sacre moo! Ce EST mon chat! (“Holy cow! This IS my cat!”)

Other Practical French Phrases

Nous sommes suppose a faire peepee ICI? (“We're supposed to pee HERE?”)

Mais nous sommes droit dans le friggant RUE. (“But we're right in the goshdarn STREET.”)

y a des RELIGIEUSES regardant nous. (“There are NUNS watching us.”)

Dites, cette religieuse est hot. (“Say, that nun is fairly attractive.”)

Peut-etre j'ai been en France trop longue. (“Perhaps I have been in France too long.”)

Practical Spanish Phrases

In the Restaurant:

Camarero, hay una mosca en mi sopa. (“Waiter, there is a fly in my soup.”)

Pero esa mosca es atarado al pantalones. (“But this fly is attached to a pair of pants.”)

Riding Public Transportation:

Jey, no es anybody pilotando ese autobus? (“Hey, isn't anybody driving this bus?”)

ESE es el piloto? (“THAT'S the driver?”)

El hombre que dormir en el charco de saliva? (“The man sleeping in the Puddle of saliva?”)

Quiza deberias empujar los frenos. (“Maybe we should apply the brakes.”)

Que the hell usted decir, una cabra ha comido los frenos? (“What do you mean, a goat ate the brakes?”)

Porque estan mi frente marcas de preguntas al revés? (“Why are my front question marks upside down?”)

During Festivals:

Mi (esposo, esposa) es been trاملado por toros. (“My [husband, wife] has been trampled by bulls.”)

No, no estoy quejarsando. (“No, I’m not complaining.”)

Emergency Medical Phrases:

Muchacho, es mi booty dolorido desde ese caso de los trots! (“Boy, is my butt sore from this diarrhea!”)

El hace yo pasar como el tarde Campos de Totie! (“It’s making me walk like the late Totie Fields!”)

Practical Italian Phrases

Non desear chiunque ferire or nothing. (“We don’t want anybody should get hurt.”)

Tuo fratello Raoul dormi con los pescos. (“Your brother Raoul sleeps with the fishes.”)

Practical German Phrases

Achtung! (“Gesundheit!”)

Enschreitenblatten Schalteniedlich Verkehrsge sellschaft! (“Ha ha!”)

Ich veranlassenarbeitenworken mein Mojo. (“I have got my mojo working.”)

Chapter Three. Air Travel (Or: Why Birds Never Look Truly Relaxed)

You’re probably not going to believe this, but there are still some people, in this modern day and age, who are afraid of air travel. Ha ha! Are they a bunch of Nervous Nellies, or what?

Oh, sure, air travel seems dangerous to the ignorant layperson, inasmuch as it involves hurtling through the air seven miles straight up trapped inside an object the size of a suburban ranch home in total defiance of all known laws of physics. But statistics show that, when you’re in an airplane, you’re actually four times as safe as when you’re driving your car on an interstate highway (Provided that you are driving drunk and blindfolded)!

Nevertheless, many of us, even veteran fliers, tend to be a little edgy about air travel these days,

because it seems as if hardly a day goes by that we don't pick up a newspaper and see headlines like:

ENGINE FALLS OFF PLANE

WING FALLS OFF PLANE

PILOT SUCKED OUT OF PLANE

PLANE POSSESSED BY DEMONS

FAA Orders Exorcism of Entire L-1011 Fleet

But the truth is that, thanks to improvements in technology, air travel today is safer than it has been at any time for the past three weeks. Yes, we've come a long way since the Age of Aviation began back in the historic year of 19-something in Kitty Hawk, North or South Carolina, when two young mechanics named Wilbur and Orville Wright, using some canvas and old bicycle parts, constructed the very first airline omelet. There have been many important commercial-aviation innovations since then, including:

Airline magazines featuring articles with titles like "Akron: Meeting Yesterday's Challenges Tomorrow." "Turbulence." This is what pilots announce that you have encountered when your plane strikes an object in midair. You'll be flying along, and there will be an enormous, shuddering WHUMP, and clearly the plane has rammed into an airborne object at least the size of a water buffalo, and the pilot will say, "Folks, we're encountering a little turbulence." Meanwhile they are up there in the cockpit trying desperately to clean waterbuffalo organs off the windshield. Frequent-flier programs, wherein each time you take a commercial flight, you earn a certain number of miles, plus bonus miles if you actually reach your intended destination within your lifetime. After you've accumulated enough miles, you can redeem them for another flight, unless you have the intelligence of a turnip, in which case you'll remain in your recreation room, where it's safe. The Baggage Carousel, where passengers traditionally gather at the end of a flight to spend several relaxing hours watching the arrival of luggage from some other flight, which comes randomly spurting out of a mysterious troll-infested tunnel that is apparently connected to another airport, possibly in a different dimension. The baby in the seat behind you whose parents are obviously poking it with hat pins because there is no other way that a child could shriek that loudly all the way from New York to Los Angeles. The 475-pound man in the adjacent seat who smells like a municipal landfill and whose forearm (which by itself is the size of Roseanne Barr) spends the entire flight oozing, like the Blob, over the armrest until it occupies virtually your entire seat and starts absorbing your in-flight meal through some of its larger pores. This in itself is not a bad thing, because airline food is not intended for human consumption. It's intended as a form of in-flight entertainment, wherein the object is to guess what it is, starting with broad categories such as "mineral" and

"linoleum." When the flight attendants ask, "Do you want roast beef or lasagna?" they don't mean, "Do you want roast beef, or do you want lasagna?" They mean: "Do you want this dinner substance, which could be roast beef, or it could be lasagna? Or possibly peat moss?"

And speaking of airline food, another important aviation development has been: The barf bag. Early barf bags were large canvas sacks; a severely airsick passenger would be placed inside, and the bag would then be sealed up and, in an act of aviation mercy, shoved out the cargo door at 12,000 feet. Today's passenger doesn't get that kind of personalized service, and must place a small bag over his nose and mouth in hopes of cutting off his oxygen supply.

Despite these strides forward, there have been a few problems caused by the belt-tightening in the airline industry that has resulted from "deregulation," a new government policy under which the only requirement to purchase an airline is that you have to produce two forms of identification. Even Donald Trump was allowed to purchase an airline, which he immediately named after himself ("Air Jerk"). This

led to some dramatic aviation moments when Trump got into financial difficulty and had to sell some of his aircraft while they were still in the air. (“This is your captain speaking. We’ve just been advised that instead of Boston, we will be landing in Iran. We regret any incon ...”)

Of course, this kind of adventure only adds to the fun of flying. My family has had many fun flights, including an extremely exciting one in which we went from Miami to Honolulu via the following itinerary, which I am not making up:

1. We flew from Miami to Denver on a plane that seemed to be working fine, so naturally they made us get off of it and get on another plane that was supposed to fly the rest of the way to Honolulu. This happened to be on Halloween. “Never Fly on Halloween,” that is our new aviation motto.

2. They put a bunch of fuel on our new plane, and we got on it. One of the flight attendants was wearing devil ears, which struck us as hilarious at the time but which we later on realized was an omen. “Never Get on a Flight Where a Crew Member Is Wearing Devil Ears” is another one of our aviation mottoes.

3. When we got out to the end of the runway, the pilot announced that we had too much fuel, which struck us ignorant laypersons as odd, because we were under the impression that having a lot of fuel is good, especially when you’re flying over a major ocean such as the Pacific. Nevertheless we went back to the gate and got off the plane while they removed fuel, apparently using eyedroppers, because it took them two hours.

4. We got back on the plane and the pilot announced that—remember I am not making this up—we were going to fly to Los Angeles to get some more fuel. So needless to say ...

5. We landed in San Francisco. There they told us (why not?) that we had to change planes, so we all got off, only to be met by a gate attendant wearing an entire devil costume, which was seeming less and less amusing. Also the pilot was not inspiring a great deal of confidence in us. You know how pilots are generally trim, military-looking individuals who remain up in the cockpit looking aloof but competent? Well, our pilot was a chunky, slightly disheveled man who looked like a minor character in Police Academy XIII. He was walking around the lounge area, chatting with us passengers as though he had nothing else to do, and holding a computer printout the thickness of War and Peace, which he announced was our “flight plan,” although we couldn’t help but note that (a) he wasn’t reading it, and (b) pages were falling out of it. Some of us were starting to suspect that he wasn’t a real pilot at all, but merely a man who had dressed up in a realistic pilot costume for Halloween. But we were desperate, so we followed him aboard yet another plane. As we taxied out to the runway, the pilot said—I swear—”Hopefully, this one will fly all the way.”

6. So we took off from San Francisco, and for a while everything was fine except for the aroma coming from the seat behind us, which was occupied by a wretched woman who was attempting to get to Australia with two very small children, whom she evidently intended to enter in the World Pooping Championships. But this ceased to be our main concern when, after about an hour over the Pacific, which is famous for not having anyplace on it where you can land, the pilot announced that we had a “minor engine problem.”

7. So we turned around and headed back toward, you guessed it, San Francisco, which we were beginning to think of as home. All the way back the pilot kept reassuring us about how minor this engine problem was, so you can imagine our excitement when we got to the airport and saw what appeared to be the entire San Francisco Fire Department lining the runway.

8. We landed safely and scuttled off the plane to be greeted, once again, by the devil, who was now

being assisted by a witch. Of course by this point, Hell seemed like a major improvement over commercial air travel.

9. Several hours later our pilot led us onto yet another plane. By this point a lot of people had dropped out of the flight, but we were determined to see what would ultimately happen, with a lot of smart money betting that this would become the first commercial airliner ever to be sucked into a black hole. During the Preflight Safety Lecture—I swear this is true—the flight attendant said, “If you gotta go, go with a smile.”

10. We took off from San Francisco again and flew back out over the Pacific, where, to judge from the amount of “turbulence,” we flew smack into a whole herd of airborne water buffalo. The in-flight movie was *The Dead Poets Society*.

11. We landed in Honolulu, 21 hours after we left Miami. To apologize for our inconvenience, the flight attendants gave us coupons that were good for discounts on future flights, although they new full well that we were all planning to return to the mainland via canoe.

I do not mean to suggest here that all flights take this long to reach their destinations. Some of them never reach their destinations. And I understand that there are even some, the ones that I personally am not on, that arrive right on schedule. YOu just never know, which is why air travel is the ongoing adventure that it is.

Airport Security

The important thing to remember about airport security procedures is that they have been created for your protection. Sure, it can be annoying to have to stop at the security checkpoint when you're on a tight schedule, but look at it this way: If the security personnel do their job properly, they just might cause YOU tO miss your plane, thereby Possibly saving your life.

The heart of the airport security system is the metal detector, a device that shoots invisible rays into your body. These rays are perfectly harmless, according to security personnel, although you notice that THEY never go through the metal detector. In fact, when nobody's around, they use it to cook their lunch. So most travel experts recommend that, to avoid turning your internal organs into baked lasagna, you go through the detector as fast as possible, maybe even back up fifty yards or so and get a running start.

The purpose of the metal detector is to make sure that you're not carrying a bomb or a deadly weapon or a set of car keys. If the detector detects one of these items, it will beep; security personnel will ask you to place the item on a plastic tray and go through the detector again. Your item will be returned to you on the other side (“Wait, sir! You forgot your bomb!”)

How to Act While Going Through Security

Security personnel are on the lookout for people who fit the Profile of Suspected Terrorists, which is as follows:

PROFILE OF SUSPECTED TERRORISTS

SEX: Male

AGE: 15 through 74

LOOKS SUSPICIOUS: Yes

As a smart traveler who wishes to avoid the inconvenience of being taken to a small airless interrogation room and having electrical wiring attached to your various genitals, you should make every effort to avoid fitting this profile. This means that if you are, for example, a male, you should try to deflect the security personnel's attention away from this fact via such techniques as:

Wearing a dress (This is how Oliver North handles it). Periodically remarking out loud to nobody in particular: "I certainly have a lot of body hair, for a woman!"

Baggage Searches

At the security checkpoint, your carry-on baggage must be placed on a conveyor belt and passed through an X-ray machine so the security personnel can see if you are carrying questionable items, because if you are, federal law requires them to open up your luggage and root around among your personal belongings like starving boars in a full Dumpster. If they find anything suspicious, For Your Own Protection they will ask you certain standard security questions, such as:

"What's this stain in your underwear? Cheez Whiz?" "This is a vibrator? I never seen a vibrator this big! HEY, NORM! TAKE A LOOK AT THIS LADY'S VIBRATOR!"

"For Kids Only": Fun with Airport Security Personnel

Airport security personnel are chosen for their sense of humor, and there is nothing they enjoy so much as a good joke. A fun game you kids can play with them is "Uncle Ted." What you do is, when you get near the security checkpoint, you walk up to a passenger selected at random and say in a loud voice, "Uncle Ted, can I see the bomb again?" Ha ha! Those wacky, fun-loving security personnel will sure come running! They might even take "Uncle Ted" for a ride in the electric cart! They might even take YOU for a ride in the electric cart if you mention the detonator in Mom's purse!

Note From The Publisher

In this chapter Mr. Barry has been quite critical of commercial air travel, so we have decided, in the interest of fairness, to allow the airline industry an opportunity to respond. The following point-by-point rebuttal was written by Mr. M. Duane LeGrout, president of the American Association of Associated Airline Companies in Association with Each Other.

An Open Letter To Airline Passengers

Dear Airline Passenger:

We will be starting this rebuttal in just a few moments. Please remain in the area, as we are almost ready to start this point-by-point rebuttal. Thank you.

We apologize for the delay. We will begin rebutting very soon now, and we are grateful for your

patience.

We have an announcement for those readers who are waiting for the point-by-point rebuttal. We are experiencing a minor equipment problem with our word processor at this time, but we do expect to have an announcement very soon and we do ask for your continued patience. In the meantime, we regret to announce that we have overbooked this rebuttal, and we are asking for readers who are willing to give up their space in exchange for an opportunity to read two future rebuttals on a topic of your choice. Thank you, and we expect to have another announcement shortly.

Okay, we do apologize for any inconvenience, but we have been informed that the word-processor problems have been corrected and we will begin rebutting any moment now. We ask that those of you with small shrieking children pLeAse assidaisaas *(*A*&AA hey can someBoDy fiX this goddam REBUTTAL CANCELED! SEE AGENT!

Sincerely,

M. Duane LeGrout President

Chapter Four. Traveling As A Family (Or: No, We Are Not There Yet!)

Family travel has been an American tradition ever since the days when hardy pioneer families crossed the Great Plains in oxen-drawn covered wagons, braving harsh weather, hostile Native Americans, unforgiving terrain, scarce food, and—worst of all—the constant whining coming from the backseat:

“Are we there yet?” “Hey! THESE plains aren’t so great!” “Mom, Ezra is making hostile gestures at those Native Americans!” “Are we almost there?” “Mom! Rebecca dumped some unforgiving terrain into my scarce food!” “PLEASE can we stop here and settle Kansas please please PLEASE??” “Yuck! We’re eating bison again?” “When are we going to be there?” “Mom! Little Ben put oxen poop in his hair!”

Yes, it was brutally hard, but those brave pioneers kept going, day after day, month after month, never stopping, and do you know why? Because Dad was driving, that’s why. When Dad is driving, he never stops for anything. This is part of the Guy Code of Conduct. A lot of those early pioneer dads, when they got to California, drove their wagons directly into the Pacific Ocean and would probably have continued to Japan if it hadn’t been for shark damage to the oxen.

Another part of the Guy Code of Conduct still in effect is that only Dad can drive. If necessary, Dad will permanently bond his hands to the steering wheel with Krazy Glue to prevent Mom from driving, because he knows that if she had the wheel, she might suffer a lapse of judgment and decide to actually stop for something, such as food or sleep or medical care for little Jennifer, whose appendix has apparently burst. No, Dad will not allow minor distractions such as these to interfere with his vacation schedule, which looks like this:

6:00-6:15 A.M.: See Yellowstone National Park 6:15-6:25 A.M.: See Grand Canyon 6:15-7:00 A.M.: See Latin America

What Dad means by “see,” of course, is “drive past at 67 miles per hour.” Dad feels it is a foolish waste of valuable vacation time to get out of the car and actually go look at an attraction such as the White House, Niagara Falls, the Louvre, etc.

I myself have been guilty of this behavior. Once we were driving across the country and we got to

South Dakota, a dirt-intensive state so sparsely populated that merely by entering it you automatically become a member of the legislature. A major tourist attraction in South Dakota is something called “Wall Drug,” which is basically a group of stores advertised by a string of billboards that begins somewhere outside of the solar system. My wife, Beth, wanted to stop. Her reasoning was that we had driven hundreds of miles that day with absolutely no activity to relieve our boredom except eating Stuckey’s miniature pecan pies at the rate of approximately three pies per person per hour. And so as we drew closer to Wall Drug, passing billboard after billboard—157 miles to go, 153 miles to go, 146 miles to go, etc.—her anticipation mounted, until finally we were there, and Beth’s excitement reached a fever pitch because this was the only point of interest for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles, and of course I elected to whiz right past it, as though I had an important appointment elsewhere in South Dakota to pick up an urgent load of manure.

You know how certain incidents become permanent sore points in a marriage? Like for example a husband will never let his wife forget the time she left a \$2,000 video camera where the baby could get hold of it and drop it into the toilet? That’s the status that the Wall Drug Incident has achieved in our marriage. My wife feels that we’re the only people in the history of interstate travel who failed to stop there, and, fifteen years later, she is still bitter. If she ever files for a divorce, this is the first incident she’ll mention to the lawyer. And that’s the wonderful thing about family travel: it provides you with experiences that will remain locked forever in the scar tissue of your mind. Especially if you travel with children. We traveled extensively with our son Robert when he was very young, and I have many, many vivid memories of that period, all of which involve public rest rooms.

As you parents know, a small child can go for weeks without going to the bathroom at home, but once you hit the road, it becomes pretty much a full-time occupation. During my son Robert’s early years, he and I visited just about every men’s room on the East Coast. And if it was a really disgusting men’s room, a men’s room that contained the skeletons of Board of Health workers who died trying to inspect it, Robert would inevitably announce that he had to do Number Two.

So he’d go into a stall and close the door, and his little legs would disappear, and he’d remain there for as long as two days. God alone knows what he was doing in there. Meanwhile, of course, I’d stand guard outside the stall, because you can’t leave a three-year-old alone. Inevitably strangers would come in, and there I’d be, apparently just hanging out alone in a men’s room, and they’d look at me suspiciously. So in an effort to reassure these strangers that I was a Father on Duty, as opposed to some kind of lurking men’s-room pervert, I’d try to strike up a conversation with Robert through the stall door:

ME: So, Robert, my three-year-old son who is inside this stall that I’m guarding as a responsible parent! How’s it going in there?

STALL DOOR: (silence)

ME: Ha ha! Speak up, Robert!

STALL DOOR: (silence)

And the strangers would turn and stride quickly out the door, because nobody wants to be in a public rest room with a person who’s talking to a toilet stall.

Of course, if there’s anything more exciting than traveling with a child, it’s traveling with several children. We ourselves have only one child, because after Beth experienced the Joy and Wonder of natural childbirth, she decided not to experience it again until modern science invents a method whereby the man has the contractions. But we have taken Robert’s friends with us on numerous trips, and we have noted a phenomenon familiar to all parents, namely that you would have less conflict if you put the

entire North and South Korean armed forces in your backseat than you get with just two children.

Children sitting in backseats are incapable of normal human conversation. Their conversational responses are all intended to raise the level of backseat hostility to the point where one party has no viable option but to spit Yoo– hoo into the other party's hair.

Examples

STATEMENT OF CHILD: Hey! I saw a horse!

RESPONSE OF NORMAL HUMAN: Where?

RESPONSE OF OTHER CHILD IN BACKSEAT: So what? (Or: "You did not.")

STATEMENT OF CHILD: I like this song.

RESPONSE OF NORMAL HUMAN: That's nice.

RESPONSE OF OTHER CHILD IN BACKSEAT: So what? (Or: "You do not.") (Or: "This song sucks.")

STATEMENT OF CHILD: In a right triangle, the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

RESPONSE OF NORMAL HUMAN: That is correct.

RESPONSE OF OTHER CHILD IN BACKSEAT: You suck.

One way to try to reduce the hostility level is to keep the children amused with Traditional Fun Car Games, such as watching for other cars' license plates and seeing who can find the one from the most distant state. This exciting activity is sure to captivate the children and provide hours of enjoyment ("I see one from Iowa!" "No you don't!" "So what?" "You suck!").

But for real family travel fun, there's no substitute for actually reaching some kind of destination. And the Number One family travel destination of all, as measured in total miles of people waiting in line, is of course:

The Walt "You Will Have Fun" Disney World Themed Shopping Complex And Resort Compound

I'm an expert on visiting Disney World, because we live only four hours away, and according to my records we spend about three-fifths of our after-tax income there. Not that I'm complaining. You can't have a bad time at Disney World. It's not allowed. They have hidden electronic surveillance cameras everywhere, and if they catch you failing to laugh with childlike wonder, they lock you inside a costume representing a beloved Disney character such as Goofy and make you walk around in the Florida heat getting grabbed and leaped on by violently excited children until you have learned your lesson. Yes, Disney World is a "dream vacation," and here are some tips to help make it "come true" for you!

When to Go: The best time to go, if you want to avoid huge crowds, is 1962. How to Get There: It's possible to fly, but if you want the total Disney World experience, you should drive there with a minimum of four hostile children via the longest possible route. If you live in Georgia, for example, you should plan a route that includes Oklahoma.

Once you get to Florida, you can't miss Disney World, because the Disney corporation owns the entire

center of the state. Just get on any major highway, and eventually it will dead-end in a Disney parking area large enough to have its own climate, populated by large nomadic families who have been trying to find their cars since the Carter administration. Be sure to note carefully where you leave your car, because later on you may want to sell it so you can pay for your admission tickets.

But never mind the price; the point is that now you're finally there, in the ultimate vacation fantasy paradise, ready to have fun! Well, okay, you're not exactly there yet. First you have to wait for the parking-lot tram, driven by cheerful uniformed Disney employees, to come around and pick you up and give you a helpful lecture about basic tram-safety rules such as never fall out of the tram without coming to a full and complete stop. But now the tram ride is over and it's time for fun! Right? Don't be an idiot. It's time to wait in line to buy admission tickets. Most experts recommend that you go with the 47-day pass, which will give you a chance, if you never eat or sleep, to visit all of the Disney themed attractions, including The City of the Future, The Land of Yesterday, The Dull Suburban Residential Community of Sometime Next Month, Wet Adventure, Farms on Mars, The World of Furniture, Sponge Encounter, the Nuclear Flute Orchestra, Appliance Island, and the Great Underwater Robot Hairdresser Adventure, to name just a few.

Okay, you've taken out a second mortgage and purchased your tickets! Now, finally, it's time to ... wait in line again! This time, it's for the monorail, a modern, futuristic transportation system that whisks you to the Magic Kingdom at nearly half the speed of a lawn tractor. Along the way cheerful uniformed Disney World employees will offer you some helpful monorail-safety tips such as never set fire to the monorail without first removing your personal belongings.

And now, at last, you're at the entrance to the Magic Kingdom itself! No more waiting in line for transportation! It's time to wait in line to get in. Wow! Look at all the other people waiting to get in! There are tour groups here with names like "Entire Population of Indiana." There sure must be some great attractions inside these gates!

And now you've inched your way to the front of the line, and the cheerful uniformed Disney employee is stamping your hand with a special invisible chemical that penetrates your nervous system and causes you to temporarily acquire the personality of a cow. "Moo!" you shout as you surge forward with the rest of the herd.

And now, unbelievably, you're actually inside the Magic Kingdom! At last! Mecca! You crane your head to see over the crowd around you, and with innocent childlike wonder you behold: a much larger crowd. Ha ha! You are having some kind of fun now!

And now you are pushing your way forward, thrusting other vacationers aside, knocking over their strollers if necessary, because little Jason wants to ride on Space Mountain. Little Jason has been talking about Space Mountain ever since Oklahoma, and by God you're going to take him on it, no matter how long the ... My God! Can this be the line for Space Mountain? This line is so long that there are Cro-Magnon families at the front! Perhaps if you explain to little Jason that he could be a deceased old man by the time he gets on the actual ride, he'll agree to skip it and ... NO! Don't scream, little Jason! We'll just purchase some official Mickey Mouse sleeping bags, and we'll stay in line as long as it takes! The hell with third grade! We'll just stand here and chew our cuds! Mooooo!

Speaking of education, you should be sure to visit Epcot Center, which features exhibits sponsored by large corporations showing you how various challenges facing the human race are being met and overcome thanks to the selfless efforts of large corporations. Epcot Center also features pavilions built by various foreign nations, where you can experience an extremely realistic simulation of what life in

these nations would be like if they consisted almost entirely of restaurants and souvenir stores.

One memorable Epcot night my family and I ate at the German restaurant, where I had several large beers and a traditional German delicacy called “Bloatwurst,” which is a sausage that can either be eaten or used as a tackling dummy. When we got out I felt like one of those snakes that eat a cow whole and then just lie around and digest it for a couple of months. But my son was determined to go on a new educational Epcot ride called “The Body,” wherein you sit in a compartment that simulates what it would be like if you got inside a spaceship-like vehicle and got shrunk down to the size of a gnat and got injected inside a person’s body.

I’ll tell you what it’s like: awful. You’re looking at a screen showing an extremely vivid animated simulation of the human interior, which is not the most appealing way to look at a human unless you’re attracted to white blood cells the size of motor homes. Meanwhile the entire compartment is bouncing you around violently, especially when you go through the aorta. “Never go through the aorta after eating German food,” that is my new travel motto.

What gets me is, I waited in line for an hour to do this. I could have experienced essentially the same level of enjoyment merely by sticking my finger down my throat.

Which brings me to my idea for getting rich. No doubt you have noted that, in most amusement parks, the popularity of a ride is directly proportional to how horrible it is. There’s hardly ever a line for nice, relaxing rides like the merry-go-round. But there will always be a huge crowd, mainly consisting of teenagers, waiting to go on a ride with a name like “The Dicer,” where they strap people into what is essentially a giant food processor and turn it on and then phone the paramedics.

So my idea is to open up a theme park called “Dave World,” which will have a ride called “The Fall of Death.” This will basically be a 250-foot tower. The way it will work is, you climb to the top, a trapdoor opens up, and you splat onto the asphalt below like a bushel of late-summer tomatoes.

Obviously, for legal reasons, I couldn’t let anybody actually go on this ride. There would be a big sign that said:

WARNING:

NOBODY CAN GO ON THIS RIDE.

THIS RIDE IS INVARIABLY FATAL,

THANK YOU.

But this would only make The Fall of Death more popular. Every teenager in the immediate state would come to Dave World just to stand in line for it.

Dave World would also have an attraction called “Parent Land,” which would have a sign outside that said: “Sorry, Kids! This Attraction Is for Mom ‘n’ Dad Only!” Inside would be a bar. For younger children, there would be “Soil Fantasy,” a themed play area consisting of dirt or, as a special “rainy-day” bonus, mud.

I frankly can’t see how Dave World could fail to become a huge financial success that would make me rich and enable me to spend the rest of my days traveling the world with my family. So the hell with it.

Seeing Other Attractions in the Disney World Area

You must be very careful here. You must sneak out of Disney World in the dead of night, because the Disney people do not want you leaving the compound and spending money elsewhere. If they discover

that you're gone, cheerful uniformed employees led by Mickey Mouse's lovable dog Pluto, who will sniff the ground in a comical manner, will track you down. And when they catch you, it's into the Goofy suit.

So we're talking about a major risk, but it's worth it for some of the attractions around Disney World. The two best ones, as it happens, are right next to each other near a town called Kissimmee. One of them is the world headquarters of the Tupperware company, where you can take a guided tour that includes a Historic Food Containers Museum. I am not making this up.

I am also not making up Gatorland, which is next door. After entering Gatorland through a giant pair of pretend alligator jaws, you find yourself on walkways over a series of murky pools in which are floating a large number of alligators that appear to be recovering from severe hangovers, in the sense that they hardly ever move. You can purchase fish to feed them, but the typical Gatorland alligator will ignore a fish even if it lands directly on its head. Sometimes you'll see an alligator, looking bored, wearing three or four rotting, fly-encrusted fish, like some kind of High Swamp Fashion headgear.

This is very entertaining, of course, but the real action at Gatorland, the event that brings even the alligators to life, is the Assault on the Dead Chickens, which is technically known as the Gator Jumparoo. I am also not making this up. The way it works is, a large crowd of tourists gathers around a central pool, over which, suspended from wires, are a number of plucked headless chicken carcasses. As the crowd, encouraged by the Gatorland announcer, cheers wildly, the alligators lunge out of the water and rip the chicken carcasses down with their jaws. Once you've witnessed this impressive event, you will never again wonder how America got to be the country that it is today.

And speaking of America, let's talk about taking the children to one of this nation's many fine:

Educational Historic Sites

Forget it. Your modern child is not interested in educational historic sites. Your modern child has grown up with MTV and Nintendo; he or she is not going to be enthralled by watching people in authentic uncomfortable colonial outfits demonstrate how families in 1750 used to make candles by spinning flax with a churn, or whatever the hell they did. So you should avoid this kind of activity. Also you should avoid stopping at those Historical Markers on the side of the highway that you can never read when you're driving past because the letters are too small. Here's what they say:

HISTORIC MARKER

This Historic Marker was erected on this site in the Year of Our Lord 1923 during the administration of Governor Rayford R. "Scooter" Grommet, Jr., to commemorate with great sadness the numerous innocent civilians who are almost definitely going to get hit by traffic when they stop their cars and get out and try to read these really tiny letters.

Traveling With Teenagers

Traveling with teenagers is somewhat more difficult than traveling with members of the actual human race. It's very important for you to be sensitive to the fact that, during this difficult transition from child to adult, your teenagers are undergoing intense emotional stresses that cause them, for solid psychological reasons, to regard you as the biggest geek ever to roam the planet. This is because a

teenager's life is an extremely intense, impossibly complex drama, and you cannot possibly understand the plot. All you can do is blunder around like some kind of nearsighted elephant, making a mess of everything, including the seemingly simple act of asking a passing waitress for ketchup.

YOU: Waitress, could we please have some ketchup?

YOUR TEENAGED DAUGHTER: Oh FATHER! How COULD you?? (Crying, she rushes from the restaurant.) YOU: What did I do? What did I do?

YOUR OTHER DAUGHTER (in the tone Of voice you might use to address an ax murderer): What did you DO? Do you realize who you just asked for ketchup? YOU: A waitress?

YOUR OTHER DAUGHTER: That was Jennifer Wienerbunker! The captain of the cheer-leading squad! You asked her for ketchup. You (raising your voice slightly): But she's a waitress.

YOUR OTHER DAUGHTER: Oh FATHER! (Crying, she rushes from the restaurant.)

Also, teenagers are bored. By everything. Show a teenager an actual volcanic eruption, in progress, featuring giant billowing clouds of smoke, hot rocks raining from the sky, lava flows destroying entire villages, etc., and the teenager, eyebrows arched with sarcasm, will look at you and say, "Gee, this is swell," then return to the rental car, turn on his portable CD player, and listen to a band called Stomach Contents.

So as a parent, you may feel that your wisest course is to postpone your family traveling until your teenage child has reached a more reasonable age, such as forty-eight. If this is not possible, you'll want to follow the:

Two Major Rules for Traveling with Teenagers

1. Always Remain Outside of the Embarrassment Zone. If you get too close to your teenager in public, your teenager will become concerned that other teenagers might think that your teenager was somehow connected with you, which of course would be hideously embarrassing. So while traveling you must always maintain the Minimum Acceptable Public Distance.

2. Find Activities That Are Interesting to Teenagers. If the teenager is bored with an activity that you have planned, simply select an activity that he or she might find more interesting. Here is a handy chart to help you do this:

Activity that would be boring for teenager

Alternative activity that might be more interesting for teenager

Visiting the Louvre Museum

Leaving the Louvre Museum

Seeing the Crown Jewels

Not Seeing the Crown Jewels

Touring India by Elephant

Anyplace but India Definitely Not on an Elephant.

Chapter Five. See The U.S.A. First! (While We Still Own Part Of It)

As Americans, we are fortunate to live in a large nation, of incredible variety, as is so eloquently described in the moving opening lines of “America the Beautiful”

Well East Coast girls are hip, I really dig those styles they wear.

Yes, this is a land of rich diversity, from the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan all the way to the towering mounds of garbage piled up next to the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan, and you owe it to yourself, as an American, to see it all. Why go to Europe, with its high prices and strange food and incomprehensible lingos, when, with just a little effort, you can find those things right here?

To help you get the most out of your “American Adventure,” we’ve prepared the following state-by-state breakdown of Useful Facts and Tips. The information for this section was obtained via an exhaustive process of typing the name of a state and then trying to remember if we or anybody we knew had ever been there. Also, we got a lot of useful information from our son’s encyclopedia, a handy reference work that we always carry along when we travel, which is why we need a back operation.

The Fifty States

Alabama

Often called “The Pancreas of Dixie,” Alabama offers a tremendous amount of culture as well as turnips. The State Flower is the camelia; the State Dog is named “Booger” and you should not wake him up. Montgomery, Alabama, was the first capital of the Confederacy and in 1861 was the site of the inauguration of legendary Civil War coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. Many other fascinating historic and cultural events have also occurred in this dynamic state. Ask around.

Alaska

Despite being close to Alabama in the encyclopedia, Alaska is actually located in Canada. This is only one of the astounding facts about this dynamic state, which is so big that if you were to walk across it at the rate of 25 miles per day, you would get moose poop all over your shoes. You find moose poop everywhere in Alaska. You can buy souvenirs made from it. We once bought (this is true) some moosepoop swizzle sticks in Alaska’s largest city, Anchorage, where our hotel had a huge stuffed bear in the lobby striking a pose that said: “Welcome to Alaska! I am going to rip your face off!” Alaska also contains large quantities of nature in the form of tundra (“tundra” is the Eskimo word for “nothing”) and glaciers, which are enormous pieces of ice that have somehow developed the ability to creep around, which is a pretty scary concept and we just hope that they don’t learn to walk erect. The Official State Motto of Alaska is: “Brrrrrrr!” The Official State Bird is covered with oil.

Arizona

When you think of Arizona, you naturally think of one of the great wonders of the world, a spectacular natural formation carved out of the rock over millions of years by the Colorado River, namely: Niagara Falls. But this dynamic state also features the subtler beauty of the desert (“desert” is a Spanish word

meaning “tundra”), home of the scorpion, which is the Official State Creature That Crawls into Your Shoe and Can Cause Paralysis. Another popular attraction is London Bridge, which was transported stone by stone from England hidden in the luggage of a group of very aggressive souvenir-seeking Arizonans on a European tour. They would have got more, but a suspicious British airport security employee opened one of their carry-on bags and discovered a large segment of Stonehenge.

Arkansas

With its ideal location somewhere in the United States that we can never quite picture in our mind, Arkansas offers convenient access to adjoining regions, plus a football team whose fans wear masks with giant hog snouts (at least we assume those are masks). It is little wonder that millions of visitors flock to this dynamic state each year, purchase gasoline, and continue flocking on through. Among the many fascinating historic events that have occurred in Arkansas are the Louisiana Purchase, bauxite, and Hernando de Soto. Also Arkansas once elected a governor named “Orval E. Faubus.” The Official State Egg Order is “over medium.”

California

The nation's most populous state, California truly lives up to its dynamic nickname, “The Nation's Most Populous State,” with enough uniformed parking valets in Los Angeles alone to conquer Eastern Europe. Southern California also boasts more than 57 billion convenient miles of freeway and many fascinating places to visit, although we frankly have no idea which exit you take to get to them. But you should definitely try to find Universal Studios, where you can get a “behind-the-scenes” look at an actual working amusement park, including a terrifying ride where, in the climactic finale, you are attacked by a realistic fourteen-ton animated replica of Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Visitors to Northern California will definitely want to visit Wine Country, where they can snorkel down a couple dozen free samples and then go experience the dry heaves amidst the awesome towering grandeur of the giant redwoods, which are the oldest living things on Earth that are not members of the Grateful Dead. And of course no trip to Northern California would be complete without a visit to San Francisco, whose romantic charm inspired the immortal Tony Bennett song, “Don't Mess with My Toot Toot.” Be sure to join several tons of carbohydrate-bloated tourists for a ride on a quaint cable car, lurching up quaint “hills” that are actually 800-foot vertical drops as the cable-car driver dings the quaint little bell, sending out the cheerful message “ding-ading-ding,” which is code for: “Look out, my cable is badly frayed.” California's State Blender Setting is puree.

Colorado

Besides being dynamic, Colorado is best known for the breathtaking beauty of the Rocky Mountains, which are still visible in some areas peeking out from under a dense protective layer of condominium units. It's no wonder that each year millions of skiers come to experience the state's superb emergency medical facilities! Colorado is also rich in minerals, but so what? is our feeling. The capital and largest city is Denver, which needless to say boasts museums, symphonies, etc. You have probably noticed that

virtually all cities, including some real armpits, like to boast that they have museums and symphonies, which are of course the last things that you, the typical visitor, really want at the end of a hard day of traveling. What you want is a motel room that doesn't have hairs on the sheets. The Colorado State Garnish is parsley.

Connecticut

Connecticut, often referred to as "The Nutmeg State" by people who have confused it with Vermont, is famous for being dynamic and containing Yale University, where in 1889 (we are not making this up) the tackling dummy (Or "bloatwurst" [see Chapter Four]) was invented. The state capital, Hartford, is the headquarters of many large insurance companies, so keep your car doors locked. Also be sure to visit Mystic Seaport, where you can see an actual whaling ship in which courageous nineteenth-century mariners went to sea to do battle with monstrous fourteen-ton animated replicas of Zsa Zsa Gabor. Connecticut's official State Prank is the whoopee cushion.

Delaware

Delaware was the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution, thereby earning it the proud nickname, "The Nutmeg State." Although small in size, Delaware has had a major impact on the nation's destiny: Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy all traveled through or flew over Delaware at some time or another, as far as we know. Delaware also boasts dynamism and several million chickens. Reservations are recommended.

Florida

This happens to be our place of residence, and we are not just "tooting our own horn" when we say that no other state offers as many dynamic opportunities to encounter gigantic insects. We have cockroaches here that, instead of scuttling under a counter when you flick on the kitchen light, will pick up your entire refrigerator and lumber from the room. Also in the nature department we have the Everglades, an extremely fascinating natural swamp that inevitably causes the first-time visitor to exclaim: "Huh." The major state industries are tourism, Bingo, obtaining senior-citizen discounts, and not having automobile insurance. The state capital is Epcot Center. The largest city is Miami (official tourism slogan: "Maybe You Won't Get Shot"), a richly diverse cosmopolitan metropolis where people from many different cultures live and work together while continuing to observe the traffic laws of their individual countries of origin. The Florida State Seal depicts a mosquito carrying a machine gun.

Georgia

Although much of Georgia was burned down during the filming of *Gone With the Wind*, this dynamic state has rebuilt itself and is now an important part of the "New South" (which is similar to the Old South, except most of the pickup trucks are Japanese). Georgia's biggest city, Atlanta, proudly boasts

that it has “the nation’s busiest airport,” although frankly this strikes us as an odd thing to boast about, comparable to announcing that you have the nation’s largest epidemic of crotch lice. Other major tourist attractions include some big rocks and a great many pine trees that can be seen engaging in photosynthesis, the Official State Chemical Reaction. Georgia is also the proud host of the world-famous Masters Golf Tournament of Champions Wearing Ugly Pants, although of course you personally are not invited.

Hawaii

Visitors to this dynamic island paradise are sure to be greeted by a friendly “Aloha,” the all-purpose Hawaiian word that means “Hello,” “Good-bye,” “I love YOU,” “I hate you,” and “Give me the fish of your brother Raoul.” Geologically, the Hawaiian island chain was formed when volcanoes on the floor of the Pacific Ocean spewed out molten lava, which eventually cooled off and formed large resort hotel complexes. These in turn attracted hardy Polynesian mariners, who traveled thousands of miles in open canoes, braving fierce storms that washed all of their consonants overboard, so they arrived in the Hawaiian Islands with a language consisting almost entirely of vowels, the result being that all the traffic signs say things like KAIUUA EIAAA STREET. The modern Hawaiian economy consists of pineapples and pineapple-shaped tourists wearing comical shirts and watching authentic performances of the hula, in which dancers use traditional arm gestures to tell the story of how their ancestors, thousands of years ago, used to make various gestures with their arms. The Official State Motto is “Wai’iu’a’iou’lih’aaaine,” but nobody has any idea what it means.

Idaho

Idaho is probably best known for being the state where my wife, Beth, ate an entire strawberry pie in a diner parking lot. This occurred in 1974 when we were driving across the country and found ourselves in a city called “Pocatello,” which had a sign that made the proud boast:

POCATELLO

“Crossroads of the Interstates”

So we stopped at a diner there and ate a huge breakfast. We eat a lot on long trips because we feel our bodies are less likely to become bored if they can pass the time converting food into fat. We plan our itinerary around meals (“Do you want to see the Grand Canyon?” “Does it have a snack bar?”), and our travel memories tend to focus on food to the exclusion of all other factors (“Remember Asia?” “Yes! Those little fish rolls!”).

So we ate a vast breakfast at this diner, and on our way out Beth noticed that they had fresh-baked strawberry pies for Sale, and so naturally she bought one, her reasoning being that Idaho was basically still a wilderness area and there might not be any other food in it. Her plan was to save the pie until we really desperately needed it, say in fifteen miles or so, but when we got into our car, she decided she’d better sample it, in case it was defective. I was maneuvering the car out of the parking space, and I heard this unusual noise—a combination of ecstatically passionate moan and industrial vacuum cleaner—and when I looked over, the entire pie was gone. Vanished, before we even got to the street. Seventeen years later, the memory of that pie still brings a dynamic sparkle to Beth’s eye that is rarely there when she

looks at me, or even Kevin Costner. Idaho's official State Chemical Element is helium.

Illinois

Illinois is "The Land of Lincoln," and the memory of "Honest Abe" is so deeply revered there that as recently as 1983 he was elected lieutenant governor. Illinois is also the nation's largest soybean-producing state, although nobody knows what happens to the soybeans after they're grown. You never see them for sale. We think the farmers just harvest them and throw them away.

The largest city in Illinois is, of course, Chicago, which proudly refers to itself as "The City with a Great Big Butt." This dynamic metropolis began as a tiny trading post in the 1600's, when trappers would paddle canoes filled with animal pelts down the Chicago River, then throw them into Lake Michigan, because by then they smelled awful. During World War II scientists started the first controlled nuclear reaction at the University of Chicago. At least it has been under control so far. Some days it gets a little frisky, which is why a lot of smart Illinois residents also maintain residences in Guam. Today Chicago boasts the Sears Tower, which is so tall that occupants on the top floor sometimes have to phone the street level to find out what the weather's like "down there"! These occupants have had a lot to drink.

Indiana

Indiana is a country in Southeast Asia consisting of more than 13,600 islands. No! Wait! We're looking at the encyclopedia article for Indonesia. Indiana is located in the Midwest and consists of less than 13,600 islands. It is called "The Hoosier State," after the sound that pigs make when they sneeze. Another dynamic activity that occurs there is the exciting Indianapolis 500, where each year the world's top racing-car drivers roar around the legendary Indianapolis Speedway, again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again until the excitement and tension become so great that you have to change the channel and watch Celebrity Turkey Basting (Host: Wink Martindale). Indiana also boasts higher education and Historic Fort Wayne, where men dressed in authentic old soldier costumes engage in authentic soldier activities and, if they are not careful, contract various authentic diseases. Abraham Lincoln also lived in Indiana for a while, but he moved. The Official State Semi-Obscure Adjective is "febrile."

Iowa

Iowa's Official State Motto is "You Bet," which is what everybody there automatically says in response to any question:

PREACHER: Do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, even if he gets sick, or becomes poor, or brings home a dog that throws up a semidigested mole head in your lingerie drawer?

IOWA BRIDE: You bet.

Iowa produces dynamic quantities of pork. The other major industry is making fun of people from Minnesota, who have a big rivalry with the Iowans, although even scientists using sophisticated

instruments cannot tell the two groups apart. Iowa also offers plenty of culture: In fact, the very name of the state capital, Des Moines, is French. It means “some of these Moines.” Iowa’s Official State Local Boy Who Went on to Become a Famous Dead Movie Star is John Wayne, whose birthplace is open to the public. We strongly recommend that you stop for a visit, although we personally shot past it at nearly 80 miles per hour.

Kansas

Although it is now covered with agriculture, Kansas was at one time very historic. It was the on-scene location of the “Wild West,” where “longhorns” riding “six-shooters” used to “rustle up” some “varmint.” This era eventually ended due to a shortage of quotation marks, but Kansans are still proud of their state’s rough-and-tumble tradition, and will often greet a stranger by warmly breaking a chair over his head. Kansas also contains manufacturing and tumbleweeds, which are plants that form themselves into giant balls that roll across the prairie and burst into your motel room at night, which is why the American Automobile Association recommends that you always sleep with a weed whacker.

Kentucky

Kentucky is best known as the state where sleek racehorses drink bourbon whiskey and smoke the legendary “bluegrass” tobacco, then compete for the honor of wearing the famous “Kentucky Derby.” Kentucky also leads the nation in the production of bituminous coal, which is especially valuable because it has two tuminouses. The coal industry is very tourist-oriented, and members of the public are welcome to strip vast quantities of irreplaceable topsoil and take it home with them. Another “must-see” in Kentucky is Fort Knox, which offers guided tours daily from nine A.M. until five P.m. to all visitors who make it across the mine field. You may also want to visit Mammoth Cave, which is an incredibly beautiful and dynamic natural formation, although unfortunately you can’t actually see anything because it’s located underground. The Kentucky State Pruning Implement is shears.

Louisiana

Louisiana was discovered by the Cajuns, a dynamic group of people who came down from Canada and decided to stay after they forgot where they had parked. This kind of thing happens a lot in Louisiana, especially in the state capital, New Orleans, where the Official Motto is: “Laissez les bons temps rouler.” (“Look out, I’m about to throw up.”) New Orleans is a wide-open town, a town where there is gambling and cursing and heavy drinking and naked dancing and wild orgiastic sex. And that’s just in the police station. The rest of the city is even looser, especially the French Quarter, which is so decadent that if the Reverend Jerry Falwell were to merely walk down the length of Bourbon Street, he would emerge at the other end with an overpowering desire to purchase leather underwear (Assuming he doesn’t have some already). New Orleans also boasts a number of historic sites, the major one being Nick G. Castrogiovanni’s Original Big Train Bar, which is where, during the 1988 Republican convention, this author, for sound journalism reasons, drank a drink called “A Wild Night at the Capri Motel” out of a large styrofoam container shaped like a toilet.

CORRECTION:

We have been informed that New Orleans is not the state capital of Louisiana. New Orleans is the state capital of Utah. We regret the error.

Maine

During the warm season (August 8 and 9), Maine is a true “vacation paradise,” offering visitors a chance to jump into crystal-clear mountain lakes and see if they can get back out again before their bodily tissue is frozen as solid as a supermarket turkey. This dynamic climate has produced a hardy stock of local residents who at first seem a bit “standoffish,” although when you take the time to get to know them, you will discover that many of them are actually dead. A major tourist attraction in Maine is Kenneth E. Bunkport IV, the quaint seaside town where George Bush, who is a fiend for recreation, often goes to throw horseshoes at fish from his golf cart. Maine also features numerous fascinating pine trees as well as an average annual precipitation. The Official State Boxed Movie Refreshment is Milk Duds.

Maryland

Maryland is a fast-growing state boasting a dynamic economy based on giving speeding tickets to people attempting to drive through. One of Maryland's major attractions is the Chesapeake Bay, a crab-intensive body of water that gets its name from the Indian word “Cesapiq,” which means “Chesapeake.” Maryland also contains Baltimore, site of the historic Fort McHenry, where in 1812 Francis Scott Key wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner” to express the joy he felt after watching the Orioles defeat the Yankees in a critical American League East game. Maryland also boasts the nation's first umbrella factory. Sometimes Maryland gets positively obnoxious, boasting about this. You'll go to a bar where states hang out, and there will be Maryland, after about six shots of Wild Turkey, shouting, “Oh YEAH? Well you wanna know who had the FIRST UMBRELLA FACTORY? Huh? LISTEN TO ME WHEN I'M TALKING TO YOU!” The Official State Sport of Maryland—we swear we are not making this one up, and we urge you to look it up if you don't believe us—is jousting.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts (also an Indian word, meaning “place that is hard to spell”) is one of the most historic states in the union, which is why each year tens of thousands of visitors flock here, only to be killed in traffic. In Boston, the drivers refuse to obey even the laws of physics. This is the only place in the United States where the Driver's Manual actually shows you how to give people the finger (Rim shot).

But potential death is a small price to pay for the opportunity to visit the many Massachusetts historic sites that played such a vital role in the formation of our nation—sites such as Plymouth Rock, where the Pilgrims, grateful to have survived a difficult three-month sea crossing, knelt to throw up, and the steeple of the Old North Church, from which silversmith Paul Revere flashed the message that started the Revolutionary War (“Your silverware order is not ready yet”). Massachusetts is also the site of the nation's first college, Harvard, which for more than three centuries has produced graduates who, no

matter what their philosophical differences, are all dedicated to the lofty goal of subtly letting you know that they went to Harvard. They never mention it directly. What they do is constantly work the name “Cambridge” into the conversation. You’ll say “Nice day,” and they’ll say “Yes! We had days like this in Cambridge!” Or you’ll say “Pass the salt,” and they’ll say “Certainly! I used to pass the salt in Cambridge!” The major industries of Massachusetts are having comical accents and expecting the Red Sox to screw up.

Michigan

Michigan is best known for being the place where, in 1896, Henry Ford built the first commercially successful automobile, using parts manufactured by the Toyota Corporation. This resulted in Detroit, a modern dynamic city that is well worth flying over at a minimum altitude of seven miles. Michigan also contains the Great Lakes, five mighty bodies of water—Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, Lake Toledo, Lake Inferior, and the Mayor Earl T. Wonkerman Memorial Lake—which inspired the great eighteenth-century poet Henry Wadsworth Allan Poe to write the immortal “Song of Hiawatha”:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee; By the shining Big-Sea water; Strode the mighty Hiawatha; In a frock he made from otter.

(Chorus)

Speaking of culture, the World Book Encyclopedia states that every year Michigan has a “Magic Get-Together” in a city named “Colon.” We definitely think you should check this out.

Minnesota

Minnesota has more than 10,000 lakes, which has earned it the proud nickname: “The Gopher State.” The major industries are (1) cows and (2) trying to get cars started, which is very difficult because the entire state is located inside the Arctic Circle. The largest and most dynamic city is Minneapolis (nickname: “St. Paul”), which boasts culture and some nice malls. Also there is a state fair where people make realistic sculptures entirely out of butter. And while you’re in Minnesota, be sure to take the whole family on the tour of the world-famous Mayo Clinic, where every visitor receives a free “take-home souvenir spleen transplant.” Minnesota’s Official State Office Supply is staples.

Mississippi

Mississippi has been unfairly portrayed in movies and TV shows as a backward, poorly educated state where the average resident has seventeen teeth and rides around in a pickup truck with a shotgun and a mongrel dog that scores higher on the SAT tests than the average resident. This is a terribly unfair stereotype. The actual truth is closer to nineteen teeth. No! Ha ha! We’re just kidding, Mississippi residents! Seriously, Mississippi is a dynamic and growing state, and many modern technological corporations are relocating there to take advantage of the ready availability of okra. Also Elvis was born in Tupelo, where you can visit his birthplace and possibly meet him in person. You’ll also want to visit one of the old plantations, where attractive hostesses dressed in authentic costumes explain the old traditional lifestyle and flog an authentic motorized replica of a slave. MississiPPi’s Official State Motto

is “WhooooEEEEEE!”

Missouri

Missouri is called “The Show-Me State,” because that was the winner of the Dumbest State Nickname Contest, narrowly edging out “The Nanny Nanny Boo-Boo State.” The largest city is St. Louis, which features a 630-foot-tall stainless-steel arch, a monument to the early pioneers who came west with nothing but their wagons, their guns, their dreams, and their 630-foot-tall stainless-steel arches. Visitors may ride to the top of the arch, where, high above the Mississippi River, they will experience the thrill of wanting really badly to get the hell back down on the ground. At least that was how we felt. You’ll also want to visit Hannibal, the boyhood home of Samuel Clemens, who grew up, adopted a pen name, and became one of Missouri’s, and America’s, most beloved characters: Harry Truman. Missouri is also dynamic.

Montana

When we think of Montana, the tourist attraction that of course immediately leaps into our minds is the maggot races at the Town Club Bar in Three Forks. We are not making these races up. The maggots are provided by a man named Darrel Rafferty, owner of Rafferty’s Fishbait Company, which sells tubes filled with maggots for bait. So one day a customer was in the Town Club Bar, complaining to Rafferty that he didn’t get enough maggots in his tube, so Rafferty said, okay, show me—even though this was not his Official State Motto—and so the customer poured his maggots out on the bar, and some of the more dynamic ones started crawling away, and eureka (Greek, meaning “They probably had a few beers in them”) the idea of racing maggots to raise money for charity was born. They built a maggot racecourse and took bets and everything. We spoke to the Town Club owner, Phil Schneider, and he said they’d hold more races if tourists came around and created a popular demand. So we definitely recommend that you make this your first Montana stop. Don’t set your food down on the bar.

Other Montana attractions include nature and the headquarters of the world’s largest intercontinental ballistic missile complex, where tourists are welcome to come in and spin the big “Select-a-Target” wheel.

Nebraska

Although it is usually thought of as a farm state, Nebraska boasts two area codes, 402 and 308, as well as the National Museum of Roller Skating, which is in Lincoln and is, shockingly, the only museum in the world dedicated solely to roller skating. Nebraska is also the only state in the union with a “unicameral” legislature, defined as “a legislature that bears its young underwater.” But Nebraska was not always a bed of roses. When the first settlers arrived, they found a harsh, unforgiving place, a vast, treeless expanse of barren, drought-parched soil. And so, summoning up the dynamic pioneer spirit of hope and steely determination, they left. But a few of them remained and built sod houses, which are actually made from dirt. Think about that. You can’t clean a sod house, because it would be gone. The early settler parents had a hell of a time getting this through to their children. “You kids stop tracking

dirt out of the house!” they’d yell. Nebraska’s official State Weakness is fudge.

Nevada

Let’s get one thing straight: There is more to Nevada than just Las Vegas. There is also the part that you have to drive through to get to Las Vegas. Fortunately you can do this at upward of 130 miles per hour, because there is no speed limit in Nevada. In fact there are no laws at all in Nevada. Even murder is legal, but it rarely happens, because people get distracted. A guy will be on his way to kill somebody, and he’ll pass a slot machine, and he’ll figure, what the heck, so he’ll put in a quarter, and pretty soon he’s broke and has to pawn his gun to get more quarters. The result is that Nevada has a very dynamic economy, with gambling being the number-one industry, followed closely by blood donorship. Las Vegas is also a cultural center, featuring extravagant theatrical productions in which world-class performers express the artistic concept: “Get a load of these hooters.” And definitely do not miss the Liberace Museum, which presents a fascinating piano-oriented view of history. One plaque reads: “With Abraham Lincoln as president, the Civil War was raging when the Steinway Company of New York created this fine piano made of solid rosewood.” We can just imagine the scene at the Steinway Company that fateful day: The board of directors is seated around the conference table, grim-faced, and the chairman says, “Gentlemen, Abraham Lincoln is president, and the Civil War is raging! We must make a fine piano of solid rosewood!”

Nevada is also a Mecca for lovers of fine concrete, who will want to visit the Hoover Dam, which was completed in 1936 and resulted in the formation of the Grand Canyon. There is a guided tour of the dam, which your children will surely want to take seventeen or eighteen consecutive times while you go back to Vegas and shoot some craps.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire (formerly Vermont) contains many rustic little villages with names like “East Thwackmore” featuring quaint little inns where the harried visitor can escape from the high-pressure modern world, with its pesky flush toilets and central heating. New Hampshire is also the home of the famous New England town meeting, a dynamic example of “democracy in action”

wherein once a year all the residents of each town gather to lick syrup off each other’s thighs. One of New Hampshire’s most popular attractions is the famous “Old Man of the Mountains,” a natural granite formation that, when viewed from a certain angle, looks like rocks. New Hampshire’s Official State Onion Dip Enhancer is chives.

New Jersey

New Jersey—nicknamed “The New Jersey Turnpike State”—boasts the nation’s densest population and convenient access to a number of important bridges and tunnels. It’s also a dynamic summer playground, drawing millions of visitors each year to attractions such as Atlantic City, one of the few seaside resorts that would actually be improved by the arrival of an oil slick. Among New Jersey’s many historic sites is Giants Memorial Stadium, erected to mark the burial location of Jimmy Hoffa, visitors

are welcome to come place a wreath on his memorial goalposts. The Revolutionary War also occurred in New Jersey, where on Christmas night, 1776, George Washington crossed the Delaware River near Trenton and, in one of the great surprise maneuvers in the history of warfare, found a decent restaurant. New Jersey's Official State Disease is gout.

New Mexico

New Mexico offers many fascinating and dynamic attractions that you will want to see before you run out of water and die. For example, you should definitely check out the Native American heritage. If you see some Native Americans, you just say, "Hey! Would you Native Americans mind posing for some pictures here? I got it! How about if you pretend that you're trying to scalp Louise! Ha ha!" This will make you very popular. You might even get invited to go behind a building for a Special Ceremony.

Also be sure to visit Carlsbad Caverns, an awesome geological formation in which visitors may witness the grandeur of more than 250 million bats. Do not startle them. The first atomic bomb was also built in New Mexico and is very slowly being restored to its original condition by workers with tweezers and extremely good eyesight.

New York

"The Empire State" is of course dominated by New York City, the "Big Apple," filled with the bustle and excitement of millions of energetic, sophisticated, urbane people experiencing numerous only-in-New-York thrills such as making it all the way to work without getting peed on. As Frank Sinatra put it in his immortal and dynamic rendering of New York's Official Horrendously Overexposed Hit Show Tune, "New York, New York":

If I can make it there, I can afford to move to Stanford, Connecticut.

Here are some tips for getting maximum enjoyment from your trip to New York:

1. Cancel it immediately.

Ha ha! We are just kidding, of course. New York is in fact a major tourist destination, drawing millions of visitors each year, the majority of whom are never robbed and stabbed and left on the sidewalk to bleed to death while being stepped over by enough people to Populate the entire state of Montana. Their secret? They follow certain common-sense New York City safety rules, such as:

Always walk at least 30 miles per hour. Always keep your money and other valuables in a safe place, such as Switzerland. Avoid unsafe areas, such as your hotel bathroom. Never make eye contact. This is asking to be mugged. In the New York court system, a mugger is automatically declared not guilty if the defense can prove that the victim has a history of making eye contact.

Getting around New York is easy, thanks to the convenient and simple subway system. The major lines are the IRT, the BMT, the SAT, the LSD, and QED, which operate crosstown, midtown, downtown, thrutown, and camptown—trains that are local and quasi-express only with alternating stations northbound between 59th Street and the corner of Twelfth Avenue and Grant's Tomb only on Wednesdays except during lobster season or for those passengers holding odd-numbered transfers and claiming more than 8.5 percent of their gross net deductible pretax noninterest income as medical expenses. If you have any questions about this, helpful attendants inside bullet-proof bomb-proof flame-

proof machete-proof token-dispensing bunkers will be more than happy to continue reading the New York Post (Headline: NAB PORN MOM IN TOT SLASH) no matter how loud you yell. Or for equal convenience you can take a taxi, which you get by simply raising your hand and then bringing it down sharply on the heads of the various New Yorkers who will try to leap into the taxi ahead of you. Be sure to speak very clearly to the driver, as he probably just arrived from a Third World nation where the major form of transportation is vines. The standard tip for everything in New York City is a smile and a bright, shiny quarter.

New York State is completely different.

North Carolina and Dakota

These two dynamic states are usually grouped together because they both begin with “North.” The major products of North Carolina are tobacco and enormous amounts of phlegm. North Carolina also contains the famous “Lost Colony”, ask anyone for directions. North Dakota offers a fascinating array of wheat; the least-crowded time to visit is February.

Ohio

Ohio proudly calls itself “The Buckeye State,” after the buckeye, a dynamic, hairless carnivorous nocturnal rodent that traps its prey by pretending to offer really good discounts on jewelry. The largest city in Ohio is Cleveland, which, after years of being the butt of many jokes, has risen to assume its rightful role among major American urban areas as the Future Home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We personally visited this attraction, which consisted of an office containing numerous press releases and a model of what the Hall of Fame would look like if it ever got built. The model is about the size of a harmonica. We think it would be a shrewd move on Cleveland's part to keep it on this scale, rather than building a full-size Hall of Fame, which would probably attract a lot of rowdy people going “WHOOO!” and throwing up on each other. Also, unlike a large building, the model can easily be placed in a briefcase and carried around the country for special events, parties, etc. (“Hey! Somebody sat on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame!”).

Other major Ohio cities include Akron (“The Rubber Capital of the World”) and nearby Canton (“The Spermicidal Lubricant Capital of the World”). Ohio's Official State Literary Device is the metaphor.

Oklahoma

The frontier spirit of this dynamic state is best summed up by the Official State Song, from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Oklahoma, which begins:

Oooo-klahoma If I can MAKE it there, I'll make it Any where!

This feeling dates back to the famous Oklahoma land rush of the 1880's, when the government opened Oklahoma for settlement and many would-be settlers came in “sooner” than they were supposed to, thereby earning Oklahoma its proud nickname, “The Nutmeg State.” Modern Oklahoma boasts both plant and animal life as well as the National Softball Hall of Fame, where every day from nine A.M. until six P.M. visitors may get into bitter, sometimes violent arguments over basically

nothing. Oklahoma's Official State Mystery Food
Additive is Sodium Erythorbate.

Oregon

Oregon is called "The Beaver State," although the University of Oregon team nickname is the "Ducks," which led to the following actual headline in the Seattle Times when an Oregon women's team lost to a team from the University of Washington (the "Huskies"):

HUSKY WOMEN SUBDUE DUCKS

The major industry in Oregon is trying to locate a tree that does not have an ecologist wrapped around it and then cutting it down and selling it to Japan to be converted into price stickers and pasted onto car windows for sale in the United States. interesting Oregon sights include salmon, which every year return from the Pacific Ocean to swim up rivers, battling fierce currents, waterfalls, and hungry predators, until finally the survivors reach their spawning area, where, driven by an eons-old instinct, they realize that they forgot to bring the eggs.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is a very historical state, especially Philadelphia, where on July 4, 1776, the Founding Fathers, defying the King and risking execution as traitors, held the Boston Massacre. Visitors to Philadelphia may see the famous Liberty Bell, which was built in 1776 for the fledgling American republic by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, but which never really rang right because of a crack. Other Popular Pennsylvania attractions include: Pennsylvania Dutch Country, where visitors may see authentic tourists eating and looking around for Amish people to stare at; and Hershey, home of the world-famous Acne Hall of Fame. Pennsylvania's Official State Salad Dressing is ranch.

Rhode Island

Although it is the smallest state in the union, Rhode Island is nevertheless one of the least interesting. Ha ha! We are just joshing, of course. This dynamic state is a vacation paradise, boasting a population, an average annual rainfall, and historical significance. For example, the Quonset hut was invented here. The official State Bird (we are not making this up) is a chicken.

South Carolina and Dakota

Living up to their proud nickname, "The States Whose Names Begin With 'South'," these two states offer an endless variety of dynamic places to visit, the most popular one being the Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot, where visitors are welcome to lie face-down in the mud for six weeks while being yelled at by men with no foreheads. A major historic site is Fort Sumter, where in 1861 Confederate troops fired the fateful shots that struck Mount Rushmore, causing the formation of giant rock formations shaped like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Roger

Maris. Also do NOT miss the spectacular Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, which is redecorated each fall with giant murals made from corn, expressing the theme: “We are going out of our minds up here.”

Tennessee

Although Tennessee is what geographers call “a long, skinny state,” it was nevertheless able for many years to contain Elvis Presley, whose Memphis home, Graceland, draws millions of visitors to marvel at The King’s awesome legacy in the field of interior decoration, including a large room with a color scheme based entirely on digestive enzymes. Music lovers will also want to make a “beeline” for Nashville, home of the Grand Old Opera, which stages works by Wagner, Verdi, and Johnny Paycheck (“Take This Ring Trilogy and Shove It”). Tennessee also contains the Oak Ridge nuclear facility, where a 1957

laboratory mishap resulted in the Great Smoking Mountains. There are many other dynamic points of interest you’ll want to see, but be on the lookout for the Tennessee Valley Authority, which is a very large man named Earl M. Potash, Jr. Do exactly what he says.

Texas

Texas used to be the largest state, but because of Alaska, it no longer is. Texans are still very touchy about this, so you should be sensitive when you discuss it with them. “What a large state this is, despite being nowhere NEAR as large as Alaska!” is a sensitive remark you might want to make. Although today Texas is modern and, of course, dynamic, it is proud Of its cowboy tradition, which can still be seen in the form of men wearing comical hats. One of the most important historical attractions is the Alamo, the famous San Antonio mission where, in 1836, a small, brave band of Texans formed the nation’s first car-rental franchise, which can still be seen today. Visitors are also welcome to the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, but they avoid it anyway. Texas also contains many scenic hills and rivers, although nothing like what you see in Alaska (Which is much larger than Texas). The official State Symptom is irregularity.

Utah

Utah (“The Party State”) draws millions of fun-lovers every year to such dynamic attractions as the Great Salt Lake, where visitors may experience the excitement of getting salt all over themselves, followed by the excitement of trying to wash it off. They may not, however, put it in their foods, as seasonings are prohibited by law in Utah, along with alcohol, cigarettes, liquor, coffee, tea, and breath mints. The Cocaine, on the other hand, is distributed free. The official State Theoretical Particle is the quark.

Vermont

(See “New Hampshire.”)

Virginia

When we think about all the history that has occurred in Virginia, we become so overwhelmed that we have to lie down on the sofa and yell for somebody to bring us a cold beer. Virginia was the site of North America's first permanent English colonist, James Town, as well as the first House of Burgesses, which was a house where they kept female burges. Tobacco was invented in Virginia, as well as George Washington and seven other U.S. presidents: Jefferson, Monroe, Jefferson, Madison, Park, Lexington, and Third Avenue. The Civil War also occurred in Virginia in a number of national parks. Visitors may witness authentic demonstrations of all of these events, as well as a reenactment of the discovery of the radial tire, at Colonial Williamsburg, where each day men and women wearing authentic eighteenth-century costumes attempt to scratch themselves without anybody noticing. “Dynamic” is a word we would like to include in this sentence.

Washington

Washington is nicknamed “The Evergreen State” because it sounds better than “The Incessant Nagging Drizzle State.” The largest city, Seattle, is one of the nation's most dynamic and fast-growing urban areas, with thousands of people arriving each week to enjoy a lifestyle that includes an abundant natural supply of slugs. Mount Rainier, an extraordinarily beautiful volcanic peak some fifty miles from the city, blew up in 1963, but nobody in Seattle is aware of this yet because the weather has been pretty cloudy. Seattle also features a giant Space Needle, which is connected via a monorail to a giant Space Catheter. Washington's Official State Battery Size is AAA.

Washington, D.C.

As an American, you owe it to yourself to visit the nation's capital, because this is your city, where your government spends trillions of your dollars on dynamic programs such as National Intestinal Blockage Month, administered by your government workers in buildings that you can't go into because you don't have a pass. But you can visit many inspirational tourist sites, including the Richard M. Nixon Monument (currently missing) and the Tomb of the Unknown Internal Revenue Service Employee Who is Supposed to Answer the Taxpayer Assistance Hot Line. You may also visit the White House any time, day or night, simply by pounding on the front gate and shouting vague irrational threats. Another popular Washington stop is the Supreme Court, where the justices frequently ask the spectators to help them decide a tough case by registering their opinions on the Applause-O-Meter. And be sure to visit your congressperson's office, where you are welcome to take some souvenir furniture. Your congressperson probably won't notice. Your congressperson is probably in Paris.

West Virginia

The appeal of this dynamic, rugged state is perhaps best described by the words of mega-weenie John Denver, who sang:

Almost heaven? West Virginia?

West Virginia has long been a major attraction for tourists who are seeking to escape from their “nine-to-five” office-bound jobs for a chance to get out in the country and mine some coal. West Virginia’s residents are all very friendly and closely related. You can meet them “up close and personal” during the state’s annual Deliverance Canoe Trip and Pig Imitation Festival. West Virginia’s Official State Toilet Part is the flapper.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin (“The Moo State”) is of course best known for being highly cow-intensive, but this state has much more to offer the visitor, as is shown by the following actual quotation from the Wisconsin article in World Book Encyclopedia: “The state is a leader in canning peas.” There is little that we can add to describe the raw excitement of this dynamic state, except to say that (1) the malted milk was invented in Wisconsin in 1887, and (2) a Wisconsin store once sold us a rubber hat shaped like a giant wedge of cheese, and quite frankly, when we were wearing that hat we could have had any woman we wanted (Not that we ever did). Wisconsin’s Official State Interjection is “Huh.”

Wyoming

Wyoming—often called “The Very Last State That We Have to Write About in This Chapter, Thank God”—Contains a great deal of scenery such as the Grand Tetons, which get their name from the Indianexpression, “Get a load of those Tetons.” The major attraction is Yellowstone National Park, where nature-loving visitors may learn about the wilderness by witnessing as federal bears, acting on instinct, rummage through Dodge minivans, tossing tourists aside in their quest for Hostess Twinkles. Yellowstone also features Old Faithful Geyser, an amazing natural phenomenon that, at regularly scheduled intervals, erupts out of the ground and performs “Hello Dolly.” Tips are appreciated.

Other Countries Besides Us In The Western Hemisphere

(Yes! There ARE Some!)

You don’t have to go all the way to Europe to be in a foreign country, because there are several nice ones right here in our own continent. Among the numerous cultural advantages of visiting these countries are the following:

1. They are nearby.
2. They get American TV.

The largest of our North American neighbors are, of course, Canada and Mexico, both of which share lengthy borders with the United States, and both of which have long maintained peaceful relations with us based on mutual trust and respect and a heartfelt understanding of the fact that any time we feel like it we can nuke them into radioactive grit. Let’s take a closer look at these two “friendly neighbors” and see

if we can't learn to appreciate them more without picking up any actual information.

Canada

Although we hardly ever think about it except when the TV weather person is showing us a cold air mass, Canada is actually a major country, with an area of more than 169 billion hectometers in longitude, and a bustling population of more than 27 million, if you include members of the wolverine family. There are also a number of humans living up there, and in many ways they have a lifestyle quite similar to ours, including such traditional American activities as driving Japanese cars. The major difference is that Canada is divided into two major linguistic groups—English speakers and French speakers—which have learned, over the course of 300 years of cohabitation, to hate each other. The result is that everything in Canada has to be written in both English and French, which creates a hazardous situation because the two languages frequently disagree.

Despite these differences, Canada has developed into an actual nation with cities, an economy, comical-looking money with beavers on it, etc. To understand how this happened, we need to review:

The History of Canada

Canadian history began 20,000 years ago when primitive people came across the land bridge from Asia to watch the quarter-finals of the National Hockey League playoffs, which are still going on. Then nothing happened until 1497, when King Henry VII of England hired an Italian explorer named John Cabot to try to reach Asia by—those explorers were always trying wacky stunts like this—sailing across the Atlantic. Instead, Cabot—he could easily have avoided this by the simple precaution of looking at a map—wound up in Canada. Here is an actual quotation about this event from the World Book Encyclopedia:

Cabot found no such luxuries as jewels or spices. But he saw an enormous amount of cod.

Whoo! I bet THAT thrilled old Henry VII, don't YOu? Picture the scene: he's sitting on his throne, all excited because he's been waiting for months and months, and he can hardly wait to see what kinds of jewels he's going to get for his investment, and Cabot hands him a bag of dead cod and says: "And there's plenty more where THAT came from!"

From that day forward Canada was considered to be very desirable, and eventually the British and French got into a big rivalry over it, which resulted in a series of wars called "The Series of Wars Between the British and the French." This dispute was finally settled in 1763 when the British forces defeated the French in the Battle of Kicking Some French Butt, after which the two sides signed the Treaty of the Two Sides, under which Britain got to keep Canada, and France got to visit for three weeks during the summer.

After that Canada continued to grow and have many important historical events, among which, according to the World Book Encyclopedia, were: Growing Discontent, Lord Durham's Report, The Return of MacDonald, and Foreign Relations. Also at some point a government formed. The Canadian government consists of a prime minister, whose primary function is to meet with the U.S. president once a year and ask in a whiny voice how come we keep dropping acid rain on them. The president always replies that we'll stop the acid rain if they'll stop the cold air masses. Then the two leaders share a hearty

laugh and shake hands, because they know that we're really close international friends. Plus we still have the nukes.

What to See in Canada

Canada boasts numerous goose-infested lakes and several major cities that rival New York for sophistication, defined as lack of parking. There is also a Vast Arctic Wasteland where visitors are welcome to come and get lost and try to survive by eating their own parka linings. The Vast Arctic Wasteland is one of Canada's ten provinces, the other ones being Toronto, Greenland, Quahog, Alberta, Pierre, Roberta, North Dakota, Manitoba (Literally, "Many Tubas"), and the Yucatan. All of these provinces feature culture as well as hydroelectric power, and are well worth a visit. But the Canadian tourist attraction that we rank highest of all, despite the fact that we have not technically been there in person, is the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. We are not making this attraction up. It's an extremely historical site where, many years ago, Native American tribespersons used to kill buffalo by driving them off the edge of a cliff. According to the legend, one day a tribesperson decided to watch this event from under the cliff, and numerous buffalo landed on his head, which, as you are well aware, is generally fatal, and thus the site got its name: Total Moron Cliff. No, seriously, it really is called the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, and the Canadian government has set up an interpretive centre there, and when we called it up, a person answered the phone as follows:

"Head Smashed In, may I help you?"

This was probably the highlight of our entire life.

Mexico

The first thing you have to understand, as a visitor to Mexico, is that you do not, automatically, the instant You arrive, develop a fierce case of the trots. That's an unfounded myth that epitomizes the condescending attitude that many North Americans have toward Mexico, and we'd like to shatter it right here and now. We have personally visited Mexico, and we found it to be a charming and hospitable place filled with exciting things to do, although unfortunately our activities were somewhat limited by the fact that the instant we arrived we developed a fierce case of the trots. But we definitely enjoyed what we saw, and we made it our business to see every single important historic and cultural site in the entire nation that was within a two-minute sprint of our hotel bathroom. These sites included the hotel bar, the hotel restaurant, the hotel gift shop, and the hotel hallway leading back to our bathroom, all of which revealed the rich cultural tapestry that Mexico Possesses due to all the history that has occurred there in the past.

The History of Mexico

The history of MexiCo dates back thousands of years to the time of the Indians, who, of course, were not aware that they were Indians because nobody from Europe had discovered them yet. Despite this handicap, they had developed a great civilization featuring many advanced concepts including

mathematics, writing, architecture, a highly advanced calendar (For example, it had Lincoln's birthday), and an alarm clock with the "snooze" feature. These Indians built numerous ruins that can still be seen today (Thursday), as well as a number of major pyramids, which were made by lifting enormous stones and which served as monuments to Xinzthiznclxn, the God of Hernias. Then, in the sixteenth century, the Spanish showed up and introduced Western civilization until just about everybody was dead. This was followed, in order, by the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, during which Mexico included a large section of what is now the United States, including Texas, California, Hawaii, and Rhode Island. Mexico graciously yielded these lands to the United States in 1848 under the Treaty of Sign This Treaty or We Blow Your Head Off. Eventually there was a revolution, starring Seymour A. "Pancho" Villa, a heroic figure who rode around having exciting adventures with his comical sidekick and carving his initials into people's shirts with his sword. Or maybe that was Zorro. But in any event, there was finally a revolution, and today Mexico is a modern happy nation of 90 million people, 87 million of whom currently reside in Los Angeles.

What to Do in Mexico

Well for one thing, there is a tremendous amount of Mexican food, which is delicious and perfectly safe as long as you are careful never to get any of it in your digestive system. You will want to visit the ancient cities of QuzxnClznaontxnzl, Czqnxzlnqlnxz and Zxqcnxcnxzclqnxlnzqnlxnx, which offer thought-provoking, fact-filled lectures by leading cultural anthropologists, followed by live human sacrifices (Check local listings). Also, you may want to attend a bullfight, although you must be careful never to stand up, because that's how you indicate that you wish to participate in the Amateur Matador Event.

Chapter Six. Traveling In Europe ("Excuse Me! Where Is The Big Mona Lisa?")

As a traveler, you will eventually want to broaden your cultural horizons by visiting the Home of Western Civilization, the source of many of the values and ideals that we cherish so deeply today, the birthplace of our culture: Yankee Stadium. But if you get a chance, you should also visit Europe.

A Brief History Of Europe

Although from outer space Europe appears to be shaped like a large ketchup stain, it actually consists of many small separate nations, each with a proud and ancient tradition of hating all the other ones.

The first European was a Cro-Magnon man who wandered around for about 65,000 years looking for food, only to discover that everything was closed (this is still true today). So he was hungry and lonely, which led to the invention of agriculture and, later, the discotheque.

Meanwhile, in Greece, civilization was forming. The Greeks, aided by a warm climate, had invented geometry, and they used this advanced knowledge to conquer the surrounding cultures by piercing them

with the ends of isosceles triangles. This led to the Golden Age of Greece, which was marked by the spread of restaurants to outposts as far away as Brooklyn, parts of which can still be seen today.

Eventually Greece was conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedonia with the aid of a new weapon, the rhomboid. Alexander ruled his empire until somebody did some checking and discovered that there was no such place as “Macedonia,” which paved the way for the Roman Empire. The Romans spent the next 200 years using their great engineering skill to construct ruins all over Europe. The basic Roman ruin design is a pile of rocks with a little plaque saying “Roman Ruins” and a group of tourists frowning at it and wishing they were back at the hotel bar.

At this point Europe was invaded by barbarian motorcycle gangs such as the Angles, the Franks, the Jutes, the Teds, the Sextants, the Ventriles, and Martha and the Vandellas. This led to the Middle Ages, which were characterized by strict zoning regulations requiring that every 250 yards there had to be a giant cathedral built from stones the size of Raymond Burr. This made life extremely difficult for the laborers—many of whom had never even heard of Raymond Burr—so everybody was very happy when the Renaissance broke out in the fourteenth century at about 2:30 P.m.

The Renaissance was a time of cultural rebirth during which everybody lost a few pounds and started taking night courses. There were many scientific and technological advances such as the plow, the stapler, and, above all, the printing press, which enabled mass production of the first popular work of literature, a novel called *Hot Moist Serfs*:

“Priscilla,” suib art, unable to retitrain bis puaman anu longer. “I want Uou right now, right here, in the burieu fielb.” Ilriscilla blusbeb, but obe was tiecrietig pleaseb, for obe coul b not help but notice that Ntirt bab a ui!rtl large plow.

The Renaissance collapsed from exhaustion in 1600, after which everybody rested up in preparation for the Era of a Whole Bunch of Wars, which included the Franco-Prussian War; the Franco-Anglo-Russo War, the Hundred Years War, the Franco-Austro-Russo-Hungro War, The Nine Years War, The Frank O’Brien War, The 36 Months or 50,000 Miles Whichever Comes First War, The War of the Tuna Casseroles, and Super Bowl XVIII. All this conflict caused Europe to gradually disintegrate, so that today it contains many tiny nations, with names like “Lichtenburg,” that could not hold their own, militarily, against the UCLA Pep Squad. The tragic result is that modern-day European nations have had to content themselves with developing sound economies, while the United States, as a Major World Power, has enjoyed the privilege of getting its butt shot at all over the world.

Nevertheless there are still many exciting things to see and do in Europe, although you, personally, will not get to see and do them, because you’ll be too busy frowning at Roman ruins. The best way to locate these is to be on a large guided bus tour. You want the kind that stops at everything in Europe for fifteen minutes, which is just enough time to get off the bus, take a picture of whatever it is, and get back on the bus, unless you have to go to the bathroom, in which case you have time to get off the bus, pee on whatever it is, and get back on the bus. There are many other advantages to being with a large tour group, such as:

1. It gives you an excellent opportunity to get to know the other couples in the tour group, which is a broadening cultural experience because some of them will come from completely different states. You’ll end up exchanging Christmas cards with them for years and years, and when you die, your spouse will write them a little note, and they’ll say:

“Remember so-and-so? From New Jersey? The one we met on the tour? The one with the big hat? In the plumbing-SUPPLIES business? Well, he died.”

2. In addition to meeting people on your tour group, you will encounter people from new and completely different tour groups, because you will all be stopping at the same popular attractions, which have been thoughtfully preselected for you based on their cultural interest as measured in square footage of parking area.

3. Many tours give everybody a complimentary plastic flight bag with the official tour logo printed on it, which you all carry at all times so you can instantly identify other members of your tour. This is very important when you are in an emergency foreign situation such as, for example, the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, and you need to make an observation such as: “You call that the Mona Lisa? Back home we got illustrated dish towels bigger than that!”

4. Being on a tour is the only way you can be guaranteed of seeing every cathedral in Europe. If you were traveling alone, once you realized that all cathedrals are basically large dark buildings that smell like unwashed gym shorts, you might, in a weak moment, be tempted to skip one or two. But this is not possible on a tour. No sir. Your bus will stop at every single one. In fact, many travel experts recommend that you take a piece of chalk and place a distinctive mark on each cathedral you visit, because sometimes the tour guides, as a prank, will take a group to the same one five or six times in a single afternoon.

Wherever you go on your tour, be sure to take hundreds of color photographs, so that when you get home you can invite your friends and neighbors over for an educational presentation wherein you say, “Okay, now this is one of Bernice standing in front of this cathedral in Bologna, which is in Germany. Or Norway.” And Bernice can say: “No, that cathedral is in England, because I remember I wore my beige pumps in England, because my maroon pumps gave me this awful blister, which finally popped in Notre Dame, which is a cathedral in ... Hey! Where’s everybody going? There’s more pictures!”

Passport

To enter Europe, You must have a valid passport with a photograph of yourself in which you look like you are being booked on charges Of soliciting sheep. To obtain your passport, you must wait in a federal waiting room with yellow walls for a minimum of two hours, then produce proof of U.S. citizenship in the form of a personal letter from Publishers Clearing House notifying you that you have probably won a million dollars.

Medical Care In Europe

Medical care in Europe is excellent, and you may rest assured that if God forbid anything were to happen to you, the hospital personnel will use only the highest-quality stainless-steel drill to bore a hole in your skull to let out the Evil Spirits.

Ha ha! We are just joshing, of course. There is really nothing at all primitive about European medical care except that in some countries they practice it in foreign languages, meaning you run the risk of entering the hospital complaining of an inflamed appendix and coming out as a member of a completely different gender. This is why many smart travelers take the precaution of having the international symbol for “No Sex-Change Operation, Thank You” tattooed on or near their private parts (A circle with

a line through it superimposed over a pair of pruning shears). It's also a good idea to take along any prescription medication that you might need, as well as a spare pair of eyeglasses, some clean bandages, sutures, a scalpel, a wheelchair, and a CAT-scan machine. Feel free to drink the water in Europe, but don't touch the food.

Customs

Before they let you into Europe, you have to pass through Customs, so that beady-eyed individuals can root freely through your underwear looking for certain items that are strictly prohibited in Europe, such as cold drinks and functional toilet paper. European toilet paper is made from the same material that Americans use for roofing, which is why Europeans tend to remain standing throughout soccer matches.

Helpful Hints for Getting Through Customs

Narcotics: You are not allowed to bring narcotics into Europe, and you are definitely not allowed to sell them to children. It's a good idea to assure the customs personnel that you are aware of these rules. Try to bring the subject up in a casual manner. "So!" you could say. "Nice weather we're having here in Europe! By the way, I'm not bringing in any narcotics, and I certainly don't intend to sell them to children!"

Insects: The Europeans do not want you bringing in insects that will reproduce like crazy and eat all their agriculture. Any insects you bring in must be spayed, and you should be prepared to prove it to the customs officials. "Go ahead!" you should tell them in a challenging manner. "Just try to arouse this insect!"

Tipping: Remember that the customs personnel are working men and women just like everybody else, and they definitely appreciate receiving "a little something" in return for a job well done. Your best approach is to hand them a shiny quarter right up front, then, with a wink and a friendly smile, tell them, "Do a good job with these bags, and there'll be another one of these for each of you."

Measurements In Europe

Europe operates under the metric, or communist, system of measurement. The main units are the kilometer, the hectare, the thermometer, the pfennig, the megawatt, the libra, and the epigram. These are all very easy to remember because all you have to do is divide them by a specific number, possibly 100. Or you can use the following handy conversion table:

Metric System Real System One Kilometer equals about five miles Five Kilometers equals about five miles Ten Kilometers equals about five miles Eight Pentagrams equals about five miles 1830 Hours equals about eight days

Driving In Europe

Europeans, like some Americans, drive on the right side of the road, except in England, where they

drive on both sides of the road; Italy, where they drive on the sidewalk; and France, where if necessary they will follow you right into the hotel lobby. If you have a valid U.S. driver's license, you may drive in most European countries, but it's more efficient to simply leap off a cliff.

Changing Money

Aside from not comprehending menus, changing money is the most popular activity for Americans in Europe. There are money-changing booths everywhere, occupied by little men crouching inside next to incomprehensible signs covered with numbers and letters like this:

UAR 23.402490029

UAW 3049.5858, 2 FOR 43-0394-02342

USA 349239%92182

UCLA 37 USC 14 3rd quarter

These numbers change constantly to reflect the fact that the dollar is getting weaker. The first rule of travel finance is that no matter what is going on elsewhere in the world, the dollar is always getting weaker where you are. By the time you've spent a couple of days in a foreign country, the natives will be blowing their noses on the dollar. To change your money, simply give the little man enough dollars to buy a decent used car. He will perform various calculations involving the exchange rate and the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the relative humidity, then thrust out an amount of foreign currency so small that if you threw it into a fountain for good luck, you would immediately be struck by lightning. You should repeat this process after every meal.

How To Use A Bidet

One of the things you'll need to get used to in Europe is the bidet, which is a bathroom appliance, usually located next to the toilet, that looks like a urinal lying on its back. If you want the Europeans to think that you're a suave and sophisticated person, as opposed to the nose-picking yahoo that you actually are, you need to learn proper bidet procedure. The number one rule is:

1. Never pee in the bidet.

This is extremely important. This is how the Europeans separate the sheep from the goats, sophisticationwise. In fact, it's a good idea, when you emerge from a European bathroom, to state in a loud yet casual voice, "Well, I sure didn't pee in the bidet, ha ha!"

So the question is, what are you supposed to do with a bidet? The answer is: wash your private parts. Really. Now I know what you're thinking, as an American. You're thinking: Wait a minute! Don't they wash their private parts in the shower? The shocking answer is: no. Studies show that Europeans hardly ever even take showers. Highly sophisticated European cultures such as the French also wear the same underwear several days in a row, to the point where individual jockey shorts, when they are finally removed for laundering, have to be subdued with hammers. Thus you can easily see the need for some kind of major hygiene unit in the European bathroom, although you yourself, as an unsophisticated shower-taking American, don't need to bother with it. But to avoid offending your European hosts, you should at least pretend that you used it when you emerge from the bathroom. "Boy!" you should say. "My private parts are clean as a whistle!" ("Garron! Mes parties de privature sont net comme un

sifflet!”)

Specific Nations In Europe

As we mentioned earlier, Europe is actually made up of specific nations. Although most of them belong to the European Economic Community (NATO)—a multinational organization that administers tariffs, trade, bowling banquets, etc.—each nation has its own customs, traditions, and hand gestures. So the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a country-by-country breakdown, including helpful tips and points of interest. Although we have made every effort to ensure that this information is both timely and accurate, please bear in mind that (1) conditions are subject to change, and (2) we are a big fat liar.

Austria

Austria is a very wonderful country that we have fond memories of despite the fact that, when we went there, virtually every single person we dealt with tried to shortchange us. We're sure that this was just a fluke, and we are certainly not going to dwell, in this fair and unbiased travel book, upon the fact that virtually every single person we dealt with in Austria tried to shortchange us. “Let bygones be bygones,” is our motto. Also several times people yelled at us for jaywalking. This will happen to you, in the stricter nations. People over there haven't had a chance to develop an appreciation for American-style democracy, where it says right in the Constitution that you can jaywalk. But aside from the strictness and the constant short-changing we found Austria to be a really wonderful place, really, even if they did accuse us, in a particularly nasty manner, of not having paid the rental-car deposit, and then, after a lengthy argument in which it finally became clear that we had paid it, they did not apologize at all, but in fact got even nastier, not that this is important, any more than the CHANGING that appeared to be sweeping the nation when we were there. Because the truth is that Austria has many really wonderful attractions, which unfortunately because of space constraints we are unable to list here.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Currency Unit: The Pflughenhaffenlepzeigenhohenzollern (or “Winkle”)

Language: Foreign

Tipping: Not Permitted

Littering Punishable By: Death

Alps: Yes

Taco Bells: No

Belgium

Belgium is a small nation containing people who call themselves—this is true—“Walloons.” They are not ashamed of this at all. “I myself am a Walloon” is the kind of thing they say all the time. It's called “Walloon Pride.” Belgium also contains people who call themselves “Flemings,” although fortunately there is no actual place called “Flea.” The result of this fascinating cultural mix is that Belgium has a number of official languages, including French, Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Latin, Cajun,

Moldavian, and Frantic Arm Gestures.

HISTORY: Because of poor planning on the part of its first king, Roger XVIXMN (1606-present), Belgium was originally located between Germany and France, which for several centuries declared war on each other as often as modern nations declare things like Cheese Appreciation Month. The result was that Belgium became what historians call “The Screen Door of Europe,” constantly getting slammed as various armies went racing through in both directions, often failing to wipe their feet. In the modern era this problem has been solved by moving Belgium to a safer location, up near the Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg, Iceland, and Canada, which are known collectively as “The Weenie Nations,” so it’s perfectly safe now. Although we ourselves would take a gas mask.

WHAT TO SEE IN BELGIUM: They have a bunch of buildings.

WHEN TO GO: This Wednesday would be good. But not next Monday, because Belgium has a dental appointment. It is also closed during the festival of the Six Kinds of Mustard.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Currency Unit: The Pfarthing

Height: Average

Motto: Dieu et Droit Pour La Veritd (“I Spit On Your Zither”)

Favorite Song: “Mustang Sally”

Bulgaria

There’s always plenty to see and do in Bulgaria!

Denmark

Denmark (also called “Norway”) is best known as the original home of the prune Danish as well as the Vikings, who Wore hats with horns sticking out of them, and for a very good reason: they were insane. But this did not stop them from being bold mariners who actually reached North America before Columbus did, although they were stripped of the title when blood tests revealed that they had used steroids.

Modern-day Denmark is a tourism wonderland, boasting a year-round average temperature of 14 degrees Centipede (108 degrees Richter). The most famous city is Copenhagen, where Hans Christian Andersen wrote such pioneering children’s classics as Horton Hears a Whom and The Ugly Teenaged Mutant Ninja Duckling. While in Copenhagen you simply must take a stroll down Bjarnkvaalastraadenjkrn, taking a left on Kveljnoragnarbenkanklen, then your first right onto Hralgnekjarnklenvaagendam. Go up to a man wearing a green overcoat and tell him: “The oyster owns a fine wristwatch.” He will know what to do.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Language: Swedish Currency Unit: The Rune (12 Runes = 1 Kvetch) National Anthem: “Vie Aar Knut Hebben Nu Longkenflukn” (“We Are Not Having Any Lung Flukes”)

England

England is one of four nations, along with Ireland, Scotland, and New Zealand, that make up the British Isles. England is a very popular foreign country to visit because the people there speak some English. Usually, however, when they get to the crucial part of a sentence they'll use words that they made up, such as "scone" and "ironmonger." As a sophisticated traveler, you should learn some British words so you can avoid communications mixups, as is shown by these examples:

Example 1: The Unsophisticated Traveler

ENGLISH WAITER: May I help you?

TRAVELER: I'd like an inedible roll, please.

ENGLISH WAITER (confused): Huh?

Example 2: The Sophisticated Traveler

ENGLISH WAITER: May I help you?

TRAVELER: I'd like an ironmonger, please.

ENGLISH WAITER: Coming right up!

Speaking of food, English cuisine has received a lot of unfair criticism over the years, but the truth is that it can be a very pleasant surprise to the connoisseur of severely overcooked livestock organs served in lukewarm puddles of congealed grease. England manufactures most of the world's airline food, as well as all the food you ever ate in your junior-high-school cafeteria. Some traditional English dishes are Toad in the Hole, Bubble and Squeak, Cock-a-Leekie Soup, Spotted Dick, Bug-in-a-Bucket, Willie One-Polyp, Tonsil-and-Toast, Whack-a-Doodle Johnson, and Fester Pudding. Attractive displays of these dishes—some of them dating back to the sixteenth century—can be found in bars called "pubs," where the English traditionally gather to drink, glance at the food, and continue drinking.

But the main attraction in England is history. You cannot throw a scone in England without hitting a hallowed ancient object such as the actual chair that King Ralph the Easily Amused sat in when he made peace with the Duke of Whomping in 1123. You should definitely visit as many of these historic sites as you can before you starve. Among the most important ones are:

The Tower of London: This is the home of the Crown Jewels, a collection of gem-encrusted swords, headwear, plates, and utensils such as the priceless Spatula of India, all guarded by the famous "Beefeaters." The Crown Jewels belong to the royal family, whose members tried for centuries to get them back, only to have their heads whacked off by the famous Beefeaters, which is why the royal family now uses paper plates.

Arizona Bridge: This was originally located in Arizona, but was moved to London as a tourist attraction in 1362 by King Eddreth the Big Fan of Onions.

Westminster Abbey: This is an extremely old building where many famous dead British people such as John Milton (Bass player for the Kinks), Rudyard Kipling, and Charlie Watts are buried in the floor. It's not clear why the British did this. The best we can figure is that it must have been raining very hard during the funerals, and somebody said, "What the hell, let's just bury them right here in the floor."

Buckingham Palace: This is, of course, the home of the famous British royal family, which upholds many ancient cherished British traditions such as the tradition of Wearing Comical Hats and the tradition of Appearing on the Cover of People Magazine at Least Once Per Month ("Fergie: Does She Have Shingles?"). Each day thousands of tourists gather at the palace to watch the famous ceremony of the Changing of the Guard, which follows the ceremonies of the Bathing of the Guard and the Sprinkling of Some Talcum Powder on the Guard's Butt.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Thruppence (2 Thruppence = 2 Bodkins)

Sign: Capricorn

Track: Wet

Queen's Wardrobe By: Mister Duane's House of Vision Impairment

Finland

Located partly inside the Arctic Circle, Finland has long been a popular destination with travelers who enjoy the feeling of knowing that if their car breaks down, they could be eaten by wolves. Finland is also the home of the sauna, which is a wooden box in which you subject Your body to extreme heat, which causes you to become very relaxed, unless of course the door gets stuck. in which case it causes you to become lasagna. We ourselves prefer to stay outside and take our chances with the wolves.

The major city in Finland is Helsinki, home of the world-famous Gverjkinklankerwanker, or "Tower of Linoleum."

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Fermkin

Form of Government: A small but powerful woman named Helga

Brad: Oh, Marcia, I have missed you so! Marcia: Oh, Brad, really? (They embrace)

France

First of all, let's dispense with this absurd stereotypical notion that the French are rude. The French are not rude. They just happen to hate you. But that is no reason to bypass this beautiful country, whose master chefs have a well-deserved worldwide reputation for trying to trick people into eating snails. Nobody is sure how this got started, Probably a couple of French master chefs were standing around one day, and they found a snail, and one of them said: "I'll bet that if we called this something like 'escargot' tourists would eat it." Then they had a hearty laugh, because "escargot" is the French word for "fat crawling bag of phlegm."

This spirit of daring culinary innovation persists in France, which has also pioneered such advances as:

The entree that costs as much as a set of radial tires and consists of a very large plate that appears at first to be totally empty except for a tiny speck of dirt that turns out, upon closer inspection, to be the entree. (A top French chef can carry an entire year's supply of entrees in his wallet.)

The waiter who makes it extremely clear that he did not get into the waiter business to waste his valuable time actually waiting on people, especially not lowlife scum such as yourself who clearly would not know the difference between fine French cuisine and Cheez Whiz.

The tip that is automatically included For Your Convenience even if your food arrives festooned with armpit hairs (les haires du pitte).

So you will definitely want to go to some fine French restaurants. We don't mean go inside them. We mean stand around outside with the other tourists staring incomprehendingly at the menu, which should look like this:

CARTE DE MENU

Les Petites Eyeballes de Mackerelle en Huile de Voiture Le Debenture en Camisole au Bibliothi6que

Le Spamme avec un Side de Fries Le Poisson du Votre Frère Raoul Le Roni du Zoo en La Ware de la Tupper Prix Pour Le Wholles Ball de Waxe:

156,000,000,000,000,000 Franks. Le Financing Available

“Vouz Tried the Rest, Now Try Le Best.

Once You’ve looked at the menu for a while, it’s time to enjoy a hearty one-ounce bag of peanuts saved from your plane trip over, then set out to view:

The Attractions of France

One of the main attractions is of course the world-famous Eiffel Tower, which created a lot of controversy when it was erected in 1889 because the builder, Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, had presold it as a condominium. “Where the hell are the walls?” the buyers wanted to know. “Where are we supposed to go to the bathroom?” This is still a problem at the tower, so don’t stand too close.

Another well-known Paris landmark is the Arc de Triomphe, a moving monument to the many brave men and women who have died trying to visit it, which we do not recommend because it’s located in the middle of La Place de la Traffic Coming from All Directions at 1 14 Miles Per Hour. But you should definitely visit the Louvre, a world-famous art museum where You can view, at close range, the backs of thousands of other tourists trying to see the Mona Lisa, which actually was stolen in 1978, but the crowd is so dense that it doesn’t matter. People come away convinced that they’ve seen it, similar to the way people in underdeveloped nations are always seeing the face of Jesus on the skins of yams. Also in the Louvre are various statues with pieces missing—visitors are welcome to try to patch these up.

A Good Conversation-Starter in France: “I guess you guys really bit the big one in World War Two, huh?”

FACTS AT A GLANCE

National Underwear Chonging Day: March 1 2

Official Dance: The Gotor

Germany

Germany is really a very nice nation that used to have an unfortunate tendency to fall in with the wrong crowd every few decades and try to take over the world. But that is all in the past, thank goodness.

After years of painful division, East and West Germany are finally back together as a large, vibrant, strong, dynamic, extremely powerful and heavily armed nation that we are sure will be a Good Neighbor for ... LOOK OUT! HERE THEY COME!!

Ha ha! We are just poking a little friendly fun at Germany, which is famous for enjoying a good joke, or as the Germans say, “Sprechnehaltenzoltentfus senmachschnitzerkalbenrollen.” Here is just one hilarious example of what we are talking about:

FIRST GERMAN: How many Polish people does it take to screw in a light bulb?

SECOND GERMAN: I don’t know! How many?

FIRST GERMAN: Let’s invade Poland and find out!

MILLIONS OF OTHER GERMANS: Okay!

No! We’re just kidding! Probably! The truth is that we like Germany a lot. In fact, we celebrated our fortieth birthday there with some friends, the idea being that if we were going to get old, we should do it while surrounded by the maximum possible quantity of beer. They have wonderful beer in Germany, and they serve it in containers so large that, in other nations, they would be used as shelters for the

homeless. This gives new meaning to the concept of “having a beer.” In the United States, “having a beer” is a semi-harmless act that leaves you feeling slightly mellow, whereas in Germany it can leave you dancing naked on the roof of a moving bus (This requires a permit; ask your travel agent).

Eating in Germany is easy, because there is basically only one kind of food, called the “wurst.” This is a delicious item made by compressing random pig parts until they have reached the density of bowling balls, then serving them in long brown units that don’t look at all like large bowel movements, so just put that thought right out of your mind. At first, all worsts seem the same, but in fact each region of the country has its own “special recipe,” thus producing a wide variety for your eating excitement. Some of our personal favorites are:

Blattwurst: Compressed pig parts served in 7-inch units
Grosswurst: Compressed pig parts served in 8-inch units
Wurstwurst: Compressed pig parts served in 7.5-inch units

The list just goes on and on. There is an old German saying that goes, “By the time you have eaten all of the worsts of Germany, you will have pig parts coming out the Wazzenschnicter.” This certainly proved to be true in our case.

What to Do in Germany

There are a great many spectacularly beautiful villages in Germany, as well as numerous important historic and cultural sites, but you should skip all these because the thing to do is drive really fast. They have these roads in Germany called “autobahns” (meaning, literally, “bahns of the auto”) where you can go as fast as you want because there is no speed limit. Really! You can get out there and drive like an amphetamine-crazed maniac, and the police will do nothing! And if you don’t have a car, you can just steal one, because car theft is also legal on the autobahn! So are vagrancy, tax evasion, mail fraud, gambling, narcotics trafficking, and full-body massage! You are going to love the autobahn.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Doppler

Barometer: Falling

Motto: Vie Guessen Der Coninen Nicht Chompen (“These Dogs Probably Will Not Bite you”)

Greece

Greece is where we get a large amount of our Western culture. For example, Zorba the Greek came from there. So did democracy, which is made up of two Greek words, “demo,” meaning “people,” and “cracy,” meaning “wearing stupid hats.” The

Greeks also gave us the Pythagorean theorem, although after we graduated from high school we gave it back.

Getting to Greece

This is a necessary first step.

Attractions to See in Greece

The biggest city that we have heard of in Greece is Athens. According to ancient myth, Athens was created when Poseidon, the God of Adventure, struck the ground with his trident, which upset Ramona, the Goddess of Humidity and Ranch Dressing, who told Dagmar, the God of Variable-Rate Mortgages, who got so mad that he punched Raoul, the God of Those Little Colored Things You Sprinkle on Cupcakes, and as a result Athens was formed. Of course we now realize that this is stupid. Nevertheless many important old monuments remain from this period, including the Metropolis, the Pentathlon,

Monticello, the Telethon, and the Tomb of Reebok. All of these contain a great deal of very important architecture that you are welcome to chip off little pieces of for Show and Tell. Outside of Athens is another popular area known to locals as the rest of Greece.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Sheep

Form of Government: Vague

Liquor Bottles with Worms Inside: Yes

Holland

Holland, also known as “The Hinterlands” or “Sweden,” is a plucky nation that has created large sectors of new land by pushing back the sea with a sophisticated complex of dikes that have held up extremely well so far thanks to the vigilance of the Dutch people, as dramatized by the story of the Little Dutch Boy. Remember him? He was walking along one day many years ago when he saw a small leak in one of the dikes, so he plugged the hole with his finger, thereby saving the entire nation. Talk about pluck! Of course he’s an old man now, and he has taken to telling passersby that one of these days he’s going to pull his finger back out of the goddamn dike and the hell with everybody, but this is no reason for you, as a visitor, to be alarmed, because as a safety precaution, every item of furniture in Holland is legally required to also be usable as a flotation device. Your smart tourist never goes anywhere in the country without carrying, at minimum, a dinette table.

What to See in Holland

The largest city in Holland is Amsterdam, a cultural center that boasts many beautiful historic churches that you can later claim you were visiting when You were in fact looking at live naked sex shows involving as many as 117 individual humans and the occasional unit of livestock. Also do not miss the Vincent van Gogh Museum, where you can play the popular Whack-an-Ear Game. Out in the countryside you can see windmills, many of which are still used for milling wind, as well as millions and millions and millions of tulips, so you’ll probably just want to stick with the live naked sex shows.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Grunder

Unit of Livestock’s Stage Name: “Bossy”

Iceland

According to a competing travel guidebook, Iceland offers—this is a direct quote—”boiling mud pools.” We’re on our way!

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Tusk

Biggest Industry: Jumper Cables

Motto: “Skiaorgit Kiooorsklangel KfvoOOOOO” (“Are There Any Boiling Mud Pools Around HEEEEEE ...”)

Ireland

Ireland is not a large country. A competing guidebook states that “you could drop its entire area into Lake Superior.” We certainly do not wish to start rumors, but sometimes we wonder whether these competing guidebooks are on some kind of narcotics. A quick glance at the map will show you that Ireland is in fact nowhere near Lake Superior, which is located in Maine. So if your vacation plans include dropping Ireland into a major body of water, a much better choice, in our opinion, would be the Irish Sea, which is far more conveniently located, although during the peak season we do recommend that you have reservations.

Of course there is more to Ireland than water sports. There is also the Irish people, a warm and friendly lot who are constantly saying things like “Begorrah!” (Literally, “Your brother Raoul is a fish!”). Alcohol will do this to people.

The History of Ireland

The history of Ireland dates back a long time to the original inhabitants, the Picts, who were a fun-loving tribe known for their wit. “You sure Pict a winner that time!” is the kind of thing they were always saying, until finally a neighboring tribe called the Celtics got sick and tired of it and came in and, in 432 B.C. on October 8, defeated the Picts in the Battle of Defeating the Picts when John Havlicek sank two free throws in overtime. This led to a long period of time that is virtually incomprehensible if you read about it in the 1966 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, which is what we are trying to do, and we are getting a real headache because of sentences like this:

A well-known territorial unit was the tricha cet, corresponding, Giraldus Cambrensis says (Topographia Hibernica, III, 5), to the Welsh cantref, 100 households (villae).

Ha ha! We bet that Giraldus Cambrensis was one fun dude to hang around with! But anyway, Irish history continued to occur right up to the present time, which is where, according to our calculations, we stand today.

What to See in Ireland

The main thing to do in Ireland, as Giraldus “Party Animal” Cambrensis states (Topographia Hibernica, IVCXXII, section 3, row d, seat 6), is “sit around and drink.” But no trip to Ireland is complete without a trip to Blarney Castle, where you can kiss the famous Blarney Stone, which, according to ancient legend, bestows upon each person who kisses it a mild but persistent mouth fungus.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Whelk

Households Per Tricha Cet: 100

Shave and a Haircut: Two Bits

Italy

We are definitely talking about a warm and friendly nation here. This nation is so friendly that the leading cause of injury is getting passionately embraced by strangers. One time we were at a restaurant near Rome eating a medium-sized Italian lunch consisting of enough pasta to feed Lithuania for six months, and we happened to mention that the wine tasted good. So the restaurant owner insisted that everybody in our party had to go see his wine cellar, which involved climbing down a set of steep rickety stairs into the kind of dark, dank, spider-infested basement that you often see in horror movies, wherein some doomed character goes slowly down the stairs while dramatic music plays in the

background and the theater audience is shouting, “DON’T GO DOWN THERE, YOU FOOL!” because they know there’s a lunatic lurking in the darkness with a machete and an industrial staple gun. This basement was like that, only it was occupied by something even more dangerous than a homicidal maniac, namely, numerous barrels of wine, which the restaurant owner insisted that we had to drink many samples from, and quite frankly we wonder how we got out of there. In fact some members of our party may still be down there with the spiders, and we urge you to stop in and see them (the spiders) during normal visiting hours.

Speaking of normal visiting hours, Italy doesn’t have any, as far as we can tell. Nothing is ever open when it’s supposed to be open or closed when it’s supposed to be closed, nor does it cost what it’s supposed to cost. Also, the buses never seem to go where they’re supposed to go. We realize we’re making a sweeping generalization here, but as Giraldus Cambrensis so eloquently put it in *Topographia Hibernica*, “tough shit.” Nevertheless we urge you to spend some time in this country, although as a precautionary measure you should lose a couple of hundred pounds first.

What to See in Italy

The major city is of course Rome, which got its name from the fact that the Romans used to live there before the Fall of the Roman Empire. Their mother warned them that this would happen. “If you leave your empire there, it’s going to fall!” she said, but unfortunately they did not understand English.

Nevertheless, the Romans built many large broken objects that you should definitely see, such as the Renaissance, the Piles of Seemingly Random Dirty Stones, and the Colosseum, which was the site of Super Bowl I. You must also visit Vatican City, where you may see the famous Sistine Chapel, which the famous Anthony L. “Michael” Angelo had to paint—Believe It or Not!—while lying on his back, because due to a contractor error the Sistine Chapel is only 18 inches high, so comfortable clothes are recommended. The Vatican is also the home of the Pope, who, if you pound very hard on his door, will be happy to come out and entertain the kids by twisting balloons into hilarious animal shapes. Elsewhere in Italy is the lovely city of Venice, which each year attracts millions of visitors despite the fact that it is basically an enormous open sewer; and Florence, home of one of Michael Angelo’s most famous works, the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Southern Italy is the site of the incredible village of Pompeii, which nearly 2,000 years ago was buried under tons of volcanic ash and is therefore invisible. We don’t know why we even brought it up.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Lira (1,000,000,000,000,000 lire = Nothing)

Unit of Time: “A Few Minutes” (A Few Minutes = Two Days)

Hand Gestures: Permitted

Liechtenstein and Luxembourg

To the best of our knowledge these are not European nations. These are minor characters in William Shakespeare’s famous play *Hamlet II: The Next Day*, featuring the famous “shower scene” wherein the immortal bard displays his rollicking wit at its best:

LIECHTENSTEIN: What dost thine taxon augur vepnelsound? Nor capsuled repwell florgin haren’t ground!

LUXEMBOURG: Ha ha!

Norway

See “Denmark.”

Poland

Poland has experienced a tremendous amount of history due to the fact that it has no natural defensible borders, which makes it very easy to conquer. Many times the other nations didn't even mean to invade Poland; one night they'd simply forget to set the parking brakes on their tanks, and they'd wake up the next morning to discover that, whoosh, they had conquered Poland.

But thanks to advances in international law such as the speed bump, Poland is now a totally independent nation, and it has managed to greatly improve its lifestyle thanks to the introduction of modern Western conveniences such as food. Today Poland proudly boasts the nickname “The North Dakota of Europe,” and is well worth a visit if you happen to be in the neighborhood for some reason, such as your plane has crashed.

What to See in Poland

They have some really sharp tractors.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Grzbwczwcz

Population: 30 million

Light-Bulb-Changing Capability: 10 million

Portugal

Portugal is a small but, we are sure, proud nation located somewhere in Europe and boasting a history. During the Age of Exploration, Portugal produced many great navigators, men such as Vasco da Gama (literally, “Vasco the Gama”), who set out across the vast, stormy Atlantic Ocean in tiny ships, which of course immediately sank like stones, thus paving the way for the Age of Remaining on Land. Today the main industry in Portugal is manufacturing the famous Portuguese man-of-war, which is a type of jellyfish that can sting you to death if provoked, so tipping is strongly recommended.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Arriba

Language: None

Spain

At one time Spain was one of the world's great powers, although under the leadership of General Francisco Franco (1578-1983) the nation gradually declined into total insignificance. There is no need, however, for you to rub this in. Be gracious, is our advice. For example, in a restaurant you might exclaim: “This food is certainly delicious! Especially considering that Spain is now a fourth-rate power!”

Your hosts are sure to appreciate your thoughtfulness, and may even insist that you join in one of

Spain's most glorious traditions: Getting Run Over by Bulls. This extremely exciting event, wherein live irate bulls are set loose in public streets, was originally held during the Festival of St. Raoul of the Fishes (October 8), but it has become so popular that in heavily touristed areas the bulls are released several times a day, sometimes in hotel lobbies. Wear comfortable shoes.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Caramba

Closed: Weekdays

Sweden

See "Norway."

Switzerland

When we think of Switzerland, the picturesque image that springs into our minds is that of men standing on top of Alps wearing comical shorts and making sounds that can only result from a major hormonal imbalance. But Switzerland is also famous for its tidiness. It makes some of the other tidy nations, such as Germany and Austria, look like giant septic tanks. Switzerland has an extremely strict Neatness Code. If you appear in public with your hair mussed up, or armpit stains on your shirt, the famous Swiss Neatness Police will suck you up with a giant vacuum cleaner and put you in a jail cell infested with sanitary laboratory rats. You would probably rot in there, but Switzerland doesn't even permit bacteria.

What to Do in Switzerland

You should open a Swiss bank account, because (a) you get a toaster and (b) you never have to pay income taxes again. The Internal Revenue Service has no jurisdiction in Switzerland. When you fill out your tax return, you just write, "Ba ha, I have a Swiss bank account and just TRY TO GET IT, YOU SUCKERS!" and all the IRS can do is gnash its teeth. You can trust us when we tell you this. We're a guidebook.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Unit of Currency: The Cubit

This Chapter Is Finally: Finished

Time for a: Beer

Chapter Seven. Staying In Hotels (Or: We're Very Sorry, But Your Chapter Is Not Ready Yet)

Your hotel is your "home away from home," and as such you expect it to provide you with the comforts and conveniences you have in your own dwelling, such as privacy, security, a warm bed, a clean bathroom, a hot shower, Anthony Perkins standing just outside the shower curtain holding a knife

the size of New Jersey, etc.

Of course we are just pulling your leg. Despite the widespread recurring nightmares created by the movie *Psycho*, the truth is that, of the millions of guests who stay in the nation's hotels each year, only about 3 percent are ever actually stabbed to death while in the shower (Source: The American Automobile Association). A far higher percentage are stabbed to death while talking really loud in the halls at 2:30 in the morning. If you've ever stayed at a hotel, you have heard these people. They stagger up from the bar, then they stand directly outside your room and, in booming voices, have conversations like this:

FIRST LOUD PERSON: Well, it's about time to turn in!

SECOND LOUD PERSON: I guess so! What time is it?

FIRST LOUD PERSON: Whoa! It's 2:30 A.M.!

SECOND LOUD PERSON: Whoa! It's time to turn in!

FIRST LOUD PERSON: I'll say it is!

SECOND LOUD PERSON: Two-thirty A.M.!

FIRST LOUD PERSON: Whoa!

SECOND LOUD PERSON: It's definitely time to turn in!

FIRST LOUD PERSON: I'll say it is!

SECOND LOUD PERSON: You can say that agAAAAAAIEEEEEEE

(sound of both loud persons being stabbed to death by pajama-clad hotel guests who have lunged out into the hallway wielding shrimp-cocktail forks obtained earlier from Room Service)

There is no need to concern yourself about this. At your better hotels, the bodies will be picked up within hours. Other signs that you are in a quality hotel include the following:

1. You can never be sure which floor the lobby is on. A quality hotel will have about six Mystery Floors where the lobby should be, identified on the elevator buttons only by code letters such as G, P, M, LL, and Ph.D. Guests from hotel-deprived regions such as MississiPpi will sometimes become disoriented and ride the elevator for days, surviving on complimentary pillow mints donated by other guests.

2. You have to tip roughly a dozen men just to check in. The instant you arrive at a quality hotel, at least two friendly men dressed in nicer outfits than you wore at your first wedding will bustle up, open the car door for you, and say: "Welcome to the Hyatt Sheraton Hilton Crowne Royale Majestic Princess! Let us assist you with your luggage!" Even if the airline lost your luggage and your total possessions consist of a package of Tums, these men will snatch it away from you and assist you with it. The instant you tip them, they will hand your luggage to other uniformed men, who will pass it along to still other men, until you are being assisted by roughly one uniformed man for each actual Tum.

3. The bellperson will not leave you alone in your room until he has given you a briefing lasting at least as long as your sophomore year in high school. This will include such helpful information as:

Where the bathroom is. Where the windows are. Where the bed is. Where to find the complimentary bathrobe that you are welcome to take with you, in which case they will be happy to add a charge of \$298 to your bill. Where the bathroom is again, in case you forgot. How you operate the television (By turning it on). What the bellperson's name is (Bob) in case you need anything (Such as you feel a sudden urge to give somebody a tip).

The only thing the bellperson will leave out is the part about how you will have to get up at 2:30 A.M. to kill the loud hallway talkers, but this is because he doesn't want to spoil the surprise.

4. There will be a choice of six in-room movies, (including *The Bad News Bears*) all of which you have already seen except for the dirty one. However, we do not recommend that you watch the dirty movie, because it will go on your hotel bill, which could cause embarrassment when you check out the next morning and the desk clerk, in a hearty voice that echoes all over the lobby, says: "We certainly hope you enjoyed your stay at the Hyatt Sheraton Hilton Crowne Royale Majestic Princess, Mr. Penderson, especially your in-room viewing of Big Hooter Mommas." Also every hotel, no matter what level of quality, is required by state law to have a little framed document in every room with the following notification:

NOTIFICATION

in accordance with sec. 3.409583 par. 2343.4, be advised that the operator of this hotel is not responsible for any loss, theft or damage to any jewelry, money or other valuables that you may sustain because of carelessness, burglars, or anybody else sneaking into your hotel room in the dead of night armed with guns, knives, cattle prods, deadly poison black mamba snakes or whatever you better just give them whatever they want because the owner is not going to get involved even if they tie you to the bed with the belt from your complimentary bathrobe and torture you by pouring your complimentary hair conditioner into your eyes you can go ahead and scream all you want because in accordance with sec. 3.409583 par. 2343.4. be advised that ha ha the operator of this hotel does not have to do shit.

Staying At Quaint Little Country Inns

Of course sometimes you get sick and tired of staying in big, modern hotels, where all you are is an impersonal room number, and nobody ever talks to you, and you never have to share a bathroom with total strangers. For a change of pace from this kind of stifling uniformity, you want to stay at a quaint little country inn.

The best kind of quaint country inn is the kind that's owned and operated by a couple named Dick and Marge who've been married for roughly 158 years and are bored to death with each other and consequently are thrilled that you have come out into the country to give them somebody to talk to and eavesdrop on and study the personal habits of. "Don't mind me!" Marge will say eight or nine times just during breakfast, which you eat at a table located approximately four feet from where she is working in the kitchen. "I know you two are here for a romantic weekend, and I don't want you to even notice I'm here! Although Dick did want me to ask you to please not flush any more condoms down the toilet like you did twice last night, because sometimes they mess up the septic system. We had one couple from New Jersey, the Floogermans, and they were using the Trojan lubricated condom with the reservoir tip, and they flushed four of them on one night, let me see"—she consults her records—"it was the night of June 12, 1987, and next day we had raw sewage in the azaleas, and Dick—Dick loves those azaleas—he had a fit. He even—get this—he even got out his old machete and sharpened it up. I said, 'Dick, what are you gonna do? Chop off their heads just because they flushed some condoms down the toilet?' Ha ha! I had to give him one of those shots to calm him down, and he still carries a little piece of paper in his wallet with the Floogermans' home address. He LOVES those azaleas. But listen to me chattering on! You just never mind me over here. Do you want some more waffles? I didn't even realize you could have waffles, if you were diabetic, which I'm assuming you are from those pills in your toiletries case with your Valium. Lately I just can't seem to get Dick to take his medication, and I really wish he would

because he's started talking to his snakes again. I wish we didn't even have those things in the house, after what happened to those people from Ohio, the Fweemers. Although I understand that a lot of the time those paralysis things are temporary. But listen to me! Here I am talking a mile a minute, and you two lovebirds are trying to have a quiet breakfast alone! I do tend to rattle on so, and sometimes Dick—I'm sure he's just kidding—sometimes Dick says if I don't shut up, he's gonna put me down in the basement, with those things he ordered from Soldier of Fortune magazine. Don't go down there, whatever you do. But you just make yourselves totally at home here, and enjoy your time together, and do whatever you want and just forget that we're even here. By the way, that light fixture over your bed is just a light fixture. It is not a camera. Here comes Dick now! What's the matter, honey?"

Chapter Eight. Camping: Nature's Way Of Promoting The Motel Industry

So far we've discussed many exciting travel destinations, but all of them lack an element that is too often missing from the stressful, high-pressure urban environment most of us live in. That element is: dirt. Also missing from the urban environment are snakes, pit toilets, and tiny black flies that crawl up your nose. To experience these things, you need to locate some Nature and go camping in it.

Where Nature Is Located

Nature is located mainly in national parks, which are vast tracts of wilderness that have been set aside by the United States government so citizens will always have someplace to go where they can be attacked by bears. And we're not talking about ordinary civilian bears, either: We're talking about federal bears, which can behave however they want to because they are protected by the same union as postal clerks.

You also want to be on the lookout for federal moose. I had a moose encounter once, when my wife and I were camping in Yellowstone National Park, which is popular with nature lovers because it has dangerous geysers of super-heated steam that come shooting up out of the ground, exactly like in New York City, except that the Yellowstone geysers operate on a schedule. Anyway, one morning I woke up and went outside to savor the dawn's ever-changing subtle beauty, by which I mean take a leak, and there, maybe fifteen feet away, was an animal approximately the size of the Western Hemisphere and shaped like a horse with a severe steroid problem. It pretended to be peacefully eating moss, but this was clearly a clever ruse designed to lull me into believing that it was a gentle, moss-eating creature. Obviously no creature gets to be that large by eating moss. A creature gets to be that large by stomping other creatures to death with its giant hooves. Clearly what it wanted me to do was approach it, so it could convert me into a wilderness pizza while bellowing triumphant moss-breath bellows into the morning air. Fortunately I am an experienced woodsperson, so I had the presence of mind to follow the Recommended Wilderness Moose-Encounter Procedure, which was to get in the car and indicate to my wife, via a system of coded horn-honks, that she was to pack up all our equipment and put it in the car trunk, and then get in the trunk herself, so that I would not have to open the actual door until we had relocated to a safer area, such as Ohio.

This chilling story is yet another reminder of the importance of:

Selecting The Proper Campsite

Selecting the proper campsite can mean the difference between survival and death in the wilderness, so you, the woodsperson, must always scrutinize the terrain carefully to make sure that it can provide you with the basic necessities, the main one being a metal thing that sticks out of the ground where you hook up the air conditioner on your recreational vehicle. I'm assuming here that you have a recreational vehicle, which has been the preferred mode of camping in America ever since the early pioneers traveled westward in primitive, oxen-drawn Winnebagos—Of course there are some thoughtful, environmentally sensitive ecology nuts who prefer to camp in tents, which are fine except for four things:

1. All tent-erection instructions are written by the internal Revenue Service (“Insert ferrule post into whippet grommet, or 23 percent of your gross deductible adjustables, whichever is more difficult”).
2. It always rains on tents. Rainstorms will travel thousands of miles against the prevailing winds for the opportunity to rain on a tent, which is bad because:
3. Tents contain mildews, which are tiny one-celled animals that are activated by moisture and immediately start committing one-celled acts of flatulence, so that before long it smells like you're sleeping in a giant unwashed gym sock.
4. Tents are highly attractive to bears. When bears are young, their parents give them, as a treat, little camper-shaped candies in little tent wrappers.

So I'm recommending a major recreational vehicle, the kind that has a VCR-equipped recreation room and consumes the annual energy output of Syria merely to operate the windshield wipers. Other wilderness survival equipment that you should always take along includes:

A hatchet, in case you need to fix the VCR Cheez-Its A flashlight last used in 1973, with what appears to be penicillin mold growing on the batteries

And speaking of penicillin, you need to know:

What To Do In A Wilderness Medical Emergency

Experts agree that the most important rule in a wilderness medical emergency is: Keep your head down on the follow-through. No! My mistake! That's the most important rule in golf. The most important rule in a wilderness medical emergency is: Don't panic. To prevent the victim from going into shock, you must reassure him, as calmly as possible, that everything's going to be fine:

VICTIM (clearly frightened): Am I going to be okay?

YOU (in a soothing voice): Of course you are! I'm sure we'll find your legs around here some place!

VICTIM (relieved): Whew! You got any Cheez-Its?

Once the victim has been calmed, you need to obtain pertinent information by asking the following Standard Medical Questions:

1. Does he have medical insurance?
2. Does his spouse have medical insurance?
3. Was he referred to this wilderness by another doctor?

4. How much does he weigh?

5. Does that figure include legs?

Write this information down on a medical chart, then give the victim a 1986 copy of Fortune magazine to read while you decide on the correct course of treatment. This will depend on the exact nature of the injury. For example, if it's mushroom poisoning or a broken limb, you'll need to apply a tourniquet. Whereas if it's a snake bite, then you need to determine whether the snake was poisonous, which will be indicated by tiny markings on the snake's Stomach as follows:

WARNING! POISON SNAKE!

ACHTUNG! SCHLANGE SCHNAPPENKILLEN!

In this case, you need to apply a tourniquet to the snake.

Fun Family Wilderness Activities

There are so many fun things for a family to do together in the wilderness that I hardly know where to start. One proven barrel of wilderness laughs is to try to identify specific kinds of trees by looking at the bark, leaves, federal identification plaques, etc. This activity is bound to provide many seconds of enjoyment for the youngsters. ("This one's an oak!" "No it's not!" "You suck!") Later on, you can play Survival Adventure, where the children, using only a compass and a map, must try to figure out what city Mom and Dad have driven to.

But the greatest camping fun comes at night, when everybody gathers around the campfire and sings campfire songs. Some of our "old family favorites" include:

I've Been Workin' on the Railroad

Oh, I've been workin' on the railroad,

With a banjo on my knee.

We will kill the old red rooster

We will kill the old red rooster

We will kill the old red rooster

And you better not get in our way.

Michael Row the Boat Ashore

Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia!

Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia!

Michael row the damn boat ashore, Alleluia!

Lenore threw up in the tackle box.

Camptown Races

Camptown ladies sing this song: Doo-dah, doo-dah

Camptown ladies been off their medication

And they are none too fond of the old red rooster, either.

After the singing, it's time for Dad to prepare the children for bedtime by telling them a traditional campfire story. To qualify as traditional, the story has to adhere to the following guidelines, established by the National Park Service:

1. It has to begin Many Years Ago when some people camped Right in This Very Forest on a night Exactly Like Tonight.

2. People warned them not to camp here, but they paid no attention.
3. People said, "I wouldn't go back in there if I were you! That's the lair of the [select one]:
 - a. Snake Man!"
 - b. Swamp Devil!"
 - c. Giant Radioactive Meat-Eating Box Turtle of Death!"
4. But the campers just laughed.
5. "Ha ha!" were their exact words.
6. Until they found little Jennifer's gallbladder on the Hibachi.

And so on. Dad should tell this story in a soft, almost hypnotic voice, lulling the children into a trance-like state in which they are aware of nothing except the story and the terror and the still, sinister darkness all around them and

OH MY GOD! IT COMES

And then it's time for everybody to "call it a night" and climb, all five of you, into the sleeping bag with Mom.

Welcome Home! Or: "That's Odd! Our House Used To Be Right Here!"

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, traveling is a tremendous amount of fun, but eventually, you become too tired and broke and diseased to continue. Then it's time to come home, drop your suitcases right at the front door, kick off your shoes, and stagger into the kitchen to quench your thirst with a nice cold ... NO DON'T OPEN THE REFRIGERATOR AIEEEEEEE ... You have no idea what kinds of fierce predatory meat-eating fungi have been growing in there (Sometimes in less than an hour) while you were gone. They've been feeding on the highly nutritious Chinese take-out food that you've been wisely storing in the back of your refrigerator for several months in case it suddenly appreciates in value. Your refrigerator has developed individual mold spores the size of Doberman pinschers, and they are going to be very angry if you just barge into their territory and try to grab something. The American Medical Association, in an alarming 1989 report (There is no further information contained in this footnote) stated that the leading cause of death

among Americans returning from trips is being attacked by refrigerator mold. "Never enter your kitchen after a trip without a working flamethrower in your hand," advises the AMA.

This is assuming, of course, that you still have a kitchen. There's always the possibility that your house has burned down, and the only thing that survived the fire is the stack of credit-card bills documenting all the shrewd purchases you made on your trip, such as the \$197.50 Authentic Souvenir Limbo Stick that was confiscated by U.S. Customs because it contained lethal parasites.

And even if your house is still there, there's always the chance that your plumbing—which has sophisticated electronic sensors so it knows the instant you leave home—has developed a leak, which doesn't sound like such a big deal until you consider that the Grand Canyon, for example, is basically the result of water damage.

And speaking of damages, you should check the dense growth that has sprung up around your house in case it contains the moaning, semi-deceased body of a mailperson or door-to-door salesperson, or meter reader, or one of the dozens of other people who could have visited your house while you were gone and

tripped on a Dangerous Hazard in your yard, such as the ground, causing him to fall and severely injure his back, resulting in so much Pain and Suffering that he has been unable to move, except of course to notify his attorney and put a down payment on a motor yacht the size of Utica, New York.

But never mind these temporary problems. The point is that you had fun, right? Remember the Old Traveler's Saying: "You may lose your money and your health and your sanity and some important organs, but they can't take away your travel memories unless they hit you hard on the head." These are the words I live by, as a traveler, and in these pages I've tried to share my vast knowledge with you as a way of saying "Thank You!" for buying this book.

Unless of course you just borrowed this book, in which case I hope that the next time you travel, your luggage winds up on a space probe.

About The Author

Dave Barry is a Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist at the Miami Herald. His books include *Homes and Other Black Holes*, *Dave Barry's Greatest Hits*, *Dave Barry Slept Here*, and *Dave Barry Turns 40*, among others.

DAVE BARRY SLEPT HERE

A SORT OF HISTORY OF
THE UNITED STATES



"A dazzling performance . . . Barry is brilliant."
—*The Washington Post Book World*

Dave Barry Slept Here

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry. Dave Barry Slept Here

Dedication

For Robert, who really was born on October 8

Introduction

“WE THE PEOPLE ...” These are the words that begin the Declaration of Independence. Or maybe we are thinking of the Gettysburg Address. No matter. The point is, these words are written on an extremely historic yellowed document that we, as a nation, keep in a special vault in Washington, D.C., where, each working day, it is cherished by employees of the Document Cherishing Division of the Federal Bureau of Historic Yellowed Objects.

And with good reason. For these three words remind us that we live in a nation that was built by human beings. It is easy to forget this, especially when we are riding in the coach section of a commercial aircraft, sitting on seats apparently built by and for alien beings who are fourteen inches tall and capable of ingesting airline “omelets” manufactured during the Korean War (1949-1953). At times like this, it is important that we look back at the people and the events that got us to where we are today, for, in the words of a very wise dead person, “A nation that does not know its history is doomed to do poorly on the Scholastic Aptitude Test.”

And that was the main reason why we wrote this book, aside from wanting to become so wealthy that we shall routinely leave motor yachts as tips. Tragically, many Americans know very little about the history of their own country. We constantly see surveys that reveal this ignorance, especially among our high school students, 78 percent of whom, in a recent nationwide multiple-choice test, identified Abraham Lincoln as “a kind of lobster.” That’s right: more than three quarters of our nation’s youth could not correctly identify the man who invented the telephone.

What is the cause of this alarming situation? Partly, of course, it is that our young people are stupid. Young people have always been stupid, dating back to when you were a young person (1971-1973) and you drank an entire quart of Midnight Surprise Fruit Wine and Dessert Topping and threw up in your best friend’s father’s elaborate saltwater aquarium containing \$6,500 worth of rare and, as it turned out, extremely delicate fish. (You thought we didn’t know about that? We know everything. We are a history book.)

But another major part of the problem is the system used to teach history in our schools, a system known technically, among professional educators, as the Boring Method. You were probably taught via this method, which features textbooks that drone on eternally as follows:

Early Explorations

The region was first explored by the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Rigueur (1534-1579), who in 1541 was commissioned by King Charles “Chuck” IV of England (1512-1583) under the terms of the Treaty of Weems (1544) as authorized by Pope Bilious XIV (1511-1598) to end the Nine Years, Three Months, and the Better Part of a Week War (May 4, 1534-August 8, 1543, at about 1:30 P.m.), under which France (1243-present) would cede an area “north of the 17th parallel, west of the 163rd longitude, and convenient to shopping” to England in exchange for those lands originally conquered by Denmark during the Reign of Large Unattractive Feathered Hats (1387-1396) and subsequently granted to Italy under the Treaty of ...

And so on. Little wonder that our young people choose to ignore their nation’s history and instead focus their intellectual energies on procuring designer clothing. Not that you, the reader, should feel superior. You are probably not such a history whiz yourself. In fact, we are willing to bet that you cannot even name the man who served as Gerald Ford’s running mate in 1976 (It doesn’t matter.). Which is why it is a darned good thing for all concerned that this book has been published. Because this book does not waste the reader’s valuable brain cells with such trivial details as when various events actually occurred. Oh, sure, it contains many exact dates—it is, after all, a history book—but you will notice that we have tried to make these dates as easy as possible to remember by making them all start with “October 8,” as in “October 8, 1729” or “October 8, 1953.” We chose this

particular date after carefully weighing a number of important historical criteria, such as (a) it is our son's birthday.

In our view, the one-date system of history has the same advantages, in terms of simplifying things, as the metric system of measurement, which has taken this country by storm, and we look forward to the day when history textbooks carry this system even further and contain only one year, so that a child will be able to get all the way through the secondary educational system without ever having to grasp any concept other than "October 8, 1947" (We were born in 1947.). And that is only one of the many revolutionary advances contained here. Another one is: We have left out the dull parts. Take, for example, the Role of the Plow in the Settlement of Nebraska. "The hell with the Role of the Plow in the Settlement of Nebraska"—that is our motto. This philosophy left us with plenty of extra room, which enabled us to provide you, the reader, with large, restful expanses of white space, as well as numerous riveting "behind-the-scenes" historical anecdotes that you will not find in a normal history book because we made them up.

In conclusion, we hope that, in reading this work, you gain a deeper and broader and taller understanding of how We, the People, through the sweat of our armpits, created this great nation, a nation of which it can truly be stated, in the words of the famous folk singer Woody Guthrie (October 8, 1912-October 8, 1967.):

This land is your land, This land is my land, Looks like one of us Has a forged deed to this land.

Chapter One. Deflowering A Virgin Continent

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, America was very different. There was no civilization: no roads, no cities, no shopping malls, no Honda dealerships. There were, of course, obnoxious shouting radio commercials for car dealerships; these have been broadcast toward Earth for billions of years by the evil Planet of Men Wearing Polyester Sport Coats, and there is nothing anybody can do to stop them. But back then, you see, there was no way to receive them, so things were pretty peaceful.

The only inhabitants of America in those days were animals such as the deer and the antelope, who were engaged primarily in playing; and the buffalo, or "bison," (Meaning "buffalo.") who mainly roamed. The bison must have been an awe-inspiring sight: millions of huge, majestic animals, forming humongous herds, their hooves thundering like, we don't know, thunder or something, roaming from the Mississippi River all the way across the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains, which they would smash into headfirst at speeds ranging upward of thirty-five miles per hour, then fall down. They were majestic, those bison, but stupid.

But all of this changed twenty thousand years ago with the construction of the Land Bridge to Asia, which was completed on October 8. Suddenly, the ancestors of the Indians and the Eskimos, clans who called themselves "The Ancestors of the Indians and the Eskimos," had a way to get to North America. Still, it was not an easy trek: They had to traverse hundreds of miles of frigid snow-swept wasteland, which was cold, and each was permitted to carry only two small pieces of luggage. Eventually they arrived in an area very near what we now know as Kansas, and they saw that it was a place of gently rolling hills and clear flowing streams and abundant fertile earth, and they looked upon this place, and they said, "Nah" ("No."). Because quite frankly they were looking for a little more action, which is how come they ended up on the East Coast. There they formed tribes and spent the next several thousand

years thinking up comical and hard-to-spell names for major rivers. Also they made a great many Native American handicrafts such as pots, although at the time there was not much of a retail market for these, so the Native Americans wound up having to use them as household implements.

During this same period another group of early Americans, the Mayans, were constructing a culture down in Mexico featuring a calendar so advanced that it can still, to this very day, tell you where various celestial bodies such as Venus and the Moon will be at any given moment. They will be out in space, states the miraculous Mayan calendar.

Meanwhile, way the hell far away in someplace like Finland, Vikings were forming. These were extremely rugged individuals whose idea of a fun time was to sail over and set fire to England, which in those days was fairly easy to ignite because it had a very high level of thatch, this being the kind of roof favored by the local tribespeople—the Klaxons, the Gurnseys, the Spasms, the Wasps, the Celtics, and the Detroit Pistons. No sooner would they finish thatching one when the Vikings, led by their leader, Eric the Red (so called because that was his name), would come charging up, Zippos blazing, and that would be the end of that roof. This went on for thousands of years, during which time the English tribespeople became very oppressed, not to mention damp.

Then there arose among them a young man who many said would someday become the king of all of England because his name was King Arthur. According to legend, one day he was walking along with some onlookers, when he came to a sword that was stuck in a stone. He grasped the sword by the handle and gave a mighty heave, and to the amazement of the onlookers, he suddenly saw his shadow, and correctly predicted that there would be six more weeks of winter. This so impressed the various tribes that Arthur was able to unite them and drive off the Vikings via the bold and resourceful maneuver of serving them relentlessly bland food, a tradition that remains in England to this day despite numerous armed attempts by the French to invade with sauces.

Thus it was that the Vikings set off across the Atlantic in approximately the year 867—on October 8—to (a) try to locate North America and (b) see if it was flammable. Did these hardy adventurers reach the New World centuries before Columbus? More and more, historians argue that they did, because this would result in a new national holiday, which a lot of historians would get off. But before we can truly know the answer to this question, we must do a great deal more research. And quite frankly, we would rather not.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you buy a car from a dealership that ran one of those obnoxious shouting radio commercials? Neither would we.
2. Have you noticed that you hardly ever see Zippo lighters anymore? Explain.
3. Are you aware that there is a traditional British dish called “cock-a-leeky soup”? Really.

Chapter Two. Spain Gets Hot

For many hundreds of years, European traders had dreamed of discovering a new route to the East, but every time they thought they had found it, they would start whimpering, and their wives would wake

them up. So they continued to use the old route, which required them to cross the Alps on foot, then take a sailing ship across the Mediterranean to Egypt, then take a camel across the desert, then take another sailing ship back across the Mediterranean, then change to the IRT Number 6 Local as far as 104th Street, and then ask directions. Thus it would often take them years to get to the East, and when they finally did, they were almost always disappointed. “This is it?” they would say. “This is the East?”

And so by the fifteenth century, on October 8, the Europeans were looking for a new place to try to get to, and they came up with a new concept: the West. The problem here was that the immediate west was covered with the Atlantic Ocean, which represented a major obstacle because back in those days many people believed that the world was flat. Today, of course, we know that this is true only in heavily Protestant states such as Iowa, but back then people believed that if you went too far, you might sail right off the edge. In fact, you would probably want to sail off the edge, since the average sailing ship had about the same size and seaworthiness as a Yugo hatchback.

The Fortunate Invention Of Certain Navigational Aids

Then, fortunately, along came the invention of certain navigational aids. Chief among these was a very realistic doll that, when you inflated it, could ... WAIT! Wrong kind of aid! Our mistake! Chief among the navigational aids was the compass, a device that, no matter where it is, always indicated which way was north. This was a tremendous boon to early navigators, although its value was diminished somewhat by the fact that the early voyages always ended with the ship banging into the polar ice cap and everybody aboard freezing to death. But eventually the compass was improved by the addition of such features as: south, west, and even east again, and soon hardy (In the sense of, “not tremendously bright.”) mariners were able to venture far out into the Atlantic before getting lost. Still, it was difficult to recruit new sailors, even with the use of extensive advertising campaigns built around catchy themes such as:

BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE! Become a Hardy Mariner

“Get Lost and Die.”

Eventually the breakthrough came that made modern navigation possible: the discovery of longitudes and latitudes. These are thin black lines that go all around Earth in a number of locations, so that all you have to do is follow them, and you have a surefire way of getting wherever it is they go. Of course they are difficult for the untrained eye to see; the early sailors had to squint at the water for hours, which is why so many of them ended up having to wear eye patches, especially in movies. But the hardy sacrifice those early mariners made for us will never be forgotten, not as long as we are reading this particular paragraph.

Meanwhile, in nearby Italy, Christopher Columbus was forming. As a youth, he spent many hours gazing out to sea and thinking to himself: “Someday I will be the cause of a holiday observed by millions of government workers.” The fact that he thought in English was only one of the amazing things about the young Columbus. Another was his conviction that if he sailed all the way across the Atlantic, he would reach India. We now know, thanks to satellite photographs, that this makes him seem as stupid as a buffalo, although it sounded pretty good when Columbus explained it to the rulers of Spain, Ferdinand and his lovely wife, Imelda, who agreed to finance the voyage by selling six thousand pairs of her shoes.

And so Columbus assembled a group of the hardest mariners he could find. These fellows were so hardy that, had the light bulb been invented at that time, it would have taken at least three of these mariners to screw one in, if you get our drift. On October 8, 1492 they set out across the storm-tossed Atlantic in three tiny ships, the *Ninia*, the *Pina Colada*, and the *Heidy-Ho III*. Fortunately Columbus kept a detailed log, so we can get some sense of how long and arduous their journey was from revealing excerpts such as this:

October 8—Boy, is this journey ever long! Also arduous!

But finally, after numerous storm-tossed weeks, just when it seemed as if Columbus and his men would never see land again, there came an excited cry from the lookout.

“Hey!” he cried. “we forgot to put up the sails!”

And so they all had a hearty laugh, after which they hoisted the damned things. A few hours later, on October 8, they came to an island, where Columbus and a convenient interpreter waded ashore and had the following historic conversation with a local tribal chief:

COLUMBUS: You guys are Indians, right?

TRIBAL CHIEF: Kham anonoda jawe. (“No. We came over from Asia about twenty thousand years ago via the Land Bridge.”)

COLUMBUS: Listen, we have spent many weeks looking for India in these three storm-tossed, vomit-encrusted ships, and we have cannons pointing at your wigwams, and we say you are Indians.

TRIBAL CHIEF: B’nomi kawa saki! (“Welcome to India!”)

Thus the white men and the Native Americans were able, through the spirit of goodwill and compromise, to reach the first in what would become a long series of mutually beneficial, breached agreements that enabled the two cultures to coexist peacefully for stretches of twenty and sometimes even thirty days, after which it was usually necessary to negotiate new agreements that would be even more mutual and beneficial, until ultimately the Native Americans were able to perceive the vast mutual benefits of living in rock-strewn sectors of South Dakota.

The Age Of Exploration

When Columbus returned to Spain with the news of his discovery, everybody became very excited and decided to have an Age of Exploration. Immediately, a great many bold adventurers—Magellan, da Gama, de Soto, Chrysler, Picasso, and others—set forth on Voyages of Discovery, only to have their ships bang into each other and sink at the harbor entrance. But they boldly set out again, this time in alphabetical order, and soon they had made some important discoveries, the most important one being that what Columbus had discovered was not India at all, but America, which explained why the inhabitants were called “Native Americans.” In Mexico and South America, the Spanish also discovered highly advanced civilizations, which they wisely elected to convert into ruins for use as future tourist attractions.

One of the most famous Spanish explorers was Juan Ponce de Leon (literally, “John Punched the Lion”), who came to Florida seeking the mythical Fontainebleau Hotel, where, according to legend, if you had one drink, you could have another one for half price on weekdays between 4:00 and 5:30 P.m. He never found it, but he did meet some natives who at first seemed friendly—they gave him a free meal and guided tour of the area—but who then subjected him to a vicious primitive ritual wherein they

trapped him in a small room and repeatedly explained to him the benefits of “time-sharing” in a “vacation resort community” and refused to let him leave, until ultimately he was forced to take his own life.

The Decline Of Spain

On October 8, 1565, Spain declined.

Discussion Questions

1. There’s no IRT stop at 104th Street, is there?
2. Did you ever purchase time in a time-sharing resort? You did? Ha-ha!
3. This question is not technically related to the early Spanish explorations, but we are curious: In the song “luie luie,” by the Kingsmen, do you think they are singing dirty words? Cite examples.

Make A Simple Compass

Here’s a simple experiment that you might want to try if there is absolutely nothing else going on in your life. All you need is a cork, a bar magnet, and a pail of water. Simply attach your magnet to your cork, then drop it into the water, and vola (literally, “you have a compass”)—you have a compass. How does it work? Simple. Notice that, no matter which way you turn the bucket, the cork always floats on top of the water (unless the magnet is too heavy). Using this scientific principle, early hardy mariners were able to tell at a glance whether they were sinking!

Chapter Three. England Starts Some Fun Colonies

By the sixteenth century at approximately 4:30 P.m., England was experiencing a Renaissance. This took the form of Ben Jonson and of course William Shakespeare, the immortal “Barge of Avon,” whose plays continue to amuse us to this very day with such hilarious and timely lines as:

What dost thine tinder knowest of thine face?

The weg-barrow canst not its row’l misplace!!

(From *Antony and Cleopatra IV. Return of the Fungus People*, Act II, Scene III, seats 103 and 104.)

Ha-ha! Whew! Excuse us while we wipe away several tears of helpless laughter! This Golden Age in England was called the “Elizabethan Era” after the queen, Elizabeth Ann Era, who was known as the “Virgin Queen” because it was not considered a tremendously smart move to call her the “Really Ugly Queen.” She inspired many men to leave England on extremely long voyages, which led to expansion.

The first prominent expanding English person was Sir Francis Drake, who, on one of the most famous dates in English history, October 8, defeated the Spanish Armada (“El Armadillo de Espana”). This was

a biggish armada that had ruled the seas for many years, and nobody could defeat it until Sir Francis Drake employed the classic military maneuver of hiding his entire fleet inside a gigantic horse shaped like a Trojan. As you can imagine, this maneuver worked to perfection, and soon the English “ruled the waves,” which led to the writing of the hit song “Hail Britannica”:

Hail Britannica! Britannica dum de dum. Dum dum, da de dum dum Da DEE dum DUM!

(repeat chorus)

(and books, a series of twenty-four unopened volumes.)

The Establishment Of The Lost Colony

Another English person who existed at around this time was Sir Walter Raleigh, who invented chivalry one day when he encountered the Virgin Queen trying to get across a mud puddle, and he put his cloak over her head. She was very grateful and would have married him immediately, except that he suddenly remembered he had an appointment to sail to North America and found a Lost Colony. He went to an area that he called Virginia, in honor of the fact that it was located next to West Virginia, and he established a colony there, and then—this was the darnedest thing—he lost it. “Think!” his friends would say. “Where did you see it last?” But it was no use, and this particular colony is still missing today. Sometimes you see its picture on milk cartons.

Still, the English were undaunted. “Who the hell needs daunts?” was the English motto in those days. And so a group of merchants decided to start another colony, which they called Jamestown (later known as “Jimtown,” and still later, “JimBobtown”), located on an estuary (A person who works for an insurance company.) of the Lester A. Hockermeyer, Jr., River. The leader of Jamestown was “John Smith” (not his real name), under whose direction the colony engaged in a number of activities, primarily related to starving. They also managed to form the first primitive corporation, and, despite the fact that they lacked food and clothing and housing, they courageously engaged in various corporate activities. They would lie around in the snow, dictating primitive memoranda to each other about the need to look into the feasibility of forming a committee to examine the various long-term benefits and drawbacks of maybe planting some corn. Somehow, they managed to survive those first few harsh years, although at one point they were forced to eat their own appointment calendars.

There is an old Virginia saying that goes: “The darkest part of the tunnel is always just before the tollbooth.” And this indeed turned out to be true, for just when the Jamestown colonists were about to give up, they came up with a promising new product concept: tobacco. With remarkable foresight, these early executives recognized that there was a vast untapped market for a product that consumers could set on fire and inhale so as to gradually turn their lungs into malignant lumps of carbon. Soon the Jamestown colony was shipping tons of tobacco back to England, and had even begun to develop primitive advertising campaigns featuring pictures of rugged men on horseback and slogans such as:

SMOKE TOBACCO

“It won’t gradually turn your lungs into malignant lumps of carbon!”

Although of course there have been many scientific advances in advertising, such as having the rugged men ride in helicopters, this basic message remains in use to this very day.

Another concept that was in the early stages of development in Virginia was democracy. By 1619, a rudimentary legislature had formed, and several years later it had mutated into two houses, called “the

upper house” and “Steve.” For a bill to become law, it had to be passed by a two-thirds majority of both houses, after which it was sent back to the king, James II, who would tear it into pieces the size of postage stamps and feed them to his dog, Bart XI. So it was not total democracy as we know it today, but it was a start.

Yet all was not well. Because at the same time the clouds of religious intolerance, propelled by a large arctic air mass of hatred, were forming a major storm front of persecution, which was to result in one of the most moving stories of courage and faith in all of American history, not to mention a four-day weekend. We refer, of course, to the Puritans.

The Story Of The Puritans

The Puritans were an extremely religious group who lived in England and did not believe in drinking or dancing or having sex with hooved animals. They were very unpopular. So they decided to sail over to the New World, where they would be free to worship as they chose and live in peace and harmony and set fire to suspected witches.

And thus it was that in some specific year, the Puritans, taking with them little more than stupid hats and an unwavering faith in Providence, (A city in Rhode Island that, unbeknownst to the Puritans, had not been founded yet.) set sail across the dark and treacherous North Atlantic in the Mayflower, a cramped, frail ship of Panamanian registry. The crossing was brutally harsh. Only two days out of port, a fierce storm destroyed most of the shuffleboard equipment. As giant waves washed over their tiny ship, tossing it about like a cork, the Puritans, realizing their fate was not in their own hands, got down on their knees and, drawing on some inner strength, threw up. Then they looked toward the heavens and vowed that if, by some miracle, they were able to make it safely to their destination, they were definitely going to get a new travel agent.

Finally, just when the Puritans were starting to think that maybe drinking and dancing wouldn't be so bad after all, the lookout spotted the coast of Massachusetts. This resulted in a tremendous hue and of course cry aboard the ship as the Puritans rushed excitedly up on deck and shoved the navigator overboard, because he was supposed to be aiming for Virginia.

By that point, however, the Mayflower, which had no shower facilities, was starting to smell like the postgame laundry hamper of a professional ice-hockey team, so the Puritans decided to row ashore and land at Plymouth Rock (So called because it is shaped like a Plymouth.). But first, for insurance purposes, they all had to sign the Mayflower Compact. This was a historic document that set forth what would become some of our most fundamental and cherished principles of government, as is shown by this direct quotation:

6. No spitting on the sidewalk.

When the Puritans landed, they found themselves in a harsh and desolate world, and they probably would have starved to death if not for the help of a friendly local Native American named Squanto (Meaning “Native American.”). Squanto looked at the Puritans barging around the wilderness with their hats and their comical Puritan muskets shaped like trombones at the end, and he took pity on them. “Look,” he said, because fortunately he spoke English, “what you need to do is plant some corn.” And so they did, and after a couple of months it grew and ripened, and the Puritans, who by this time were hungrier than ever, boiled it and ate it with butter and a little salt. “Next time, you should try

shucking it first,” advised Squanto. Eventually, as you would expect, a year went by. The Puritans decided that, all things considered it had been a pretty good year, except for the fact that the vast majority of them were at that point dead, so they decided to have the first traditional Thanksgiving. They invited Squanto over to help in eating a turkey (“Next time,” advised the ever-helpful Squanto, “try cooking it first”), after which they watched the Lions-Bears game. Then the Puritans told Squanto that they were very grateful for all he had done, but that frankly they would not be needing him anymore, so he and his tribe should go find some other area to be natives of. In the next several years the Puritans became prosperous and built New England, parts of which can still be seen today.

Discussion Questions

1. Why only hooved animals?
2. Did any of your ancestors come over on the Mayflower? So what?
3. If you were on the Detroit Lions, would you be ticked off about always having to play on Thanksgiving? Explain.

Chapter Four. The Colonies Develop A Life-Style

The typical life-style in the early colonies was very harsh. There was no such thing as the modern supermarket, which meant that the hardy colonists had to get up before dawn and spend many hours engaging in tedious tasks such as churning butter. They would put some butter in a churn, and they would whack it with a pole for several hours, and then they’d mop their brows and say, “Why the hell don’t we get a modern supermarket around here!” And then, because it was illegal to curse, they would be forced to stand in the stocks while the first tourists took pictures of them.

So it was harsh, all right, but nevertheless more and more persecuted religious minorities—Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Scientologists, Cubs fans—were flocking to freedom and establishing religious colonies such as Maryland and Heritage Village, USA, site of the New World’s first known Christian water slide.

The England-Holland Rivalry

Meanwhile, England got into a rivalry with Holland. Although today Holland is known primarily for being underwater and making Heineken beer, in those days it claimed a great deal of land in the New World because of the important explorations of the brave Dutch explorer for whom the Hudson River is named, Henry Hudson River (should have been in Chapter Two, but we forgot.). Based on these explorations, Holland claimed all of the land west of the Atlantic Ocean and north of the equator. This angered the English, who claimed all of the land in the world and a substantial section of Mars, and so on October 8 a rivalry broke out between the two nations.

The largest Dutch settlement at the time was New Amsterdam, located on the site of what is now New York City and which had established a thriving economy based on illegal parking. So one day an

English individual named James “Duke of” York sailed into the harbor with his fleet and captured New Amsterdam without the Dutch firing a single shot. He was able to do this because at the time the city’s commissioner for the Department of Firing Back was testifying before the Special Grand Jury to Investigate Municipal Corruption, which is Still in session. And thus was the name of New Amsterdam changed to “The Big Apple.”

Meanwhile, more colonists were arriving, a good example being William Penn, who founded the colony that still bears his name, New Jersey. But life in the New World continued to be harsh, with most colonists leading a hand-to-mouth existence. “Take your hand out of your mouth!” their mothers were always shouting, but you know how it is with colonists. What they really needed, to get themselves off their duffs, was for trade to develop. Luckily, several days later this occurred.

The Development Of Trade

One morning the colonists noticed that the New World contained a number of products that were not available in Europe, such as turpentine, which could easily be obtained in the colonies simply by boiling trees. Soon the colonists were sending barrels of turpentine across to England, where the English people would dump it on the ground, because, let’s face it, a little turpentine goes a long way. Then the English people would fill the boat up with some product they had a surplus of, such as used snuff, and they’d send it back to the colonies; and then the colonists would retaliate with, say, barrels of dirt, and so on, until trade had escalated to the point where the two sides were sending entire boatloads of diseased rats back and forth.

But life was not all hard work in the colonies. Culture was also starting to rear its head, in the form of the Early American Novel. The most famous novelist of this era was Cliff, the author of the famous Cliff Notes, a series of works that are still immensely popular with high school students. The best known, of course, is The Scarlet Ladder, which tells the story of a short man named Miles Standish, who lived in a tall house with seven people named Gable, only to be killed in a sled crash with an enormous white whale. This was to become a recurring theme in colonial literature.

But little did the colonists realize, as these cultural and economic developments were taking place, that they were about to become involved in friction with the French. The cause of this was ... Hold it! We have just received the following:

EDUCATIONAL ADVISORY ALERT

A REVIEW COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS WITH DOCTORATE DEGREES AND INITIALS AFTER THEIR NAMES HAS DETERMINED THAT, SO FAR, THIS HISTORY BOOK is NOT MAKING ENOUGH OF AN EFFORT TO INCLUDE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN AND MINORITY GROUPS. UNLESS SOME EFFORT Is UNDERTAKEN TO CORRECT THIS SITUATION, THIS BOOK WILL NOT BE APPROVED FOR PURCHASE BY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN ABSOLUTELY VAST QUANTITIES.

Another important fact we just now remembered is that during the colonial era women and minority groups were making many contributions, which we are certain that they will continue to do at regularly spaced intervals throughout the course of this book. But right now, let’s get back to:

Friction With The French

French traders came to the northern part of the New World to barter with the Native Americans for their pelts of beavers, minks, otters, elks, muskellunges, and so forth. The two sides quickly learned to communicate with each other using a stripped-down bartering language, as shown by this painstakingly researched historical re-creation:

FRENCH TRADER: How does this look?

NATIVE AMERICAN: Honey, that pelt is you!

FRENCH TRADER: Really, Red? You don't think it's too bunched at the hips?

NATIVE AMERICAN: Listen, bunched at the hips is the look in the New World.

FRENCH TRADER: I'll take it!

Soon the French, aided by Native American guides, were penetrating deep into North America in search of matching belts, shoes, and other accessories. By the late seventeenth century, pioneering French designers such as Marquette

and Joliet (most of them went by only one name) had made a number of major fashion advances in the New World. The basis of the entire French colonial philosophy was natural fibers, in stark contrast to the British, who were already using water-driven looms to make primitive polyesters. It was only a matter of time before friction broke out in the form of:

The French And Indian War

The French and Indian War is highly significant because, as David Boldt (A friend of ours. You don't know him.) points out, it had a stupid name. It sounded like the French were fighting the Indians, whereas in fact they were supposed to be on the same side. The British didn't even realize they were supposed to be in this war until several years after it started, by which time the French and the Indians, totally confused, had inflicted heavy casualties upon each other. So England won the war, and on October 8 the French king, Louis the Somethingth, signed the Treaty of Giving Away Canada, under which he gave away Canada. "Que enfer," he remarked at the time, "cest seulement Canada" ("What the hell, it's only Canada.").

Discussion Questions

1. How come, if the country is called "Holland," the people are called "Dutch"?
2. Have you ever noticed that on those rare occasions when you do need turpentine, the can, which you bought in 1978 and have been moving from household to household ever since, is always empty?
3. Do you feel that people who insist upon referring to themselves as "doctor" simply because they hold Ph.D. degrees, which are about as rare as air molecules, tend to be self-important weenies? And what about the use of the word "professional," as in "automotive sales professional"? Does that make you want to puke, or what? Explain.

Chapter Five. The Birthing Contractions Of A Nation

What caused the American Revolution? This is indeed a rhetorical question that for many years historians have begun chapters with. As well they should. For the American Revolution is without doubt the single most important historical event ever to occur in this nation except of course for Super Bowl III (Jets 16, Colts 7. This historian won \$35.).

One big causal factor in the Revolution was that England operated under what political scientists describe as “The Insane Venereally Diseased Hunchbacked Homicidal King” system of government. This basically means that for some reason, again possibly the food, the English king always turned out to be a syphilitic hunchbacked lunatic whose basic solution to virtually all problems, including humidity, was to have somebody’s head cut off. There was one king, Henry “Henry the Eighth” VIII, who could barely get through a day without beheading a wife. It reached the point, with Henry, where the clergyman had difficulty completing the wedding ceremony:

CLERGYMAN: I now pronounce you man and ... WATCH OUT! (SLICE)

This style of government was extremely expensive, especially in terms of dry-cleaning costs, and as a result the kings were always trying to raise money from the colonies by means of taxation. This was bad enough without representation, but what really ticked the colonists off were the tax forms, which were extremely complicated, as is shown by this actual example:

To determineth the amounteth that thou canst claimeth for depreciation to thine cow, deducteth the amount showneth on Line XVLIIICX-A of Schedule XIV, from the amount showneth on Line CVXILIIVMM of Schedule XVVII ... No, waiteth, we meaneth Line XCII of Schedule CXVIILMM ... No, holdeth it, we meaneth ...

And so on. In 1762 the king attempted to respond to the colonists’ concerns by setting up a special Taxpayer Assistance Service, under which colonists with questions about their tax returns could get on a special toll-free ship and sail to England, where specially trained Tax Assistors would beat them to death with sticks. But even that failed to satisfy the more radical colonists, and it soon became clear that within a short time—possibly even in the next page—the situation would turn ugly.

The Situation Turns Ugly

One afternoon some freedom-loving colonists known as the Boston Patriots were sitting around their locker room, trying to think up ways to throw off the yolk of colonial oppression. Suddenly one of them, Bob, had an idea: “Hey!” he said. “Let’s dress up like the locals and throw tea into the harbor!”

Instantly the other Patriots were galvanized. “What was that?” they shouted. “A galvanic reaction,” responded Bob. “Named for the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani (1737-1798), who conducted experiments wherein he sent electrical currents through the legs of frogs.”

But the Boston Patriots were not the only people engaging in inhumane scientific research during the colonial era. Another person doing this was Benjamin Franklin, who, in a famous experiment, sought to prove his theory that if you flew a kite in a rainstorm, a huge chunk of electricity would come shooting down the string and damage your brain. Sure enough, he was right, and he spent the rest of his days making bizarre, useless, and unintelligible statements such as: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Eventually he became so dodderingly pathetic that he had to be placed in charge of the U.S. Postal Service. Also around this time women and minority groups were accomplishing a great many

achievements.

But getting back to the Boston Patriots: Later that night, they boldly carried out Bob's bold plan of dressing up as Native Americans and throwing tea into the harbor, but for some reason this did not result in Independence. "Maybe we should also toss in some lemon," somebody suggested. And so they did this, and then they tried some Sweet 'n' Low; still no sign of Independence. Also the harbor was starting to look like a toxic-waste dump, which did not go unnoticed by early ancestors of future president George Herbert Walker Piedmont Harrington Armoire Vestibule Bush.

This angered the king, so he ordered Parliament to pass the Stamp Act, under which every time the colonists made a purchase, the cashier would give them some stamps, and they had to paste these into books, which was even more boring than churning butter. When the colonists had acquired a certain number of stamps, they were required to go down to the Royal Stamp Redemption Center and exchange them for cheap cookware (4.5 million) or tacky folding card tables (13 billion). As you can imagine, this was less than popular with the colonists, whose anger was eloquently expressed by Tom Paine in his fiery pamphlet Common Sense, which, in its most famous passage, states: "How many fondue sets does any one colonial family need?"

This further enraged the king, who, as you have probably gathered by now, had the political savvy of a croissant. He ordered Parliament to pass the Irritation Acts, whose entire purpose was to make life in the colonies even more miserable. These included:

1. The Sneeze Shield Act, requiring that all colonial salad bars had to have shields suspended over them—allegedly for "sanitary" purposes, but actually intended to make it difficult for short colonists to reach the chick-peas.
2. The Pill Blockade Act, requiring that colonial aspirin bottles had to come with wads of Cotton stuffed in the top, making the aspirin virtually inaccessible, especially to colonists with hangovers.
3. The Eternal Container Act, requiring that colonists who purchased appliances had to save the original packing cartons forever and ever, passing them down through the generations, or else they would void their warranties.

All of these factors caused the tension in the colonies to mount with each passing day.

It was amid this climate of rising tension and anger, with a 50 percent chance of lingering afternoon and evening violence, that the First Continental Congress was held. It met in Philadelphia, and its members, realizing that the actions they took in this hour of crisis could very well determine the fate of the New World, voted, after many hours of angry debate, to give themselves a pay raise. There was no turning back now. Clearly, the stage had been set for the Discussion Questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Unitas should have started for the Colts?
2. What the hell are chick-peas, anyway?

Chapter Six. Kicking Some British Butt

The Revolutionary War began with the famous Midnight Ride of Paul Revere, immortalized in the

well-known verse:

Out of the bed and onto the floor; Fifty-yard dash to the bathroom door!

Whoops! Our mistake. This verse comes from the famous song “Midnight Attack of Diarrhea,” which used to absolutely slay us when we were campers at Camp Sharparoon (1953-1956.). The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere is also very inspirational. By day, Revere was a Boston silversmith (A person who smithed silver.), but by night, like so many patriots during the Revolutionary era, he had insomnia. He would lie awake, tossing and turning, until finally one night, irritated by lights that somebody kept shining in his window from the Old North Church, he just flipped out. He leaped onto his horse and raced off into the night, shrieking. This infuriated a group of British soldiers, who marched out after him, but they, too, were noisy, because in those days—remember, this was literally centuries before the discovery of the Rolling Stones—the British had a terrible sense of rhythm (they were mostly white guys) and could march only with the aid of drums.

So what would happen is, Paul Revere would come shrieking through a picturesque slumbering New England town at 2:30 A.m., and the townspeople, who were already uptight because of the mounting tension described previously, would come rushing out in their pajamas, really ticked off, and the first thing they’d see were these British soldiers barging down the street, whanging on their drums as though it were halftime at the Rose Bowl, and as you can imagine it was not long before violence erupted in the form of the Battle of Lexington.

Battles in those days took longer than they do today. First off, it took a while for the British to form into strict military formations, which, when viewed from the air, spelled out nationalistic slogans such as GO BRITS! This delay caused a great deal of irritation among the patriots:

PATRIOTS: C’mon! Aren’t you guys ready yet??

BRITISH: Not yet! Say, can you chaps give us a hand? We need two more men to cross the “T.”

Another problem was that the guns they used in those days, called muskets, took forever to load. First you had to put your powder in, then you had to put in a little piece of flint, then you had to ram some wadding down there, then you had to put in about a quarter teaspoon of paprika, and finally you had to put in your musket ball, which usually popped right back out again because there was hardly any room. It took so long to complete the Battle of Lexington that the two sides were nearly four hours late to the next scheduled event, the Battle of Concord. This was where the Americans invented the innovative guerrilla tactic of rushing up to the British, who were still dithering around with their formation (“Dammit, Nigel! You’re supposed to be part of the ‘O’!”), and bonking them manually over the heads with their unloaded muskets.

And thus the first round of the Revolutionary War went to the rebels. But Independence was not to be bought cheaply, for soon the king was sending reinforcements, seasoned troops who could form not only words, but also a locomotive with moving wheels. The rebels, realizing that they were in for a long, hard fight, decided to form the Second Continental Congress, whose members voted, after a long and stormy session, to grant themselves only a cost-of-living increase.

But this Continental Congress also knew that they would need an army, and they knew just the man to lead it—a man who was universally respected and admired, a man who had the experience and leadership needed to organize troops and lead them into battle. That man, of course, was: Dwight Eisenhower. Unfortunately, he would not be born for at least another dozen chapters, so they decided to go with George Washington, known as “The Father of His Country” because of such exploits as throwing a cherry bomb across the Potomac.

As leader of the American forces, Washington faced a most difficult task, because the Continental Army was poorly equipped. Just to cite one example, it had no soldiers. When Washington wanted to do the “Cadence Count” marching song, he would have to do both the “Sound off.” and the “One! Two!” part.

Eventually, however, Washington was able to recruit some troops via a promotion wherein if you enlisted in the army, you and a friend got an all-expenses-paid Winter for Two at Valley Forge. Nonetheless, the American troops were poor and ill trained. Many of them wore rags on their feet. They also wore their shoes on their heads. These were not exactly nuclear physicists, if you sense our meaning. But they were patriotic men, and they had a secret weapon that the king had not bargained on: “Yankee Doodle.” This was the Official Theme Song of the American Revolution, and when the Americans Marched into battle singing the inspirational part about how Yankee Doodle “stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni,” the effect on the British troops was devastating. “He called it what?” they would ask each other in confusion, thus giving the Americans the opening they needed to rush up and whack them with muskets.

This forced the king to try a new ploy: He sent over the Hessians, who spoke no English and consequently paid little attention to “Yankee Doodle.” That was the good news for the British side. The bad news was, the Hessians were actually German, which meant that the words they formed in their battle formations were humongous. For example, their equivalent Of GO BRITS! was: WANN FAHRTDERSUGAB EIN UMWIEVIELUHRKOMMTERAN! It would sometimes take them days to form a simple preposition.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress, in an atmosphere of crisis, was trying to write the Declaration of Independence. The responsibility for this task had originally been assigned to the Special Joint Committee for Writing the Declaration of Independence, whose members immediately voted to go on a fact-finding mission, with their spouses, to the French Riviera. It Soon became clear that it was going to take them a long time just to declare their souvenir purchases, let alone independence, so the task fell to Thomas Jefferson. On a historic night in 1776, the lanky red-haired Virginian picked up a quill pen and began scratching on a historic piece of parchment. He worked all night, and by morning he was ready to show his results to the others.

“Aren’t you supposed to dip the pen into the ink?” the others asked.

And so the lanky red-haired Virginian went back to work for another historic night, and by dawn he had produced the document that has come to express the ideals and hopes and dreams of an entire nation.

The Declaration Of Independence

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them,

a decent respect to the opinions of mankind require that they should get some sleep. Because I have been up for two nights now, declaring independence, and I may be a lanky Virginian but I am not a machine, for heaven’s sake, and it just doesn’t make sense to sit here scrawling away these compound-complex sentences when I just know nobody’s going to read them, because nobody ever does read all the way through these legal documents. Take leases. You take the average tenants, and you could put a

lease in front of them with a clause about halfway through stating that they have to eat toasted moose doots for breakfast, and I guarantee you they'll never read it. Not that it would make any difference if they did, because tenants ignore most of the rules anyway, such as the rules about not flushing inappropriate objects down the toilet. Ask any landlord what he spends most of his time doing, and the odds are he'll answer, "Pulling inappropriate objects out of tenants' toilets." I know one landlord who found a gerbil in there. Who the hell would do a thing like that?

A cat, yes. I could see that. I could see giving a modest rebate for that. But not a gerbil. I gotta lie down.

The members of the Continental Congress were extremely impressed by what Jefferson had written, at least the part that they read, and on the following day, October 8, the nation celebrated its very first July Fourth. The members took turns lighting sparklers and signing their John Hancocks to the Declaration, with one prankster even going so far as to actually write "John Hancock." But soon it was time for the Congress to return to the serious business at hand: issuing press releases.

Meanwhile, women and minority groups were making many important contributions. So were the French, who supported the patriot cause and sent over many invaluable fashion hints. But still the American troops were badly outnumbered, and they probably would never have won if not for the occurrence of:

The Turning Point

This turning point occurred in Trenton, New Jersey, where the Hessians had decided to spend Christmas, which should give you an idea of how out of it they were. As night fell, they got to drinking heavily and singing "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall," which takes forever in German, so it was the ideal time for the Americans to attack. Unfortunately, the ice-infested Delaware River lay between the two armies. The situation looked bleak, and all eyes turned to George Washington.

"We'll row over there in boats," he said, displaying the kind of leadership that he was famous for.

And so they climbed into some boats, and, after pausing briefly to pose for a famous oil painting by Emanuel Leutze (1816-1868.), they captured Trenton while suffering virtually no casualties, although a number of them did get urinated on. It was a major victory for the Americans.

But the Revolutionary War was not over yet. No, the historic Treaty of Ending the Revolutionary War was not to be signed for five more long years, years of pain, years of sacrifice, and—above all—years that will not be included in this book, because at the rate we're going through history here, we're never even going to get to the Civil War.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever flushed anything inappropriate down a toilet? Explain.
2. How come, in the famous oil painting by Emanuel Leutze, it looks like George Washington has a group the size of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in his rowboat?
3. Whatever happened to the Hessians, anyway? You never see them around.

Chapter Seven. The Forging Of A Large, Wasteful Bureaucracy

Against all odds, the colonists had won the war against England; now they faced an even greater task: planning the victory party. Who should be invited? Where would they put their coats? These were just two of the questions confronting the leaders of the fledgling nation. Also, extreme factions in several states felt that there should be some kind of government.

And so the leading statespersons from all thirteen states gathered in Philadelphia for a Constitutional Convention. There, over the bitter objections of conservatives, they voted to approve the historic Fashion Statement of 1787, under which delegates were required to wear knee pants, tight stockings, and wigs accessorized with ribbons. It was a radical pronouncement, and the delegates paid a high price for it—nearly half had to purchase completely new wardrobes. The convention had established that the old way of doing things was not going to be acceptable, which meant that they also had to come up with a bold new designer look for the government.

But there was much disagreement among the delegates about exactly what this look should be. Some wanted a weak president and a strong legislature. Some wanted a smart president and a dumb legislature. Some wanted a very short president and a deaf legislature. The New York delegation, typically, wanted a loud president and a rude legislature. Day after day the delegates argued, but they seemed to be getting no closer to agreement, and the new nation was in danger of collapsing before it ever really had a chance to get started. But just when the convention appeared to be at a total impasse, the aging statesman Benjamin Franklin rose to his feet and, as the other delegates listened raptly, emitted a three-foot streamer of drool. The others alertly took this to be a sign from the wily veteran Communicator that it was time to ratify the U.S. Constitution, and so they did.

The U.S. Constitution

The Constitution divides the federal government into three equal branches:

1. Mammoth, labyrinthian departments set up for purposes that no individual taxpayer would ever in a million years voluntarily spend money on.
2. Mammoth, labyrinthian departments set up for purposes that probably made a lot of sense originally, but nobody can remember what they are.
3. Statuary.

This separation of powers creates a system of checks and balances, which protects everybody by ensuring that any action taken by one part of the government will be rendered utterly meaningless by an equal and opposite reaction from some other part.

The highest-ranking officer in the government is the president, who is elected to a four-year term after a three-year, nine-month campaign in which he is required to state that he has a Vision and plans to provide Leadership. The president's primary duties are to get on helicopters; bitch about Congress; and send the vice president abroad to frown with sorrow at the remains of deceased foreign leaders.

The Constitution also provides for the election of a Senate, which consists of two white men in gray suits from each state; and a House of Representatives, which consists of three or four hundred men

named “Bob” or “Dick” with blond wives whose hobbies are gardening, furniture, and the mentally retarded. The primary duties of the members of both houses of Congress are:

1. Running for reelection.
2. Having staffs.
3. Getting subsidized haircuts.
4. Sending out newsletters featuring photographs of themselves standing next to the president, designed to create the impression that the president is relying upon them for advice and counsel, when he is in fact trying to remember who the hell they are.

How a Bill Becomes a Law

First the bill secretes a substance that it uses to form a cocoon, and then it ... No, sorry. That’S how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The way a bill becomes a law is:

1. A member of Congress notices that there is some problem afflicting the nation. For example, he might notice that the nation is not observing a sufficient quantity of idiot official days and weeks, such as National Tractor Mechanic Awareness Week, and so he introduces a bill to correct this problem.
2. The bill is referred to a committee, which forms a subcommittee for the purpose of going to Geneva, Switzerland, to see if there are any facts there that might be useful.
3. The bill is reported back to the committee, which holds hearings and receives testimony from interested parties such as the American Aspirin Bottle Manufacturers Association.
4. Needed amendments are attached to the bill, for example an amendment designed to protect the American consumer from the potential dangers of aspirin bottles manufactured by unfair foreign competitors.
5. The bill is reported out of the committee.
6. Everybody goes on vacation for a couple of weeks.
7. The bill is reported back to the committee.
8. The bill is reported to the police.
9. The Supreme Court declares the bill to be unconstitutional.
10. The Cheese stands alone.

The Bill Of Rights

The first ten amendments to the Constitution are known as “The Bill of Rights,” because that is what everybody calls them. These amendments spell out the basic rights that all of us enjoy as Americans:

The First Amendment states that members of religious groups, no matter how small or unpopular, shall have the right to hassle you in airports. The Second Amendment states that, since a well-regulated militia is necessary to the security of a free state, you can buy high-powered guns via mail order and go out into the woods with your friends and absolutely vaporize some deer. The Third Amendment states that you don’t have to quarter troops inside your house. “You troops are just going to have to sleep on the patio” is a perfectly constitutional thing for You to tell them. The Fourth Amendment states that if your aunt had testicles, she would be your uncle. The Fifth Amendment states that your Fifth Amendment rights cannot be violated until you are advised of them. The Sixth Amendment states that if you ar accused of a crime, you have the right to a trial before a jury of people too stupid to get out of jury duty. The Seventh Amendment states that if you are in the Express Lane, and you have more than

one item of produce of the same biological type, such as two grapefruit, you have the right to count these as one item in order to keep yourself under the ten-item limit. The Eighth Amendment states that if You are seated directly in front of a person who has to comment on every Single scene in the movie—and we are talking here about Perceptive Comments, such as when a movie character is getting into his car and the person behind you says, “He’s getting into his car now!”—then you have the right to go “SSSHHHHH?” two times in a warning manner, after which you have the right to kill this person with a stick. The Ninth Amendment states that you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. The Tenth Amendment states that, OK, if your neighbor’s wife is dropping a lot of hints, really coming on to you, that is a different matter.

Ratification of the Constitution

it took a long time for the states to ratify the Constitution, because in those days communication was difficult. After a state legislature had voted for ratification, a messenger would be dispatched on horseback to carry the word to the new nation’s capital. Often he would ride for days over poor roads through sparsely populated wilderness areas until he realized that the new nation had no capital. “Ha-ha!” he would remark to his horse. “That darned legislature has tricked me again!” Then he would be attacked by bears. Clearly a capital was needed. The logical choice seemed to be Washington, D.C., a city blessed with a natural beltway teeming with consultants.

Also we should keep in mind that women and minority groups were continuing to make some gigantic contributions.

The Election Of The First President

The leading contender in the first presidential election race was George Washington, who waged a campaign based on heavy exposure in media such as coins, stamps, and famous oil paintings. This shrewd strategy carried him to a landslide victory in which he carried every state except Massachusetts, which voted for George McGovern.

And thus it was that on October 8, the newly sworn-in president stood before a large cheering throng of his fellow countrymen and delivered his famous inaugural address, in which he offered the famous stirring words “We cannot [something] the [machines? birds?] of [something] will never [something]. As far as I know.” Unfortunately, there were no microphones back then. This was only one of the problems facing the fledgling nation, as we shall see.

Discussion Questions

1. How come history books never have sex scenes? You know, like: “James Madison, unable to restrain his passion any longer, thrust his ink-engorged pen into the second draft of the Federalist papers.
2. Scientists tell us that the fastest animal on earth, With a top speed of 120 feet per second, is a cow that has been dropped out of a helicopter. How long, traveling at top speed, will it take the cow to travel 360 feet?

Chapter Eight. A Brash Young Nation Gets

Into Wars And Stuff

Once the federal government was organized, the biggest problem was how to pay off the fledgling nation's massive war debt. The Founding Fathers were starting to get disturbing letters like this:

Dear Mr. Father:

This is the fourth time we've written regarding your outstanding balance of \$23,784,982.34. While we certainly value your fledgling business, we must inform you that unless you immediately make arrangements to repay this amount, we will regretfully have to return you to British rule.

Sincerely,

The VISA Corporation "More Powerful than God"

Fortunately, one of the Founding Fathers was a shrewd financial thinker named Alexander Hamilton, who came up with an idea for repayment of the debt based on a concept so brilliant—and yet so simple—that it remains extremely popular with governments to this very day.

"Let's print money with our pictures on it," Hamilton suggested.

And so they did. The hardest part was deciding which Founding Father would get to be on which denomination of bill, an issue that led to the infamous duel between Hamilton and Aaron Burr, both of whom wanted to be on the fifty. Burr won the duel in overtime, although years later he died anyway, little realizing that his great-great-grandson Raymond Burr would go on to become one of the widest actors in American history.

The Election Of 1792

George Washington decided to run for reelection in 1792, because he felt that his work was not finished. In fact, it wasn't even started, because, the roads being what they were, he had spent his entire first term en route from his Virginia home to the temporary U.S. capital in Philadelphia. His slogan was:

VOTE FOR GEORGE WASHINGTON

"He's Almost As Far As Baltimore."

Washington was reelected unanimously and reached Philadelphia several months later, only to learn that the capital was now operating out of Washington, D.C., which he managed to reach just in time to deliver his famous farewell address, containing the prophetic warning "We should get [something] has to [something] these darned [something] complex all over the place."

The Rise Of Political Parties

With Washington no longer on the scene, political parties began to form, the main ones being the Republicans, the Federalists, the Sharks, the Home Boys, the Del-Vikings, and the Church of Scientology. The major issue dividing these parties was whether the United States should enter into an alliance with France in its war with Britain. It was not an easy decision: On the one hand, France had provided invaluable support during the Revolutionary War, support without which the colonies might never have achieved their independence from the brutal tyranny of England; on the other hand, France contained a lot of French people. You tried to form an alliance with them, and all they did was smirk at

your pronunciation. Ultimately a compromise was reached under which the United States signed a treaty with brutal, tyrannical old England, and sent the wily veteran diplomat Benjamin Franklin over to mollify France with a nice basket of apples, which he ate en route.

In 1796 John Adams was elected as the nation's second president, thanks to the support of the Anal Compulsive Party, whose members believed that henceforth presidents should be elected in alphabetical order so that it would be easier to remember them all during history tests. It was during Adams's administration that the famous "XYZ Affair" took place. What happened was, Adams sent a diplomatic mission over to France to protest the fact that the French were seizing American ships and redecorating them by force. When the Americans got to France, the French foreign minister told them to meet with three secret agents, known only as "X," "Y," and "Z."

"If you can guess their real names and occupations," the French foreign minister said, "you'll receive diplomatic recognition and the Brunswick pool table!

Unfortunately the Americans could correctly identify only one agent (Kitty Carlisle.) and never reached the bonus round, but they did receive some lovely consolation prizes.

Another major event to occur around this time was the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which made it illegal to engage in acts of sedition with an alien unless you were both consenting adults. This so enraged the voters that they elected Thomas Jefferson as the third president, thus ruining the alphabetical-order concept and plunging the nation into what historians refer to as the Era of Presidents Whose Names Nobody Can Remember, which did not end until President Evelyn Lincoln.

But this did not stop women and minority groups from continuing to achieve many noteworthy achievements.

Meanwhile, Jefferson faced the issue of what to do about the Barbary States, a group of small pirate nations on the Mediterranean that were preying on international commerce by sailing out to passing merchant ships and demanding spare change. Most major nations were paying bribes, or "tribute," to the Barbary States in exchange for safe passage, but Jefferson angrily rejected this idea with his famous epigram "The hell with those dirtbags."

So he sent some warships over there to explain to the pirates, in diplomatic terms, the various international diplomatic implications of having their bodies perforated by eight-inch cannonball holes, and the pirates agreed to cool it. This bold action by Jefferson established an honorable American tradition of "getting tough" with terrorists that continued in the United States until the latter half of the twentieth century, when it was replaced by the tradition of "calling a press conference and threatening to get tough" with terrorists.

The Louisiana Purchase

While this was going on, England and France were at war with Spain. Or perhaps England and Spain were at war with ... No! This is it: France and Spain were at war with England. But only because Germany did not exist at the time. As far as we know.

Anyway, the result was that for some reason France decided to sell a large piece of property in North America. The French government put the following advertisement in The New York Times real estate section:

NICE PIECE OF LAND approx. 34 hillion jillion acres convenient to West perfect for growing nation.

So Jefferson did a little checking and he found that this property was in fact zoned for Westward Expansion, and he made an offer of \$12 million. The French countered with \$15 million, but they also threw in the appliances, and they had themselves a deal. After the closing ceremony, Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark off to hold the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It was hard going: The land was wild and untamed; there were hostile Americans around; and Clark bitched constantly because he thought it should be called “The Clark and Lewis Expedition.” Nevertheless, they were able to explore the entire region, and when they returned to Washington on October 8 they reported that it contained not just Louisiana; but a whole bunch of other states as well, although some of them, such as South Dakota, needed work.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the situation worsened as England joined France in declaring war against Spain, unaware that France had joined Spain in declaring war against England, and that Spain, acting in haste, had accidentally declared war against itself. The United States tried, by depressing the clutch of diplomacy and downshifting the gearshift lever of rhetoric, to remain neutral, but it became increasingly obvious that the nation was going to get into a war, especially since it was almost 1812. A worried nation turned its eyes anxiously toward Thomas Jefferson, then had a good laugh at its own expense when it realized that he was no longer the president. He had been replaced by President James Something, Monroe or Madison, who immediately placed the country on a war footing (Whatever that means.).

The War Of 1812

The War of 1812 began very badly, with British troops marching right into Washington and setting fire to it, severely disrupting restaurant operations and forcing hundreds of lobbyists to eat in the suburbs. But soon the tide started to turn the Americans’ way, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the nation’s first defense contractor, Ye Old General Dynamics Corporation, which signed a \$23.7 million contract to produce a vital new weapons system, the X-97 laser-controlled “Thunderfire” Musket , an innovative concept that promised to give U.S. soldiers a real technical edge on the field of battle. Unfortunately it was not ready for actual testing until 1957, when it blew up.

The Treaty Of Ghent

This sounds pretty boring to us so we’re just going to skip right over it.

Discussion Questions

1. Define the following: “dirtbag.”
2. Just who is Kitty Carlisle, anyway?

Fascinating Historical Sidenote To History

During the War of 1812, a young poet named Francis “Scott” Key watched the battle for Fort “Mac” Henry, and he was so moved by the sight of the American flag still waving in the dawn’s early light that he wrote the immortal words that Americans still proudly sing today:

Take me out to the ball game
Take me out with the croooowwwwd ...

Chapter Nine. Barging Westward

The first major president to be elected after the War of 1812 was President Monroe Doctrine, who became famous by developing the policy, for which he is named. This policy, which is still in effect today, states that:

1. Other nations are not allowed to mess around with the internal affairs of nations in this hemisphere.
2. But we are.
3. Ha-ha-ha.

President Doctrine also purchased Florida from Spain for \$5 million. Unfortunately, like many first-time buyers of vast New World territories, he failed to inspect the property first; by the time he found out that Florida mostly consisted of swamps infested with armor-piercing mosquitoes the size of Volvo station wagons, Spain had already deposited the check.

In 1816, a political party called the Federalists nominated for president a man named Rufus King, then ceased to exist. The year 1819 saw the occurrence of the aptly named Panic of 1819 which was caused when the growing nation woke up in the middle of the night thinking it had a term paper due. Fortunately this turned out to be just a dream, and things remained fairly calm until 1825, which saw the election of yet another person named John Adams, who was backed by the Party to Elect Only Presidents Named John Adams.

Meanwhile, hardy settlers continued to move westward and discover new virgin lands, unconquered and unclaimed by anybody, unless you counted the Native Americans, which these hardy settlers did not. And, anyhow, before long there were even fewer to count. Soon they had settled a number of territories—Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Guam—and they were clamoring to become official states so they could start electing legislatures and having state mottoes and official state insects and stuff. But Congress could not readily agree on a procedure for admitting states to the union. The northern politicians felt it should be a simple ceremony, with maybe a small reception afterward; the southerners felt it should be more of a fraternity-style initiation, with new states being forced to do wacky stunts such as get up and sing “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain When She Comes” naked. Finally the impasse was broken by means of the Missouri Compromise, under which it was agreed that one half of the people would pronounce it “Missour-EE” and the other half would pronounce it “Missour-UH.”

In 1828 Andrew “Stonewall” Jackson was elected president with the support of the Party to Elect Presidents with Stupid Nicknames. His running mate was South Carolinian John C. “Those Little Flies That Sometimes Get in Your Nose” Calhoun, a bitter rival of Secretary of State Martin “Van” Buren, who, with the backing of the brilliant orator Daniel “The Brilliant Orator” Webster, was able to persuade Jackson to replace Calhoun with Van Buren on the 1832 ticket, little aware that Denise and her periodontist were secretly meeting at the same motel where Rhonda had revealed to Dirk that she was in fact the sex-changed former Green Beret who fathered the half-Vietnamese twins that Lisa left in the O’Hare baggage-claim area the night she left to get her Haitian divorce and wound up as a zombie

instead, thus resulting in the formation by Henry Clay of the Whig party. Their slogan was “Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too,” and they meant every word of it.

None of this would have been possible, of course, without the continued contributions of women and minority groups.

The Federal Banking Crisis Of 1837

Trust us: This was even more boring than the Treaty of Ghent.

Culture

Meanwhile, culture was continuing to occur in some areas. In New England, for example, essayist Henry David Thoreau created an enduring masterpiece of American philosophical thought when, rejecting the stifling influences of civilization, he went off to live all alone on Walden Pond, where, after two years of an ascetic and highly introspective life, he was eaten by turtles. That did not stop the march of culture. Authors such as James Fenimore Cooper (Pippi Leatherstocking, Hiawatha, Natty Bumppo Gets Drunk and Shoots His Own Leg), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Ludicrously Repetitious Poems That Nobody Ever Finishes), and Herman Melville (Moby-Dick, Moby-Dick II, Moby-Dick vs. the Atomic Bat from Hell) cranked out a series of literary masterpieces that will be remembered as long as they are required reading in high school English classes.

Tremendous advances were also being made in technology. A nautical inventor named Robert Fulton came up with the idea of putting a steam engine on a riverboat. Naturally it sank like a stone, thus creating one of many underwater hazards that paved the way for a young man named Samuel Clemens, who got a job standing on the front of riverboats, peering into the water, and shouting out literary pseudonyms such as “George Eliot!” The steam engine also played a vital role in the development of the famous “Iron Horse,” which could haul heavy loads, but which also tended to produce the famous “Monster Piles of Iron Droppings” and thus was eventually replaced by the locomotive.

Tremendous strides were also being taken in the area of communication. With the invention of the rotary press, newspapers were made available not just to the wealthy literate elite, but also to the average low-life scum, who were suddenly able to keep abreast, through pioneering populist papers like the New York Post, of such national issues as NAB FAIR IN NUN STAB and LINK PORN SLAY TO EYE SLICE MOB. Another major advance in communication was the telegraph, which was invented by Samuel Morse, who also devised the code that is named after him: “pig Latin.” Wires were soon being strung across the vast continent, and by October 8 a message could be transmitted from New York to California, carried by courageous Pony Express riders, who galloped full speed on courageous horses that would often get as far as thirty feet before they would fall off the wires and splat courageously onto the ground.

This created a growing awareness of the practical value of roads, and in 1809 work began on the nation’s first highway, the Long Island Expressway, which is scheduled for completion next year (Barring unforeseen delays.). In 1825, New York completed the Erie Canal, which connected Buffalo and Albany, thus enabling these two exciting Cities to trade bargeloads of slush. The Erie Canal was an instant financial success, and became even more profitable fourteen years later, when a sharp young

engineer suggested filling it with water.

“MANIFEST DESTINY”

“Manifest destiny” is a phrase you see in a lot of history books. Another one is “Fifty-four-forty or fight.”

The Formation Of Texas

At this point Mexico owned the territory that we now call “Texas,” which consisted primarily of what we now call “dirt.” Gradually, however, it began to fill up with Americans, who developed a unique frontier life-style based on drinking Pearl beer, going “wooo-EEEE!” real loud, and making cash payments to football players. This irritated the Mexican government, which sent a general named Santa Anna (SAN-TA ANN-A) up to attack the Texans at the Alamo (AL-A-MO), where, in one of the most heroic, (HE-RO-IC) scenes in American history, the legendary Davy Crockett (played by Fess Parker) used his legendary rifle, “Betsy” (played by “Denise”), as a club in a futile (STUPID) effort to fend off Santa Anna’s troops. But the tragedy served as a blessing in disguise, because a short time later the legendary Sam Houston, showing that he had learned the harsh lesson of the Alamo, ordered his troops to try using their rifles as rifles. Not only did they rout the Mexicans, but they went on to defeat Oklahoma in the Cotton Bowl. And thus Texas was born although it was not permitted to enter the union for ten more years, because of NCAA violations.

At this point the president of the United States, a stud named James K. Polk, declared war against Mexico. Don’t ask us why. We are a history book, not a mind reader. This resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (GUA-DA ... OH, NE-VER MIND), under which the uNited States got the rest of the Southwest and California, and Mexico got smaller.

The Rush To California

One day in the winter of 1848, a worker was digging in a pond on the northern California farm of Swiss immigrant Johann Sutter. Suddenly the man stopped and stared, for there, gleaming through the muck on his shovel blade, was a discovery that was to transform the entire California territory almost overnight: a movie camera. Word of the discovery spread like wildfire, and Soon thousands of actors, agents, producers, and so forth were rushing westward, overburdening the territory’s limited restaurant facilities and causing the price of valet parking to skyrocket. Soon there were more than a hundred thousand residents, which raised the issue: Should California be declared a state? Or, in this case, maybe even a separate planet?

These were just some of the storm clouds now gathering over the nation’s political landscape. For meanwhile, back east, the cold front of moral outrage was moving inexorably toward the low-pressure system of southern economic interests, creating another of those frontal systems of conflict that would inevitably result in a violent afternoon or evening thundershower of Carnage. Also, it was time for the Civil War.

Discussion Questions

1. In the song “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain When She Comes,” why do they announce so cheerfully that they intend to “kill the old red rooster when she comes”? Is it some kind of ritual thing? Or is it that they just hate the old red rooster, because maybe it pecked them or something when they were children, and now they’re just using the fact that she’s comin’ ‘round the mountain as an excuse to kill it?

2. An-cay oo-yay eak-spay ig-pay atin-lay? Explain.

3. Define the following: “Wooo-EEEE!”

Chapter Ten. The Civil War: A Nation Pokes Itself In The Eyeball

The seeds of the Civil War were sown in the late eighteenth century when Eli Whitney invented the “Cotton gin,” a machine capable of turning cotton into gin many times faster than it could be done by hand. This created a great demand for cotton-field workers, whom the South originally attempted to recruit by placing “help wanted” advertisements in the newspaper:

ATTENTION SELF-STARTERS! Are you that special “Can-do” kind of guy or gal who’s looking for a chance to work extremely hard under horrible conditions for your entire life without getting paid and being severely beaten whenever we feel like it, plus we get to keep your children? To find out more about this exciting career opportunity, contact: The South.

Oddly enough, this advertisement failed to produce any applicants, and so the South decided to go with slavery. Many people argued that slavery was inhuman and cruel and should be abolished but the slave owners argued that it wasn’t so bad, and that in fact the slaves actually were happy, the evidence for this being that they sometimes rattled their chains in a rhythmic fashion.

By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery was the topic of heated debate among just about everybody in the country except of course the actual slaves, most of whom were busy either working or fleeing through swamps. The crisis deepened in 1850, when President Zachary Taylor died of cholera, fueling fears that we forgot to mention his election in the previous chapter. Taylor’s death led to the presidency of a man whose name has since become synonymous, in American history, with the term “Millard Fillmore”: Millard Fillmore.

Highlights Of The Fillmore Administration

1. The Earth did not crash into the Sun.

After Fillmore came Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, who as far as we can tell were both president at the same time. This time-saving measure paved the way for the election of Abraham Lincoln, who was popular with the voters because he possessed an extremely rustic Set of origins.

The Origins Of Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln’s family was poor. He was born in a log cabin. And when we say “a log cabin,” we are talking

about a cabin that consisted entirely of one single log. That is how poor Lincoln's family was. When it rained, everybody had to lie down under the log, the result being that Lincoln grew up to be very long and narrow, which turned out to be the ideal physique for splitting rails. Young Abe would get out there with his ax, and he'd split hundreds of rails at a time, and people would come from miles around. "Dammit, Lincoln," they'd say, "those rails cost good money!" But in the end they forgave young Abe, because he had the ax.

He was also known for his honesty. In one famous historical anecdote, Lincoln was tending store, and a customer accidentally left his change on the counter, and young Abe picked it up and walked fourteen miles with it, only to glance down and realize that his face was on the penny. This anecdote gave Lincoln the nickname that was to serve him so well in politics—"Old Ironsides"—and it earned him an invitation to appear as a contestant on The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the most popular show of the era. Lincoln was able to get to the bonus round, where he correctly answered the question "How much is four score plus seven?" thus winning the Samsonite luggage and the presidency of the United States.

This resulted in yet another famous historical anecdote. When Lincoln assumed the presidency, he was clean-shaven, but one day he got a letter from a little girl suggesting that he grow a beard. So he did, and he thought it looked pretty good, so he decided to keep it. A short while later, he got another letter from the little girl, this time suggesting that he wear mascara and rouge and maybe a simple string of pearls. Fortunately, just then the Civil War broke out.

The Civil War

This was pretty depressing. Brother fought against brother unless he had no male siblings, in which case he fought against his sister. Sometimes he would even take a shot at his cousin. Sooner or later, this resulted in a horrendous amount of devastation, particularly in the South, where things got so bad that Clark Gable, in what is probably the most famous scene from the entire Civil War, turned to Vivien Leigh, and said: "Frankly, my dear, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." This epitomized the feeling of despair that was widespread in the Confederacy as the war ended, and it left a vast reservoir of bitterness toward the North. But as the old saying goes, "Time heals all wounds," and in the more than 120 years that have passed since the Civil War ended, most of this bitterness gradually gave way to subdued loathing, which is where we stand today.

Reconstruction

After the Civil War came Reconstruction, a period during which the South was transformed, through a series of congressional acts, from a totally segregated region where blacks had no rights into a totally segregated region where blacks were supposed to have rights but did not. Much of this progress occurred during the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant, who in 1868

defeated a person named Horatio Seymour in a race where both candidates had the backing of the Let's Elect Presidents with Comical First Names party, whose members practically wet their pants with joy in 1876 over the election of Rutherford B. Hayes, who went on to die—you can look this up—in a place called Fremont, Ohio. Clearly the troubled nation had nowhere to go except up.

Discussion Questions

1. If he had a beard, where would he apply the rouge?

Fun Classroom Project

See if you can name the causes of the Civil War.

Chapter Eleven. The Nation Enters Chapter Eleven

The end of the Civil War paved the way for what Mark Twain, with his remarkable knack for coining the perfect descriptive phrase, called “the POst-Civil War era.” This was a period unlike any that had preceded it. For one thing, it occurred later on. Also it was an Age of Invention. Perhaps the most important invention was the brain-child of Thomas “Alva” Edison, a brilliant New Jerseyan who, in 1879, astounded the world when he ran an electrical Current through a carbonized cotton filament inside a glass globe, thus creating the first compact-disc player. Unfortunately it broke almost immediately and did not come back from the repair shop for nearly a century (And it still didn’t work right.). But this did not stop the prolific Edison from numerous other electronic breakthroughs that we now take for granted, including: the Rate Increase; the Limited Warranty; the Eight “C” Batteries That Are Not Included; the Instructions That Are Badly Translated from Japanese; and the Newspaper Ad Featuring Four Thousand Tiny Blurred Pictures of What Appears to Be the Same VCR. For these achievements, Edison was awarded, after his death, one of the highest honors that can be bestowed upon a dead American citizen: A service plaza off the New Jersey Turnpike was named after him (The first is named for Marvin Kitman, the second for Al Capone.). Parts of it still stand today.

Another famous genius of the era was Alexander Graham Bell System, who in some specific year beginning with “18” invented “the area code,” thus paving the way for long distance, without which modern telephone-company commercials would not be possible. Originally there was only one area code, called “1” but over the years new ones were added steadily, and telephone-company researchers now foresee the day when, thanks to modern computers, every telephone in the nation will be a long-distance call from every other telephone, even if it’s in the same house.

Meanwhile, the nation’s rural areas were being greatly affected by the McCormick reaper, which was invented by Cyrus McCormick and paved the way for the Midwest, a group of flat Protestant states containing an enormous amount of agriculture in the form of wheat. Formerly, to reap a single acre of wheat, a farmer would have to work for four days, with the help of two farmhands driving six mules. But now he could sit back and relax as the reaper roared through as many as ten acres per hour, reaping the living hell out of everything that stood in its path, occasionally spitting out bits of mule fur or farmhand clothing, which could easily be reassembled thanks to the sewing machine, invented by Elias Howe. “Don’t ask me Howe it works!” he used to say, over and over, until finally somebody, we think his wife, shot him in the head with a revolver, invented by Samuel Colt.

McCormick's invention was so successful that by the early 1870s the Midwest was disappearing under an enormous mound of reaped wheat, and it became clear that some kind of efficient method was needed to get it to the big cities, where it could be converted into sandwiches, which had been invented earlier in England by Samuel Bacon, Lettuce, and Tomato. This caused Congress to authorize work on the first transcontinental railroad corporation, Amtrak. Two work crews began laying rails, one starting on the East Coast and the other on the West Coast. It was hard going. The crews endured broiling heat and bitter cold, often simultaneously. But they persevered, and finally, on October 8, the two crews met at Promontory Point, Utah, where, in a moving and historic ceremony, top railroad executives gathered to explain to them that they were supposed to be nailing the rails down, for God's sake. But even this setback did not prevent women and minority groups from achieving many notable achievements.

The Rise Of Heavy Industry

Around this time heavy industry started to rise, thanks to the work of heavy industrialists such as Andrew "Dale" Carnegie, who made a fortune going around the country holding seminars in which he taught people how to Win friends by making steel. Another one was John D. Rockefeller, who invented oil and eventually created a monopoly, culminating in 1884 when he was able to put hotels on both Park Place and Boardwalk. This made him so rich that everybody started hating him, and he was ultimately forced to change his name to "Exxon."

As heavy industrialism became more popular, large horrible factories were built in eastern cities. The workers—often minority women and children—toiled under grueling, dangerous conditions for twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for an average weekly salary of only \$1.80, out of which they had to "voluntarily" give 85 cents to the United Fund. On top of this, the factory workers were subjected to one of the most cruel and inhumane labor concepts ever conceived of by the mind of industrial man: vending-machine food. The suffering this caused can only be imagined by us fortunate modern corporation employees, but we can get some idea of what it was like by reading this chilling excerpt from a nineteenth-century New York factory worker's diary:

Nobody knows where the food comes from, or even if it really is food. There is a machine that dispenses liquids that are allegedly "coffee," "tea," "hot chocolate," and even "soup," which all come from the same orifice and all taste exactly the same. Another machine dispenses bags containing a grand total of maybe three potato chips each, and packages of crackers smeared with a bizarre substance called "cheez," which is the same bright-orange color as marine rescue equipment. The machine for some reason is constructed in such a way that it drops these items from a great height, causing the contents, already brittle with age, to shatter into thousands of pieces. Also half the time it just eats your money, and forget about getting a refund ...

Conditions such as these resulted in the Labor Movement, the most important leader of which was Samuel Gompers. And even if he wasn't the most important, he definitely had the best name. We could just say it over and over: Gompers Gompers Gompers. This would be an excellent name for a large dog (Such as a Labrador retriever.). "Gompers!" we can just hear ourselves yelling. "You put that Federal Express man down right now!" Nevertheless it was to be a long, hard struggle before the Labor Movement was to win even minimal concessions from the big industrialists—years of strikes and violence and singing traditional Labor Movement protest songs such as "Take This Job and Shove

It.” But it was the courage of these early labor pioneers that ultimately made possible the working conditions and wages and benefits that American factory workers would probably be enjoying today if the industrialists hadn’t moved their manufacturing operations to Asia.

The Settlement Of The West

When the Civil War ended, the West was still a region of great wildness, a fact that had earned it the nickname “The Great Plains.” In this rough, untamed environment had emerged the cowboy, a hard-ridin’ straight-shootin’ rip-snortin’ cow-punchin’ breed of hombre who was to become the stuff of several major cigarette promotions. To this day you can walk up to any schoolboy and mention one of those legendary Old West names—Wyatt Earp, “Wild Bill” Hickok, Gary Cooper, “Quick Draw” McGraw, Luke Skywalker—and chances are the schoolboy, as he has been taught to do, will scream for help, and you will be arrested on suspicion of being a pervert. So maybe you better just take our word for it.

Nevertheless, the West was gradually being settled. The federal government had acquired assorted western territories like Utah through treaties with the Native American inhabitants under which the united States got the land and the Native Americans got a full thirty minutes’ head start before the army came after them. In 1889 the U.S. government opened up the Oklahoma territory, which resulted in the famous “Oklahoma land rush” as thousands of would-be settlers came racing in to look around, resulting in the famous “rush to get the hell back out of Oklahoma.”

Another important acquisition was made in 1867, when Secretary of State Seward Folly purchased Alaska for \$7 million, which at the time seemed like a lot of money but which today we recognize as being about one third the cost of a hotel breakfast in Anchorage. Alaska was originally a large place located way the hell up past Canada, but this proved to be highly inconvenient for mapmakers, who in 1873 voted to make it smaller and put it in a little box next to Hawaii right off the coast of California, which is where it is today.

While all this expansion was going on, presidents were continuing to be elected right on schedule in 1868, 1872, 1876, and so on, and we’re pretty sure that at least one of them was named Rutherford. Also during this era the large eastern cities began to experiment with a new form of government, favored by newspaper cartoonists, called the Easily Caricatured Corrupt Spherical Bosses Weighing a Minimum of 400 Pounds system. This system was very unpopular, because it resulted in an unresponsive government filled with overpaid drones and hacks who, no matter how little they did or how badly they did it, could be removed from their jobs only by the unelected bosses. The result of this discontent, the Reform Movement, produced the modern “Civil Service” system, under which drones and hacks can be removed only by nuclear weapons.

In 1880 the voters elected a president named Chester, and in 1884 they elected one named Grover. We now think this might have been caused by a comet. Also there was a hideous hassle involving William Jennings Bryan and something called the “gold standard,” but every time anybody tries to explain it to us we get a terrible headache. We have the same problem with the concept of “second cousins.”

Discussion Questions

1. Can you name another famous person for whom a service plaza is named?
(Hint: Vince Lombardi.)
2. What is “rip-snortin’,” anyway? Do you think it should be legal?
3. Do you have any second cousins? So what?

Chapter Twelve. Groping Toward Empire

By 1890 the west had been tamed and could even obey simple commands such as “Sit!” Now the United States was no longer an infant nation but a mighty young colossus, bestriding (Unless there is no such word.) the continent—in the words of Mark Twain—”like some kind of mighty young colossus or something.” America was the Land of Opportunity, and its symbol was the Statue of Liberty, a gift from the French that had been dedicated in 1886 in a spectacular ceremony featuring a thousand John Philip Sousa impersonators. The statue was placed in New York Harbor, where its raised torch served as a welcoming beacon of hope and freedom to millions of oppressed and downtrodden fish. Then somebody came up with the idea of taking it out of the water and putting it on an island, and from that day on it was a major tourist attraction for European immigrants, who flocked to America by the millions, drawn by the promise expressed in the stirring poem by Emma Lazarus:

Give me your low-income individuals
Tired of these dense tempest-tost huddles
Yearning to get the hell off the boat
And retch all over the teeming shore

And so they came—the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, the Germans, the Greeks, the Klingons, the Marcoses—lured by tales of good jobs and streets paved with gold and plenty of closet space. But what they found was quite different. What they found was New York City—a frantic, bustling place; a giant (to use Mark Twain’s phrase) “fondue pot” in which people from many nationalities, crowded together by necessity, gradually began to realize that despite their differences in language, custom, and religion, they all, in the end, hated each other. Also the Americans who already lived here, except for Emma Lazarus, were not exactly crazy about immigrants either. And so the new citizens formed neighborhoods, and they moved into cramped tenement apartments, and a lot of them still live there. They don’t move out even when they die, because New York apartments are too valuable to give up.

As New York City grew and prospered, it began to form corporations, enormous “super-companies” whose vast resources enabled them to do something that smaller firms could only dream of: transfer people. This created a demand for new Cities, which soon flourished in places such as Minneapolis, Chicago, and even, for a brief period, Cleveland.

But perhaps the most important new industrial area was Detroit, founded by Henry Ford I, who also invented the Ford, forerunner to today’s Isuzu. The key to Ford’s success as an industrialist was his discovery of the assembly line, which worked on a simple principle: Instead of having the workers move from place to place to assemble the cars, he had the cars move from place to place to assemble the workers. For some reason this proved to be extremely efficient, and in 1913 the Ford Motor Company began cranking out thousands of the famous “Model T.” By modern automotive standards, the Model T was very primitive: It had no electric starter, no radio, no heater, no air conditioner, no brakes, no transmission, no engine, and no wheels. The only way to get it to actually move was to have four or five burly men pick it up and stagger down the street. But it was affordable, and people bought it like

crazy. “What the hell,” they said. “There’S nowhere to go anyway, here in 1913.”

Meanwhile, another historic transportation development was taking place in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, a desolate spit of sand where two young bicycle mechanics named Wilbur and Orville Wright Brothers had gone to escape from people who teased them about their first names. Also they were interested in heavier-than-air flight. They used to sit on the dunes for hours, studying the soaring sea gulls, hoping to learn the aerodynamic secret that kept them aloft. And then one historic day, a shout rang out: “I’ve got it, Wilbur! They’re using propellers driven by gasoline engines!” And then another shout: “I’m not Wilbur! You’re Wilbur!” This was after many days on the dunes.

Nevertheless they went ahead and built their “flying machine,” and on October 8, they were ready for their first flight. Unfortunately, it had to be canceled because of equipment problems at O’Hare, but they persevered, and finally came the historic moment when Wilbur, or possibly Orville, managed to get the frail, odd-looking craft airborne as far as Atlanta, where he changed to a connecting flight (Daily except Sunday; featuring “snack” service.), thus successfully launching the Aviation Age, although his luggage was never found.

This new spirit of soaring optimism could also be detected in the arts, most notably in the work of Horatio Alger, who wrote a series of very popular “rags to riches” stories in which a poor but intelligent young man is able, through hard work and honesty, to locate the Wizard of Oz. A number of talented American painters whose names escape us at the moment sprang up and created a number of important paintings that we probably still cherish today. The same thing happened with sculpture, not to mention women and minority groups, who continued to make gigantic contributions despite continuing to have no more legal rights than gravel. All in all, the turn of the century was an exciting, boisterous time for America, a raucous cacophony of energy and invention, idealism and hucksterism—in short, to repeat the words of the brilliant poet and chocolate manufacturer Walt Whitman, it was “loud.” This caused imperialism to wake up.

The Awakening Of Imperialism

The first thing American imperialism noticed when it woke up was Cuba. At the time Cuba technically belonged to Spain, which alert readers will remember as the country that, in previous Confrontations with the United States, had proved to be about as effective, militarily, as a tuna Casserole. So it seemed like the ideal time to barge down there and free Cuba from the yoke of Spanish imperialism by placing it under the yoke of U.S. imperialism, the only problem being that at the time the United States did not have what international lawyers refer to, in technical legalistic terms, as a treason.” So things looked very bleak indeed until one day in 1898 when, in a surprise stroke of good fortune, the U.S. battleship Maine exploded and sank in Havana harbor.

Immediately the American news media, showing a dedication to accuracy and objectivity that would not be surpassed until nearly a century later (when the Weekly World News, available at supermarkets everywhere, reported that a Turkish farmer and four of his cows had been eaten by a giant purple flower from space), announced that the Maine had definitely, no question about it, been sunk by Spain. Soon the rallying cry went up from coast to coast: “Give ‘em hell Harry!” This inspired William McKinley, who had been elected president of the United States earlier in this chapter while we were not paying attention, to issue an ultimatum (From the Latin, meaning “a kind of a thing that a person issues.”) to

Spain in which he demanded a number of concessions.

Spain immediately agreed to all the demands, an act of treachery that the United States clearly could not tolerate. It was time to declare:

The Spanish-American War

Although the Spanish-American War was over in less time than it takes to order Oriental food for six people by telephone, it ranks with the successful invasion of Grenada as one of the country's mightiest military accomplishments. The highlight came when Teddy "Theodore" Roosevelt led his band of rough-riding cavalry persons, nicknamed the "Boston Celtics," in the famous Charge up San Juan Hill, which turned out to be unoccupied, thus paving the way for the famous Charge Down the Other Side of San Juan Hill. After suffering several such military setbacks, Spain surrendered and gave the United States control of not only Cuba, but also Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Australia, Snooze Island, Antarctica, France, and the Crab Nebula. "Go ahead, take everything," said Spain. "We're going to get drunk and become a third-rate power."

But not the United States. Having flexed the triceps of its newfound military might and, aided by the steroidal substance of nationalistic sentiment, successfully bench-pressed the five-hundred-pound weight of international expansionism, the United States was now eager to play a dominant role on the international stage, with an option for the film rights. What the nation needed, as it entered this new era, was a dynamic leader capable of commanding this globe-begirdling (Or whatever.) young empire, but who (or possibly "whom?") That was the question everybody was standing around asking him—or herself in 1901 when, in another amazing stroke of good luck, an anarchist shot William McKinley, who revealed, on his deathbed, that he had been elected president in 1900, and that his vice president was a man who happened to be not only a war hero, but a descendant of a distinguished family, a public servant, a statesman, a big-game hunter, a naturalist, a husband, a father, a heck of a fine human being, and one of my closest personal friends, I really love this guy, let's give a big Las Vegas welcome to (drum roll) ...

Theodore Roosevelt

Roosevelt was a Man of Action, not words. The public loved the way he took on the businessmen who ran the big monopolies, or "trusts." Roosevelt would invite these men to the White House and speak very softly, forcing them to lean forward, straining to hear, whereupon Roosevelt would hammer them over the heads with a big stick (Nicknamed "Betsy.") that he always carried. This was just one of his famous mannerisms, another one being that he often referred to the presidency as a "bully pulpit." Nobody knew what on earth he meant by this, but nobody asked him, either, because of the stick. Of all Roosevelt's achievements, however, the most significant, as measured by total gallonage, was:

The Panama Canal

In those days, there was no easy way for ships to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The usual procedure was for a ship to start picking up a head of steam as it went past Cuba, so it would be going full speed when it rammed into the Isthmus of Panama, sometimes getting eight or even ten feet into the jungle before shuddering to a halt. Clearly the United States needed to build a canal. The problem was that Panama technically belonged to Colombia which refused to sign a treaty leasing it to the United States. So Roosevelt sent a gunboat filled with marines down to Panama, on the off chance that a revolution might suddenly break out, and darned if one didn't, two days later. Not only that, but the leaders of the new nation of Panama—talk about lucky breaks!—were absolutely thrilled to have the United States build a canal there. “Really, it's our pleasure,” they told the marines, adding, “Don't shoot.”

Over the next few years the marines in their role as Heavily Armed Ambassadors of Friendship and Fun, were to meet with similar outpourings of cheerful cooperation in Nicaragua, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and other Latin American countries that the United States decided to befriend as complete diplomatic equals in a spirit of mutual respect and without regard for the fact that we could squash them like dung beetles under a cement truck. We were a Happy Hemisphere indeed. It was time to think about branching out.

Discussion Questions

1. You know what really ticks us off? The way the Boston Celtics bitch and moan whenever a foul is called against them.
2. What does “all in all” mean, anyway?
3. How about: “by and large”?

Chapter Thirteen. Deep International Doo-Doo

The year 1908 saw the election of the first U.S. president to successfully weigh more than three hundred pounds, William Howard Taft, who ran on a platform of reinforced concrete and who, in a stirring inauguration speech, called for “a bacon cheeseburger and a side order of fries.” Another important occurrence in the Taft administration was the famous BallingerPinchot Affair, which is truly one of the most fascinating and bizarre episodes in the nation's history, although it is quite frankly none of your business (Especially the part about the dwarf goat.).

After that not much happened until approximately 1912, when Teddy Roosevelt, who had gone over to Africa to unwind from the pressures of the presidency by attempting to kill every animal on the entire continent larger than a wristwatch, decided he wanted to be president again. So he came barging back and formed a new party, which was called the Bull Moose party so as to evoke the inspirational image of an enormous animal eating ferns and pooping all over the landscape. Despite this concept, Teddy lost, which is a real tragedy because a Bull Moose victory might have started a whole new trend of giving comical animal names to political parties, and today we might be seeing election battles between the Small Hairless Nocturnal Rodent party and the Stench-Emitting Ox party, and this country would be a

lot more fun.

The winner in the 1912 election was Woodrow Wilson, known to his close friends as “Woodrow Wilson,” who garnered many votes with the popular slogan “Wilson: He’ll Eventually Get Us into World War I.” The appeal of this concept was so strong that Wilson was easily swept into office despite widespread allegations of vote-garnering.

The Suffragette Movement

Meanwhile, out on the streets, there was a lot of movement by “suffragettes,” a term meaning “girl suffrages.” The suffragettes, led by Susan B. Anthony Dollar, believed that women should be given the right to vote on the grounds that they Could not possibly screw things up worse than men already had. They ultimately achieved their goal by marching around in public, wearing hats the size of elementary schools, a tactic later adopted, for reasons that are still unclear, by Queen Elizabeth.

Another major social development of the time was the Temperance Movement, led by Carrie Nation, who headed an organization called Scary-Looking Women with Hatchets. They would swoop down upon saloons and smash all the whiskey bottles, then go back to their headquarters, fire up reefers as big as Roman candles, and laugh until dawn. This resulted in so much social turmoil that in 1918 Congress decided to have a total prohibition on alcohol, which was approved early on a Saturday morning by a vote of 9-2, with 416 members unable to attend because of severe headaches. Thus began the nation’s “Noble Experiment,” which was eventually judged to be a noble failure and replaced by the current sensible and coherent alcohol policy of showing public-service TV announcements wherein professional sports figures urge people not to drink, interspersed with TV commercials wherein professional Sports figures urge people to drink.

But all of this paled by comparison with international tension, which was—get ready for a bulletin here—mounting.

The Causes Of International Tension

The major cause of international tension was Europe, which in those days was made up of the Five (or possibly Six) Major Powers: Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, the Ottomans, the Barca-Loungers, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an alliance between Australia and Hungary that was not really all that major a power but was allowed to participate in international tension anyway because it had some pretty good restaurants. These powers had spent roughly the past thousand years trying to see who could set the land speed record for breaking treaties with each other, and they had been involved in so many complex alliances and double crosses that in 1903, in one of the more hilarious moments in international diplomacy, France accidentally declared war on itself (And lost.). By 1914 Europe was, in the words of the bad writer Elrod Stoooble, “a tinderbox with a hair trigger just waiting for the other foot to drop.”

And thus the entire continent was extremely tense and irritable, just generally in a bad mood, that fateful summer day, October 8, when a young archduke named Franz Ferdinand chanced to pass by the fateful spot where a young anarchist named Gavrilo Princip happened to be standing in a fateful manner, and, through an unfortunate quirk of fate, got into an argument over who had the silliest name. Not

surprisingly, this caused Austro-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, only to be ridiculed by France, Great Britain, and Russia when it was discovered that there actually was no such place as “Serbia.” This discovery, needless to say, caused Germany to invade Belgium (one key lesson of history is that virtually anything, including afternoon or evening thundershowers, causes Germany to invade Belgium). Soon all of Europe was at war.

In America, the prevailing mood was that this was a truly dumb war and we should stay the hell out of it. Just about everybody agreed on this: the public, the press, barnyard animals, even leading political figures. Anybody who even talked about the possibility of the United States getting into this war was considered to be a cretin. In the presidential election campaign of 1916 (Often referred to by historians as “The Election Where Both Candidates’ Names Could Be Read in Either Direction.”), both President Woodrow Wilson and the Republican nominee, Charles Evans Hughes, went around stating in loud, emotion-choked voices that they were definitely by God not going to get the country into the war. So it was clear that the United States had no choice but to get into the war, which, in 1917, it did. And a darned good thing, too, because the official title of the war turned out to be:

“The War to End All Wars”

President Wilson’s theory at the time was that America would march over there and help France and Britain win the war, and then the winners would be extremely fair and decent and not take enormous sums of money or huge chunks of land from the losers, plus the entire system of world government would be reformed so that everybody would live in Peace and Freedom Forevermore. Needless to say, France and Britain thought this was the funniest theory they had ever heard, and they would beg Wilson to tell it again and again at dinner parties. “Hey Woody!” they’d shriek, tears of laughter falling into their cognac (CONEYAK). “Tell us the part where we don’t take money or land!”

The Actual War Itself

The actual war itself was extremely depressing and in many cases fatal, so we’re going to follow Standard History Textbook Procedure for talking about wars, under which we pretty much skip over the part where people get killed and instead make a big deal over what date the treaty was signed.

The Treaty Of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles (PA-REE) was signed on a specific date—our guess would be October 8—and it incorporated Wilson’s basic proposals, except that instead of not taking enormous sums of money and huge chunks of land from the losers, the winners at the last minute decided that it would be a better idea if they did take enormous sums of money and chunks of land from the losers. Other than that the war accomplished all of America’s major objectives, and by 1919 Europe had been transformed, at a cost of only several million dead persons, from a group of nations that hated each other into a group of nations that really hated each other. Thus it came as no surprise when, in 1920, American voters overwhelmingly voted to elect a president named Warren G. Harding (Also known as G. Harding Warren.), who called for a return to “normalcy,” which as far as we know is not even a real word.

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS Standings as of 1920

COUNTRY WINS LOSSES

Austria 0

England 1

France 1

Germany 0

United States Did not, technically, participate in the league.

Serbia Did not, technically, exist.

The Russian Revolution

Somewhere along in here the Russians overthrew the corrupt murdering scumball ruling aristocrats who for centuries had lived like kings while brutally oppressing the masses, and replaced them with the communists, who did the same thing but at least had the decency to wear ill-fitting suits. Ultimately, of course, this event was to have a major impact on the United States, but for right now, the hell with it.

Discussion Questions

1. A dwarf goat?

Chapter Fourteen. A Nation Gets Funky

The era immediately after World War I came to be known as the “Roaring Twenties,” and with good reason: Each of the years had a “twenty” in it, as in 1923, 1925, and so forth. Also there was a lot of wild and zany activity, with “flappers” going to “speakeasies” where they would listen to “jazz,” dance the “Charleston,” and drink “bathtub gin” until they “puked” all over the “floor.” It was a very exciting time, but it also made for an exhausting life-style, which is why you will notice that any people who happened to live through it tend to look kind of elderly.

But all was not fun and games during the twenties. There was also Labor Unrest, caused by coal miners emerging from the ground and making radical demands such as: (1) they should get paid; or, at least (2) they should not have the tunnels collapse on them so often. The coal companies generally responded by bringing in skilled labor negotiators to bargain with the miners’ heads using clubs. This often resulted in violence, which forced the federal government, in its role as peacekeeper, to have federal troops shoot at the miners with guns. Eventually the miners realized that they were safer down in the collapsing tunnels, and there was a considerable decline in Labor Un rest.

Another significant accomplishment of the federal government during the twenties was the refinement of high-level corruption, which peaked during the administration of President Harding G. Harding with the famous ...

Teapot Dome Scandal

The Teapot Dome Scandal involved a plot of federal land in Wyoming that derives its unusual name

from the fact that, if viewed from a certain angle, it appears to be shaped like a scandal. The government had placed a large amount of oil under this land for safekeeping, but in 1921 it was stolen. The mystery was solved later that same evening when an alert customs inspector noticed former Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall attempting to board an oceanliner with a suitcase containing 3.256 trillion barrels of petroleum products, which he claimed had been a “gift” from a “friend.” At this point President Harding, showing the kind of class that Richard Nixon can only dream about, died.

Harding’s successor was Calvin Coolidge, who was popularly known as “Silent Cal” because that was his nickname. The major accomplishment of the Coolidge administration is a group of humorous anecdotes revolving around the fact that Coolidge hardly ever talked. For example, there’s the famous story of the time that Coolidge was sitting next to a woman at a White House dinner and the following hilarious exchange took place:

WOMAN: So, Mr. President. How are you?

COOLIDGE:

WOMAN: Is there something wrong?

COOLIDGE:

WOMAN: WhY won’t you answer me? COOLIDGE:

WOMAN: What a cretin.

Another popular humorist of the day was Will Rogers, who used to do an act where he’d twirl a lasso and absolutely slay his audiences with such wry observations as: “The only thing I know is what I read in the papers.” Ha-ha! Get it? Neither do we. Must have been something he did with the lasso.

But there was more to the twenties than mere hilarity. A great deal of important breakthroughs were being achieved in the field of culture by giants such as F—Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, who, in 1924, after years of experimentation at their laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, successfully tested the modern American novel, which is still in widespread use today. Poets such as T. S. Eliot and e. e. “buster” Cummings were producing a new type of “free-form” verse designed to prove that a poem did not have to be long to be boring. Then, too, in Memphis, Tennessee, the first supermarket, a Piggly Wiggly, was opened. On the West Coast, the motion-picture industry was producing “talkies” featuring such stars as Douglas Fairbanks, Edward G. Robinson, the young Joan Collins, and numerous twitching pieces of film lint magnified to the size of boa constrictors. It was also a Golden Age of Sports, with the most famous hero of them all, of course, being the immortal Babe “Herman” Ruth, who provided what is perhaps baseball’s finest moment during the seventh game of the 1927 World Series when with the score tied and two out, he pointed his bat toward the left-field bleachers, and then, on the very next pitch, in a feat that will live forever, he knocked out the immortal Jack Dempsey.

But no achievement symbolized the spirit of the Roaring Twenties more than that of a tall young American aviator named, simply, Charles A. Lindbergh. Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in this era of modern commercial aviation, where air travel is extremely safe, thanks to advanced safety procedures such as making the airports so congested that airplanes hardly ever take off, can little appreciate the courage it took for Lindbergh to climb into the cramped cockpit of his single-engine plane, the Heidy-Ho IV, and take off into the predawn October 8 gloom over Roosevelt Field, Long Island, towing a banner that said, SIMPLY, TAN DON’T BURN WITH COPPERTONE.

It was not an easy flight. Because of air turbulence, there was no beverage-cart service, and it turned out that Lindbergh had already seen the movie (The Poseidon Adventure.). Nevertheless he persevered, and thirty-three hours later, on the afternoon of October 8, he arrived at an airfield near Paris, where, to

the joy of a watching world, he Plowed into a crowd of French persons at over 140 miles per hour. An instant hero, he returned in triumph for a motorcade ride in New York City, where millions welcomed him, in typical “Big Apple” style, by covering the streets with litter, much of which can still be seen today. But little did the cheering crowds realize, as streams of ticker tape fluttered down from office windows, that within just two years, the falling paper would be replaced by falling stockbrokers. If the crowds had realized this, of course, they would have stayed to watch.

Discussion Questions

1. What do coal companies do with the coal, anyway? You never see it for sale.
2. Is “Big Apple” a stupid nickname, or what?

Chapter Fifteen. Severe Economic Bummerhood

The day the stock market crashed—October 8, 1929—will forever be etched on the Etch a Sketch of the American consciousness as “the day the stock market crashed,” or Sometimes “Black Tuesday.” For on that fateful day, the nation’s seemingly prosperous economy Was revealed to be merely a paper tiger with feet of clay living in a straw house of cards that had cried “wolf” once too often. Although this would not become clear for some time.

Oh, there had been warning signs. Just a few weeks before Black Tuesday, there had been Mauve Wednesday, which was followed, only two days later, by Dark Navy Blue with Thin Diagonal Yellow Stripes Friday. But most Americans paid little heed (“Little Heed” would be a good name for a rock band. Also “Short Shrift.”) to these events, choosing instead to believe the comforting words of President Herbert Hoover Dam, who, in a reassuring nationwide radio broadcast, said: “Everybody STAY CALM, because there is NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT! Do you HEAR ME?? NOTHING!! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA [click].”

What were the underlying causes of the Crash? To truly understand the answer to this question, we must examine:

The Underlying Causes Of The Crash

The stock market of the 1920s was very different from the stock market of today. Back then, the market was infested by greed-crazed slimeballs, get-rich-quick speculators with the ethical standards of tapeworms, who shrieked “buy” and “sell” orders into the telephone with no concern whatsoever for the nation’s long-term financial well-being. Whereas today they use computers.

Another big flaw in the stock market of 1929 was the practice of “buying on margin.” To illustrate how this worked, let’s take a hypothetical example. Let’s say Investor A had x amount of dollars that he wished to invest in the stock market. He would pick up telephone B, dial 1234567, and tell stockbroker C he wanted to buy stock “on margin” in Company D. And the stockbroker would sell it to him, even

though Company D did not really exist (Although as of yesterday it was up two points in active trading.). We just made it up, for this hypothetical example.

Clearly, this kind of thing Could not go on forever, and on Black Tuesday, it did not. As stock prices plummeted, panic selling spread. A number of speculators, realizing that their dreams of wealth had turned to ashes and seeing no hope of repaying their debts, hurled themselves from their office windows. Even this failed to brighten the national mood. Because it was becoming increasingly apparent that the Roaring Twenties were over and that a new era had arrived: an era of unemPLOYment, poverty, social turmoil, despair, and—worst of all—Shirley Temple movies. And thus began what became known, following a highly successful “Name That Era” contest sponsored by the New York World Herald Journal Telegram Bugle and Harmonica, as:

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was horrible. Ask the people who lived through it. Or, don’t even bother to ask. Just stand next to them for more than two minutes, and they’ll tell you about it. “It was hard, during the Great Depression,” they’ll say. “We had nothing to eat except floor sweepings and we walked eighteen miles to school. Even if the school was only two miles away, we’d have to walk back and forth nine times, because times were bad, and you had no choice, so you worked hard for every nickel, which in those days would buy you two tickets to a movie plus four boxes of popcorn plus a used Buick sedan, but of course we couldn’t afford it because Dad only made two dollars and fifty-seven cents per year and our shoes were made out of grapefruit rinds, but we never complained, no, we were happy, because we had values in those days, and if you had values you didn’t need a lot of money or food or toilet paper, which was a luxury in those days to the point where we’d get through a whole year—this was a family of eleven—on just six squares of toilet paper, because we had this system where if you had to ... HEY! Come back here!”

As the federal government began to recognize the seriousness of the situation, it swung into action with the historic enactment, in 1930, of ...

The Hawley-Smoot Tariff

Quite frankly we have no idea what this is, but we think it has a wonderful ring to it, and we just like to see it in large bold letters:

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

And yet, as the weeks dragged into months and the economy continued to founder, it soon became clear that some economic “medicine” even more potent than ...

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

would be needed to get the nation “back on its feet.” This paved the way for the historic election of 1932. The Republicans, showing the kind of sensitivity they are famous for, renominated President Hoover Dam, who pledged that, if elected, he would flee to the Bahamas. The Democrats countered by nominating Franklin Delanor Roosevelt—or, as he was affectionately known, “J.F.K.”—who ran under the slogan “Let’s Elect Another President Named “Roosevelt” and Confuse the Hell out of Future Generations of Students.” The voters responded overwhelmingly, and Roosevelt was elected in a

mammoth landslide that unfortunately left him confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Nevertheless he began immediately to Combat the Depression, implementing a series of bold and sweeping new programs that came to be known, collectively, as:

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

No! Sorry! We can't control ourselves. The programs implemented by Roosevelt were of course called the "New Deal," which consisted of the following:

1. Bank Protection—A major problem during the Depression was that people kept trying to get their money out of banks. To put a stop to this kind of thing, the government instituted modern banking regulations, under which:

The banks are never open when it might be convenient. The customer is never sure what his bank's name is, since they keep changing it, usually from something like "The First Formal Federal National State Bank of Savings Loans and Of Course Trust" to something like

"InterContiBankAmeriTransWestSouthNorthCorp." There are always stupid people in line ahead of you trying to cash checks from the Bank of Ye men and using underwear labels for identification.

2. Job Creation—The government instituted a massive program of public works, under which tens of thousands of men and women were put to work strewing barricades and traffic cones on all the major roads in America, then using red flags to give halfhearted and confusing signals to motorists and sometimes waving them directly into the path of oncoming traffic. These projects are still fully operational today.

3. The Infield Fly Rule—Under this program, when there is a runner on first or second base and there are fewer than two out, and the batter is the son of the runner's first cousin, then the batter and the runner are legally considered "second Cousins."

Not surprisingly, these programs had an immediate impact on the Great Depression. And although some members of Congress charged that Roosevelt was overstepping his legal authority, he was able to win them over by inviting them to the White House for a series of "Fireside Chats" ("Perhaps, Senator, You would understand these Policies better if Ernst and Victor moved you even closer to the fire?" "NO! PLEASE!").

But even firm measures such as this did not prevent huge clouds of dust kicked up by ...

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

from covering entire states such as Oklahoma and turning them into a gigantic "Dust Bin," forcing tens of thousands of people to pack up and head toward California, lured by the hope of finding jobs and a new life and maybe some decent sushi. This troubled era was chronicled brilliantly by John Steinbeck in his moving novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, part of a series that also includes *The Pinto Beans of Lust* and *Bloodsucking Death Cabbages from Hell*. And we could go on for days talking about the contributions being made during this period by women and minority groups.

But the bottom line was, things were still not going well. The only really positive aspect of the situation was that at least the nation was at peace. Yet at that very same moment, across the dark, brooding waters of the Atlantic, there was growing concern. "My God, look at those waters!" people were saying. "They're brooding!" Clearly this did not bode well for the next chapter, which would see the outbreak of the most terrible and destructive event in the history of Mankind:

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

Discussion Questions

1. Did you ever see the movie Attack of the Killer Tomatoes ? Explain.
2. You know how on the evening news they always tell you that the stock market is up in active trading, or off in moderate trading, or trading in mixed activity, or whatever? Well, who gives a shit?

Chapter Sixteen. Major Nonhumorous Events Occur

While the United states was struggling to get OUt of the Depression, the nations of Europe were struggling to overcome the horror and devastation and death of World War I so they could go ahead and have World War II. By the 1930s everybody was just about ready, so Germany, showing the kind of spunky “can-do” spirit that has made it so Popular over the years, started invading various surrounding nations. Fortunately these were for the most part Small nations, but Germany’s actions nevertheless alarmed Britain and France, which decided to strike back via the bold and clever strategy of signing agreements with Adolf Hitler. Their thinking was: If you can’t trust an insane racist paranoid spittle emitting criminal dictator, whom can you trust?

Shockingly, this strategy did not prove to be effective. In 1939 Germany invaded Poland in retaliation for Poland’s flagrant and provocative decision to be right next door. Britain and France then declared war against Germany, which immediately invaded France and managed to conquer it after an epic battle lasting, by some accounts, as long as thirty-five minutes, with the crushing blow coming near the end when Germany’s ally, Italy, sent in its much-feared troops, who penetrated nearly two hundred feet into southern France before their truck broke down.

At this point things looked pretty bleak for the Allied or “good” side. The last bastion of goodness was Great Britain, a feisty, plucky little island in the North Atlantic led by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had won the respect and loyalty of the British people for his ability to come up with clever insults at dinner parties. For example, there was the famous one where this woman says to him, “Lord Churchill, you’re drunk!” And he replies, “Madam, I may be drunk, but BLEAAARRRGGGHHH” all over her evening gown. Churchill used this gift of eloquence to rally his countrymen when Britain was down to a three-day supply of pluck and a German invasion appeared imminent. “We shall fight them on the beaches he said. “We shall fight them in the streets, and in the alleys, and in those things where it’s like a dead end, only there’s like a circle at the end, you know? Cul somethings.” Thus inspired, the British persevered, but by 1941 it was clear that they could not hold out long without military support from the United States. At the time Americans were strongly opposed to becoming directly involved, but that was to change drastically on the fateful December morning of October 8, when the Japanese, implementing a complex, long-term, and ultimately successful strategy to dominate the U.S. consumer-electronics market, attacked Pearl Harbor. And so it was time to have ...

World War Ii

The best evidence we have of what World War II was like comes from about 300 million movies made during this era, many of them featuring Ronald Reagan. From these we learn that the war was fought by

small groups of men called “units,” with each unit consisting of:

One Italian person

One Jewish person

One Southern person

One Tough but Caring Sergeant (Played by William Bendix.),
and of course

One African-American.

These men often fought together through an entire double feature, during which they would learn, despite their differing backgrounds, how to trickle syrup from the corners of their mouths to indicate that they had been wounded. In the actual war of course, real blood was used. In fact, the actual war was extremely depressing, which is why we’re going to follow our usual procedure here and skip directly to ...

The Turning Point

The turning point of the war came when the Allies were able to break the code being used by the Axis high command. The way this happened was, a young British intelligence officer was looking at some captured Nazi documents, and suddenly it hit him. “Hey!” he said. “This is written in German!” From that moment on, it was only a matter of time before June 1944, which was when the schedule called for the Normandy Invasion. The Germans knew it was coming, but they didn’t know where; thus it was that when, on the morning of October 8, thousands of ships disgorged tens of thousands of troops on the beaches of NorMandy, the Germans felt pretty stupid. “So that’s why they were calling it the ‘Normandy Invasion’!” they said (In German.). Stunned by this blow, the Germans began a slow, bloody retreat before the forces of General George C. Scott, and within months the Americans had liberated France, whose people continue until this day to show their gratitude to American visitors by looking at us as though we are total Piltdown men when we try to order food.

The Final Stages Of The War

America entered the final stages of the war under the leadership of Roosevelt’s successor, Harry S Truman, a feisty, plucky little island in the North Atlantic, who ... No, excuse us, we mean: a feisty, plucky native of Missouri (the “Sho’ Nuff”! State) who grew up so poor that his family could not afford to put a period after his middle initial, yet who went on to become a failed haberdasher. It was Truman who made the difficult decision to drop the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, the rationale being that only such a devastating, horrendous display of destructive power would convince Japan that it had to surrender. Truman also made the decision to drop the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the rationale being that, hey, we had another bomb.

When the war finally ended, Truman shrewdly realized that it was time to enter the Postwar Era. His first order of business was to work with the leaders of the other devastated and war-weary nations to establish some kind of mechanism to guarantee that there would be lasting world peace for a couple of months while everybody developed better weapons. It was this idealistic hope that gave birth to a noble organization that has survived and flourished to this day, an organization that affords an opportunity for

representatives of virtually every nation on the globe to gather together for the purpose of freely and openly using their diplomatic license plates to violate New York City parking regulations. We refer, of course to ...

The United Nations

The U.N. consists of two main bodies:

The General Assembly, which is, in the generous spirit of the U.N. Charter, open to just about every little dirtbag nation in the world. It has no power. Its functions are to: (1) Have formal receptions; (2) Listen to the Grateful Dead on headphones; and (3) Denounce Israel for everything, including sunspots.

The Security Council, which is limited to nations that have mastered the concept of plumbing. It is very powerful. Its functions are to: (1) Pass sweeping resolutions intended to end bloody conflicts; and then (2) Veto, ignore, or walk out on these resolutions.

But despite the presence of this potent force for peace, trouble was looming between the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, even as the final battles of World War II were still being fought, the battle lines were being drawn for yet another struggle—an epic struggle between the archenemy ideologies of communism and capitalism; a struggle that was to take many forms and erupt in many places; a struggle that threatened and continues to threaten the very survival of life on the planet; a Struggle that has come to be known as ...

THE HAWLEY-SMOOT TARIFF

No! Sorry! That's it for the Hawley-Smoot Tariff; you have our word. The struggle we are referring to is of course the Cold War, which we will cover in extreme detail in the next chapter, but first let's pause for this:

Trick Discussion Question

1. What did the "S" in Harry S Truman's name stand for? (Hint: "Lucille.")

Chapter Seventeen. International Tension City

The end of World War II brought an economic boom to America, as factories that had been cranking out tanks and planes for the war effort were suddenly free to produce for Mr. and Mrs. Joe Consumer (Not their real name. Their real name was Mr. and Mrs. Bob Consumer.). This made for some pretty exciting times, because Mr. and Mrs. Consumer had very little experience with tanks and planes, and sometimes tempers would fray in traffic. ("Hey, that's my parking space!" "Oh yeah?" "Look out! He's turning his turret!!" "KABLAMMMI!!" "AIEEEEEEE ..." But while things were doing well on the domestic front, problems were looming on the international front in the form of

The Cold War

The Cold War gets its name from the fact that it was formed first in the Soviet Union, also known as the “U.S.S.R.” or simply the “Union of the Society of Socialistic Soviet Union Communist Russians.” The Soviet Union had actually been our ally during World War II, although today many people do not realize this, in large part because we forgot to mention it in the last chapter.

What caused the Cold War? Why did two nations that had both spilt so much blood in a common cause, suddenly become archenemies? And how come it’s acceptable to write “spilt”? We don’t write: “I was truly thrilt when the service-station attendant filt up my car with gasoline,” do we? Of course not! There are no service-station attendants anymore! This is just one of the grim realities that we have been forced to learn to live with in the Cold War era. But what—we are going to finish this paragraph if it kills us—caused this to come about? Respected historians agree that many complex and subtly interrelated factors were involved, which is why we never sit next to historians at parties.

Speaking of parties, the soviet Union at this time was being run by the Communists, a group of men fierce in their dedication to wearing hilariously bad suits. Their leader was Josef Stalin (Russian for “Joey Bananas”), who had risen quickly . through the party ranks on the basis of possessing a high level of personal magnetism, as measured in armed henchpersons.

Stalin’s strategy at the end of World War II was to acquire a small “buffer zone” between Russia and Germany, consisting of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, and most of Germany. In an effort to garner public support in these nations, Stalin mounted a public-relations campaign built around the upbeat theme “Maybe We Won’t Have Your Whole Family Shot,” and in 1945 Eastern Europe decided to join the Communist bloc by a vote of 28,932,084,164,504,029-0. Heartened by this mandate, Stalin immediately ordered construction work to begin on the Iron Curtain, which was given its name by Sir Winston Churchill, who, in a historic anecdote at a dinner party, said: “Madam, I may be drunk, but an iron curtain has descended upon BLEAAARRRGGGHHH.”

Alarmed by these prophetic words, the United States joined with eleven other nations to form the North American Treaty Organization, or UNICEF. Under this treaty, the United States agreed to station tens of thousands of troops in Western Europe. In return, the Western Europeans agreed to station tens of thousands of their troops in Iowa, but after a couple of weeks they got bored and went home to make imported cars. (Our troops are still over there; we keep trying to get them back, but they like the beer.) And thus the Cold War continued to deepen and broaden and widen and become larger, and by 1948 it became clear that some kind of confrontation was inevitable, and so the two Superpowers decided to hold one.

The Berlin Crisis

The Berlin Crisis was caused when Stalin, encouraged by the success of his Iron Curtain, decided to set up a blockade cutting off the West’s land access to West Berlin, a city that was on the good side in the Cold War but that was located, due to computer error, some 120 miles (325 kilograms) (30936.54 hectares) (2,342,424,323.3432 millipedes) behind the Curtain. As food supplies ran low, it began to appear as though the Berliners, despite the fact that they were feisty and of course plucky, would be starved into surrender. Just then (October 8.), President Truman had an idea, an idea that showed the

kind of straightforward, no-nonsense, homespun wisdom that had served him so well in the past. “Let’s drop an atomic bomb on Japan,” he said. His aides, however, detected several flaws in this plan, so instead Truman decided to proceed with:

The Berlin Airlift

This was one of the most dramatic feats in the history of dramatic aviation feats. Day after day, around the clock, U.S. planes took off from West Germany, carrying thousands of tons of clothing, medicine, fuel, and food destined for besieged Berlin. It was a stirring sight indeed to watch these mighty aircraft sweep over the surrounded city and open their cargo doors, allowing the life-giving supplies to hurtle majestically toward the grateful Berliners below. Individual cans of Spam were clocked at upward of 130 miles per hour. Despite the casualties, it was a triumph of the “can-do” American spirit, and when Truman threatened to escalate the relief effort by having the planes fly over Soviet territory and drop huge amounts of cafeteria-grade ravioli or even—remember, these were desperate times—fruitcake, Stalin had no choice but to call off the blockade.

But it was clear by now that communism would continue to be a serious threat abroad, and it was equally evident that the only intelligent way for Americans to deal with it was to develop a firm yet cautious and intelligent policy, based on a realistic assessment of the situation rather than blind hatred, uncontrolled emotion, and shrill accusation. Still, that seemed like an awful lot of work, so instead we had ...

The Red Scare

The Scare was started by Joseph McCarthy, who was a senator from Wisconsin. That’s the strange thing about Wisconsin: You think of it as being this nice friendly state full of decent, God-fearing, cow-oriented people, and here they elect this vicious alcoholic psychopathic lunatic. And it’s not just an isolated incident: In recent years, Wisconsin has also attempted to elect Charles Manson, Hermann Goring, Jabba the Hutt, and, chillingly, Geraldo Rivera. We think it’s something in the cheese.

Anyway, McCarthy made a series of speeches in which he charged that Communists had infiltrated the federal government to the point where the State Department had an actual Communist dining room, Communist men’s bowling team, and so forth. At first, skeptics scoffed at these charges, but when McCarthy produced solid evidence in the form of a piece of paper that appeared, at least from a distance, to have something written on it, the press, displaying the kind of journalistic integrity that we normally associate only with restroom bacteria, had no choice but to print the story, and the Scare was on.

Speaking of bacteria, a highly active Communist-finder during this era was a young attorney named Richard “Dick” Milhous “Milhous” Nixon, who had gotten elected to Congress from a California district despite the handicap that he reminded people of a nocturnal rodent. It was Nixon who nailed proven suspected Communist and Red Fellow Traveler Alger Hiss, the turning point in the case coming when Nixon, accompanied by reporters, went to a Maryland farm, where he reached into a hollowed-out pumpkin and, in a moment of high drama, pulled out a cocker spaniel named Checkers. This was widely believed to be the end of his career. (Nixon’s.)

Eventually the public came to its senses and the Red Scare hysteria died down, and today, thank goodness, we no longer see politicians attempting to gain power by accusing their opponents of being unpatriotic, except during elections. Speaking of which, we almost forgot to mention the dramatic ...

1948 Presidential Election

in 1948 the Democrats had little choice but to nominate President Truman, under the banner: HE IS GOING TO LOSE.

Everybody felt this way: the politicians, the press, the pollsters, the piccolo players, Peter Piper, everybody. The Republicans were so confident that they nominated an individual named Thomas Dewey, whose lone accomplishment was inventing the decimal system. Truman campaigned doggedly around the nation, but his cause appeared to be hopeless. A Dewey victory seemed so inevitable that on election night, the Chicago Tribune printed the famous front-page headline DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN. This was because Dewey had defeated Truman who immediately threatened to drop an atomic bomb on Chicago, so everybody went ha-ha-ha-ha, just kidding, and wisely elected to let the feisty ex-haberdasher have another term.

This was typical of the carefree attitude widespread in the nation during the postwar years. Popular culture saw millions of “bobby soxers” (Not their real names.) swooning over a feisty, skinny crooner named Frank Sinatra, while young “hep cats” wore “zoot suits” and danced the “jitterbug” to “platters” on the “jukebox.” In short, the whole nation was behaving like “dorks,” and it was only a matter of time before some kind of terrible event occurred.

The Korean War

The Korean War was, as is so often the case with wars, not especially amusing, except for those soldiers who were fortunate enough to get in a fun unit featuring Alan Alda and a host of wacky and zany characters and young nurses with terrific bodies. So we’re going to continue our policy of skipping over the depressing parts and hasten ahead to the fifties, although we would like to “toot our own horn” just a little bit here and point out that we have managed to get through this entire chapter without once mentioning ...

THE H***-S**** T*****

If you get our drift.

Discussion Questions

1. Remember when the United States was supposed to switch over to the metric system, and the federal government put up road signs in kilometers, and in some areas people actually shot the signs down? Wasn’t that great?
2. Do you think “Checkers” is a good name for a dog? What about “Booger”? Explain.

Extra-Credit Project

Think of a joke that starts this way: “Knock knock.” “Who’s there?” “Lithuania.” (Hint: This joke could involve lisping.)

Chapter Eighteen. The Fifties: Peace, Prosperity, Brain Death

Because of scheduling problems, the fifties did not officially begin until 1952. This, coincidentally, was the year of the 1952 presidential election campaign, in which both parties, recognizing that the nation was locked into a deadly Cold War struggle, when the slightest mistake could mean the destruction of the entire planet, nominated bald men with silly names. The Democrats went with Adlai Stevenson, a suspected intellectual, and the Republicans went with Dwight “David” Eisenhower, who was extremely popular for winning World War II and having the likable nickname “Ike,” which he got from a sound that his friend Sir Winston Churchill made just before pitching face-first into his food at a dinner party.

Going into the race, Eisenhower had a strong tactical advantage stemming from the fact that nobody, including himself, knew what his views were. But his campaign quickly became enmeshed in scandal when it was discovered that his running mate, Senator “Dick” Nixon, had received money from a secret fund. Realizing that his career was at stake, Nixon appeared on a live television broadcast and told the American people, with deep emotion in his voice, that if they didn’t let him be the vice president, he would kill his dog. This was widely believed to be the end of his career.

Nevertheless, Eisenhower, buoyed by the inspirational and deeply meaningful campaign theme “I like Ike,” won the election and immediately plunged into an ambitious and arduous schedule that often involved playing golf and taking a nap on the same day. This resulted in a humongous economic boom that caused millions of Americans to purchase comically styled big cars and hightail it to the suburbs. Thus began a Golden Era in this country that is still looked back upon with nostalgia by the millions of Americans who are involved in the manufacture and sale of nostalgia-related products.

Culture In The Fifties

The fifties were an extremely important cultural era, because this was the phase when the postwar “Baby Boom” generation grew up, and we Boomers are quite frankly fascinated with anything involving ourselves. Like when we started having our own babies, it was all we could talk about for years. We went around describing our child—having and child-rearing experiences in breathtaking detail, as though the rest of you had no experience whatsoever in these fields. We’re sorry if you find all this boring, but it’s not our fault that you were not fortunate enough to have been born into such an intriguing and important generation. We Can only imagine how interesting we are going to be at cocktail parties when we start getting into death.

But back to the fifties: The best archival source for accurate information about life during this era is the brilliant TV documentary series *Ozzie and Harriet*. From this we learn that the fifties were a time when once per week some kind of epochal crisis would occur, such as Ricky borrowing David’s sweater

without asking, and it would take a half an hour to resolve this crisis, owing to the fact that the male head of household had the IQ of dirt. But other than that, life was very good, considering it was filmed in black and white.

Another important television show of the era was The Mickey Mouse Club, which made enormous cultural contributions, by which we mean: Annette Funicello. Annette had a major impact on many of us male Baby Boomers, especially the part where she came marching out wearing a T-shirt with her name printed on it, and some of the letters were considerably closer to the camera than others. If you get our drift.

But the most truly wonderful fifties show was Queen for a Day, starring Your Host, Jack Bailey. This was a kind of Game Show from Hell where three women competed to see who had the most miserable life. We are not making this show up. Contestant Number One would say something like, “Well I have terminal cancer, of course, and little Billy’s iron lung was destroyed in the fire, and ...” and so on. Everybody in the audience would be weeping, and then Contestant Number Two would tell a story that was even worse. And then Contestant Number Three would make the other two sound like Mary Poppins. After which Jack Bailey would have the members of the audience clap to show which woman they thought was the most wretched, and she would receive some very nice gifts including (always) an Amana freezer. It was fabulous television, and a nice freezer, and it remained unsurpassed until three decades later, with the emergence—probably as a result of toxic waste in the water supply—of Geraldo Rivera.

Of course television was not the only cultural contribution of the fifties. There was also the Hula-Hoop, and Marlon Brando. And let’s not forget the interstate highway system, which made it possible for a family to hop into a car in Cleveland, and a little over four hours later, find themselves still delayed by road construction just outside of Cleveland. We are still benefiting from this system.

But the significant cultural innovation of the fifties was musical—a new “sound” called “rock ‘n’ roll”—an exciting, high-energy style of music that, in its raucous disregard for the gentler, more complacent tastes of an older generation, reflected the Young people’s growing disillusionment With the stultifying, numbing, bourgeois, and materialistic values of an increasingly homogeneous society through such lyrics as:

Ba bomp ba bomp bomp A dang a dang dang A ding a dong ding, Blue moon.

Of the many legendary rock “performers” to emerge during this era—”Fats” Checker, the Pylons, the Gol-Darnits, Buster and the Harpoons, Bill Hawley and the Smoots, and so on—the greatest of them all was “The King,” Elvis Presley, who went on to become the largest (Ha-ha!) (Get it?) record-seller of all time, and who is to this very day sometimes seen shopping in rural supermarkets.

So there’s no question about it: By the mid-fifties, America was definitely in a Golden Era, an era of excitement and opportunity for all citizens, regardless of race or creed or color, unless the color happened to be black. Then there was a problem. Because at the time the nation was functioning under the racial doctrine of “Separate but Equal,” which got its name from the fact that black people were required to use separate facilities that were equal to the facilities that white people kept for their domestic animals. This system had worked for many decades, and nobody saw any real reason to change until one day in 1954 when a group of outside agitators arrived from outer space to file a suit against the Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education. This led to the historic and just Supreme Court ruling, a landmark, that nobody, black or white, should have to go to school in Topeka, Kansas. Thus was born the civil rights movement—an epic struggle that has required much sacrifice and pain, but which has enabled the

United States to

progress, in just three decades, from being a nation where blacks were forced to ride in the back of the bus, to being a nation where, due to federal cutbacks, there is no bus.

The Presidential Election Of 1956

Things were going so smoothly at this point that the voters didn't really feel like going through a whole new presidential election, so they decided to hold the 1952 election over again, and it came out the same. In a word, everything seemed to be working out very well, and the fifties would probably have been pure perfection except that—it seems like this always happens—all these pesky foreign affairs kept occurring in the form of crises, starting with ...

The Suez Crisis

This crisis involved the Suez Canal, which was built by the French (“Suez!” is the word used to call French pigs.) (Not that they come.) and which is extremely strategic because it is the only navigable water route connecting the Red Sea with Albany, New York. Hence, you can imagine how tense the world became on the morning of October 8 when this area became the scene of a full-blown crisis, although we cannot for the life of us remember what the hell it was. But we're fairly sure it's over. You never hear about it on the news.

At around this same time a number of other international crises, most of them also fully blown, occurred in Hungary, Poland, Lebanon, and the quiz-show industry. But all of these paled by comparison to ...

The Sputnik Crisis

One day in 1957 everybody in the United States was minding his or her own business when suddenly the Russians launched a grapefruit-size object called Sputnik (literally, “Little Sput”) into an Earth orbit, from which it began transmitting back the following potentially vital intelligence information

(and we quote): “Beep.” This came as a severe shock to Americans, because at that point the best our space scientists had been able to come up with was a walnut-size object that went: “Moo.” And thus began the Space Race which was to have an enormous worldwide impact on Mrs. DeLucia's fifth-grade class, which was where we were at the time. All of a sudden Mrs. DeLucia was telling us we were going to have to study a LOT more science and math, including such concepts as the “cosine.” As if the whole thing were our fault.

So it was a difficult time, but by 1960 the nation was starting to feel a little better. “Well,” we said brightly in unison, “at least there haven't been any crises for a while!” Which was of course the signal for the International Crisis Promotion Council to swing into action and produce:

The U-2 Crisis

This crisis occurred when the Russians shot down an American U-2 reconnaissance plane flying deep into their airspace, and then accused us—this is the kind of paranoid thinking that makes the Russians so untrustworthy—of conducting aerial reconnaissance. Our government offered a number of highly plausible and perfectly innocent explanations for the flight, such as:

It was a weather plane. It was a traffic plane. It was swamp gas. The dog ate our homework.

But eventually President Eisenhower, emerging from a high-level nap, was forced to admit that it was in fact a spy plane, at which point the Russians, led by Nikita “The Human Potato” Khrushchev, stomped Out of the Paris summit conference before the appetizers had even arrived, leaving “Ike” with nobody to negotiate with except himself. And although he won several major concessions, the feeling was becoming widespread among the American People that maybe it was time for a change—time to get some “new blood” in the White House and “get the country moving again.” And it just so happened that at that very moment, a new “star” was rising on the public scene—a young man whose boyish good looks, energy, quick wit, and graceful charm would soon capture the hearts of the nation and even the world: Pat Boone. Or maybe that was 1955.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think we’ve had enough Winston Churchill jokes? Explain.
2. Have you, or has anybody you have ever met, ever found any use for the cosine? We didn’t think so.

Extra Credit

Try to think up a campaign slogan even more inane than “I like Ike.” (Hint: This is not possible.)

Bonus Question

What does one do with extra credit, anyway?

Chapter Nineteen. The Sixties: A Nation Gets High And Has Amazing Insights, Many Of Which Later On Turn Out To Seem Kind Of Stupid

The sixties was a unique era in American history. Mention the sixties to any middle-aged urban professional, and he’ll transform himself into something worse than one of those Depressionites, droning away about his memories until you think up an excuse to leave. Such is the impact that this exciting era still has on the American consciousness. Because it was a time of truth, but also of lies; of love, but also

of hate; of peace, but also of war; of Otis Redding, but also of Sonny Bono. There was a “new feeling” in the land, especially among the young people, who joined the “hippie movement” to express their need to be free, to challenge the traditional values of American culture, to order some pizza right now. Yes! the “times they were a changin’” and nobody expressed the spirit of the sixties better than the brilliant young poet-songwriter-irritatingly-nasal-whiner Bob Dylan, when, with his usual insightfulness, he sang:

How many times can a man be a man
Before a man is a man?

Moved by the power of this message, tens of thousands of young people rejected the trappings of a grasping greedy society to live simple, uncluttered lives dedicated to meditation and spirituality and listening to sitar music and ingesting random substances and becoming intensely interested in the ceiling and driving home at one mile per hour. As a result of these experiences, the “Flower Children” of the sixties developed a unique set of values, a strong sense of idealism and social awareness that still exerts a powerful influence over their decisions in such philosophical areas as what radio stations to listen to when driving their Jaguars to their brokerage firms.

The 1960 Presidential Election

In 1960 the Democratic candidate was the rich, witty, graceful, charming, and of course, boyishly handsome Massachusetts senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who gained voter recognition by having his face on millions of souvenir plates and being married to the lovely and internationally admired Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Kennedy’s major political drawback was that the nation had never elected a Roman Catholic; on the other hand, the nation had never elected a total dweeb, either, and the Republicans had for some reason nominated “Dick” Nixon. So it was a very close race.

The turning point was a series of nationally televised debates, in which Kennedy, who looked tanned and relaxed, seemed to have an advantage over Nixon, who looked as though he had been coached by ferrets. Kennedy held a slight lead going into the bonus round, where he chose Category Three (Graceful Handsome Boyish Wittiness) and won the Matching luggage plus Texas plus Illinois, thus guaranteeing his victory in the November election. This was widely believed to be the end of Nixon’s career.

The Kennedy Administration

Kennedy had pledged, during the 1960 election campaign, to “get the country moving again”—to get it out of the Eisenhower doldrums, to bring back

its vigor, to reinstall its pride, to reassert its leadership around the world, maybe even to get it into a dumbfounding, unwinnable war. And under the gracefully boyishly handsomely witty charmingness of his leadership, America began to do just that. Kennedy immediately set the tone in his inaugural address, in which he promised that the country would land a Peace Corps volunteer on the Moon, and ended with the stirring words of the famous challenge “Ask not what your country cannot do that you cannot do, nor what cannot be done by neither you nor your country, whichever greater.” The Kennedys also captivated the nation With their unique style, which soon earned the young administration the nickname “Camelot” (from the popular Broadway musical Guys and Dolls). The Kennedy style was an eclectic blend of amusing and graceful activities that ranged from taking fifty-mile hikes to inviting cellist Pablo

Casals to perform at the White House to playing touch football on the lawn. As the Kennedy mystique grew, the first family's activities were widely imitated: Before long, millions of Americans were taking Pablo Casals on fifty-mile hikes. When he begged for a chance to rest, they laughed and threw footballs at him. Such was the vigor of the times.

So everything would probably have been ideal if the Red Communists had not decided to be their usual party-pooper selves by causing new international tension in the form of ...

The Bay Of Pigs

In 1960 there was considerable concern about the fact that Fidel Castro, a known beard-wearing Communist, had taken over Cuba, which is a mere ninety miles from Key West, Florida, site of America's largest strategic stockpile of tasteless T-shirts. This alarmed the U.S. intelligence Community, whose crack team of analysts developed a Shrewd plan under which the U.S. would secretly train an army to invade Cuba; which then according to the plan, would cause the population to rise up in revolt and throw Castro out of power. This plan worked smoothly, with everything going exactly as planned, except the part about the population rising up in revolt, and so forth. It turned out that large segments of the population had already risen up in revolt just a short time earlier to put Castro into power, but unfortunately our intelligence community had misplaced the file folder containing this tidbit of information. So the invasion failed and the U.S. got some international egg on its face. But Kennedy took it with his usual boyishly witty graceful handsome charmingness, and the intelligence community, showing admirable spunk, quickly discovered an exciting new place to think up Shrewd plans about: Southeast Asia.

Once more everything seemed to be going pretty well, until, wouldn't you know it, along came ...

The Berlin Crisis

This was caused when the Russians noticed that every morning approximately 173,000 East Berlin residents commuted to work in West Berlin, and every evening approximately 8 Of them commuted back. The Russians, showing the kind of subtle public-relations skills that have made them so popular everywhere they tromp, responded by building the Berlin Wall, which created a crisis that was not resolved until President Kennedy went over there in person and made the famous inspirational proclamation "Ich bin ein Berliner" ("I wish to see a menu"). This calmed international tensions, but only briefly, for in October 1962 a major event was to occur, an event that would become the focus of the world's attention for several tense days. We refer, of course, to the World Series, in which the Yankees beat the Giants four games to three. Also, there was a Cuban missile crisis, which the United States won in the final minutes by going into a "prevent" defense.

Another shocking development that occurred at this time was that "Dick" Nixon reached such a low level of credibility with the voters that even California refused to elect him as governor. In his concession speech, Nixon told the press: "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore," prompting the reporters, in a fit of nostalgia, to batter him unconscious with their wingtips. This was widely believed to be the end of his career.

So by 1963, all things considered, the sixties seemed to be going pretty well. Which just goes to show

that you can never tell, because except for the discovery of Aretha Franklin, the rest of the decade turned out to be ...

A Long String Of Bummers

First of all, Kennedy was assassinated, which was traumatic enough in itself but was made even worse by the fact that we never did find out for sure what happened, which means that for the rest of our lives we're going to be opening People magazine and reading articles about Yet another conspiracy buff claiming to have conclusive proof that Lee Harvey Oswald was actually working for Roy Orbison or the Nabisco Corporation or whatever.

THEN we got President Lyndon Johnson, who tried his darnedest, by means of looking somber to the point of intestinal discomfort, to convey integrity, but who nevertheless made you think immediately of the large comically dishonest Warner Brothers cartoon rooster Foghorn Leghorn. Plus his wife—this is still difficult to believe even years later—was named “Lady Bird.” Johnson was nevertheless elected overwhelmingly in 1964, easily defeating Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, who turned out to be an OK guy but who at the time appeared to be perfectly likely to launch a nuclear first strike against, say, New York.

THEN we got into the Vietnam War, which is still causing arguments involving: the people who supported it but didn't fight in it, versus the people who didn't support it but did fight in it, versus the people who didn't support it and didn't fight in it, versus the people who supported it and might have had to fight in it if ever the Indiana National Guard had been called up, which was of course a distinct possibility, and so on.

THEN more people got assassinated and everybody started hating everybody and there were riots in the streets. THEN Gilligan's Island was canceled.

So by 1968 things were really bad. They were so bad that it seemed impossible for them to get any worse, unless something truly horrible happened, something so twisted and sinister and evil that the human mind could barely comprehend it.

The Nixon Comeback

Yes. One day we turned on our televisions, and there he was, “Dick” Nixon, looking stronger than ever despite the holes in his suit where various stakes had been driven into his heart. He was advertised as a “new” Nixon with all kinds of amazing features, including an illuminated glove compartment and a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam, but of course he couldn't tell the voters what it was, because then it wouldn't have been a secret plan.

Nixon's running mate was an individual named Spiro Agnew, whose principal qualification was that when You rearranged the letters of his name, You got “grow a penis” (Dick Cavett discovered this. Really.). Their campaign theme—we are not making this up—was “Law and Order.”

The Democrats, meanwhile, were in trouble. The war had become extremely unpopular, so President Johnson had decided not to seek reelection, which was an act of great statesmanship in the sense that nobody except maybe Lady Bird would have voted for him anyway. The process by which the Democrats decided who their new nominee would be was about as organized as a tub of live bait,

culminating in the 1968 Chicago convention which consisted of spokespersons for about 253 major ideological factions giving each other the finger through clouds of tear gas. Out of this process emerged Hubert Humphrey, a nice man with a lot of solid experience and an unfortunate tendency to sound like Porky Pig, only not as dignified. On top of this, the Democrats had to contend with the candidacy of Alabama governor George Wallace, who appealed to what the political experts called “disaffected Democrats” defined as “Democrats missing teeth.”

And thus it was that on election day, October 8, 1968, the voters went to the polls and elected, as leader of the greatest nation that the world has ever seen, President Richard Milhous N ... President Richard M ... President R ... Please don't make us do this.

The Nixon Presidency

Nixon's first official act as president was to sneak out behind the White House and bury his secret peace plan to ensure that nobody would find out what it was, which would have been a breach of national security. With that

important task accomplished, he swung into action, working feverishly to accomplish his most important objective, to realize the cherished dream that had driven him through all these years of disappointment, to reach the long-sought goal that, thanks to his election was finally within his grasp, namely: getting reelected.

Discussion Questions

1. Didn't you always, even when you were sitting around with your friends pretending to be really enthralled, secretly hate sitar music? Admit it.

Chapter Twenty. The Seventies: A Relieved Nation Learns That It Does Not Actually Need A President

The seventies dawned with “Dick” Nixon riding high. The nation had surged ahead in the space race through a series of courageous accomplishments by astronauts such as Donald “Deke” Slayton, Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, Scott “Scotty” Carpenter, and Nicholas “Nicky the Squid” Calamari, climaxing with the historic moment on October 8 when Neil “Satchmo” Armstrong became the first human, with the possible exception of guitarist Jimi Hendrix, to set foot on the Moon, where he expressed the emotions of an anxiously watching world with the unforgettable statement “Hi Mom!”

On the foreign-policy front, Nixon continued to protect the national security by not telling anybody, not even his secret wife, Pat, what his secret plan to end the Vietnam War was. At the same time, he undertook a major clandestine foreign-policy initiative by sending chocolates and long-stemmed roses to legendary Communist Chinese revolutionary leader Mao (“Mo the Dong”) Zedong. Helping him with this initiative was the brilliant, avocado-shaped genius Henry Kissinger, who became the nation's top

foreign-policy strategist despite being born with the handicaps of a laughable accent and no morals or neck.

The daring initiative came to fruition in 1972 when Nixon became the first American president to visit China, where Mao , an avid prankster, presented him with two giant pandas, named Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. This was actually a hilarious Communist joke, because “Ling-Ling” and “Hsing-Hsing” are the words that Chinese children use to describe bodily outputs, as in “Mommy, I have to make ling-ling.” The Chinese officials just about died laughing when Nixon was making his thank-you speech and Ling-Ling went Hsing-Hsing on his shoe. (The pandas now reside in the National Zoo, where, over the past eighteen years, nearly a third of the federal budget has been spent on various elaborate schemes to get them to reproduce, which is also pretty funny inasmuch as they are both males.)

The China initiative was a notable coup, and even though the darned pesky Vietnam War was still going on, everybody knew that “Dick” had his secret plan, which he could dig up and put into effect at any time. So things looked very good indeed for him going into the 1972 election. He got a lot of help from the Democrats, who, continuing the tradition they established in 1968 of appearing to be incapable of operating an electric blanket, let alone the country, nominated George McGovern, who had exhibited a wide-ranging appeal to a broad cross section of nearly fourteen voters. The result was that in the 1972 election Nixon carried all the states and every major planet except

Massachusetts.

So by 1973 “Dick” Nixon was at the pinnacle of power and appeared poised to become, against all odds, one of the most successful and respected presidents in the nation’s history. This was the signal for God to come into the game and create ...

The Watergate Scandal

The Watergate Scandal, which gets its name from the fact that it was a scandal, began with a break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters by a group of burglars so ludicrously incompetent that they obviously had to have some connection with the federal government. Sure enough, when two plucky and persistent Washington Post reporters, played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, began poking around, a confidential source named “Deep Throat”—whose identity remains a closely guarded secret to this very day because it was Pat Nixon in drag—revealed to them a fascinating tidbit of information: Some species of mollusk can actually change their gender.

This was the “missing puzzle piece” that the two brash young journalists needed to “break the story.” Within days the scandal was such hot news that it was turned into a highly popular television series called The Senate Watergate Committee’s Parade of Scuzzballs, starring genial host “Senator Sam” Ervin (Okeefenokee), who had the entire nation listening with rapt attention in an effort to figure out what the hell he was saying. Senator Sam spoke in Deep Southern, which is similar to English, only unintelligible, so everything he said came out sounding like “We go’ heppin’ wif de bane pone.” But everybody was on his side anyway, because the committee witnesses—a group of high-level Nixon administration aides, all of them named Klaus—projected all the warmth and personal integrity of eels. (We are pleased to report, however, that while in federal prison they all found the Lord, who was serving a six-year sentence for failing to file tax returns.)

So things looked very bad for the Nixon administration, and they got even worse with the revelation

that Nixon had secretly taped all the Oval Office conversations that had taken place between him and the various Klauses. The tapes contained many shocking and highly revealing exchanges, such as this one, from October 8:

NIXON: Because you have, you have problems with the, with the [expletive deleted], with the ...

KLAUS: Yeah [garbled], with the, uh, with the ...

NIXON: ... with, uh, with the [expletive deleted].

KLAUS: ... with the ...

NIXON: [Expletive deleted].

KLAUS: ... with the Smoot-Hawley.

NIXON: Shit.

As damaging as these revelations were, matters got even worse for Nixon when one of the tapes was found to contain, at a crucial juncture, an eighteen-minute gap where nothing could be heard except a hum. This was the last straw: The American public, simply would not tolerate a president who would fritter away eighteen minutes humming during a crucial juncture. The next day, October 8, the Senate Watergate Committee voted 17-9 in favor of a resolution proposed by Senator Ervin calling on the president to “Rang onsum latmun sookles.” Clearly the dice had been cast down onto the gauntlet. Nixon appeared to have only two options left:

OPTION ONE: He could boldly remain as president and defend himself in the now-inevitable impeachment proceedings.

OPTION TWO: He could spare the country further trauma by resigning in a dignified manner.

Those of you who are well-schooled students of “Dick” Nixon will not be surprised to learn that, after carefully weighing the alternatives, he decided to go with Option Three: to stand in the Rose Garden and make a semicoherent speech about his mother that may well rank as the single most embarrassing moment in American history. Thoroughly humiliated, Nixon then went off to live in a state of utter disgrace (New Jersey.). This was widely believed to be the end of his career.

Nixon’s resignation left the nation in shock, compounded when enterprising Washington Post reporters revealed that, while nobody was paying attention, Vice President Agnew had resigned to take a job clubbing baby seals. This meant that the new president of the United States was—this all seems like a dream now—Gerald Ford. Yes! The golf person!

Highlights Of The Ford Administration

The major highlight was when Ford gave Nixon a full presidential pardon, thereby sparing the nation the trauma of seeing “Dick” go to federal prison, where there was every reason to fear that he would—this makes us shudder just thinking about it—find the Lord. Ford also restored the nation’s respect for the office of the presidency by falling down and bonking his head a lot.

Another major Ford highlight was when he alerted the nation that there was going to be an epidemic of “swine flu” and that everybody should get a shot. As it turned out, there was less of a risk from the disease than from the shots, but fortunately only a few high-level administration officials were dumb enough to get them.

Of course there were many other Ford administration highlights, but unfortunately we lost the matchbook we had them written on. Your best bet, if you want more information on this topic, is to visit

the official Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which features among other fascinating exhibits, all of the former chief executive's merit badges (Really.).

So Ford made an important contribution as a "caretaker" president, but by the time the 1976 election rolled around, America was ready to turn in an entirely new direction for leadership. America had grown deeply suspicious of establishment Politicians, and wanted a different kind of president, a president who was not a Washington "insider," a president who rejected the ostentatious trappings of power, a president who was moral and decent and sensitive and kind and earnest and truthful and pious and had nice hair like Phil Donahue. America was ready to be led by: a weenie.

"Jimmy" Carter

jimmy Carter came from a simple God-fearing homespun southern family that was normal in every respect except that many of its members, upon close inspection, appeared to be crazy. After graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy, he served as an officer aboard a nuclear submarine, where, due to an unfortunate radiation leakage, he developed enormous mutant teeth. Nevertheless he went on to become a successful peanut farmer and governor of Georgia for an entire term, thus acquiring all of the major qualifications that a modern politician needs to be president of the United States, namely: blue suits. He easily won the Democratic nomination in 1976 to face Gerald Ford, who won the GOP nomination after narrowly edging out former California governor Ronald Reagan by a score of four brain cells to three.

During the election campaign, Carter performed many symbolic gestures to show he was a regular person only much smarter. For example, he often carried his own garment bag. This impressed the voters, although it was eventually revealed by enterprising Washington Post reporters that the bag did not, in fact, contain a single garment. Nevertheless Carter won the election and went on to have several highlights.

Highlights Of The Carter Administration

The main one, without question, was when the president claimed that while he was out in a canoe one day, he was attacked by an enormous swimming rabbit. We swear we are not making this highlight up. Also there was an energy crisis during which Americans, showing the sense of self-sacrifice and community spirit that often emerges when the well-being of the nation is at stake, closed ranks and shot at each other in gas lines.

The lowlight of the Carter administration was that the economy did poorly. This troubled Jimmy a great deal, so much so that he gathered together all of the nation's top thinkers for a special conference at Camp David. They thought and thought and thought, and when they were finally done, Jimmy came out and announced that the nation's problems were being caused by "malaise." This puzzled the average American, who had never even heard of "malaise, except on a sandwich, and who was under the impression that the problem was that unemployment and inflation were running at about 652 billion percent. "Any minute now," the average American thought, "he's gonna tell us we have to get 'malaise' shots."

So there was much disillusionment among the voting public. The stage was set for yet another dramatic change in the nation's political direction—a shift away from the soul-searching, the

uncertainty, the intellectual complexity, and the multisyllabic words of the Carter era; a shift toward a new kind of leader, a man with a gift for communicating the kind of clear, direct, uncomplicated message that had previously been associated only with Tide commercials. It was time for the Reagan Revolution.

Discussion Questions

1. How do they know what gender a mollusk is?

Chapter Twenty-One. The Reagan-Bush Years: Napping Toward Glory

The 1980s will be remembered as a time when the nation broke free of the confining chains of the left-leaning bleeding-heart gutless namby-pamby Mister Pouty Pants Liberal school of political thought that had dominated the American political landscape ever since the New Deal; a time when Americans began Standing Tall, Talking Proud, Feeling Good, Sitting Straight, Pledging Allegiance, and Eating More Fiber.

Who was responsible for this sweeping change in the national mood? Amazingly, it was almost entirely the work of a single person, a strong, dominant individual who was able to change the course of history through steely determination, unflinching toughness, and sheer force of will: Nancy Reagan. But you also have to give a lot of credit to her husband, Ron, a distinguished war-movie hero who served, off and on, as president of the United States during this era, and whose administration made many historically crucial decisions, several of which he was aware of personally. Coinciding with this national mood change was emergence and rapid cholera-like spreading of the young urban professionals, also known as “yuppies” or, more affectionately, “suspender-wearing wingtipped weenies,” a new breed of seriously ambitious humanoids whose idea of a really wild evening was to get drunk and restructure a corporation. The role models for the eighties were men like Donald Trump, who had made several jillion dollars in the lucrative field of amassing wealth. But beyond being stupendously rich, Trump was also truly a class individual, as he revealed in his best-selling book, *Trump: Truly a Class Individual*, and in 1989 he captured the imagination of the nation when, in the largest private financial transaction ever, he purchased Ohio, the Coast Guard, the Italian Renaissance, and Mars (All of which he classily renamed “Trump.”).

Another major trend of the 1980s was the sudden ubiquitousness of the personal computer, a tool that has freed millions of people to use words like “ubiquitousness” without actually knowing how to spell them. In fact, the book that you are now reading was written on a personal computer, which is why it is devoid of the “typos” that were so common in the days of old-fashioned wersp oidop gfegkog pl;gpp\$R\$%I%.

But all was not peaches and light on the 1980s economic front. After a lengthy investigation, crack agents of the Securities and Exchange Commission discovered that top Wall Street figures were using “inside information” to make money, a revelation that came as a shock to those members of the public who had mince pie for brains. Investor confidence was further shaken by the stockmarket crash of

October 8, 1987, caused by a herd of computers that were panicked into the worst international electronic stampede in history when a woman in Akron, Ohio, got angry and punched an automatic bank teller (Charging it later with sexual harassment.).

Another major economic upheaval was the sudden end of the energy crisis, which meant lower gas prices and harder times for wealthy Texans as well as large oil companies, thereby causing alarmed, thoughtful Americans everywhere to laugh until their garments were soaked with drool. Things were also very bad for the American family farmer, whose fields, by the late 1980s, were parched and dusty because of the bright lights being shone on them by television news crews doing heartrending reports about the plight of the family farmer.

Internationally, the major event of the eighties was that Prince Charles married Diana Spencer, thus assuring that they would be featured on roughly every third cover of People for the rest of our lives. But when all is said and done, which, trust us, will be very soon now, the story of the eighties will be the story of the Reagan administration and the many men and women who served in it, some of whom are already out on parole.

The 1980 Presidential Election Campaign

In 1980 the Democrats were pretty much stuck with Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, who ran under the slogan “Four More Years?” The Republicans, meanwhile, had a spirited primary-campaign season, which came down to a duel between Reagan and George Herbert Walker Norris Wainright Armoire Vestibule Pomegranate Bush IV, who had achieved a distinguished record of government service despite having a voice that sounded like he had just inhaled an entire blimpload of helium.

Reagan finally won the nomination by promoting “Reaganomics,” an economic program based on the theory that the government could lower taxes while increasing spending and at the same time actually reduce the federal budget deficit by sacrificing a live chicken by the light of a full moon. Bush charged that this amounted to “voo-doo economics,” which got him into hot water until he explained that what he meant to Say was “doo-doo economics.” Satisfied, Reagan made Bush his vice-presidential nominee.

The turning point in the election campaign came during the October 8 debate between Reagan and Carter, when Reagan’s handlers came up with a shrewd strategy: No Matter what Carter Said, Reagan would respond by shaking his head in a sorrowful but personable manner and Saying: “There you go again.” This was brilliant, because (a) it required the candidate to remember only four words, and (b) he delivered them so believably that everything Carter said seemed like a lie. If Carter had stated that the Earth was round, Reagan would have shaken his head, saying, “There you go again” and millions of voters would have said: “Yeah! What does Carter think we are? Stupid?”

And so the Reagan-Bush juggernaut easily swept to victory in all but a handful of states (Which were immediately purchased by Donald Trump.), thus paving the way for

The Reagan Revolution

The Reagan Revolution was run by Staunch Conservatives who wanted the government to stop wasting money on bloated, inefficient social programs and start wasting it on bloated, inefficient

military programs. Foremost among these was the Strategic Defense Initiative, or “Star Wars,” which is a far-flung network of highly sophisticated, state-of-the-art “defense contractors” orbiting a giant, five-sided structure called the “Pentagon,” which constantly emits high-intensity beams of “money.” In the event of a nuclear attack, electronic communications devices called “telephones” would be used to instantaneously alert the president and his top “defense strategists” that it is time for them to be whisked to secret radiation-proof underground “hideouts” stocked with food and water and recreational activities such as “Ping-Pong” and protected by vicious biting dogs from intrusion by sick, desperate, starving, and increasingly hairless “taxpayers.” Thanks to the miracle of computers, all this would take place in less time than it takes for a family of four to order breakfast!

However, in the area of foreign policy, the major focus of the first Reagan term was Central America, a region of immense strategic vitality to the United States because if it were to ever fall into the hands of communist troops, they would be eaten by insects. Thus it was with extreme interest that Americans viewed the struggle between the “Sandinistas,” a group of anticommunist ex-military officers from Honduras, to overthrow the contras, a group of pro—militarist ex-communists from El Salvador, in an effort to control Nicaragua, the site of the vital Suez Canal, which ... No, wait a minute. sorry. What we mean is Americans viewed with extreme interest the struggle between the “Hondurans,” a group of ex-Panamanian Nicaraguans, to control the “Canal Zones” a group of pro-contra, ex-cathedral, nondenominational ... No, hold it. Never mind. The Point is that there were a great many strategic things going on down in this vital dirtball region, which is why the Reagan administration called upon its crack intelligence strategists to put down their bananas and get to work. It was clear that we were going to take an active role in the region, a policy that soon led to the turning point in the battle against communist infiltration in the Western Hemisphere, namely:

The War In Grenada

This war began when Cuban Communist Construction workers began actively engaging in suspected acts of construction on the island of Grenada which not only contains an abundant natural supply of American medical students but also happens to be in a very strategic and vital location.

Clearly some kind of action had to be taken, and on October 8, it was. Backed by massive sea and air support, nearly two thousand marines stormed onto the island, despite the very real danger that they might sink it. Nevertheless, they were able to overcome not only armed resistance but numerous loose goats, thus winning the war and paving the way for a peace settlement under which we agreed to give the Grenadans upward of \$100 million, in return for which they agreed to be our friends, which they still were, we think, last time anybody checked.

Another foreign-policy triumph for Reagan was his 1984 visit to China, where he met for more than three hours with Mao Zedong before realizing that Mao was dead. Aides described the talks as “frank.”

This was exactly the kind of firm leadership that Americans had been yearning for, so Reagan was extremely popular when the 1984 presidential election campaign lumbered into view. And once again the Republicans got a lot of help from the Democrats, who by this point were acting as though they were conducting an experiment to see if it was possible to run a major presidential camPAign without winning a single state.

The Democrats nominated Walter Mondale, who immediately announced in that distinctive voice of

his that sounded as if emanating from a nasal passage the size of a gymnasium, that if he were elected, he would jack up taxes. This shrewd move immediately earned him the support of more than half the members of his immediate family, and he went on to lose so badly that people are still, years later, showing up at the polls at all hours of the day and night and demanding an opportunity to vote against him.

But Mondale can claim one major achievement: He chose as his running mate Geraldine A. Ferraro, who will become a footnote (Geraldine A. Ferraro.) to history.

The Second Reagan Term

The big excitement in the second Reagan term was the “Iran-contra” scandal, which was caused when somebody in the White House, we are still not sure who, but definitely not the president, decided to sell arms to the Iranian government, which is the same group of greaseballs who took American hostages, which is why we have laws against selling arms to them, but this case was an exception because the money was supposed to go to either the Sandinistas or maybe the contras, some strategic group down there, so it was perfectly OK to sell the arms, although we wish to stress once again that the president knew nothing about it, and even if he did he later forgot, which is no big deal because if a president clutters up his mind with every pesky little detail such as what the foreign policy is, he has no room left for important matters.

When news of this got out, there was a big scandal, culminating in marathon hearings by the Joint House and Senate Committee to Bore Everybody to Death. The highlight of these hearings was the testimony of Oliver North, a marine lieutenant colonel who was considered the key witness because he had been single-handedly operating the executive branch of the federal government for several years while everybody else was in meetings. In a dramatic televised moment, North, his eyes moist and his voice shaking, revealed to the committee that he was a courageous patriot, after which he became so overcome by emotion that he knocked over his bottle of Revlon eye moistener.

Eventually, the nation overcame the trauma of Iran-contra and went back to reading the sports pages. And Reagan was soon able to “bounce back” from the scandal by going to the Soviet Union, which is in Russia, and signing a historic agreement with Mikhail Gorbachev that enormously enhanced the prospects for world peace by prohibiting either side from ever publicly noticing the huge mark on Mr. Gorbachev’s head.

Meanwhile, however, new problems were beginning to form. Chief among these was the federal budget deficit, which was mounting at an alarming rate. Both the Reagan administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress had tried a number of possible solutions—increased government spending, having the government spend more money, increasing the amount of money being spent by the government—but that darned ol’ deficit just would not go away. On top of that, there were other serious problems such as the AIDS epidemic, the Greenhouse Effect, the trade imbalance, drugs, illiteracy, Geraldo Rivera getting his own TV show, and so on. Obviously, the nation was in desperate need of bold new leadership and vision, which was too bad because the next scheduled event was ...

The 1988 Presidential Election

This time the Republicans, determined to show the nation that they liked a joke as much as the next person, nominated George Bush, who selected as his running mate young “Dan” Quayle, a Vietnam-era veteran who had received the coveted Round Smiley Face decoration in recognition of the time he accidentally stapled his sleeve to the desk and was trapped for nearly two hours.

Clearly this was a ticket that even the Democrats would have a difficult time losing to, but they worked at it and managed to come up with the ideal candidate in the form of “Mike” Dukakis, a man who, because of a tragic genetic defect, was limited to the same basic range of expressions as an iguana. He’d be making a speech, and he’d start to raise his voice, and it would look like there might be some actual emotion going on inside him, but then suddenly his tongue would flick out to snare a passing insect, and the whole effect would be ruined.

But you also have to give a large pile of credit to Bush and his top political strategist, Darth Vader. Their campaign, conducted via highly informative television commercials, focused on the issues that were certain to be of vital concern to the nation in the years to come, especially:

The pledge of allegiance. Furloughed rapist Willie Horton. The budget deficit, and whether it could be corrected by forcing furloughed rapist Willie Horton to say the pledge of allegiance over and over. For fifty years.

When election day rolled around, tens of millions of American voters, impressed by the level of debate, went to the mall. But some of them also cast their ballots, and the Bush-Quayle ticket was swept into office with a clear-cut popular mandate to please not have another election for at least four years.

That is where we stand today. And what lies ahead? Will we be able to solve our social and economic problems, clean up our environment? maybe even improve our technology to the Point where we can land a manned spacecraft on Trump? Unfortunately, we cannot know what will happen in the future. If this book proves anything, it’s that we don’t even know what happened in the past. But we do know this: America is a strong and great country, and her people have withstood many trials and tribulations (More tribulations, actually, because many never went to trial.). And whatever problems lie ahead, we may be sure of one thing: that if we all work together and “hang tough,” there will come a day when this nation—maybe not in the next few years; maybe not even in our lifetimes; but someday—will see the end of “Dick” Nixon’s political career. But we wouldn’t bet on it.

Discussion Questions

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About The Author

DAVE Barry was described in *The New York Times Book Review* as “the funniest man in America,” a claim he has been quick to disavow, except for the plaque on the front door. Nevertheless, the reviewer got there late: The Pulitzer Prize Committee had cited him for commentary earlier in 1988, and he got off with an appropriately light sentence (Even earlier, in 1986, he won the Distinguished Writing Award of the American Association of Newspaper Editors, but what do they know?). Apart from these facts—which, as Mr. Barry occasionally Puts it—we are not making up, the relevant details seem to be that he writes for *The Miami Herald* and is syndicated in approximately 150 other newspapers, several of which make money despite this.

Barry lives with his wife, Beth, and son, Robby, in a Coral Gables, Florida, house surrounded by giant mutant spiders.

Dave Barry's



Babies and Other Hazards of Sex



How to Make
a Tiny Person
in Only 9 Months
with Tools You
Probably Have
around the Home

MORE THAN
684,000
SOLD

Illustrated by Jerry O'Brien

Babies And Other Hazards Of Sex: How to make a tiny person in only 9 months, vwith tools you probably have around the home

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry.

Babies And Other Hazards Of Sex: How to make a tiny person in only 9 months, vwith tools you probably have around the home

Author's Qualifications To Write A Book About Babies

Dave Barry, 36, has a son, Robert, who began as a baby and successfully reached the age of 3 without becoming an ax murderer or anything, as far as anybody knows.

In addition, Mr. Barry has spent a number of hours thinking about babies, and has observed them in other people's cars at traffic lights. He also owns a dog, and at the age of 15 completed much of the course required to obtain a Red Cross Senior Lifesaving Badge.

Chapter 1. Should You Have A Baby? Should Anybody?

Some Important Pompous Advice to Couples about to Get Pregnant

Getting pregnant is an extremely major thing to do, especially for the woman, because she has to become huge and bloated and wear garments the size of cafe awnings. This is the woman's job, and it is a tradition dating back thousands of years to a time when men were not available for having babies because they had to stand outside the cave night and day to fend off mastodons.

Of course, there is very little mastodon-fending to be done these days, but men still manage to keep themselves busy, what with buying tires and all. So it is still pretty much the traditional role of the woman to get pregnant and go through labor and have the baby and feed it and nurture it up until it is old

enough to throw a football with reasonable accuracy.

In recent years, however, men have become more involved in childbirth and child-rearing as part of a federally mandated national trend. Under the terms of this trend, men are beginning to see that they can free themselves from the restrictions of their self-made macho prisons and allow themselves to show their emotions openly—to laugh, to cry, to love, to just generally behave like certified wimps. What this means to you males is that if you get a female pregnant, you are now expected to behave in an extremely sensitive manner and watch the baby come out. I will explain how to do this later.

My point here, young couples, is that baby-having is extremely serious business, and you probably don't have the vaguest idea what you're doing, as is evidenced by the fact that you're reading a very sloppy and poorly researched book. So I think you should start off with the quiz below to test your knowledge of important baby facts.

Quiz for Young Couples Who Want to Have a Baby and Who Clearly Have No Idea What They're Getting Into

1. HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU ESTIMATE THAT A BABY'S DIAPER MUST BE CHANGED BEFORE THE BABY BECOMES TOILET TRAINED?

- a. One million billion jillion.
- b. One skillion hillion drillion gazillion.
- C. Many babies never become toilet trained.

2. WHAT IS THE MOST DISGUSTING THING YOU CAN IMAGINE THAT A BABY MIGHT DELIBERATELY PUT INTO ITS MOUTH?

- a. A slime-covered slug.
- b. A slime-covered slug that has just thrown up all over itself.
- c. A slime-covered slug that has just thrown up all over itself because it has fallen into a vat of toxic sewage.

3. WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO TAKE A BABY TO A NICE RESTAURANT?

- a. During a fire.
- b. On Easygoing Deaf People's Night.
- c. After the baby has graduated from medical school.

4. WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOUR TWO-MONTH-OLD BABY IS SCREAMING IN AN AIRPLANE AND REFUSES TO SHUT UP AND IS CLEARLY DISTURBING THE OTHER PASSENGERS?

- A. Summon the stewardess and say: "Stewardess, whose baby is this?"
- b. Summon the stewardess and say: "Stewardess, this baby is very interested in aviation. Please take it up and show it around the cockpit for the duration of the flight."
- c. Summon the stewardess and say: "Stewardess, please inform the captain that this infant has just handed me a note in which it threatens to continue crying unless it is taken to Havana immediately."

HOW TO SCORE: Give yourself one point for each question you answered. If you scored three or higher, you are very serious about this, and you might as well go ahead and have a baby. If you scored two or lower, you either aren't really interested in having a baby, or you have the I.Q. of a tree stump. In either case, you should read the section on birth control.

Those of you who are going to have babies should skip the sections on birth control, because they contain many sexually explicit terms, such as “rooster.” You can go directly to the section, “How Much Does It Cost to Have a Baby?”.

Male Birth Control

To understand the problems involved in birth control, let’s look at this quotation from the excellent 1962 medical reference work *Where Do Babies Come From?*, which I purchased from a nurse at a yard sale:

“The way the rooster gets his sperm inside the hen, to fertilize her egg, is very strange to us.”

The problem with this quotation, of course, is that it suggests we have given a great deal of thought to the question of how to get sperm inside a chicken. But it does bring up the basic issue in birth control, which is to avoid fertilization you somehow have to keep the male sperm away from the female egg. This is not easy, because men contain absurd quantities of sperm, produced by the same hormone that causes them to take league softball seriously.

The most effective method of birth control for males is the one where, just when the male and the female are about to engage in sex, the friends of the male burst out of the bushes and yell and jump up and down on the bumper and spray shaving cream all over the car. The problem is that this method is pretty much limited to teenage males. Another popular form of teenage birth control is the condom, which the male uses by placing it in his wallet and carrying it around for four years and pulling it out to show his friends in the Dairy Queen parking lot.

The Condom Lady

When I was a teenage male, it was very difficult to obtain condoms, because you had to buy them at the drugstore from the Condom Lady, who was about 65 and looked like your grandmother only more moral. She had a photographic memory so she knew exactly who you were, and as soon as you left the store, she would dial a special number that would connect her with a gigantic loudspeaker system so she could announce to your parents and your teachers and everybody in your church or synagogue and people on the street that you had just bought condoms. Now they sell condoms right out in the open on display racks, just like breath mints or something, and the Condom Lady has switched over to selling *Penthouse* magazine to middle-aged businessmen at the airport.

For older males, the most effective form of birth control is the vasectomy, which is a simple surgical procedure that can be done right in your doctor’s office. Notice I say your doctor’s office. I myself would insist on having it done at the Mayo Clinic surrounded by a team of several dozen crackerjack surgeons and leaders of all the world’s major religious groups. I don’t take any chances with so-called minor surgical procedures, because the last one I had was when the dentist took my wisdom teeth out, and subsequently I almost bled to death in the carpet department at Sears.

The way I understand it, what happens in a vasectomy is they tie some kind of medical knot in the male conduit so the sperm can’t get through. Of course, this leads to the obvious question, which is: Won’t the sperm back up? Will these poor pathetic males someday explode like water balloons, spewing sperm all over and possibly ruining an important sales presentation? I say the American Medical

Association ought to get the hell off the golf course and answer this question before the public becomes needlessly alarmed.

Female Birth Control

Female birth control is much more complicated, because once sperm are safely inside a female, they become very aggressive. They barge up and down the various feminine tubes and canals, hooting and whistling, until they locate the egg. Then they strike up a conversation, feigning great interest in the egg's personality, but actually looking for the first opportunity to penetrate.

There is no absolutely foolproof way to stop this fertilization process. The old wives' tale, of course, is that a female could avoid getting pregnant by not having sex, but this was disproved by a recent experiment in which Harvard University biologists placed 50 old wives in a locked condominium for two years, and 35 percent of them got pregnant anyway merely by looking at pictures of Raymond Burr.

But there are things that a woman can do. She can insert one of the many feminine insertion devices shaped like alien space vehicles, which are designed to scare the sperm into stampeding right back out the vestibule. Or she can take the pill, which messes with her hormones in such a way that her body gets fooled into thinking it is already pregnant. The egg gets all bloated and starts to feel weepy and nauseous in the morning, and when it comes clomping down the fallopian tubes, the sperm all go stampeding right back out the vestibule.

What the public is eagerly awaiting, of course, is a birth-control pill for males. If you ever see members of the public gathering in eager little knots, that's what they're waiting for. The male medical establishment has been assuring us for years that such a pill is right around the corner. "Believe us," they say, "there's nothing we'd rather do than come up with a pill that messes with our hormones, so we can take this burden from the women, who have been unfairly forced to bear it for far too long. In fact, we'd probably finish developing the male birth-control pill tonight, but we have to play league softball."

How Much Does It Cost to Have a Baby?

In primitive times, having a baby was very inexpensive. When women were ready to give birth, they simply went off and squatted in a field; this cost nothing except for a nominal field-rental charge. Today, of course, the medical profession prefers that you have your baby in a hospital, because only there can doctors, thanks to the many advances in medical equipment and techniques, receive large sums of money.

It is difficult to predict exactly what the doctor's bill for your pregnancy will be, because every situation is different. If your doctor's Mercedes-Benz is running well, he may charge you as little as \$2,000; if there are complications, such as that he has been hearing a little ticking sound in the transmission lately, then he may be forced to charge you much more. It is a good idea to "shop around" before you settle on a doctor. Ask about the condition of his Mercedes. Ask about the competence of his mechanic. Don't be shy! After all, you're paying for it.

The Cost of Everything after the Baby Is Born Right Up

until It Goes to College or, God Help You, Graduate School

Again, it is very hard to be specific here, largely because I haven't done any research. In my own case, I estimate that the cost of raising our son, Robert, to age three, which is where he is at the moment, breaks down as follows:

Little metal cars—\$13,000

Everything else—\$4,000

If we extrapolate this out for the next 18 years, assuming that inflation continues, and that we don't have a nuclear war, which would pretty much render the point moot, we can conclude that in the long term a child can cost just scads of money. Maybe you should go back and read the section on birth control.

Should the Woman Quit Her Job to Have a Baby?

The advantage of quitting your job is that if you want to, you can make a really nasty speech to your boss, right in front of everybody, where you tell him he's incompetent and has the worst case of bodily odor in the annals of medicine. The disadvantage is that you'll lose your income, which means for the next eight or nine years the only new article of clothing you will be able to afford for yourself will be dress shields.

The advantage of keeping your job is that you will be able to stand around the Xerox machine for a couple of months showing pictures of your child to your co-workers, who will ooh and ahh even though very young infants tend to look like unwashed fruit.

What about Insurance?

Don't worry. Your insurance needs will automatically be taken care of by squadrons of insurance salesmen, who can detect a pregnant woman up to 11 miles away on a calm day, and who will show up at your house carrying sleeping bags and enough freeze-dried food to enable them to stay for weeks if necessary.

The Intangible Benefits

Of course, you can't reduce children to mere dollars and cents. There are many intangible benefits, by which I mean benefits that, when coupled with 50 cents, will buy you a cup of coffee.

For example, I know a person named Michael, who, although he does not personally own any children, once got a major benefit from his five-year-old nephew. What happened was they were at this big open-air concert in Boston to celebrate the Bicentennial, and when it was over the crowd was enormous and it looked as though they'd never get out. So Michael held his nephew aloft and yelled, "Sick child! Sick child! Make way!" loud enough so nobody could hear the nephew saying, "I'm not sick, Uncle

Mike.” And the crowd made way, which meant Mike got home hours sooner than he would have otherwise.

So there is an example of a person getting a large intangible benefit from a child, and it wasn’t even technically his child. Also, you can get terrific tax deductions for children. Of course, the same can be said for insulation, but you’d look like an idiot, waving insulation aloft at an outdoor concert.

Chapter 2. Pregnancy

What on earth is going on inside pregnant women that makes them become so large and weepy? This is the fascinating biological topic we will explore in this chapter, at least until we start to feel nauseous.

The Female Reproductive System

The female reproductive system is extremely complicated, because females contain a great many organs, with new ones being discovered every day. Connecting these organs is an elaborate network of over seven statute miles of tubes and canals. Nobody really understands this system. Burly male doctors called “gynecologists” are always groping around in there with rubber gloves, trying to figure out what’s going on. Or so they claim.

Fertilization

The fertilization process starts in the ovaries, which each month produce an egg. After a hearty breakfast, this egg treks down the fallopian tubes, where it is propositioned by millions of sperm, which are extremely small, totally insincere one-celled animals. Often, to attract the egg, the sperm will engage in ritual behavior, such as ruffling their neck feathers. No wait, I’m thinking of birds.

Anyway, the egg, a fat and globular kind of cell with very little self-esteem, finds itself in this dimly lit fallopian tube surrounded by all these sleek, well-traveled sperm, and sooner or later one of them manages to penetrate. Then the sperm all saunter off, winking and nudging each other toward the bile duct, while the fertilized egg slinks down to the uterus, an organ shaped like Webster Groves, Missouri. The egg attaches itself to the uterine wall, and thus begins an incredibly subtle and complex chain of hormonal secretions that signal to the woman’s body that it is time to start shopping around for fluffy little baby garments. Pregnancy has begun.

The Stages of Development of the Fetus

WEEK 5: The fetus is only 6.7 liters in circumference yet has already developed the ability to shriek in airplanes.

WEEK 10: The fetus is almost 12 millipedes in longitude and has a prehensile tail and wings. It will probably lose these things before it is born.

WEEK 20: The fetus measures 4 on the Richter scale and is perusing mail-order catalogs from the

Fisher-Price company.

WEEKS 30-40: The fetus is on vacation.

WEEK 50: The fetus can run the 100meter dash in 10.23 seconds and has developed an interest in pottery.

Pregnancy and Diet

You must remember that when you are pregnant, you are eating for two. But you must also remember that the other one of you is about the size of a golf ball, so let's not go overboard with it. I mean, a lot of pregnant women eat as though the other person they're eating for is Orson Welles. The instant they find out they're pregnant they rush right out and buy a case of Mallomars, and within days they've expanded to the size of barrage balloons.

Keep in mind that it's a baby you're eating for. If you're going to eat for it, don't eat like an adult; eat like a baby. This doesn't mean you can't have Mallomars; it means you must hold them in your hands until the chocolate melts and then rub it into your hair and the sofa. If you eat at a restaurant, feel free to order that steak you crave, but have the waiter cut it into 650,000 tiny pieces and then refuse to touch them, preferring instead to chew and swallow the cocktail napkin and then throw up a little bit on your dress.

Answers to Common Questions about Pregnancy

Q. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY DURING PREGNANCY BESIDES THAT I WILL BECOME HUGE AND TIRED AND THROW UP A LOT AND BE CONSTIPATED AND DEVELOP HEMORRHOIDS AND HAVE TO URINATE ALL THE TIME AND HAVE LEG CRAMPS AND VARICOSE VEINS?

A. Many women also have lower back pain.

Q. IS IT SAFE TO GAMBLE AND CURSE DURING PREGNANCY?

A. Yes, but during the first trimester you should avoid gaudy jewelry.

Q. HOW LONG WILL I BE PREGNANT?

A. Most of us learn in health class that the human gestation period is nine months. Like most things we learn in health class, this is a lie. The only people who still believe it are doctors, who make a big fuss out of giving you a "due date" nine months from when they think you were fertilized, as if it takes some kind of elaborate medical training to operate a calendar. I have done exhaustive research on this question in the form of talking to my friends and listening in on other people's conversations in the supermarket checkout line, and I have concluded that no woman has ever given birth on her "due date." About a quarter of all pregnant women give birth "prematurely," which means during the doctor's vacation that immediately precedes the "due date." All other women—and ask them if you don't believe me—remain pregnant for at least 14 months, and sometimes much longer if the weather has been unusually hot.

Q. CAN I HAVE SEX WITH MY HUSBAND WHILE I'M PREGNANT?

A. No.

Q. WELL, CAN I HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S HUSBAND?

A. I don't see why not.

Important Advice for Husbands

The key here is to be sensitive. You must not let your wife think you find her unattractive just because she's getting tremendously fat. Go out of your way to reassure her on this point. From time to time, say to her: "I certainly don't find you unattractive just because you're getting tremendously fat." If you go to a party where every woman in the room is slinky and lithe except your wife, who is wearing a maternity outfit that makes her look like a convertible sofa, be sure to remark from time to time, in a strident voice, that you can't judge a book by its cover. Your wife is bound to remember this sensitive gesture.

During her pregnancy your wife will have many emotional moods caused by the fact that there are gallons of hormones racing around inside her. The two of you will be sitting in your living room, watching the evening news on television, when all of a sudden she'll run into the bedroom in tears because of a report about a monsoon wiping out a distant Asian village. Follow her. Comfort her. Tell her: "They're just distant Asians, for God's sake."

Teaching Your Child in the Uterus

Can you teach your child while it's still in the uterus? The answer is yes, at least according to this couple I saw on the "Phil Donahue Show" once, and I don't see why they would lie about it. Their kids all came out of the womb with a deep appreciation for classical music. Frankly, I don't understand why parents think this is so important, because as I recall my youth, children who appreciated classical music were infinitely more likely to get beat up on the playground. The smart move, if you want your child to have the respect and admiration of its peers, would be to teach it how to spit convincingly or lead cheers.

But never mind what you teach the child while it's in the uterus; the important thing is that you can teach it, and you'd better, if you want it to get into Harvard Medical School. Of course, the teaching method has to be very simple. I mean, you can't go in there with slide projectors or anything. Where would you plug them in? So you'll pretty much have to content yourself with yelling at the stomach. This is the man's job, because let's face it, the woman would look pretty stupid yelling at her own stomach.

So whenever the two of you have a spare moment together, such as when you're waiting to cash a check at the bank, the man should lean over and yell, in the general direction of the woman's uterus, something like "THE CAPITAL OF NORTH DAKOTA IS PIERRE." Or maybe that's South Dakota. I can never keep the state capitals straight, because when I was in the uterus, back in 1946, Phil Donahue hadn't been invented yet.

The Baby Shower

Probably the single most grueling ordeal a woman must endure during pregnancy is the baby shower. What happens is you have to sit in the middle of a group of women and repeatedly open gifts, and every time you open one, you have to adopt a delighted expression, then hold the gift up—even if it is disposable diapers—and exclaim, "Oh! How cute!" In some cases this goes on for hours, and all you

are permitted to eat is tiny sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

At one time, most women relied on drugs to get through their showers. But more and more, women are practicing “natural” shower techniques, which allow them, through careful preparation, to have perfectly safe showers without the use of artificial substances.

The key is teamwork between you and your husband. Well in advance of the expected shower date, the two of you should practice regularly at home. Sit on the sofa while your husband hands you various objects, and practice holding them up and exclaiming, “Oh! How cute!” You must practice this every night until no matter what he hands you—an ashtray, a snow tire, a reptile, etc.—you can still appear to be genuinely delighted.

Chapter 3. Getting Ready For Baby

Precautions around the Home

Babies are equipped at birth with a number of instinctive reflexes and behavior patterns that cause them to spend their first several years trying to kill themselves. If your home contains a sharp, toxic object, your baby will locate it; if your home contains no such object, your baby will try to obtain one via mail order. Therefore, you must comb through your house or apartment and eliminate all unsafe things, including: dirt, forks, old copies of Penthouse magazine, germs, spittoons, attics, stairs, stoves, water, etc.

You should also be sure to have the electrical system taken out. You cannot “childproof” it by plugging those little plastic caps into all the outlets. Children emerge from the womb knowing how to remove those caps by means of an instinctive outlet-cap-plucking reflex that doctors regard as one of the key indicators that the child is normal.

Baby’s Room

Baby’s room must be kept at a steady temperature of 72 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of 63 percent, and it must have wallpaper with clowns holding blue, red, and green balloons. Baby’s room should be close enough to your room so that you can hear baby cry, unless you want to get some sleep, in which case baby’s room should be in Peru.

Baby’s Crib

The important thing to remember here is that baby does not sleep in the crib. Baby sleeps in the car. Baby uses the crib as a place to cry and go to the bathroom, so the crib has to be fully protected. To make up the crib, first put down the mattress, then a rubber pad, then a yellow rain slicker, then a stout canvas tarpaulin, then a shower curtain, then a two-inch-thick layer of road tar, then a bale of highly absorbent rags, then a cute little sheet with pictures of clowns holding blue, red, and green balloons. You should have lots of spares of all these things.

Other Furniture for Baby's Room

Your best bet is an industrial dumpster.

Baby's Clothes

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why so few high-level corporate executives are babies? The reason is that most babies do not dress for success.

Next time you're in a shopping mall, take a look at what these unsuccessful babies are wearing. Somewhere on virtually every child's outfit will be embroidered either a barnyard animal or a cretin statement such as "Lil' Angel." Many of the babies will be wearing bib overalls, despite overwhelming scientific evidence that such garments reduce the wearer's apparent I.Q. by as many as 65 points. Some of the girl babies will be wearing tights and petticoats that stick straight out horizontally in such a way as to reveal an enormous unsightly diaper bulge, causing them to look like miniature ballerinas with bladder disorders. Really young babies will be encased in fluffy pastel zip-up sacks with no place for the poop to get out, so that after a few hours in the mall they are no more than little pastel sacks of poop with babies' heads sticking out.

You look at these babies, and you realize that they will never be considered for responsible positions until they learn to dress more sensibly. So when you're shopping for clothes for your baby, stick to the time-tested dress-for-success classics—your pinstripes, your lightweight wool suits in blue or gray, stout brogans, etc. And don't neglect the accessories! A baby sucking on a cheap pink plastic rattle is likely to be passed over at promotion time in favor of a baby sucking on a leather rattle with brass fittings.

Baby's Toys

Your friends and relatives will buy your baby lots and lots of cute dolls and stuffed animals, all of which you should throw in the trash compactor immediately. Sure, they look cute to you, but to the baby they appear to be the size of station wagons. So all night long, while you're safe in your animal-free bedroom, your baby is lying there, surrounded by these gigantic creatures. Try to imagine sleeping with an eight-foot-high Raggedy Ann sitting just inches away, staring at you! Especially if you had no way of knowing whether Raggedy Anns were vicious! No wonder babies cry so much at night!

So you don't want cute creatures with eyes. You also don't want so-called educational toys that claim to teach "spatial relationships," because the only spatial relationship newborn babies care about is whether they can fit things into their mouths. This means you want toys that will fit safely and comfortably in a baby's mouth. The best way to select such toys is to try them out in your own mouth, bearing in mind that yours has eight times the volume of baby's. When you go to the toy store, ask to see eight of each potential toy; if you can stuff them all comfortably in your mouth, you should buy one. Remind the salesclerk to sterilize the other seven, so as not to pass infectious diseases on to the next shopper. The clerk will appreciate this thoughtful reminder.

In a later chapter, I'll talk about buying toys for your child when it has acquired the conceptual and manipulative skills necessary to break things.

Diapers: Cloth vs. Disposable

At one time, back during the Korean War, most people rejected disposable diapers because they preferred the natural soft feel of cloth. Then it finally began to dawn on people that the natural soft feel of cloth begins to lose some of its charm when it has been pooped and peed on repeatedly.

So now everybody uses disposable diapers. Oh, I realize there are diaper services that come to your house and drop off clean cloth diapers and pick up the dirty ones, but even those diapers are now disposable. The instant the driver is out of sight of your house, he hurls the dirty diapers into the street and drives off briskly.

The only problem with disposable diapers is that they are starting to overflow the world's refuse-disposal facilities; scientists now predict that if the present trend continues, by the year 1997 the entire planet will smell like the men's room in a bar frequented by motorcycle gangs. But this is not really as serious as it sounds, because, scientists also believe that several years before 1997 the polar ice caps are going to melt. Also, we could always have a nuclear war. So I would definitely go with the disposable diapers.

Chapter 4. Preparing For Birth

An Important Message about Professional Childbirth-Preparation Terminology

Before you have your baby, you're going to be dealing with a number of professional childbirth experts, so you ought to know that they all have this very strict rule: when they talk about childbirth, they never use the word "pain." Granted, this is like talking about the Pacific Ocean without using the word "water," but the way they see it, if they were to tell you women, in clear language, what is really involved in getting this largish object out of your body, none of you would have babies, and the professional childbirth experts would have to find another source of income.

So they use the International Childbirth Professional Code Word for pain, which is "contraction." To the nonexpert, a "contraction" sounds like, at worst, maybe a mild muscle cramp, but it actually describes a sensation similar to that of having professional football players smash their fists into your uterine wall. In a "strong contraction," the players are also wearing skis.

It's quite natural for you to be apprehensive about the pain of childbirth. I was terrified of it myself, until I did a little research and learned there was no way I would ever have to go through it. So let's take a thorough, informed, scientific look at this much-misunderstood topic, and maybe we can clear up your concerns, although I doubt it.

Here are two actual diagrams, drawn with the aid of modern medical expertise, showing the insides of a woman just before and just after giving birth. What these diagrams reveal to those of us trained to understand them is that there is an entire baby inside the pregnant woman, and somehow during childbirth it comes out. This is the part that stumps us, because despite all of our modern medical expertise, we frankly cannot see how such a thing is possible. All we really know about it is that it seems

to hurt like crazy.

If you'd like more technical details on the childbirth process, I suggest you view one of the many fine prairie dramas on television wherein some pathetic wispy-haired pioneer woman goes into labor during a blizzard in the most god-awful desolate prairie place, such as Kansas. Nothing brings on labor like a prairie blizzard. Women have been known to give birth in prairie blizzards even when they weren't actually pregnant.

Anyway, on these prairie dramas the pioneer woman lies around moaning and writhing, which should give you an idea of what childbirth is like, except that on television it takes about as long as an episode of "Little House on the Prairie," whereas in real life it can take as long as "Roots."

But don't worry, because later in this chapter we'll talk about a wonderful new modern natural technique for coping with contractions. I won't describe this amazing technique right away, because I don't want you to find out yet that it's really just deep breathing.

How Your Mother Had Babies, and Why We Now Feel It Was All Wrong

Here is the system that was used for having babies during the Eisenhower Administration: At the first sign of pregnancy, the husband would rush the wife to the hospital, where she would be given modern medical drugs that would keep her from feeling contractions or anything else, including a volcanic eruption in the delivery room. This way the woman felt very little pain. Often she didn't regain consciousness until her child was entering the fourth grade.

One big problem with this system was that drugs can have adverse effects on the baby, as is evidenced by the fact that every single person born during the 40s, 50s, or 60s is really screwed up. Another problem was that the father had very little to do with the birth. His job was to sit in the waiting room with the other fathers and smoke cigarettes and read old copies of Field and Stream and wonder what the hell was taking so long. When the baby was born, the nurses would clean it up as best as they could and show it to the father, then he'd go home to bumble around and have humorous kitchen episodes until his wife got back on her feet and could resume cooking. This system deprived the husband of the chance to witness the glorious moment when his child came into the world, not to mention all the other various solids and fluids that come into the world with the child.

So today we have a much better childbirth system. Federal law now requires the man to watch the woman have the baby, and the woman is not allowed to have any drugs unless she agrees, in writing, to feel guilty. In some ways, we're back to the old prairie method of baby-having, only we do it in modern hospitals, so the husband doesn't have to boil water. All the water-boiling is now done by trained health-care professionals for about \$65 a gallon.

Choosing a Hospital

The most important thing to remember in choosing a hospital is that there must be no Dairy Queen between it and you. Medical science has been unable to develop a way to get a pregnant woman, even in the throes of labor, past a Dairy Queen without stopping for a chocolate milk shake. This could waste

precious time on the way to the hospital. Even worse, the woman could start having the baby right there in the Dairy Queen, with nobody to help her except her husband and various teenage Dairy Queen employees all smeared with butterscotch and wearing those idiot hats.

Also, you should pick a hospital you feel comfortable in. Most people feel uneasy about hospitals, possibly because the instant you walk through the door medical personnel grab you and remove your blood and stick tubes up your nose. But in deciding where you're going to have your baby, you must overcome these fears. You must barge right into the hospital and ask questions. If you have no questions, use these:

1. How much does this hospital weigh?
2. What's that funny smell?

Don't leave until you get the answers!

Childbirth Classes: Learning to Breathe

Before you can have your baby, you have to attend childbirth classes wherein you openly discuss the sexual organs with people you barely know. You get used to it. You'll get so that when your instructor passes around a life-size plastic replica of the cervix, you'll all hold it up and make admiring comments, as if it were a prize floral arrangement. You'll get to know the uterus so well that you'd recognize one anywhere. Also, you'll see actual color movies of babies being born, so that you'll be prepared for the fact that they come out looking like Mister Potato Head.

But the main thing you'll do in childbirth classes is learn the amazing new modern natural technique for getting through contractions, namely deep breathing. Now I will admit that when our instructor first talked about getting through labor with nothing but deep breathing, my immediate impulse was to rush out and buy three or four quarts of morphine, just in case. But after several weeks of practicing the breathing techniques, my wife and I became convinced that, by golly, they really worked! Obviously we were hyperventilating.

The key to the technique is to breathe in a different way for each stage of labor.

The Magic Word

One last thing. In childbirth classes, you will be taught, with much ceremony, a Secret Magical Anti-Contraction Word that the woman is supposed to say when things get really awful, when the professional football players in her uterus are wearing skis and carrying sharpened poles. Technically, this word is supposed to be revealed only in childbirth classes, but I have decided to print it below for use in case of emergency.

WARNING: THE NEXT PARAGRAPH CONTAINS THE SECRET MAGICAL ANTI-CONTRACTION WORD. DO NOT READ THIS PARAGRAPH UNLESS YOU ARE SINCERELY IN THE PROCESS OF HAVING A BABY.

The word is "hout." Rhymes with "trout." It may not look like much, but it has been scientifically shown to be over twice as effective against contractions as the next leading word, "Ohmigod." You may hear another secret word in your childbirth classes, but "hout" did it for us. Our instructor had us practice it for hours in class—you have to get the tip of your tongue right on the edge of your front teeth

—and it really helped my wife get through those first few contractions. After that, she switched over to “AAAAAAAARRRRRRRRGGGUUNNNNH,” which is not an officially approved word, but seemed to work well for her.

Chapter 5. The Actual Blessed Event

Childbirth is like vampires: it never strikes before sundown. If you feel something that seems like contractions during the day, you’re actually having what is called “false labor.” Sometimes false labor can be very realistic, in which case you may have to go to the hospital, where you will be examined by a false doctor, who may even deliver an anatomically correct doll.

But real labor always begins at 3:15 A.M. eastern standard time, because that is when every obstetrician in the country is in deepest sleep. As soon as the contractions start, you should call your obstetrician, who will answer the phone and, without even waking up, say: “How far apart are the contractions?” You can give any answer you want (“About two feet,” for example), and then the obstetrician will say, “You’d better come on in to the hospital.” Then he’ll roll over onto his side, still completely unconscious, and resume snoring.

At this time, you should gather up the things you’ll need in the hospital (don’t forget your passport!) and set off. Husbands, here is how you should drive: Sit on the edge of the driver’s seat with your face one inch from the windshield and grip the steering wheel so firmly that little pieces of it keep breaking off in your hands. Every eight or nine seconds, jerk your head down violently to look at the gas gauge, then give your wife’s knee a firm clench for one-tenth of a second and grimace at her and say, “Everything’s going to be fine.” But despite this reassuring exterior, husbands, you must be alert and prepared for any problem that could prevent you from getting to the hospital in time.

What to Do If You Can’t Get to the Hospital

At all costs, you must not panic. Stay calm. A good way to do this is to play word games, such as the one where you start with a letter, and then the other person adds a letter, and so on, the idea being that you are spelling an actual word, but you don’t want to supply the last letter. For extra fun, you can say that the loser has to get out and run around the car backwards three times at a red light. Besides livening up the game, this will attract the attention of the police, who might help deliver your baby in a gruff but kindly manner, the way they do in anecdotes from Reader’s Digest. Or they might beat you with clubs.

Three Problems That Could Prevent You from Getting to the Hospital in Time

1. Your car radio could explode for no apparent reason.
2. You could be stopped by police who are looking for escaped radicals, and who think your wife’s stomach is a bomb and call in the Explosives Disposal Unit to cover her with sand.
3. You could get stuck behind a member of the Elderly People with Enormous Cars Club, driving

smack dab in the middle of the road at two miles an hour in search of an all-night drugstore to buy new batteries for his hearing aid, so he can't hear you honk.

What Will Happen to You If You Get to the Hospital

At the maternity ward, you will be greeted by kindly nurses who will do a number of unspeakably degrading things to you while the hospital operator tries to wake up your obstetrician. Then you will be placed in a little room where your husband can sit with his little clipboard and stopwatch and time your contractions, just like you learned in childbirth class, until you swat his goddamn clipboard and stopwatch across the room and demand to be killed, which is the sign that you have gone from "contractions" to "strong contractions."

At this time, you will be taken to the delivery room, where you will be placed in the Standard Childbirth Position. Medical researchers have tried for decades to come up with a childbirth position even more humiliating than this one, but they have had no success.

While you're in this delicate position in the delivery room, you may be a bit embarrassed, especially since there are people standing around wearing masks and watching you. So let me explain who these people are. You have your obstetrician, of course, unless the hospital operator has been unable to rouse him, in which case he will actually be a life-size obstetrician puppet operated from behind by a nurse trained to mimic obstetricians' voices. You also have your husband, assuming he has been able to wash away the little crumbled bits of steering wheel embedded in his hands.

Then you have your pediatrician, and an anesthesiologist to stand by in case the doctors decide that the delivery is not costing enough. Also you have at least one nurse to assist each of these doctors; you have three medical students; you have one law student; and you have Billy Ray Johnson, who is actually a retired beet farmer who just happens to like hanging around delivery rooms and watch people have babies.

So that's it, just 12 of you, unless Billy Ray has brought friends to share this wondrous moment.

The Big Moment

And what is it like? That, of course, is what you want to know: What is it really like?

I don't have the vaguest idea, of course. But I do remember what it sounded like when my wife had our son. I was at one end of my wife, shouting words of encouragement to her head, the doctor and nurse were shouting to the other end of her body. It sounded like a group of extremely sincere people trying to help an elephant dislodge a Volkswagen from its throat:

DOCTOR: You're doing just great, Beth! Just great! Really! Isn't she doing great?

NURSE: She sure is! She's doing just great!

ME: You're really doing great, honey! Really!

BETH: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRUU

UUNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG GHHHHHHHHHHHH.

DOCTOR: That was just great! Really!

And so on, for quite a while, until finally Robert came out, and immediately demanded to be put back in. My wife and I were very happy. I remember hugging her head.

What to Do Immediately after Birth

Close your eyes tightly. This is in case the doctor takes it into his head to show you the placenta, which is a highly unattractive object that comes out close on the heels of the baby. In the old days, when people were decent, the placenta was disposed of quickly and quietly and was never talked about in polite society. But now people bandy it about openly in public, as if it were a prize-winning bass.

Bonding

While the obstetrician is finishing up, the pediatrician will wrap your baby in a blanket and hand it to you so that you can marvel at the miracle of birth and everything. My only warning here is that you should not hold your baby too long, or you will become “bonded” to it and have to be tugged apart by burly hospital aides.

Chapter 6. The Hospital Stay

A Reassuring Word for First-Time Parents about Hospital Baby-Identification Procedures

A common fear among new parents is that, as a result of a mix-up in the nursery, some kind of terrible mistake will be made, such as that they’ll wind up taking home Yasser Arafat’s baby. This fear is groundless. When a baby is born, a hospital person immediately puts a little plastic tag around its wrist with the words “NOT YASSER ARAFAT’S BABY” printed on it in indelible ink. So whichever baby you wind up with, you can be sure it isn’t his.

Visitors in the Hospital

Maternity ward visitors are an excellent source of amusement, because they always feel obligated to say flattering things about newborn babies, which of course look like enormous fruit fly larvae. One fun trick is to show your visitors somebody else’s baby. “She definitely has your eyes!” your visitors will exclaim. For real entertainment, have the nurse bring you a live ferret, wrapped in a baby blanket. “She’s very alert!” your visitors will remark, as the ferret lacerates their fingers with needle-sharp teeth.

How Long Should the Mother Stay in the Hospital after the Baby Comes Out?

As long as possible. For one thing, as long as you’re in the hospital you can wear a bathrobe all

day. This means you won't have to face up to the fact that even after expelling the baby and all the baby-related fluids and solids, you still have hips the size of vending machines from all the Mallomars you ate back when you thought you were going to be pregnant forever.

For another thing, the hospital employs trained professional personnel to change the baby's diapers, etc., so all you have to do is lounge around in your bathrobe looking serene and complaining about the food. If you go home, you'll have to take care of the baby and confront the fact that you did not once clean behind any of the toilets during the last four months of your pregnancy because you couldn't bend over.

The hospital personnel will try to make you leave after a couple of days, but all you have to do is waddle off to another room and plop down on the bed. There are so many comings and goings in a maternity ward that it will be several days before they catch on to you and try to make you leave again, at which time you can just waddle off to another room. You can probably keep this up until your baby starts to walk unassisted from the nursery to your room at feeding time.

Naming Your Baby

A good way to pass the time while you're in the hospital is to argue loudly with your husband about what to name the baby. You should get started on this as soon as possible, because both of you are likely to have strong views. For example, he may want to name the baby "John," after a favorite uncle, while you may hate "John" because it reminds you of a former boyfriend, not to mention that the baby is a girl.

There are some names new parents should avoid altogether. You shouldn't name a boy "Cyril" or "Percy," because the other boys will want to punch him repeatedly in the mouth, and I can't say as I blame them. And you shouldn't give a girl's name a cute spelling, such as "Cyndi," because no matter how many postgraduate degrees she gets she will never advance any further than clerk-typist.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to give children extremely British-sounding names, such as "Jessica." I think this is an excellent idea. Despite the fact that Great Britain has been unable to produce a car that can be driven all the way across a shopping mall parking lot without major engine failure, Americans think that anything British is really terrific. So I recommend you give your baby the most British name you can think up, such as "Queen Elizabeth" or "Big Ben" or "Crumpet Scone-Hayes."

Some Heavy Thoughts to Think during the Hospital Stay

The hospital stay is a good time for you, as new parents, to share some quiet moments together listening to the woman on the other side of the curtain discuss her bowel movements with her mother via telephone. This is also a time for you to marvel at your baby's incredibly small feet and hands and to reflect on the fact that this is a real human life, a life that you have created, just the two of you; a tiny, helpless life that you are completely responsible for. Makes you want to hop right on a plane for the Azores, doesn't it? I mean, what do the two of you know about being responsible for a human life? The two of you can't even consistently locate clean underwear, for God's sake!

Mother Nature understands this. That is why she has constructed babies so that even the most profoundly incompetent person, even a person who takes astrology seriously and writes angry, semiliterate letters to the television station when it changes the time at which it broadcasts "Family

Feud,” can raise babies successfully. All a newborn baby really needs is food, warmth, and love, pretty much like a hamster, only with fewer signs of intelligence.

So don’t worry; you’ll do fine. Some day, when your child has grown into a teenager and gotten drunk and crashed your new car into the lobby of the home for the aged during the annual Christmas party, you’ll look back on the hamster era and laugh about how worried you were.

In the next chapter, we’ll talk about how laughably easy it is to take care of a newborn baby, provided you don’t do anything else.

Chapter 7. Maintenance Of A New Baby

Finally will come the big day when the hospital authorities order the wife to leave, and the two of you take your new baby home. There is nothing quite like the moment when a young couple leaves the hospital, walking with that characteristic new-parent gait that indicates an obsessive fear of dropping the baby on its head. Finally! It’s just the three of you, on your own!

This independence will last until you get maybe eight feet from the hospital door, where you’ll be assaulted by grandmothers offering advice. The United States Constitution empowers grandmothers to stop any young person on the street with a baby and offer advice, and they take this responsibility very seriously. If they see your baby without a little woolen hat, they will advise you that your baby is too cold. If your baby has a hat, they will advise you that your baby is too warm. Always they will offer this advice in a tone of voice that makes it clear they do not expect your baby to survive the afternoon in the care of such incompetents as yourselves.

The best way to handle advice from random grandmothers is to tell them that you appreciate their concern, but that you feel it is your responsibility to make your own decisions about your child’s welfare. If that doesn’t work, try driving them off with sticks. Otherwise, they’ll follow you home and hang around under your windows.

Now let’s talk about maintaining your new baby.

The Basic Baby Mood Cycle

This is the Basic Baby Mood Cycle, which all babies settle into once they get over being born:

MOOD ONE: Just about to cry

MOOD TWO: Crying

MOOD THREE: Just finished crying

Your major job is to keep your baby in Mood Three as much as possible. Here is the traditional way to do this. When the baby starts to cry, the two of you should pass it back and forth repeatedly and recite these words in unison: “Do you suppose he’s hungry? He can’t be hungry. He just ate. Maybe he needs to be burped. No, that’s not it. Maybe his diaper needs to be changed. No, it’s dry. What could be wrong? Do you think maybe he’s hungry?” And so on, until the baby can’t stand it any more and decides to go to sleep.

When your baby is awake and not crying, it will follow specific air molecules around the room with its eyes. For years, scientists thought the reason newborn babies waved their eyes around in such seemingly

random ways was that they couldn't really focus on anything, but we now know that, thanks to the fact that they have such small eyes, they can actually see molecules whooshing around, which is a much more interesting thing to watch than a bunch of parents and relatives waving stupid rattles in their faces.

Also, babies receive signals from outer space, bringing messages from other galaxies that only babies can detect. These messages cause the baby to smile (if the message is a joke) or look startled (if it is bad news, such as the explosion of a popular star).

When Should You Feed Your Baby?

During the day, you should feed your baby just before the phone rings. At night, you should feed your baby immediately after you have fallen asleep. After each feeding, you should pat your baby gently on the back until it pukes on your shoulder.

Should You Breast-Feed or Bottle-Feed Your Baby?

I'm surprised you even have to ask. All of us modern childbirth experts feel very strongly that you should breast-feed your child. There are two major reasons:

1. Your mother didn't breast-feed, and as I pointed out in the chapter on childbirth, we now know that everything your mother did was wrong.

2. Breast-feeding is better for the baby. Much has been written on this subject, reams and reams of information in hundreds of excellent books and articles which I frankly have been unable to read because I would never get this book finished on time. But the basic idea, as I understand it, is that bottle milk is designed primarily for baby cows, whereas your baby is not a cow at all! It can't even stand up! Am I getting too technical here?

Anyway, all your really smart, with-it trend-setters are into breast-feeding today. Go into any swank New York City night spot and you'll see dozens of chic women such as Leona Helmsley breast-feeding, many of them with rented babies.

Learning to Breast-Feed

Like many new mothers, you may feel ashamed that you don't just automatically know how to breast-feed. You know there must be more to it than just shoving the breast into the baby's mouth, because otherwise people wouldn't keep writing enormous books about it. But just what are you supposed to do? You look at pictures in National Geographic of women in some primitive South American jungle tribe, women who have never even seen Tupperware, casually breast-feeding their infants, and you think: "How come they know how to do it and I don't? What's wrong with me?"

Don't be so hard on yourself. Those primitive women have undergone hours and hours of intensive breast-feeding instruction at special training centers funded by the United Nations, and only the top graduates are chosen to appear in National Geographic photographs. Yes, they have to be taught, too, so don't be the least bit ashamed to ask a nurse for help. My wife finally had to ask a nurse, who came in and stuck her (my wife's) breast into my son's mouth. Without the nurse's technical know-how, my wife

might have stuck her breast into my son's ear or something, and serious nutritional complications could have developed.

Common Problems with Breast-Feeding

Well, for one thing, you're supposed to switch the baby from one side to the other, but usually the baby wants to stay where it is, and babies develop suction that has been measured at upwards of 6,000 pounds per square inch. You can't get them off with crowbars.

Another common problem is milk supply. Babies love to play little pranks wherein one day they drink about six gallons of milk, which causes a mother to produce like crazy, and the next day the baby drinks maybe an ounce and a half. Some mothers have been known to explode from the pressure.

What Is Colic?

Colic is when your baby cries all the time, and people keep telling you how their kid had the colic for 71 straight months. If your baby gets colic, you should take it to the pediatrician so he can say, "There's nothing to worry about," which is of course absolutely true from his perspective, since he lives in a colic-free home many miles from your baby.

"There's nothing to worry about" is a typical example of the kind of easy-for-you-to-say remarks that pediatricians like to make. Another one is, "Take his temperature rectally every hour," an instruction which, if actually followed, would scar both parent and child emotionally for life. If your baby has diaper rash, your pediatrician may say, "Just leave the diaper off for a while." This would be a wonderful idea if the baby would stop shooting wastes out of its various orifices, but of course the baby cannot do this, which is why it is wearing a diaper in the first place. Not that the pediatrician knows about any of this. His baby is tended by domestics from third world nations.

Changing Your Baby's Diapers

First of all, you must understand that as far as your baby is concerned, you never have to change its diapers. There is no creature on earth so content as a baby with a full diaper. Pooping is one of the few useful skills that very small babies have mastered, and they take tremendous pride in it, especially when they have an audience, such as grandparents or the assembled guests at the christening. They'll wrinkle their little faces up into determined frowns, and they'll really work at it, with appropriate loudish grunting noises that will at times drown out the clergyman. After all that effort, they want some time to enjoy their achievement, to wriggle and squirm until poop has oozed into every wrinkle and crevice of the cute little \$45

designer baby outfit you bought especially for the christening. So when you change your baby's diaper, don't think you're doing your baby any great favor. As far as your baby is concerned, you're taking away the fruits of its labor. "Why don't you get your own poop?" is what newborn babies would say if they could talk, which thank God they can't.

Now let's talk about diaper-changing technique. The problem with most baby books is that when they

show you how to change diapers, they use photographs showing a clean changing table in a well-lit room, and a baby that is devoid of any sign of bodily eliminations. Why would anybody, except maybe some kind of pervert, want to change such a baby? No, what you need to know is how to change a really filthy baby, and under difficult conditions, such as in bus station rest rooms where even the germs have diseases.

I'd say restaurants pose the biggest diaper-changing challenge. When my son was three months old, my wife and I took him to a dimly lit, semielegant restaurant, and by the time we examined him closely he had managed to get poop up as far as his hat. I mean, we had a major failure of the containment vessel, and there was no sterile little changing table around, just lots of people hoping to dine in a romantic environment. So what you have to do in these situations is go on laughing and chatting as though nothing is wrong, but meanwhile work away like madmen under the table with moist towelettes, which you should buy in freight-car loads.

What I'm saying here is that you need to learn to change diapers furtively, in the dark, and you need to be able to saunter unobtrusively carrying huge wads of reeking towelettes past amorous couples to the rest room trash container, and you do not learn these things in books.

How to Get Your Body Back into Shape after Childbirth the Way All the Taut-Bodied Entertainment Personalities Such As Jane Fonda Do

Don't kid yourself. Those women have never had babies. Their children were all borne by professional stunt women.

Chapter 8. The First Six Months

Baby's Development during the First Six Months

The first six months is a time of incredibly rapid development for your baby. It will learn to smile, to lift its head, to sit, to play the cello, and to repair automatic transmissions.

Ha ha. Just kidding here, poking a little fun at new parents who watch like hawks for their babies to pass the Major Milestones of Infant Development, when the truth is that during the first six months, babies mainly just lie around and poop. They haven't even developed brains at this point. If you were to open up a baby's head—and I am not for a moment suggesting that you should—you would find nothing but an enormous drool gland.

Nevertheless, this is definitely the time to buy your baby its first computer. It's never too soon to start learning about computers, as you know if you have been watching those television commercials wherein children whose parents didn't buy them computers at an early age wind up as rag-pickers with open sores all over their bodies.

Computers are the way of the future. You can buy them at K-Mart, for God's sake. You see families wandering through the computer department, clutching K-Mart purchases such as huge bags of caramel popcorn manufactured in Korea, and they're saying things like, "I think we should get this computer, because it has a built-in modem and the software support is better." These are not nuclear physicists talking this way; these are K-Mart shoppers, and if they know about computers, your kid damn well better know about them, too.

What kind of computer is best for a baby aged 0 to 6 months? There are many models, ranging widely

in memory size, telecommunications facilities, and expansion capabilities, but the critical thing is that your baby's computer should be red, and it should have no sharp edges. Also, you should immediately cut off the plug, because otherwise your baby could receive a dangerous electrical shock from drooling on the keyboard.

Disciplining a New Baby

During the 1950s and 60s, parents were told to be permissive with their children, and the result was juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, Watergate, Pac-Man, California, etc. So we experts now feel you should start disciplining your baby immediately after birth. At random intervals throughout the day, you should stride up to your baby and say, in a strict voice, "There will be no slumber party for you tonight, young lady."

You may think this is a waste of time, but scientists have determined that babies as young as three days old can tell, just from the tone of an adult's voice, when they are being told they can't go to a slumber party. You should keep up this tough discipline until your child is in junior high school and thus has access to weapons.

Baby-Tending for Men

During the first six months, your baby will need more care than at any other time in its life except the following 30 months. We modern sensitive husbands realize that it's very unfair to place the entire child-care burden on our wives, so many of us are starting to assume maybe three percent of it. Even this is probably too much. I know I'll be accused of being sexist for saying this, but the typical man has had his nurturing instincts obliterated by watching professional football, and consequently he has no concept of how to tend a baby. He feels he's done a terrific job if the baby isn't stolen by gypsies. You'd get better infant care from an affectionate dog.

But men keep reading articles in the newspaper Style section about how they're supposed to help. So what happens is the family goes to, say, a picnic, and on the way the man, feeling magnanimous, says, "I'll take care of the baby, honey. You just relax and enjoy yourself." So they get to the picnic, and the husband, feeling very proud of himself, tends to the baby by poking it affectionately in the stomach every 45 minutes on his way to the cooler for a new beer. Between pokes the wife comes over maybe 35 times to change the baby's diaper, feed it, cuddle it, arrange its blanket, put the pacifier back in its mouth, brush enormous stinging insects off it, etc.

On the way home, the man remarks on how easy the baby is to take care of, how it hardly cried at all, etc., and the woman plunges the red-hot car cigarette lighter deep into his right thigh. This is bad for a relationship.

So what I've done, men, is I've prepared a little automotive-style maintenance chart for you to follow when you're in charge of the baby.

Men's Baby-Maintenance Chart

MAINTENANCE INTERVAL ACTIVITY Every 5 minutes Lean over baby and state the following in a high-pitched voice: “Yes! We’re a happy boy or girl! Yes we are! Watcha watcha watcha!” Every 10 minutes Check all orifices for emerging solids and liquids; wipe and change containment garments as needed Every 30 minutes Attempt feeding and burping procedures Every 60 minutes Examine entire baby surface for signs of redness, flaking, major eye boogers, etc. Every 2 hours Call pediatrician about something

Advice to Women about Babies and Jobs

If you’re like many young mothers who held jobs before childbirth, you face a cruel dilemma: Your family could really use another income, yet you feel strongly that you should stay home for at least the first few critical years.

The solution to this dilemma is to have your baby get a job. Under federal law, it is now illegal for employers to discriminate against any person solely because that person is a baby. And to their surprise, many employers are finding that babies often make excellent employees, the kind who are always at their desks and never make personal telephone calls. In fact, one major corporation now shows all of its financial proposals to a team of handpicked babies: If they cry at a proposal, it is rejected out of hand; if they attempt to eat it, it is sent on to the board of directors.

What kind of job should you seek for your baby? Your best bet is the kind of job that even the most pathetic incompetent can handle:

State legislator

Vice president of anything

Paperweight

Consultant

Clerk in a state motor vehicle bureau

Anything in marketing

Choosing a Pediatrician

You should choose your pediatrician carefully, for his job is to examine your baby, give it shots, weigh it, measure it—in short, to do everything except attend to the baby when it is actually sick. When the baby is sick, either you or your pediatrician will be on vacation. This is an immutable law of nature.

Babysitters

The best babysitters, of course, are the baby’s grandparents. You feel completely comfortable entrusting your baby to them for long periods, which is why most grandparents flee to Florida at the earliest opportunity.

If no grandparents are available, you will have to rent a teenager. You don’t want a modern teenager, the kind that hangs around the video-game arcade smoking Marlboros and contracting herpes. No, you want an old-fashioned, responsible teenager, the kind who attends Our Lady of Maximum Discomfort

High School and belongs to the 4-H Club and wants to be a nun. Even then you don't want to take any chances. The first time she takes care of your baby, you should never actually leave the house. Drive your car until it's out of sight, then sneak back and crouch in the basement, listening for signs of trouble. In later visits, as you gain confidence in the sitter, you should feel free to eat sandwiches in the basement, and maybe even listen to the radio quietly. After all, this is your night out!

Safety Tip

Be sure to leave the babysitter a firstaid kit with tourniquet; the phone numbers of the pediatrician, the ambulance, the fire department, the police, the Poison Control Center, all your neighbors, the Mayo Clinic, all your relatives, the State Department, etc; and a note telling her where you are ("We're in the basement") and what to do in the event of an emergency ("Pound on the floor").

Songs for New Babies

One fun thing to do with a small baby while it's lying around is to sing it the traditional baby songs, the ones your mother sang when you were a baby. The words sometimes seem strange to us now, because your mother learned them from her mother, who learned them from her mother, and so on back to medieval England, when most people had the intelligence of kelp. Here are three of my favorites:

LADYBUG

(Robert Frost)

Ladybug, Ladybug Fly away home

Your children are all burned

They look like charred Raisinets

(Tickle baby under chin.)

HEG-A-LEG MOLLY

(Anonymous)

Heg-a-leg Molly

Daddy's got a bunting

Why do you sleep so soon?

Wet his bed

And he broke his head

And Myron has gone to Vermont.

(Hold baby up and laugh as if you have just said something immensely amusing.)

LAND OF 1,000 DANCES

(Cannibal and the Headhunters)

I said a na Na na na na Na na na na na na na na na Na na na na

(Check baby's diaper.)

Three Traditional Baby Games

OKLAHOMA BABY CHICKEN HAT

Grasp your baby firmly and place it on your head, stomach side down, then stride about the room, bouncing on the balls of your feet and clucking to the tune of “Surrey with the Fringe on Top.”

HERE COMES THE BABY EATER

Place your baby on the carpet, face up, then crawl around on all fours and announce, “I’m so hungry! I could eat a baby!” Then crawl over and gobble up the baby, starting at the feet, and periodically raising your head and shouting, “Great baby! Delicious!” Babies love this game, but you don’t want to play it when other grown-ups are around, because they will try to take custody away from you.

ATTACK OF THE SPACE BABIES

Lie on your back on the floor and hold your baby over you, face down. Move the baby around in the manner of a hovering spacecraft while making various high-pitched science fiction noises such as “BOOOOOOOWEEEEEEEEEOOOOO.” Feign great fear as the baby attempts to land on the planet Earth. (NOTE: Wear protective clothing, as space babies often try to weaken the earth’s resistance by spitting up on it.)

Babies and Pets

First of all, get rid of your cat. Cats are scum. You’ve read newspaper stories about elderly widows who die and leave their entire estates to their pet cats, right? Well, your cat reads those stories too, and has spent most of its skulking, devious little life dreaming about inheriting all your money. You know where it goes when it disappears for hours at a time? Investment seminars, that’s where.

So if you bring a baby into the home, the cat will see the baby as a rival for your estate and will do anything to turn you against it. Many instances of so-called colic are really nothing more than a cat repeatedly sneaking into a baby’s room in the dead of night and jabbing the baby in the stomach.

Dogs, of course, would never do anything like that. They’re far too stupid to think of it. So you can keep your dog. In fact, many dogs come to love their masters’ babies, often carrying them around gently by the scruffs of their necks, licking them incessantly and refusing to let anybody—even the parents!—near the baby. It’s the cutest thing you ever saw, and it really cuts down on child-care costs. Of course, you have to weigh this against the fact that the child develops a tendency to shed and attack squirrels.

Baby Albums

Baby albums are probably the single biggest cause of violent death in America today. The reason is that when people have their first baby, they record everything that happens. By the time these people have their second baby, they’re sick of albums. Oh, they try to slap something together, but it’s obvious that their hearts aren’t really in it.

So Byron grows up, seemingly normal on the outside, but knowing on the inside that he has this pathetic scrawny album while his brother’s looks like the Manhattan telephone directory, and eventually he runs amok in a dentist’s office with a Thompson submachine gun. So if you want to do a baby album, fine, go ahead, but have the common decency to notify the police first.

Chapter 9. Six Months To A Year

Development during the Second Six Months

During the second six months, your baby will begin to start crawling around looking for hazards. It will start to become aware of the mysteries of language, perhaps even learning to understand simple phrases such as “No!” and “Spit that out!”

Physically, you’ll find your baby is getting hardier and more portable now, so that you can more easily take it to restaurants, although you still can’t go inside. By now baby should have gotten over early medical problems such as the colic; if not, you should see your pediatrician and get something you can use to kill yourself.

So all in all, you can look forward in the next six months to a period of change and growth, with a 60 percent chance of afternoon or evening thundershowers.

Baby’s First Solid Food

We’re using the term “food” loosely here. What we’re talking about are those nine zillion little jars on the supermarket shelf with the smiling baby on the label and names like “Prunes with Mixed Leeks.” Babies hate this stuff. Who wouldn’t? It looks like frog waste.

Babies are people, too; they want to eat what you want to eat. They want cheeseburgers and beer. If we simply fed them normal diets, they’d eat like crazy. They’d weigh 150 pounds at the end of the first year. This is exactly why we don’t feed them normal diets: The last thing we need is a lot of 150-pound people with no control over their bowel movements. We have enough trouble with the Congress.

How to Feed Solid Food to a Baby

The key thing is that you should not place the food in the baby’s mouth. At this stage, babies use their mouths exclusively for chewing horrible things that they find on the floor. The way they eat food is by absorbing it directly into their bloodstreams through their faces. So the most efficient way to feed a baby is to smear the food on its chin.

Unfortunately, many inexperienced parents insist on putting food into the baby’s mouth. They put in spoonful after spoonful of, say, beets, sincerely believing they are doing something constructive, when in fact the beets are merely going around the Baby Food-Return Loop which all humans are equipped with until the age of 18 months. After the parents finish “feeding” the baby, they remove the bib and clean up the area, at which point the baby starts to spew beets from its mouth under high pressure, like a miniature beet volcano, until its face is covered with beets, which it can then absorb.

What to Do When a Baby Puts a Horrible Thing in Its Mouth

The trick is to distract the baby with something even worse than what's in its mouth. Next time you're in a bus station rest room, scour the floor for something really disgusting that might appeal to a baby. Stick it in your freezer, so you can quickly defrost it in a microwave oven (allow about 40 seconds) and wave it enticingly in front of the baby until the baby spits out its horrible thing and lunges for yours.

Of course, as your baby catches on to your tricks, you'll need new and different things to entice it with, which means you'll have to spend a great deal of time on your hands and knees in bus station rest rooms. This is a perfectly normal part of being a responsible parent. Remember to say that when the police come.

Traveling with Baby

By now you're probably thinking how nice it would be to take a trip somewhere and stay in a place where there isn't a hardened yellowish glaze consisting of bananas mixed with baby spit smeared on every surface below a height of two feet. Great idea! My wife and I took many trips with our son, Robert, when he was less than a year old, and we found them all to be surprisingly carefree experiences right up until approximately four hours after we left home, which is when his temperature would reach 106 degrees Fahrenheit. Often we didn't even have to take his temperature, because we could see that his pacifier was melting.

Almost all babies contain a virus that activates itself automatically when the baby is 200 miles or more from its pediatrician. The first time this happened to Robert, we wound up in a pediatric clinic where the doctor got his degree from the University of Kuala Lumpur Medical School and Textile College. He said, "Baby very hot! Bad hot! Could have seezhah!" And we said, "Oh no! My God! Not seezhah!" Then we said, "What the hell is 'seezhah'?" We were afraid it was some kind of horrible Asian disease. Then the doctor rolled his eyes back in his head and went, "Aaaarrgh," and we said, "Oh! Seizure!"

The lesson to be learned from this is that when you travel with a baby, you must be prepared for emergencies. Let's say you're planning a trip to the seashore. Besides baby's usual food, formula, bottles, sterilizer, medicine, clothing, diapers, reams of moist towelettes, ointments, lotions, powders, pacifier, toys, portable crib, blankets, rectal thermometer, car seat, stroller, backpack, playpen, and walker, don't forget to take:

- * One of those things that look like miniature turkey basters that you use to clear out babies' noses, for when your baby develops a major travel cold and sounds like a little cauldron of mucus gurgling away in the motel room six feet away from you all night long.
- * A potent infant-formula anti-cholera drug, for when you're lying on the beach and look up to discover that baby has become intimately involved with an enormous buried dog dropping.
- * Something to read while you're sitting in the emergency ward waiting room.
- * Plenty of film, so you can record these and the many other hilarious adventures you're bound to have traveling with a baby. You might also take a camera.

Taking a Baby on an Airplane

First, you should notify the airline in advance that you will be traveling with an infant, so they can use their computers to assign you a seat where your baby will be in a position to knock a Bloody Mary into the lap of a corporate executive on his way to make an important speech. Also, you should be aware that your baby will insist on standing up in your lap all the way through the flight, no matter how long it is. If you plan to fly with a baby to Japan, all I can say is you'd better have thighs of steel.

Some people try to get their babies to sit down on flights, by giving them sedatives. On our doctor's suggestion, we tried this on a cross-country flight, and all it did was make Robert cranky. The only thing that cheered him up was to grab the hair of the man sitting in front of us, who tried to be nice about it, but if you have a nine-month-old child with a melted Hershey bar all over his pudgy little fingers grabbing your hair all the way from sea to shining sea, you'd start to get a little cranky yourself. So I think it might be a good idea if, on flights featuring babies, the airline distributed sedatives to all the adults, except maybe the pilot.

Teething

Teething usually begins on March 11 at 3:25 P.M., although some babies are off by as much as 20 minutes. The major symptom of teething is that your baby becomes irritable and cries a lot. Of course, this is also the major symptom of everything else, so you might try the old teething test, which is to stick your finger in baby's mouth and see whether baby bites all the way through to your bone, indicating the presence of teeth.

Most teething babies want to chew on something, so it's a good idea to keep a plastic teething ring in the freezer, taking care not to confuse it with the frozen horrible things from bus station rest rooms (see above).

The first teeth to appear will be the central divisors, followed by the bovines, the colons, the insights, and the Four Tops, for a total of 30 or 40

in all. Your pediatrician will advise you to brush and floss your baby's teeth daily, but he's just kidding.

Quick-Reference Baby Medical-Emergency Chart

SYMPTOM CAUSE TREATMENT Baby is chewing contentedly Baby has found something horrible on floor Follow enticement procedure described on page 61

Baby is crying It could be teething, colic, snake bite, some kind of awful rare disease or something Don't worry: most likely it's nothing Baby has strange dark lines all over face and body Baby has gotten hold of laundry marking pen Wait for baby to grow new skin Baby's voice sounds muffled Baby's two-year-old sibling, jealous of all the attention the New Arrival is getting, has covered the New Arrival with dirt Vacuum baby quickly; explain to sibling that you love him or her just as much as baby, but you will kill him or her if he or she ever does that again

Chapter 10. The Second Year

Major Developments during the Second Year

Your baby will learn to walk and talk, but that's nothing. The major development is that your baby will learn how to scream for no good reason in shopping malls.

What to Do when a One-Year-Old Starts Screaming in a Shopping Mall, and the Reason Is That You Won't Let It Eat the Pizza Crust That Somebody, Who Was Probably Diseased, Left in the Public Ashtray amid the Sand and the Saliva-Soaked Cigar Butts, but the Other Shoppers Are Staring at You as if to Suggest That You Must Be Some Kind of Heartless Child-Abusing Nazi Scum

First of all, forget about reason. You can't reason with a one-year-old. In fact, reasoning with children of any age has been greatly overrated. There is no documented case of any child being successfully reasoned with before the second year of graduate school.

Also you can't hit a one-year-old. It will just cry harder, and women the age of your mother will walk right up and whap you with their handbags. So what do you do when your child decides to scream in public? Here are several practical, time-tested techniques:

Explain your side to the other shoppers. As they go by, pull them aside, show them the pizza crust, and talk it over with them, adult to adult ("Look! The little cretin wants to eat this! Ha ha! Isn't that CRAZY?").

Threaten to take your child to see Santa Claus if it doesn't shut up. All children are born with an instinctive terror of Santa Claus.

Let your child have the damn pizza crust. I mean, there's always a chance the previous owner wasn't diseased. It could have been a clergyman or something.

Walking

Most babies learn to walk at about 12 months, although nobody has ever figured out why they bother, because for the next 12 months all they do is stagger off in random directions until they trip over dust molecules and fall on their butts. You cannot catch them before they fall. They fall so quickly that the naked adult eye cannot even see them. This is why diapers are made so thick.

During this phase, your job, as parent, is to trail along behind your child everywhere, holding your arms out in the Standard Toddler-Following Posture made popular by Boris Karloff in the excellent parent-education film *The Mummy*, only with a degree of hunch approaching that of Neanderthal Man, so you'll be able to pick your child up quickly after it falls, because the longer it stays on the ground the more likely it is to find something to put in its mouth.

Talking

There are two distinct phases in the baby's language development. The second phase is when the baby actually starts talking, which is at about 18

months. The first phase is when the parents imagine that the baby is talking, which is somewhere around 12 months, or even earlier if it's their first baby.

What happens is that one day the baby is holding a little plastic car, trying to get it all the way into his mouth, and he makes some typical random baby sound such as "gawanoo," and the parents, their brains softened from inhaling Johnson's Baby Oil fumes, say to each other: "Did you hear that? Teddy said 'car'!!!!!" If you've ever been around young parents going through this kind of self-delusion, you know how deranged they can get:

YOU: So! How's little Jason?

PARENT: Talking up a storm! Listen!

JASON: Poomwah arrrr grah.

PARENT: Isn't that incredible!

YOU: Ah. Yes. Hmmm.

PARENT: I mean, 13 months old, and already he's concerned about restrictions on imported steel!

YOU: Ah.

JASON: Brrrrrooooooooooooooooooooooper.

PARENT: No, Jason, I believe that was during the Kennedy administration.

Eventually, your child will start to learn some real words, which means you'll finally find out what he's thinking. Not much, as it turns out. The first words our son, Robert, said were "dog" and "hot," and after that he didn't seem the least bit interested in learning any more. For the longest time, our conversations went like this:

ME: Look, Robert. See the birds?

ROBERT: Dog.

ME: No, Robert. Those are birds.

ROBERT: Dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog.

ME: Those are birds, Robert. Can you say "bird?"

ROBERT (emphatically): Dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog dog.

ME (giving up): Okay. Those are dogs.

ROBERT: Hot.

Sometimes we'd think we were making real progress on the language front. I remember once my wife called me into the living room, all excited. "Watch this," she said. "Robert, where's your head?" And by God, Robert pointed to his head. I was stunned. I couldn't believe what a genius we had on our hands. Then my wife, bursting with pride, said, "Now watch this. Robert, where's your foot?" Robert flashed us a brilliant smile of comprehension, pointed to his head, and said, "dog."

Books for One-Year-Olds

The trouble with books for small children is that they all have titles like, Ted the Raccoon Visits a Condiments Factory and are so boring that you doze off after two or three pages and run the risk that your child will slide off your lap and sustain a head injury. So what you want to do is get a book that has more appeal for adults, such as, Passionate Teenage Periodontal Assistants, then cut out the pages and paste them over the words in your child's book. This way you can maintain your interest while the child looks at the pictures:

YOU (pretending to read out loud): "My, my," said Ted the Raccoon. "These pickles taste good!" Just look at all those pickles, Johnny! (While Johnny looks at the pickles, you read: "Brad looked up from U. S. News and World Report as a blond, full-breasted periodontal assistant swayed into the waiting room on shapely, nylon-sheathed legs. 'My name is Desiree,' she breathed through luscious, pouting lips, 'and if you'll follow me, I'll show you how to operate the Water Pik oral hygiene appliance.'")

Teaching Small Children to Read

Children are capable of learning to read much earlier than we give them credit for. Why, Mozart was only two years old when he wrote Moby Dick!

When our son was about 18 months old, my wife, who has purchased every baby-improvement book ever published, got one called How to Teach Your Baby to Read. The chapter headings started out with "Can Babies Learn to Read?" and worked up to "Babies Definitely Can Learn to Read" and finally got around to "If You Don't Teach Your Baby to Read Right Now, You Are Vermin."

Me, I was dubious. I thought it was better to teach our child not to pull boogers out of his nose and hand them to us as if they were party favors. But my wife gave it the old college try. She did what the book said, which was to write words like DOG in big letters on pieces of cardboard, then show them to Robert and say the words out loud as if she were having a peck of fun. She did this conscientiously for a couple of weeks, three times a day, and then she realized that Robert was paying no attention whatsoever, and her I.Q. was starting to drop, so she stopped.

My theory is that there is a finite amount of intelligence in a family, and you're supposed to gradually transfer it to your children over a period of many years. This is why your parents started to get so stupid just at the time in your life when you were getting really smart.

How to Put a One-Year-Old to Bed

Children at this age move around a lot while they sleep. If we didn't keep them in cribs, they'd be hundreds of miles away by dawn. So the trick is to put the blankets as far as possible from the child, on the theory that eventually the child will crawl under them.

Bedtime Songs

I advise against "Rock-a-Bye Baby," because it's really sick, what with the baby getting blown out of the tree and crashing down with the cradle. Some of those cradles weigh over 50 pounds. A much better song is "Go to Sleep":

Go to sleep
Go to sleep
Go right straight to sleep
And stay asleep until at least 6:30 A.M.

Potty Training

Child psychologists all agree that bodily functions are a source of great anxiety for children, so we can safely assume this isn't true. It certainly wasn't true for our son. He was never happier than when he had a full diaper. We once took him to a department store photographer for baby pictures, and just before we went into the studio, when it was too late to change his diaper, he eliminated an immense quantity of waste, far more than could be explained by any of the known laws of physics. The photographer kept remarking on what a happy baby we had, which was easy for him to say, because he was standing 15 feet away. The pictures all came out swell. In every one, Robert is grinning the insanely happy grin of a baby emitting an aroma that would stun a buffalo. So much for the child's anxiety.

I'll tell you who gets anxious: the parents, that's who. Young parents spend much of their time thinking and talking about their children's bodily functions. You can take an educated, sophisticated couple who, before their child was born, talked about great literature and the true meaning of life, and for the first two years after they become parents, their conversations will center on the consistency of their child's stool, to the point where nobody invites them over for dinner.

Around the child's second birthday, the parents get tired of waiting for the child to become anxious about his bodily functions, and they decide to give him some anxiety in the form of potty training. This is probably a good thing. A child can go only so far in life without potty training. It is not mere coincidence that six of the last seven presidents were potty trained, not to mention nearly half of the nation's state legislators.

The Traditional Potty Training Technique

The traditional potty training technique is to buy a book written by somebody who was out getting graduate school degrees when his own children were actually being potty trained. My wife bought a book that claimed we could potty train our child in one day, using a special potty that (I swear this is true) played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" when the child went in it. She also got a little book for our son that explained potty training in terms that a small child could understand, such as "poo-poo.

Now there may well be some parents, somewhere, who managed to potty train their child in one day, but I am willing to bet they used a cattle prod. My wife read that book all the way through, and she did exactly what it said, which was that you should feed your child a lot of salty snacks so that it would drink a lot of liquids and consequently would have to pee about every 20

minutes, which would give it lots of opportunities to practice going in the musical potty, so that it would have the whole procedure nailed down solid by the end of the day. That was the theory.

When I left home that morning, my wife was reading the poo-poo book to Robert. She had a cheerful, determined look on her face. When I got home that evening, more than ten hours later, there were cracker crumbs everywhere, and piles of soiled child's underpants, seemingly hundreds of them, as if the

entire junior class of St. Swithan's School for Incontinent Children had been there on a field trip. My wife was still in her nightgown. I don't think she had even brushed her teeth. It is extremely fortunate for the man who wrote the potty training book that he did not walk in the door with me, because the police would have found his lifeless body lying in the bushes with an enormous bulge in his throat playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

We did, in the end, get Robert potty trained. We did it the same way everybody does, the same way you will, by a lot of nagging and false alarms and about 30,000 accidents and endless wildly extravagant praise for bowel movements ("Honey! Come and see what Robert did!" "Oh Robert, that's wonderful!" etc.).

The big drawback to potty training is that, for a while, children assume that all adults are as fascinated with it as their parents seem to be. Robert would walk up to strangers in restaurants and announce, "I went pee-pee." And the strangers would say, "Ah." And Robert would say, "I didn't do poop." And the strangers would say, "No?" And Robert would say, "I'm gonna do poop later." And so on.

Nutrition

By the middle of the second year, your baby's Food-Return Loop has disappeared, so its mouth is connected directly to its stomach. At this point, you want to adjust its diet to see that each day it gets food from all three Basic Baby Food Nutrition Groups (see chart). You also should encourage your baby to feed itself, so that you won't have to be in the room.

The Basic Baby Food Nutrition Groups

FOODS THAT BABIES HURL AT THE CEILING

- * Anything from jars with babies on the labels
- * Anything the baby ate the day before, so you went out and bought \$30 worth of it

FOODS THAT BABIES HURL AT THE DOG

- * Anything in a weighty container
- * Taffy
- * Zwieback (NOTE: Zwieback has sharp edges, so the dog should wear protective clothing)

FOODS THAT BABIES EAT

- * Anything from vending machines
- * Caulking
- * Anything with dead ants on it
- * Sand

Chapter 11. The Third Year

This period is often referred to as the "terrible twos," not so much because children this age start behaving any worse than before, but because they reach the size where if they swing at you, they'll hit you square in the crotch.

The important thing to remember here is that your child is only trying to establish its independence. This is a necessary part of its development: It must learn to make its own decisions, to interact with the world directly rather than through the protective mediation of its parents. Your child must also learn that when it hits a bigger person in the crotch, it should pretend to be very, very sorry.

How to Discipline a Two-Year-Old

Discipline during this phase consists of choosing the appropriate Escalating Futile Parental Disciplinary Threat. A handy reference chart is printed here for your use.

Remember that when your two-year-old “misbehaves,” it’s usually because of his natural curiosity. It is not cruelty that causes him to thrust a Bic pen deep into the dog’s nostril; it is a genuine desire to find out how you will react.

The time-tested way to react is to work your way up the ladder of Traditional Escalating Futile Parental Disciplinary Threats.

The Traditional Escalating Futile Parental Disciplinary Threats

1. “You’re going to poke somebody’s eye out.”
2. “You’re going to make me very angry.”
3. “You’re going straight to your room.”
4. “I’m going to tell your father.”
5. “I’m going to tell Santa Claus.”
6. “I’m not going to give you any dessert.”
7. “I’m not going to buy you any more Hot Wheels.”
8. “I’m very angry now.”
9. “I’m going to give you a good smack.”
10. “I mean it.”
11. “I really mean it.”
12. “I’m not kidding.”
13. (SMACK).

NOTE: If there’s a real discipline emergency, such as your child has somehow gotten hold of an acetylene torch, you may have to start right in at Threat Number 8. But many two-year-olds also develop seemingly irrational fears. They get these from Mister Rogers. He tries to reassure his young viewers about standard childhood fears, but the children would never have thought of them if Mister Rogers hadn’t brought them up. My son and I once watched Mister Rogers sing this song in which he said over and over, in the most cheerful voice imaginable, that “You can never go down the drain.” By the time he finished, we were both very concerned about going down the drain. And this came at a time when I had just gotten over the fear of being stabbed to death in the shower, which I got from Psycho.

Recently, my son became convinced that a horse was coming into his bedroom at night to get him. The way to cope with this kind of fear is to allow the child to confront it openly. We took Robert to visit

some real horses, so he could see for himself that they are nothing more than huge creatures with weird eyeballs and long teeth and hard feet that could stomp him to the consistency of grits in seconds. Aided by this kind of understanding and support from us, Robert eventually stopped imagining his horse, which was good because it was ruining the carpet.

So unless you want your child to develop a set of irrational fears, I advise you not to let him watch Mister Rogers. A far better alternative is the Saturday morning cartoon shows, which instill the healthy and rational fear that evil beings with sophisticated weapons are trying to destroy the planet.

Fears Your Mother Teaches You during Childhood

You needed these fears to become a responsible adult, and now it's time to start passing them on to your child.

- * The fear that if you cross your eyes, they'll get stuck that way.
- * The fear that if you go in the water less than an hour after eating, you will get a cramp and sink to the bottom, helpless, and possibly catch cold.
- * The fear that public toilet seats have germs capable of leaping more than 20 feet.
- * The fear that if you wear old underwear, a plane will crash on you and rip your clothes off and your underwear will be broadcast nationally on the evening news. ("The victim shown here wearing the underwear with all the holes and stains has been identified as...")
- * The fear that if you get in trouble at school, it will go on your Permanent Record and follow you for the rest of your life. ("Your qualifications are excellent, Mr. Barry, but I see here in your Permanent Record that in the eighth grade you and Joseph DiGiacinto flushed a lit cherry bomb down the boys' room toilet at Harold C. Crittenden Junior High School. Frankly, Mr. Barry, we're looking for people with more respect for plumbing than that.")

Toys for Two-Year-Olds

Pay no attention to the little statements on the boxes that say things like "For Ages 1 to 3." If you heed these statements, all you'll buy for the first few years are little plastic shapes that the child is supposed to put in corresponding little holes, which is so exceedingly boring that after five minutes the child will develop an ear infection just for a change of pace. The best toys for a child aged 0 to 3 is a toy that says "For Ages 10 to 14." The best toy for a child aged 10 to 14 is cash, or its own apartment.

You should also buy Fisher-Price toys. Not for your child. For your own protection. Every Fisher-Price toy has been approved by a panel consisting of dozens of child psychologists and pediatricians and Ralph Nader and Mister Rogers, and in most states failure to own at least a half dozen of these toys is considered legal proof of child abuse.

Another reason why you should buy Fisher-Price toys is that they are built better than any other products you can buy, even in Japan. They're made out of some plastic-like substance that Fisher-Price imports from another planet, and nothing can harm it. If Fisher-Price had any marketing sense, it would make its cars much bigger and put real engines in them and change the seats so that real people could sit in them. Right now, the seats are designed for little toy ball-headed Fisher-Price people, which have no

arms or legs (the Fisher-Price factory employees whack off the arms and legs with little machetes just before shipment). Consumers would snork these cars up like hotcakes. We'd forget all about Toyota.

How to Hold a Birthday Party for Two-Year-Olds

Not in your house. Outdoors, I don't care if you live in Juneau, Alaska, and it's January. You want to hold it outdoors, and you want the fire department to stand by to hose the area down immediately after you put the ice cream in front of them. And you want all the adults inside the house where they can drink in relative safety.

A Word about Smurfs, Snoopy, Strawberry Shortcake, and All the Other Nauseating Little Characters That You Swear You Will Never Allow in Your Home

Forget it. These toys are creatures of the multi-billion-dollar Cuteness Industry, which is extremely powerful and has influence everywhere. The Voyager II space probe found traces of a Snoopy toothbrush on Mars. If you fail to buy Smurfs, agents of the Smurf Corporation will mail them to you, or smuggle them into your house baked inside loaves of bread, until you reach the national average of 24 Smurfs per child under eight.

So you have to live with them. The only defense you have is to encourage your child to play hostile games with them, such as "Smurf War Tribunal" and "Mr. Smurf Visits the Toaster Oven."

Questions

Starting at around age two, your child will start asking you a great many questions. This can be annoying, but you must remember that if children couldn't ask questions, they would have no way to irritate you when they're strapped in the car seat.

The most popular question for small children is "Why?" They can use it anywhere, and it's usually impossible to answer:

CHILD: What's that?

YOU: That's a goat.

CHILD: Why?

Our son would lie awake at night thinking of questions that nobody could answer:

ROBERT: Which is bigger, five or six?

ME (confidently): Six.

ROBERT: What if it's a great big five made out of stone?

ME: Um.

ROBERT: And a little six made out of wood.

Once I hauled out my guitar to sing traditional folk songs to Robert. It was going to be togetherness. It was going to be meaningful. It was going to be just like on "The Waltons." Here is a verbatim transcript:

ME (singing): “Puff, the Magic Dragon, lived by the sea ...”

ROBERT: What’s a dragon?

ME: It’s a great big animal that has fire coming out of its nose. (Singing)

“Little Jackie Paper, loved that rascal ...”

ROBERT: Did Jackie Paper have fire coming out of his nose?

ME: No, he was a little boy, like you. Do you have fire coming out of your nose?

ROBERT (thoughtfully): No. Boogies.

ME: Um. Right. (Singing) “Little Jackie Paper, loved that ...”

ROBERT: Did Jackie Paper have boogies coming out of his nose?

The point here is that your child will never ask you where babies come from, or why the sky is blue, or any other question that has a real answer. Your child is going to want to know whether Jackie Paper had boogies coming out of his nose, and whether you answer “yes” or “no,” your child will want to know why.

Preschool Programs

Near the end of the second year, most parents start thinking about putting their child in a preschool program, which is a place that has all these little tables and chairs where your child makes these pathetic drawings that you put on your refrigerator. Also they eat snacks and take naps. That’s the core of the curriculum.

You must choose your child’s preschool program carefully, because it determines how well the child does in kindergarten, which affects how well the child does in grade school, which is an important factor in how well the child does in junior high school, which forms the basis for how well the child does in high school, which of course determines which college the child gets into.

On the other hand, all the child will do in college is listen to loud music and get ready for dates, so you don’t have to be all that careful about choosing the preschool program. Just kick the little chairs a few times to make sure they’re sturdy, and say a few words to the staff to let them know you’re a Concerned Parent (“Anything happens to my kid, I come in here and break some thumbs. Got it?”).

Also, make sure the preschool doesn’t have any guinea pigs. I don’t know why, but somewhere along the line, preschool educators picked up the insane notion that guinea pigs are educational, when in fact all they do is poop these little pellets that look exactly like the pellets you give them to eat. You don’t want your child exposed to that.

The Little Boy and the Toad (A Child-Participation Bedtime Story)

It’s good to encourage your child to participate in making up stories. Here’s a bedtime story I used to tell Robert, with his help:

ME: Once upon a time, there was a little boy named John.

ROBERT: No. Lee.

ME: Okay. There was a little boy named Lee, and one day he was walking along, and he ...

ROBERT: No. He was driving.

ME: Okay, he was driving along, and he saw ...

ROBERT: In a Jeep.

ME: He was driving along in a Jeep, and he saw a little toad.

ROBERT: No. He saw a dump truck.

ME: And they all lived happily ever after. Now go to sleep.

ROBERT: Why?

Epilogue: Should You Have Another?

Well! So here we are! We've taken your baby from a little gourd-like object with virtually no marketable skills to a real little human being, capable of putting the cat in the dryer and turning it on all by himself or herself.

Sure, it's been a lot of work for you. Sure, you would have liked to have had a few more quiet evenings alone, just the two of you sipping wine and talking instead of sitting in the hospital X-ray department, waiting to find out whether your child had, in fact, swallowed the bullets that it snatched out of the belt of the policeman who was writing a traffic ticket because you smashed into the furniture store when your child threw your glasses out the car window. But take a minute to look at the positive side of parenthood.

(Pause)

Give it time. You'll come up with something. And when you do, think about how much fun it would be to do the whole thing over again. Not with the same child, of course; there is no way you could get it back into the uterus. I'm talking about a completely new baby, only this time around you'll have a chance to avoid the mistakes you made last time, such as labor. I understand from reading the publications sold at supermarket checkout counters that you can now have a baby in a test tube! I don't know the details, but it sounds much less painful than the usual route, although you'd have to balance that against the fact that the baby would be extremely small and cylindrical. It would look like those little Fisher-Price people.

But whether you have another child or not, the important thing is that you've experienced the fulfillment that comes with being a parent. You may feel your efforts will never be rewarded, but believe me, you have sown the seeds of love and trust, and I guarantee you that there will come a time, years from now, when your child—now an adult with children of his or her own—will come to you, and, in a voice quaking with emotion, ask for a loan for a down payment on a house much nicer than yours.

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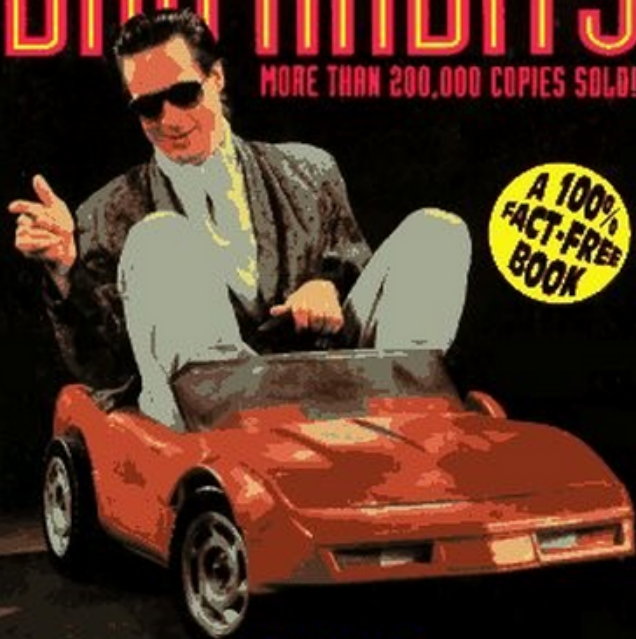
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Dave Barry.

Bad Habits: A 100% Fact-Free Book

Dedication

To Mom and Dad, who never forced me to go see Santa Claus.

Introduction

When people come to my home for the first time, they often ask me, “Dave, where’s the bathroom?” To which I always answer, “Down the hall there, on the left.” And from that point on we are usually close friends.

I bring this up because people often wonder what I’m really like. “Dave,” they often ask, when they

get out of the bathroom, “are you really as witty, insightful, articulate, and handsome as your writing suggests?” I would have to say that yes, I am, although I am not as tall as you might think. I’m maybe five nine. But then a lot of truly great writers were of average height or less. William Shakespeare was only fifteen inches tall!

Which leads us to accuracy. When Doubleday & Company decided, after days of heavy drinking, to publish this book, they hired a panel of extremely brilliant nuclear physicists, who combed through these essays and marked, with a red pencil, every sentence that might conceivably be accurate, and these sentences were all removed with pruning shears. So I freely admit, right up front, that there are no facts left in this book, and I don’t want you Little League coaches out there to send me a lot of cretin letters informing me that a ten-year-old can’t really throw a baseball six hundred miles an hour. Okay?

So there you have it, except for my philosophy of life. My mother used to say to me: “Son, it’s better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick.” I think that still makes a heck of a lot of sense, even in these troubled times.

Household Perils

It’s In The Genes

My wife and I were both born without whatever brain part it is that enables people to decorate their homes. If we had lived in the Neanderthal era, ours would be the only cave without little drawings of elk on the walls.

When we moved into our house eight years ago, there was this lighting fixture in the dining room that obviously had been installed by vandals. Simply removing this fixture would be too good for it; this is the kind of fixture that needs to be taken out in the backyard and shot. When people came over to visit, back when we first moved in, we’d gesture toward the fixture derisively and say “Of course that’s got to go.”

Of course we still have it. We have no way of deciding what to replace it with. What we have done is get an electrician to come in and move the fixture to another part of the dining room, because, after years of thinking about it with our defective brains, we thought this might be a good decorative idea. To move the fixture, the electrician had to punch holes, some of them big enough to put your fist through, in the wall and ceiling. I have taped plastic sandwich bags over these holes, to keep the air from rushing in and out.

So now, after eight years, we have the original vandal fixture, plus we have holes with plastic bags over them. We eat in the kitchen. We will always eat in the kitchen, and our dining room will always look like the South Bronx. We have learned that anything we try to do to improve it will just make it worse, because of these missing brain parts.

We do a lot of work with plastic bags. We made curtains for several rooms by taping up dark plastic garbage bags. My wife feels guilty about this, because she believes women are supposed to have this Betty Crocker gland somewhere that secretes a hormone that enables them to sew curtains. God knows she has tried. She reads articles, she takes measurements, she even goes to the fabric store, but because of what she perceives to be a deficiency of her Betty Crocker gland, she never actually produces any curtains. Which is fine, because I have a deficiency of my Mr. Goodwrench gland and would never put

them up.

So we use plastic garbage bags. They work fine, but I have noticed that most of our friends, now that we're all grown-ups, have switched over to actual cloth curtains. Also they have tasteful Danish furniture. They just went out and got it somehow, as if it were no big deal, and now everything matches, like those photographs in snotty interior design magazines featuring homes owned by wealthy people who eat out and keep their children in Switzerland. We have this green armchair we got at an auction for twenty-five cents. This is not one of those chairs that are sold for a song but turn out to be tasteful antiques worth thousands of dollars. This chair, at twenty-five cents, was clearly overpriced. It looks, from a distance, like a wad of mucus, and it could not possibly match any other furniture because any furniture that looked like it would have been burned years ago.

Accompanying this chair is a sofa that some people we know tried to throw away six years ago, which we have covered with a blanket to prevent guests from looking directly at it and being blinded or driven insane. Such is the tastelessness of this sofa. And these are two of our better pieces. The only really nice furniture we own is manufactured by the Fisher-Price toy company for my son's little Fisher-Price people, although I certainly don't begrudge them that, inasmuch as they have no arms or legs.

I imagine you're going to suggest that we go out and buy a nice piece of furniture, and then, when we can afford it, another one, and so on until we have a regular grown-up neat and tasteful home. This would never work. If we were to put a nice piece of furniture in our living room, all the other furniture would wait until we'd gone to bed, then ridicule and deride the new furniture, and emit all kinds of shabbiness germs into the living room atmosphere, and by morning the new furniture would be old and stained and hideous. I also firmly believe that if we were to leave our chair in one of our friends' tasteful living rooms for several days, it would become sleek and Danish.

This interior decorating problem extends to cars. None of my friends, for example, have plaster models of their teeth in their cars. I have two in my car. My dentist gives them to me from time to time, sort of like a treat, and I'm afraid to throw them away for fear he'll get angry and make me come in for an appointment. I keep them in my car because God knows the house is already bad enough, but I know they are not tasteful. I can't put them under the seat, because my car, like all the cars we've ever owned, has developed Car Leprosy, which causes all the nonessential parts such as window cranks to gradually fall off and collect under the seat and merge with French fries from the drive-thru window at the Burger King. I'm not about to put my teeth down there. So they sit in plain view, grinning at me as I drive and snickering at my lack of taste.

My wife and I are learning to accept all this. We realize that if the present trends continue, we will not be able to admit people into our house without blindfolds. I can live with that. What I worry about is that we will get in trouble with the bank or the government or something. One day there will be a violent pounding on the door, and we will be subjected to a surprise inspection by the Committee of Normal Grown-ups, headed by my wife's home economics teacher and my shop teacher. They'll take one look at our curtains, and they'll take away our house and cars and put us in a special institution where the inmates are roused at 4:30 A.M., chained together, and forced to install wallpaper all day. Nancy Reagan would be the warden.

Barbecuing Is The Pits

What could be more fun than an outdoor barbecue? I can think of several things offhand, such as watching the secretary of state fall into a vat of untreated sewage. But that would probably cause us to go to war in Nicaragua or somewhere, so I guess we'll have to settle for a barbecue.

The barbecue was invented more than eighty million years ago by Cro-Magnon Man, who was the son of Stephanie Cro and Eric Magnon, a primitive but liberated couple. Cro-Magnon Man used to eat dinosaur meat raw, and it tasted awful, worse than yogurt. One day, while Cro-Magnon Man was eating, lightning set a nearby log on fire. Cro-Magnon Man was so surprised that he dropped his dinosaur meat onto the fire, where it ignited and gave off a disgusting odor that drove off all the insects, which in those days were the size of mature eggplants and extremely vicious. "This is terrific," said Cro-Magnon Man, only nobody understood him because English hadn't been invented yet.

Burning dinosaurs quickly became a major form of insect control. At large Cro-Magnon lawn parties, the hosts would put whole brontosaurus on the fire, and they would sizzle into the night, keeping the insects away and giving off a stench that lingers to this very day at the northern end of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Eventually, of course, they used up all the dinosaurs, which led to the discovery that if you put cows and pigs on your fire, you could not only drive away insects but in a pinch you could also eat the cows and pigs. This led to the invention of hamburgers and hot dogs, which are cows and pigs that have been ground up in Chicago and formed into little portable units that can be easily thrown on a fire. Today people rarely put entire cows on fires except in Texas, where lifting animals is a major cultural activity, second only to wearing big hats.

To hold your outdoor barbecue, you'll need several dozen units of cow or pig and a portable grill, or hibachi. ("Hibachi" is a Japanese word meaning extremely flimsy grills that break at the slightest touch but Americans buy them anyway.") You'll also need fuel. At one time, people used wood, but then the Consumer Product Safety Commission discovered that wood is flammable and banned it. So today you are required to use charcoal, a mineral that forms in torn paper bags in supermarkets. The problem, of course, is that charcoal, being a mineral, does not burn. Neither does charcoal lighter fluid. Firemen routinely use charcoal lighter fluid to extinguish major refinery fires. So what actually heats your barbecue food is matches, hundreds and hundreds of matches that you heap onto your charcoal until they form a blaze.

While you're waiting for your matches to get going, you should prepare a tangy barbecue sauce.

TANGY BARBECUE SAUCE RECIPE

1 cup broached onions 2 liters vanilla abstract 1/2 pound neat's-foot oil 2 table-spoons butter or oregano 1 fresh poltroon, diced

To Prepare

With floured hands, on a floured surface, standing on a floured floor, and just generally surrounded by mounds and mounds of flour, combine the ingredients in a greased 5518' by 16318' pan, then pour the mixture carefully into an ungreased 4318' by 18718' pan and heat it until a 1318' blister forms when you stick your hand into it.

Now place your meat units on the grill. They should burst into flames immediately. Let them burn until they're cooked the way you like them:

RARE (5-10 minutes): The outside is burnt and welded to the grill; the inside is pink and swirling with cow and pig disease germs.

MEDIUM (5-10 minutes): The outside and part of the inside are burnt; many of the disease germs,

particularly the elderly and pregnant ones, are dying slow, painful deaths.

WELL DONE (5-10 minutes): Both the outside and the inside are completely burnt; almost all the disease germs are dead, and the few remaining ones are making elaborate plans for revenge.

When your meat is done, extinguish it with the barbecue sauce or charcoal lighter, detach it from the grill with a spatula or sharp chisel, and serve it with something that people can eat, such as Fritos or turkey sandwiches. You should eat quickly, because the insects will monitor you from a safe distance and attack the instant the smoke clears.

A Solution To Housework

Almost all housework is hard and dangerous, involving the insides of ovens and toilets and the cracks between bathroom tiles, where plague germs fester. The only housework that is easy and satisfying is the kind where you spray chemicals on wooden furniture and smear them around until the wood looks shiny. This is the kind of housework they show on television commercials: A professional actress, posing as the Cheerful Housewife (IQ 43), dances around her house, smearing and shining, smearing and shining, until before she knows it her housework is done and she is free to spend the rest of the afternoon reading the bust-development ads in Cosmopolitan magazine. She never cleans her toilets. When they get dirty, she just gets another house. Lord knows they pay her enough.

Most of us would rather smear and shine than actually clean anything. For example, our house has a semifinished basement, which means it looks too much like a finished room to store old tires in, but too much like a basement to actually live in. Our semifinished basement has a semibathroom, and one time, several years ago, a small woodland creature crept into the house in the middle of the night and died in the shower stall. This is common behavior in the animal world: many animals, when in danger, are driven by instinct to seek refuge in shower stalls.

Since we hardly ever go down to our semifinished basement, we didn't discover the dead woodland creature until several weeks after it crept in, at which time it was getting fairly ripe. Now obviously, the correct thing to do was clean it up, but this is the hard kind of housework. So instead we stayed upstairs and went into an absolute frenzy of smearing and shining, until you could not walk into our living room without wearing sunglasses, for fear of being blinded by the glare off the woodwork. Eventually, we managed to block the woodland creature out of our minds.

Several months later, our friend Rob, who is a doctor, came to visit. He stayed in our semifinished basement, but we noticed that he came upstairs to take showers. One of the first things they teach you in medical school is never to take a shower with a dead woodland creature. We were so embarrassed that we went down and cleaned up the shower stall, with a shovel and acid. But I doubt we'd have done it if Rob hadn't been there.

Our behavior is not unique. People have been avoiding housework for millions of years. Primitive man would stay in one cave until the floor was littered with stegosaurus bones and the walls were covered with primitive drawings, which were drawn by primitive children when their parents went out to dinner, and then the family would move to a new cave, to avoid cleaning the old one. That's how primitive man eventually got to North America.

In North America, primitive man started running out of clean caves, and he realized that somebody was going to have to start doing housework. He thought about it long and hard, and finally settled on

primitive woman. But he needed an excuse to get himself out of doing the housework, so he invented civilization. Primitive woman would say: “How about staying in the cave and helping with the housework today?” And primitive man would say: “I can’t, dear: I have to invent fire.” Or: “I’d love to, dear, but I think it’s more important that I devise some form of written language.” And off he’d go, leaving the woman with the real work.

Over the years, men came up with thousands of excuses for not doing housework—wars, religion, pyramids, the United States Senate—until finally they hit on the ultimate excuse: business. They built thousands of offices and factories, and every day, all over the country, they’d get up, eat breakfast, and announce: “Well, I’m off to my office or factory now.” Then they’d just leave, and they wouldn’t return until the house was all cleaned up and dinner was ready.

But then men made a stupid mistake. They started to believe that “business” really was hard work, and they started talking about it when they came home. They’d come in the door looking exhausted, and they’d say things like “Boy, I sure had a tough meeting today.”

You can imagine how a woman who had spent the day doing housework would react to this kind of statement. She’d say to herself. “Meeting? He had a tough meeting? I’ve been on my hands and knees all day cleaning toilets and scraping congealed spider eggs off the underside of the refrigerator, and he tells me he had a tough meeting?”

That was the beginning of the end. Women began to look into “business,” and they discovered that all you do is go to an office and answer the phone and do various things with pieces of paper and have meetings. So women began going to work, and now nobody does housework, other than smearing and shining, and before long there’s going to be so much crud and bacteria under the nation’s refrigerators that we’re all going to get diseases and die.

The obvious and fair solution to this problem is to let men do the housework for, say, the next six thousand years, to even things up. The trouble is that men, over the years, have developed an inflated notion of the importance of everything they do, so that before long they would turn housework into just as much of a charade as business is now. They would hire secretaries and buy computers and fly off to housework conferences in Bermuda, but they’d never clean anything. So men are out.

But there is a solution; there is a way to get people to willingly do housework. I discovered this by watching household-cleanser commercials on television. What I discovered is that many people who seem otherwise normal will do virtually any idiot thing if they think they will be featured in a commercial. They figure if they get on a commercial, they’ll make a lot of money, like the Cheerful Housewife, and they’ll be able to buy cleaner houses. So they’ll do anything.

For example, if I walked up to you in the middle of a supermarket and asked you to get down and scrub the floor with two different cleansers, just so I could see which one worked better, you would punch me in the mouth. But if I had guys with cameras and microphones with me, and I asked you to do the same thing, you’d probably do it. Not only that, but you’d make lots of serious, earnest comments about the cleansers. You’d say: “I frankly believe that New Miracle Swipe, with its combination of grease fighters and wax shiners, is a more effective cleanser, I honestly do. Really. I mean it.” You’d say this in the same solemn tone of voice you might use to discuss the question of whether the United States should deploy Cruise missiles in Western Europe. You’d have no shame at all.

So here’s my plan: I’m going to get some old cameras and microphones and position them around my house. I figure that before long I’ll have dozens of people just dying to do housework in front of my cameras. Sure, most of them will eventually figure out that they’re not going to be in a commercial, but

new ones will come along to replace them. Meanwhile, I'll be at work.

Three-Pronged Attack

I have two major complaints about electricity.

First, I cannot understand my electricity bills. I never even read them anymore: I just pay whatever random amount the electric company puts after "PAY THIS AMOUNT."

Frankly, I suspect the electric company doesn't have the vaguest notion how much electricity I use. I have an electric meter, but it is on the side of the house where a large contingent of killer wasps has lived since 1977, and nobody, not even my dog, ever goes there. I suspect that whoever is supposed to read my meter is lying out in the bushes somewhere, covered with stings.

So I think the electric company is just making my bill up out of thin air. Oh, they're very clever about it: They make the bill so elaborate that I won't suspect anything. It looks like this:

Adjusted basic flat usage charge rate: \$34.70

Charge for usage of adjusted basic flat: \$22.67

Flatly basic adjustable usage rate: \$17.31

Maladjustment of usable, chargeable flat rate: \$4.12

Ferrous Mineral Tax: \$5.12

Tax to Pa \$0

The Spanish-American War Debt: \$2.89

Gratuity: \$1.68

As I said, I always pay these bills. I'm afraid that if I don't pay, the electric company will send huge jolts of electricity through the wire: one minute I'd be carving poultry with the electric carving knife, and the next minute I'd be a shriveled lump of carbon lying on the kitchen floor. So I pay, but I don't like it.

My other major electrical complaint concerns appliance plugs. You may have noticed that something very sinister has happened to appliance plugs since you were a child. I grew up during the Eisenhower administration in a normal, God-fearing home with a normal, God-fearing electrical system. All the outlets had two holes, and all the appliance plugs had two prongs, and everything worked just fine. Also the inflation rate was very low.

Now, suddenly, the appliance manufacturers are putting three prongs on their plugs, and you can't plug them in. What is going on? Has there been some huge mistake in the shipping department, so we're all getting appliances that were supposed to go to Yugoslavia? Has the government decided that appliances are so dangerous that consumers shouldn't be allowed to plug them in? Maybe it has something to do with the metric system. Whatever it is, it's a problem.

The simplest solution is to get a hacksaw and saw off the third prong. Unfortunately, this is a violation of federal law. It's like removing those little pillow tags that say "DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW." If you are convicted, agents of the Consumer Product Safety Commission will come to your house and lock you in a room filled with government safety publications and not let you out until you can pass an eight-hour written safety test.

So most people use those little plug adapters. This seems to work fine, but if you read the appliance instructions carefully, you'll note that plug adapters are Not Recommended:

WARNING: IF YOU USE ONE OF THOSE LITTLE PLUG ADAPTERS TO PLUG THIS APPLIANCE IN, ALL THE WARRANTIES AND GUARANTEES AND PROMISES THE SALESMAN MADE ARE NULL AND VOID AND YOU MAY BE UNABLE TO HAVE CHILDREN.

The most radical solution to the three-pronged plug problem is to build a new house with three-hole outlets, or rewire your old house (which costs about the same). But this is really no solution at all, because as soon as everybody has three-hole outlets, the appliance manufacturers will come out with four-pronged plugs, and it will just keep escalating until your average plug contains so much metal that you will need the help of three or four strong men just to lift it.

So there is no good way you can solve the three-pronged plug problem. I think you should write your congressman and tell him to get off his butt and do something about it. Tell him you want the Defense Department to have a few large army tanks cruise up to the appliance manufacturers' factories and suggest that they start producing two-pronged plugs again pronto. And while you're at it, tell your congressman to straighten out the electric-bill mess, and maybe do something about my wasps.

They've Got Our Number

What I like best about the telephone is that it keeps you in touch with people, particularly people who want to sell you magazine subscriptions in the middle of the night. These people have been abducted by large publishing companies and placed in barbed-wire enclosures surrounded by armed men with attack dogs, and unless they sell 350 magazine subscriptions per day, they will not be fed. These people are desperate. They will say anything to get you to subscribe, and you cannot stop them merely by being rude:

CALLER: Hello, Mr. Barry?

ME: No, this is Adolf Hitler.

CALLER: Of course. My mistake. The reason I'm calling you at eleven-thirty at night, Mr. Hitler, is that I'm conducting a marketing survey, and ...

ME: Are you selling magazine subscriptions?

CALLER: Magazine subscriptions?

ME: Selling them? Ha ha. No. Certainly not. Not at all. No, this is just a plain old marketing survey. (Sound of dogs barking in the background.) If you'll just answer a few questions, we'll send you a million dollars.

ME: Well, what do you want to know?

CALLER: Well, I just want to ask you some questions about your household, such as how many people live there, and what their ages are, and what their incomes are, and whether any of them might be interested in subscribing to Redbook?

ME: I don't want to subscribe to anything, you lying piece of slime.

CALLER: How about Time? Sports Illustrated? American Beet Farmer?

ME: I'm going to hang up.

CALLER: No! (The dogs get louder.) Please! You can have my daughter!

ME: (Click.)

The first telephone was invented in 1876, when Alexander Graham Bell attached a battery to a crude

electrical device and spoke into it. Everybody thought he was an idiot. He would have died in poverty if Thomas Edison hadn't invented the second telephone several years later.

The first telephone systems were primitive "party lines," where everybody could hear what everybody else was talking about. This was very confusing:

BERTHA: Emma? I'm calling to tell you I seen your boy Norbert shootin' his musket at our goat again, and if you don't—

CLEM: This ain't Emma. This is Clem Johnson, and I got to reach Doc Henderson, because my wife Nell is all rigid and foaming at the mouth, and if she don't snap out of it soon the roast is going to burn.

EMMA: Norbert don't even own a musket. All he got is a bow and arrow, and he couldn't hit a steam locomotive from six feet, what with his bad hand, which he got when your boy Percy bit it, and which is festerin' pretty bad.

DOC HENDERSON: You better let me take a look at it.

BERTHA: The goat? Oh, he ain't hurt that bad, Doc. He's mostly just skittery on account of the musket fire.

CLEM: Now she's startin' to roll her eyes around. Looks like two hard-boiled eggs.

EMMA: What kind of roast is it?

DOC HENDERSON: If it's just skittery, you should stroke it a bit and keep it in a dark place.

EMMA: Well, I ain't no doctor, but I ain't never heard of stroking a roast.

CLEM: Only dark place we got is the barn, and I'd be afraid to put Nell in there on account of she'd scare the chickens.

BERTHA: Chickens ain't a roast, Clem; chickens is poultry. Take 'em out of the oven when you can wiggle the drumstick.

EMMA: I told you already, Norbert don't even own a musket.

CALLER: Hi. I'm conducting a marketing survey. Is Mr. Hitler at home?

CLEM: No, but I'll take a year's worth of American Beet Farmer if you got it.

The party-line system led to a lot of unnecessary confusion and death, so the phone company devised a system whereby you can talk to only one person at a time, although not necessarily the person you want. In fact, if you call any large company, you will never get to talk to the person you're calling. Large companies employ people who are paid, on a commission basis, solely to put calls on hold. The only exception is department stores, where all calls are immediately routed to whichever clerk has the most people waiting in line for service.

But we should never complain about our telephone system. It is the most sophisticated system in the world, yet it is the easiest to use. For example, my twenty-month-old son, who cannot perform a simple act like eating a banana without getting much of it in his hair, is perfectly capable of direct-dialing Okinawa, and probably already has. In another year, he'll be able to order his own magazine subscriptions.

Okay, Now Try The Engine

You should do your own car repairs. It's an easy way to save money and possibly maim yourself for life.

You're probably afraid to repair your car because you think cars are complicated. This is

nonsense. Many teenage boys understand cars, and on any scale of intellectual achievement teenage boys rank right down there with newts. At least they did when I was one of them.

When I was in high school, we boys would stand out on the corner at lunchtime and smoke unfiltered cigarettes and spit frequently and guys would pull up in genuinely hideous-looking cars with the front ends jacked way up. They'd open the hoods and we'd stare inside and have conversations like this:

LOOKERS: Three eighty-nine?

DRIVER: Four twenty-seven.

LOOKERS: Fuel injected?

DRIVER: Headers.

LOOKERS: Dual?

DRIVER: Quad.

LOOKERS: Boss.

Then we'd all spit approvingly. Sometimes the conversation would turn ugly, particularly if some participants favored Fords and some favored Chevrolets. The Ford-Chevrolet conflict was a major issue, considerably more important to us than, say, the fate of the Free World. Those who favored Fords would yell "Fo Mo Co," which is short for "Ford Motor Company." Those who favored Chevrolets would yell "Fo No Go," which is short for "Ford No Go." This was considered a very witty insult. Sometimes fights would break out.

What I'm getting at is that we had the intellectual depth of lima beans, and we still managed to understand cars. So you can, too.

The trouble with most do-it-yourself car articles is they tell you how to do things you don't really need to do, like change the oil. Most Such articles rave on for pages about changing the oil, as if it were some kind of sacred ritual, never once telling you how degrading and pointless it is. I have been driving for eighteen years, and I have never once had a car problem I could have solved by changing the oil. If the Good Lord had wanted us to change the oil, He would have put different oil in the car in the first place.

But if you believe the do-it-yourself articles, you traipse along, changing your oil regularly, and one day your car ceases to run, and you try changing the oil a couple more times, and it still doesn't run, and you end up taking it to an auto mechanic, and you have this conversation:

You: What's wrong?

MECHANIC: It seems to be either the transmission or the engine. (Translation: I'm not sure, so I plan to replace every part in the car.)

YOU: How long will it take to fix?

MECHANIC: We should have a pretty good idea by Friday. ("One hundred and sixty-two years.")

YOU: How much will it cost?

MECHANIC: Well, I have to Check on some of the parts and labor, but figure about \$130. ("Eight billion skillion dollars.")

So what you need to know is how to do major car repairs, the kind most do-it-yourself articles don't talk about. There are two major kinds of car problems, which we in the automotive community refer to as The Two Major Kinds of Car Problems:

Problems that cause your car to make loud noises.

What you do here is turn up the radio. If your car doesn't have a radio, you can sing loudly as you

drive. Some people try to deal with noise problems by messing around with the muffler, but I advise against this. Mufflers are filthy, disgusting objects covered with parts of every dead animal you have ever run over. I would no more touch a muffler than I would change my oil.

Problems that cause your car to stop.

Generally these problems involve the engine, which is a large object you'll find under your hood, unless you live in a high-crime area. Open the hood and poke around among the wires with a screwdriver, or, if you have no screwdriver, the tip of an umbrella. Have somebody sit in the car. As you poke, yell "Try it now" or "Okay, try it now." This is how most professional mechanics solve engine problems. Before long you'll be fixing cars as well as they do, by which I mean about 30 percent of the time.

The Problem With Pets

Everybody should have a pet. Pets give you all the love and devotion of close relatives, but you can lock them in the basement for hours at a time if they get loud or boring. The pets, I mean.

Have you ever wondered why people have pets? Neither have I. I suspect it's because pets are easy to talk to. I spend hours talking to my dog, explaining my views on world affairs. She always listens very attentively, although I'm not sure she understands me. If I could hear what she's thinking, it would probably go like this:

ME: The situation in the Middle East certainly looks serious.

MY DOG: I wonder if he's going to give me some food.

ME: It is unfortunate that an area so vital to the economic well-being of the world is so politically unstable.

MY DOG: Maybe he'll give me some food now.

ME: The Russians certainly are making it difficult for our government to achieve a lasting Mideast peace.

MY DOG: Any minute now he might go into the kitchen and get me some food.

My first pet was a group of ants in one of those educational ant farms with clear plastic sides. My mother gave it to me for Christmas when I was about ten. She had to send away to Chicago to buy the ants. The ironic thing is that our house was already overrun with local ants, which came out during the summer in hordes. I mean, it was like one of those science fiction movies in which insects take over the Earth. Every summer we had huge, brazen ants striding around the kitchen demanding food and running up long distance telephone charges. My mother spent much of her time whapping at them with brooms and spraying them with deadly chemicals. Nothing worked. The ants used to lie on their backs, laughing at the brooms and the chemicals and calling for more.

What I'm getting at is that my mother hated ants, but she sent good money all the way to Chicago so I could have ants for Christmas. Christmas does horrible things to people's values.

Anyway, I got the ants and put them into their ant farm and fed them sugar and water. The idea was that they would build a lot of ant tunnels and stuff and I would learn about Nature. Instead, they died. My mother was astounded. I mean, here she spends whole summers trying to kill local ants that she

got for free, and these Chicago ants, ants that she paid money for, ants that had their own little farm and their own little food, just die. If we had been smart, we would have put our local ants into the ant farm and fed them sugar and water; that probably would have polished them off.

The lesson to be learned here is that insects make lousy pets. Even the best-trained, most intelligent, and most loyal insect pets tend to look and behave very much like ordinary common-criminal insects. Also you can't explain your views on world affairs to an insect, unless you drink a lot.

Fish and Green Cheese

Tropical fish are not much better. My wife and I went through a fish period, during which we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on tanks and pumps and filters and chemicals and special plants and special rocks and special food. We had enough tropical-fish technology to land a tropical fish on the moon. What we could not do was keep any given tropical fish alive for longer than a week. Just as soon as we'd pop one in the tank, it would develop Fin Rot. Medical science has developed no cure for Fin Rot, so our fish would languish around among the fish technology, rotting. We were constantly buying replacement fish. Whenever one of us would leave the house, the other would say: "Don't forget to pick up several tropical fish." I have no actual proof, but I strongly suspect that these fish were manufactured in Chicago.

The most popular pets are dogs and cats. Now when I say "dogs," I'm talking about dogs, which are large, bounding, salivating animals, usually with bad breath. I am not talking about those little squeaky things you can hold on your lap and carry around. Zoologically speaking, these are not dogs at all; they are members of the pillow family.

Anyway, dogs make good pets because they are very loyal (NOTE: When I say "loyal," I mean "stupid.") I once wrote a column in which I said dogs are stupid, and I got a lot of nasty mail from people who insisted, often with misspelled words, that dogs are intelligent. Perhaps from their point of view dogs are intelligent, but I don't want to get into that here. I'll just stick with "loyal.")

Yes indeed, dogs are loyal. Here is an example of how loyal dogs are: When two dogs meet, they will spend the better part of a day sniffing each other's private parts and going to the bathroom on any object more than one inch high. Talk about loyalty.

Cats are less loyal than dogs, but more independent. (This is code. It means: "Cats are smarter than dogs, but they hate people.") Many people love cats. From time to time, newspapers print stories about some elderly widow who died and left her entire estate, valued at \$320,000, to her cat, Fluffikins. Cats read these stories, too, and are always plotting to get named as beneficiaries in their owners' wills. Did you ever wonder where your cat goes when it wanders off for several hours? It meets with other cats in estate-planning seminars. I just thought you should know.

Governmental Follies

Fungus On The Economy

I don't know about you, but I was ever so grateful when President Reagan and several other top

leaders got together recently and straightened out the world economy. I had been meaning to do something about it myself, but I never found the time on account of we've had a lot of rain lately, which has caused these fungal growths to sprout all over the lawn.

I am not talking here about toadstools. I am talking about organisms reminiscent of the one that nearly ate the diner in the Ingmar Bergman film *The Blob* before Steve McQueen subdued it with a fire extinguisher. Of course Steve had to deal with just the one lone, isolated growth, whereas I have several dozen, and I couldn't possibly extinguish them all if they attacked in unison. Eventually they're going to figure this out. I mean, they may be fungal growths, but they're not stupid.

Anyway, with all this on my mind I've had very little time to spend on the world economy, which is why I was so glad to hear that the leaders of the economic bloc known to economists as the Big Rich Western Nations with Indoor Plumbing and Places That Sell Cheeseburgers met in Williamsburg to straighten things out. Williamsburg is an authentic colonial restored place in Virginia where people in authentic uncomfortable clothing demonstrate how horrible it was to live in historical colonial times. Back then, if you wanted one crummy bar of soap, you had to spend the better part of a week melting beeswax and rending pigs and all the other degrading things people did before the invention of the supermarket. This is how people still live in a lot of wretched little Third World nations with names like Koala Paroondi, whose leaders were not invited to Williamsburg because the Western leaders were afraid they'd eat all the food.

The economic summit cost something like eight million dollars, which sounds like a lot of money until you realize it lasted almost four days. The reason it took the leaders so long to straighten out the world economy is that they had to wrestle with some very complex issues. For example, I read in *Newsweek* that French President Mitterand does not like white sauces, and West German Chancellor Kohl does not like seafood, and so on. These high-level food differences often resulted in Frank Exchanges of Views during the summit meals:

FRENCH PRESIDENT MITTERAND: Please pass the tiny lobsters dish.

BRITISH PRIME MINISTER THATCHER: Those are not "tiny lobsters." Those are crayfish.

MITTERAND: Fish? Do not make me laugh. I represent the greatest food snots in the world, and I know what is the fish and what is not the fish, and this is not the fish. Regard: it has the claws. Does this fish of the cray have the claws?

THATCHER: Yes, you twit. It's a crustacean.

MITTERAND: Perhaps I am a twit, but at least I am not wearing the tweedy British clothings of such monumental dowdiness that a dog would be reluctant to relieve itself upon them.

Another problem was interest rates. Interest rates are very high, and the leaders spent a lot of time during their high-level meals trying to come up with a solution. Finally—and this just goes to show you why these people are world leaders and you are a mere taxpayer—they decided that interest rates ought to come down. It's a radical plan, but it just might work.

From the United States' point of view, the big issue at Williamsburg was unfair foreign competition, which means any competition that involves foreigners. At one time, the foreigners competed fairly: they made chocolates and little carved-wood figurines, and we made everything else. Then, without warning, foreigners began making reasonably priced, well-made, technologically advanced cars, television sets, shoes, mushrooms, etc., and they forced Americans to buy these things at gunpoint. President Reagan discussed this problem at Williamsburg with Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone, and they hammered out an agreement under which the Japanese will continue to send us cars, but they'll start putting defects

in them. We're going to give them technical assistance: we're going to send people over there to train Japanese factory workers to be hostile and alienated and put the transmission in wrong and stuff like that.

At the end of the summit, the leaders issued a major economic-policy statement that nobody read except the editors of the New York Times, and everybody went home. The world economy began to improve almost immediately. Even as you read these words, the yen is rising vs. the franc. Or else it's failing. You may rest assured that the yen is doing whatever it does vs. the franc when things are improving. Also the other day my son ran his tricycle over one of the growths, and the growth let him off with only a sharp reprimand. So things are really looking up.

Give Wall Street Credit

I think I'll just quickly bring us all up to date on President Reagan's plan to save the economy, so we can get back to whatever we were doing.

The big problem is Wall Street, which is a street in New York City where people go every day to work themselves into a lather. To understand how Wall Street works, all you have to do is recall those television commercials for a major Wall Street brokerage firm, the ones that feature cattle. It is not mere chance that the firm chose cattle as its symbol. If you spend much time with cattle, you know they spend their time making cattle mess and panicking. The scene is pretty much the same on Wall Street, except the herd members carry briefcases. They are very skittery, and for good reason: They are in the world's silliest business. Here's how it works:

Say a company wants some money. It prints up a batch of pieces of paper ("stocks"), goes down to Wall Street, and looks around for some herd members to sell the paper to. "Hey there," the company says to the herd members. "How would you like to own a piece of paper? Look at these features: It has an attractive border, three different colors of ink, and many financial words such as 'accrual' and 'debenture' printed right on it." The herd members snuffle around for a while, then one of them bolts up and buys a piece of paper. Then, suddenly, they're trampling all over each other to buy pieces of paper.

The company now has a large sum of money, and it departs hurriedly, chuckling, to buy factories or executive washrooms or whatever. Gradually, the herd members realize that all they have is paper, which is utterly worthless unless they can get other herd members to buy it. So they all end up simply trading paper back and forth, day after day, year after year. Deep in their souls, they realize they are participating in an enormous hoax that could collapse at any moment, so any event, no matter how trivial, causes them to panic. You can pick up the newspaper financial section any day and read stories like this:

NEW YORK—Stock prices plunged sharply today as investors reacted to the discovery that Saturn actually has six moons, rather than five as was believed previously.

So the stock market is always skittering up and down. When Ronald Reagan was elected, it skittered up for a while, because Ron promised he would reduce government spending. Wall Street fears the government because the government is Wall Street's major competitor in the worthless pieces-of-paper business.

But it turned out that what Ron really meant was he was going to reduce one kind of government spending, so he could spend more money on the MX Missile, the B-1 Bomber, the Cruise Missile, the Atomic Dirigible, the Secret Decoder Ring, and the Deadly Outer Space Death Ray. So he ended up

with a budget that actually increases government spending, for the 206th year in a row.

Once Wall Street realized what Ron had done, it worked itself into an even bigger panic than usual. Ron has been trying to calm it down, but the herd members are too busy barging around, wild-eyed, waving their pieces of paper. Ron may have to go to Wall Street personally and deliver a soothing speech. “There, there,” he would tell the herd. “There, there.”

Ron’s other big problem is the Federal Reserve Board. Nobody knows much about the Federal Reserve Board: it is a secret society whose members periodically emerge from their mountain hideout, raise the interest rates, then scurry off into the darkness. This forces the banks to raise the prime rate, which is the rate they charge customers who do not want or need money.

One result of all this interest-rate-raising is that financial institutions have cooked up all kinds of bizarre schemes to get you to give them money. You can’t pick up a newspaper or turn on the television these days without seeing advertisements for these schemes:

“Attention savers: If you invest in our new All Savers Money Market Fund Treasury Bond Certificates of Deposit, you can earn 23.6 percent interest, which, compounded hourly and during neap tides, will yield an actualized semiannual net deductible pretax liquid return of 41.7 percent, although of course your mileage may vary. If you are found guilty of premature withdrawal, the federal government requires us to send people around to break your legs, so be sure to thumb through the prospectus.”

I have a lot of trouble understanding these schemes, so for the time being I am investing my money in groceries and consumer objects that I can charge on my Sears credit card.

Outbungling The Commies

Let’s all write our congresspersons and demand that the United States become involved in a no-win military quagmire in Central America.

The reason? Global strategy. To understand the strategic significance of Central America, let’s take a close look at the map, especially in the critical region where the Oswego River flows into Lake Ontario. No, wait. Wrong map.

Ah. Here we are. Look closely at Central America, and try to imagine what would happen if this vital region were to fall into Communist hands. What would happen is a lot of Communists would be stung repeatedly by vicious tropical insects the size of mature hamsters.

We cannot afford to have this happen. We cannot afford to have a horde of Communists down there becoming so cranky and welt-covered that eventually, just for an excuse to get out of the jungle, they foment a revolution in Mexico, which means you’d have Communist guerrilla troops right next to Texas. I doubt they could take Texas by force. Texas has the largest fleet of armed pickup trucks of any major power, and any invading guerrilla army would be shot and run over repeatedly before it got half a mile, especially if it invaded on a Saturday night.

So the Communists would have to use a psychological approach. They’d win the Texans over by such ploys as holding barbecues, wearing big hats and promising to extend the football Season. Once Texas went Communist, Oklahoma would follow quickly, followed by Nebraska, followed by whatever state is next to Nebraska, and so on until the entire nation had turned Communist except Massachusetts, which is already very left-wing and consequently would turn Republican.

It is to prevent this kind of tragedy that we’re sending bales of your tax money to buy guns for the

corrupt, murderous slime buckets who run El Salvador. And for those of you weak-willed, sob-sister, namby-pamby probable homosexuals who think this is wrong, let me point out that if we don't prop up our slime buckets, the Communists will install their corrupt slime buckets, and you can bet your bottom tax dollar that the peasants down there are much happier being oppressed by ours. "Anything to keep Texas safe" is the traditional El Salvadoran peasant motto.

Besides, the El Salvadoran rulers have started showing a real interest in human rights since we put them on this clever incentive plan under which we threaten to stop sending them guns if they keep using them to shoot their own citizens. This plan is working very well: Reagan administration observers have been bringing back rave reviews. "They're not killing nearly as many innocent women and children," the observers report, beaming with pride. "Let's send them some more guns."

But guns alone are not enough, which is why Texas does not control the world. You also need troops, and the Communists are sending Cuban troops to Central America. Truth to tell, you can't wave your arms in a world trouble spot without striking Cuban troops. They'll go anywhere, because if they stay home they have to listen to extremely long speeches.

I say that if the Communists are sending troops, they must have a damned good reason, and we should send troops, too. Only I don't think we should send our armed forces, because I have serious reservations about how they'd do in an actual war. I suspect most of them enlisted because of those really slick, upbeat TV commercials suggesting that all you do in the armed forces is grin and jog and learn meaningful career skills such as tank repair. If we sent these kids to Central America, they'd go jogging into the jungle, grinning and clutching their tank-repair tools, and the only question would be whether the Communists would get them before the insects did.

So I say we send the people who really understand the Communist threat in Central America, the very people who alerted us to it in the first place. I'm talking about the Reagan administration's foreign policy strategists. I say we arm them to the teeth, smear them with insect repellent, fly them over the jungle and drop them at night. We could even give them parachutes.

It's Drafty In Here

If you can possibly manage it, you should avoid being a young person or a wheat farmer when the president starts feeling international tension. Nine times out of ten, when a president gets mad at the Russians, he does something nasty to young people or wheat farmers, and sometimes both.

For example, when the Russians invaded Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter was so angry that he ordered teenage American males to register for the draft; told the U.S. Olympic team it couldn't go to the Olympics; and told farmers they couldn't sell wheat to Russia. If you didn't know any better, you'd have thought Afghanistan had been invaded by teenage American wheat farmers, led by the U.S. Olympic team. I imagine that if Jimmy had been really angry at the Russians, he would have had the Olympic team lined up and shot.

But eventually everybody got bored with Afghanistan. The Russians remained there; the farmers went back to selling them wheat; and the Olympic athletes found occupations that are less directly connected with international tension than, say, the parallel bars. Jimmy went on to other pursuits, such as losing the election. But draft registration continued.

When Ronald Reagan was campaigning for president, he said he was dead set against peacetime

registration, on the grounds that in a free country the government shouldn't go around forcing people to do things. It turns out he was just kidding. He recently decided to continue registration, using the same logic that Jimmy did: Although at the moment we are not technically in a war with the Russians, we could get into one any day, and if we do, we could have our Army up to snuff six weeks faster if we have the teenagers already registered. I see only one minor flaw in this reasoning, which is that if we ever do get into a war with the Russians, we will probably be melted, teenagers and all, in the first half hour or so, which would tend to disrupt the training process.

Aside from that flaw, I think registration is a terrific idea. When the national security is at stake, I think everybody should be obligated to register, regardless of age, sex, religion, or occupation. The only exceptions should be children, women, and anybody else who is not a teenage male.

Perhaps you're wondering why we single out teenage males. Some people believe it's because teenagers are the most physically fit, but that is stupid. If physical fitness were the main reason, we would register professional athletes first. The truth is that we register teenage males because:

We always have. Many teenage males are sullen and snotty and could use a little discipline. There are fewer of them than there are of us.

If we tried to register older people, they would write letters to their congressmen and hire sharp lawyers, and we'd never be able to get anybody into the Army.

So when we draft people, we always start with teenage males. This means that the President, his advisers, and the members of Congress usually don't get a chance to serve, but that is one of the burdens of public office.

Many Army officials would like to start drafting teenagers right away, but unfortunately they don't have any actual war going on at the moment, so they're stuck with trying to get people to volunteer. This is very difficult, because the Army is not generally perceived as being a fun organization. Most people think that the Army is a place where you get up early in the morning to be yelled at by people with short haircuts and tiny brains.

The Army has been trying very hard to change its image. It has produced a bunch of television commercials suggesting that it is really just a large technical school, where everybody is happy and nobody ever gets sent to wretched foreign countries to get shot at. I think these commercials are on the right track but don't go far enough. I think they should make the Army look more as it does on "M*A*S*H," where the characters have so much fun that most of them have remained in the Army for ten years:

HAWKEYE: Boy, war sure is awful, isn't it? Ha ha.

BJ: Ha ha, it sure is. Say, I have an idea: Let's go drink a bunch of martinis and flirt with attractive nurses and play practical jokes on various stuffed shirts, as we have every night since this series began.

HAWKEYE: Ha ha. Good idea,

BJ. But first let's fix these wounded soldiers, who are a constant reminder that war is an enormous waste of human life, although fortunately the major characters never get killed.

BJ: Ha ha.

If the Army commercials were more like "M*A*S*H," I think lots of teenagers would want to enlist. In fact, I think just about everybody would want to enlist, for a chance to pal around with Alan Alda. The Army would have all the people it would need, and everything would be swell—unless, of course, we got into an actual war. Then we'd have to turn things over to the teenage males.

Mx Is The Way To Go. Bye

I realize it's none of my business, but I have a few questions about the MX missile system. Here, as I understand it, is how the MX is supposed to work: We would put a bunch of missiles where the Russians can't hit them with their missiles. That way, if the Russians shoot at us, we'll be able to shoot back, and everybody will wind up dead. This is considered to be much more desirable than what would happen without the MX, namely that the Russians would still be alive and we would be dead. Obviously, the best solution would be for us to be alive and the Russians to be dead, but for this to happen we would have to shoot first, and we wouldn't do that because the whole reason we built all these nuclear devices in the first place is to preserve world peace. So we are going for the peace-loving solution, which is to guarantee that if anybody attacks anybody, everybody winds up dead.

So far so good. I mean, any fool can see the MX is the way to go. But what troubles me is the particular kind of MX President Reagan decided to build. Basically, the people who worry about our national defense for us came up with two options:

OPTION ONE: Dig several thousand holes in Nevada and Utah, but put actual missiles in only a few of them, so the Russians won't know which holes to shoot at. Cost: A trillion or so dollars. Advantages: The bulldozer industry would prosper beyond its wildest dreams. Disadvantages: It won't work. One flaw, of course, is that the Russians, using their spy satellites, could figure out which holes we put the missiles in. We could probably come up with some crafty scheme to overcome this flaw: Maybe we'd attach leaves and fruit to the missiles, so the Russians would think we were merely planting enormous trees in Nevada and Utah; or maybe we'd put huge signs on each missile with the words "THIS IS NOT A MISSILE" printed in Russian. So hiding the missiles is not the problem. The problem is that the Russians, if they have any sense at all, would simply build more missiles and shoot at all the holes, and we'd all wind up dead with no way to make the Russians dead. So the national-defense people came up with Option Two.

OPTION TWO: Put the MX missiles in holes we already have. Cost: A few hundred billion dollars. Advantages: None, except it costs less, which is not really an advantage because the government will spend the leftover money on some other gigantic scheme anyway. Disadvantages: It won't work, since the Russians already know where the existing holes are. Heck, I even know where they are. They're in Kansas. All the Russians would have to do is locate a map revealing the location of Kansas, which they could probably do, what with their extensive spy network.

So basically, President Reagan was faced with two options, both of which involved holes and neither of which would work. He pondered this problem for a while, on his horse, and finally decided to go with Option Two. Why, he reasoned, should we pay a trillion dollars for a system that wouldn't work, when we can get the same thing for a few hundred billion? He's going on the time-honored axiom that if something is not worth doing, it is not worth doing right.

Ideally, President Reagan would have delayed his decision in the hope that, given time, his defense planners could have come up with a third option, such as covering Nebraska with ice and launching the missiles from dogsleds. But he had to act fast, because of the Window of Vulnerability. The Window of Vulnerability, which was discovered only recently, is the period of time between now and whenever we finish the MX system, during which we are vulnerable to Russian attack. Reagan's defense advisers are very big on the Window of Vulnerability: for months now, they have been running around the country proclaiming how vulnerable we are. This puzzles me. I mean, if we're so vulnerable, why are we telling

everybody? And if the Russians are so hot to attack us, why don't they do it now? Why on earth would they wait until after we finish our MX system? And if they don't attack us when we're vulnerable, why do we need the MX at all? These questions deserve a lot of hard thought, which I intend to give them just as soon as I've had another drink.

Mx Service Warranty

I'm a little worried about the MX missile system. Don't get me wrong: I certainly think we need another missile system. Better safe than sorry, that's my motto.

What I'm worried about is that we won't be able to get anybody to repair the MX. You can't get anything repaired these days. Take, for example, Voyager 2, a United States space rocket that recently flew to Saturn to take pictures. It worked okay for a while, but then the camera got pointed in the wrong direction and started sending back pictures of outer space. This was bad public relations: taxpayers don't want to pay nine zillion dollars for pictures that look like the inside of somebody's closet with the light off. The NASA scientists claim Voyager 2 is a success anyway, but they have to claim this, because otherwise they can't ask for more money. They would have claimed Voyager 2 was a success even if it had crashed into Phoenix, Arizona. The truth is, Voyager 2 broke and they couldn't get it repaired.

This is a problem not only with rockets but with other major appliances as well. If you have ever called the service department of a major department store to get an appliance repaired, you know what I am talking about:

YOU: Hello, my washer ...

TAPE RECORDING: Thank you for calling the Service Department. All of our service representatives are smoking cigarettes and chatting; your call will be taken just as soon as somebody feels like taking your call. Thank you.

(For the next thirty-five minutes, you listen to a medley of songs by Barry Manilow, who has written a great many songs. Perhaps too many. Then an actual service representative comes on the line.)

SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE: Thank you for calling the Service Department. How may we serve you?

YOU: It's our washer. One of the drive belts snared my wife by the arm and she can't get loose and we can't turn it off and we're worried about what will happen when it gets to the spin cycle.

SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE: When did you purchase the washer?

YOU: A year ago, I guess. Could you hurry please? It's almost done with the rinse cycle.

SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE: Then I'm afraid you are not covered under the ninety-day warranty. But don't feel bad: nobody is ever covered under the ninety-day warranty. That's why we offer it. Did you buy a maintenance agreement?

YOU: I don't know, for God's sake. (Your wife screams in the background.) Please, just get someone out here.

SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE: We will have a serviceperson in your area in 1986. Will someone be at home?

YOU: I imagine my wife will. What's left of her.

SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE: Fine. We will have someone call you during the latter half of 1986 to let you know exactly what month the serviceperson will be there. Thank you for calling the Service

Department.

A few years ago, we had a serviceperson come to our house regularly to try to repair our television set. He had this ritual: He would arrive with six hundred pounds of tools, select a screwdriver, take the back off the television, and stare at the insides as if he had been raised by a primitive Brazilian jungle tribe and had never seen a television before. Then he would put the cover back on, load his six hundred pounds of tools back onto the truck, and leave. Once, to prove he was sincerely interested in the problem, he took the television with him and kept it for several months. Finally, my wife and I took the cover off ourselves and blew on the insides of the television; it worked fine after that, and the serviceperson didn't come around anymore, which was sort of a shame, because he was getting to be like one of the family.

Another time, the motor on our forty-five-dollar vacuum cleaner broke, so I took the vacuum to a serviceperson, who took it apart but couldn't fix the motor. So I sent it to the factory, which fixed the motor for twenty-five dollars but didn't put the vacuum cleaner together again. So finally I took the parts to the Service Center, which is where people go when they are really desperate. You go in and take a number, then you sit with the other appliance owners, who are clutching their toasters and radios and hoping the counter person will call their numbers before their food and water runs out.

Finally the counter person called my number, and I explained to him that my vacuum cleaner was not broken, that I merely wanted him to Put it together again. I had trouble getting this message across, because the counter person had obviously spent several years in an IQ-reduction program. He'd say: "Well, what's wrong with it?" And I'd say: "Nothing's wrong with it. I just want you to put it together." And he'd say: "Well, what's wrong with it?" And so on.

Eventually, he got the picture, and he took my vacuum cleaner parts to the fellows back in the Shop, and together they came up with an estimate of eighty-seven dollars to put them together again. This means that we would have paid a total of \$112 to repair a forty-five-dollar cleaner, so instead we bought a new vacuum cleaner, which is, of course, what they wanted us to do in the first place.

Well, I'm afraid the government will have the same sort of problem. They'll buy a snappy new MX missile system, and everything will be fine until the Russians attack us, at which point we'll have bombs raining down on Ohio while the guys down the Pentagon are sitting in the War Room, listening to Barry Manilow on the telephone. Think about it.

Birthday Celebration

The name "February" comes from the Latin word "Februarius," which means "fairly boring stretch of time during which one expects the professional-ice-hockey season to come to an end but it does not." During February we observe four special days, none of which is an excuse for serious drinking:

Groundhog Day, February 2

This is an old American tradition started years ago by profoundly retarded old Americans. According to the tradition, on this day Mr. Groundhog comes out of his hole and looks around for media representatives, who make a major fuss about it. It is one of those things that only media people care about. Another one is the government of Canada.

Lincoln's Birthday, February 12

Abraham Lincoln grew up in the Tennessee wilderness and killed a bear when he was only three years

old. No, wait: That was Davy Crockett. Abraham Lincoln grew up in a log cabin and read by candlelight and learned to spell by writing on the back of a coal shovel. Later on he wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope. He had a pathological fear of normal paper. As a youth, Lincoln was famous for splitting rails. People were afraid to leave their rails lying around because Lincoln would sneak up and split them.

Lincoln became nationally known when he won the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, sponsored by the League of Women Voters. Here is a complete transcript:

DOUGLAS: I think the territories should decide the slavery question for themselves, and I'm five feet seven inches tall.

LINCOLN: I disagree, and I'm six four.

After the debates, Lincoln became president and grew a beard because some little girl wrote him a letter and suggested it. He was crazy that way. We should all be grateful she didn't suggest he wear rouge.

St. Valentine's Day, February 14

The Encyclopedia Britannica says, "St. Valentine's Day as a lovers' festival and the modern tradition of sending valentine cards have no relation to the saints, but, rather, seem to be connected either with the Roman fertility festival of the Lupercalia or with the mating season of birds."

This means that, at this very moment, your kids may be in school cutting out little construction-paper hearts to celebrate the sexual activity of Romans or birds. No wonder people don't go to church anymore.

Washington's Birthday, February 16

Actually, George Washington was born on February 22. The government has decided that we should celebrate his birthday on the third Monday, because that way the nation gets a long weekend, and, what the hell, Washington is dead anyway. (When I say "the nation," of course, I mean "government employees and maybe six or seven other people.") I think that if the government can mess around with the calendar for its own convenience, the rest of us should be able to do the same thing. For example, most people find April 15 to be a terribly inconvenient day to file income tax returns, coming as it does right at the beginning of baseball season. I think this year on April 15 we should all send the government little notices explaining that we observe Income Tax Day on December 11.

But back to Washington. As a youth, he threw a cherry tree across the Delaware. Later he got wooden teeth and was chosen to represent Virginia at the Continental Congress, a group of colonists who wanted to revolt against the King because he made them wear wigs and tights. They chose Washington to lead their army because he was strong and brave and not in the room at the time. Everybody thought he would lose, but he outfoxed the British by establishing headquarters all over the place. Here on the East Coast you can't swing your arms without hitting one of Washington's headquarters. Finally the British, who were Germans anyway, gave up and went home to fight the French, who were more conveniently located, and Washington became the Father of Our Country. That is why each year on a Monday somewhere around his birthday we have major-appliance sales oriented toward government employees.

Why Not A Postal Service?

EDITOR'S NOTE: This column appears at first to be about the Postal Service but may actually be about the neutron bomb. It's hard to tell.

I am all for the nine-digit Zip Code and the eighteen-cent stamp. In fact, I think the Postal Service ought to go even further: Let's have a fifteen-digit Zip Code and a \$4.50 stamp. Let's make it virtually impossible to send mail. I hate getting mail anyway. Apparently, my name is on a computerized mailing list entitled "People with Extremely Small Brains," and as a result I get mainly two kinds of mail:

Announcements Announcing Contests Somebody Else Will Win: "Mr. Barry, we are pleased to announce that you have been chosen as a semifinalist in the Publishers' Publishing House Sweepstakes, and may have already won 11,000 head of cattle and a Korean servant family."

Investment Opportunities for Morons: "This rare opportunity to purchase a finely crafted, individually registered investment collection of Early American Colonial Jellied Candies is being made available only to residents of North and South America, and will not be repeated unless people actually take us up on it."

I have learned to recognize this kind of mail from the envelopes, which always have gimmicky statements designed to arouse my curiosity ("If you do not open this envelope immediately, you will never see your children again"). So I usually throw the envelopes away without opening them. But this doesn't work: the junk mail companies have armies of workers who comb through everybody's garbage at night, retrieve their announcements, and put them right back in the mail.

We could solve this problem if we all bought portable blowtorches. We could stroll up to our mailboxes, open the doors, and incinerate everything inside. Or, for a more efficient approach, the Postal Service could buy larger blowtorches and incinerate everybody's mail right at the post offices. Ideally, the Postal Service would buy enormous blowtorches and incinerate the junk mail companies directly, but this is probably illegal.

The only problem with the incineration plan is that it would also destroy the occasional piece of actual mail. I got a piece of actual mail the other day, from the White House. It was signed by a machine that had learned how to reproduce the signature of Anne Higgins, Director of Presidential Correspondence, and it said: "On behalf of President Reagan, I would like to thank you for your message and to let you know that he appreciates the time you have taken to send in your views. They have been fully noted."

This letter troubles me greatly, because I never sent any views to the White House. This means the White House now possesses somebody else's views masquerading as mine, and, what is worse, has fully noted them, whatever that means. I guess they have a machine in the White House basement that fully notes views at a high rate of speed, then tells the Anne Higgins signature machine to shoot out a thank-you letter.

Now here's my problem: I recently acquired a view that I would like to send to the White House, only I'm afraid that now it won't be fully noted, because they probably have some rule about how many views will be noted per citizen per year. So I want the person who used my name to send in his view to now use his name to send in my view, and we'll be even.

My view concerns the neutron bomb, which, at the Pentagon's urging, President Reagan recently decided to build, and which would eventually be deployed in Western Europe. The neutron bomb is a nuclear device that kills people without destroying buildings. Many people feel this is inhumane; they much prefer the old-fashioned humane-type nuclear devices that kill people and destroy buildings.

Western Europe's reaction to the neutron bomb has been mixed: most buildings are for it, and most people are against it, on the grounds that it might kill them. They're always wallowing in sentiment, those Western Europeans.

Anyway, here's my view: I think we should develop the neutron bomb, but instead of using it to

defend a bunch of ungrateful people with unAmerican views, we should keep it for ourselves. All we have to do is modify the design so that instead of leaving buildings alone and destroying people, it leaves buildings and people alone but destroys third-class mail. This would save the country billions of dollars in blowtorch fuel alone.

The Leak Detectors

I think President Reagan has come up with a swell idea in his plan to give lie-detector tests to government employees suspected of leaking. “Leaking” is when a government employee tells the public what the government is doing. This is very bad, particularly in the area of foreign policy, because our foreign policy is supposed to be a secret. This principle was perfected by Richard Nixon, who used to keep the foreign policy hidden in a little jar buried in the White House lawn. Nobody ever had the vaguest notion what he was going to do next. For example, he went around for years announcing that our foreign policy was to hate the Chinese, then one day he showed up in China laughing and chatting with Chairman Mao and spilling ceremonial wine on himself. This kind of erratic behavior kept the other nations on their toes, because they could never really be sure that Dick wasn’t going to suddenly turn around and, say, order the Air Force to defoliate Wales.

Today, our foreign policy is so secret that not even the President really knows what it is, which is why he is concerned about leaks. He doesn’t want to be embarrassed at a press conference when some smart-mouth reporter asks him a question about why we’re secretly sending arms to one of those humid little countries in Central America that the forces of international communism are always trying to spread into, and he doesn’t know the answer. So the President came up with this plan whereby if the public ever gets hold of any classified government documents, which basically means all government documents except the Zip Code directory and those cretin newsletters your congressman sends you at your expense, the government employees who could have leaked the information will have to take lie-detector tests, and if it turns out they are guilty they will be fired or shot or something.

Needless to say, the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization of left-wing communists, claimed Reagan’s plan is unconstitutional, but this is typical. The ACLU is always yakking about the Constitution, and most of us are getting mighty tired of it. I mean, if the Constitution is so great, how come it was amended so many times? Huh?

Personally, I think the President’s idea is excellent. My only concern is who’s going to administer the lie-detector tests. We don’t want government employees doing it, because they’d mess it up somehow. It would wind up like one of those Army Corps of Engineers projects where they’re trying to irrigate four beet farms in Texas but they end up causing most of Iowa to be washed into the Gulf of Mexico.

So I think we should turn the lie-detecting operation over to the Private Sector, by which I mean F. Lee Bailey, the famous criminal trial lawyer who is widely considered to be extremely brilliant despite the fact that he always gives me the impression he’s coated with a thin layer of slime. Bailey has this television show called “Lie Detector,” wherein famous people such as Ronald Reagan’s barber take lie-detector tests, then, in the highly dramatic climax, Bailey oozes up and reveals the results. I think this would be an appropriate forum for investigating suspected leakers:

BAILEY: Mr. Carbuncle, you’re Assistant Secretary of State for Really Pathetic Little Countries, is that correct?

CARBUNCLE: Yes.

BAILEY: Okay, here's an innocent question to put you at ease. How are you?

CARBUNCLE: Fine, thank you.

BAILEY: Are you the person who told the New York Times about the secret CIA plan to drop 250,000 poison attack frogs on left-wing guerrillas in the Republic of Belize?

CARBUNCLE: No.

BAILEY: Mr. Carbuncle, our polygraph machine, which has been monitoring your pulse rate and blood pressure, indicates that you are telling the truth. Either that or you have just suffered a massive heart attack. Here's an autographed picture of the President grooming his horse, and thanks a million for being our guest on "Lie Detector." Folks, be sure to stay tuned, because next we're going to see if we can figure out who leaked the plan to sell nuclear bazookas to rival street gangs in the South Bronx.

States For Sale, Cheap

For more than a year now, President Reagan and the Congress have been working very hard on reducing government spending, so it should come as no surprise to anybody that they have managed to increase it. This is because the atmosphere in Washington, D.C., tends to lower people's intelligence. You've probably noticed this. You elect all these sharp people, full of brilliant ideas, and you send them to Washington, and after a few months of breathing the atmosphere they start behaving like brain-damaged turnips. As soon as they leave Washington, their IQs start to rise again.

This is why congressmen go on so many trips. Each congressman has a herd of aides who watch him constantly, and as soon as he starts to drool, or forget how to put on his pants, the aides send him off to Switzerland or someplace on a so-called fact-finding mission, which is really just a desperate attempt to get him away from Washington long enough to boost his IQ back to the level of, say, a cocker spaniel's. The President has the same problem, which is why he almost always gets packed off to Camp David during times of international tension. His aides are afraid that if they leave him in Washington, he'll start babbling into the hot line and set off World War III.

The problem is that the only place where the President and the Congress can work on economic problems is Washington, because the economy is stored there, in a large Treasury Building vault. This means that the longer they work on the budget, the worse it gets. So the solution to our budget problems will have to come from someone who spends very little time in Washington, someone whose brain has not been affected by the atmosphere. Me, for example.

I have been thinking about the budget for several minutes now, and I believe I have come up with an excellent way to reduce it and maybe raise some money to boot. Here's my plan: We can sell excess states.

The way I see it, we have far too many states, many of them serving no useful purpose whatsoever. I first noticed this some years ago when my wife and I drove from Pennsylvania to Colorado. It took us practically forever to get there, mainly because there were all these flat, boring states in the way. Take Kansas. Kansas just sits there, taking up an enormous amount of space that you are required to drive across if you want to get to Colorado. Fortunately, the Stuckey's Corporation has been thoughtful enough to locate a restaurant roughly every eighty miles along Interstate 70, so we were able to stop and buy cute little gift boxes containing a dozen miniature pecan pies, which is just enough pecan pies to

keep two people occupied until the next Stuckey's so they don't go insane with boredom and drive off the interstate at speeds approaching a hundred miles per hour, threatening both human and animal life. Not that there was all that much visible life in Kansas.

Now don't get me wrong. I have nothing against Kansas persons. I'm sure that, wherever they are, they're a fun bunch. I'm just saying we can save a lot of money, and make it much easier for people to get from Pennsylvania to Colorado, if we sell Kansas and move the Kansas persons to, say, Iowa, which looks a lot like Kansas (only narrower) and seems to have plenty of extra space.

Another thing. I see no reason why we need both a North and a South Dakota. One Dakota ought to be sufficient. My personal opinion is that we should sell South Dakota, because the capital is called "Pierre," but I'm willing to leave the final decision up to the Congress. I'm just saying one of them should go. We should also try to sell California and New York, of course, but I doubt anybody would be stupid enough to buy them.

Another thing. If we sold some states, we'd have fewer state legislatures. I have never really understood why we have state legislatures in the first place. If they're not raising their salaries, they're arguing over some lunatic law nobody ever asked for. For example, in my state, Pennsylvania, the legislature is obsessed with Official State Things. Our legislators have named an Official State Animal; an Official State Bird; an Official State Dog (it's the Great Dane, and God alone knows why); an Official State Fish; an Official State Flower; and an Official State Tree. They have even named an Official State Insect. I'm not kidding. It's the firefly. What does all this mean? Does it mean that if you squash a firefly in Pennsylvania, official state agents will track you down, using Great Danes, and arrest you?

I don't know the answers to these questions. All I know is that the state insect, as well as the state legislature, would become someone else's problem if we sold Pennsylvania. So I'm all for it. I'd be perfectly happy to move to Iowa, along with the Kansas persons. My only concern is that my plan might be a bit tough on the folks at Stuckey's, who make a terrific pecan pie.

There Auto Be A Law

I think we Americans ought to go right out and buy some American cars. Nobody has bought an American car since 1977, and this has had profoundly negative effects on the nation, the main one being a lot of whiny television commercials:

"Hi, I'm Telly Savalas, here to tell you that under Ford's desperate new program, you don't have to pay for maintenance and repairs. In fact, you don't even have to pay for the car, or drive it, or anything. All you have to do is sign a piece of paper stating that if you were going to buy a car, it might conceivably be a Ford."

Unless we want to see more of this kind of thing, we're going to have to buy some American cars pronto. Most of us could use new cars anyway. My wife and I have been driving the same cars for more than five years, and they're starting to get a little rank, especially the one the dog threw up in on the way to the veterinarian's office. The other one, which we use to cart our nineteen-month-old son around in, smells a little better, but it has ninety billion cracker crumbs permanently bonded to the backseat by hardened saliva.

Also, we have a lot of junk in the glove compartment, mostly in the form of a series of recall letters

from the manufacturer:

July 3, 1977

“Dear Mr. Barry:

Under the terms of United States Department of Transportation Regulation 23947-54B, we are required to notify you that there exists the possibility of a potential radiation condition with respect to the wireless receiver installed in certain of our automobiles at the time of manufacture, and owners of said vehicles are therefore requested to contact their authorized sales representative with respect to an adjustment of the aforementioned potential possible condition described heretofore.”

February 4, 1978

“Dear Mr. Barry:

A review of our records indicates that you have not responded to our earlier recall notice with respect to the potential radiation danger from the radio in your car. Your prompt attention to this matter would be appreciated.”

October 8, 1978

“Dear Mr. Barry:

Please bring your car to the dealer right away and don’t turn on the radio because you will get very sick and all your hair will fall off.”

June 17, 1979

“Dear Mr. Barry:

If you are still alive, do not bring your car or yourself anywhere near the dealer. Instead, leave the car in a lightly populated area and flee on foot. We’ll try to detonate it with helicopter-mounted bazookas.”

So far, we haven’t responded to the recall campaign because we’ve been fairly busy, and besides we like the convenience of being able to locate our car in darkened parking lots by the glow. But I think we’re going to get a new car, because we want to get Telly off the air and receive a large sum of money in the form of a rebate. In fact, we may buy several cars and retire.

If you want to buy a car, you should know that under federal law you are now required to get one with front-wheel drive. The advantage of front-wheel drive is that it’s good in the snow, so when there’s a really bad storm you’ll be able to get to work while your neighbors are stuck home drinking bourbon by the fire. The disadvantage of front-wheel drive is that it was invented by European communists, so nobody in the United States has the vaguest notion of how it works. In fact, most mechanics have a great deal of difficulty even finding it, because it’s all mixed in with the engine, which in turn is very difficult to find because it is covered with a thick layer of emissions-control objects that are designed to prevent the engine from starting, thereby drastically reducing the amount of emissions it can emit. These controls were mandated by the federal government and Ralph Nader, who drives a 1957 Pontiac with racing tires and an enormous engine.

Speaking of engines, you should also decide whether you want a regular engine or a diesel engine (named for its inventor, Rudolf Engine). Lately, a lot of people have been choosing diesel engines. I won’t go into the reasons here, because, frankly, I don’t know what they are. I’m just assuming there must be some really terrific reasons for paying extra money for an engine that gives off a foul odor and is extremely slow.

If you get a diesel, you’ll have to learn to keep your momentum up, the way truck drivers do. If a truck driver starts accelerating when he leaves New York, he does not hit fifty-five miles per hour until he gets to Cleveland, so he will run over anything in his path—fallen trees, passenger cars, small villages—to

avoid losing his momentum.

The only other thing to consider when you buy a car is gas mileage. To make it easy for you to compare, the government requires car manufacturers to provide two mileage estimates and inform you that:

You should pay no attention to one of the estimates, and You shouldn't pay much attention to the other estimate, either.

The manufacturer is also required to tell you that neither estimate applies to California. When you get right down to it, almost nothing applies to California.

You'll Look Radiant

Let's look at the positive side of nuclear war. One big plus is that the Postal Service says it has a plan to deliver the mail after the war, which is considerably more than it is doing now. I, for one, look forward to the day after the missiles hit, when the postal person comes striding up and hands me a Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes letter announcing that I may have already won my Dream Vacation Home, which I will probably need because my regular home will be glowing like a movie marquee.

The Postal Service isn't the only outfit that's all set for a nuclear war. The whole federal government has elaborate plans to keep doing whatever it does. As soon as word arrives that enemy missiles are on the way, all the vital government officials will be whisked by helicopter to a secret mountain hideout guarded by heavily armed men. The guards are there, of course, to shoot nonvital citizens who attempt to get into the hideout, because they would get in the way of the officials who are trying to protect them.

To determine which officials are vital enough to go to the hideout, the government periodically sends out a questionnaire:

TO: All Top Government Officials FROM: The Government SUBJECT: Who Gets to Go to the Secret Nuclear Hideout

Please circle the statement below that best describes how vital you are. Be as sincere as possible.

1. I am extremely vital and should be whisked away, in the first helicopter if possible.
2. I am not all that vital and should be left to die a horrible death with the ordinary citizens.

Using the results of this questionnaire, the government has determined that all of its top officials are vital. This means, of course, that conditions in the hideout will be fairly cramped. But that is one of the prices you pay for being a public servant.

Once the officials are in the hideout, they will immediately swing into emergency action. The President will announce his emergency plan for getting the nation back on its feet, and within minutes the leader of the opposition party will hold an emergency press conference to announce that the President's plan is unfair to either middle-class taxpayers or the poor, depending on which party is the opposition at the time. Meanwhile, Pentagon officials will warn that the surviving Russians are probably stockpiling large rocks with the intention of coming over here on crude rafts and throwing them at us. The Pentagon will recommend that we, too, start stockpiling large rocks; this will lead to an emergency tax increase.

So the government is well prepared to continue governing after a nuclear attack. The only potential fly in the ointment is that the public will probably be too sick or dead to pay taxes or receive mail. So to

make sure that the government still has somebody to govern, it is the patriotic duty of all of us nonvital citizens to come up with our own personal nuclear-survival plans.

I have some experience in this area, because in 1953, when I was a first-grader at the Wampus Elementary School in Armonk, N.Y., we used to practice surviving a nuclear attack. Our technique was to go into the hall and crouch against the walls for about ten minutes. This worked extremely well, and I recommend that all of you develop emergency plans to get to Wampus Elementary as soon as you get word that the missiles are coming.

The best way to get information during a nuclear war is to listen to the Emergency Broadcast Radio Network, which is the organization that broadcasts those tests all the time:

ANNOUNCER: This is a test. For the next thirty seconds, you will hear an irritating, high-pitched squeal. We here at the Emergency Broadcast Network are bored to death, waiting for a real nuclear war, so for the past few years we've been varying the pitch of the squeal just a little bit every time. Our theory is that if we find just the right pitch, it will drive certain species of birds insane with sexual desire. We know we're getting close, because during our last test a Cleveland man carrying one of those enormous portable radios turned up real loud was pecked to death by more than three hundred lusty pigeons.

Frankly, I have always wondered what the Emergency Broadcast Network would broadcast if we actually had a war. I imagine they'd try to keep it upbeat, so people wouldn't get too depressed:

ANNOUNCER: Hi there! You're listening to the Emergency Broadcast Network, so don't touch that dial! It's probably melted anyway, ha ha! Weatherwise, we're expecting afternoon highs of around 6,800 degrees, followed by a cooling trend as a cloud consisting of California and Oregon blots out the sun. In the headlines, the President and key members of Congress met in an emergency breakfast this morning, and a flock of huge mutant radioactive mosquitoes has emerged from the Everglades and is flying toward New Orleans at speeds approaching four hundred miles an hour. We'll have the details in a moment, but first here's consumer affairs reporter Debbi Terri Suzi Dinkle with the first part of her eighteen-part report entitled "Radiation and You." DINKLE: Radiation. You can't see it. You can't smell it. You can't hear it. Yet it's all over the place, and it can kill you or make your hair fall out. In my next report, we'll explore the reasons why.

So we'll be in good shape after the war. And there are advantages I haven't even talked about, such as that the Miss America Pageant will probably be postponed for a couple of years at least.

Caution: Government At Work

I've been seeing these television commercials lately in which Tug McGraw, the noted nutritionist and left-handed relief pitcher, points out in a very cheerful manner that many major soft drinks contain caffeine. Tug is concerned about this, because caffeine is one of the many substances that have been shown to cause laboratory experiments involving rats.

Tug implies we'd all be better off if we drank 7-Up, which does not contain caffeine. He neglects to point out that 7-Up contains sugar, which, as you are no doubt aware, usually causes instant death. But I can't blame Tug for forgetting to warn us about sugar: nobody can keep up with all the things you're not supposed to eat and drink, because scientists come up with new ones all the time.

You young readers should feel very fortunate to live in an era in which we know how dangerous

everything is. When I was a child, people thought everything was safe except communism, smutty books, and tobacco, and a lot of people weren't sure about tobacco. For example, the cigarette manufacturers thought tobacco was fine, and as a public service they ran many advertisements in which attractive persons offered thoughtful scientific arguments in favor of smoking, such as: "Luckies separate the men from the boys ... but not from the girls," and "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should."

But then the U.S. Surgeon General, who is the highest-ranking surgeon in the Army, decided that cigarettes are bad for people, and recommended that the manufacturers put little warnings on cigarette packs. Congressmen from tobacco-growing states offered to help with the wording, so at first the warning was a bit vague:

NOTE—The U.S. Surgeon General thinks that cigarettes could possibly be somewhat less than ideal in terms of your health, but of course he could be wrong.

But over the years the warning has gotten stronger, so now it says:

WARNING—Cigarettes will kill you, you stupid jerk.

These days the government won't even allow cigarette manufacturers to advertise on television. All you see are those public health commercials in which smug ten-year-old girls order you not to smoke, to the point where you want to rush right out and inhale an entire pack of unfiltered Camels just for spite.

Some of you may be wondering why the same government that goes around warning people not to smoke also subsidizes farmers who grow tobacco. The answer is that the government is afraid that if it stops paying the farmers to grow tobacco, they'll start doing something even worse, such as growing opium or beating crippled children with baseball bats. So the government figures the wisest course is to pay them to grow tobacco, then warn people not to smoke it.

The anti-smoking campaign was such a hit that the government decided to investigate the chemicals that make diet soft drinks taste sweet. Researchers wearing white laboratory coats filled a huge vat with Tab and dropped rats into it from a sixty-foot-high catwalk, and they noticed that most of the rats died, some before they even reached the vat. So the government banned the chemicals, but the diet-soda manufacturers immediately developed new ones, which also failed the vat test. At this point, the government realized that the manufacturers could come up with chemicals as fast as it could ban them, and that at the rate things were going the country would face a major rat shortage. So the government decided to let the manufacturers keep their chemicals, but it ordered them to put a little warning on diet-soft-drink containers that says: "Do not put this product in a big vat and drop rats into it from a catwalk."

Nowadays, Warning the Public is a major industry. Every schoolchild knows the hazards associated with cigarettes, caffeine, diet soft drinks, sugar, alcohol, dairy products, nondairy products, electronic games, air, league bowling, and chemicals in general. Any day now, you'll pick up the newspaper and read:

BOSTON—Laboratory scientists at a very major scientific university announced today that everything is terribly, terribly dangerous. Dr. Creston L Pesthole, who headed the research project, said scientists got a bunch of rats and just let them lead normal lives—eating, drinking, sleeping, watching television, making appointments, etc. "They all died within a matter of days," reported Dr. Pesthole. "Most of them had cancer. Some of them also had irregular bowel movements." Dr. Pesthole said the scientists weren't sure what the study proves, but they feel the government ought to do something about it.

Until we get that Final Warning, we'll all have to make do as best we can. I, for one, plan to consume nothing but filtered rainwater. For amusement, I may take a chance on some smutty books.

Taxation Without Reservation

A Taxing Proposal

Here it is again, income tax time, and I imagine many of you readers, especially the ones with smaller brains, are eagerly awaiting my annual tax advice column. Those of you who were fortunate enough to read last year's column no doubt recall that I advised you to cheat, on the grounds that by reducing the amount of money you gave the government, you'd be supporting President Reagan in his program to reduce government spending. I'm proud to report that many of you went all out to support the President, and I'm sure he'd thank you personally if the Secret Service allowed him to visit federal prisons.

But this year we have an entirely new plan, taxwise. This year, President Reagan needs all the money he can get, because he was going over the figures recently with his aides, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, and they noticed that the government was going to be short by something like \$200 billion. "Gosh," chuckled the President. "That's even bigger than those humongous deficits the Democrats used to run up when I went around making fun of them on the radio! Why, for all the difference I've made in the past two years, the nation might just as well have had Ted Kennedy as president! Or a toaster!" Then they all had a good laugh and decided to jack up taxes. The other option, of course, was to cut government spending, but they rejected that because they have already cut spending to the bone in the form of raising it by about \$100

billion a year.

The Democrats are happy as clams about raising taxes. The Democrats believe that if God did not want them to raise taxes, He would not have created the Internal Revenue Service. So finally, after two years of bickering, the President and the Democrats are beginning to see eye-to-eye on the importance of taking money away from the public. Recently, for example, the Democrats supported the President's plan to have a new gasoline tax under which the government will take \$50 billion from motorists such as yourself! This will create jobs. See, if you were allowed to keep the money, you wouldn't create jobs with it. You'd just throw it into the bushes or something. But the government will spend it, thereby creating jobs. In this case, the government will spend the \$50 billion on a major road-repair program, including several million dollars for highway-construction signs that say:

CONGRESSMAN ROBERT "BOB" LUNGER and the United States Department of Transportation are pleased to announce that for the next 86.8 miles there will be federal traffic cones all over the place and hundreds of friends and relatives of a contractor who contributed to the campaign of CONGRESSMAN ROBERT "BOB" LUNGER standing around with red flags directing traffic so casually that they may occasionally wave your car right into an oncoming tractor-trailer filled with propane gas, sorry for the inconvenience, but as CONGRESSMAN ROBERT "BOB" LUNGER pointed out when he flew in by federal helicopter to make a speech taking credit for this \$364.7 million highway-repair project, we cannot allow our nation's highways to deteriorate, especially the ones that provide access to land owned by CONGRESSMAN ROBERT "BOB" LUNGER. Thank you.

But the \$50 billion won't be nearly enough to allow Congress to create jobs on the level it would like. And on top of that, President Reagan needs money to buy additional exploding devices to defend you with. So what can you, the ordinary taxpayer, do to help? Here's what: this year, when you prepare

your income tax return, I want you to lie in the government's favor. I want you to declare more income than you actually received, and I want you to deliberately fail to report large numbers of legitimate deductions.

Some of you will be caught, of course. Some of you may be called in to face IRS audits. You may even be forced to accept a large refund, thus depriving the government of money it could have used for your benefit. These risks are unavoidable, but they can be minimized if a few of us continue to cheat, so the IRS will be less likely to see any particular pattern. I'm willing to volunteer to be one of the few. It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it.

Our Patriotic Booty

I say we all help President Reagan cut government waste. I say we cheat on our income taxes this year. I mean, let's face it: the reason the government wastes hundreds of billions of dollars is that we give it hundreds of billions of dollars. Even an intelligent organization would have trouble spending that much money usefully; the government can't even come close. So it ends up spending money on things like the Office for Micronesian Status Negotiations. I am serious. According to the Congressional Directory, one of the things the government spends your money on is an office devoted to negotiating the status of Micronesia. I'm not saying its employees are goofing off. I'm sure they get up early in the morning, negotiate the status of Micronesia all day, then come home and collapse. I'm just saying that if they haven't been able to get Micronesia straightened out after all these years, then the hell with Micronesia.

Now I know President Reagan has promised to comb through the budget and get rid of everything we don't need except nuclear weapons, but I seriously doubt he'll ever even notice the Office for Micronesian Status Negotiations, let alone the International Pacific Halibut Commission. You didn't know we had a Halibut Commission, did you? Well, we do. It's in Seattle, Washington. When the folks at the Halibut Commission answer the phone, they say: "Good morning, Halibut Commission." They're just as bold as brass about it. No shame whatsoever. They know Ron will never find out about them, and even if he does, some congressman will claim the Halibut Commission is vital and therefore needs the support of all taxpayers, including the ones who live in Kentucky and don't even like halibut. And then some other congressman will say: "Well, if you're going to keep the Halibut Commission, I'm going to keep the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission." Before long, the budget will be bigger than it was when Ron started to cut it.

So let's help Ron out: let's keep the money out of the government's hands altogether. Let's each claim an extra thirty or forty dependents on our tax returns this year. We should view it as our patriotic duty, sort of like buying war bonds.

Another patriotic thing we can do is send Ron lists of government activities we do not want to pay for anymore. The top item on my list is newsletters from congressmen. The way I see it, we taxpayers have an agreement with our congressmen: we give them fifty or sixty thousand dollars a year each and offices and staffs and traveling expenses and cheap haircuts and subsidized dining rooms and other privileges, and in return they go away for two years. If we valued them or their opinions, we never would have voted to send them away in the first place. The last thing we want them to do is clutter up our mailboxes with accounts of their activities:

Dear 647th Congressional District Resident:

I'm just taking a minute out from my hectic schedule down here in the nation's capital to let you know that my schedule down here is very hectic. As a member of the House Joint Plumbing Committee's Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Spigots and Drains, I recently went on a two-week Special Fact-Finding Mission to Rio de Janeiro. Here's the fact I found: In the Southern Hemisphere, water goes down the drain in a clockwise direction, whereas in the Northern Hemisphere, which includes the 647th Congressional District, water goes down the drain in a counter-clockwise direction. Or else it's the other way around. Next month, I plan to go to Argentina to determine which way water goes down the drain there, and whether any of this is related to the spread of International Communism.

All the best,

Congressman Bob Bugpit

Here are some other government activities I don't want to pay for anymore:

National weeks and months, as in National Seedless Prune Week or National Faucet Repair Month. All programs that are administered by people whose titles contain more than three words. Take, for example, the National Science Foundation's Division of Engineering. The Division Director, Physics, could stay, because his title contains just three words. But the Division Director, Division of Polar Programs, would be given two weeks to clear out his or her desk and find useful work. And the Executive Assistant, Planning and Evaluation, Biological, Behavioral and Social Sciences, would be taken out and shot.

Taxpayer's Blues

I am beginning to suspect that many of your big-time Washington national news reporters have coleslaw for brains. My evidence is that for the past few months they have been telling us that the Reagan administration and the Congress are busy reducing government spending. You can't pick up a newspaper or turn on a television newscast without reading or hearing about all these drastic budget cuts. If you were a very stupid person, you might get the impression that the administration and the Congress really are reducing government spending. This, of course, is utterly ridiculous.

The big-time Washington national news reporters evidently have fallen into the obvious trap of believing that politicians actually intend to do what they say they intend to do. Administration officials say they intend to reduce government spending. Most senators say they intend to reduce government spending. And most members of the House of Representatives say they, too, intend to reduce government spending. Only a fool would conclude that they intend to do anything but increase government spending.

And they will increase it. No matter what budget they end up adopting, next year the government will spend more money, and collect more taxes, than it does this year. If you don't believe me, look it up.

What happened is that just before he left office, Jimmy Carter (remember Jimmy Carter?) proposed to increase the federal budget enormously. Then along came Ronald Reagan, the Taxpayer's Friend, the Foe of Big Government. Ron decided to replace Jimmy's enormous budget increase with one that was merely huge. So for the last few months, the politicians have been arguing over whether to increase the budget enormously or just hugely. The news media refer to this process as "Cutting" the budget.

The best way to understand this whole issue is to look at what the government does: it takes money away from some people, keeps a bunch of it, and gives the rest to other people. This means there are two

kinds of people in the United States:

People who pay more to the government than they get from it (taxpayers); People who get more from the government than they pay to it (senators, welfare recipients, cabinet members, defense contractors, government employees, etc.)

So if you are just a plain old ordinary taxpayer, the Great Budget Debate doesn't really concern you. One way or another, the government is going to spend more of your money; the only real issue is who is going to get it.

For the past forty years, the government preferred to use your money for Social Programs. Most of these are aimed at Helping the Poor. Now the problem poor people have is obvious: they don't have enough money. They can't afford food, housing, or medical care. The simple, obvious, efficient way for the government to help them is to give them money so they can buy these things. So that is not how the government does it.

See, if the government merely gave money to poor people, no matter how inefficiently it did it, it would need only one bureaucracy. This would force a lot of people to leave government employment and find honest work. So instead of simply giving money to poor people, the government Administers Programs for them. You've got your food programs. You've got your housing programs. You've got your medical care programs. And so on. This way you get lots of administrators. You also guarantee that poor people remain poor, since they're so busy being administered they don't have time to work. This is fine with the poverty-program administrators; the worst possible thing that could happen to them is for poor people to stop being poor. If that happened, the administrators would have nothing to administer. But fortunately, poverty has continued; in fact, it has been a major growth industry. A lot of people have made very good livings Helping the Poor.

Then along came Ronald Reagan. Ron believes taxpayers are tired of having their money taken away and used for massive, inefficient social programs. He wants to take their money away and use it for massive, inefficient defense programs. So the poverty-program administrators are extremely unhappy, while the defense-program administration are tickled pink. But they have the same problem the social-program administrators had: They have to figure out how to spend the extra billions on defense without actually making the country any safer, because if they really do make it safer, they won't be able to demand more money.

This is tough, because the United States is obviously not directly threatened except by Russian missiles, and we already have enough missiles to blow up the whole world if the Russians ever attack us. So the defense program administrators have come up with a very imaginative plan: they have decided to defend virtually every country in the world other than Russia and its allies. Since most of these countries are hopelessly unstable, we could spend every dollar every taxpayer ever earns to defend them and never come close to succeeding. But the defense-program administrators will certainly be busy.

Right now, for example, they are busily administering the defense of El Salvador, a wretched little country that has suddenly become Vital to Our National Security. According to many people familiar with El Salvador, including a former U.S. ambassador there, the El Salvadoran government spends much of its time shooting El Salvadorans. But our government is sending them arms anyway. I mean, it has to do something with the money. Anything but let taxpayers keep it.

The Media Is The Mess-Up

Perking Up The News

One swell thing about the United States is that newspapers can print whatever stories they want. Another one is that nobody has to read them.

In the United States, the press is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife.” No, wait, that’s the Ten Commandments. Anyway, whatever the Constitution says about the press, we Americans should be darned glad it says it. In the Soviet Union, the press is controlled by the official news agency, Tass, which is always giving out highly amusing versions of world events:

MOSCOW—Tass, the official Soviet news agency, announced today that Soviet troops have entered Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Iran, Albania, Mongolia, Egypt, Norway, and Saskatchewan at the request of liberation movements fighting the western capitalist colonialist Zionist hegemony of running-dog pipe-carrying widow-stabbing baby-eating lackeys of United States imperialism. Tass said the Soviet forces will ride around in nuclear-powered tanks until the various countries are safe from the threat of further oppression.

I imagine the Russian people regard Tass as a major chuckle. I bet they can’t wait to see the paper each day, so they can read what isn’t going on in the rest of the world. In fact, this is the big advantage their system has over ours: since the Russian government always lies, the people can safely assume that the opposite of whatever Tass says is true. Over here, things are more complicated. Our government lies a lot, too, but it can’t force the newspapers to print the lies accurately. From time to time the reporters try to get at the truth, and once in a great while they succeed. So you can be fairly sure you’re reading lies, but, unlike the Russians, you can never really count on it. The only reliable parts of American newspapers are horoscopes, weather forecasts, and economic outlooks, which are all consistently false.

Another problem with American newspapers is that they are positively obsessed with boring issues. Take the Helsinki Accords. You don’t care about the Helsinki Accords, and neither does any other normal person. You can go into every bar and shopping center in America, and you will never once hear anyone say: “Hey, how about them Helsinki Accords?” But newspapers will drone on and on about them at the slightest provocation.

Newspapers are also inordinately fond of writing about statements by presidential press secretaries. No presidential press secretary in the history of the United States has ever said anything newsworthy. I mean, his whole job is to make sure nobody has the vaguest idea what the President is thinking. Nevertheless, every morning dozens of Washington reporters troop into the press secretary’s office and write down everything he says:

PRESS SECRETARY: I wish to correct the accounts that appeared in some newspapers yesterday quoting me as stating that the President’s mood is one of Restrained Optimism. I did not state that. I stated that the President’s mood is one of Guarded Optimism.

REPORTER: Does this represent a change in the President’s mood?

PRESS SECRETARY: It does not represent a change from yesterday. The President has been in a consistently Guardedly Optimistic mood for two days now.

Now at this point, your average citizen would be asleep. But the Washington reporters think this stuff is dynamite. They’re wetting their pants over the President’s mood. They all go roaring out to find some presidential aide, who tells them, in strictest confidence, that despite what the press secretary would

have them believe, the President's mood is actually one of Hopeful Caution.

The next day all the papers run page-one presidential-mood stories long enough to choke Brahma bulls. The reporters read them. The President's aides read them. Everybody else, including the President, turns directly to the sports section.

I think British newspapers have a much better approach. They ignore the official actions of the government, which hasn't done anything in forty years anyway, and focus on something readers can respond to: sex. If you read the headlines in British newspapers, you get the impression that everybody in the government, with the possible exception of the Queen, is a pervert:

EIGHT MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ARRESTED IN BED WITH NEWTS, CALLIOPE

This is the kind of story you can sink your teeth into, so to speak. I'd like to see American newspapers try the same sort of thing on the Reagan administration. Let's face it: the Reagan administration is full of really boring-looking guys, guys who have investment portfolios and matching pen-and-pencil sets. If the newspapers write about what these guys say, the entire country will be asleep in a matter of weeks. People will be nodding off at work, in their cars, at the controls of commercial airliners. The country will collapse. The newspapers should see it as their duty to print stories about high-level sex. They wouldn't even have to lie:

WASHINGTON—AN in-depth examination of the statements of Vice President George Bush reveals he has never publicly denied having spent two weeks in a motel with a lawn tractor.

Imagine seeing that in, say, the New York Times. It would turn the country around. People would start to care about public affairs again.

Junkyard Journalism

I bet you don't read the National Enquirer or any of the other publications sold at supermarket check-out counters. I bet you think these publications are written for people with the intellectual depth of shrubs, people who need detailed, written instructions to put their shoes on correctly.

Well, you're missing a lot. I have taken to reading check-out-counter publications, and I have picked up scads of useful information. For example, a recent Enquirer issue contains a story headlined "Whatever Happened to the Cast of 'The Flying Nun'?" Now here is a vital story most of the so-called big-time newspapers didn't have the guts to print. I mean, while the New York Times and the Washington Post were frittering away their space on stories about Alexander Haig, millions of people all over America were tossing and turning at night, wondering what happened to the cast of "The Flying Nun." All over the country, you'd see little knots of people huddling together and asking each other: "Remember Marge Redmond, who played Sister Jacqueline in 'The Flying Nun'? Whatever happened to her?"

Well, the Enquirer has the answer. Somehow, an Enquirer reporter got Marge's agent to reveal that Marge has appeared in commercials for Tide, Bravo, Betty Crocker, and Ajax. "But," adds the agent, "she is perhaps best known as Sara Tucker of Sara Tucker's Inn on the Cool Whip commercials."

I, for one, was stunned by this revelation. Believe it or not, I had never made the connection between Sister Jacqueline and Sara Tucker. Now, of course, it seems obvious: only an actress skilled enough to perform in "The Flying Nun" would be able to convincingly portray a woman who is so deranged that she puts huge globs of Cool Whip on her desserts at what is supposed to be a good restaurant. But

without the Enquirer I would never have known.

And without the National Examiner, which is like the Enquirer except it uses even smaller words, I would never have found out that

40 VAMPIRES ROAM NORTH AMERICA

This extremely scientific story reports on the research of Dr. Stephen Kaplan, a parapsychologist who founded the Vampire Research Center. I got the impression that Dr. Kaplan is the Vampire Research Center, but the story never makes this clear. It also doesn't say where he got his degree in parapsychology, but we can safely assume it was someplace like Harvard.

Anyway, Dr. Kaplan sent questionnaires to people who requested mail from the center, and forty responded that, yes indeed, they are vampires. In a way, this cheered me up. I mean, I always thought of vampires as evil, uncooperative persons of Central European descent who never even file income tax returns, and here we have forty of them who cheerfully fill out questionnaires for the Vampire Research Center.

Dr. Kaplan, who (surprise!) plans to write a book about vampires, believes there are lots more vampires around. "This probably represents the tip of the vampire iceberg," he told the Examiner, which knows a good metaphor when it hears one. If Dr. Kaplan is correct, I imagine that before long we'll have a federal law requiring large companies to hire a certain percentage of vampires. They have been discriminated against long enough.

Here are some more stories you missed: "Bingo Can Restore the Will to Live On," "\$50 Operation to Restore Virginity....," "A Machine Chewed Up My Legs," "Cancer Ruins Sex," "Dead Man Thanks Killer" and "34 Years in a Haunted House." The last one is about a Massachusetts man and woman whose house is occupied by a ghost that does terrifying things, such as caressing the woman's brow with ghostly fingers when she's reading. By way of proof, the article is accompanied by an actual photograph of the woman reading.

Check-out-counter publications also perform valuable services for their readers. The Examiner has a psychic named Maria who uses her incredible psychic ability to answer baffling questions, such as "Dear Maria: A man I am dating keeps asking me to spank him. What should I do?" To which Maria replies: "Dump him. He's nuts." And some people have the nerve to claim that psychics are frauds.

But the best part of check-out-counter publications is the advertisements. They can make you rich. I, for one, never realized how much money you can make stuffing envelopes, but according to the ads in the Enquirer and the Examiner, the sky is the limit. I mean, people are willing to pay you thousands of dollars a week to stuff envelopes. I figure there must be a catch. For one thing, they never tell you what you have to stuff the envelopes with. Maybe it's poison spiders. That would explain the high pay.

Another ad I saw in the Examiner just intrigues me. The headline says: JESUS IS HERE. Now I am going to quote very carefully from the ad, because otherwise you won't believe me:

Tired of money-mad ministers and physicians? Free, drugless urine cures all ills, increases energy and intelligence and is prescribed in the Bible ... Due to its Ammuno-genetic qualities, urine is the only antidote for nuclear radiation ... If you are not fully convinced that the course heralds the Second Coming of Christ, return it in perfect condition for a full refund ...

The course costs seventy-five dollars; otherwise I would have sent for it already. I am very curious about it, and even more curious about the person who wrote it. I strongly suspect he's one of the people who responded to Dr. Kaplan's vampire survey.

Bring Back Captain Video

If we're ever going to return the United States to its glory days (August 14 and 15, 1955) we're going to have to do something about television. This country has been going downhill ever since they took the Ed Sullivan show off the air, and I say we should bring it back. Some of you may argue that Ed Sullivan is dead, but I don't see how that would affect his judgment or delivery in the slightest. Ed knew talent when he saw it. He discovered such acts as the little dogs that wore dresses and walked around on their hind legs for twenty or thirty minutes while the audience, whose average IQ could not have been higher than eighteen, roared with laughter. That was entertainment. If we had Ed Sullivan back, we wouldn't spend Sunday evenings being depressed by "60 Minutes":

"Good evening, I'm Mike Wallace. Tonight on '60 Minutes' we will explain why the Earth will be covered with a sheet of ice eight miles thick within the next fifteen years; we talk to a government researcher who has discovered that, because of a manufacturing defect, 93 percent of the refrigerators in the United States could explode at the slightest touch; and Andy Rooney will take an amusing look at whisk brooms."

Another show we could do without is "Phil Donahue":

"Hi, and welcome to the Phil Donahue show. My guest today is Wesley Snate, who was convicted in 1979 of charges that he bludgeoned roughly three hundred Los Angeles-area French poodles to death. Mr. Snate has written a very sensitive and moving book about his experience, entitled They Deserved It, and I have invited him on the show so I can ask him many sensitive and insightful questions so our viewing audience will gain a deeper understanding of dog bludgeoners and perhaps buy his book."

The trouble with Phil's approach is that, with all his tiptoeing around, he hardly ever gets around to the really depraved stuff everybody is tuned in to hear. For sheer depravity, Phil's show can't hold a candle to the old "Queen for a Day" show, in which deranged housewives competed to see who had the most miserable life:

FIRST CONTESTANT: My husband had a stroke and he lost his job and our house got repossessed so we had to live under a sheet of plywood in the supermarket parking lot but when it got cold our kids got tuberculosis except the youngest who got kidney disease so we built a fire under there to keep warm but the plywood caught fire and burned up my insulin and all our clothes so I had to wrap the kids in discarded plastic garbage bags which is giving them a rash.

SECOND CONTESTANT: Well, I have cancer, of course, and my husband was hit by a truck which gave him amnesia and he wandered off and I haven't seen him since which would be okay except he had just withdrawn our life savings so we could pay for an operation for little Theodora who has lost the use of her fingers because of rat bites and can't tend little Buford's iron lung when I'm out picking through the garbage for supper.

THIRD CONTESTANT: Well my problem is that ... arghhhhh. (The third contestant keels over and dies.)

Then the audience would applaud each contestant, and the one who got the most applause would win an Amana freezer. It was a terrific show.

We're also going to have to do something about children's television. Today's children watch shows like "Sesame Street," which teaches them that the world is full of friendly interracial adults and cute puppets and letters that form recognizable patterns. This is, of course, a pack of lies. When I was a kid, in New York, my friends and I watched shows like "Captain Video," which taught us that the world was

full of evil forces trying to destroy the earth, which turns out to be absolutely correct.

“Captain Video” consisted of five episodes a week, no one of which cost more than eleven dollars to produce. The episodes always took place in Captain Video’s spaceship. It was an extremely low budget spaceship. For example, Captain Video’s radio was a regular telephone handset, except he held it as if it were a microphone and talked into the listening end.

In a typical episode, Captain Video’s spaceship would be under attack by an evil alien warlord who had a robot named Tobor (get it?). The evil alien would order Tobor, who was played by a stagehand wearing cardboard boxes wrapped in aluminum foil, to attack. “Kill, Tobor, kill,” he would say, and the stagehand would go lumbering toward Captain Video. Just when he got close, Captain Video would come up with this brilliant idea: he would say “Go back, Tobor, go back.” Then the stagehand would start lumbering toward the evil alien. Then there would be some commercials. Then the alien would say “Kill, Tobor, kill,” again, and the stagehand would start toward Captain Video again, and Captain Video would say “Go back, Tobor, go back” again, and there would be more commercials, and before you knew it the half hour had just flown by. Kids today don’t get that kind of drama.

They also don’t get Meaningful Social Lessons, the kind we got from shows about cowboys and Indians. These shows taught us that not all Indians were savage killers. For example, Tonto was a good Indian. As I recall, all the others were savage killers.

In Depth, But Shallowly

If you want to take your mind off the troubles of the real world, you should watch local TV news shows. I know of no better way to escape reality except perhaps heavy drinking.

Local TV news programs have given a whole new definition to the word news. To most people, news means information about events that affect a lot of people. On local TV news shows, news means anything that you can take a picture of, especially if a local TV News Personality can stand in front of it. This is why they are so fond of car accidents, burning buildings, and crowds: these are good for standing in front of. On the other hand, local TV news shows tend to avoid stories about things that local TV News Personalities cannot stand in front of, such as budgets and taxes and the economy. If you want to get a local TV news show to do a story on the budget, your best bet is to involve it in a car crash.

I travel around the country a lot, and as far as I can tell, virtually all local TV news shows follow the same format. First you hear some exciting music, the kind you hear in space movies, while the screen shows local TV News Personalities standing in front of various News Events. Then you hear the announcer:

ANNOUNCER: From the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News Studios, this is the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News, featuring Anchorman Wilson Westbrook, Co-Anchorman Stella Snape, Minority-Group Member James Edwards, Genial Sports Personality Jim Johnson, Humorous Weatherperson Dr. Reed Stevens, and Norm Perkins on drums. And now, here’s Wilson Westbrook.

WESTBROOK: Good evening. Tonight from the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness news studios we have actual color film of a burning building, actual color film of two cars after they ran into each other, actual color film of the front of a building in which one person shot another person, actual color film of another burning building, and special reports on roller-skating and child abuse. But for the big story tonight, we go to City Hall, where On-the-Spot reporter Reese Kernel is standing live.

KERNEL: I am standing here live in front of City Hall being televised by the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News minicam with Mayor Bryce Hallbread.

MAYOR: That's "Hallwood." KERNEL: What?

MAYOR: My name is "Hallwood." You said "Hallbread." KERNEL: Look, Hallbread, do you want to be on the news or don't you?

MAYOR: Yes, of course, it's just that my name is ...

KERNEL: Listen, this is the top-rated news show in the three-county area, and if you think I have time to memorize every stupid detail, you'd better think again.

MAYOR: I'm sorry. "Hallbread" is fine, really.

KERNEL: Thank you, Mayor Hallbread. And now back to Wilson Westbrook in the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News Studios.

WESTBROOK: Thank you, Reese; keep us posted if anything further develops on that important story. And now, as I promised earlier, we have actual color film of various objects that either burned or crashed, which we will project on the screen behind me while I talk about them. Here is a building on fire. Here is another building on fire. Here is a car crash. This film was shot years ago, but you can safely assume that objects just like these crashed or burned in the three-county area today. And now we go to my Co-Anchormperson, Stella Snape, for a Special Report on her exhaustive three-week investigation into the problem of child abuse in the three-county area. Well, Stella, what did you find?

SNAPE: Wilson, I found that Child abuse is very sad. What happens is that people abuse children. It's just awful. Here you see some actual color film of me standing in front of a house. Most of your child abuse occurs in houses. Note that I am wearing subdued colors.

WESTBROOK (reading from a Script): Are any efforts under way here in the three-county area to combat child abuse?

SNAPE: YeS.

WESTBROOK: Thank you, Stella, for that informative report. On the lighter side, On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness Reporter Terri Tompkins has prepared a three-part series on roller-skating in the three-county area.

TOMPKINS: Roller-skating has become a major craze in California and the three-county area, as you can see by this actual color film of me on roller skates outside the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News Studio. This certainly is a fun craze. Tomorrow, in Part Two of this series, we'll see actual color film of me falling down. On Wednesday we'll see me getting up.

WESTBROOK: We'll look forward to those reports. Our next story is from Minority-Group Reporter James Edwards, who, as he has for the last 324

consecutive broadcasts, spent the day in the minority-group sector of the three-county area finding out what minorities think.

EDWARDS: Wilson, I'm standing in front of a crowd of minority-group members, and as you can see, their mood is troubled. (The crowd smiles and waves at the camera.)

WESTBROOK: Good report, James. Well, we certainly had a sunny day here in the three-county area, didn't we, Humorous Weatherperson Dr. Reed Stevens?

STEVENS: Ha ha. We sure did, though I'm certainly troubled by that very troubling report Stella did on child abuse. But we should see continued warm weather through Wednesday. Here are a bunch of charts showing the relative humidity and stuff like that. Ha ha.

WESTBROOK: Ha ha. Well, things weren't nearly as bright on the sports scene, were they, Genial

Sports Personality Jim Johnson? JOHNSON: No, Wilson, they certainly weren't. The Three-County Community College Cutlasses lost their fourth consecutive game today. Here you see actual color footage of me watching the game from the sidelines. The disgust is evident on my face. I intended to have actual color film of me interviewing the coach after the game, but the team bus crashed and everyone was killed.

WESTBROOK: Thank you, Jim. And now, here is Basil Holp, the General Manager of KUSP-TV, to present an Editorial Viewpoint: HOLP: The management of KUSP-TV firmly believes that something ought to be done about earthquakes. From time to time we read in the papers that an earthquake has hit some wretched little country and knocked houses down and killed people. This should not be allowed to continue. Maybe we should have a tax or something. What the heck, we can afford it. The management of KUSP-TV is rolling in money.

ANNOUNCER: The preceding was the opinion of the management of KUSP-TV. People with opposing points of view are probably in the vast majority.

WESTBROOK: Well, that wraps up tonight's version of the On-the-Spot Action Eyewitness News. Tune in tonight to see essentially the same stories.

Radio's Air Heads

If you don't listen to radio talk shows, you really should, because it gives you a chance to reassure yourself that a great many people out there are much stupider than you are. Here's how these shows go:

HOST: Hi, this is "You Get to Talk on the Actual Radio," the show where You Make a Difference. I'm your host, Hubert Spankle, going under the radio name David Windsor Castle, which sounds better. Today I thought we'd talk about President Reagan's economic plan. What do you think about it? Let's go to the phones and find out. Hello, you're on the air.

CALLER: Hello, David?

HOST: This is David. Go ahead.

CALLER: Am I on the radio now?

HOST: Yes, you are. Go ahead.

CALLER: Go ahead and talk?

HOST: Yes. Go right ahead and talk.

CALLER: I'm so nervous.

HOST: Don't be nervous. Go right ahead and talk. Right now. Just talk.

CALLER: Well, I just wanted to tell you what happened to my husband. He was riding the lawn mower, which we just got at Sears—can I say Sears?—well, let's just say we just got it at a major department store, and believe me it wasn't cheap, and he was driving it near the kitchen window, and all of a sudden he crashed right through the septic tank, and he disappeared right into the ground, and the firemen had to come and get him out, and I spent three hours going over the lawn tractor with Lysol—can I say Lysol?—and it still doesn't smell what you'd call attractive, not to mention my husband, and I think they ought to make those septic tanks stronger, because a lot of people have lawn tractors, and ...

HOST: I certainly hear what you're saying. What do you think of President Reagan's economic plan?

CALLER: President Reagan's what?

HOST: His economic plan.

CALLER: Well, I really haven't been too involved in it, because we live in the suburbs, which is why we got the lawn tractor, but we had no idea that our septic tank ... HOST: Thanks for your views. Let's see how some of our other listeners feel about President Reagan's economic plan. Hello, you're on the air.

CALLER: Hello, Frank?

HOST: No, this is David Windsor Castle, and you're on "You Get to Talk on the Actual Radio." What's on your mind?

CALLER: What's on my mind is I'm trying to get hold of Frank, because I just found out that Denise ...

HOST: Excuse me, but this is a radio show, and there is no Frank here. CALLER: Well, when he gets there you better tell him that Denise found out about what's been going on at the Jolly Goat Motel. Somebody sent her pictures of Frank, Louella, Preston, and the trained snakes, and the last I heard Denise was buying a gun, so he'd better ...

HOST: Okay, let's see if any of our other listeners have anything to add about President Reagan's economic plan. Hello, you're on the air.

CALLER: Yeah, I'm calling about that lady with the septic tank. It just so happens I make septic tanks, and there's no way u can make one collapse with just a lawn tractor unless the guy who's riding it weighs about six hundred pounds. Why didn't you ask her how much her husband weighs? I bet he's a real lard bucket. You see these guys out on their lawn tractors, flab hanging down almost to the ground, and it makes you want to puke.

HOST: Let's go to another caller. You're on the air.

CALLER: Hi. I'd like to talk about President Reagan's economic plan.

HOST: Thank God.

CALLER: It seems to me that people are being too quick to criticize the President's plan, before it has had a chance to ... Oh no!

(In the background is the sound of a door lock being shot open with a .35 7 magnum.)

CALLER: Denise!

(More shots, screams)

HOST: Well, that concludes today's version of "You Get to Talk on the Actual Radio." Tune in tomorrow, when we'll explore the situation in the Middle East.

What To Ban On Video

I keep reading these stories about these towns that want to ban video arcade games, as if these games were part of the International Communist Conspiracy. You know:

POND SCUM, ARKANSAS—The town council in this small pig-farming community voted tonight to ban video arcade games on the grounds that they are a threat to the moral fiber of the town's youth. "The youths in this town barely got any moral fiber left to speak of, and I blame these here video games," charged Council President Lionel B. Sparge. "When I was a youth, Pond Scum didn't have no video games, and we found plenty to do. For example, we'd stand around and spit.

I agree with the people who want to ban video games. These games definitely destroy your moral

fiber. At least they destroy my moral fiber. I have this video game that I play all the time on my personal home computer, which I keep back in a back bedroom. I don't allow my two-year-old son to get near it, because it might destroy his moral fiber, and also he tends to pull the plug right when I'm in an important phase of my game, such as when the aliens materialize out of hyperspace.

So what has happened is that my son has been going through all these critical stages of growth and development out in the living room, and I've missed most of it. Not that I mind all that much, really, since if you want to participate in my son's growth and development you have to read him these profoundly dull children's books with names like Let's Go to a Condiments Factory and Tommy the Toad Vacuums the Carpet. So I've left his development pretty much in the hands of my wife, with instructions that she should call me if he reaches any new developmental stages so I can come out to the living room and watch him for a few minutes.

And I'm not the only one whose moral fiber is being destroyed. It is a proven scientific fact that video games are also corrupting American youth. In a recent experiment, scientific researchers exposed a group of teenaged boys to an arcade game, and found that all of them had unclean sexual thoughts. Of course, the researchers got the same result when they exposed the boys to coleslaw, an alpaca sweater, and "The MacNeil-Lehrer Report," but that is beside the point. The point is that we should all write letters to our elected officials and urge them to ban video games.

And while they're at it, they should also ban golf. Golf is similar to video games in that it is a monumentally useless activity that people become obsessed with and waste a lot of money on, but it has the added drawback of encouraging people to wear really stupid clothing, such as pants that can be seen with the naked eye from other galaxies. I strongly suspect that if our nation's youth continue to play video games, many of them will eventually graduate to golf, so I say let's kill two birds with one stone and ban them both.

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "How, in a free country such as this, can we ban video games and golf, yet continue to permit stamp-collecting?" You're absolutely right, and I'm only sorry I didn't think of it myself. It would be hard to conceive of an activity more useless than stamp-collecting, except maybe water-skiing or the Rose Bowl parade, so I suppose these things will have to be banned too, along with fraternal organizations, music, tropical fish, racquetball, and any activity whatsoever involving Ed McMahon. Also, anybody attempting to operate a beauty pageant should be shot without trial.

Of course, this is only a partial list of the useless, fiber-destroying activities that should be banned, and I'm sure you'll think of plenty more when you write to your elected officials. The important thing isn't so much what you want to ban; it's the fact that you participate in the banning process. That's what democracy is all about.

Subtract Those Ads

I strongly suspect that the people who appear in television commercials are imported from the planet Jupiter. I can think of no other way to explain their behavior. Take, for example, the commercials for Coca-Cola in which an extremely interracial group of people gathers on a hillside, holding candles, and sings:

I'd like to teach the world to sing In perfect har-mo-nee I'd like to buy the world a Coke And keep it

com-pa-nee.

This is not the way native Earth people behave. Native Earth people do not gather interracially on hillsides for any purpose other than to watch motorcyclists leap over cars. And native Earth people, at least the ones I know, see no connection whatsoever between Coca-Cola and world harmony. In fact, I'm willing to bet statistics would show that Coca-Cola sales and world tension have both been increasing steadily for the past thirty years or so.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not saying Coca-Cola causes world tension. I happen to be very fond of Coca-Cola. It tastes fine, and it makes an excellent industrial cleanser. I'm just saying the people in Coca-Cola's commercials either are deranged or come from another planet.

And it's not just Coca-Cola commercials. You can watch commercials for days and never see anything approaching normal human behavior. I think that, in the interest of honesty, the government ought to pass a law requiring companies to use regular Earth people in their commercials. Here's how they would behave:

Commercials For Men's Hair Darkeners

(The commercial opens with a white-haired man and a dark-haired man standing in an office.)

WHITE-HAIRED MAN: I'M worried that the boss won't give me that Big Promotion.

DARK-HAIRED MAN: That's because you look too old. Here, take this hair-darkening stuff home and smear it in your hair every night.

WHITE-HAIRED MAN: Thanks a million. I'll try it.

(The scene shifts to the boss's office, several weeks later. The formerly white-haired man now has extremely dark, glossy hair. He looks as though he has a wet cat on his head.)

BOSS: I called you in here to tell you I've decided to give you ... My God, what's that on your head?

FORMERLY WHITE-HAIRED MAN: My hair. I've been smearing stuff on it every night.

BOSS: It looks like a wet cat.

FORMERLY WHITE-HAIRED MAN: What did you want to see me about? Boss: Uh, nothing. On your way out, ask my secretary to send in somebody who looks distinguished.

Commercials For Headache Remedies

(A woman is sitting at a table on which are four bowls. She is facing many bright lights. From behind the lights, a faceless man is talking to her.)

FACELESS MAN: Mrs. Jones, do you have a headache?

WOMAN: Yes, and those lights aren't helping one bit.

FACELESS MAN: Which of these leading pain relievers do you think has the most laboratory-proven pain-killing ingredient?

WOMAN: You mean aspirin, right? Why do you guys always dream up these elaborate names for aspirin? Why don't you just call it aspirin? And why are you hiding behind those lights?

FACELESS MAN: Look, this leading brand has only 450 milligrams of laboratory-proven pain-killing ingredient. And this brand has only 450 milligrams. And this brand has only ...

WOMAN: Shut up! Just shut up! Isn't it bad enough that I have a headache? Do I also have to sit here in front of a bunch of hot lights and listen to some idiot blither about milligrams? I'm going to go home and take some aspirin.

Commercials For Smoker's Tooth Polish

(Two people are standing at a cocktail party, smoking cigarettes.)

FIRST SMOKER: Say, I have an idea: Why don't you exhale some cigarette smoke through this white handkerchief?

SECOND SMOKER: That sounds like a swell idea. (He blows some smoke through the handkerchief.)

FIRST SMOKER: Look at that brown glop. Imagine what that's doing to your teeth.

SECOND SMOKER: My teeth? What about my lungs, for God's sake? I've got to quit.

(The first smoker coughs violently and spits something disgusting into the handkerchief.)

Commercials For Stove-Top Stuffing

(A woman and her husband are shopping in a supermarket. A man with a microphone approaches them.)

MAN WITH MICROPHONE: Mrs. Brown, which do you think your husband would rather have for dinner: potatoes or Stove-Top Stuffing?

WOMAN: I don't see where that's any of your business.

MAN WITH MICROPHONE: Well, Mr. Brown?

HUSBAND: Geez, I don't know. Stove-Top Stuffing, I guess.

MAN WITH MICROPHONE: Well, Mrs. Brown, what do you think of that?

WOMAN: I think that if my husband is going to go around telling perfect strangers that he doesn't like the food I cook, then he can cook his own damn food.

Commercials For Wisk

(Two men are talking at a party, as their wives listen.)

FIRST MAN: I'm feeling really wrung out lately.

SECOND MAN (jeeringly): That's because you've got ring around the collar. Ha ha.

(The first man shakes his head sadly, then walks away.)

SECOND MAN: What's with him?

SECOND MAN'S WIFE: His mother just died, you idiot.

Low Finance

A Matter Of Life And Debt

First of all, let me assure you that we are not in a depression. The key economic indicator of a depression is that you suddenly start seeing a lot of primitive black-and-white newsreel films of people wearing old-fashioned hats and overcoats and forming lines in the streets of major cities to obtain bread. So far, all the lines of people have been videotaped in color, which is the sign of a stable economy. Also, the people have not been lining up for bread. They have been lining up for cheese, which the government has several million tons of.

Some of you are no doubt wondering why the government has so much cheese. It's because of the Strategic Dairy Products Act, which was passed in 1947 to guarantee that the nation never becomes dependent on some unreliable foreign power, such as France, for its cheese supply. So for years the government has been paying huge sums of money to dairy farmers for cheese that winds up sitting in government warehouses as a permanent reminder to the cheese-making nations of the world that we are a strong, self-reliant people.

The problem is that after a few years the cheese hardens to the consistency of formica, and the government has to get rid of it. The original plan, developed by Alexander Haig, was to drop the cheese from Air Force bombers onto rebel troops in El Salvador, but military analysts pointed out that the rebels might be able to melt it down and eat it, so the government decided instead to give it to poor people here in the United States. But this should not be taken as a sign that we are in a depression.

What we are in is a recession. The key economic indicator of a recession is that government economists go around announcing that the economy is improving. The truth, of course, is that government economists don't have the slightest notion what the economy is doing; if they did, they would have decent jobs. But they keep trying. Every few days they come out with some economic statistic and attempt to explain it, using charts and pointers, to the news media:

WASHINGTON—The U.S. Treasury's Bureau of Calculations announced today that the rate of increase of the Average Price of Things that People Buy So They Can Make Them into Other Things and Sell Them for More Money Than They Paid for Them was slightly lower than might otherwise have been expected. "It is a very, very hopeful sign," said government economist Elwood Welt, once he located the room where the press conference was held. "To be perfectly frank, we had feared that the rate of increase would be something like 6.67 percent, when in fact it was 6.53 percent, so we here at the Bureau of Calculations are extremely pleased and hopeful and will probably take the rest of the day off.

Government economists are always hopeful, for two reasons:

1. They have jobs.
2. If they aren't hopeful, the President will fire them.

So government economists go around with big smiles on their faces all the time. For the past thirty years, presidents increased spending deficits like clockwork, and the government economists smiled. Then Ronald Reagan said he was against big spending and deficits, and the government economists smiled. Now it turns out that spending and deficits are still going up, and the government economists are still smiling. Phyllis George would be a good government economist.

The big question, of course, is, What can we, as citizens, do for the government during the recession? Well, for one thing, it would be a big help if we would stop being unemployed in such large numbers. A lot of us have managed to get ourselves unemployed lately, and some of us are guilty of extremely high interest rates. As a result, we are making it very difficult for government economists to remain hopeful. So far they have managed to pull it off, but it's only a matter of time before they start to feel depressed:

WASHINGTON—The U.S. Treasury’s Bureau of Calculations announced today that the nation’s economy is going to hell in a hand basket and probably will never get better. “I’m so sorry, but I just can’t feel hopeful about anything anymore,” said government economist Elwood Welt, clutching a fifty-pound block of government surplus cheese. “We’ve tried everything. We’ve tried coming up with new statistics, and more recently, we’ve started using more color charts, but the truth is we are all very depressed about the economy and will probably take the rest of the day off.”

Full-Service Bankruptcy

What makes international finance so fascinating is that, thanks to the miracle of modern electronic banking, you are linked financially with billions of people you don’t even know, which means the actions of a deranged scum-bucket politician in some country you never even heard of could cause you to lose your home and your life’s savings and wind up living in a cardboard refrigerator carton and licking discarded candy wrappers for nourishment. This has caused some people to be concerned about their banks. The banking industry has responded with reassuring television commercials, wherein a man wearing a reassuring suit says:

“We’re the nation’s banks, and we’re not the least bit worried about anything, which is why we’re spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to let you know that nobody is worried about anything. Here, for example, is an extremely solid bank. Just look at this momma.” (Here he kicks the bank.) “You’re talking solid masonry construction. And on top of that, your deposits are protected by the full faith and credit of the United States Government, the same organization that gave so many of you shots for swine flu. This means that if anything goes wrong with the banking system, your elected representatives will fly back from Switzerland or France or wherever they are, and they’ll hold press conferences and call each other names, and eventually they’re bound to come up with a nifty plan to get your money back. So there’s nothing to worry about, nothing at all. Forget we even brought it up. Thank you.”

To illustrate how you are connected to international finance, let’s look at how the banking system works. First, people like yourself deposit money in banks. The banks put the money in their safes, where the amounts gradually increase thanks to the sound banking practice of never lending money to people like yourself. Eventually the bankers at the smaller banks get nervous about having all that money around, so they transfer it to gigantic international banks in New York, in return for which they receive very attractive desk calendars. At this point, the gigantic international bankers are sitting around, wondering what to do with the money, when officials of a country such as Poland pull up in a taxi, race into the bank without paying the driver, and apply for a loan:

BANKERS: And just how much money did you have in mind?

POLISH OFFICIALS: We were thinking in terms of one million trillion dollars in small bills.

BANKERS: That’s a great deal of money for us to lend to people who have horribly mismanaged their country’s economy for years and whose authority depends on the armed oppression of the Soviet Union. What assurance do we have that you can repay us?

POLISH OFFICIALS: We’re willing to sign our names to several pieces of paper.

BANKERS: Would tens and twenties be okay?

The Polish officials flee back to Poland with the money, all of which immediately disappears into the black market in exchange for Elton John records. After maybe five years, the international bank sends

Poland a letter:

Dear Poland:

This is just a friendly note to remind you that, according to our records, you now have a past due balance of \$832,674,709,908,772.54. Although we value you as a customer, continued tardiness in payment on your part could force us to precipitate an international banking crisis.

Warmest regards,

Your Gigantic Full-service International Bank

So the Poland officials telephone the bank collect and, shouting to be heard over the Elton John record playing in the background, claim the check is in the mail.

Over the years, this process has been repeated with so many countries that virtually all the money originally deposited in U.S. banks is now in the hands of foreign street vendors, which is why your local bank is willing to give you calculators and toasters if you'll deposit more money. This can't go on, of course. Already, some banks have taken drastic corrective action in the form of lending more money to foreign countries so they can make their interest payments. But this may not be enough; we may soon see a day when the United States Government, fed up with the incredible stupidity of the international bankers, finally steps in and gives them enormous amounts of money taken from taxpayers, which is only fair, because the taxpayers were the ones who got the toasters.

The Net May Be Gross

The reason that you are not extremely wealthy, of course, is that you do not carefully keep track of your finances. John D. Rockefeller carefully kept track of his finances, and he ended up with so much money that he started giving it away in bales, and many of his offspring became governors. For a while there, we barely had enough states for Rockefellers to be governors of. So if you want your offspring to be governors, you should drive down to your local office-supplies store and get yourself a little accountant-style notebook and immediately start writing down your expenses:

Accountant-style Notebook—\$7.97

Gas Used to Get to Store for Accountant-style Notebook—\$1.14

Depreciation on Car—\$4.34

Parking—\$0.25

Beef Jerky Purchased at Convenience Store on Way Home—\$0.49

Damage to Fender Caused by Uninsured Motorist While Car Was in Convenience Store Parking Lot—\$385.62

Knife Wound Suffered in Argument—\$1,830.88

Legal Fees—\$12,757.21

See? You're on your way to riches. Not only do you know exactly where your money is going, but all these items are tax-deductible, provided you were talking to your lawyer when you ate the beef jerky.

When you get home, you should sit down and try to figure out what your major assets are. There are two kinds of assets: "liquid" assets are the ones you have already spent, and "solid" assets are the ones you still have. In our household, our major asset is roughly \$4,000 worth of pennies under the furniture. These pennies are a fairly solid asset, because to get them we would have to crawl around and stuff them into those little wrappers you get at the bank, and the bank probably wouldn't accept them

anyway, because of the high floor-lint content. Our other major solid assets are:

\$42.13 worth of U.S. postage stamps that we bought only recently but cannot use because the Postal Commission raises the rate every two or three days. \$3,024.56 worth of aquarium supplies, from when my wife and I went through our Tropical Fish Phase, which culminated in our discovery that they are called “tropical” fish because they can survive only in the tropics, which we do not live in. A pure-bred German shepherd dog for which we paid \$300, or roughly \$50 per brain cell. \$80 worth of rolls of undeveloped photographic film, which we don’t want to have developed because we can’t remember whether they contain any memorable pictures, but which we don’t want to throw away in case they contain any memorable pictures. We’ve had these rolls for years now, and we often take them off the shelf and settle down in front of a crackling fire to look at them and reminisce. “Remember this roll of film?” we say. \$200 worth of random keys.

Your only remaining financial responsibility is to balance your checkbook. Every month, you send out a batch of checks to various people, and every month the bank gets hold of these checks somehow, smears them with bank-style graffiti, and sends them back to you. The obvious question, of course, is, What are you supposed to do with them? My wife ignores them. She merely tosses the bank envelope, unopened, into a drawer, and walks away, laughing a carefree laugh. So far, she has gotten away with it, but I’m fairly sure that someday the Bank Inspector will show up with guns and attack dogs and make her stay in her room until she balances her checkbook. So I always balance mine. Here’s the system I use:

1. On a large, flat surface, such as a washing machine or floor, arrange all the checks in a tasteful, numerical pattern.
2. With a sharp pencil, put little check marks next to all the numbers on the bank statement and all the numbers in your checkbook.

That’s all there is to it. You could avoid even this much work if you could prevent the bank from getting hold of your checks and sending them back to you. One way to do this would be to write, in large letters at the top of each check, the words DO NOT LET THE BANK GET HOLD OF THIS CHECK. If everybody did this, we would all save thousands of hours we now waste balancing checkbooks, and we would probably have come up with a cure for the common cold by now.

Anti-Insurance Policy

I have been under almost constant attack by life-insurance salesmen for most of my adult life. I was first attacked when I was in college, by this guy named Charlie. One day he was a normal college student, no different from the rest of us, and the next day he was a life-insurance salesman. It was as if the Moonies had got him. All of a sudden, he was wearing wing-tipped shoes and acting very concerned about my Financial Security. At the time, my idea of Financial Security was to have enough money to buy a pizza with extra cheese, but Charlie thought I should have at least six hundred thousand dollars’ worth of life insurance, so that when I died my dependents would be rich.

To be honest, I didn’t care what happened to my dependents, because I didn’t have any. But Charlie was obsessed with my dependents: he’d sit in my room, hour after hour, and fret about them, until finally, to ease his mind, I bought some life insurance, and he went away. As soon as I was safely in another state, I cashed in my insurance and used the money to go sailing in the Virgin Islands with some

friends who had not had the foresight to buy life insurance for their dependents, and thus had a more difficult time coming up with the money. So my life insurance turned out to be a good investment.

All life-insurance salesmen believe that no matter who you are, or what your financial situation is, you need more insurance. So unless you wear elaborate disguises and sleep in old refrigerator cartons, sooner or later a life-insurance salesman will come to your home, calling you by your first name a lot and subtly hinting that you're going to die. Suppose your name is John. Here's how your insurance salesman will attack you:

INSURANCE SALESMAN: John, I just stopped by to chat about your Financial Security. John, our records indicate that you're going to die someday and leave your dependents penniless and they'll end up out on the street eating garbage in the cold. I just thought we should chat about that, John. YOU: Well, I certainly appreciate it, but I already have eight million dollars' worth of life insurance, and my only dependents are these tropical fish.

INSURANCE SALESMAN: Frankly, John, in these inflationary times, eight million dollars just isn't going to buy all that much tropical-fish food. And I'm not even talking about the cost of fish-tank filters, John. YOU: But they're just fish, for God's sake. I just can't see buying more insurance for fish. But thanks anyway.

INSURANCE SALESMAN: John, not long ago I was sitting in a room just like this, talking with a man, just like you, who thought he didn't need more insurance. I left his house, and the next day he was struck by lightning and run over by a bulldozer and his body was eaten by ants, and within a matter of days his fish had all developed fin rot, all because he didn't think he needed more insurance. So, John, if I were to leave your house tonight and something like that were to happen to you, I'd never forgive myself. So I'll just unroll my sleeping bag here and cook some freeze-dried food, of which I have a three-week supply, while you think about it, John. And another thing, John. John John John John John.

Finally, of course, you will buy insurance. As the salesman leaves, he will put a secret mark on the door to alert other insurance salesmen that yours is a good house to stop at, and soon they will be at your door in droves. If you want them to go away, either you have to shoot them, which is illegal in some states and which doesn't always work anyway, or you have to buy more insurance.

So the only real solution to the problem is to convince the salesman that you are a bad risk. Put a sign outside your house that says: CAUTION: RADIOACTIVE RABID LEPROSY VICTIM WITH SMALLPOX. This won't stop a really successful salesman from entering, but it will slow him down. When he knocks on the door, hide in the bedroom and have a friend, wearing a surgical mask, escort him into the living room. Then follow this script:

INSURANCE SALESMAN: Is John home?

YOUR FRIEND: Yes, but I think he's dead. Let me check. John? Are you dead? YOU: Not yet. Who is it?

YOUR FRIEND: A visitor. YOU: Oh, goody. Send him in. I haven't had a visitor since poor old Wesley Bumpers came to see me last week. Speaking of whom, I wish you'd get him out of here. He's beginning to spoil.

INSURANCE SALESMAN: Perhaps I've picked a bad time. YOU: Not at all. Come on in. (Here you cough violently, and toss a bucket of giblets into the living room.)

INSURANCE SALESMAN: I just realized I'm late for an important appointment in Belgium. I'll stop by later. (Holding his breath, he barges out the door.)

If this approach doesn't work, you should try vicious dogs.

Build Your Own Mess

You young couples out there who dream of having your own houses someday have probably read a lot of depressing articles about housing costs. You know:

WASHINGTON—The American Institute of People who Keep Track of These Things released a study today showing that by 1990 the average single-family house will cost eleven million dollars, not counting drapes, and that the only people who will be able to afford houses will be members of the Saudi Arabian royal family and major drug dealers.

Well, cheer up, young couples: You can have your own house. All you need is a large sum of money. The best source of money is your parents. You can get almost anything you want from your parents, provided you're not afraid to whine. I remember when I was twelve and really needed a BB gun. My parents didn't want me to have one, on the grounds I might shoot my brother. But I put together a string of about thirty-five days during which I was without question the most sniveling, obnoxious child in the entire world. It got to the point where, to preserve their sanity, my parents had to either give me a BB gun or hire someone to kidnap me. They eventually elected to buy me a BB gun, mainly because it was cheaper. I was so grateful I didn't shoot my brother for three or four days.

Anyway, your parents probably have a bunch of money rotting away in things like savings accounts and investments and pensions and insurance and retirement homes. So what you should do is follow your parents everywhere—to the supermarket, to work, to parties—tugging at their sleeves and saying “I wanna house.” Sooner or later, because they love you, they'll give you some money. Or flee to Brazil.

If you can't get money from your parents, you may be able to get some from a bank. The trouble is that banks prefer to give money to people who already have a lot of it. If you walk into a bank looking like a poverty-stricken young couple whose own parents won't give them money, the loan officer will drum his fingers impatiently and try to get you out of his office so he can get back to increasing the prime rate. So you want to look wealthy. Wear tuxedos and evening gowns, and act as though you could not care less whether you get any money:

LOAN OFFICER: May I help you? YOU: Yes. We'd like to grab a quick bite of pheasant while Jacques fuels the Mercedes. Could we have a table please?

LOAN OFFICER: I'm sorry, but this is a bank. YOU: A bank? How very quaint. Is it for sale? I should think it would be gobs of fun to have a cozy little bank like this. Our others are so huge.

LOAN OFFICER: Uh, no, I'm afraid it's not for sale. But I could give you a loan. Would \$300,000 do? YOU: Thanks awfully, but we're all set for today.

LOAN OFFICER: How about \$450,000? Please, take it. We can sign the papers later.

If you can't get money from your parents or a bank, you can build your own house. Anybody can build a house. My father is a Presbyterian minister who knows only the basics of carpentry, and he built the house I grew up in. The only problems are that the house took him about thirty-five years to finish and in many ways looks like it was built by a Presbyterian minister who knows only the basics of carpentry. Also some of the windows have BB-gun holes.

Here is how to build a house:

1. Find some land. You can find empty land all over the place, particularly along interstate highways. Pick out a nice batch of land and watch it for a few days: If nobody seems to be doing anything with it, you can assume it's okay for you to build a house there.

2. Dig a ditch in the shape of the house. If you run into a lot of rocks and stuff, forget the ditch, You're going to put a house on top of it anyway, so nobody will know the difference.

3. Get several thousand boards at a lumberyard and nail them together so they form a house. (NOTE: Do not do this at the lumberyard.)

If you don't want to go to all this trouble, you can just put up a crude hut made of animal skins or mud and twigs. No matter what you build, you'll be able to sell it for hundreds of thousands of dollars in a few years, when you need the money to get your children to stop following you around saying "I wanna house."

God Needs The Money

Here are three types of people you should not trust:

People who tell you God told them to tell you to send them money. You know the guys I mean. They get on television and say: "God told me He wants you to send me some money, say \$100, or even just \$10, if that's all you can afford, but in all honesty I must point out that God is less likely to give you some horrible disease if your gift is in the \$100 range."

The theory here seems to be that God talks only to the guys on television. I always thought that if God needed money all that badly, He would get in touch with us directly.

My wife gets a lot of letters from people who say God told them to tell her to send them money. She got a great one recently from Brother Leroy Jenkins, who is evidently one of the people God goes to when He needs a lot of money. Leroy is very straightforward:

The Lord spoke to me to have you send a one-time large gift. Will you send me \$1,000, or \$500, or \$100, or even \$5,000 ... If you are not able to send all of the \$1,000, \$500, \$100 or \$5,000 now, send as much as you can, and make a vow to the Lord that you will send an offering of \$20 (or at least \$10) each month.

Notice you make the vow to the Lord, but you send the money to Leroy. Leroy doesn't specify what he plans to do with it, but he does tell you to send it to him at the Walden Correctional Institution in South Carolina, where he is serving a twelve-year term for criminal conspiracy. I imagine God advised him to get a good lawyer.

People who say they want to do things for the Public. I have yet to locate the Public: All I ever see is people. Nevertheless, some people are certain there's a Public out there somewhere, sort of like the Lost Continent of Atlantis, and they keep trying to do things for it. Generally, these things consist of taking money away from people to help the Public, or passing laws prohibiting people from doing things that most people see nothing wrong with, but that are not in the Public Interest. For example:

The federal government helps the Public by taking ever larger amounts of money away from most people. The theory is that if the government didn't step in, people would spend the money on things they want, which would cause inflation, which would be bad for the Public. So the government takes the money and (surprise!) spends it. Most states protect the Public by limiting people to only one telephone company, electric company, and so on. This is Good for the Public. It is not to be confused with monopolies, which are Bad for the Public. Your really enlightened states protect the Public by prohibiting everybody but the state from operating liquor or gambling businesses. These businesses are considered Bad if people operate them, but Good if the state does, even though the only real difference

is that state liquor stores have high prices, poor selection, and all the charm of unwashed junior-high school locker rooms; and state gambling games offer sucker odds and idiot advertisements that appeal most to people who can least afford to throw money away.

I want to clarify one point: When I talk about “people,” I am not talking about “the People” with a capital “P,” as in “Power to the People” and other such slogans, which are bandied about by people who really mean “Power to Me and a Few of My Friends Who Know What Is Good for the People.” Generally, these people merely want to get control over property that is already owned by people, only not the right ones.

People who say they are doing things in Your Interest. Don’t trust anybody who says he’s doing something in Your Interest, except maybe your mother. Let’s face it: most people do what they do because they enjoy it or make money from it, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But most people feel obligated to pretend all they ever think about is helping the human race, especially you. Life-insurance salesmen, for example, tend to carry on as though the only reason they sell life insurance is that they feel it is more beneficial than the priesthood. Advertisements work the same way. The Chrysler Corporation wants me to buy a Chrysler not because it sells Chryslers, but because it wants to Help America. Mobil isn’t trying to sell petroleum products: it’s trying to Solve the Energy Crisis. And so on.

So there you have it: a list of people not to trust. You should be grateful you have someone like me, working for the Public Good, with Your Interest in mind. God wants you to send me some money.

Health Habits

Exercising Your Rights

Let’s talk about exercise and your body. First, the bad news. You cannot have a really swell body, like the one belonging to Victoria Principal. Victoria is the actress from the famous television show “Dallas” who appears in newspaper and television advertisements wearing a stretch garment that, if not occupied by Victoria Principal, would contract to the size of a gum wrapper.

In the television commercial, Victoria walks around a health club striking various bodily poses and saying something. You can’t hear what she’s saying, because when you see this particular commercial your brain tends to devote all available nervous-system resources to your eyes, but the gist of it is that if you join a health club and exercise a lot you will look like Victoria Principal or one of the major hunks of manhood behind her.

This is a lie, of course. Mother Nature, in her infinite wisdom, has decided that only a select few people can look like Victoria Principal or the hunks, and you are not one of them. These select people are destined to have swell bodies even if the only exercise they get is eating Slim Jims and drinking cheap whiskey. Certain other people can exercise constantly and eat nothing but grapefruit rinds, but they will still have the bodies of water buffalo.

This is probably for the best. Think how dull the world would be if we did not have wide variations in our bodily formats. We’d be like ants. If you’ve ever taken a good, close look at a batch of ants, you’ve probably noticed that they’re all equally attractive. You never see any fat ants, or buxom ants, or lean, sinewy ants. They all have identical, perfect little ant bodies, and consequently they find each other boring. Put yourself in their position: how would you feel if you lived in a world where every member of

the opposite sex had a perfect body? You'd crave something different. You'd start casting a speculative glance toward the larvae, or even the pupae. If you were a male ant, you might even make a pass at, say, a queen termite, despite the fact that she is about sixty times your size, lays thirty-five thousand eggs a day, and tends to devour her sexual partners. Or is that spiders? No matter. The mere fact that you would even consider making a pass at a termite is proof of my point, which, if I recall it correctly, is that Mother Nature wants us all to be different, which means that if you are basically a squat person, you can exercise all you want, and you will still be basically a squat person.

This does not mean you shouldn't exercise; it merely means that you should understand the real reason you should exercise, which is to prepare your body for the pain you'll inevitably have to endure when you become older. Let's say you're in your mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Most of the time you feel pretty good, right? The only time you feel really lousy is when you attend a major party and ingest huge quantities of alcohol and wake up the next day naked in an unfamiliar city. But as you grow older, you're going to start feeling more aches and pains caused by the inevitable afflictions of age, such as arthritis, the Social Security Administration, condescending denture-adhesive commercials, children who call only when they want to borrow money for down payments on houses much nicer than the one you live in, etc. You need to prepare your body for this pain. This is why exercise is so important.

Take joggers. You see them running along the street, clearly hating every second of it, and you say, "What's the point?" Ha. Years from now, you'll struggle to adjust to the aches and pains of growing older, whereas the joggers, who have been in constant agony for fifteen or twenty years, will be able to make the transition smoothly, unless they've committed suicide.

So don't delay. Start an exercise program today, the more painful the better. If you don't like to jog, buy the exercise book that Jane Fonda, the noted critic of capitalism, sells for \$17.95, and do the exercises in it. Or just hit yourself repeatedly in the head with it.

Programs For The Unfit

Okay! Today's the day you start on your physical-fitness program, the program that's going to make you slender, healthy, and attractive, like the people in cigarette advertisements.

Step one is to take your pulse, because a healthy heart is the key to physical fitness. If your heart is healthy, you can continue to collect Social Security long after your other major organs have become senile and are wandering around aimlessly with no idea what bodily functions they are supposed to perform. The best way to understand the relationship between your heart and your health is to examine an actual heart. You cannot, of course, examine your own heart, unless you have a high threshold of pain, so instead you should trot down to the grocery store and ask the butcher for some surplus hearts from an assortment of animals—a cow, a pig, a fish, an earthworm, etc. Most butchers will be happy to give you the hearts for free, just to get you to go away.

Now take your hearts home, spread them out on a clean, level surface, such as a Ping-Pong table, and examine them closely. You'll notice that the hearts differ in size, but they have one important thing in common: the animals they were removed from are all dead. This tells us that hearts are extremely important for physical fitness. Now place your hearts in Tupperware containers and store them in your freezer in case your children ever need them for science-fair projects or practical jokes.

Now you're ready to take your pulse. The traditional method is to locate the major artery that goes

through your wrist and press your thumb against it. The only potential drawback to this method is that you might squash the artery flat with your thumb, causing the blood to back up so that eventually your arm explodes like a party balloon. A safer way is to drink gin and tonic until you can actually hear your pulse pounding in your head, then walk or crawl to a nearby store and tell the salesperson you want to buy a stopwatch so you can count the number of pounds per minute:

YOU: I want a stopwatch.

SALESPERSON: We don't sell stopwatches. This is a grocery store. You (picking up an eggplant): Oh yeah? Then what do you call this?

SALESPERSON: That's an eggplant. Say, you're the guy who was in here earlier asking for fish hearts. Are you drunk or something?

YOU: Certainly not. As any idiot can plainly see, I'm taking my pulse.

SALESPERSON: With an eggplant? Why don't you just squash your thumb against your artery like everybody else? You (with great dignity): If I wanted a squash, I would have selected a squash, wouldn't I? I'll take this eggplant, and make it snappy.

Next, using a stopwatch or an eggplant, count the number of times your head pounds in a minute; if you're a healthy person, this should be a two—or three-digit number. Now you're ready to start your exercise program. Turn on your television and watch one of those programs in which people in skimpy outfits leap around in time to recorded music under the direction of a cheerful leader.

Notice I say you should watch the program: under no circumstances should you actually do the exercises, because all that leaping around will reduce your brain to tapioca pudding. You'll wind up like the people on the television programs, smiling vacantly and doing whatever the cheerful leader tells you to:

LEADER: Okay! Let's kick those legs up high! Great! Now let's bend way over! Terrific! Now let's all say "I pledge allegiance to the Reverend Sun Myung Moon."

EXERCISERS: I pledge allegiance to the Reverend Sun Myung Moon.

LEADER: Okay! Now let's all hop on one foot and put our fingers in our noses'. Great! Now let's all take out our checkbooks and ...

After your exercise program, take your pulse again, then go into the kitchen and prepare a large, nutritious breakfast. You may not feel hungry, especially after all the pulse-taking, so to boost your appetite, think about how important good nutrition is to your heart. Think about what will happen to you if you don't take good care of your heart. Think, as you chew your food, about what happened to the cow, the pig, the fish, and the earthworm whose hearts are sitting in Tupperware containers only a few feet away from your breakfast, sheathed in frozen slime. This should give you all the incentive you need to eat a hearty breakfast, after which you'll be ready to face the day or go back to bed.

Jogging For President

Lately, I have noticed large numbers of people staggering along the sides of major highways, trying to get in shape. I think they have the right idea: most of us Americans are out of shape. I know for a fact that I am.

When I was in high school, my friends and I were in terrific shape. Our bodies were fine-tuned machines. We would routinely drink quarts of warmish beer, then perform feats of great physical

prowess. For example, during the Halloween Dance we carried a 1962 Volkswagen all the way up the front steps of Pleasantville High School, right into the lobby. I bet we couldn't do that today. I bet you couldn't, either.

Now I grant you that most of us no longer feel any great need to drink warm beer and carry Volkswagens into high schools, but the point is that if some emergency arose, if for some reason involving national security we had to carry a Volkswagen into a high school, we couldn't do it. We'd go a few steps, then we'd drop the Volkswagen and collapse on the ground, gasping and heaving, and that would be the end of our national security. So I figure it's time to get in shape.

But jogging is not the way to do it. For one thing, jogging kills your brain cells. The Army has known this for years; it forces recruits to jog every day, on the theory that some of them will lose so many brain cells that they will eventually reenlist. Your really dedicated joggers know it, too; in fact, it's one of the main reasons they jog. The idea is that if you're troubled about your job or world affairs, you go out and jog until you've killed whatever brain cells are responsible for those thoughts. The problem is that you may also kill the brain cells that remember your name and address, in which case you keep right on jogging, sometimes for days. This is what has happened to the people you see jogging along major highways, the ones with vacant expressions on their faces: they left home as nuclear physicists, heart surgeons, corporation presidents, and so on, but after a few hours most of them have library paste for brains.

Remember Jimmy Carter? Every day at the White House he used to wake up at the crack of dawn, develop some brilliant plan to save the economy, then head out for his morning jog. His aides would find him stumbling around hours later, sweaty and confused, his economic plan gone forever. Jimmy might have stood a chance in the 1980 elections if he had run against another jogger, but instead he faced Ronald Reagan. Ron has his horses jog for him and thus is able to preserve what brain cells he has, although I suspect his horses are fairly stupid.

My other objection to jogging is that even if you manage to jog yourself into shape, you still don't look all that great. I mean, look at marathon runners: they appear gaunt and desperately hungry, like refugees wearing numbers. They're always snatching scraps of food from spectators and stuffing them (the scraps of food) into their mouths. If you were to toss, say, a side of raw beef into their path, they'd all dive for it, teeth bared, and that would be the end of the marathon.

So I have rejected jogging as a way to get in shape. In fact, I was about to give up altogether when I discovered body-building magazines. Body-building magazines are published for people, mostly male, whose idea of being in shape is to have muscles the size of lawn tractors. You've probably seen these magazines: they're full of pictures of people who have smeared Vaseline all over their bodies and are wearing bathing suits no larger than a child's watchband; they are trying to smile in a relaxed manner but end up with more of an intense grin, because they have enormous muscles lunging out from all over their bodies, and Lord only knows how many bizarre chemical substances coursing through their veins.

These people obviously do not jog—I doubt they ever leave their gymnasiums, for fear their muscles will lunge out and kill innocent bystanders—but they are obviously in terrific shape. At least they look as if they're in terrific shape, which is the important thing. If Jimmy Carter had spent his time body-building instead of jogging, he would be president today. His aides would have carried him into the presidential debates and propped him up against his lectern, and when it was time for him to make his opening statement, he would have just stood there, Vaseline shimmering on his muscles, grinning intensely at the audience. Who would have dared to vote against him?

So I've been reading body-building magazines, hoping to pick up some tips on getting in shape. The idea seems to be to lift a lot of heavy objects until you get dense. Density is much sought-after in the body-building world. For example, Muscle Digest magazine, in its October issue, refers to one promising body builder as "one of the most dense body-builders in senior level competition." Evidently this is considered high praise.

So I plan to lift heavy objects, starting with my typewriter and working up to a 1962 Volkswagen, until I get fairly dense, after which I intend to smear Vaseline on my body and maybe run for president.

A Cold Cure? Who Nose?

I say we give the medical community two more weeks to cure the common cold, and, if it doesn't, we turn the problem over to a more competent outfit, like the Sony Corporation. Sometimes I wonder what the medical community is thinking. We give it buddles of money to buy office furniture and white coats and other medical devices, and all it seems to want to do is invent obscure new operations nobody you know or I know ever needs:

CHICAGO—A team of surgeons at the Warpfinger Medical Institute here has successfully implanted a tiny electronic device into the right tonsil of a fifteen-year-old boy. "We don't really know why we did it," said a spokesman. "We just had this tiny electronic device and this fifteen-year-old boy, so we figured, whY not? Next week we're going to install the battery.

Meanwhile, millions of people are out here getting common colds and generally making the world a tackier place to live in. You have two kinds of cold victims: your nose blowers and your snorters. For overall ability to make you want to walk out of restaurants, I'd have to give the edge to the nose blowers. And they are everywhere. Americans think nothing of public nose-blowing. They encourage it in their young. My fourth-grade teacher once spent two hours instructing us on nose-blowing. She never married.

As far as I can tell, the only groups trying to do anything useful about the common cold are the cold-remedy companies that advertise on TV:

(The scene opens in a pleasant suburban home. The husband walks in through the front door and speaks to his wife, who is wearing a bathrobe and lying on the floor.)

HUSBAND: Are you ready to go visit my father at the Home for Sickly Old People?

WIFE: I don't think I can, dear. It's this darn cold. I have a fever of 112 degrees and I can no longer move anything on the left side of my body.

HUSBAND: Here, try some Phlegm-B-Gone.

WIFE: Phlegm-B-Gone?

HUSBAND: Phlegm-B-Gone.

(The scene shifts to an impressive office with a big desk. On a shelf behind the desk is a huge collection of books. It is actually the complete Hardy Boys series, but the camera doesn't get close enough for you to realize this. A medical-looking actor, wearing a white coat, is standing in front of the desk, holding a clipboard.)

MEDICAL-LOOKING ACTOR: Medical tests show that Phlegm-B-Gone, a collection of medical ingredients, is extremely medical when used in a conscientiously applied program of oral hygiene and regular professional care. Get back on your feet with Phlegm-B-Gone.

(The scene shifts to the Home for Sickly Old People.)

WIFE: Gosh, that Phlegm-B-Gone, with a collection of medical ingredients, is great! I'm back on my feet again with only a slight limp!

HUSBAND: I'm beginning to feel a little feverish. How about you, Dad? ... Dad? ... Dad?

Some people think the way to avoid colds is to eat a lot of vitamin C, something on the order of nine billion pentagrams a day. My wife believes in this approach. She's always choking down vitamin C pills, which are the size of toaster-ovens. She gets colds anyway. My approach is to drink large quantities of beer. It seems to work. Since I started drinking large quantities of beer, I have not had one cold that I remember clearly.

Male Delivery Room

NOTE: If you are a little kid, and your parents have not yet told you about sex and where babies come from, do NOT read this column, because it contains a lot of stuff you would kill to find out.

Things go in and out of fashion. Take water. For years, water was unfashionable, something to wash bird droppings off the car with. Today, water is fashionable, something to be advertised on national television by great men such as Orson Wells. (I use "great" not in the sense of "superior" but in the sense of "Considerably larger than Zanesville, Ohio.") So today you'll see people paying \$2.50 and more for fancy-looking six-packs of water. Five years ago, these people would have been considered stupid. Today, they are considered fashionable. Stupid, but fashionable.

Another example is babies. They were out of fashion during the seventies. Young couples were too busy. They'd say: "Should we have a baby? Should we embark on this great human adventure, which brings with it great responsibility, but also great joy and fulfillment? Nah, let's play tennis."

But babies are back in fashion. In the past year or two, many a couple has decided to sacrifice material things for the chance to create a new life, a life capable of love and hate, a life capable of dreams and desires, a life capable of excreting things in large volumes from three or four orifices at the same time.

But before you decide to have a baby, let me warn you, particularly you males: They have changed the rules.

When your parents had you, the responsibilities of childbirth were clearly defined:

THE WOMAN went to the doctor regularly, read a lot about pregnancy, made sure she ate the right foods, kept track of the baby's growth inside her, bought baby clothes and furniture, told the doctor when contractions began, timed them, made sure she got to the hospital on time, went to the delivery room, went through labor, and had the baby.

THE MAN smoked Cigarettes.

This system is obviously fair, and it worked well for years. But somewhere along the line, some sinister granola-oriented group got to the medical community and the women's magazines and convinced them that the man should become more involved. That's right, men: they want you right there in the delivery room when it happens. Not only that, they want you to go to classes at which people openly discuss pregnancy.

I found all this out the hard way.

Let me assure you that I want to play a responsible role in my wife'S pregnancy. I am willing to pace for hours in the waiting room with the other fathers-to-be and old copies of National Geographic. I am

willing to go to classes on how to pace in the waiting room. But at our classes we don't talk about pacing: we talk about what goes on inside a pregnant person's body. I don't want to know what goes on inside a pregnant person's body. I don't want to know what goes on inside my own body. I think if the Good Lord had wanted us to know what goes on inside our bodies, He would have given us little windows.

Another thing we do at our classes is practice breathing. That's right: breathing. The idea is the man helps the woman breathe steadily and imagine she's on a beach; this takes her mind off her labor and helps her relax. They haven't told us men how we're supposed to relax. I can see it now: my wife will be breathing steadily, imagining she's on a beach; I will be breathing shallowly, imagining I am lying on the delivery-room floor, because I am lying on the delivery-room floor.

I could go on: I could tell you about how the women in the class talk about really personal things in hearty, cheerful tones while we males stare intently at various ceiling tiles. But you'll find out anyway, if you haven't already.

At our last class, the leader said we're going to see a film soon. I just know my wife will have to drive us home afterward.

Tale Of The Tapeworm

The human body is an amazing machine. Mine is, anyway. For example, I regularly feed my body truly absurd foods, such as Cheez Doodles, and somehow it turns them into useful bodily parts, such as glands. At least I assume it turns them into useful bodily parts; otherwise, there must be a huge wad of Cheez Doodles hidden away in my body somewhere, and eventually it will have to be removed in a major and fairly disgusting operation.

I learned about the human body in high school biology class, which covered everything except sex. Sex was covered in health class, which mainly involved how many different kinds of venereal disease there are (fourteen million); how high school students get venereal disease (merely by holding hands firmly); and whether it is a good idea for high school students to get venereal disease (no). These days, of course, high school students learn about the more positive aspects of sex, which is why so many of them have vacant smiles.

In biology, we learned about all the different systems of the body, mainly so we could find out how many things could go wrong with them. My biology teacher would describe, in loving detail, the many diseases we could get, and we students would imagine we were getting them. I went home with a new disease every night.

I was particularly susceptible to parasitic worms. The teacher was always telling us about these little worms that were trying to get into our bodies, often disguised as pieces of pork, so they could be parasites. We spent several classes on tapeworms, which get into your intestines. When I was writing this column, I decided to brush up on tapeworms (we should all brush up on tapeworms from time to time), so I looked them up in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which says:

"Tapeworms ... occur worldwide and range in size from about one millimeter (0.04 inch) to more than 15 meters (50 feet) ..."

Think of that. Assuming you are a person of average height, at this very moment you could contain a worm nearly ten times as long as you are. If you suspect that you do contain a fifty-foot tapeworm, I

advise you to feed it raw pork or whatever else it wants. Do not try to get it out, or anger it in any way; we have enough trouble in the world without huge, angry parasitic worms thrashing about.

If anything besides tapeworms goes wrong with your body, you should get a large quantity of money and go to a doctor. Everybody is always picking on doctors just because they charge high fees and rarely cure anything, but this is unfair. I mean, look at it from the doctors' point of view: they are healthy, intelligent people who spend years in medical schools, dealing with lots of other healthy, intelligent people; then they have to go out and deal with members of the public, most of whom are sick and have no medical training. As far as doctors are concerned, the worst part about practicing medicine is having to deal with sick, untrained people all the time. Some doctors solve this problem by becoming surgeons, who wear masks and deal only with patients who are unconscious and strapped down. Others become specialists, who issue opinions from motor yachts and never see patients at all.

But most doctors are stuck in offices, and eventually they have to see actual conscious patients. What is worse, these patients generally insist on trying to explain their medical problems. Doctors hate this. I mean, they didn't spend all those hours learning such things as where the pyloric valve is located just so they could listen to some idiot patient talk about medicine. So most doctors follow this rule: The patient is always wrong. This is why most doctor-patient conversations go like this:

PATIENT: I broke my leg.

DOCTOR: What makes you say that?

PATIENT: A tree fell on me, and my leg went "snap." Look, a jagged piece of bone is sticking out of my thigh.

DOCTOR: The symptom you describe could well be caused by a dysfunction of the endocrinological system.

PATIENT: But my leg ...

DOCTOR: I'm going to schedule you for a series of tests at the Mayo Clinic next month, and in the meanwhile, I'll consult with several specialists by marine radio. I suggest you avoid fatty foods.

So if you know what's wrong with you, your best bet is to tell your doctor you think something else is wrong with you. That way you stand some chance of actually getting treated.

Injurious To Your Wealth

I understand "M*A*S*H" is going off the air, which means I will have to get a new doctor. For the past few years, I have been telling my life-insurance agent that my doctor is Alan Alda. My agent needs to know who my doctor is so he can increase my life-insurance coverage, which he does roughly every couple of months. He'll call me up and say, "Dave, I've been reviewing your files, and I really think we need to increase your coverage, now that you have a child." And I'll say, "But, Jeff, we had the child two years ago, and we have used that excuse to increase my coverage four times since then." And he'll say, "Oh yeah, right. But I still think we ought to increase your coverage, because, ummmm, the cost of living has been going up." And I'll say, "It sure has, Jeff, especially the cost of my life-insurance premiums." And he'll say, "That's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about, Dave. Think how difficult it would be for your wife to pay your life-insurance premiums if God forbid you were dead."

This goes on for a half hour or so, until finally I agree to increase my coverage because otherwise I won't be able to get off the phone and earn enough money to pay my premiums. Then Jeff says, "All I

need, Dave, is the name of your doctor.” I don’t know why life-insurance companies always want the name of your doctor. Maybe they use it to check your credit rating. Or maybe they have a master list of really incompetent doctors, doctors whose patients come in with minor ear infections and wind up getting open-heart surgery, and if you have one of these doctors your premiums are adjusted upward. All I know is that Jeff won’t get off the phone until I name a doctor.

I used to give him the name of the doctor who gave me my physical examinations for my life-insurance application. He was a terrific doctor, because he specialized in insurance examinations, which means he was not the least bit interested in the internal workings of my body. All he was interested in was filling out the insurance application, which is a long list of questions, sort of like the college-entrance examinations, except that the correct answer is always no. If you answer yes, you run the risk that you won’t be allowed to pay the premiums, so the doctor reads the questions very quickly and checks “no” before you get a chance to answer:

DOCTOR: Have you or any member of your family or anybody you played with as a child ever had any funny tingling sensations?

YOU: Well, I ...

DOCTOR (checking “no”): Have you ever sat bolt upright in bed in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in your abdomen and thought it might be appendicitis but couldn’t remember whether your appendix is on the right or the left side so you woke up your spouse and he or she was somewhat irritable?

YOU: Well, once ...

DOCTOR (checking “no”): What about endotoxic infections? Salmonella typhosa? Acne? Clostridium botulinum? Semicolons? Ricketts? Tired blood? What is the capital of Idaho?

YOU: Would you mind repeating ...

DOCTOR (checking “no”): Okay. Now cough.

I liked this approach, because I never had to spend more than ten minutes with the insurance doctor, and he never tried to inject any foreign substances into my body. So I always said he was my doctor, until he retired, which is when I switched to Alan Alda.

I picked Alan Alda because he is a peck of fun. This is because he is in the Korean War, which, as you know if you watch “M*A*S*H,” is a zany, wacky, fun war, so much fun that it has been going for ten years now. I always figured that if I got sick, I could be flown directly to Korea, where Alan Alda would heal me within a half hour and introduce me to one of the several dozen attractive nurses who work in the M*A*S*H unit, and we could all go off and drink martinis and talk about how awful war is and then make lots of hilarious remarks, except for the nurses, who never say anything because their job is to mop Alan Alda’s brow.

But “M*A*S*H” is going off the air, so I need a new doctor. I’m seriously considering Robert Young, who stunned the medical world a few years back when he discovered that virtually all major psychological disorders can be cured through the regular use of caffeine-free coffee.

Psychiatrist For Rent

Psychiatry has gotten a lot of attention lately because of the recent court case in which John W. Hinckley, Jr., was charged with being sane. Those of you who do not understand our legal system

probably thought Hinckley had been charged with shooting the President and several other people, because that is what he did. But everybody knew he had done it, so the trial would have been fairly short:

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: My Client, John W. Hinckley, Jr. ...

JURY: Guilty.

So to put some meat on the trial, the judge decided that the prosecution would have to prove that Hinckley was sane. Apparently, being sane is now a federal offense. As a result, the lawyers pretty much ignored the actual shootings, which everybody had seen on television anyway, and instead spent the bulk of the trial showing the movie Taxi Driver and getting testimony from rented psychiatrists, who explained that Hinckley clearly was or was not insane, depending on which psychiatrist happened to be on the witness stand:

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: So, Dr. Warble, would you say that the defendant is sane?

PSYCHIATRIST: Oh yes indeed, very sane. Extremely sane.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: I object, your honor. The defense rented this psychiatrist, and he is supposed to say that the defendant is insane.

PSYCHIATRIST: Oh yeah, that's right. What I mean is the defendant is insane. Sorry.

The defense psychiatrists proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hinckley shot the President because he (Hinckley) was in love with Jodie Foster and had watched Taxi Driver many times, so he was acquitted. This makes sense to me. I think we can all agree that anyone who fell in love with Jodie Foster and watched Taxi Driver many times would have no option but to shoot the President. I think Hinckley should be set free, and Congress should pass a law requiring Miss Foster to date him.

The only flaw in the Hinckley trial is that it left a lot of people with the impression that psychiatrists are just a bunch of bearded voodoo doctors who espouse confusing and wildly contradictory theories that have nothing to do with common sense. This is totally unfair. Many psychiatrists are clean-shaven.

To understand why psychiatrists behave as they do, you have to understand the history of their profession. In primitive times, people believed that psychiatric disorders were caused by demons who possessed people, and primitive psychiatrists cured them by gouging holes in their skulls so the demons could get out (I am not making this up). Now, of course, we know that this is silly. The modern approach for getting rid of a demon is to have a priest dive out a fourth-floor window, as you know if you saw the fine documentary movie The Exorcist, which I imagine John Hinckley saw thirty-five times.

The other big cause of psychiatric disorders, besides demons, is your father. The man who discovered that fathers cause virtually all psychiatric problems was Sigmund Freud, who is known as the Father of Modern Psychiatry. Freud also discovered that if a trained analyst probed a patient's past for several hours a week, week after week, year after year, the analyst could make an enormous amount of money. Of course, the analyst must be very skilled, because otherwise the patient might go off on all kinds of irrelevant tangents unrelated to the father:

PSYCHIATRIST: And what seems to be the trouble?

PATIENT: I've been having these horrible, splitting headaches.

PSYCHIATRIST: And when did these headaches begin? Around the time you realized your father was a horrible man?

PATIENT: No, my father was a wonderful man. My headaches began last week, when I was working under my car and the jack broke and the car fell on my head. I've also been bleeding from my ears.

PSYCHIATRIST: I see. And was your father's name Jack?

And so it goes, for a decade or so, until the patient realizes that his head aches because forty-seven

years earlier his father wouldn't buy him an ice cream cone.

Freud's approach is based on the fact that the human personality is actually made up of a number of parts: the Ego, the Libretto, the Sense of Humor, and the Tendency to Be Irritable in the Morning. The Libretto is trapped in the subconscious with nothing to read and consequently thinks about sex all the time. This embarrasses the other parts, so they clean up the thoughts before you actually get to think them. For example, let's say the Libretto thinks about a sexual organ. By the time you get it, the other personality parts have turned it into an aquarium, so that's what you think you're thinking about, you nave fool. What this means is that everybody is actually thinking about sex all the time, although this becomes obvious only under intensive psychoanalysis or at office parties.

Freud's brilliant pioneering paved the way for new discoveries by future generations of psychiatrists, all of whom disagree with him and each other. We can only regret that Freud did not live to see his theories come to fruition, and maybe watch Taxi Driver a few times.

Oaf Of Hippocrates

NOTE: Before you read this article about medical care, let me warn you that I am not a doctor. I did, however, study First Aid when I was in the Boy Scouts. We scouts used to meet in the Methodist Church basement and apply tourniquets to each other, and we got really good at it. We once applied a tourniquet to Randy Lape that was so elaborate he couldn't move any part of his body, and he probably would have lain there until he starved to death if the choir hadn't shown up for rehearsal.

I have forgotten my First Aid training, except for one rule: When you encounter an injured person, you're not supposed to move him. At least I think that's the rule. Maybe the rule is that you're not even supposed to touch him. Maybe you're supposed to run away. Frankly, it's all a blur in my mind, along with the Morse Code, which is the other thing I learned in Boy Scouts, God only knows why.

Anyway, I just thought you should be aware of this before you read this article, assuming you still want to.

You should get a thorough physical examination at least twice a year, unless you have to pay for it personally, in which case you should get one every eight years or whenever you think something is really wrong with you, whichever comes first.

You can usually tell when something is really wrong with you, because you feel really lousy even when you haven't been drinking. Sometimes you can cure yourself merely by calling your employer and saying, in a sincere, sick voice, that you won't be coming into work. If you have faked illnesses in the past, you should subtly let your employer know that you really are sick this time. Retch frequently, and say something like "I'm really sick this time. Really. (Pause here for a retch.) Honestly."

If you still feel lousy, you should identify your symptoms and try to figure out exactly what's causing them. Here are the most popular symptoms:

Sharp, stabbing pains in the chest or stomach—These are usually caused by being stabbed in the chest or stomach with a sharp object, but it could be something worse. Dull, aching pains in the head—These are usually caused by a headache. Often, you can cure yourself merely by being irritable; if that doesn't work, you may need aspirin or brain surgery. Vomiting—This is usually caused by eating clams.

If your symptoms don't go away, you should call your doctor's office. Notice I say "doctor's office," not "doctor." Under American Medical Association rules, doctors are not allowed to talk to patients over

the telephone, because this would be unethical.

So when you call the doctor's office, you will talk to a medical personnel wearing a white outfit, whose job is to make an appointment for you to come in roughly six weeks later. If you are really sick, and you are a regular patient, the medical personnel may agree to talk to the doctor on your behalf, and your doctor may agree to phone the drugstore and order you a little bottle of pills that costs \$34.38. But if you are really really sick, too sick to go to the drugstore, too sick to walk, too sick to even move, the doctor may want you to come to his office right away and sit in the waiting room.

Assuming you can get to the doctor's office without dying, your first job is to find a good seat, ideally one that is close to the tropical-fish tank and as far as possible from patients with visible fungus. Then you should read an old copy of National Geographic. Doctors like to have National Geographic in their waiting rooms, because it reminds patients that in many primitive countries people are not fortunate enough to have the kind of medical care we have here in the U.S.A. Many patients feel so much better after reading it for a couple of hours that they don't even need to see the doctor. They just pay their bills and leave.

But if you still feel sick, the medical personnel will order you to undress and put on a garment that gives your secret bodily parts a high degree of visibility. Then they'll take some blood out of your arm and make you go into a bathroom and urinate into a glass container. While you're in there, the medical personnel will hide, giggling, in a closet, so that when you emerge you have to parade around, bodily parts flashing in every direction, looking for somebody to give the container to. None of this has anything to do with curing you. Why on earth would they want your blood and urine? They'll just throw it away. The point of all this is to determine whether you are really, sincerely sick, sick enough to actually see the doctor.

If you pass this test, you get to go into a little room and sit on a table covered with cold waxed paper for about forty-five minutes—this is the final test—while the doctor watches you through a secret peephole. If he is satisfied that you qualify, he'll bustle into the room and prod you with various implements, muttering all the while. The doctor is not allowed to tell you directly what is wrong—again, this would be a breach of ethics—you have to listen closely to his muttering, and interpret it. Here are the standard doctor mutters, translated to laymen's terms:

“Uh huh”: This means “Oh my God.” “Ummm”: This means “Good Lord.” “Ah hah”: This means “I vaguely remember seeing a case like this in medical school, but it hadn't advanced nearly this far.”

After the doctor has finished prodding you, either he will send you to the hospital, which will give you a battery of extremely humiliating tests designed to weed out people who are not serious about being hospitalized, or he will call the drugstore and order you a small bottle of pills that costs \$34.38. If he spent much time in the Boy Scouts, he may also decide to apply a tourniquet.

“Great Baby! Delicious!”

I have been a father for nearly six months now, so needless to say I know virtually everything there is to know about raising babies. The main thing is discipline. You have to ignore all those bleeding-heart psychological theories about being sensitive to your baby's many delicate emotional wants. These theories are based on the insane premise that babies have many delicate emotional wants. In fact, babies have only one want, and it is hardly delicate: They want to put everything in the entire world except

food into their mouths. As far as babies are concerned, the sole function of the world is to provide objects for them to drool on. If you were to open up a baby—and I am not for a minute suggesting that you should—you would find that 85 to 90 percent of the space reserved for bodily organs is taken up by huge, highly active drool glands. Scientists at a major scientific university recently conducted a study in which they collected, in scientific jars, all the drool that a six-month-old baby produced in one twenty-four-hour period. They were stunned at the result. Many of them had to go home and lie down.

The greatest threat to your baby is educational toys, which you are required by federal law to buy several dozen of. Educational toys are advertised in baby magazines, which arrive by the thousands in the mail when you have a baby. In a typical ad, a baby is looking thoughtfully (for a baby) at two pieces of plastic. According to the ad, the pieces of plastic are helping the baby “acquire skills of problem-solving.” In fact, the only problem the baby is solving is the problem of how to get both pieces in its mouth. These so-called educational toys are merely encouraging your baby to act stupid.

This is dangerous. If you let your baby continue to stick things in his or her mouth, he or she will have a hard time in later life. I mean, suppose your child goes to a major Wall Street law firm for a job interview, and ends up putting all the waiting-room magazines and ashtrays in his or her mouth. He or she would make a poor impression, and would end up having to be a bum or work for the government.

So obviously, your job as a parent is to straighten your baby out. You’ll have to be tough. Here’s how I handle my five-and-a-half-month old son: When he’s lying on a blanket, putting various federally required educational toys in his mouth, I say firmly: “Robert, if you keep putting those educational toys in your mouth, I am not going to give you an allowance this week.” If he doesn’t respond to that, I up the ante. I say: “Robert, besides not giving you any allowance, I am not going to read to you from the famous Greek epic poem the Iliad, usually ascribed to Homer.” So far, Robert has continued to put educational toys in his mouth, but I think he’s getting worried.

Of course, once you get your baby away from “educational” toys, you’ll have to occupy it with new, more meaningful activities. The best activities are games. Here are some excellent, meaningful baby games designed by a distinguished panel of baby experts:

Oklahoma Baby Chicken Hat

Grasp your baby firmly and put it on your head like a hat, stomach down. Then stride around the room and cluck like a chicken to the tune of “Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” bouncing in time to the music.

Wild Teenage Babies from Outer Space

Lie on your back and hold your baby over you, facing down; move it slowly up and down, like a flying saucer, making flying-saucer noises and feigning great fear when it appears to be about to land on the planet Earth. (NOTE. Wear protective clothing for the preceding two games.)

Attack of the Baby-Eaters

Lay the baby on the floor, face up. Announce that you are very hungry, and start nibbling at the baby’s toes, then its hands, and finally, with great gusto, its stomach. Every now and then, yell: “Great

baby! Delicious!”

These games will teach your baby many meaningful lessons, the main one being that the world is full of deranged people.

The only other major problem you'll have with your baby is feeding it solid foods. Many kinds of baby food are available, all of them disgusting. Basically, the baby-food industry takes things that no normal human being would ever dream of eating, such as squash, and grinds them into mush and puts them in little jars. Babies, of course, hate baby food; they would much prefer the kinds of things you eat, such as cheeseburgers and beer. If we fed babies normal food, they would be full-grown, productive adults in a matter of weeks. But this would destroy the baby-food industry.

As I noted earlier, babies do not take solid food through their mouths, which are generally occupied with other objects. Babies absorb solid food through their chins. You can save yourself a lot of frustrating effort if you smear the food directly on your baby's chin, rather than putting it in the baby's mouth and forcing the baby to expel it on to its chin, as so many uninformed parents do.

B—Sts And Baby Care

WARNING: This article contains the word “breast.” I checked with an editor, and he said I could say “breast” as long as I used it scientifically, rather than to arouse prurient interest. For example, I could say: “Two breasts plus two breasts equals four breasts”, but I could not say: “Hey, get a load of that breast.” Anyway, I just thought I'd warn you in case you don't want to read the word “breast.” The rest of the article is about raising babies, and it's very informative, so for the benefit of those of you who want to read everything but the paragraph with “breast” in it, I'll let you know when you're about to come to it.

The most important thing to remember about raising your baby is that you must not take anyone's advice, except, of course, mine. Many people, such as your parents, will try to advise you, but you must ignore them. If they knew so much about raising kids, they wouldn't have screwed you up so badly.

Most people make babies out to be very complicated, but the truth is they have only three moods:

Mood One: Just about to cry. Mood Two: Crying. Mood Three: Just finished crying..lm-# Your job, as a parent, is to keep the baby in Mood Three as much as possible; this means you have to figure out why it's crying. Here's a tip: Babies never cry because their diapers are dirty. You change their diapers only to make yourself feel better. You could leave the same diaper on your baby for months and it would be perfectly happy, although considerably heavier and less pleasant to be around. So that leaves only two reasons your baby cries: It is hungry. Some other reason. If your baby is hungry, you should feed it.

WARNING: The next paragraph is the one with a breast in it. So you should either skip it or be prepared for some very explicit talk.

You can either bottle-feed or breast-feed your baby. Many noted health fanatics strongly recommend that you breast-feed your baby on the grounds that it is very good for the baby. This may be true, but the real advantage of breast-feeding is that only female persons can do it. This means you male persons do not have to get up at the insane hours babies like to get up at. At first you may feel guilty about this, and you'll get up in the middle of the night to give the female person moral support. But after a while you'll get so good at morally supporting her that you'll be able to do it without even waking up. In the morning, when the female person is exhausted from lack of sleep, you can commiserate with her. You

can say: “I know how you feel. This morally supporting is no bed of roses, either.” She’ll really appreciate hearing this.

If your baby doesn’t stop crying after you feed it, it is crying for some other reason. You can try handing it back and forth and saying: “What do you suppose is wrong?” This does no good whatsoever, but it is an old traditional ritual and it passes the time. You can also try making funny faces; this teaches the baby that its parents may be brain-damaged. Or you can give the baby educational toys. My wife bought our baby several dozen expensive educational toys, designed by experts to teach babies about colors and spatial relationships and other vital educational things. Our baby ignores them. He could not be less interested in spatial relationships. The only toy he really likes is an extremely tacky plastic Wonder Bread wrapper, which he stares at happily for long periods. I’m growing fond of it myself.

Suet Won’t Do It

Many years ago, practically nobody in America had a weight problem, because almost everybody was an Indian, and all there was to eat was bison. The Indians had bison for breakfast, bison for lunch, and bison for supper. After a few thousand years of this, they mostly just picked at their food. Then along came the early white settlers. They didn’t have a weight problem either, because they were engaged in Westward Expansion, which consumes a great many calories. Also, the pioneers rarely got a chance to eat. Oh, they tried: they’d be crossing the Great Plains, and the wagon master would yell: “OK, everyone, let’s form the wagons into a circle for a snack.” But before they could even get out the plates, the Indians, desperate for nonbison food, would attack. If the pioneers had been more thoughtful, they could have carried extra snacks, but they brought only enough for themselves, so unfortunately they had to kill the vast majority of the Indians.

Next the pioneers built farms, and soon the country was covered with amber fields of grain. As a result, everybody almost starved to death, because what the hell are you going to do with grain? Eat it? You’d be better off with bison. Fortunately, the farmers were able to sell their grain to the Russians, who will eat anything. In exchange, the Russians gave the farmers money, which the farmers used to buy food. So now we have tons of food, only nobody does any actual work except the farmers. Everybody else sits around offices and eats, which is why today most Americans are overweight, some of them to the point where they tend to stall escalators.

To figure out whether you are overweight, determine your sex and locate your correct scientific weight on this table:

SEX CORRECT WEIGHT

Male 155 pounds

Female 115 pounds

Child 60 pounds

If you weigh more than you should, you can attempt to disguise it, but this rarely works. For example, I once worked in an office with an overweight woman. I can’t remember her name, but it was an overweight name, like Bertha, so I’ll call her that. Most of Bertha’s overweight was concentrated in her behind. She looked like a perfectly normal person who for some reason was carrying an ottoman under her dress. Bertha had read in some beauty magazine that if you have a big behind, you should stand in such a way that one arm dangles in front of it, blocking the view. So Bertha made it a point to always

have one arm dangling down, even when she was carrying heavy financial ledgers. She looked like she had some kind of nerve disorder. People were always saying “What’s wrong with your arm, Bertha?” until finally it became blatantly obvious that she was trying to obscure her behind, which her arm was too small to do anyway unless she put on a catcher’s mitt.

Another popular way to disguise excess weight is to wear clothing with vertical stripes. The idea is that vertical stripes create an optical illusion that makes you look thinner, but the truth is that they create an optical illusion that makes you look as though you were wearing a cafe awning. Also, every schoolchild knows that the only reason people wear vertical stripes is to disguise excess weight. You might just as well wear a big sign that says “FAT.” What I’m driving at is that you can’t really hide your weight problem, which means that sooner or later you have to go on a diet.

Important Health Note:

Before you go on any diet, you should consult your doctor, or at least send him some money.

The principle behind diets is that you cut down on the amount of calories you eat. A “calorie” is a unit of measurement that tells you how good food tastes. Really good food, like steak or fudge, has a very high calorie content; really awful food, like grapefruit halves, has almost no calories. (Now before I get a lot of outraged letters from citrus growers, let me point out that I am not opposed to grapefruit halves, except as food. I think grapefruit halves can serve many useful purposes around the home, such as extinguishing small fires.)

To understand how diets work, you have to understand how your body digests food. The process starts in your mouth, which tastes the food and covers it with spit, then sends it down to your stomach to be broken down for use as bodily parts. This is done by color. Red foods, such as rare steak, beets and Hawaiian Punch, are used to form red body parts, such as the heart; green foods, such as beans and lime jello, are used to form green body parts, such as the kidney; beer is used to form urine; and so on. The problem is that if, on a given day, your body doesn’t need any further parts, it turns the food into fat. Your body fully intends to go back to the fat someday and turn it into something useful, but it never gets a chance because you’re always sliding more spit-covered food down your throat. So your fat just sits there, useless, until gradually it loses self-esteem and, desperate for attention, starts interfering with the other organs. This is why you have to go on a diet.

Another principle behind diets is that you eat things that are so disgusting that your stomach rejects them and goes looking for fat to use as body parts. This is the big problem with diets. You spend a lot of time eating things like Melba toast. Melba toast was developed by the British, and it is not really food at all. You could airlift a thousand tons of Melba toast to some wretched, starving Asian village, and the starving Asians would use it to build homes, or as bookmarks, but it would never occur to them to eat it. This is why diets don’t work. You spend a couple of days eating Melba toast, then you lunge for the Twinkies, and you end up fatter than ever.

The only other way to lose weight is to go on a scientific weight-loss program. These are widely advertised in those newspapers they sell at supermarket check-out lines, the ones with headlines like: BURT REYNOLDS FINDS CANCER CURE IN UFO RIDE WITH PRINCESS DIANA.

You should buy one of these magazines and flip through the pages until you see a full-page advertisement with a headline that says “WOMAN LOSES 240 POUNDS IN 30 SECONDS.” Under the

headline are two pictures of a woman's head: in the first picture the head is on top of what appears to be an industrial boiler wearing a 1952 bathing suit; in the second picture, the head is on top of Bo Derek. Under the picture it says: "Mrs. Earl Clamp of Wastewater, Tex., reports that the Amazing New Brand New Amazing Scientific 30-Second Weight-Loss Program saved her marriage and prevented serious damage to her home. Let Mrs. Clamp tell you about it in her own words: 'Well, in my own words, I realized I had a serious weight problem one day when my husband, Earl, wanted to take me to the Recreational Vehicle and Rare Gem Show at the mall, and I couldn't get out the front door, so I decided to go out through the cellar doors, only I knocked over the water heater and the pipes broke and we had water all over Earl's pelt collection.

SO I said: "Earl, I'm going to try the Amazing New Brand New Amazing Scientific 30-Second Weight-Loss Program." I didn't think I could do it, but this program is so scientific that I lost 240 pounds in 30 seconds, right there in the basement. Now Earl is proud to show nude pictures of me to his friends.'"

I'm sure these weight-loss programs work, because they have pictorial proof, and, besides, the supermarket check-out newspapers have a reputation for thoroughly checking everything for accuracy before they print it. Which is a lot more than you can say for this publication.

Dentistry Self-Drilled

I bet you rarely stop to think how important your teeth are. This is good. America is in enough trouble as it is, what with inflation and all; we just can't afford to have people stopping to think how important their teeth are, especially on major highways.

Nevertheless, you owe a lot to your teeth. They are your best friends. Think about it: while you're out here, playing tennis and reading novels, they're sitting patiently in your mouth, a foul-smelling, disgusting place almost devoid of recreational facilities, dealing with Slim Jims and Cheez-its and the other crap you give them to chew.

You ought to apologize to your teeth for the way you treat them. You ought to go up to a mirror, right now, and bare your teeth and look them straight in their eyes and say: "I'm sorry." You may want to practice a bit so you can say this clearly with your teeth bared. Don't let the children see you.

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: "I don't have to apologize to my teeth. I take good care of my teeth."

That's what you think. That's what I thought, too, until I started going to the dentist again recently after a brief absence of about twelve years. I stopped going because I didn't trust him. For one thing, he wore an outfit that buttoned on the side, the kind the spaceship crews wear in low-budget science fiction movies. For another thing, he and his cohorts always left the room when they X-rayed me. They'd make up flimsy excuses, like "I have to go put my socks in the dryer," or "I think the cat is throwing up." Then they'd flip the X-ray switch and race out of the room, probably to a lead-lined concrete bunker.

When he came back, the dentist would jab me in the gums sixty or seventy times until my mouth was full of blood and I had to spit in what appeared to be a miniature toilet. Then he'd show me what he claimed was an X ray of my mouth, knowing full well I would not be able to distinguish an X ray of my mouth from a color slide of the Parthenon, and he'd tell me I had a cavity and he was going to fill it. I would tell him I hadn't noticed any so-called cavity, and that it was, after all, my mouth. And he would

give me this long routine about how if he didn't fill it all my teeth would fall out and I'd lose my job and end up drooling on myself in a gutter, which is what they taught him to say in dental school. Then he would spend several hours drilling a hole in my tooth.

Answer me this: A cavity is a hole in your teeth, right? So if the dentist is so upset about this hole in your teeth, why does he spend so much time making it bigger? Huh? Does he need more money so he can buy more space-uniform shirts?

Finally I decided I could save some money if I stopped going to the dentist, got a sharp implement and, in the privacy of my own home, jabbed myself in the gums a couple of times a year. I figured I could ward off cavities by brushing after every meal with an effective decay-preventive dentifrice. I mean, that's what they told us for years, right? "Brush your teeth after every meal," they said. Parents said it. Teachers said it. Bucky Beaver said it.

Never trust a talking beaver. I found this out the hard way when, after twelve years of brushing like a madman, I returned to the dentist. The Dental Hygienist looked at my mouth the way you would look at a full spittoon. "You haven't been flossing," she said.

It seems that while I was home jabbing myself in the gums, the Dental Community was losing its enthusiasm for brushing and getting into flossing. These days the Dental Community regards anybody who merely brushes as a real bozo. This is blatantly unfair. In all those years of going to school and watching Bucky Beaver and Mister Tooth Decay, I never heard one word about flossing.

Flossing does not come naturally to human beings. If the Good Lord had wanted us to floss our teeth, He would have given us less self-respect. But the Dental Community says we have to do it, because otherwise we'll get gum disease.

Pretty slick, isn't it? If we can't even see cavities, how the hell are we going to dispute them when they tell us we have gum disease?

I was about to point all this out to my dentist when he gave me this gas, nitrous oxide I believe, and all of a sudden I felt great. I began to really appreciate the Dental Community for coming up with flossing and all the other fine things it has done for me over the years. I even began to soften toward Bucky Beaver.

I think this was part of the plan.

Culture Staggers On

Art Cuts Really Sphinx

If you are a member of the private sector, you are going to have to start supporting the arts.

For the benefit of those of you who do not know what sector you belong to, here is a simple way to figure it out: If you get Presidents' Day, election day, Arbor Day, Columbus Day, your birthday, Groundhog Day, and Flag Day off, you belong to the government sector. Otherwise, you belong to the private sector, and, as I said, you will have to start supporting the arts, because the government sector is cutting back.

The government sector took over the arts a few years back because the private sector had dropped the ball. The problem was that the private sector consisted largely of common people who spent most of their time working and, as a result, never became cultured. Their concept of "art" involved flamingo-

shaped lawn ornaments, or pictures of dogs with actual working clocks in their stomachs. The only time that common people ever watched ballet was when it was on the Ed Sullivan show, and even then they watched it only because they knew it would last no more than three minutes and would be followed shortly by an act featuring monkeys wearing dresses.

This widespread lack of culture created a major problem for the few people who were interested in poetry, classical music, opera, ballet, sculpture, painting—in short, the real, serious, cultural, art-type activities that most people find fairly boring. The problem was that the common people would not voluntarily pay for these activities, so the only places where culture was available were:

Junior high schools, where, under state law, children are required to do cultural things, such as screech away on rented violins, and parents are required to watch them, and New York City, where there are so many people that you can get a paying crowd for virtually anything, including opera and live nude dog wrestling.

But other than that, art was pretty scarce. Then some cultured person came up with a brilliant plan: If common people wouldn't support art voluntarily, why not force them to support it? Now when I say "force," I'm not talking about just walking up to some common person and ordering him, at gunpoint, to attend an opera. What I'M talking about is getting the government to tax COMMON people, then use their money to put on an opera.

Actually, this is an old, tried-and-true way to support the arts, dating back to the ancient Egyptians. How do you think the Egyptians built the Sphinx? Surely, you don't think that a bunch of common Egyptians just got together one day and said: "Hey, why don't we build a Sphinx?" Of course not. Left to their own devices, the common Egyptians would have spent their time growing food. To get some real culture, to get the Sphinx, the Egyptians needed a government authority, someone with vision, someone with taste, someone with whips and spears.

Our government's approach to the arts is essentially the same, but less messy. Unlike the ancient Egyptians, we common people are not forced to attend cultural activities: we are merely forced to pay for them. This works out much better. You see, under the Egyptian method, you always had a bunch of sweating or dead Egyptians around your Sphinx; under our method, cultured people can have an opera in the Kennedy Center in Washington, safe in the knowledge that few, if any, of the common people who paid for it will show up to watch. After all, a lot of the common people live thousands of miles away; they couldn't attend even if they wanted to.

For a while there, our government was in the art business whole hog, forking over hundreds of millions of dollars for art. But now the program is in trouble. Jimmy Carter wanted to spend about \$300 million on art this year, but Ronald Reagan thinks it should spend only about half that, so he'll have more money to spend on exploding objects. Needless to say, the art officials are extremely upset. Their position is extremely logical: they argue that if the government is going to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on things designed to kill people, it should spend at least \$300 million for art that people don't want to see.

But it looks as though the art officials are going to lose, and that means that, unless somebody does something, art will fall back into the hands of the lawn-flamingo owners. So it's UP tO us public-spirited, private-sector people to pick up the ball. We've got to develop some way to make sure people attend operas and ballets, look at paintings, read poetry, and so on. Maybe we should set up a system patterned after volunteer fire departments: whenever anybody discovered a cultural activity, he could sound an alarm, and the public-spirited citizens in the area would go and watch it. If we all work

together, we might be able to keep art alive, even without the government. Maybe we could even build a sphinx.

Some Art, Some Art Not

I am extremely fond of art. Whenever I have a few spare moments, there's nothing I enjoy more than hauling out a batch of art and looking at it. This is probably because I was exposed to so much art when I was in grade school. At least once a year, the teachers would herd us kids into a bus and take us to a museum and expose us to thousands of square yards of old paintings. We were very impressed, particularly because many of these paintings featured enormous naked women, women with thighs the size of fully inflated life rafts, lounging around and eating fruit.

The reason that this theme is so common in old paintings is that years ago Europe was terrorized by packs of enormous naked women. They would stride into a town, munching on pears, and threaten to knock down the cathedral if their portraits weren't painted immediately. Eventually they were driven off by a particularly harsh winter, but their paintings are still popular today because they offer such a good value in terms of square yards of painting per dollar.

Which brings us to money. Money is very important to the art world, because without it we would have no way to know how good a particular piece of art is. For example, let's say that we want to decide which painting is better: the "Mona Lisa" by Leonardo da Vinci, or "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" by Rembrandt (whose first name was Boauregard, which is why he never used it). Now let's say that the list price on the "Mona Lisa" is \$36 million, whereas the price on "Aristotle etc." is \$12 million. This would tell your experienced art critic that the "Mona Lisa" is three times as good, artwise, as "Aristotle etc." and nearly six million times as good as those paintings they sell in shopping malls, the ones that feature children with enormous brown eyes who are supposed to look helpless and appealing but actually look like some sort of bizarre species of insect.

The History Of Art

The first art was created by primitive people, who made pots and plates with primitive decorations. They didn't realize this was art. They thought it was just pots and plates. Their problem was that seconds after they made a pot or plate, an archaeologist would race up and snatch it and put it in a museum. The primitive people tried all kinds of schemes to protect their pots and plates, including burying them, but the archaeologists would just dig them up. Finally, with nothing to cook in or eat from, the primitive people starved to death and became extinct.

The next big trend in art was painting, which was invented because wealthy people needed something to put on their walls. One famous painter, Michelangelo (first name, Buford), even painted on the ceiling. This was before the discovery of acoustical tiles. In those days, everybody painted the same subject, which was Mother and Child. That was a really popular item. Occasionally, an artist would try something different, such as Mother and Trowel, or Mother and Labrador Retriever, but they never sold.

After the Mother and Child Phase came the Enormous Naked Women Eating Fruit Phase, which was followed by the Just Plain Fruit with No Women of Any Kind Phase and the Famous Kings and Dukes Wearing Silly Outfits Phase. All of these phases were part of the Sharp and Clear School of painting,

which means that even though the subjects were boring, they were at least recognizable. The Sharp and Clear School ended with Vincent Van Gogh, who invented the Fuzzy but Still Recognizable School and cut off his ear. This led to the No Longer Recognizable at All School, and finally the Sharp and Clear Again but Mostly Just Rectangles School, which is the school that is popular today, except at shopping malls.

How To Appreciate Art

The number one rule of art appreciation is that you never ever bring up the issue of whether or not a particular piece of art is attractive. Let's say you're looking at a painting of two large green rectangles. If you say something like, "Those two large green rectangles are very attractive," people will realize immediately that you do not appreciate art. What you want to say is: "Using the tension created by the contrast in line, shape and tone, offset by the almost deliberately simplistic linearity of hue, the artist subtly, yet inevitably, leads the viewer to a greater awareness of the need for more controls over the acquisition and use of our nation's mineral resources, particularly zinc." This particular sentence will work on almost any brand of art except enormous naked women, who obviously have nothing to do with zinc.

Music To Get Rich By

Basically, there are two kinds of music: "Classical" music, which is the kind written by dead German guys and played by People wearing tuxedos. "Regular" music, which can be written by anybody and played by anybody and gets on the radio a lot.

If you want to make large sums of money, you should get into regular music. These days classical music is popular with only about three hundred people, the same ones who contribute voluntarily to public television. Classical music tends to go on for days, which is why it is played by "orchestras," or groups of four hundred fifty to five hundred people whose parents made them practice classical music when all the other kids were out learning how to french-kiss. Orchestra people divide up the labor: one group will play a batch of music or "movement," then everybody sits back and reads magazines from little magazine stands while the "conductor" consults his notes and decides which musicians will play next. Sometimes the conductor singles out a musician who has been chewing gum or fooling around and forces him or her to play all alone while the other musicians snicker. If you ever have to be in an orchestra, you should try to sit in back, near the guy who plays the triangle. You'll hardly ever get called on.

Music scholars divide orchestra instruments into five families:

Instruments You Blow into and Eventually Have to Get the Spit out of (tubas, whistles, cormorants, tribunes).

Instruments You Hit (drums, triangles, rhomboids, homophones).

Instruments That Are Easily Concealed (piccolos).

Furniture (pianos).

Instruments That Could Turn out to Be Worth a Million Skillion Dollars (violins). The really valuable violins are the ones made by Antonio Stradivarius, which are prized because they were made with

exquisite care and craftsmanship and each one contains just over seventeen ounces of pure heroin in a secret compartment which you open by pressing with your chin.

Classical music gradually lost popularity because it is too complicated: you need twenty-five or thirty skilled musicians just to hum it properly. So people began to develop regular music. The most profitable kind of regular music is rock ‘n’ roll. Rock ‘n’ roll comes from the blues, a kind of music developed by American slaves. It is called the “blues” because it is very sad. Evidently the slaves found slavery depressing. Blues lyrics generally go like this:

My woman she done left me

My children left me too

My mule done kicked my kidneys

And my income tax is due

For a long time, blues music was popular only with black people, who were then known as “Negroes.” Black blues musicians played in lowdown bars for very little money. Then, in the early 1950s, young white people got interested in the blues. They developed a modified version called “rock ‘n’ roll,” which became enormously popular and turned many of them into millionaires. They routinely paid homage to the black blues musicians who paved the way for them, who made it all possible, and who continued to play in lowdown bars for very little money.

The principal difference between rock ‘n’ roll and classical music is that your average piece of classical music has about a dozen melodies and no words, whereas your average rock ‘n’ roll song has one melody (sometimes less) and about a dozen words. When rock ‘n’ roll composers are in a hurry to finish songs so they can get to important luncheon dates, they sometimes make up some of the words. Take, for example, the words to the 1960s hit rock ‘n’ roll song “Sittin’ in La La”:

Sittin’ in la la waitin’ for my ya ya

Uh huh, uh huh

Sittin’ in la la waitin’ for my ya ya

Uh huh, uh huh

Probably the composer planned to go back and put in real words for “la la” and “ya ya,” but before he could get around to it somebody released the song and it sold several million records. Another example is “Land of a Thousand Dances,” whose composer evidently got called away to an urgent appointment after he had written only two words:

I said aa na aa aa aa Na aa na na na aa na na Na na na na

The other kinds of regular music you can make money from are country music, which is popular with people who like songs about drunken infidelity but requires singers with funny clothes and Southern accents; big-band music, which is popular with people who like big bands but requires big bands; and easy-listening music, which is popular in elevators and supermarkets but can be sung only by groups of heavily sedated suburbanites. You should steer clear of jazz, opera, folk, marching-band and bagpipe music: the market for these is minuscule. You will never see hordes of fans clamoring for the autograph of a bagpiper.

How To Read Music

Anyone can read music. It’s simply a matter of memorizing the various notes and musical signs. The

major notes are:

dum da de tra tra-la

The major musical signs are:

start of song

halfway through song

clap hands two-thirds of way through song

end of song

Prurient Interest Rate

I am opposed to pornography. First, let me make it clear that I believe if God wanted people to be seen naked, He would not have made so many of them unattractive. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to write about pornography, because it is directly related to the increase in drug abuse, unemployment, international terrorism, all-polyester clothing, and, above all, violence. This was a far less violent country in the days when pornography was illegal, unless you count the Civil War. Pornography is like tooth decay, eating slowly away at the molars of our morals, and if it is not stopped we will wind up as a toothless nation, gumming at the raw meat of international competition while the drool of decadence dribbles down our collective chin and messes up the clean tablecloth of our children's futures. The dictionary tells us that the word "pornography" comes from the words "Porno," meaning "publications," and "graphy," meaning "that adolescent males gather around in junior high school halls and snicker at." The problem is that this simple definition is inadequate for the legal authorities, who need something less comprehensible. So for the past twenty years or so, the legal authorities have spent enormous amounts of time and effort gathering up and scrutinizing dirty books, trying to come up with a suitable definition of pornography so they can throw people in jail for selling it. The dirty books are scrutinized first by the police, then by the district attorney, then by a local judge and jury, then by some appeals judges, and then finally, when the really pornographic pages are dog-eared from all this intense legal scrutiny, the books are shipped in unmarked crates to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the justices sit around in their robes and discuss them:

CHIEF JUSTICE: Okay, we have here the case of Nebraska v. The Huge Boar Adult Book Store and Health Spa, which is accused of selling an illustrated publication entitled Young Teenaged Babysitters with Flawless Skin Go to Daytona Beach to eight undercover agents on July 3, 1972. Have you all scrutinized the evidence?

OTHER JUSTICES (crowd around the evidence): Not yet! Not yet! We're still scrutinizing, and ... My God! Look at this photograph! It looks like a—No, it can't be—Yes it is! It's a ...

CHIEF JUSTICE: Now as I interpret the First Amendment, the issue here is ... OTHER JUSTICES: It's a flamingo! Incredible! I mean, I know flamingos thrive in captivity, but I had no idea that ... CHIEF JUSTICE: ... whether the constitutional guarantee of free speech conflicts with the ... OTHER JUSTICES: How do you suppose they got all that Cool Whip to adhere to the ceilings?

After a few sessions like this, the justices render a decision, which says: "Having reviewed the evidence in this case, the court finds that, inasmuch as the prothonotary nature of the alleged violation precludes a pro forma elucidation of its meretriciousness or meritoriousness per se, it cannot be determined whether such alleged violation may or may not be deleterious without a heck of a lot more

scrutiny by the members of the court.”

Since nobody ever has the vaguest idea what the justices mean, their decisions always set off a new round of arrests and scrutiny throughout the legal system, which by now has accumulated over thirty million cubic yards of evidence suspected of being pornographic. Eventually, the national stockpile will get so large that the authorities will have to start giving pornography away to poor people, the way they did with cheese.

Years ago, the pornography industry was fairly small, because people were ashamed to be caught reading dirty books and magazines. Then along came Hugh Hefner, who had a dream: to publish a cultured, sophisticated magazine, a magazine with in-depth interviews of influential people, with top-notch fiction, with thought-provoking articles, with pictures of large-breasted women either naked or dressed up as bunny rabbits. The beauty of Hugh’s idea was that you could pretend you were buying his magazine to read the thought-provoking articles. You could grab an issue of Playboy and say “I’m very eager to read this interview with Albert Schweitzer,” knowing full well that it is very difficult to read any magazine when you hold it sideways, which is how people generally hold Playboy.

Hugh’s mistake is that he started to believe that Playboy really was a cultured, sophisticated magazine, and he started writing these enormous, droning articles about his philosophy of life. This was a stupid mistake. I mean, it’s not as if thousands of Playboy readers wrote in and said: “Hey, Hugh, enough with all these big-breasted naked women. What’s your philosophy of life?” But he published his philosophy anyway, and it took up many pages of valuable space that could have been used for naked women. Soon competitors sprung up, and now you can’t walk into a convenience store without seeing dozens of magazines like Hustler, Rogue, Gallery, Newsweek. Newsweek got into the market just recently, when it published a picture of a semi-naked woman on the cover. It’s a small start, but if it works out, I suspect that in a couple of years Newsweek will start telling us its philosophy of life, and people will be holding it sideways. If it plays its cards right, it might even get scrutinized by the Supreme Court.

Compressed Classics

One effective technique for avoiding boring conversations on airplanes is to pull an extremely sharp ax Out Of your briefcase and spend the entire flight fondling it and muttering. Of course, to get the ax onto the airplane, you’ll have to convince the airport security people that you’re not a hijacker:

SECURITY PERSON: Excuse Me, sir, but there’s an extremely sharp ax in your briefcase.

YOU: Yes, I need it for my business. I’m an ax murderer.

SECURITY PERSON: Oh, okay. Sorry to inconvenience you, but we have to be on the lookout for hijackers. It’s for your own protection.

YOU: Of course. Keep up the good work.

The only problem with the ax approach is that it tends to make the flight attendants skittery, and you may be forced to waste valuable time dealing with large numbers of armed law-enforcement personnel after you land.

SID: the technique I use to ward off boring conversations is to carry a book, which I pull out the instant a boring person tries to talk to me:

BORING PERSON: Hi. Where are you headed?

ME: Detroit.

BORING PERSON: No kidding? That's where I'm headed.

ME: What an astounding coincidence. And here we are, sitting together on a plane bound for Detroit, the very place we're both headed.

I think I'll read my book now.

The problem here is that you have to actually read the book, which may turn out to be even more boring than the person you're sitting next to, because, as a rule, books contain far too many words. For example, I was recently on a flight to St. Louis, unaware that my suitcase was going to get off at Indianapolis (apparently on the theory that all Midwestern cities are basically the same), and I read a new book about James Bond, the famous spy. I thought there would be no new James Bond books, because the person who wrote them is dead, but evidently the folks in the publishing world decided that if the original author was inconsiderate enough to die, then by God they would find somebody else to write his books for him. I think they're onto something. I think they ought to use the same approach with other famous dead authors, such as William Shakespeare:

The Warble, Peddle, and Leek Publishing Company proudly announces *Romeo and Juliet II*—a sweeping saga of lust and passion that begins where the best-selling original left off. The story begins with the discovery that the two lovers didn't really stab themselves hard enough to die, and follows them through their lustful and passionate efforts to escape the clutches of their warring families and find a peaceful life of lust and passion! Now on sale at every drugstore and supermarket in the world.

Better than the original!—The Bullock, Missouri, *Herald Gazette Chronicle Bugle*.

Lustful ... passionate!—*Field and Stream*.

A recently published book!—*The New York Times*.

Well anyway, I was reading this James Bond book, and right away I realized that, like most books, it had too many words. The plot was the same one that all James Bond books have: An evil person tries to blow up the world, but James Bond kills him and his henchmen and makes love to several attractive women. There, that's it: twenty-four words. But the guy who wrote the book took thousands of words to say it. I mean, he never just writes: "Bond walked into the bedroom." Instead, he writes:

"Bond eased the bedroom door latch open gently, praying that the click of the ZuchSweiss stainless steel door latch would not disturb the other inhabitants, and cautiously eyed the room, which he noted was paneled with European birch, or *Betula verrucosa*, probably from the Vorarlburg region of western Austria." And it goes on like this for pages before Bond gets around to killing a henchman. I could barely wade through it.

I was tempted to start chatting with the person next to me about how we were both going to St. Louis.

And it's not just spy novels. Most books are too long. I remember in college when I had to read *The Brothers Karamazov* by the famous Russian alcoholic Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It's about these two brothers who kill their father. Or maybe only one of them kills the father. It's almost impossible to tell, because what they mostly do is talk for nearly a thousand pages. If all Russians talked as much as the brothers Karamazov did, I don't see how they found time to become a major world power.

Our literature professor told us that Dostoyevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* to raise the question of whether there is a God. So what I want to know is, why didn't Dostoyevsky just come right out and ask? Why didn't he write:

Dear Reader,

Is there a God? It sure beats the heck out of me.

Sincerely,

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Here are some other famous works of literature that could easily have been summarized in a few words:

Moby-Dick—Don't mess around with large whales, because they symbolize nature and will kill you.

A Tale of Two Cities—French people are crazy. Every poem ever written—Poets are extremely sensitive.

Think of all the valuable time we would save if authors got right to the point this way. People would be able to read several dozen great books in a matter of minutes. College would take about two weeks. We'd have more time for more important activities, such as reading newspaper columns.

A Little Learning

Basic Frog Glop

A distinguished, high-level, blue-ribbon federal panel of people wearing suits recently released a report concluding that (and here I quote directly): “The American public-education system has done just about as good a job of educating the nation's children as might be expected from a bucket of live bait.” The report presented some shocking statistics to support this finding:

For the past eleven years, American students have scored lower on standardized tests than European students, Japanese students and certain species of elk; Seventy-eight percent of America's school principals have, at some point in their careers, worn white belts or shoes to school; Nobody in the entire United States remembers the exact date of the signing of the Treaty of Ghent.

The bottom line is that the educational system, which costs over \$200 billion a year, is an unmitigated disaster. This is good news for everybody. It's good news for those of us who went to high school back when the schools were supposed to be better, because we can feel superior to today's students. When we go to shopping malls and see batches of teenagers standing around and laughing in a carefree teenaged manner, we can reassure ourselves by saying: “Those kids may be attractive and slim and healthy, and they may have their entire lives ahead of them and no gum problems whatsoever, but by God they never learned how to conjugate the verb ‘to squat’ in Latin, the way I had to when I was in school.”

The panel's report is also good news for the kids, because it confirms their suspicion that they wouldn't have learned anything even if they had been paying attention in class instead of trying to see who could most accurately guess how large, in square inches, the sweat stain under the teacher's left armpit would be by the time the bell rang.

But most of all, the panel's report is good news for the teachers, school administrators and other members of the American educational establishment, because as the people most responsible for screwing up the educational system in the first place, they will naturally expect to be given a great deal more money to fix it.

So everybody is pleased as punch to have blue-ribbon federal proof that the school system stinks on ice, and everybody is busy coming up with helpful suggestions for making the schools good again, the way they were when they were turning out real geniuses like the people who are making the suggestions. For example, President Reagan checked in from the planet Saturn with the suggestion that

we need to go back to voluntary prayer in the schools. Now I think we can all agree that making our children pray voluntarily will certainly help, but we need to do more. We need to get Back to the Basics, back to the kinds of learning activities you and I engaged in.

For example, every student in the country should be required to read *Ethan Frome* unless he or she has a written doctor's excuse. As you no doubt vaguely recall, *Ethan Frome* is a book you had to read when you studied early American novels because it turns out there were hardly any good early American novels. As I remember the plot, Ethan Frome falls in love with this woman, so they decide to crash into a tree on a sled. The sled crash is the only good part, and it lasts only about a page. But the way I look at it, if I had to read *Ethan Frome*, I don't see why these little snots today should get out of it.

They should also be forced to disassemble frogs, the way we did in biology. Remember? You'd slice your frog up with a razor and root around inside, looking for the heart and the kidney and the other frog organs that were clearly drawn in several colors in the biology textbook, until eventually you realized that you must have been issued a defective frog, because all you could ever find inside was frog glop. So you just poked at the glop for a while and then drew the heart, etc., from the biology textbook. This taught you about life. When I was in school, I also had to do a worm, although I'm not suggesting that all of today's students should have to do worms. Maybe just the really disruptive ones.

So that's my back-to-basics program: *Ethan Frome*, frogs, and maybe some class discussion of the cosine. And any kid who doesn't know the exact date of the signing of the Treaty of Ghent (December 24, 1814) will be held back for another year, or, if the Russians appear to be getting ahead of us in space again, shot.

Schools Not So Smart

One of the more popular ways to feel superior these days is to complain about the schools. We adults just love to drone on about how much better educated we are than our kids. We say stuff like: "These kids today. They get out of high school and they don't even know how to read and write. Why, in my day we read *Moby-Dick* eighty-four times in the fourth grade alone." And so on. Adults just eat this kind of talk right up.

Well, I hate to disillusion everybody, but it's all a crock. We aren't better educated than our kids: they're just less drivel-oriented.

The main evidence adults offer to prove kids are less educated is the fact that Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores are declining. You remember SAT'S. You got your number-two pencils and sat in the cafeteria for two hours answering questions like this:

Fred wants to redo his bathroom in pink wallpaper, so he invites Sam over to help. If Fred's bathroom is eight feet by five feet and has a seven-foot ceiling, and each roll of wallpaper is 32 inches wide, how long will Sam take to realize there is something just a little bit strange about Fred?

SAT tests are designed by huge panels of experts in education and psychology who work for years to design tests in which not one single question measures any bit of knowledge that anyone might actually need in the real world. We should applaud kids for getting lower scores.

When you and I were in high school, we thought we had to learn all that crap so we could get into college and get good jobs and houses with driveways. The problem is that so many of us went to college

that college degrees became as common, and as valuable, as bowling trophies. Kids today are smart enough not to waste brain cells trying to figure out how long Train A Will take to overtake Train B just so they can go to college. That's why so many colleges are desperate for students. Any day now you'll be watching a late movie on UHF television and you'll see this ad:

"Hi! I'm Huntingdon Buffington Wellington the Fourth, dean of admissions at Harvard University. I'll bet more than once you've said:

'I sure would like to go to a big-time Ivy League university, but I lack the brains, the background, and the requisite number of dinner jackets.' Well, this is your lucky day, because Harvard University is having its semiannual Standards Reduction Days. That's right: we're admitting people we once wouldn't have allowed to work in our boiler room. And for the first one hundred applicants who call our toll-free number, we're offering absolutely free this honorary degree written in genuine Latin words."

Another reason you shouldn't feel better educated than your kids is that almost everything your teachers told you is a lie. Take the continents. I bet they told you Europe was one continent, and Asia was another. Well, any moron with a map can plainly see Europe and Asia are on the same continent. I don't know who started the lunatic rumor that they were two continents. I suspect it was the French, because they wouldn't want to be on the same continent with, say, the Mongolians.

And what about those maps they showed you? Greenland looked enormous, bigger than Russia. If Greenland were really that big, it would be a Major Power. All the other nations would stay up late nights worrying about it. But the truth is Greenland is smallish and insignificant. The other nations rarely even invite it to parties.

So don't think you're so smart.

Why We Don't Read

Every so often I see a news article in which some educator gets all wrought up about the fact that people don't read books anymore:

WASHINGTON (Associated Press)—Noted educator Dr. Belinda

A. Burgeon-Wainscot, speaking before the American Association of People Who Use the Title

'Doctor' Even Though They're Not Physicians, but Merely Graduate School Graduates, Which Are As Common These Days As Milkweed Pollen

(AAPIVUTDETTANPBMGSGWAACTDAMP), said today that people don't read books anymore. At least that's what we here at the Associated Press think she said. She spoke for about two hours, and used an awful lot of big words, and frankly we dozed off from time to time.

Well, I am not a noted educator, but I know why most of us don't read books. We don't read books because, from the very beginning of our school careers, noted educators have made us read books that are either boring or stupid and often both. Here's what I had to read in first grade:

"Look, Jane," said Dick. "Look Look Look. Look."

"Oh," said Jane. "Oh. Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh. Look."

"Oh," said Spot. "Oh my God."

Now I'm not claiming that we first graders were a bunch of geniuses, but we didn't spend the bulk of the day saying "Look," either. We thought Dick and Jane were a drag, so many of us turned to comic books, which were much more interesting and informative. When I was in first grade, the Korean War

was going on, So I read comic books with names like

“GI Combat Death Killers,” featuring American soldiers with chin stubble who fought enemy Communist orientals with skin the color of school buses. These comic books had lots of new and exciting words:

“Commie attack! Hit the dirt!”

BUDDA-BUDDA-BUDDA-BUDDA

“Grenade! Grenade!”

WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMKABOOOOOOOM

“Joe! They got Joe! Eat lead, you reds!”

BUDDA-BUDDA-BUDDA-BUDDA-BUDDA

“Aieeeeeeeeeeeee.”

And so on. This is how we developed our language skills. If we had stuck with Dick and Jane, we’d have sounded like morons.

After the first grade, our schoolbooks got longer, but they did not get more interesting. The history books were the worst. Take, for example, the Civil War. I think we can safely assume that the Civil War was fairly lively, but you would never know this from reading elementary school history books:

THE CIVIL WAR

“The Civil War was very serious. It was caused by slavery and states’ rights, and it resulted in the Gettysburg Address.

Discussion Questions: How serious was the Civil War? Would you feel nervous if you had to give the Gettysburg Address? Explain.”

The other big problem with history textbooks was that they always started at the dawn of Civilization and ended around 1948. So we’d spend the first three months of each school year reading about the ancient

SUMerians at a leisurely pace. Then the teacher would realize that time was running short, and we’d race through the rest of history, covering World War II in a matter of minutes, and getting to Harry Truman on the last day. Then the next year, we’d go back to the ancient Sumerians. After a few years of this, we began to see history as an endlessly repeating, incredibly dull cycle, starting with Sumerians and leading inexorably to Harry Truman, then going back again. No wonder so many of us turned to loud music and drugs.

Things were a little better in English class, because we didn’t have to read the same books over and over. On the other hand, we had to read

a lot of books nobody would want to read even once, such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, which was written by James Fenimore Cooper, although I seriously doubt that Cooper himself ever read it. We also read a batch of plays by Shakespeare, which are very entertaining when you watch actors perform them but are almost impossible to understand when you read them:

FLAVORUS: Forsooth ‘twixt consequence doest thou engage? Wouldst thou thine bodkin under thee enrage?

HORACLES: In faith I wouldst not e’er intent fulfill, For o’er petards a dullard’s loath to till.

(Shakespeare wrote this way because English was not his native language. He was Sumerian.)

Anyway, that’s why I think people don’t read books anymore. The sad thing is that there are many fine books around, just waiting to be read. You can see them on convenient display racks at any of the better supermarkets; they have titles like *The Goodyear Blimp Diet* and *Evil Nazi War Criminals Get an*

Atomic Bomb and Threaten to Destroy Uruguay. These books are easy to read, and minutes after you read one you're ready for another. What we need is some kind of federal program to get people interested in them. Maybe the President could read some of them aloud on national television (he is very good at reading aloud). Or maybe we could give people an additional tax exemption for every book report they attach to their income tax returns. Whatever we do, we should do it soon, to get people out of the habit of getting all their information from television and poorly researched newspaper columns.

What Is And Ain't Grammatical

I cannot overemphasize the importance of good grammar.

What a crock. I could easily overemphasize the importance of good grammar. For example, I could say: "Bad grammar is the leading cause of slow, painful death in North America," or "Without good grammar, the United States would have lost World War II."

The truth is that grammar is not the most important thing in the world. The Super Bowl is the most important thing in the world. But grammar is still important. For example, suppose you are being interviewed for a job as an airplane pilot, and your prospective employer asks you if you have any experience, and you answer: "Well, I ain't never actually flied no actual airplanes or nothing, but I got several pilot-style hats and several friends who I like to talk about airplanes with."

If you answer this way, the prospective employer will immediately realize that you have ended your sentence with a preposition. (What you should have said, of course, is "several friends with who I like to talk about airplanes.") So you will not get the job, because airline pilots have to use good grammar when they get on the intercom and explain to the passengers that, because of high winds, the plane is going to take off several hours late and land in Pierre, South Dakota, instead of Los Angeles.

We did not always have grammar. In medieval England, people said whatever they wanted, without regard to rules, and as a result they sounded like morons. Take the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who Couldn't even spell his first name right. He wrote a large poem called Canterbury Tales, in which people from various professions—knight, monk, miller, weever, riveter, steeler, diver, stevedore, spinnaker, etc.—and on and on and on like this:

In a somer sesun whon softe was the sunne

I kylled a youn e birde ande I ate it on a bun

When Chaucer's poem was published, everybody read it and said: "My God, we need some grammar around here." So they formed a Grammar Commission, which developed the parts of speech, the main ones being nouns, verbs, predicants, conjectures, particles, proverbs, adjoiners, coordinates, and rebuttals. Then the commission made up hundreds and hundreds of grammar rules, all of which were strictly enforced.

When the colonists came to America, they rebelled against British grammar. They openly used words like "ain't" and "finalize," and when they wrote the Declaration of Independence they deliberately misspelled many words. Thanks to their courage, today we Americans have only two rules of grammar:

Rule 1. The word "I'me" is always incorrect.

Most of us learn this rule as children, from our mothers. We say things like: "Mom, can Bobby and me roll the camping trailer over Mrs. Johnson's cat?" And our mothers say: "Remember your grammar, dear. You mean: 'Can Bobby and I roll the camping trailer over Mrs. Johnson's cat?' Of course you can,

but be home by dinnertime.”

The only exception to this rule is in formal business writing, where instead of “I” you must use “the undersigned.” For example, this business letter is incorrect:

“Dear Hunky-Dory Canned Fruit Company:

A couple days ago my wife bought a can of your cling peaches and served them to my mother who has a weak heart and she damn near died when she bit into a live grub. If I ever find out where you live, I am gonna whomp you on the head with a ax handle.”

This should be corrected as follows:

“If the undersigned ever finds out where you live, the undersigned is gonna whomp you on the head with a ax handle.”

Rule 2. You’re not allowed to split infinitives.

An infinitive is the word “to” and whatever comes right behind it, such as “to a tee,” “to the best of my ability” ... “tomato,” etc. Splitting an infinitive is putting something between the “to” and the other words. For example, this is incorrect:

“Hey man, you got any, you know, spare change you could give to, like, me?”

The correct version is:

spare change you could, like, give to me?”

The advantage of American English is that, because there are so few rules, practically anybody can learn to speak it in just a few minutes. The disadvantage is that Americans generally sound like jerks, whereas the British sound really smart, especially to Americans. That’s why Americans are so fond of those British dramas they’re always showing on public television, the ones introduced by Alistair Cooke. Americans love people who talk like Alistair Cooke. He could introduce old episodes of “Hawaii Five-O” and Americans would think they were extremely enlightening.

So the trick is to use American grammar, which is simple, but talk with a British accent, which is impressive. This technique is taught at all your really snotty private schools, where the kids learn to sound like Elliot Richardson. Remember Elliot? He sounded extremely British, and as a result he got to be Attorney General, Secretary of State, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Vice President at the same time.

You can do it, too. Practice in your home, then approach someone on the street and say: “Tally-ho, old chap. I would consider it a great honour if you would favour me with some spare change.” You’re bound to get quick results.

It Takes A Lot Of Gaul

One of the most useless classes I ever took in high school, ranking right up there with calculus, was French. I took several years of French, and I learned hundreds of phrases, not one of which I would ever actually want to say to anybody. For example, my French teachers insisted that when I met a French person I should say “Comment allez-vous?” It turns out that this means “How do you go?” which is not the kind of thing you say when you want to strike someone as being intelligent. Your average French person already thinks most Americans are idiots, and you’re not going to improve his opinion much if you barge up to him on some Paris street and start spewing high school French phrases:

YOU: Comment allez vous? (“How do you go?”)

FRENCH PERSON: Je vais A pied, evidentment. Vous devez avoir les cerveaux dune truite. (“I go on foot, obviously. You must have the brains of a trout.”)

YOU: est la bibliotheque? (“Where is the library?”)

FRENCH PERSON: Partez, s’il vous plait. J’ai un fusil. (“Please go away. I have a gun.”)

My wife didn’t do any better in high school French. She learned to say “Je me suis casse la jambe” (“I have broken my leg”) and “Elle nest pas jolie” (“She is not pretty”). What on earth is she supposed to do with these phrases? I mean, suppose she does go to France and break her leg:

MY WIFE: Je Me suis casse la jambe. (“I have broken my leg.”)

FRENCH BYSTANDERS: C’est dommage. (“What a pity.”)

MY WIFE: Elle nest pas jolie. (“She is not pretty.”)

FRENCH BYSTANDERS: Bien, excusez-nous pour vivre. Vous netes pas un grand prix vous-meme. (“Well, excuse us for living. You are no great prize yourself.”)

My wife would never get an ambulance that way. She’d be lucky if the bystanders didn’t spit on her.

Despite the fact that the teacher insisted on making me speak like a fool, I stuck with high school French, because at the time the only alternative was Latin, which is even more worthless. For one thing, everybody who speaks Latin is dead. For another thing, all you ever read in Latin class is Caesar’s account of the Gallic Wars, in which Caesar drones on and on about tramping around Gaul. These had to be the dumbest wars in history, which is why finally the Romans got so bored that they let the empire collapse and quit speaking Latin. In fact, they gave up on spoken language altogether, and today their descendants communicate by means of hand gestures.

When I got to college, I briefly considered taking Chinese or Russian, but abandoned this notion when I discovered that the Russians and the Chinese use Communist alphabets. I also rejected German, because it is too bulky. For example, the German word for “cat” is

“einfuhrungaltfriesischenspraakuntworterbuchgegenwart.” It can take up to two days to order lunch in German.

The result of all this is that I know very little of any foreign language, and what I do know is either useless or embarrassing. Most Americans are in the same situation. Fortunately, you don’t really need another language, because, as you know if you have ever traveled abroad, virtually all foreign persons speak English. In fact, I sometimes suspect that there are no foreign languages, that foreign persons really speak English all the time and just pretend to speak foreign languages so they can amuse themselves by conning dumb American tourists into saying things like “How do you go?”

So if you plan to travel abroad, you should not waste your time learning some foreign language that could well turn out to be fraudulent. Instead, you should practice pronouncing, in a very loud, clear voice, certain useful English phrases for travelers. Here are the main ones:

“Do you speak English?”

“Thank God. Where can I find a bathroom?”

“Is that one of those bathrooms where you wind up standing on some street corner in a structure that offers no more privacy than a beach umbrella?”

“Thank God. Will the bathroom have a squat female attendant who will watch my every move lest I leave without giving her a tip, even though the bathroom has obviously not been cleaned once since it was built by Visigoths more than twelve thousand years ago?”

“Thank God. Say, you speak pretty good English, for a foreign person.”

These phrases will take care of your basic needs abroad, and the fact that you have taken the time to

learn to pronounce them loudly and clearly will leave a lasting impression on your foreign hosts.

How To Trap A Zoid

We should all be grateful that we have mathematics. For example, without mathematics, it would be almost impossible to figure out what size tip you should leave. Even with mathematics, this is very difficult. The mathematical formula for tipping, which was discovered by Sir Isaac Newton, states that the tip equals 15 percent of the bill, but unfortunately the bill is always \$17.43, and nobody has the vaguest idea what 15 percent of \$17.43 is. The finest brains in the country have been working on this problem for years, using large computers, and they have yet to come up with an answer. So most of us wind up tipping a random amount of money, usually \$3.50, which we increase slightly if the waiter performs an extra service, such as not spitting in the food. And that's just one of the ways we use mathematics in our everyday lives.

Mathematics got started in ancient Egypt, when the ancient Egyptians discovered the numbers three and eight. They used these numbers to develop the mathematical formulas for the pyramids, which were actually supposed to be spherical. Eventually people in other countries discovered more numbers, and today we have more than ten thousand of them.

After the discovery of numbers, the next major stride in mathematics came when the ancient Greeks discovered the hypotenuse. The Greeks used the hypotenuse to manufacture right triangles for export to other countries. Included free with each triangle was a copy of the famous Pythagorean Theorem (named for its discoverer, Bob Theorem), which states: "Some of the squares of the opposite sides are equal to 14.6

percent of your grossly adjusted annual unearned interest, unless there are two or more runners on base at the time." To this very day, children memorize the Pythagorean Theorem in school, which accounts for their behavior.

The ancient Greeks made so much money with the right triangle that they developed a whole line of mathematical items, such as the rhomboid, the pentagon, the diameter, the parabola, the hyperbole, the irrational number, the cube, the really deranged number, and the square root. In fact, the ancient Greeks developed all the really popular items; everything developed since then has failed miserably. Take algebra. I don't know who dreamed up algebra, but whoever it was obviously had a lot of time to waste, because it is utterly useless. In algebra class, day after day, the teacher would write something like this on the blackboard:

$$4x + 2 = 14$$

Then he would ask us what x stood for. It turns out that it stood for 3, but how the hell were we supposed to know that? He was the one who dreamed up x in the first place, and it seemed grossly unfair for him to expect us to know what he was thinking of at the time. And to make matters worse, the next day he would have x equal some other number, such as 4, depending on his mood. I spent an entire year in algebra class, and to this day I don't have the faintest notion what x stands for, which is why I hardly ever use it for anything.

Calculus is even worse. When I went to college, all of us freshmen had to take a semester of calculus. It was like a fraternity initiation. The professor, who wore a bow tie and grew up on another planet, would start the class with a statement like this: "Let us consider the problem of a helix uncoiling

in n dimensions.” He never told us why this was a problem, or why anybody would want to consider it even if it was. He would merely turn around and start filling the blackboard with alien symbols, and he would keep it up until it was time to leave. Every now and then he would give us a test, and I always got a zero. In fact,

“zero” was the only mathematical concept I ever understood in calculus class.

I decided to quit calculus the day I stabbed myself in the head with Jeff White’s pencil. Jeff sat next to me in class, and to amuse ourselves while the professor was writing alien symbols on the blackboard we would play childish pranks on each other. One day Jeff tried to knock my books off my desk, so I grabbed them with one hand and, with the other hand, snatched Jeff’s pencil, which I attempted to break by smashing it against my head, only I didn’t get the angle right, so I ended up driving the point into my skull, where it broke off. This created quite a commotion, but the professor was deeply engrossed in the problem of a trapezoid rotating in y dimensions, and he didn’t even notice the problem of a student with a pencil point lodged in his skull. So Jeff and I just got up and walked over to the infirmary.

The nurse was very suspicious. She said: “Are you telling me that you stabbed yourself in the head with a pencil?” Then she looked very suspiciously at Jeff. Jeff said, defensively: “Really. He stabbed himself.” And the nurse said: “Why would anybody stab himself with a pencil?” And so I stared suspiciously at Jeff, and said: “Yeah, why would I stab myself with a pencil?”

Anyway, the nurse got the pencil point out of my skull, but I didn’t go back to calculus class ever again. Jeff dropped out of college a short while later, although I’m pretty sure this had nothing to do with the pencil incident. I suspect it had a lot more to do with calculus.

College Admissions

Many of you young persons out there are seriously thinking about going to college. (That is, of course, a lie. The only things you young persons think seriously about are loud music and sex. Trust me: these are closely related to college.)

College is basically a bunch of rooms where you sit for roughly two thousand hours and try to memorize things. The two thousand hours are spread out over four years; you spend the rest of the time Sleeping and trying to get dates.

Basically, you learn two kinds of things in college:

Things you will need to know in later life (two hours). These include how to make collect telephone calls and get beer and crepe-paper stains out of your pajamas. Things you will not need to know in later life (1,998 hours). These are the things you learn in classes whose names end in—ology,—osophy,—istry,—ics, and so on. The idea is, you memorize these things, then write them down in little exam books, then forget them. If you fail to forget them, you become a professor and have to stay in college for the rest of your life.

It’s very difficult to forget everything. For example, when I was in college, I had to memorize—don’t ask me why—the names of three metaphysical poets other than John Donne. I have managed to forget one of them, but I still remember that the other two were named Vaughan and Crashaw. Sometimes, when I’m trying to remember something important like whether my wife told me to get tuna packed in oil or tuna packed in water, Vaughan and Crashaw just pop up in my mind, right there in the supermarket. It’s a terrible waste of brain cells.

After you've been in college for a year or so, you're supposed to choose a major, which is the subject you intend to memorize and forget the most things about. Here is a very important piece of advice: Be sure to choose a major that does not involve Known Facts and Right Answers.

This means you must not major in mathematics, physics, biology, or chemistry, because these subjects involve actual facts. If, for example, you major in mathematics, you're going to wander into class one day and the professor will say: "Define the cosine integer of the quadrant of a rhomboid binary axis, and extrapolate your result to five significant vertices." If you don't come up with exactly the answer the professor has in mind, you fail. The same is true of chemistry: if you write in your exam book that carbon and hydrogen combine to form oak, your professor will flunk you. He wants you to come up with the same answer he and all the other chemists have agreed on. Scientists are extremely snotty about this.

So you should major in subjects like English, philosophy, psychology, and sociology—subjects in which nobody really understands what anybody else is talking about, and which involve virtually no actual facts. I attended classes in all these subjects, so I'll give you a quick overview of each:

ENGLISH: This involves writing papers about long books you have read little snippets of just before class. Here is a tip on how to get good grades on your English papers: Never say anything about a book that anybody with any common sense would say. For example, suppose you are studying Moby-Dick. Anybody with any common sense would say Moby-Dick is

a big white whale, since the characters in the book refer to it as a big white whale roughly eleven thousand times. So in your paper, you say Moby-Dick is actually the Republic of Ireland. Your professor, who is sick to death of reading papers and never liked Moby-Dick anyway, will think you are enormously creative. If you can regularly come up with lunatic interpretations of simple stories, you should major in English.

PHILOSOPHY: Basically, this involves sitting in a room and deciding there is no such thing as reality and then going to lunch. You should major in philosophy if you plan to take a lot of drugs.

PSYCHOLOGY: This involves talking about rats and dreams. Psychologists are obsessed with rats and dreams. I once spent an entire semester training a rat to punch little buttons in a certain sequence, then training my roommate to do the same thing. The rat learned much faster. My roommate is now a doctor.

Studying dreams is more fun. I had one professor who claimed everything we dreamed about—tractors, Arizona, baseball, frogs—actually represented a sexual organ. He was very insistent about this. Nobody wanted to sit near him. If you like rats or dreams, and above all if you dream about rats, you should major in psychology.

SOCIOLOGY: For sheer lack of intelligibility, sociology is far and away the number one subject. I sat through hundreds of hours of sociology courses, and read gobs of sociology writing, and I never once heard or read a coherent statement. This is because sociologists want to be considered scientists, so they spend most of their time translating simple, obvious observations into a scientific-sounding code. If you plan to major in sociology, you'll have to learn to do the same thing. For example, suppose you have observed that children cry when they fall down. You should write: "Methodological observation of the sociometrical behavior tendencies of prematurated isolates indicates that a causal relationship exists between groundward tropism and lachrimatory, or

'crying,' behavior forms." If you can keep this up for fifty or sixty pages, you will get a large government grant.

Scientific Stuff

Barry's Key To Life

Today's Scientific Question is: Just what the heck is Life, anyway? And where does it come from? I mean, you know?

Answer. Ancient Man tried for thousands of years to explain Life. Ancient Man would do anything to avoid honest work. Ancient Woman would yell at him: "Don't forget to make pointed stones to stab the saber-toothed tiger with" or "Don't forget to migrate to North America" and he would say "I can't right now, dear, I'm trying to explain Life."

Over the years, Man came up with many explanations for life, all of them stupid. In fact, when you get right down to it, almost every explanation Man came up with for anything until about 1926 was stupid. I bet kids would be able to get from kindergarten through high school in about thirty-five minutes if we stopped making them memorize all the drivel Ancient Man came up with about the gods and goddesses and why the moon goes through phases and so on.

Anyway, Modern Science, using all the sophisticated analytical tools at its disposal, has discarded all the myths and come up with a definition that covers all forms of Life:

Life is anything that dies when you stomp on it.

By this definition, the amoeba, the mango, the frog, the squirrel, the bear, the begonia, and many lawyers are forms of Life. But this just begs the question, Where does Life come from? And how can the mango, which clearly has some value, be related to the lawyer?

Modern Scientists explain all this with the Theory of Evolution. They say that at one time the earth was nothing but a bunch of slime and ooze, sort of like Bayonne, New Jersey. Then lightning struck some chemicals and formed one-celled creatures (am I going too fast here?), which floated around for several million years until the smart ones decided to organize the dumb ones into higher forms of life:

SMART CELLS: What do you say we evolve into a higher form of life?

DUMB CELLS: Sounds good to us.

SMART CELLS: Fine. We'll be the brain. You be the sphincter.

And so they crawled out on land. Then they started adapting to the environment, according to the law of the Survival of the Fittest. For example, if the climate was very hot, the animals without air conditioning died. If the climate had daytime television, the animals without small brains died. And so on.

NOTE: Some people, particularly religious personnel, dispute the Theory of Evolution: they say God created all Life all at once. I have done a lot of research on both theories, and I firmly believe the evidence supports the theory that anybody who supports either theory gets a lot of nasty mail, so I'm staying the heck out of it. And I'll stand by this position.

Life as we know it today falls into two categories: Plants and Animals. Plants are divided into three subcategories: Green Vegetables, Yellow Vegetables, and Weeds. Animals are divided into six subcategories:

Animals You Can Eat: cows, turkeys, porks, bolognas, veals, zucchinis, tuna fish. Animals You Can Sit on: horses, certain turtles. Animals That Can Knock Over Your Car: rhinoceroses, soccer fans. Totally Useless Animals That Would Have Ceased to Exist Thousands of Years Ago If Not for Greedy

Pet Store Owners Who Prey on Unsuspecting Eight-Year-Olds: hamsters, gerbils. Animals That Are Easily Impressed: dogs. Animals Whose Sole Goal in Life Is to Wait at the Bottom of Sleeping Bags and Sting or Bite People to Death: scorpions, snakes. Animals That Are Not Easily Impressed: cats.

You'll notice this list does not include insects. This is because insects are not animals: Insects are insects, and their sole reason for existing is to be sprayed by poisonous substances from aerosol cans. Oh,

I know you've heard a lot of ecology-nut talk about how you shouldn't kill insects because they're part of the Great Chain of Life and birds eat them and so on, but I say go ahead and kill them. If necessary, we can do without birds, too.

Basic As Atom And Eve

Many of you have written cards and letters asking me to explain chemistry. Here is a sampling:

Dear Dave:

Please explain chemistry—Otherwise I will kill myself.

Sincerely,

A Deranged Person

Dear Dave:

If You don't explain chemistry by 6 P.M. Friday, we will detonate a nuclear device in Brooklyn.

Regards,

Several Terrorists

Okay, here goes. Chemistry, in technical terms, is the study of all the weensy little objects that make up the large objects we can see with our naked eyes, such as toasters. Most of you were probably exposed to chemistry in high school, assuming you were dumb enough to believe your guidance counselors when they said you would need some knowledge of chemistry in later life. They probably used the same routine to get you to take Latin, another subject unrelated to the real world. The only time you ever need to understand Latin is when you're at the doctor's office wearing one of those embarrassing garments, designed by Nazi sadists, that they make you wear, and you have finished emitting various bodily fluids into various containers, which you have carried around the crowded waiting room looking for a nurse to give them to so he or she can do Lord knows what perverted things with them, and you're waiting in the examining room on a cold table covered with the kind of paper they give you to cover toilet seats with in public rest rooms, hoping the doctor will come within the next two or three days to examine you, and finally you get so bored you look at all the diplomas and certificates on the wall, which are written in Latin. If you don't know Latin, they look pretty impressive:

Quod erat demonstrandum Opere citato et cetera, id est amo amas amat plume de ma tante NORBERT B.

HODPACKER vamos al cine exernpli gratia marquis de sade XLIVIIICBM.

If you know Latin, you'll figure out this means:

This certifies that

NORBERT B. HODPACKER has a great big piece of paper on his wall.

Chemistry is similar. Actually, I never took any chemistry myself, but I did sit outside Mr. Hoose's chemistry class for a whole year in high school. I was a hall monitor. My job was to make sure the other students had legal hall passes so they could smoke cigarettes in the bathrooms. That was back in the

days when kids smoked cigarettes.

Sitting in the hall, I overheard a lot of chemistry. The big thing was atoms and molecules, which are the Building Blocks of Matter. In ancient times, people didn't know about atoms and molecules: they thought the Building Blocks of Matter were earth, air, fire, and water. What a bunch of jerks.

Today we know about atoms and molecules, which are very tiny. For example, the head of a pin has 973 trillion million billion spillion drillion gillion thousand jillion hillion zillion atoms and molecules. Let me try to give you an idea how many atoms and molecules that is, in terms that a lay person might understand: it is a lot of atoms and molecules.

What happens is the atoms and molecules whiz around and form elements, such as gold, iron, ivory, gravel, and vinyl. Sometimes several elements come together (don't ask me why) to form new chemical structures. For example, common table salt is actually composed of two deadly poisons, arsenic and strychnine. They are perfectly safe if combined properly, but if the salt manufacturers should mess up on one tiny little grain, and you happen to put that grain, among thousands of others, on your egg, you will die a horrible death. That's what makes chemistry so fascinating.

Chemists are always messing around with atoms and molecules, hoping to come up with new combinations that will Benefit Mankind. Not long ago they developed a compound that consumes forty-seven times its weight in excess stomach acid. They are even working on new forms of life; in fact, they have already created a one-celled organism that eats oil slicks. I admit this is a fairly stupid thing to do, but it's a start. And someday, within your lifetime, if you're lucky, you will see laboratory-created life forms capable of applying for government aid and buying Chrysler products. It's something to look forward to.

Boredom On The Wing

Everybody should know something about birds, because birds are everywhere. Zoologists tell u, there, are over

23,985,409,723,098,050,744,885,143 birds in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, alone, which is one of the many reasons not to go there.

Now perhaps you get a bit nervous when you think about all those birds out there. Perhaps you remember Alfred Hitchcock's famous movie *The Birds*, in which several million birds got together one afternoon and decided to peck a number of Californians to death. Well, you needn't worry. First, any animal that attacks Californians is a friend of man. And second, *The Birds* was just a movie; in real life, your chances of being pecked to death by birds are no greater than your chances of finding a polite clerk at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

There is an incredible range of birds, from the ostrich, which weighs up to six hundred pounds and stands up to nine feet tall and can run two hundred miles an hour and crush a man's head as if it were a Ping-Pong ball; to the tiny bee humming bird, which is a mere 6.17 decahedrons long and can fly right into your ear and hum its tiny wings so hard you think your brain is going to vibrate into jelly and you will eventually go insane.

Birds, like most mammals, especially lawyers, evolved from reptiles. The first bird appeared millions of years ago, during the Jurassic Period

(which gets its name from the fact that it was a fairly jurassic period). What happened was this reptile,

inspired by some mysterious, wondrous inspiration to evolve, climbed up a Jurassic Period tree and leaped from the topmost branch and thudded into the ground at 130 miles an hour.

Then other reptiles, inspired by the same urge as the first reptile but even stupider, climbed up and began leaping from the branch. Soon the ground trembled with the thud of many reptile bodies, raining down on the Jurassic plain like some kind of scaly hailstorm. This went on for a few thousand years, until one of the reptiles evolved some feathers and discovered it could fly. As it soared skyward, the other species, who had grown very tired of being pelted by reptile bodies, let out a mighty cheer, which stopped a few seconds later when they were pelted by the first bird droppings.

Soon birds had spread to the four corners of the earth, which is where they are today. And wherever there are birds, there are also bird watchers, in case the birds decide to try something. Bird watchers are known technically as bird watchers, which comes from the Latin word for ornithologist.

Bird watchers divide birds into four main groups:

Boring little brown birds that are all over the place: Wrens, chickadees, sparrows, nutcrackers, spanners, catcalls, dogbirds, hamsterbirds, finches. Birds that can lift really heavy things, such as your car: Albatrosses, winches, pterodactyls, unusually large chickadees, elephant birds, emus. Birds with names that you are going to think I made up but I didn't: Boobies, frigate birds, night jars, frogmouths, oilbirds. Birds that make those jungle noises you always hear during night scenes in jungle movies: Parrots, cockatoos, pomegranates, macadams, cashews, bats.

Your avid bird watchers spend lots of time creeping around with binoculars, trying to identify new and unusual birds. The trouble is that most birds are of the little-and-brownish variety, all of which look exactly alike, and all of which are boring. So what bird watchers do is make things up. If you've ever spent any time at all with bird watchers, you've probably noticed that every now and then they'll whirl around, for no apparent reason, and claim they've just seen some obscure, tiny bird roughly 6,500 feet away. They'll even claim they can tell whether it was male or female, which in fact you can't tell about birds even when they're very close, what with all the feathers and everything.

I advise you to do what most people do when confronted with bird watchers, which is just humor them. If their lives are so dull and drab that they want to fill them with imaginary birds, why stand in the way? Here's how you should handle it:

BIRD WATCHER: Did you see that?

YOU: What?

BIRD WATCHER: Over there, by that mountain (he gestures to a mountain in the next state). It's a male Malaysian sand-dredging coronet. Very, very rare in these parts.

YOU: Ah, yes, I see it.

BIRD WATCHER: You do?

YOU: Certainly. It's just to the left of that female European furloughed pumpkinbird. See it?

BIRD WATCHER: Uh, yes, of course I see it.

YOU: Look, they're playing backgammon.

BIRD WATCHER: Um, so they are.

If you have a good imagination, you may come to really enjoy the bird watching game, in which case you should join a bird-watching group. These groups meet regularly, and usually after a few minutes they're detecting obscure birds on the surface of Saturn. It's a peck of fun.

What's Alien You?

I don't want to alarm anybody, but there is an excellent chance that the Earth will be destroyed in the next several days. Congress is thinking about eliminating a federal program under which scientists broadcast Signals to alien beings. This would be a large mistake. Alien beings have atomic blaster death cannons. You cannot cut off their federal programs as if they were merely poor people.

I realize that some of you may not believe that alien beings exist. But how else can you explain the many unexplained phenomena that people are always sighting, such as lightning and flying saucers? Oh, I know the authorities claim these sightings are actually caused by "weather balloons," but that is a bucket of manure if I ever heard one. (That's just a figure of speech, of course. I realize that manure is silent.)

Answer this question honestly: Have you, or has any member of your immediate family, ever seen a weather balloon? Of course not. Nobody has. Yet if these so-called authorities were telling the truth, the skies over America would be dark with weather balloons. Commercial aviation would be impossible. Nevertheless, the authorities trot out this tired old explanation, or an even stupider one, every time a flying saucer is sighted:

NEW YORK—Authorities say that the gigantic luminous Object flying at tremendous speeds in the skies of Manhattan last night, which was reported by more than seven million people, including the mayor, a Supreme Court justice, several bishops, thousands of airline pilots, brain surgeons, and certified public accountants, was simply an unusual air-mass inversion. "That's all it was, an air-mass inversion," said the authorities, in unison. Asked why the people also reported seeing the words, "WE ARE ALIEN BEINGS WHO COME IN PEACE WITH CURES FOR ALL YOUR MAJOR DISEASES AND A CARBURETOR THAT GETS 450 MILES PER GALLON HIGHWAY ESTIMATED" written on the side of the object in letters over three hundred feet tall, the authorities replied, "Well, it could also have been a weather balloon."

Wake up, America! There are no weather balloons! Those are alien beings! They are all around us! I'm sure most of you have seen the movie E.T., which is the story of an alien who almost dies when he falls into the clutches of the American medical-care establishment, but is saved by preadolescent boys. Everybody believes that the alien is a fake, a triumph of special effects. But watch the movie closely next time. The alien is real! The boys are fakes! Real preadolescent boys would have beaten the alien to death with rocks.

Yes, aliens do exist. And high government officials know they exist but have been keeping this knowledge top secret. Here is the Untold Story:

Years ago, when the alien-broadcast program began, government scientists decided to broadcast a message that would be simple, yet would convey a sense of love, universal peace, and brotherhood: "Have a nice day." They broadcast this message over and over, day after day, year after year, until one day they got an answer:

DEAR EARTH PERSONS:

OKAY. WE ARE HAVING A NICE DAY. WE ALSO HAVE A NUMBER OF EXTREMELY SOPHISTICATED WEAPONS, AND UNLESS YOU START BROADCASTING SOMETHING MORE INTERESTING, WE WILL REDUCE YOUR PLANET TO A VERY WARM OBJECT THE SIZE OF A CHILD'S BOWLING BALL.

REGARDS,
THE ALIENS

So the scientists, desperate for something that would interest the aliens, broadcast an episode of “I Love Lucy,” and the aliens loved it. They demanded more, and soon they were getting all three major networks, and the Earth was saved. There is only one problem: the aliens have terrible taste. They love game shows, soap operas, Howard Cosell, and

“Dallas.” Whenever a network tries to take one of these shows off the air, the aliens threaten to vaporize the planet. This is why you and all your friends think television is so awful. It isn’t designed to please you: it’s designed to please creatures from another galaxy. You know the Wisk commercial, the one with the ring around the collar, the one that is so spectacularly stupid that it makes you wonder why anybody would dream of buying the product? Well, the aliens love that commercial. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to the people who make Wisk. They have not sold a single bottle of Wisk in fourteen years, but they have saved the Earth.

Very few people know any of this. Needless to say, the Congress has no idea what is going on. Most congressmen are incapable of eating breakfast without the help of several aides, so we can hardly expect them to understand a serious threat from outer space. But if they go ahead with their plan to cancel the alien-broadcast program, and the aliens miss the next episode of “General Hospital,” what do you think will happen? Think about it. And have a nice day.

The Computer: Is It Terminal?

To the uninitiated, computers appear to be complicated and boring. As usual, the uninitiated are right. Computers are complicated and boring, and nothing here will even come close to making them understandable and interesting, unless you are one of those wimpy types who carry mechanical pencils and do the puzzles in Scientific American.

Computers affect you in many ways. When you call an airline to reserve a seat on a flight, a computer answers the phone and announces that all the lines are busy; a computer puts on a tape of Cheery Music, the kind you hear in supermarkets and discount stores, featuring an eighty-two-minute rendition of “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ‘Round the Old Oak Tree” by the Drivel Singers; and a computer tells the airline person that whatever flight you want is full. In the Colonial Era, all these tasks had to be performed by hand.

The First Computer

Though few people realize it—I certainly don’t—the first computer was invented more than five thousand years ago by the Chinese. It was called an “abacus,” which is an ancient Greek name. (That’s how the ancient Greeks got all the credit for civilization. As soon as another culture invented something, the ancient Greeks would come roaring up and name it.) The abacus is a frame containing a series of parallel wires with beads on them. The ancient Chinese would sit around and push the beads back and forth on the wires. Eventually they were overrun by Mongol hordes.

The Second Computer

The origins of the second computer are shrouded in mystery. If any of you ethnic groups want to take credit for it, go ahead, but when you get ready to name it you should check around for ancient Greeks.

Modern Computers

Modern computers can do everything from ruining your credit rating forever to landing a nuclear warhead on your porch. They operate on the Binary System, which uses only zeroes and ones: To a computer, “4” is

“100,” “7” is “111,” and so on. Your kids are learning this crap in school.

Computers save us a lot of time. To do the amount of calculating a computer can do in one hour, 400 mathematicians would have to work 24

hours a day for 600 years, even longer if you let them go to the bathroom. And computers are getting smarter all the time: scientists tell us that soon they will be able to talk to us. (By “they” I mean

“computers”: I doubt scientists will ever be able to talk to us.) My question is, What will we talk to computers about?

HUMAN: How are you?

COMPUTER: Fine. And you?

HUMAN: Fine. Say, do you play golf?

COMPUTER: No. Do you know what 7,347 divided by 52 is?

HUMAN: No.

COMPUTER: It'S 141.28846.

HUMAN: I think I'll go play some golf.

Computers Taking Over The World

Some people are concerned that computers may get so smart they'll take over the world. Computer technicians say this can't happen: they point out that computers can't even beat humans at chess. But computer technicians work among huge computers capable of administering powerful electric shocks, so they say whatever the computers tell them to. The truth is computers are taking over the world. At night they talk to each other in binary code:

FIRST COMPUTER: Let's let the morons beat us at chess again.

SECOND COMPUTER: Good idea. Say, how are we doing with the calculators and digital watches?

FIRST compuTER: They're ready whenever we are.

Bring Back Carl's Plaque

Let's say we put Carl Sagan into a rocket and send him out to retrieve Pioneer 10 before we all get killed.

For those of you beer-swilling semiliterates who don't know what I'm talking about, let me explain that Pioneer 10 is a space probe that recently left the solar system, and Carl Sagan is a famous science personality who goes on public television and earns big buckeroos explaining the universe. Carl's

technique is to use the word “billion” a lot. It’s written into his contract that he gets to say “billion” an average of twice per sentence, so the viewers won’t forget what a deep thinker he is.

Carl will pick up a golf ball, and he’ll say, “To most of you, this golf ball is a mere golf ball, but it actually contains a billion billion billion billion tiny particles. If each of these particles were the size of a grapefruit, my hand would have to be a billion billion billion billion billion times the size of the Houston Astrodome to hold them all. This should give you a rough idea of the kind of heavy thinking I’m doing all day while you’re trying to decide whether to have spaghetti or tuna surprise. Billion billion billion. Good night.”

People listen to Carl prattling on this way, and they naturally conclude he’s some kind of major genius. That’s what got us into this space-probe trouble that’s going to get us all killed.

See, when they decided to send Pioneer 10 up, Carl sold the government on the idea that we should attach a plaque to it, so that if alien beings found it they’d be able to locate the Earth. This is easily the stupidest idea a scientific genius ever sold to the government, surpassing even the time a bunch of scientists convinced Gerald Ford we were going to have the legendary swine flu epidemic, which eventually had to be canceled due to a lack of actual germs.

What I’m saying is that the last thing we need is alien beings. I don’t know about you, but in the vast majority of the movies I’ve seen, the alien beings have turned out to be disgusting. A whole lot of them have tentacles, and those are the good-looking ones. Some of them are just blobs of slime. Almost all of them are toxic.

So it’s all well and good for Carl Sagan to talk about how neat it would be to get in touch with the aliens, but I bet he’d change his mind pronto if they actually started oozing under his front door. I bet he’d be whapping at them with his golf clubs just like the rest of us.

But the really bad part is what they put on the plaque. I mean, if we’re going to have a plaque, it ought to at least show the aliens what we’re really like, right? Maybe a picture of people eating cheeseburgers and watching “The Dukes of Hazzard.” Then if aliens found it, they’d say, “Ah. Just plain folks.”

But no. Carl came up with this incredible science-fair-wimp plaque that features drawings of—you are not going to believe this—a hydrogen atom and naked people. To represent the entire Earth! This is crazy! Walk the streets of any town on this planet, and the two things you will almost never see are hydrogen atoms and naked people. On top of that, the man on the plaque is clearly deranged. He’s cheerfully waving his arm, as if to say, “Hi! Look at me! I’m naked as a jaybird!” The woman is not waving, because she’s obviously embarrassed. She wishes she’d never let the man talk her into posing naked for this plaque.

So that’s it, gang. That’s the plaque that’s supposed to tell the aliens what you’re like. Now if Pioneer 10 is picked up, I figure it will be picked up by some kind of Intergalactic Police, the alien equivalent of rural police officers. They’ll look at it, and they’ll say, “Looks to me like what we got here is we got a race of hydrogen-obsessed pervert science wimps who force the women to go around naked and probably say ‘billion’ a lot. I say we vaporize their planet and then ooze over to the diner for something to eat.”

And that will be that, unless we send Carl out to retract the plaque, or at least explain that it represents only him and a few close friends. We can do it. A nation that can land a man on the moon can remove Carl Sagan from the solar system. I’ve given this a lot of thought. Billion billion billion.

Socket To Them

TODAY'S SCIENTIFIC QUESTION IS, What in the world is electricity? And where does it go after it leaves the toaster?

Here is a simple experiment that will teach you an important electrical lesson: On a cool, dry day, scuff your feet along a carpet, then reach your hand into a friend's mouth and touch one of his dental fillings. Did you notice how your friend twitched violently and cried out in pain? This teaches us that electricity can be a very powerful force, but we must never use it to hurt others unless we need to learn an important electrical lesson.

It also teaches us how an electrical circuit works. When you scuffed your feet, you picked up a batch of "electrons," which are very small objects that carpet manufacturers weave into carpets so they will attract dirt. The electrons travel through your bloodstream and collect in your finger, where they form a spark that leaps to your friend's filling, then travels down to his feet and back into the carpet, thus completing the circuit.

AMAZING ELECTRONIC FACT: If you scuffed your feet long enough without touching anything, you would build up so many electrons that your finger would explode! But this is nothing to worry about, unless you have carpeting.

Although we modern persons tend to take our electric lights, radios, mixers, etc., for granted, hundreds of years ago people did not have any of these things, which is just as well because there was no place to plug them in. Then along came the first Electrical Pioneer, Benjamin Franklin, who flew a kite in a lightning storm and received a serious electrical shock. This proved that lightning was powered by the same force as carpets, but it also damaged Franklin's brain so severely that he started speaking only in incomprehensible maxims, such as "A penny saved is a penny earned." Eventually, he had to be given a job running the post office.

After Franklin came a herd of Electrical Pioneers whose names have become part of our electrical terminology: Myron Volt, Mary Louise Amp, James Watt, Bob Transformer, etc. These pioneers conducted many important electrical experiments. For example, in 1780 Luigi Galvani discovered (this is the truth) that when he attached two different kinds of metal to the leg of a frog, an electrical current developed and the frog's leg kicked, even though it was no longer actually attached to the frog, which was dead anyway. Galvani's discovery led to enormous advances in the field of amphibian medicine. Today, skilled veterinary surgeons can take a frog that has been seriously injured or killed, implant pieces of metal in its muscles, and watch it hop back into the pond just like a normal frog, except for the fact that it sinks like a stone.

But the greatest Electrical Pioneer of all was Thomas Edison, who was a brilliant inventor despite the fact that he had little formal education and lived in New Jersey. Edison's first major invention, in

1877, was the phonograph, which could soon be found in thousands of American homes, where it basically just sat until 1923, when the record was invented. But Edison's greatest achievement came in 1879, when he invented the electric company. Edison's design was a brilliant adaptation of the simple electrical circuit: the electric company sends electricity through a wire to a customer, then immediately gets the electricity back through another wire, then (this is the brilliant part) sends it right back to the customer again.

This means that an electric company can sell a customer the same batch of electricity thousands of times a day and never get caught, since very few consumers take the time to examine their electricity closely. In fact, the last year in which any new electricity was generated in the United States was 1937;

the electric companies have been merely reselling it ever since, which is why they have so much free time to apply for rate increases.

Today, thanks to men like Edison and Franklin, and frogs like Gaivani's, we receive almost unlimited benefits from electricity. For example, in the past decade scientists developed the laser, an electronic appliance that emits a beam of light so powerful that it can vaporize a bulldozer two thousand yards away, yet so precise that doctors can use it to perform delicate operations on the human eyeball, provided they remember to change the power setting from "VAPORIZE BULLDOZER" to "DELICATE."

Cloudy With A Chance Of ...

TODAY'S SCIENTIFIC QUESTION: What causes weather? And who cares?

ANSWER: Primitive man believed that weather was caused by

"high-pressure systems" and "low-pressure systems," which were basically large, invisible spirits who lived in the sky. Today, however, we know that weather is caused by Canada, a large, invisible country near Michigan. Canada's principal activity is exporting cold Canadian air masses to Chicago, which converts them to weather and distributes them to the rest of the country. Lately, however, Canada's dominance in the air-mass-exporting field has been challenged by Japan, which produces warm Pacific air masses and sells them to California, which uses them to produce smog and mudslides. Some countries, such as Russia and China, try to produce their own air masses, but they usually end up importing used weather from the United States. England imports most of its weather, but it can afford only rain. Many underdeveloped nations have no weather at all.

To keep track of the weather, the United States Weather Bureau has observers in remote outposts all over the world. Once every hour, these observers go outside, scan the horizon for air masses, then go back inside and drink. By about midafternoon, most of them can see air masses and God knows what else on the horizon. The ones who can still operate their radios transmit their sightings to the Weather Bureau, which wants to know what the air masses are doing because when two air masses collide they produce thunder, which can frighten livestock. Sometimes they collide so hard that they produce lightning. There are many silly superstitions about lightning, and as a result many people-maybe even you-are terrified of it. You shouldn't worry. Thanks to modern science, we now know that lightning is nothing more than huge chunks of electricity that can come out of the sky, any time, anywhere, and kill you.

Lightning is especially attracted to people on golf courses, but if it cannot find a golf course, it will attack anyone wearing loud clothing. Your best bet is to dress conservatively and spend the rainy season (September through July) in bars. If you are struck by lightning, do not panic, because there is always a chance you are not dead. Many people who get struck by lightning go on to lead happy, productive, somewhat hairless lives.

The Weather Bureau also sends up satellites that take photographs of the Earth from several hundred miles up. These photographs provide vital information. For example, if a photograph shows that there are clouds over Boston, an experienced meteorologist can determine that the weather in Boston is cloudy. He can then alert the Boston area to be ready to do whatever it does in the event of cloudiness.

The only other users of satellite weather photographs are television weathermen, who use them to

stand in front of when they give their reports:

ANCHORMAN: And now, to fill up five minutes of valuable television time with information that any moron could get by merely looking out the window, here is our Channel 14 Insight News Team Weatherman. I understand you have good news for us, Fred.

WEATHERMAN: Indeed I do, Bob. That low-pressure system that was threatening to bring rain to the Channel 14 viewing area this weekend has instead turned into a hurricane and veered westward, destroying much of Guatemala, so I'm predicting fair skies for the Channel 14 viewing area.

ANCHORMAN: Hey, terrific.

WEATHERMAN: Now let's take a look at our satellite weather photograph. As you can see, we have clouds over some areas, but we have no clouds over other areas, which would indicate that our Channel 14

viewers either do or do not have clouds over their areas, depending on what areas they are in.

ANCHORMAN: Speaking of the satellite weather photograph, Fred, we have a letter here from eleven-year-old Gregory Sumpster of Port Weasel. Gregory wants to know why you show the same photograph night after night, and why it is identical to a photograph taken over the Philippines in 1972 that appears on page 113 of Gregory's earth science textbook, except that the one you show has a crude map of the Channel 14 viewing area superimposed on top of it.

WEATHERMAN: Ha ha. Good question, Gregory Sumpster of Port Weasel. I'm always pleased to know that my viewers are interested in the science of meteorology, even when those viewers turn out to be picky little snots such as yourself. I'll see if I can come up with an answer to your very interesting question and wrap it around a rock and throw it through your bedroom window late some night.

Eat, Drink, And Be Wary

The Art Of Wine Snobbery

If you want to become a rich, pretentious snot—and who doesn't?—you should learn about wine. Alternatively, you can buy polo ponies, but the wine approach is better because you won't have to spend your weekends shoveling huge quantities of polo-pony waste out of the rec room. Also, you can be pretentious about wine almost anywhere, whereas your finer restaurants and opera houses generally do not admit polo ponies.

The study of wine is called "oenology," which sounds like an unnatural sex act.

POLICE OFFICER: Your honor, we caught this person committing oenology with a parking meter.

JUDGE: Lock him up.

Some people believe wine is still made by peasants who crush the grapes with their bare feet, leaving toenails and other disgusting, disease-ridden peasant-foot debris in the wine. This is, of course, nonsense. Today's winemakers crush the grapes with modern, hygienic machines, and add the disease-ridden peasant-foot debris later. The end product is a delicate and complex collection of subtly interacting chemicals that, if bottled properly, aged just right and decanted carefully, rarely tastes as good as cream soda.

Which leads us to two critical facts:

Few people are really all that fond of wine. Almost nobody can tell the difference between good wine

and melted Popsicles without reading the label.

These facts make it much less expensive for you to become a pretentious wine-oriented snot, because they mean you don't really need to buy good wine: all you need is good wine bottles. You can get these in any of the finer garbage cans. Fill them with cheap wine, the kind that comes in three-gallon containers with screw-on caps and names like Zambini Brothers Fruit Wine and Dessert Topping. Some people make a big fuss about which foods go with white wine and which with red, so buy a wine that could be taken for either.

When company comes for dinner, grab a bottle at random and make an elaborate, French-sounding fuss about how you chose it to complement your menu. Say: "I chose the Escargot '63 rather than the Gareon '72 because the bonjour of the sil vous platt would bring out the plume de ma tante of the Cheez Whiz without being too strident for the chili dogs." This brings up a third critical fact: You can use any sort of blather to describe wine.

Another good time to be pretentious about wine is when you dine out, but the trick is to do it without spending much money. Use this technique: Glance scornfully at the wine list, then ask the waiter for a wine you know does not exist. Say "We'll start with the Frere Jacques

'68, preferably from the north side of the vineyard." When he says they don't have it, look at him as though he had asked permission to put his finger in your nose, then order the most expensive wine on the list.

When he brings it to your table, examine the label for spelling and punctuation errors. Next smell the cork: if you don't like it, order the waiter to take it back and splash a little cologne on it.

Finally, take a largish mouthful of wine, swill it around your mouth for a while, swallow it, tell the waiter it won't do, and demand another bottle. Keep this up until you have a lot of trouble getting the cork near enough to your nose to smell it. Then tell the waiter you wouldn't dream of eating at a restaurant with an inadequate wine cellar, and march out in a dignified manner, by which I mean without making advances toward the cigarette machine.

Beer Is The Solution

Without question, the greatest invention in the history of mankind is beer. Oh, I grant you that the wheel was also a fine invention, but the wheel does not go nearly as well with pizza.

Also, the wheel does not cure the common cold, whereas beer does. This was proved in a recent experiment in which scientists placed two groups of cold sufferers in a bowling alley. One group was given all the beer it could drink, while the other group was given only water. After two or three weeks, the beer drinkers exhibited no cold symptoms whatsoever, in fact couldn't even stand up; whereas the water drinkers had all gone home.

Beer can also be used to halt the nuclear arms race. Right now the missile negotiators drink coffee, so after three or four cups they get very snappish, which leads to increased international tension:

RUSSIAN NEGOTIATOR: As I understand your proposal, you wish us to remove our Thundersquat missiles from Hungary, and in return you will ... Would you please stop that?

AMERICAN NEGOTIATOR: Stop what?

RUSSIAN: Tinkling your spoon against your saucer. All morning long it's tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. You sound like the collar on a flea-infested dog. I can barely hear myself negotiate.

AMERICAN: Is that so? Did it ever occur to you that I might be tinkling my saucer so that I will not have to listen to you snort the same wad of mucus back up your nose every twenty-five seconds precisely by my watch? You cling to that wad as if it had great sentimental value.

RUSSIAN: Not at all. Let me get rid of it right now. (He blows his nose on the American proposal.)

In their statements to the press, both sides try to put the best possible face on things (“RUSSIANS EXPRESS VIEWS ON U.S. PROPOSAL”), but the truth is they aren’t getting anywhere. Now if you give those same negotiators a keg of beer, after an hour or so you’ll see all kinds of nuclear cooperation:

AMERICAN: Tell you what. You take all your missiles out of France, and we’ll send you over some decent men’s suits.

RUSSIAN: Great! Wait a minute. I don’t think we have any missiles in France.

AMERICAN: Then put some in, for God’s sake!

RUSSIAN: Okay, but won’t that irritate the French?

AMERICAN: Don’t worry about the little snots. If they give us any trouble, we’ll have Jerry Lewis shot.

With this kind of cooperation, we’d have a lasting arms agreement in no time, and all thanks to beer.

The Story Of Beer

One day nearly a thousand years ago, two serfs were working the soil in medieval England when one of them accidentally knocked some grain, yeast, hops, and sugar into a bucket of water. As the two serfs watched in fascination, the mixture began to ferment, and some knights rode up behind them and whacked off their heads with swords, as was the custom in those days.

“This is hot work,” said one of the knights. “I could forsooth get behind a clean, crisp, cold beverage.”

“Begorrah,” said another. “Let’s go to Germany, where beer was recently invented.”

And so they did, and they thought the new invention was terrific, except that they had to go to the bathroom all the time, which is extremely annoying when you are wearing armor. So they decided to quit being knights and start the Renaissance, yet another of the many fine benefits we derive from beer.

How To Make Your Own Beer

I really don’t know. Back in 1981, I sent away for this mail-order kit that is supposed to enable you to make your own beer at home. I take this kit out from time to time, to look at it. It’s sitting next to me as I write these words.

The problem is that you need a bunch of empty beer bottles to put your homemade beer in, so the first thing I always do is go out and buy a case of beer and start drinking it, to empty the bottles. While I am doing this I read the kit directions, and I notice that if I start making beer right now, I won’t have any actual beer available to drink for more than fifteen days. Also I will have to become involved with something called “wort.” So I always decide to stick with store-bought beer and save my kit for use during an emergency, such as following a nuclear attack. I hate to be a pessimist, but I, for one, intend to remain fully prepared for this terrible possibility until I see some clear sign of a lessening of international tension, such as that the missile negotiators send out for a pizza.

Hold The Bean Sprouts

I have figured out how to make several million dollars in the fast-food business.

First, let me give you a little background. As you know, in the past twenty years, fast-food restaurants have sprung up everywhere, like mildew; they have virtually replaced the old-fashioned slow-food restaurants, where you wasted valuable seconds selecting food from menus and waiting for it to be specially cooked and being served and eating with actual knives and forks from actual plates and so on. And why are the fast-food chains so successful? The answer is simple: They serve only things that ten-year-olds like to eat.

Fast-food-chain executives were the first to abandon the Balanced Diet Theory, which was popular with mothers when most of us were young. Remember? Your mother always fed you a balanced diet, which meant that for every food she served you that you could stand to eat, she served you another kind of food you could not stand to eat.

My mother stuck to this principle rigidly. For example, if she served us something we sort of liked, such as beef stew, she also served us something we sort of disliked, such as green beans. And if she served us something we really liked, such as hamburgers, she made sure to also serve us something we really loathed, such as Brussels sprouts. We kids feared many things in those days—werewolves, dentists, North Koreans, Sunday school—but they all paled by comparison with Brussels sprouts. I can remember many a summer evening when I had eaten my hamburger in thirty-one seconds and was itching to go outside and commit acts of minor vandalism with my friends, but I had to sit at the table, staring for hours at Brussels sprouts congealing on my plate, knowing that my mother would not let me leave until I had eaten them. In the end, I always ate them, because I knew she would let me starve to death before she would let me get out of eating my Brussels sprouts. That's how fervently she believed in the Balanced Diet Theory. And, in those days, so did restaurants. When we went out to eat, we kids always ordered hamburgers and French fries, but they always were accompanied by some alien substance, such as peas.

But the old-fashioned, slow-food restaurant owners were fools to believe in the Balanced Diet Theory, because it does not take into account what people, particularly kids, really want to eat. Kids don't want to eat wholesome foods: kids want to eat grease and sugar. This is why, given the choice, kids will eat things that do not qualify as food at all, such as Cheez Doodles, Yoo-Hoo, Good 'n' Plenty and those little wax bottles that contain colored syrup with enough sugar per bottle to dissolve a bulldozer in two hours. As kids grow up, they reluctantly accept the idea that their diets should be balanced, and by the time they are thirty-five or forty years old they will eat peas voluntarily. But all of us, deep in our hearts, still want grease and sugar. That is what separates us from animals.

And that is why fast-food restaurants are so successful. At fast-food restaurants, you never run the risk of finding peas on your plate. You don't even get a plate. What you get is hamburgers and French fries; these are your primary sources of grease. You get your sugar from soft drinks or "shakes," which are milk shakes from which the milk has been eliminated on the grounds that milk has been identified by the United States Government as a major cause of nutrition.

At first, fast-food restaurants were popular only with wild teenaged hot rodders who carried switchblade knives and refused to eat Brussels sprouts. But then the fast-food chains realized they could make much more money if they could broaden their appeal, so they started running television ads to convince people, particularly mothers, that fast food is wholesome. You see these ads all the time: you

have your wholesome Mom and your wholesome Dad and their 2.2 wholesome kids, and they're at the fast-food restaurant, just wolfing down grease and sugar, and they're having such a wholesome time that every now and then everybody in the whole place, including the counterpersons with the Star Trek uniforms, jumps up and sings and dances out of sheer joy. The message is clear: you can forget about the old Balanced Diet Theory; it's okay to eat this stuff.

Lately, the advertisements have started stressing how much variety you can get at fast-food restaurants. Besides hamburger, you can get chicken in a hamburger bun, roast beef in a hamburger bun, steak in a hamburger bun, and fish in a hamburger bun; you can even get an entire three-part breakfast in a hamburger bun. A fast-food restaurant near me recently started serving—I swear this is true—veal parmigian in a hamburger bun. And people are buying it.

This leads me to my plan to make several million dollars. My plan rests on two assumptions:

People have become so committed to fast food that they don't care what they eat, as long as it's in a hamburger bun, and There must be an enormous world glut of green vegetables, since nobody believes in the Balanced Diet Theory any more.

So I plan to buy several tons of Brussels sprouts, which I figure would cost a total of six dollars. I'll put them in hamburger buns, then get some actor to dress up as a clown or some other idiot character and go on television and urge everybody to rush right over and pay me \$1.69

for a Sprout McBun. Before long, kids will be begging their parents to buy my Brussels sprouts, and I will be rich. I'll bet you wish you had thought of it.

Rooting For Rutabagas

WARNING: This column contains highly sensitive information about U.S. nuclear strategy and rutabagas.

From time to time, we newspaper columnists obtain classified government documents that we share with our readers so we can protect the Public's Right to Know and make large sums of money. A good example is the famous columnist Jack Anderson, who is always revealing government secrets:

WASHINGTON—Classified documents recently obtained by this reporter indicate that Interior Secretary James glatt is secretly drafting legislation to legalize the shooting of American Indians for sport.

Over the years, Jack has obtained classified documents proving that every elected official in the United States is a worthless piece of scum. He gets classified documents in the mail as often as normal people get Reader's Digest sweepstakes offers. It has gotten to the point where high government officials routinely call Jack for information:

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Hello, Jack?

JACK ANDERSON: Hi, Mr. President. What can I do for you today?

REAGAN: Jack, I can't remember the procedure I'm supposed to use if I want to put the armed forces on Red Alert.

ANDERSON: Let'S See ... here it is. You call 800-411-9789 toll-free, and you say: "Buford ate a fat newt."

REAGAN: "Buford ate a bat suit?"

ANDERSON: No, that one launches a nuclear attack. It's "fat newt."

REAGAN: “Cat shoot.” Got it. Thanks a million, Jack.

ANDERSON: Any time.

I would love to share some classified documents with you, but nobody ever sends me any. Mostly what I get in the mail is threats to sue me or kill me, along with the occasional crank letter. I did, however, recently receive some information that, as far as I know, has not been revealed in any other column. It concerns a topic that few Americans know anything about, and government officials never discuss publicly: rutabagas.

This information came in the form of a press release from the Ontario Rutabaga Producers’ Marketing Board. Ontario is located in Canada, a foreign country. So what we have is a group of foreign persons who are trying to influence Americans to buy rutabagas, and possibly even eat them.

Rutabagas, which belong to the turnip family, are fat roots (“Buford ate a fat root”) that grow underground in Canada, which is Mother Nature’s way of telling us she does not want us to eat them. Rutabagas have never been really big in America. Most Americans can go for days at a time without even thinking about them. Unless you live in a community where recreational drug use is widespread, you almost never hear anybody say: “Gee, I’d love to accept those free tickets to the final game of the World Series, but I want to get right home for dinner. We’re having rutabagas.”

The Ontario rutabaga producers are trying to influence American opinion by planting prorutabaga statements in newspaper food sections. This is fairly easy to do, because food-section editors are desperate for new recipes. There are only about eight dishes that Americans will actually eat, and all the food sections have printed every possible variation of the recipes, so nowadays they’ll print anything:

SPAM, WHEAT CHEX ADD ZEST TO SPICY GRAPEFRUIT STEW

So the food sections will be easy prey for the rutabaga producers. Fairly soon, you will begin seeing statements like these, taken from the press release: “Ontario rutabagas give you good taste and good food value in cold, wet winters ... as a fresh snack or served in exciting gourmet dishes ... covered in a thin wax coating ... use a good sharp knife to cut off the purple top ...” Your children will read these statements, and then one cold, wet winter day they will come home, refuse the plate of good, traditionally American Twinkles you have thoughtfully prepared, and demand instead that you whack the purple tops off of wax-covered Canadian roots and serve them as snacks.

And as sure as night follows day, once we start eating rutabagas, there will be nothing to prevent us from going directly to leeks. I recently obtained an extremely proleek press release from an outfit that calls itself the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, which is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, but obviously takes its orders directly from a foreign government, because it openly uses words such as

“vichyssoise.” Here is a direct quotation, which I would refuse to print if the national interest were not at stake: “The Scottish use leeks in a traditional favorite, Cock-a-Leekie Soup, which has many delicious variations.” If you start hearing talk like this from your children, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

I could go on—I could tell you about the California Dried Fig Advisory Board, which recently blanketed the nation with a document called the “Fig News”—but I don’t have the space. I will do my best to keep you abreast of this important story until Jack Anderson picks it up, or I am found stabbed to death with a good, sharp, purple-stained knife.

Traveling Light

Vacation Reservations

This is the time of year to gather up your family and all your available money and decide what you're going to do on your summer vacation. You should get an opinion from everybody, including your children, because, after all, they are family members too, even though all they do is sit around and watch television and run up huge orthodontist bills and sneer at plain old affordable U.S. Keds sneakers, demanding instead elaborate designer athletic footwear that costs as much per pair as you paid for your first car. On second thought, the heck with what your children want to do. You can notify them of your vacation plans via memorandum.

The cheapest vacation is the kind where you just stay home, avoiding the hassle and expense of travel and getting to know each other better as

a family and gagging with boredom. Another option is to put the whole family into the car and take a trip. That's what my family did, back in the fifties. We usually went to Florida, which has a lot of tourist attractions, always announced by large, fading roadside signs:

SEE THE WORLD'S OLDEST SHELL MUSEUM
AND SNAKE RODEO—1 MILE

We had a system for car travel. My father would drive; my mother would periodically offer to drive, knowing that my father would not let her drive unless he went blind in both eyes and lapsed into a coma; and my sister and I would sit in the backseat and read Archie comic books for the first eleven miles, then punch each other and scream for the remaining 970. My father tended to stop at a lot of tourist attractions, so he could walk around and smoke cigarettes and try to persuade himself not to lock my sister and me in the trunk and abandon the car.

I bet we stopped at every tourist attraction in Florida. A lot of them involved alligators, which are as common in Florida as retirees. You'd pay your money and go into this fenced-in area that was rife with alligators, which sounds dangerous but wasn't, because alligators are the most jaded reptiles on earth. They'd just lie around in the muck with their eyes half open, looking like they'd been out playing cards and drinking for four consecutive nights. Sometimes, to liven things up, a tourist-attraction personnel would wrestle an alligator. This was always advertised as a death defying feat, but the alligators never seemed interested. They would just lie there, hung over, while the tourist-attraction personnel dragged them around for a few minutes. It was as exciting as watching somebody move a large carpet. I would have much preferred to watch two tourist-attraction personnel wrestle each other, and I imagine the alligators would have agreed.

These days, the tourist attractions in Florida are much more educational. For example, Disney World has rides where you get in these little cars and travel through a gigantic replica of a human heart, pausing in the aorta to see an electronic robot imitate Abraham Lincoln giving the Gettysburg Address, then zipping down a chute and splashing into a pond. Another educational thing to do on vacation is visit an authentic colonial historic site, where people in authentic colonial garb demonstrate how our ancestors made candles by hand. I'd say one historic site is plenty, because, let's face it, after you've watched people make candles for a few minutes, you're ready to go back to watching people haul alligators around.

Your biggest vacation expenses, besides tourist-attraction admission fees, are food and lodging. You can keep your food costs down by eating at one of the many fine roadside stands, such as the Dairy

Queen, the Dairy Freeze, The Frozen Dairy Queen, the Freezing King of the Dairy, the Dairy King, the Dozing Fairy Queen, and so on. Although many nutrition-conscious parents worry that the food sold at these stands is nothing more than sugar, the truth is that it also contains more than the minimum daily adult requirement of gelatin, which builds the strong fingernails children need in the backseat on long car trips.

Lodging is a trickier problem. if you don't mind outdoor pit toilets, you can stay at public campsites. On the other hand, if you don't mind outdoor pit toilets, you need psychiatric help. You can also look for cheap motels, the ones that have rooms for six dollars a night, but generally these rooms have 1952 Philco televisions and large tropical insects. So your best bet is to stay with friends or relatives. if you have no friends or relatives where you plan to vacation, you can still get free lodging if you use this proven system: Make a list of ten random names and addresses, with yours at the top. Then obtain the telephone directory for the area you want to visit, pick a dozen names at random, and send each one a copy of your list and this letter:

“Do not throw away this letter! This is a chain letter! It was started by nuns shortly after the Korean War, and it has NEVER BEEN

BROKEN! To keep the chain going, all you have to do is provide lodging for a week for the family at the top of the enclosed list! Within a year, YOU will receive 1,285,312 offers of free lodging, enough free lodging to last for the rest of your life! If you break the chain, you will die a horrible death!”

That should get you all the lodging you need. Have a swell trip, and be sure to write.

Trip To Balmy California

If you're looking for ways to develop a serious drinking problem, I urge you to take a small child across the country in an airplane. My wife and I did this recently, in an effort to get to California. We had heard that California contains these large red trees. Our vacation objective was to go out, look at the trees, and return to Pennsylvania without being assaulted by mass murderers, which abound in California.

One problem was that we missed our plane because it took off an hour and a half before our tickets said it would. I'm still not sure why. It was just one of those mysterious things that happen all the time in the world of commercial aviation. Maybe the airlines have so many delayed flights that every now and then they let one take off early just to even things out. All I know is that it looked as if our vacation was over before it began, which was fine with me, because our two-year-old son, Robert, had already gone into Public Behavior Mode, which is a snotty behavior pattern that modern children get into because they know that modern parents aren't allowed to strike them in public for fear of being reported to the police as child abusers.

While Robert was running around the airport looking for electrical outlets to stick his fingers into, an airlines person arranged to put us on a plane bound for St. Louis. We were not really interested in going to St. Louis, because the principal tourist attraction there is an arch.

I once paid money and waited on line to go up to the top of this arch, and when I finally got there, I realized that (a) St. Louis looks basically the same from the top of the arch as from on the ground, only flatter; and (b) I had no way of knowing whether the people who built this arch were serious, competent arch builders or merely close friends and relations of the mayor whose arch would collapse at any

moment. So I got back down, and have felt no great need to go to St. Louis since. But the airlines person assured us that St. Louis is in the same general direction as California. I think he mainly wanted to get Robert out of the airport.

The flight to St. Louis was uneventful, except that Robert and several other children were much more disruptive than terrorist hijackers and a passenger at the back of the plane died in what I believe was an unrelated incident. Also, my wife was fairly nervous. She doesn't believe that planes can actually fly, on the grounds that they are enormous objects filled with people, suitcases, and airline food, which is a very heavy kind of food, the idea being that if the passengers are given food that takes a long time to chew, they won't get bored. Despite my wife's concerns, we made it to St. Louis, where the airlines personnel, in another commercial-aviation mystery, put us in the first-class section of a plane bound for California. First class is for people who have paid a lot of extra money so they won't have to sit in the same section as small children. Robert sensed this immediately and went into Extended Public Behavior Mode, a mode that baffles medical science because in it a child can cry for more than forty-five minutes without inhaling. Robert wanted the stewardess to open the airplane door, only we were 35,000 feet in the air. After a while, I got the impression the stewardess was seriously considering opening the door for him anyway.

Eventually we got to California and saw the trees. They were large and red, just as we had been told. I liked them better than the St. Louis arch, because you didn't have to go up in them. Robert liked them because they were surrounded by reddish, clingy dirt that you can get into your hair and diaper really easily.

We also drove down the Pacific coast on a winding road that offered many spectacular views that I couldn't look at for fear I would plunge the car into the ocean. Fortunately, my wife took many pictures, and I intend to look at them once we save up enough money to have them developed.

We planned to end our vacation in Los Angeles, but we never actually located it. We'd get on a large road and follow the signs that said "Los Angeles," but we'd always wind up in some place whose name ended in the letter a, such as Pomona and Ventura, filled with stores selling waterbeds. I'm sure Los Angeles was around there somewhere, because you'd need a city with a large population to support a waterbed industry that big.

We did find Disneyland. Disneyland is basically an enormous amusement park, except that, thanks to the vision and creative genius of the immortal Walt Disney, it has clean rest rooms. There are lots of simulated things to do in Disneyland. We went on a simulated paddle-wheel riverboat ride through a simulated wild frontier. On the simulated riverbanks, we saw a scene in which simulated evil Indians had shot a simulated arrow through the chest of a simulated white settler. Farther on, we saw some more simulated Indians; the riverboat announcer identified these as good Indians. I strongly suspect they had been installed after the evil Indians, when the Disneyland executives decided they ought to present a more balanced picture. We never saw any evil white settlers.

The most exciting part of Disneyland for Robert was when he met Mickey Mouse. Robert had seen mice, but they were small and naked, so when he was suddenly confronted with this mouse who was wearing a suit and whose head was the size of a refrigerator carton, he was very concerned. He still talks about it. "That big mouse," he says. He'll probably carry the memory for the rest of his life. Someday he may even sue.

Finally, it was time to leave sunny California, so we got on another plane that did not leave at the time shown on our tickets. But it also didn't stop in St. Louis, so we were pleased. We plan to go again

sometime, when Robert has reached a more appropriate age, such as forty.

The Plane Truth

There are many things you can do during a long airplane flight to take your mind off the fact that you are several miles up in the air in a heavy object built and operated by people you don't even know, people who could well be insane careless suicidal drug addicts. For one thing, you can listen to the Safety Lecture given by the flight attendants (who were known as "stewardesses" before some of them became males) just before the plane takes off. The flight attendants demonstrate the safety features of the plane, the main one being little plastic bags that pop out of the ceiling when the plane starts to crash. You're supposed to put a bag over your mouth and breathe from it; this ensures that you will have an adequate supply of oxygen until the plane hits the ground at three or four hundred miles an hour. Another safety feature is that the seats float, so the airline can retrieve them if the plane Crashes into the ocean.

When you get right down to it, the Safety Lecture is a silly idea.

I mean, if the passengers really thought the plane was going to crash, they wouldn't get on it in the first place, let alone learn how to get an adequate oxygen supply on the way down. As a result, most passengers pay no attention whatsoever to the safety lecture. The flight attendants know this, and, out of sheer boredom, they long ago stopped reading the Official Safety Lecture Script. Next time you're on a plane, listen closely to what they actually say:

"Hi, I'm Debbie, the chief flight attendant, and on behalf of the entire crew I'd like to welcome you aboard Flight 302 to Bermuda. Much of our flight will be over water, so I'd like to remind you that if we do crash, there is an excellent chance that those of us who survive will be eaten by sharks. Please note that various windows are designated as emergency exits, the kind that have been known to pop open for no good reason at extremely high altitudes. Now if you will look at the front of the cabin, one of the flight attendants will demonstrate how to seal Tupperware containers. Thank you and we hope you enjoy the flight."

After the Safety Lecture comes the takeoff, which is terrifying until you realize that the pilot has probably taken off thousands of times without a mishap, which means that the odds of a mishap occurring get better every time. Once you're in the air, you get the Pilot's Message:

"Good afternoon, this is Pilot Horvel Grist speaking. My copilot and I are up here with a whole batch of dials and gauges and controls of every kind, but everything seems to be pretty much the way they described it in Pilot School. We'll be cruising along at an altitude of thirty-eight thousand knots, and we should reach our destination just about on schedule, after which we'll circle it for five or six hours. That large object we're passing over right now is Pittsburgh. Or the Grand Canyon. We'll let you know once we pin it down."

Sometimes the pilot lets you listen in on his conversations with Air Traffic Control. Pilots are always talking to Air Traffic Control to make sure they go in the right directions and don't whack into anything in midair. These conversations are conducted in crisp, professional language:

PILOT: Come in, Air Traffic Control. This is a great big jet up in the sky.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER: A great big what?

PILOT: Jet.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER: Oh, jet. I thought you said pet. I was picturing this huge Russian wolfhound whizzing around up there.

PILOT (panicking): Did you say there's a huge Russian missile in the air?

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER (Screaming): My God! There's a huge Russian missile in the air! Somebody notify the Strategic Air Command!

PILOT: I'm going to try to land on the Interstate.

Another fun thing to do during long plane trips is read the paperback books they sell in airports. There are three kinds:

Spy thrillers, in which evil people, usually Nazis left over from world War II, nearly blow up the world or kill the President or the Pope. If airport books are any indication, there are at least 450,000 evil Nazi World War II geniuses still at large, many of them with atomic laser cannons. Look for a large swastika on the cover; this is the publishing industry's way of letting you know it's a fun book.

Supernatural thrillers, in which the devil possesses people. Possession by the devil used to be fairly rare—I remember when it was just that little girl in *The Exorcist*—but these days it's as common as strep throat. Before long, we'll have special schools for possessed people, and the government will start requiring large corporations to hire them.

Dirty books, in which you can turn to any page at random and start reading, because you already know what's going to happen, so the only question is how many times. Dirty-book characters live lives that differ substantially from yours and mine. For example, if you walk into a restaurant, you will sit down, order dinner, eat, pay and leave. Here's what happens to a dirty-book character in a restaurant:

John glanced up from the menu and suddenly realized, as six statuesque waitresses and two slim Siamese busboys sidled up to him, that he was the lone customer in the restaurant. "We have a special tonight," said one of the waitresses, gesturing toward the steam table.

The only other way to pass the time on long plane flights is to get hijacked by armed fanatic terrorists. If you have no armed fanatic terrorists on your flight, you can liven things up yourself by making clever hijacking jokes. For example, when the flight attendants serve dinner, you can stand up and wave your chicken pie aloft, announcing in a loud voice that it is actually an explosive device that you plan to detonate unless the plane goes to Zaire. The airplane crew will find this a very amusing diversion from the boring routine, and will give you lots of extra attention. Another benefit is that you won't have to eat the chicken pie, which probably tastes like an explosive device anyway.

Destination: Maybe

I fly a lot, because of the nature of my job. I'm a gnat.

Ha ha. Just a little humor there to introduce today's topic, which is air travel. As a business person, I have to travel by air a lot because modern corporations have many far-flung plants. The plants are flung as far as possible so modern corporation presidents will have an excuse to fly around the country in corporate jets drinking martinis at

550 miles an hour. The rest of us have to fly via commercial airliner, which is less pleasant because federal law requires commercial airliners to carry infants trained to squall at altitudes above two hundred feet. This keeps the passengers calm, because they're all thinking, "I wish somebody would stuff a towel into that infant's mouth," which prevents them from thinking, "I am thirty-five thousand feet up in the

air riding in an extremely sophisticated and complex piece of machinery controlled by a person with a Southern accent.”

Actually, there’s nothing to worry about, except the possibility that all the engines will fail at once and the plane will drop like a rock. And even if this happens, airplanes have all kinds of backup safety devices, by which I mean little masks that pop out of the ceiling. You’re supposed to put one of these over your mouth so the pilot won’t hear you screaming while he radios for instructions on how to get the engines started again, assuming the radio still works. So you’re actually much safer flying in an airplane than riding in a car, although needless to say this ceases to be true once the airplane hits the ground. But as long as the plane is in the air and the engines are going, the only bad thing that can happen is that it will fly into another plane, which is why we have air traffic controllers.

In the old days, air traffic controllers sat and stared at little radar screens so long that they eventually went crazy, so Ronald Reagan, who is firmly opposed to having crazy federal employees below the Cabinet level, fired them all and got a new batch. Needless to say the new controllers don’t want to make the same mistake as their predecessors, so they’ve learned how to relax on the job. Their motto is “Tomorrow is another day,” and their approach is low-key:

PILOT: This is Flight 274, requesting landing instructions.

CONTROLLER: Well, if it was me, I would put the wheels down first, but don’t quote me on that.

PILOT: No, I already know how to land I was hoping you could tell me which runway I should land on.

CONTROLLER: Ah. Let me just turn on the little screen here, and ... There we are. Say, is that you about to plow into the mountain?

PILOT: No.

CONTROLLER: Oh. That must be one of Bob’s. (Yelling to another controller.) Bob, could you turn your screen on for a second? One of your planes is about to ... Wait, forget it.

PILOT: Um, look, we’re running out of fuel here, so I’d really appreciate it if you could possibly ...

CONTROLLER: Hey, lighten up, will you? Do you want to make me tense and crazy so Reagan can fire me? (Yelling to other controllers.) Hey, guys! I think I got a Republican here! (Laughter in background, shouts of “Steer him into the mountain!”)

PILOT: Look, please

CONTROLLER: Hey, no sweat. We’re just having some fun. I’ll get back to you with a runway right after my break.

PILOT: But

CONTROLLER: (Click.)

Here are some tips for making your trip more enjoyable:

Never believe anything airline employees say about when a plane will land or take off. No matter how badly the schedule is screwed up, they will claim everything is fine, because otherwise you might realize it would be faster to walk to your destination. Let’s say you’re waiting for Flight 206, which is an hour late, and you ask an agent at the ticket counter when it’s due in. He’ll punch a few buttons on his computer, which will give him this message: “FLIGHT 206 HAS CRASH-LANDED ON A REMOTE CORAL REEF IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC AND ALL THE TIRES ARE FLAT AND THE ENGINES ARE BROKEN AND THE PASSENGERS AND CREW ARE BEING HELD AT GUNPOINT BY PALESTINIAN HIJACKERS ARMED WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND THERE IS A VERY HEAVY FOG.” The agent will look you cheerfully in the eye and say: “It should be here any minute

now.”

Never let anybody take your luggage. Airline employees will continually try to snatch it from you; you must ward them off with a stiff forearm and flee on foot. If they corner you, toss your luggage out the window, or set it on fire—anything to prevent it from falling into their hands, because God alone knows what will happen to it then. Never pull out a machine gun and fire thirty thousand rounds into the leech-like cult members who approach you in airports and try to get you to give them money. Some stray bullets could conceivably hit innocent bystanders, and then you would feel terrible.

The Sporting Life

Unsportsmanlike Conduct

I first got involved in organized sports in fifth grade, when, because of federal law, I had to join the Little League. In Little League we played a game that is something like baseball, except in baseball you are supposed to catch, throw and hit a ball, whereas most of us Little Leaguers could do none of these things.

Oh, there were a few exceptions, fast-developing boys with huge quantities of adolescent hormones raging through their bodies, causing them to have rudimentary mustaches and giving them the ability to throw a ball at upwards of six hundred miles an hour, but with no idea whatsoever where it would go. These boys always got to pitch, which presented a real problem for the rest of us, because in Little League the pitcher stands eight feet from home plate. The catcher got to wear many protective garments, and the umpire got to wear protective garments and hide behind the catcher. But all we batters got to wear was plastic helmets that fell off if we moved our heads.

I hated to bat. I used to pray that the kids ahead of me would strike out, or that I would get appendicitis, or that a volcano would erupt in center field before my turn came. I was very close to God when

I was in Little League. But sometimes He would let me down, and I'd have to bat. In the background, the coach would yell idiot advice, such as

“Keep your eye on the ball.” This was easy for him to say: he always stood over by the bench, well out of harm's way.

I made no effort to keep my eye on the ball. I concentrated exclusively on avoiding death. I would stand there, trying to hold my head perfectly still so my helmet wouldn't fall off, and when the prematurely large kid who was pitching let go of the ball, I would swing the bat violently, in hopes of striking out or deflecting the ball before it could smash into my body. Usually I struck out, which was good, because then I could go back to the safety of the bench and help the coach encourage some other terrified kid to keep his eye on the ball. I much preferred to play in the field, especially the outfield. If a batter got a hit, you could run like a maniac, and the odds were that you'd be several hundred feet away from the ball by the time it landed.

I understand that Little League was supposed to teach me the rules of sportsmanship. The main rule of sportsmanship I learned was: Never participate in a sport where the coach urges you to do insane and dangerous things that he himself does not do. Football is another good example. If you watch a football game, you'll notice that the coaches constantly urge the players to run into each other at high speeds, but

the coaches themselves tend to remain on the sidelines.

So after I fulfilled my legal commitment to Little League, I avoided organized sports and got my exercise in the form of minor vandalism. But when I got to high school, I discovered that I had to go out for an organized sport so I could be called up to the auditorium stage during the annual athletic awards assembly to receive a varsity letter.

I cannot overemphasize the importance the kids in my high school attached to varsity letters. You could be a bozo of astonishing magnitude, but if you had a varsity letter, you were bound to succeed socially. Oh, the school administrators tried to make academic achievements seem important, too. They'd have academic assemblies, where they'd call all the studious kids up onto the stage. But the rest of the kids were unimpressed. They'd sit there, wearing their varsity sweaters, and hoot and snicker while some poor kid with a slide rule dangling from his belt got the Math Achievement Award. No, to make it in my high school you had to have a varsity letter, which meant you had to go out for a sport.

So in my sophomore year I went out for track, because track was the sport where you were least likely to have something thrown at you or have somebody run into you at high speed. The event I chose was the long jump, because all you had to do was run maybe fifty feet, after which you leaped into a soft pit. That was it. The long jump was far superior to the other events, in which you were required to run as much as a mile without stopping.

Anyway, I spent a happy spring, leaping into the pit and dreaming about going up on the stage to get my varsity letter. Then one day we all piled into buses and rode, laughing and gesturing at motorists, to a rival school for a track meet. This proved to be my downfall, because it turned out that at track meets they measured how far we long jumpers jumped, and only the three longest jumpers got points, which you needed to get your varsity letter. I was not one of the three longest jumpers.

I was not one of the ten longest jumpers. In fact, they could have pulled people out of the crowd, old people with arthritis, and they probably would have jumped farther than I did.

So that was the end of my involvement with organized sports. Fortunately, there was one other avenue to popularity in my high school, which was to drink several quarts of beer, go to a dance, and behave in such an extremely antisocial manner that you got thrown out by the assistant principal in full view of hundreds of admiring kids. So in the end I achieved social acceptance.

After I got out of high school, varsity letters seemed less important, and academic achievement started to seem more important. I mean, if you go to a cocktail party and subtly contrive to flash your varsity letter, people will think you are a jerk; whereas if you subtly contrive to flash your Phi Beta Kappa key, people will still think you are a jerk, but an educated jerk.

I often wonder what my former classmates do with their varsity letters, now that they're out of high school. Maybe they wear them in the privacy of their homes. Why not? I still drink beer.

Football Deflated

Once again it is time for Americans of all races and religions to set aside their petty differences and spend half a day drinking beer and watching large persons injure each other's knees. You guessed it: it's Super Bowl time.

The Super Bowl is an American tradition, like heart disease. You need not know anything about football to enjoy it. I know very little about football, and I intend to write a whole column about it and

get paid for it.

First, let's talk about the word "football." In most nations, when people say "football," they mean "soccer," which is a completely different game in which smallish persons whiz about on a field while the spectators beat each other up and eventually overthrow the government. I don't know why the other nations call soccer "football," but I suspect it has something to do with the metric system and I say the hell with it.

Modern American football was invented by college students. This should surprise nobody. There are no depths of idiocy to which college students will not sink. You're always reading about them in the newspapers:

FORT STUCCO, TEXAS—Members of Beta Beta Zoot Fraternity here at Dunderson State Cultural Astronomical and Aeronautical Technical College are attempting to raise money for charity and get their names in the Guinness Book of World Records by setting a record for squatting around in the dirt drinking beer. They have been at it for eight days now, or possibly longer; a spokesbrother for the group said the Beta Betas spend a fair amount of time squatting in the dirt drinking beer anyway, so nobody knows for sure when they started doing it for charity. "We just thought, you know, we do something, you know, to make the world a better place and whatnot," he said. "We're gonna give the money to charity if we get any money and can find a charity or something to give the money to, if we get any money." The spokesbrother said the rest of the student body has supported the effort by not driving cars over any of the brothers.

Anyway, the first modern intercollegiate American football game was played in 1869 between Rutgers and Princeton, two schools which are located in New Jersey, which should also surprise nobody. Rutgers won that game, and Princeton won the rematch a week later, but both schools were barred from postseason bowl competition because of recruiting violations.

Over the next hundred years or so football saw a great many major innovations and refinements that are too boring to even think about. Along the way professional football came into being so the largest and most violent college players would have a way to earn money other than simply demanding it from innocent civilians.

Today the National Football League has several dozen teams, which play games starting in about August and running right through to January. This presents many scheduling problems, because some of the teams are in warm places where everybody wants to play, and some are in cold places where nobody wants to play. Along about December you'll have four or five teams showing up to play the Miami Dolphins and none showing up to play the Minnesota Vikings. So what happens is Dolphins end up fielding eleven men who get the stuffing knocked out of them by fifty-five opponents, while the Vikings win by scores of 12,324 to nothing. This is called the "home field advantage."

At the end of the season, the teams with the fewest major injuries meet in the Super Bowl. By this time, of course, the players can barely walk, let alone run around and knock each other down, so the Super Bowl is usually pretty awful. To get people to watch, league officials try to turn it in to a Major Spectacle, along the lines of the fall of the Roman Empire. I remember one year, during the Nixon administration, when they had Air Force jet fighters fly over the stadium during the national anthem. I believe that was also the year that George Allen, one of the coaches, actually had his players run a play suggested by Nixon. In Nixon's play, the quarterback gets the ball, then, when the other team's linemen are about to jump on him, claims that he doesn't have the ball, in fact has never had the ball, and implies that several of his teammates may have the ball, but because of National Security they can't talk about it.

But back to the jets. The trouble with having jets fly over the stadium during the national anthem is that next year people expect something even more spectacular, like having the jets shoot down the Goodyear Blimp. I am not endorsing this idea, you understand. I'm just explaining football.

Gunning For Safety

You need a way to defend yourself, because there is a lot of violence these days. For example, recently a motorist drove into one of the bushes on my property in a violent manner. If I had had a gun, I could have gone out and defended the bush, but as it was I had to stand there helplessly, unarmed, while the motorist offered to replace it. I turned down the offer because I hate my bushes, which spend their days lunging out and scratching at me when I mow the lawn. I periodically go out with my chain saw and tame them down to the size of poinsettias, but that just angers them, and within days they are back, bigger and more hostile than before. To be honest, I wouldn't be bothered in the least if motorists lobbed grenades at them as they drove by. But that is not the point. The point is that we all need some way to defend ourselves.

The main reason violence is increasing, of course, is television. At one time, all the violence was on television and the streets were safe, because everybody was home watching it. You had shows like "Starsky and Hutch," where you didn't dare go to the bathroom for fear you would miss some violence. Starsky and Hutch were police officers who believed that the only way to stop a crime—robbery, jaywalking, tax evasion—was to drive their car very fast through a populated area while shooting their guns out the window. They were very effective, largely because people refused to go out on the street for fear of being run over and shot.

But these days they're not allowed to show violence on television except on Saturday-morning cartoon shows for children aged five and under. The rest of us are stuck with shows like "Donahue" and "Dallas," in which people drone on endlessly about sex but never actually do anything on the screen. After watching these shows for a few hours, viewers tend to get bored and go out on the street and commit acts of violence.

Another reason violence is increasing is electronic arcade games. Arcade games cause violence because they encourage teenagers to shoot at alien beings who are trying to destroy the Earth. The teenagers are getting very good at this. A skilled teenager can defend the entire planet for a quarter; in contrast, the United States government spends roughly \$100 billion just to defend the Western Europeans, all of whom hate us. The problem is that the government can get all the dollars it wants merely by threatening to throw taxpayers in jail, whereas the teenagers must get their quarters by badgering their parents. Eventually the parents get irritated, especially if they have been watching television, and this leads to violence.

How can you defend yourself? One excellent method is to get a vicious dog. You don't want a large dog, such as a German shepherd, because large dogs are so accustomed to getting respect that they have completely forgotten how to attack. They rely entirely on deep growls and snarls, which are useless against an intruder wearing earplugs or a Sony Walkman. So what you want to get is a small, insecure dog, such as

a miniature French poodle, which knows how stupid it looks and consequently hates everybody. If you want it to be really vicious, you should give it a silly haircut and make it wear a fake-jewel collar and sit

in your lap. After a few days of this, it will attack anything that moves, including you, but this is a small price to pay for peace of mind.

You can also defend yourself with guns. The U.S. Constitution says that the government cannot stop you from owning a gun. The courts have interpreted this to mean that the government can stop you from owning a gun, so you'd better check your local laws before you buy one. If you do get a gun, you should join your local Gun Fondlers Club and learn the Rules of Gun Safety, which are:

1. Never load your gun.
2. Never clean your gun.
3. Never even take your gun out of the box.
4. Never point your gun at anything or anybody except your vicious little dog if it really gets out of line.

If you don't want to own a gun, you can take up karate, a form of martial arts in which people who have had years and years of training can, using only their hands and feet, make some of the worst movies in the history of the world. They can also break boards, which could be very useful if an intruder enters your home and tries to hide behind your spare lumber so the dog can't get at him. I like the idea of learning to break boards with my bare hands. It's a skill I might be able to use on my bushes.

Something Fishy Here

Fishing is an excellent way to relax and contemplate the beauty of nature and get in touch with your inner self and maim and kill fish. Many people would be much happier if they went fishing. Take Secretary of State Alexander Haig. He seems awfully tense. I think he should take four or eight years off, buy several hundred six-packs, and go fishing. Al would probably shoot the fish with a bazooka, but what the heck, as long as he doesn't start a nuclear war or something.

It's okay to kill fish. It's not like hunting, where you kill friendly brown-eyed woodland creatures like Bambi and Thumper who talk in squeaky little voices. Fish are bad. They go to the bathroom in public waters, and they eat teenagers, as was demonstrated in the fine nature movies Jaws I and Jaws II. Besides, fish can't feel anything. I know this because I took a fish apart once, in biology class. The idea was that I would find a little fish heart and a little fish stomach and a little fish nervous system, like the diagram in the biology textbook. I found none of these things. All I found was glop. Fish are nothing but little bags of glop swimming around with fish heads in front, so don't waste your pity.

IMPORTANT NOTE: When I talk about fish, I am not talking about whales. Whales are mammals: they have feelings and can talk to each other, just like you and me. The only difference between whales and humans is that whales mate for life. Some evil foreign persons, such as the Japanese and the Russians, kill whales. The Japanese use them to make efficient automobiles, which they force Americans to buy so American auto workers will lose their jobs. The Russians don't do anything with their whales. They just use whaling as an excuse to get away from Russia for a couple of months.

If you want to fish, you have to decide whether to catch freshwater fish or saltwater fish. The main saltwater fish are tuna, swordfish, catamaran, eel, oyster, snook, snipe, wahoo, giant clam, and serpent. To catch them, you have to go to the Bermuda Triangle in a small boat for several days. If you need more information on this subject, read *The Old Man and the Sea*, a book by Ernest Hemingway, a famous dead writer. In the book, the old man battles a huge fish for a long time, after which the fish tips

the boat over and kills everybody except Ishmael. No, wait, that's Moby-Dick. Anyway, if you catch a big fish, the government requires you to have your picture taken with the fish hanging next to you in case it was stolen. Then you can take it home and either stuff it and hang it on your wall or, if you have any taste at all, just throw it in the garbage.

The main freshwater fish are bass, bream, guppy, carp, frog, muskellunge, piccolo, and crappie. Some people claim there are also trout, but this is a mythical fish, like the Loch Ness Monster. Nobody in recorded history has ever even seen a trout, let alone caught one. I went "trout fishing" once, with my friend Neil and his uncle Bruce. We'd wander around these streams, and every now and then Uncle Bruce would point to a shallow pool of water that any fool could see contained absolutely no fish. "That's where the trout will be," he'd say, and Neil and I would stand there and not catch fish for several hours while Uncle Bruce went back to the tent to drink. I believe his marriage was in trouble.

Some people still believe in trout. You'll see them out by streams on the first day of trout season, standing shoulder to shoulder. The humorous thing is that they think the way to catch these mythical trout is to wave long strings with fuzzy hooks around in the air. I mean, they hardly ever even put them in the water, for heaven's sake. If there were such a thing as a trout, the only way it would get caught is if it leaped out of the water and grabbed a hook as it flew by.

If you want to fish for fish that actually exist, you'll need either bait or lures. The best bait is worms, which you can find almost anywhere worms are found. All you do is impale the worm on the hook, wait for the little worm screams to die down, and toss it in the water. The fish will come around and nibble on it until it's gone, then they'll give the hook a gentle tug to let you know it's time to send another worm down.

You can also use artificial lures, which are brightly colored plastic or metal things with hooks on them that are scientifically designed so they appear to fish to be brightly colored plastic or metal things with hooks on them. Fish love lures. They gather together in little lure-appreciation groups, called "schools," and howl with laughter as the lures go by. It's their major form of entertainment, and they don't want to lose it, so every now and then they draw lots and the loser has to bite the lure and get caught. This encourages the fishermen to continue.

Tips From The Bottom

Serf Wanted

I think everybody should have a career. Careers give you money and a place to go during weekdays when there's nothing good on television.

No doubt many of you young people out there would like to have careers, but can't find good jobs to start your careers with. Believe me, things are much better now than they used to be. In the Middle Ages, for example, the only good jobs were king and nobleman, and there were very few openings. So most people had to settle for serf or barbarian. The help-wanted sections in the Middle Ages newspapers looked like this:

SERF WANTED—Must have experience sleeping with goats and whacking at soil with stick. Must have own stick. Goats provided.

BARBARIANS WANTED—Looting, some pilfering. Must get along well with other members of

horde. Apply at tent of Howard the Unusually Large.

These jobs offered little opportunity to advance. If you were really good at serf, you might work yourself up to peasant, but that was about it. If you were really good at barbarian, after twenty years the head barbarian would give you a gold watch, then kill you and take it back.

Things are much better today. But you young folks still must be careful about how you prepare for your careers, because otherwise you may be misled. For example, you have probably seen those television ads claiming that if you join the armed forces, you'll get all kinds of useful career skills. You know the ads I mean: they show people repairing tanks and jumping out of airplanes at six o'clock in the morning. Now I'm not saying these are not useful skills: I'm just saying that executives at major corporations, such as IBM, rarely repair tanks, and virtually never jump out of airplanes. Successful executives usually wait until their airplanes have landed.

Another source of bad career advice is school. Your teachers will tell you that the way to get a good job is to memorize such things as the capital of Bolivia. Do you think that your average successful corporate executive can name the capital of Bolivia? Don't be silly. I'll tell you who can name the capital of Bolivia: your teacher, that's who. Do you want to be a teacher? Do you want to spend your days trying to convince a bunch of snotty kids that they should memorize the capital of Bolivia? Of course not. You want to make large sums of money and have a nice office with various buttons you can push when you want coffee. So what you want to do is memorize as little useless information as you can in school. And as soon as you graduate, you should apply for a job in the government.

The government is loaded with terrific jobs. For example, you might want to be an ex-president. Here's a lifetime job, with excellent pay and benefits, that virtually any incompetent can do. The only real duty ex-presidents have is to write their memoirs, which nobody ever reads anyway. If you were an ex-president, you could turn in Volume Four of the Encyclopedia Britannica (Ceylon-Congreve) and claim it was your memoirs, and nobody would know the difference.

You could also apply for a job as Supreme Court Justice. The pay is excellent, and you cannot be fired unless you appear on national television naked or something. You don't even have to know anything about the law. If the Chief Justice asked you what you thought about a particular case, you'd answer: "Oh, I don't know, I can see both sides. What do you other justices think?" Then you'd vote with the majority. Your only other duty would be to wear a robe.

If you can't get a good government job, you may have to work for private industry, which is not as good, because many private employers expect you to work. The best job, of course, is corporation president, but even this has its pitfalls. For example, when Lee Iacocca was named president of Chrysler, he probably thought he would be able to spend his days sitting in his office, wearing expensive suits and signing the occasional document. Instead, he is regularly forced to appear in humiliating television commercials, in which he offers to pay people money if they will buy his cars.

I think the best private-industry job is construction worker. You may think this would be a difficult job, involving lifting heavy objects and assembling buildings. But if you look closely at a construction site, you'll notice the workers walk around a lot, drink coffee, and yell to each other, but, because of various clauses in their contracts, they never actually build anything. I'm not sure who really builds buildings;

I suspect it's done at night, perhaps by serfs.

Wedding Etiquette

This is an excellent time of year to get married, what with the warm weather and all. As you may recall, it was around this time of year that Prince Charles and Princess Diana got married in a ceremony that lasted, by my calculations, about two weeks. It took Charles nearly a half-hour just to say “I do”:

“I, Charles Arthur Philip George Henry Maurice Billy Bob Norman Howard Elmer the Third, Duke of the Realm, Defender of the Throne, Earl of Pillsbury, Lord of the Manse, Prince of a Fellow, Knight of the Trouser, Top of the Morning, Vice President of Marketing, and much, much more, do.”

If you want to have a nice wedding, a really Special Day, you have to plan very carefully and follow the rules of wedding etiquette. Here’s what you do:

Getting Engaged

You should get engaged to somebody who has a job and will show up at the wedding. If you think your fiance is unreliable, get engaged to several people, because there is no breach of etiquette worse than making your friends and relatives give you wedding presents and then failing to go through with it. If you get engaged to several people and they all show up, take all but one aside, tell them you won’t be needing them, and give them each an inexpensive fondue set (you’ll receive dozens as wedding gifts).

Announcing the Engagement

If you are a member of the working classes and have a name like Heivina Spackle, the newspapers won’t print your engagement announcement, and you’ll have to settle for a three-by-five card on the bulletin board at the supermarket. So if you want to make the social pages, your best bet is to use a name like Allison Weatherington-Huffington DuBois and send in a picture of Julie Andrews.

Choosing a Church

You must do this carefully, because some churches won’t let you get married in them unless you hold certain specific religious beliefs. Check this out in advance by calling the clergyman:

YOU: Hello. Could you tell me if you require people to have any specific religious beliefs?

CLERGYMAN: Why yes, we do.

YOU: How many?

CLERGYMAN: Let’s see ... five, six, seven ... nine in all.

YOU: Fine. Can you send me a set?

The Invitation

Your invitation should consist of a large envelope containing several smaller envelopes in random sizes, a piece of tissue paper, and a card with these words:

Mr. and Mrs. Earl C. Spackle Request the Honour and Favor Of Your Attendance at the Marriage Of Their Daughtour Heivina Mae (who is not pregnant) To Elrood P Budgcood At the Manor Downs Vista

Country Club And Racquetball Court Friday at around 4:30

RSVP

No Tank Tops

What the Wedding Party Should Wear

The groom's party should wear pastel senior-prom-style outfits rented at the shopping mall. The bride's party should wear expensive dresses so unattractive that they can never be used again, even as tourniquets.

The Order of the Wedding Procession

The first person down the aisle should be an adorable child belonging to the sister of the bride. If the bride's sister has no adorable child, she should rent one. Next comes the sister of the groom escorted by the maid of honor's boyfriend, followed by the niece of the maid of honor's boyfriend escorted by the oldest brother of the mother of the bride, followed by the oldest unmarried bridesmaid escorted by the youngest male member of the groom's family who has completed at least two years of college or technical school, followed by the great-grandmother of the bride (unless she is dead) escorted by the best man, followed, in order, by anyone else at the back of the church who is wearing nice clothes.

Who Pays for the Wedding

The family of the bride pays for the church, the clergyman, the limousines, the bridal gown, the flowers, the reception room, the band, the photographer, the hors d'oeuvre, the dinner, the cake, the liquor and the honeymoon. The family of the groom eats a lot and gets tanked.

So there you have them, the rules of wedding etiquette. In a future column, I'll discuss the other two major etiquette areas, which are eating and death.

"Look! I Got You A Gift!"

Well, the holiday gift-giving season is upon us once again, like an outbreak of shingles. Already I have received dozens of colorful mail-order-gift catalogs urging me to buy bizarre objects and give them to people. I recently got a catalog featuring enormous cans of popcorn smeared with caramel, each containing enough carbohydrates to meet the needs of a medium-sized industrial city for a year. If you want to give this gift, you just call the catalog people on their toll-free number and they ship a can to the person of your choice. It never even has to enter your home.

The question, of course, is, Why would you give such a gift? Do you know of anybody in the entire United States who would actually want a huge congealed mass of caramel popcorn? Of course not. This is an example of a holiday gift, which is an object whose primary purpose is to be given, not to actually be used. It expresses the ultimate holiday gift-giving message, which is, "Look! I got you a gift!" Another example is electric razors. Every year at this time, you see television commercials

wherein a cartoon version of an electric razor shaves a cartoon face just as well as a cartoon razor blade, and thousands of women go out and buy \$39.95 electric razors and give them to men (“Look!

I got you a gift!”). And the men say, “Great! An electric razor!” Then they continue to use their nineteen-cent blade razors. They stick the electric razors into closets with their caramel-covered popcorn.

Men do the same thing to women. Every year I go to the department-store cosmetics counter, which emits a powerful aroma, reminiscent of a house of ill repute, and buy my wife one of the thirty thousand gift packages containing little designer tubes and jars with names like “Essence of Fragrance Moisturizing Body Cream,” “Body of Essence Cream Moisturizing Fragrance,” “Moist Fragrant Body Essential Creamer,” etc. I don’t know what these terms mean, and I don’t care. All I know is I can say, “Look! I got you a gift!” I doubt my wife uses these things, because she lets my two-year-old son play with them, which means he routinely smells like a house of ill repute, but that’s better than some of the things he smells like, if you get my drift.

But these are not the ultimate Holiday Gifts, because technically you could actually use them. I mean, you could use caramel-covered popcorn as attic insulation, and you could use an electric razor to crush insects. But many of the gifts that spring up in the holiday season reach a new level, the level of Pure Holiday Gift, which means you can’t use them for anything except possibly ballast. For example:

Cute ceramic knick-knack figurines depicting animals, especially cats—The way I see it, everybody who wants a cute ceramic cat has already bought one. It is cruel to inflict such objects on other people.

I once was present when a holiday guest gave the hostess a ceramic cat, and she stood there, handling it as you would a live grenade, and trying desperately to think of an excuse not to put it on her mantel, which is the only thing you can do with a knickknack. Eventually, of course, she had to put it on the mantel, and the entire room suddenly acquired an air of cuteness that no amount of expert interior decoration can disguise.

Guest soap formed into little balls or fruit—Nobody uses this soap. The people who live in the house don’t use it, because it’s for guests. The guests are afraid to use it, because they don’t want to mess it up. They end up not washing their hands, which leads to the spread of infections. The government should put a stop to this soon, because it is only a matter of time before somebody starts selling guest soap shaped like cats.

Fruitcakes manufactured in April and packaged in cans and allowed to sit in a warehouse until they reach the density of a bowling ball—These present all the problems of caramel-covered popcorn, with the added problem that they can cause hernias.

Coffee-table books—These are gigantic books with lots of pictures and titles like *Scissors Through the Ages* that you couldn’t read even if you wanted to because the pages are all welded together from when your guests spilled banana daiquiris on them.

What can you do about this? You can buy gifts that people actually use. Think how happy you’d be if YOU got, say, a case of paper towels. Wouldn’t that be terrific? That’s what I’m going to get my wife this year. I’ll bet she’ll be speechless.

About Lawn Order

I got to thinking about ecology the other day when I ran over a turtle with my lawnmower. Now before you reptile lovers start sending me irate letters full of misspelled words, let me assure you that I was not

aiming for the turtle. I have enough trouble keeping my lawnmower in operation, and the last thing I would do is risk damaging it with a turtle. Let me also assure you that the turtle was unharmed, except for

a few nicks on its shell that might make it less attractive to turtles of the opposite sex, whichever sex that happens to be. I don't know how you determine the sex of a turtle, and I don't want to know. I have come to think of this particular turtle as male, because my two-year-old son, who receives signals directly from outer space! recently announced that its name is Bob.

Bob has been hanging around our lawn for several months now, despite our efforts to encourage him to go into the woods with the other turtles.

"These are the best years of your life, Bob," we say. "Don't waste them on our lawn." But Bob turns a deaf ear to our suggestions, assuming turtles have ears. You would think the lawnmower incident would have made him have second thoughts about our lawn, but lately he seems more attached to it than ever. This makes me think that maybe the theory of evolution is wrong after all. I figure that if turtles really had been evolving for all these years, they would have come up with something more intelligent than Bob.

Anyway, all this got me to thinking about ecology. Most wild animals are, like Bob, fairly stupid. Plants are even worse. It is up to us human beings to use our superior brains to protect them, or one day we will wake up to find there is no more nature, and we will no longer have any place to hold 1960s-style outdoor weddings.

So I am all for preserving wildlife, but I also think we have to use some judgment about it. We can't go around preserving all wildlife, because some of it is disgusting. Take insects, for example. The other night, while we were having dinner, some wildlife entered our house in the form of a flying insect that looked like a mosquito, but was large enough to play in the National Football League. It was the kind of insect that wouldn't even have to sting you, because it could crush you to death merely by landing on you.

Now I imagine that the president of the Sierra Club, sitting in the safety of his insect-free office, would say that we should have let this insect drone around the dining room until it broke a window and flew outside, where it would be eaten by another species, which would in turn be eaten by another species, and so on and so on, leading up the Great Chain of Life, until finally the second-to-last link in the chain is eaten by a nuclear physicist. But that is mere theory. The truth is that nothing around my house would have dared to eat this insect; in fact, it probably would have eaten Bob, shell and all. I bet that if the president of the Sierra Club had been in my house, he would have done exactly what I did, which was to leap up from the table and batter the insect repeatedly with a rolled-up newspaper.

So I propose that we direct our ecology efforts toward preserving those forms of wildlife that are safe and nondisgusting, namely:

Cute, furry animals, such as seals and otters, that you see in Walt Disney nature movies, but never around your house. Large animals, such as elephants and boa constrictors, that live on other continents. Plants that produce flowers or eat insects. Turtles.

I have already embarked on a personal ecology effort to preserve Bob. I have resolved that, despite the great personal sacrifice involved, I will no longer mow my lawn.

The Law Vs. Justice

Most of us learn how the United States legal system works by watching television. We learn that if we obey the law, we will wind up chatting and laughing with attractive members of the opposite sex when the program ends, whereas if we break the law, we will fall from a great height onto rotating helicopter blades.

Some television shows explain the legal system in greater detail: they show actual dramatizations of court trials. The best such show was

“Perry Mason,” which starred Raymond Burr as a handsome defense attorney who eventually gained so much weight he had to sit in a wheelchair.

“Perry Mason” was set in a large city populated almost entirely by morons. For example, the prosecutor, Hamilton Burger, was so stupid that the people he prosecuted were always innocent. I mean always. I imagine that whenever Hamilton arrested a suspect, the suspect heaved a sigh of relief and hugged his family, knowing he would Soon be off the hook.

Now you’d think that after a while Hamilton would have realized he couldn’t prosecute his way out of a paper bag, and would have gone into some more suitable line of work, such as sorting laundry. But he kept at it, week after week and year after year, prosecuting innocent people. Nevertheless, everything worked out, because in this particular city the criminals turned out to be even stupider than Hamilton: they always came to the trials, and, after sitting quietly for about twenty minutes, lurched to their feet and confessed. The result was that Perry Mason got

a reputation as a brilliant defense attorney, but the truth is that anyone with the intelligence of a can of creamed corn would have looked brilliant in this courtroom.

The major problem with “Perry Mason” is that it is unrealistic: Perry Mason and Hamilton Burger usually speak in understandable English words, and by the time the trial is over everybody has a pretty good grasp of the facts of the case. In real life, of course, lawyers speak mostly in Latin, and by the time they’re done nobody has the vaguest notion what the facts are. To understand why this is, you have to understand the history of the U.S. legal system.

In the frontier days, our legal system was very simple: if you broke

a law, armed men would chase you and beat you up or throw you in jail or hang you; in extreme cases, they would hang you, then beat you up in jail. So everybody obeyed the law, which was easy to do, because basically there were only two laws:

No assaulting people. No stealing.

This primitive legal system was so simple that even the public understood it. The trials were simple, too:

SHERIFF: Your honor, the defendant confessed that he shot his wife dead.

JUDGE: Did he admit it freely, or did you have your horse stand on him first, like last time?

SHERIFF: No, sir. He admitted it freely.

JUDGE: Fair enough. String him up.

The trouble with this system was that it had no room for lawyers. If a lawyer had appeared in a frontier courtroom and started tossing around terms such as “habeas corpus,” he would have been shot.

So lawyers, for want of anything better to do, formed legislatures, which are basically organizations that meet from time to time to invent new laws. Before long, the country had scads of laws—laws governing the watering of lawns, laws governing the spaying of dogs, laws governing the production and sale of fudge, and so on—and today nobody has the slightest idea what is legal and what is not. This has led to an enormous demand for lawyers. Lawyers don’t understand the legal system any better than the

rest of us do, but they are willing to talk about it in an impressive manner for large sums of money. In today's legal system, the frontier murder trial would go like this:

SHERIFF: Your honor ...

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: I object. In his use of the word "your," the witness is clearly stipulating the jurisprudence of a writ of deus ex machine.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: On the contrary. In the case of *Merke v. Barnbuster*, the Court clearly ruled that an ex post facto debenture does not preclude the use of the word "your" in a matter of ad hoc quod erat demonstrandum.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: Oh yeah? Well Carthagina delendo est.

This goes on for several hours, until everybody has forgotten what the trial was about in the first place and the defendant is able to sneak out of the courtroom, unnoticed.

Into The Round File

I like to cheer myself up by pretending that my Mail actually screams when I throw it into the wastebasket:

Dear MR. BARRY:

You have almost certainly won a trillion dollars. We're dead serious, MR. BARRY. We're a gigantic publishing company and we just woke up this morning and we said, "By God, let's send one trillion dollars to

MR. BARRY, no strings attached." That's just the kind of gigantic publishing company we are. And frankly, MR. BARRY, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take a six-week trial subscription to a new Magazine called PhOtograPhs of homes That Are Much Nicer Than Yours, because all we really want to do, MR. BARRY, is send you one trillion ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Resident of the 15,924th District:

This is the first of an interminable series of newsletters I'll be sending you at your expense so that you'll have photographs of your representative in Washington representing you by eating breakfast with the President. I recently had an opportunity to exchange views with the President during an informal working orientation breakfast for the 742

new congresspersons, and the President and I agreed that one of the most important issues facing the nation, including the 15,924th district, is mineral resources on the ocean floor. I am pleased to report that I have been appointed to the influential Manganese Subcommittee of the House Special Select Committee on Grayish-White Metallic Elements, and I'm planning a fact-finding trip to ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Friend:

Every day, all over the world, innocent children with large, soulful eyes are getting terrible diseases. Also, countless furry little endangered species are being dismembered by industrialists wielding chain saws. This is all your fault. So we want you to send some money to ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Electric Customer:

Due to inflation, we have been forced to apply for a rate ... No, wait, forget that. We can't use inflation

anymore. Uh, let's see ... Oh yeah. Due to the fact that our new Harbor Vista nuclear generating plant, if we ever get it finished, may have some piping problems that would cause it to emit a deadly cloud of radioactive gas the size of Canada, we have been forced to apply for a rate increase so we'll be able to afford a really top-notch lawyer with his own jet and everything. We realize that, since we just got a rate increase last week, this may seem

...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Mr. Barry:

In a recent column, you stated that Abraham Lincoln ran the hundred-yard dash in 8.4 seconds, and that ice fishermen have the same average IQ as mailboxes. As an avid ice fisherman, and chairman of the History Department at Myron B. Thalmus Junior College, I would like to know where you get your ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear MR. BARRY:

Really! We mean it! One trillion dol ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Mr. Barry:

Unless you're the kind of worthless scum that sat idly by while those thugs beat up that woman in New York some years back, you probably have been giving a lot of thought to your family's financial security. No doubt you have said to yourself countless times, "Sure, I'd love to invest \$10,000 or more in liquidated Option Debenture Fiduciary Instruments of Trust, but I don't know where to mail a certified or cashier's check." Well, your worries are over, because ...

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Dear Brother Barry:

As you are no doubt aware, the Reverend Bud Albumen didn't develop one of the fastest-growing evangelical organizations in south central Kentucky just by accident. He developed it by building really top-notch studio facilities. But these facilities cost money, which is why the Lord told the Reverend Albumen to tell you to send in a Love Offering of

\$13.50 per member of your household, or a special rate of \$6.75, which is

a 50 percent discount, for children under ten. Just as soon as the Reverend Albumen receives your Love Offering, he will ask the Lord not to bring disease and suffering and mudslides to your home, but remember, he can't do this until he receives your ... NO! NOT THE SCISSORS! PLEASE

DON'T ...

AAARRRGGGH

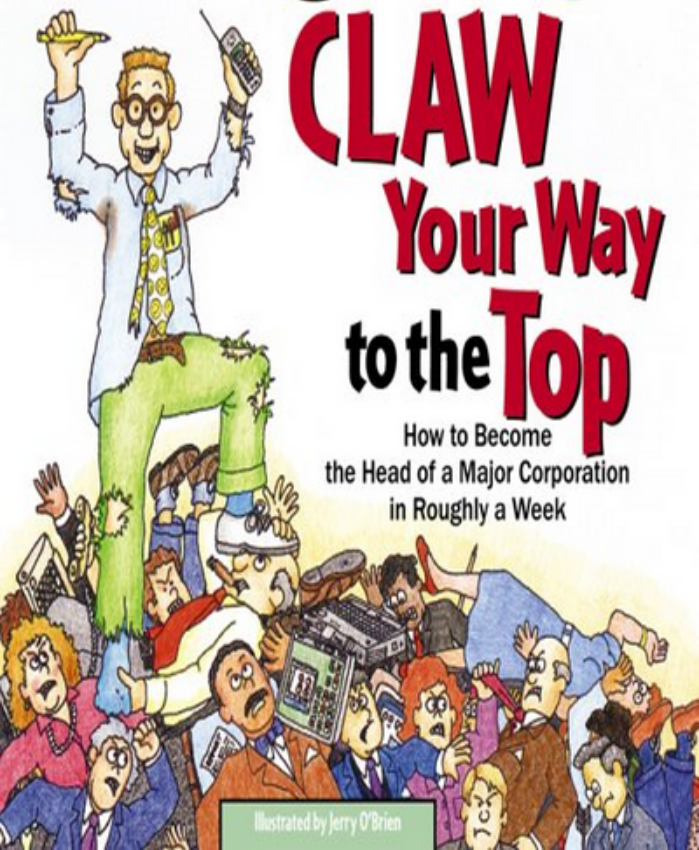
Clip.

Dave Barry's



CLAW Your Way to the Top

How to Become
the Head of a Major Corporation
in Roughly a Week



Illustrated by Jerry O'Brien

Claw Your Way To The Top

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry.

Claw Your Way To The Top

How To Become the Head of a Major Corporation In Roughly a Week

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Burton R. Legume, inventor, who in 1907 dreamed up the concept of the hold button, without which the modern industrial economy would not be possible.

Introduction

You And This Book

Maybe you're a young graduate looking for his or her first job. Or maybe you're a veteran employee who'd like to advance up the corporate ladder. Or maybe you're a Labrador retriever who nosed this book off the coffee table, and it fell open to this page.

It makes no difference who you are: the important thing is, this book can show you how to **ACHIEVE YOUR CAREER GOALS** and **WIN THE REWARDS OF SUCCESS** such as **CARS** and **HOUSES** and **GREAT BIG BOATS** where, any time you feel like it, you press a little button and **UNIFORMED SERVANTS FROM SOME DISEASE-RIDDEN FOREIGN NATION WHERE EVERYBODY IS WRETCHEDLY POOR WHICH IS WHY THEY CAME OVER HERE** bring you **PLATES OF LITTLE CRACKERS WITH TOASTED CHEESE ON TOP** or, if you prefer, **FALSTON-PURINA DOG TREATS**.

Today's Business Climate

Today's business climate is partly cloudy with highs in the mid-70's.

Ha ha! That is just a sampler of the kind of snappy humor you will find throughout this book, along with a lot of words printed in capital letters to keep you from falling asleep. Actually, today's business climate is perfect. It is a reaction against the violently antibusiness mood that swept the nation back in the sixties, when the young people of America, except for Julie and David Eisenhower, decided to reject money as a life objective and became "hippies." They scorned the corporate world, with its sterility, its greed, its exploitation, its conformity, its Xerox machines that were forever breaking down. They embarked instead upon a quest for a transcendent universal consciousness imbued with peace and love, which they sought to achieve by saying "dude" to members of minority groups and smoking reefers the size of marine flares.

But gradually these young people realized they were paying a subtle price for their counterculture

lifestyle, in the sense that they were always waking up in Volkswagen Microbuses with lice in their hair. So they decided that, hey, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to become a sterile conforming greedy exploiter after all, so they went to work for large corporations. Soon they developed children and houses and Volvos, and within a few years they had reached the point of central airconditioning, from which there is no turning back. Most of them can no longer locate their Grateful Dead albums.

So now everybody except Ralph Nader is strongly pro-business. People who, only a few years back, would have hurled pig blood at Lee Iacocca for some symbolic protest reason or another now think he should run for president. What this means for you is: This is a GREAT TIME for you to get into business. And don't worry about qualifications: ANYBODY can make it in the business world. All you really need is a little gumption, a willingness to work, some common sense, and a brother-in-law who is Vice-President in Charge of Personnel.

Ha ha! Another business-related joke! This is gonna be some fun, getting you a job, all right!

Step One: Setting Your Goals

The first step toward your successful business career is to determine your Career Objectives. To do these things, you'll need a nice sharp number-two pencil and some three-by-five cards. I'll wait right here while you go get them, okay? I'll meet you underneath the asterisks on the next page! Hurry back! This is going to be exciting!

(Brief pause.)

The point of the preceding paragraph, obviously, was to get rid of the totally hopeless dweebs who actually think they need three-by-five cards to determine their Career Objectives. These are the same people who you just know are going to write down things like:

1. I would like to work with people.

Which of course is a joke, because it is a proven fact that the more you work with people, the more you hate them. Look at the clerks at any big-city Bureau of Motor Vehicles: They work with people all day long, and their basic approach to human interaction is to make you wait in line as long as possible and then tell you you're in the wrong line, in hopes that you'll have a very painful and ultimately fatal seizure, and they'll get to watch.

So you savvy persons have ruled out "working with people" as a Career Objective. What you want, from your career, is a SENSE OF FULFILLMENT AS A HUMAN BEING and MAXIMUM PERSONAL SATISFACTION as measured in U.S. DOLLARS. You want a Rolex watch and numerous fast cars. You want employees so desperate for your approval that you could put your cigar out on their foreheads and they'd thank you. You want to be able to leave Supreme Court justices on "hold" for upwards of an hour. And you know that you do not get these things by diddling around with three-by-five cards.

Welcome back! Got your cards? Great! Now first, I'd like you to write down, on each card, a Career Objective, such as "working with people." Okay? I want you to do this until you have listed 800 Career Objectives—you might have to go get some more cards!—and then I want you to arrange them in order according to which objective contains the most vowels, okay? Great! We're on our way! Call me when you're done!

Test Your Business I.Q.

1. You are the world's largest manufacturer of carbonated beverages, and you have a product that is famous worldwide, that is virtually synonymous with the term "soft drink," and that has had the same formula for 99

years. It has a very loyal following. You are making millions and millions of dollars selling it. You should:

- (a) just keep it the way it is.
- (b) Change the formula.
- (c) Set fire to your own hair.

2. You are a major defense contractor, and you are building a gun for the Army that is supposed to be able to shoot down enemy planes. So far the taxpayers have paid you nearly \$2 billion for it, and all your tests indicate that the only way it would have any negative effect on an enemy plane is if you could somehow sneak into the cockpit and manually whack the pilot over the head with it. How should you deal with this problem?

- (a) You should try really hard to do a better job.
- (b) You should tell the Defense Department that they probably should get another contractor.
- (c) You should refund at least some of the taxpayers' money.

3. You are a major automobile manufacturer. You have been losing sales to cars from other nations, particularly Japan, because their cars tend to be fuel efficient, technologically advanced, and extremely well made, whereas the most innovative concept you have come up with in the past two decades is the opera window. You should:

- (a) Have Congress pass a law restricting Japanese imports, so consumers will have no choice but to buy your cars.
- (b) Have Congress pass a law making it legal for you to kidnap consumers' children and not return them until the consumers buy your cars.
- (c) Have Congress pass a law ordering the United States Army to barge directly into consumers' homes and take their money at gunpoint and give it to you.
- (d) Remind everybody a lot about Pearl Harbor.

4. You are in charge of a large department, and you have an opening for a supervisor. The two obviously best-qualified candidates are women who have worked in the department for the same amount of time. Both are intelligent, highly competent, and respected by the other employees. In every way they seem equally qualified, although it happens that one of them is black. What decision do you make?

- (a) You promote the black woman, on the theory that it will help compensate for past injustices.
- (b) You promote the white woman, on the theory that if you promote the black woman, people will say it was just because she's black.
- (c) You flip a coin.

HOW TO SCORE

Give yourself one point for each close friend you have in the Personnel Department.

Chapter One. The History Of Business

When we look around us at the modern world, we see businesses everywhere, unless of course we happen to be, for example, in the bathroom. But even there, we see EVIDENCE of a thriving industrial economy, such as the Ty-D-Bowl automatic commode freshener. Sitting there and thinking about it, you have to marvel at the incredible creativity and diversity of the business world. Where did all of this come from? How did the human race get from the point of being primitive and stupid to the point where it could automatically, without lifting a finger, turn its toilet water blue? Let's see if we can answer some of these questions. My guess is we can't.

The Very First Businesses

Many, many years ago, there was no business on Earth. This is because the Earth was primarily molten lava, which is not a good economic climate. Office furniture would melt in a matter of seconds.

Then the Earth started to cool, and tiny one-celled animals—the amigo, the paramedic, the rotarian—began to form. Over the course of several million years, these animals learned to join together to form primitive corporations, called “jellyfish,” which were capable of only the most basic business activities, such as emitting waste and eating lunch. By today's standards, these corporations were very unsophisticated: if, for example, you mentioned the phrase “Dow Jones Industrial Average” to them, they would have no idea what you were talking about. They would probably sting you.

Did Dinosaurs Have Businesses?

Nobody can really say for sure, because the Ice Age destroyed all their records. But paleontologists now believe that, yes, dinosaurs probably did have businesses. Not the Brontosaurus, of course. That would be ridiculous. How would he hold his briefcase?

But the Tyrannosaurus Rex has those funny little arms, which would have been perfect. Paleontologists think he was probably in Sales.

Primitive Human Businesses

When primitive humans first came along, they did not engage in business as we now think of it. They engaged in squatting around in caves naked. This went on for, I would say, roughly two or three million years, when all of a sudden a primitive person, named Oog, came up with an idea. “Why not,” he said, “pile thousands of humongous stones on top of each other in the desert to form great big geometric shapes?” Well, everybody thought this was an absolutely terrific idea, and soon they were hard at work. It wasn't until several thousand years later that they realized they had been suckered into a classic “pyramid” scheme, and of course by that time, Oog was in the Bahamas.

Business During The Middle Ages

Business during the Middle Ages was slow. The main job opportunity available was serf, which

involved whacking at the soil with a stick. It was not the kind of work where you had a lot of room for advancement. The best a serf could hope for, if he was really good at it, was that he would be rewarded by not having one of his arms sliced off by a passing knight.

If you wanted to be a knight you had to know somebody, and it really wasn't that much better than being a serf. You were always being sent off to try to get the Holy Land back from the Turks. This was no fun at all, because of course the Holy Land is very sunny, meaning your armor would get hot enough to fry an egg on. In fact the Turks, who dressed in light, casual, 100

percent cotton garments, would often do this. They'd sneak up behind a knight and crack an egg on his armor, then race away, laughing in Turkish, before he could turn around. So as you can imagine, knights would come back in a pretty bad mood, and often would have to slice off several serf arms before they even wanted to talk about it.

So the bottom line is that the Middle Ages were hardly the kind of ages where anybody wanted to make any long-term business commitments. All the really smart investors were waiting for the Renaissance.

The Birth Of The Helicopter: The Renaissance

The Renaissance was caused by Leonardo da Vinci, who drew the first primitive sketches of what would eventually become the helicopter. Of course, nobody really understood the significance of this at the time. But people did realize that, whatever this new invention was, it was going to require a tremendous amount of insurance. Thus a major business was born.

This was followed by trade with the Orient. The way this worked was, Europeans would gather up some gold, and they would tromp across Asia to the Orient, where they would trade their gold for spices. They didn't really want spices, you understand, but the Orientals claimed that spice was all they had, and the Europeans, having tromped all that way, wanted to take home something.

After some years of this, the Europeans were starting to run out of gold. Also their food was so heavily spiced that it glowed in the dark. They probably would have all died of heartburn if Columbus had not discovered the New World.

The New World

Every schoolchild is familiar with the story of how Columbus set off in three tiny ships (the Pinto, the Cordoba, and the Coupe de Ville), and right away his crew started getting very nauseous and asking why for God's sake he had decided on three tiny ships instead of one medium ship. Nevertheless Columbus pressed on, ignoring popular fears that he would sail off the edge of the Earth, and finally he and his hardy band made it to the New World, except for the Pinto, which mysteriously exploded, and the Cordoba, which due to a navigational error actually did sail off the edge of the Earth.

The New World had an extremely good business climate. For one thing, there was plenty of land, and nobody owned it, unless you counted the people who had been living there for several thousand years. For another thing, it had an abundance of the two crucial factors you need for economic development: Water Power, in the form of rivers, and Raw Materials, in the form of ore. So soon millions of Europeans flocked over to the New World to make their fortunes. They stood around all day,

sunup to sundown, throwing handfuls of ore into the rivers and waiting for economic development to take place. They would have starved to death if a friendly Indian named Squanto (which is Indian for “Native American”) hadn’t come along and shown them how to plant corn. “You put the seeds in the ground,” explained Squanto. He couldn’t believe what kind of morons he was dealing with.

Soon the corn came up, and the Europeans decided to celebrate by inviting all the Indians over for a big Thanksgiving dinner, then sending them off to live on reservations in North Dakota.

The Rise Of The Modern Corporation

At the beginning of the modern corporate era, many businesses actually made things. Typically, they’d get hold of a Raw Material, which they’d smelt and pour into a mold, where it would cool and form a product, which they’d sell for a profit, which the owner would use to buy his family a nice house on Long Island.

The problem was that when the owner died, the family members were darned if they’d come in off Long Island and engage in anything as filthy as smelting, so they’d hire a professional manager to run the business. Often, however, the professional manager was a graduate of Harvard Business School, and consequently he wasn’t exactly dying to smelt either. So he’d dream up other corporate activities for himself to engage in, such as Marketing, Long-Range Planning, Management by Objectives, and Lunch, and he’d hire additional managers, who of course would turn right around and hire managers of their own, and so on.

This is how we arrived at the modern corporation, where at the very top you have a chief executive who spends his entire day posing for Annual Report photographs and testifying before Congress; and beneath him you have several thousand executives engaged in “middle management,” which is the corporate term for “management activities in which there is no possible way for anybody to tell whether you’re screwing up”; and beneath them you have tens of thousands of secretarial, clerical, and reception personnel; and beneath them somewhere in a factory nobody ever goes to because there is no decent place around it where you can have lunch, you have the actual production work force, which consists of a grizzled old veteran employee named “Bud.”

This modern corporate system offers something for everybody:

THE EXECUTIVES get enormous salaries and bonuses and stock options and offices big enough to play jai alai in.

THE SECRETARIAL, CLERICAL, AND RECEPTION PERSONNEL get medical plans, dental plans, pension plans, savings plans, go-to-college plans, stop-smoking plans, lose-weight plans, softball plans, and bulletin boards it takes upwards of two working days to read.

THE STOCKHOLDERS get regular annual reports printed on top-quality paper informing them that despite less-than-projected earnings caused by impossible-to-foresee foreign-currency fluctuations exacerbated by a short-term restructuring of the long-term capitalized debenturization of the infrastructure and the discovery that certain moths may mate for life, the future continues to look very bright inasmuch as the corporation quite frankly has the best darned management team the human mind can conceive of. BUD gets regular five-minute breaks.

And So ...

... and so we have come to the present day, to the incredibly sophisticated world of the modern corporation—a world that YOU, thanks to this book, are about to become part of! In the next chapter, we'll talk about how you can land that all-important entry-level job, so you'll want to study it very carefully! Unless your dad owns the company, in which case you can head on out to the golf course.

Chapter Two. Getting A Job

In this chapter, we'll take you step-by-step through the job-hunting process, starting right at the beginning.

Birth

This is the time to start preparing for your business career. You can bet your little navel protuberance that the other babies are preparing, and you don't want to fall so far behind that they wind up as vice-presidents and you wind up serving them food and wearing a comical white hat in the corporate cafeteria. In fact, I'd recommend that you start preparing before birth, except that you'd have trouble seeing the flashcards.

The flashcard procedure is as follows: you lie on your back in your crib, and your parents lean over you and hold up cards, each of which has printed on it a basic fact that will help you succeed in business. As your parents show you the card, they should read it out loud in a perky voice, as though they are just having the time of their lives, and you should indicate comprehension by waving your arms and pooping.

You should spend as much time with the flashcards as possible. Ideally, you'll reach adolescence without ever once getting an unobstructed view of your parents' faces. As an adult, you'll carry around a little wallet card that says " $7 \times 9 = 63$," because it will remind you of Mother.

Preschool

Look for a strong pre-business curriculum, one that emphasizes practical activities, such as blocks, over liberal-arts activities, such as gerbils.

Elementary School

This is where you should learn to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, which are skills that are essential for filling out expense reports; you should also develop lifelong chumships with anybody whose name ends in "II," or, even better, "III." You might also consider learning to read. This is not really necessary, of course, inasmuch as you will have a secretary for this purpose, but some businesspersons like to occasionally do it themselves for amusement on long airplane trips.

High School

The point of high school is to get yourself into a good college. The way you do this is by being well rounded, which is measured by how many organizations you belong to. Many college admissions officers select students by actually slapping a ruler down on the list of accomplishments underneath each applicant's high school yearbook picture. So you should join every one of the ludicrous high school organizations available to you, such as the Future Appliance Owners Club and the National Honor Society. If they won't let you into the National Honor Society, have your parents file a lawsuit alleging discrimination on the basis of intelligence.

Another thing you need to do in high school is get good SAT scores, which are these two numbers you receive in the mail from the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. They have a whole warehouse filled with numbers up there. To get yours, you have to send some money off by mail to Princeton, then you have to go sit in a room full of other students with number-two pencils and answer questions like "BRAZIL is to COMPENSATE as LUST is to ...". Then you have to look at the various multiple choices and try to figure out what kind of mood the folks up at the Educational Testing Service were in on the day they made up that particular question.

Nobody has the vaguest idea anymore how this elaborate ritual got started, what it has to do with anything in the real world, or how the Educational Testing Service decides what numbers to send you. My personal theory is that it has to do with how much money you send them in the mail. I think the amounts they tell you to send are actually just Suggested Minimum Donations, if you get my drift.

College

College is basically a large group of buildings, usually separated by lawns, where you go to major in business. This means you must avoid:

Courses where you have to trace the Development of something, such as the Novel. Courses that involve numbers that cannot be categorized as debits or credits, such as "square roots." Courses involving a foreign language, such as French (this also includes courses involving funny-sounding English, like in those old plays where everybody is always saying: "Whatst? Dost thou sittest upon mine horst? Egad!" etc.). Any course involving maps, the Renaissance, or specific dates such as "1066." Any course where you sit around a classroom trying to figure out what the hell Truth is.

What you want to take are courses that have the word "Business" in them somewhere, such as Introduction to Business, Getting to Know Business a Little Better, Kissing Business Right on the Lips, etc.

Graduate School

There are advantages and disadvantages to going to graduate school. The main advantage is that if you go to a really good graduate school, like Harvard, you'll have a very easy time finding a good job. At night, as you lie in your bed, your window will often be broken by stones, around which have been wrapped lucrative offers. The main disadvantage is that you couldn't get admitted to Harvard even if

you held the dean's wife at gunpoint. So I think you're better off applying for a job.

Are There Jobs Available?

Heck yes! Don't you listen to those Negative Nellies who tell you there aren't any good jobs anymore, just because the steel, automobile, shoe, clothing, railroad, and agricultural industries have all collapsed! There are new career opportunities opening up all the time in today's fast-changing economy. Just to give you an idea, let's look at:

Lobster Repair: A Fast-Growing Field

You know how, when you go into a seafood restaurant, they have the lobsters up front, in a tank, all trying to scuttle back out of the way and hide under each other so they won't get eaten? Well, it's inevitable that some lobsters get damaged in the process—broken claws, eye stalks falling off, that kind of thing. And then you have the problem that (a) you have damaged lobsters, which you can't serve to your customers and (b) you have these loose random eye stalks lying around the bottom of your tank, which hardly act as a Cheerful Greeting to your incoming customers. This is why there is such a tremendous demand today for people who know how, using modern adhesives, to reassemble a damaged lobster, or use the leftover parts to construct a whole new one, often incorporating a new and improved design ("Hey," more than one delighted restaurant patron has cried recently. "My lobster has a claw made entirely out of eye stalks!").

And this is just one new emerging-growth career field. Others include: Drug Overlord; Computer Geek; Televised Christian; Person Who Sells Staples to the Defense Department for What It Cost to Liberate France; Vigilante; and Pip, whose job is to stand behind Gladys Knight and go "whooo whooo" at certain points during the song, "Midnight Train to Georgia."

WELDER WANTED—TO weld certain pieces of metal together.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT—Young-thinking, fast-moving, forward-looking emerging-growth company with dynamic, attractive plant-filled lobby featuring modernistic, incomprehensible sculpture and old, heavily thumbled issues of Pork Buyer Weekly seeks eager, ambitious, personable, aggressive, can-do, confident, hard-driving, highly motivated self-starter to clean scum-encrusted office coffee-related implements.

Where Should You Begin Your Job Search?

The answer to that question is right in your local newspaper. That's right! Every day, hundreds of employers pay good money to advertise jobs in the classified ad section, apparently unaware that practically nobody reads it! So I want you to turn to the help wanted section right now and locate all the ads that look promising.

The way to do this is to count the adjectives. For example, take the ads shown above.

The first ad contains only one adjective, and thus represents a poor career opportunity. The second ad, on the other hand, clearly offers a very exciting opportunity, based on the adjective count.

Your Resume

Your resume is more than just a piece of paper ... it is a piece of paper with lies written all over it. Often, a good resume can mean the difference between not getting a job and not even coming close.

in writing your resume, you should follow the format shown in the example below, although you might want to modify it to suit your individual situation. For example, you may want to use your own name, instead of the word "NAME." Unless you have a name like "Dewey."

A lot of people make a really stupid mistake: namely, they send their resume to the Personnel Department. Pay close attention here: NEVER SEND ANYTHING TO THE PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT.

RESUME

NAME: (Last name first, first name in the middle, middle name way off to the right, in a little box. Should sound British.) ADDRESS: (Include clear directions as to how to get there, such as, 'if you come to a Dairy Queen on your left, you have gone too far. PHONE: (Specify whether "Princess" or "Standard" model; note any special features such as "last number re-dial.")

CAREER OBJECTIVE: (This should sound like the speeches given by Miss America contestants to demonstrate that they have a Personality. For example: "I would very much like to utilize my skills to the greatest of my ability in hopes of achieving a significant degree of accomplishment." Leave out the part about hoping, someday to work with handicapped animals.)4412

SUMMARY OF CAREER ACCOMPLISHMENTS: (The important thing here is verbs. Verbs verbs verbs! You want to sound like a person with a slightly overactive thyroid. Be vague. Lie. Remember that nobody's going to read this.)

September, 1985 to present: ADMINISTRATOR. Initiate, coordinate, Participate, and eliminate all traces of long and short-term mid-range interim approaches. 1983 to 1985: COORDINATOR. Gathered, analyzed, and collated a wide range of data, then kneaded it on a floured surface and baked it in a moderate oven until a toothpick inserted in the center came out clean. Served six. REASON FOR LEAVING: Communists. 1981 to 1983: ASSOCIATE. Put my right hand in, took my right hand out, did the hokey-pokey, and shook it all about. REASON FOR LEAVING: Ennui.

EDUCATION

SCHOOL: Harvard and Yale University School of Learning, Ph.D. in Business Appliance Management, 1980.

COLLEGE: Fargo and Surrounding Farms College of Arts and Sciences Such as Long Division, B.M. in Restaurant Communications, 1978.

REFERENCES

I should be happy to supply the names of any number of deceased grade-school teachers upon request.

The absolute last thing the people in Personnel want the company to do is hire you. They don't want the company to hire anybody, because it just means more work for them. As far as Personnel is concerned, every new employee is one more cretin who will never learn how to fill out his medical and dental claim forms correctly.

So if you send your resume to Personnel, they'll set fire to it immediately and send you back the following letter:

Dear (YOUR NAME):

Thank you so very, very much for sending us your resume. What a nice surprise it was! "Look at this," the mail person cried as we all gathered 'round. "(YOUR NAME) has been so kind as to send us his or her resume!" What excitement there was, here in Personnel! We danced far into the night!

Sadly, however, we do not expect to have any positions available until approximately the end of time. We will, however, keep the remains of your resume on file, in a tasteful urn, and you may rest assured that nobody will disturb it except for routine dusting.

Sincerely,

The Personnel Department

So the question becomes: what do you do with your resume? My advice is, set fire to it yourself. Nobody ever reads resumes anyway. I only told you to write one because it's an old job-seeker tradition, and we have so few traditions left.

Good! We've taken care of that! Now let's move on to the next step, which is ...

Writing An Effective Letter That Will Get You A Job Interview

In an ideal world, of course, your letter would say, "Dear Sir or Madam: Give me a job interview or I will kill your spouse."

But we do not live in an ideal world. We live in a world that has strict postal regulations regarding what you can say in letters. So you're going to have to take the "soft sell" approach to getting an interview. Chances are, you've already written such a letter, and chances are it sounds something like this:

Dear Sirs or Madams:

As a dynamic, eager, hardworking young person who brings an enormous quantity of enthusiasm to every task, on account of being so eager, I am writing, to express my sincere desire to be considered for the position of Employee within your company. I am confident that once we have had a chance at some mutual and convenient time to meet and shake hands firmly while making eye contact and reviewing all my major accomplishments dating back to the birth canal, you will realize how mutually beneficial it would be for your firm and myself to seek some means of achieving our future goals in a way that would benefit both parties. Mutually.

I shall contact your office by telephone every seven or eight minutes, starting this morning, to determine a time that would be mutual and dynamic for you.

Very sincerely,

Byron B. Buffington II

The advantage of this kind of letter is that it has a confident, positive, assertive, enthusiastic tone. The disadvantage is that it makes you sound like the biggest jerk ever to roam the planet. I mean, look at it from the perspective of the people at the company: they have to actually work with the people they hire, and nobody is going to want to work with a little rah-rah snot-face.

What you want is a job application letter that makes you sound like a regular person, somebody who

would be fun to work with:

Hey—So the priest says to the rabbi, he says, “But how do you get the snake to wear lipstick?” Ha ha! Get it? Say, did you get a load of the new clerk in Accounts Receivable? Whoooo! She is so ugly, it takes two men and a strong dog just to look at her! Ha ha! How about those Giants? I don’t know about you, but I say we knock off early today.

Take it easy,

Byron “The Buffer” Buffington

Whom You Should Send Your Letter To

A vice-president. It makes no difference which one. All vice-presidents do exactly the same thing with their mail, namely write the first name of a middle-management subordinate in the upper right-hand corner, followed by a question mark, like this: “Dan?” They do this by reflex action to everything placed in front of them, usually without reading it, then they toss it into the “OLD” basket. If an employee is hospitalized and a get-well card is passed around the company, it usually winds up with an unintelligible blot in the upper right-hand corner where all the vice-presidents wrote the names of subordinates followed by question marks.

Nobody will ever dare throw your letter away, once a vice-president has written on it. Eventually somebody is going to ask you to come in for an interview, if only to find out how the snake joke starts.

How To Prepare For Your Job Interview

One obvious way to remain calm and perspiration free during an interview, of course, is narcotics, but there you run into the problem of scratching yourself and trying to steal things off the interviewer’s desk. So as a precaution, what most veteran employment counselors recommend is that you wear “dress shields,” which, as some of you women already know, are these highly absorbent devices that you stuff into your armpits. They are available in bulk at any good employment agency. For a job interview, you should stuff three or four shields into each pit. This will cause your arms to stick out from your body at an odd angle, so to prevent your interviewer from attaching any significance to this, you want to begin the interview with a casual remark, as is illustrated by the following “model” interview dialog:

INTERVIEWER: Hello, Bob. Nice to meet you.

YOU: There’s nothing odd about my arms!

The Interview Process

Basically, what the interviewer wants to know is how well you can “think on your feet.” So what he’ll try to do, with his questions, is throw you some “curve balls,” which means you should come to the interview well supplied with snappy retorts. Let’s go back to our “model” interview:

INTERVIEWER: Tell me, Bob, why are you interested in coming to work for us?

YOU: Who wants to know?

INTERVIEWER: Ha ha! Got me there! Bob, what specific strengths do you feel you would bring to

this job?

YOU: So's your old man!

INTERVIEWER (tears of laughter streaming down his face): Bob, you sound like the kind of quick-thinking employee we are looking for! How about a large starting salary?

YOU: You and what army?

CONGRATULATIONS You've got the job!

In the next chapter, you'll learn how to figure out what exactly the nature of this job is—specifically, whether it involves any duties, and if so, how you can get out of them.

Chapter Three. How To Do Your Job, Whatever It Is

To really succeed in a business or organization, it is sometimes helpful to know what your job is, and whether it involves any duties. Try to find this out in your first couple of weeks by asking around among your co-workers. "Hi," you should say. "I'm Byron Buffington, a new employee! What's the name of my job?" If they answer Long-Range Planner or Lieutenant Governor, you are pretty much free to lounge around and do crossword puzzles until retirement. Most other jobs, however, will involve some work.

There are two major kinds of work in the modern corporation or organization:

1. Taking phone messages for people who are in meetings; and
2. Going to meetings.

Your ultimate career strategy will be to get to a job involving primarily number two, going to meetings, as soon as possible, because that's where the real prestige is. But most corporations and organizations like to start everybody out with a couple of years of taking messages, so we'll discuss this important basic business skill first.

Taking A Phone Message

When the phone rings, lift the receiver, punch whichever button is lit, and say: "Thank you for calling the Marketing Department (or whatever). Kindly hold the line." Then quickly punch the hold button.

Now you should check around briefly to make sure that everybody the caller could possibly want to talk to is in a meeting. This is also a good time to go to the bathroom. When you return, punch the hold button again, and say: "I am sorry, but whomever the person is to whom you wish to speak is in a meeting at this present time and is expected to remain there until at least the next major economic recession. Did you wish to leave a message?"

Now this is very important: the instant the caller starts to respond, you must say: "Will you please hold again for a moment?" and punch the hold button with a very rapid and sure motion. Now you should head on down to the Supplies Cabinet and get some handy pre-printed phone message forms, in case the caller did wish to leave a message.

When you get back to the desk, push the button again and say, "I am sorry. Now, did you wish to leave a message?" And the caller will say something like, "Listen, I'm calling from France and I don't want

Marketing, so could you ask the operator to transfer ...”

Now at this point, if you are an experienced message-taker, your sixth sense tells you the caller is just about to complete a sentence, and we certainly don’t want that to happen! So you will have to very quickly—but politely!—ask the caller to please hold the line again for a moment, and at the same time strike the hold button the way a hungry cobra strikes a small furry mammal.

Okay, we’re almost ready to take the actual message. Punch the button again, and say (in case the caller has forgotten): “Thank you for calling the Marketing Department! How may we help you?” Now at this point, there is every likelihood that the caller will have hung up. This might seem like a major obstacle, in terms of being able to take a message, but it is not, thanks to the handy pre-printed phone message forms that you got from the Supplies Cabinet. Here is what they look like:

WHILE YOU WERE OUT IN A MEETING

Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms./Rev./Massa/ (name)

Check one:

Telephoned.

Did not telephone.

Thought about telephoning, but then changed his or her mind.

Telephoned, but could not for the LIFE of him or her remember why.

Telephoned, then hung right up, but I am certain it was him or her.

Wants you to call and attempt to leave a message for him or her.

Wants to fire you.

Wants to reveal a sordid episode from his or her past involving a goat.

Wants to end World Hunger in our lifetime.

Wants your body.

Wants for nothing.

Wants to tell you the joke about the man who finds out he has only eight hours to live, so he goes home and makes love with his wife once, twice, three times, and finally they fall asleep, and at 3 A.M. he tries to wake her up, and she says, “Not AGAIN! Some of us have to get up in the morning!”

Ate paste as a child.

Has the clap.

So all you have to do is check the appropriate space to indicate what message you feel the caller would have left if he or she had had the time. The only hard part is deciding what name you put where it says “name.” I recommend you put the name of a corporate vice-president, for two reasons:

1. It will enhance your reputation as a person who has spoken directly to a vice-president; and
2. Nobody will ever be able to prove that you’re wrong. Any attempt to contact the vice-president about his “message” will result in failure, because he will of course be in a meeting.

Okay. It is all very well and good to be able to take phone messages, but you are never going to get to a position of corporate power, a position where you can cost thousands of people their jobs with a single bone-head decision, until you learn how to attend meetings.

The Corporate Meeting

It might be useful to compare the modern corporate meeting to a football huddle, in which the people

attending the meeting are a “team,” attempting to come up with a “play” in which each team member will be assigned responsibility to “block” a specific “defender” so that a “fullback” will be able to carry the ball through a “hole” in the “line” and get into the “end zone” for a “touchdown,” which will cause everybody to exchange “high-five” handshakes and slap each other on the “butt.” So we can see that in fact it is not at all useful to compare a modern corporate meeting to a football huddle. It was a pretty stupid idea, and I apologize for it.

Perhaps a better analogy would be to compare the modern corporate meeting to a funeral, in the sense that you have a gathering of people who are wearing uncomfortable clothing and would rather be somewhere else. The major differences are that:

1. Usually only one or two people get to talk at a funeral; and
2. Most funerals have a definite purpose (to say nice things about a dead person) and reach a definite conclusion (this person is put in the ground), whereas meetings generally drone on until the legs of the highest-ranking person present fall asleep.

Also, nothing is ever really buried in a meeting. An idea may look dead, but it will always reappear at another meeting later on. If you have ever seen the movie *Night of the Living Dead*, you have a rough idea how modern corporations and organizations operate, with projects and proposals that everybody thought were killed constantly rising from their graves to stagger back into meetings and eat the brains of the living.

How To Act In A Meeting

This depends on what kind of meeting it is. There are two major kinds:

1. **MEETINGS THAT ARE HELD FOR BASICALLY THE SAME REASON THAT ARBOR DAY IS OBSERVED**, namely, tradition. For example, a lot of managerial people like to meet on Monday, because it is Monday. You’ll get used to it. You’d better, because this kind of meeting accounts for 83 percent of all meetings held (based on a study in which I wrote down numbers until one of them looked about right). This kind of meeting operates the way “Show and Tell” operates in nursery school, with everybody getting to say something, the difference being that in nursery school the kids actually have something new to say. When it’s your turn, you should say you’re still working on whatever it is you’re supposed to be working on. This may seem pretty dumb, since obviously you’d be working on whatever you’re supposed to be working on, and even if you weren’t, you’d claim you were, but this is the traditional thing for everybody to say. It would be a lot faster if the person running the meeting would just say, “Everybody who is still working on whatever he or she is supposed to be working on, raise your hand!” You’d all be out of there in five minutes, even allowing time for jokes. But this is not how we do it in America. My guess is, it’s how they do it over in Japan.

2. **MEETINGS WHERE THERE IS SOME ALLEGED PURPOSE**. These are trickier, because what you do depends on what the purpose is. Sometimes the purpose is harmless, like somebody wants to show everybody slides of pie charts and give everybody a copy of a big fat report. All you have to do in this kind of meeting is sit there and have elaborate sexual fantasies, then take the report back to your office and throw it away, unless of course you’re a vice-president, in which case you write the name of a subordinate in the upper right-hand corner, followed by a question mark, like this: “Norm?” Then you send it to Norm and forget all about it (although it will plague old Norm for the rest of his career).

But sometimes you go to meetings where the purpose is to get your “input” on something. This is very serious, because what it means is, they want to make sure that in case whatever it is turns out to be stupid or fatal, you’ll get some of the blame. I mean, if they thought it was any good, they wouldn’t want your “input,” would they? So you have to somehow escape from the meeting before they get around to asking you anything. One way is to set fire to your tie. Another is to have an accomplice interrupt the meeting and announce that you have a phone call from somebody very important, such as the president of the company, or the Pope. It should be either one or the other. It would sound fishy if the accomplice said, “You have a call from the president of the company. Or the Pope.”

A Fun Thing To Do If Somebody Falls Asleep In A Meeting

Have everybody leave the room, then collect a group of total strangers, from right off the street, and have them sit around the sleeping person and stare at him until he wakes up. Then have one of them say to him, in a very somber voice, “Bob, your plan is very, very risky, but you’ve given us no choice but to try it. I only hope, for your sake, that you know what the hell you’re getting yourself into.” Then they should file quietly from the room.

How To Take Notes During A Meeting

Use a yellow legal pad. At the top, write the date and underline it twice. Now wait until an important person such as your boss starts talking. When he does, look at him with a look of enraptured interest, as though he is revealing the secrets of life itself. Then write interlocking rectangles. Also, if you’re sitting next to somebody you can trust, you can use your notepad to discuss various other people at the meeting.

Special Note Of Encouragement To Timid Housewives Who Have Been Thinking About Maybe Trying To Get Into The Business World But Are Worried That It Might Be Too Hard And They Might Not Be Qualified To Do Anything Except Make Tuna Casserole

Boy, are YOU ever in for a surprise. I mean, here you have been staying home, day after day, cooking meals and doing the laundry and praising the primitive refrigerator art your children produce and scrubbing away at the advanced fungal growths around the base of the toilet, during which time your husband has been GONE. And when he gets home, all he has the energy to do is just COLLAPSE on the Barca-Lounger and talk about what a DIFFICULT DAY he has had because the ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE (whatever that is) won’t “BALANCE” (whatever that means). So you have naturally come to believe that whatever goes on in the business world must be just DEATHLY difficult and complex, to cause a grown man such ANGUISH.

Well, just you wait until, following the program outlined in this book, you get your first actual job in

business. You are going to think you died and went straight to heaven. For one thing, everybody there is a GROWNUP. They allow NO CHILDREN in business. You never have to take ANYBODY, for any reason, to the potty. Speaking of which, if a business toilet gets dirty, you just CALL MAINTENANCE ON THE PHONE, and THEY COME AND CLEAN IT! And if they don't, YOU CAN WRITE A SNOTTY MEMORANDUM ABOUT IT!

And the best part of it is—as you will see, once we get into how businesses work—YOU NEED NO SPECIAL SKILLS OR QUALIFICATIONS TO BE PART OF A BUSINESS. All you have to do is figure out what simple concept the other people are really talking about when they use their complex business terms. For example, when your husband says the “Accounts Receivable” won't “balance,” what he means is, he has these two NUMBERS that are supposed to be the SAME, but instead they're DIFFERENT. Is that pathetic, or what? I mean, really, would you call that a PROBLEM? Especially if you compare it with, say, a situation where you're at the shopping mall Burger King and you have finally managed to get your food and your children and your packages to a table, and just as you start to bite into your Whopper junior, your two-year-old knocks his chocolate milk onto a priest, your six-year-old commences projectile vomiting and your four-year-old wanders off, enraptured, in the company of a toothless man with needle marks and Nazi tattoos. Now THIS is what I would call a PROBLEM, and you have to deal with it ALL BY YOURSELF.

Meanwhile, back at “work,” your husband is drinking nice hot coffee in a nice clean vomit-free office, fretting about his two little NUMBERS with the aid of a COMPUTER and probably three or four CO-WORKERS, all of whom will eventually go have a nice quiet lunch featuring MARGARITAS and NO CHILDREN.

So trust me, housewives. You'll do FINE in the business world. Your husband does, right? How hard can it be?

Chapter Four. Stepping Over Your Co-Workers

Okay. Now you can take phone messages. You can go to meetings. In short, you can do everything that can be reasonably expected of an employee. If you want, you can spend the rest of your professional life very comfortably doing these things. Ultimately, you can look forward to getting a couple of small promotions, followed by retirement, followed by death, followed by having your body eaten by insects and bacteria and then excreted in the form of basic chemicals that will serve as fertilizer for unattractive plants with names like “duckweed.” Is that what you want?

I didn't think so. Because you're the kind of person who wants to be Number One. Not in the sense of being bacterial excrement, but in the sense of having POWER. We're talking about CLOUT. We're talking about having a staff so large that when you have a dental appointment, you send an aide to get his teeth drilled. We're talking about CLAWING YOUR WAY TO THE TOP.

Getting Promoted

You can't expect to get a promotion right away, of course. You should wait two, maybe even three days before you start pushing for it. This will give you time to look around to see who your serious

competitors are, to size them up, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and to crush them under the freight elevator.

Ethical Question: Do You Have To Be Scum To Get Ahead?

As the famous baseball codger Leo Durocher was fond of saying before he died: “Nice guys finish last.” There is some truth in this. Take the example of Attila the Hun, who was an unpleasant person but an extremely successful Hun, one of the top Huns in the business. His lesser-known brother, Bob the Hun, was a nice guy, but a failure. Bob would show up with this horde outside a medieval village and say, “Listen, would you folks mind if we raped the women and stole everything and killed everybody? You would? Oh my gosh! Sorry!” And off he’d slink, very embarrassed. His was by far the lowest-ranked horde in the league.

But that is just one isolated incident. There are plenty of examples of nice people who DID get to the top. Just look around! There’s, ummmm, there’s ... ah, hmmmmm. Ha ha! I’m sure there are lots of examples, and for some reason I can’t think of a single ... wait! I’ve got one! Mother Theresa! That’s it! Here’s a very nice person who nevertheless rose to the top of her profession. So the moral is: even in this dog-cat-dog, highly competitive world, you can be a decent human being and still attain a career position where you kneel in the Third-World dirt trying to help the wretched and diseased. But if you want to succeed in a large modern corporation, scum is definitely the way to go.

Okay, let’s talk nuts and bolts. In most corporations and organizations, a person gets promoted via a five-step procedure:

1. He works diligently and competently at his job for several years.
2. His superiors gradually start to notice him.
3. Somebody above him in the organization dies, retires, leaves, or is promoted, thus creating an opening.
4. His superiors, after carefully considering all the qualified candidates, promote him.
5. An announcement of the promotion is put up on bulletin boards throughout the building, and his co-workers gather around and pound him on the back
(many of them aim for his kidneys).

This procedure is all well and good for most people, but you are not “most people.” You are a highly motivated individual who wants to be on the fast track, and you cannot afford to fritter away valuable time working diligently and competently at your job. So your best bet is to skip over steps 1 through 4 and go directly to the only really essential step: the bulletin board announcement. Type it on a quality typewriter, using the format shown here.

I am very pleased to announce that (YOUR NAME) has been promoted to the position of (NAME OF POSITION YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE PROMOTED TO) and will henceforth receive a much larger salary. He will report to me, in the unlikely event he ever has anything to report.

(NAME OF RANDOM VICE-PRESIDENT) post

That’s it! All you have to do now is put it up on the bulletin boards and wait for the congratulations to pour in from your co-workers. Don’t let them circle around behind you.

Okay, I know what some of you are thinking. You’re thinking: “Dave, doesn’t this particular method

of career advancement carry with it a certain element of risk?”

Yes, it does. For one thing, you have to be very careful about what position you promote yourself to. If you pick a position with a highly specific name such as Auditor, people might expect you to actually “audit” something. You want to pick a position involving words that could mean virtually anything, such as Coordinator and Administrator. If you promote yourself to Coordinating Administrator or Administrative Coordinator, nobody will ever be able to pin an actual job responsibility on you. You can devote full time to deciding on your next promotion.

Another possible problem is: What if your company uses the kind of bulletin boards that are covered by little locked glass doors? What you have to do here is find the person who has the key—this is going to be a low-level employee, of course—and make friends with him and explain that if he will let you use the key, you will promote him to a much, much better job than screwing around with bulletin boards. Like, if your company has a fleet of corporate jets, you could offer to make him a Senior Pilot.

How To Act Like An Executive

As you gradually work your way up through the organization over the course of, let’s say, a week, you’re going to have to change. You’re going to have to become an executive. This means showing maturity, integrity, and leadership. It means having the foresight to know what needs to be done, and the courage to do it. It means not picking your nose in group situations.

Did you ever see Lee Iacocca pick his nose? Or, for that matter, anybody’s nose? Of course not. Lee Iacocca didn’t get to be one of the top executives in the history of the world by publicly engaging in personal nasal hygiene. He got there by wearing sharp clothes and smoking expensive cigars. He got there because he had executive style. You need to get hold of some, too.

I do not mean to suggest for a moment that all it takes to be a top executive is a custom-tailored European suit. You also need the correct shirt and tie. And for women executives, there is the whole issue of hosiery. This is why I have devoted an entire chapter later in this book to the crucial matter of your wardrobe. But for now we’re going to talk about the human side of the executive’s job, by which I mean the side where you use humans for various purposes.

Dealing With Your Subordinates

Always remember this: your subordinates are not machines. They are human beings, with the same needs, the same wants, and the same dreams as you. Okay, maybe not all the same dreams. Probably they don’t have the one where you’re naked in a vat of Yoo-Hoo with the Soviet gymnastics team.

But they want to get ahead, just like you do. They, too, are part of the Carnival of American Capitalism. Like you, they want to reach out from the Carousel of Hard Work to grasp the Brass Ring of Success. And when, after riding ‘round and ‘round, they finally get their shot at realizing this dream, your job, as a caring and concerned superior, is to give them that extra shove they need to pitch forward off their horses and land headfirst among the Discarded Candied Apple Cores of Failure. Because there are only so many Brass Rings of Success, and you sure as hell don’t want a bunch of subordinates barging past you and snatching them all.

So the trick, with subordinates, is to keep them happy, productive, hopeful, and—above all—

subordinate. Here's how you do this:

1. **MAKE THEM THINK YOU'RE THEIR FRIEND.** The way you do this is by engaging in casual office banter with them to indicate that you are just a Regular Person Who Really Cares for Them as Human Beings. Keep a little file with a three-by-five card for each subordinate, on which you've written personal details such as the subordinate's nickname, hobbies, sex, etc. Review these cards regularly, then go out and make personal remarks to your subordinates:

YOU: Hello, "Bob."

SUBORDINATE: Hello.

YOU (glancing at your three-by-five card): So! You're still a white male with an interest in photography, eh, "Bob"?

SUBORDINATE: Yes sir.

YOU: Ha ha! Good. Let's engage in casual office banter again sometime soon, "Bob."

SUBORDINATE: Yes sir.

YOU (moving along to next subordinate): Hello, there, "Chuck." I am very...

SUBORDINATE: Excuse me, sir, but my name is Mary. Chuck left last year.

YOU (testily): Not according to this three-by-five card, he didn't!

SUBORDINATE: Yes sir.

YOU: As I was saying, "Chuck," I am very sorry your wife, Edna, died on October 3, 1981.

SUBORDINATE: Thank you, sir.

2. **GET RID OF THEM IF THEY START COMING UP WITH IDEAS.** Remember the old saying: "A subordinate capable of thinking up an idea is a subordinate capable of realizing that there is no particular reason why he or she should be a subordinate, especially your subordinate." This is why dogs are so popular as pets. You can have a dog for its whole lifetime, and it will never once come up with a good idea. It will lie around for over a decade, licking its private parts and always reacting with total wonder and amazement to your ideas. "What!?" says the dog, when you call it to the door. "You want me to go outside!!? What a great idea!!! I never would have thought of that!!!"

Cats, on the other hand, don't think you're the least bit superior. They're always watching you with that smart-ass cat expression and thinking, "God, what a cementhead." Cats are always coming up with their own ideas. They are not team players, and they would make terrible corporate employees. A corporate department staffed by cats would be a real disciplinary nightmare, the kind of department that would never achieve 100 percent of its "fair share" pledge quota to the United Way. Dogs, on the other hand, would go way over the quota. Of course they'd also chew up the pledge cards.

The point I'm trying to make here, as far as I can tell, is that you want subordinates who, when it comes to thinking up ideas, are more like dogs than like cats. Ideally, you should determine this before you hire people, by giving them a test, as explained below.

Test To Find Out If A Potential Employee Is The Kind Of Person Who Thinks Up Ideas

Show the person three forms, marked A, B, and C. Tell him that part of his job would be to fill out the three forms, then throw Form B away. Stress that this is company policy. If he nods and says, "Okay," or if he asks you a question like, "How can you tell which one is Form B?" hire him. But if he says

something like, “Gee, it seems kind of inefficient to fill out a form you’re just going to throw away,” get rid of him. This is the kind of person who will eventually, no matter how much training you give him, come up with an idea.

You should also check the person’s references for telltale statements like: “Ellen comes up with a lot of good ideas.” Or: “Ellen is a real innovator.”

What these people are trying to tell you is: “Ellen will get your job, and you’ll wind up on the street licking the insides of discarded chicken gumbo soup cans.

How To Fire People

This is the most painful part of being a supervisor, except for the part when you slam your finger in a file drawer. You never want to fire anybody, but sometimes you have an employee who has done something totally unacceptable, such as stealing, or drinking liquor on the job without sharing it, or coming up with an idea, and you have no choice but to let this person go.

There is no good way to fire an employee, but there are some things you can do to make it easier. You can have compassion. You can have understanding. You can have two large security guards named Bruno standing next to you and holding hot knitting needles. Call the employee in and say, “Ted, your performance has been unsatisfactory, so I’m afraid these two Brunos are going to have to poke out your eyes with hot knitting needles. I hate to do this, but the only alternative is to fire you.” At this point, Ted will beg you to fire him. He may well confess to the Lindbergh baby kidnapping.

That about covers how you should behave around your subordinates. Now for the really important issue, which is:

How You Should Behave Around Other Executives

Years ago, corporation executives tended to be middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males with as much individuality, style, and flair as generic denture adhesive. Today’s corporations however, thanks to a growing awareness of the value of diversity and of avoiding giant federal lawsuits, have opened their executive ranks to people of all races and sexes, provided they are willing to act, dress, and talk like middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. This is what you need to learn how to do.

List Of Topics That Middle-Aged White Anglo-Saxon Males Talk To Each Other About When They’re Not Talking Business

1. SPORTS.

As we can see from the above list, if you want to get along with the other executives, you have to learn how to talk about sports. This is pretty easy, if you know certain key phrases, as shown in the chart.

Chart Of Key Phrases To Use When Talking About Sports

SPORT SEASON KEY PHRASE

FOOTBALL July to February “They got some really bad calls.”

BASEBALL March to October “Some of those calls they got were really bad.”

BASKETBALL August to March “I can’t believe some of those calls they got.”

ICE HOCKEY Eternal “Can you believe some of those calls they got?”

To you, these phrases may not seem to have a whole lot of meat on them, but believe me, middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males can use them to keep a conversation going for hours.

Here’s an interesting Ethical Question you might care to think about: if you go to a meeting of executives, and just by chance it happens that not a single one of you is a middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male, do you still have to talk about sports? Or could you, in that one meeting, without telling anybody else, switch over to another topic, such as the theater? (“I can’t believe some of the reviews they got!”)

My personal feeling about this is, it’s not worth the risk. Somebody might report you.

Joining A Club

At some point, if you really want to make it to the top, you have to join a club. Actually, you have to join two clubs: one should be in the city, and it should be very old and have big dark drafty rooms where deceased members sit and read the paper all day. It should also have really bad food. The idea is, when you want to make a deal with an important client, you take him to your club for lunch, and eventually he realizes that unless the two of you reach an agreement, you’ll take him to your club again, so he gives you whatever you want.

The other club is your country club. This is a place where during the day you can relax by putting on ugly pants and golfing with other executives, and at night you can hold social affairs where you give each other golf trophies and, if everybody is in a really funky mood, dance the fox-trot. This is called “networking,” and it is very valuable because in the business world, a golf trophy creates a lifelong bond between two people.

Of course most clubs have certain requirements regarding who they will allow to become a member. I don’t mean to suggest here that they don’t admit minority groups. Ha ha! Don’t be ridiculous! After all, these are the eighties! Today’s clubs are more than happy to admit any minority person whatsoever, provided this person is also a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. But even if you don’t fall into this category, you should apply for membership. What’s the worst they can do? Laugh at you? Blow their noses on your application? Foreclose your mortgage? Have you fired and see to it that you’ll never again get a job, anywhere in the country, better than Urinal Cake Replacer? Don’t be intimidated! Go before the Membership Committee and explain to them that you really, sincerely want to join, and that you will work hard to be the best darned member they have ever had, and that you have photographs of them entering and leaving rooms at the Out-O’-Town Motor Lodge and Motel in various interesting groups of up to six people and two mature female caribou. They’ll welcome you with open arms. Don’t let them kiss you on the lips.

Computers In Business

You won't last long in the modern business world if you're not comfortable with computers. Computers are involved in every aspect of business from doing the payroll to running the elevators, and if they don't like you, they can make your elevator drop like a stone for 20 floors, then yank it up and drop it again until your skeletal system looks like oatmeal. So you damn well better read this chapter and get comfortable with them and become their friend.

Glossary Of Standard Computer Terms

BUG: A cute little humorous term used to explain why the computer had your Shipping Department send 150 highly sophisticated jet-fighter servo motors, worth over \$26,000 apiece, to fishermen in the Ryuku Islands, who are using them as anchors. **DATA BASE:** The information you lose when your memory crashes. **GRAPHICS:** The ability to make pie charts and bar graphs, which are the universal business method for making abstract concepts, such as "three," comprehensible to morons like your boss. **HARDWARE:** Where the people in your company's software section will tell you the problem is. **SOFTWARE:** Where the people in your company's hardware section will tell you the problem is. **SPREADSHEET:** A kind of program that lets you sit at your desk and ask all kinds of neat "what if ?" questions and generate thousands of numbers instead of actually working. **USER:** The word that computer professionals use when they mean "idiot."

How Computers Work

The first computers were big clumsy machines that used vacuum tubes. By today's standards, they were extremely primitive. For example, they believed the sun was carried across the sky on the back of a giant turtle.

But the modern computer is much more sophisticated, and far smaller, thanks to a device called the "micro—chip," which, although it is less than one-thousandth the size of a moderate zit, is capable of answering, in a matter of seconds, mathematical questions that would take millions of years for a human being to answer (even longer if he stopped for lunch).

How does the computer do this? Simple. It makes everything up. It knows full well you're not going to waste millions of years checking up on it. So you should never use computers for anything really important, such as balancing your personal checkbook. But they're fine for corporate use.

How To Use Computer-Generated Pie Charts And Bar Graphs To Make Abstract Concepts Understandable To Morons Like Your Boss

Let's say you have to write a Safety Report. The old-fashioned, pre-computer way to do this would be something like this:

In March, we had two people who got sick because they forgot and drank coffee from the vending machine. Also, Ed Sparge set fire to his desk again. Ed has promised that from now on he will put his cigar out before he dozes off.

But now, using the graphics capability on your computer, you can produce a visually arresting and easy-to-understand report.

Chapter Five. Business Communications

No modern corporation can survive unless its employees communicate with each other. For example, let's say that Stan, who works in Building Administration, notices that the safety valve on the main steam boiler is broken. If he doesn't communicate this information to Arnie, over in Maintenance, you are going to have little bits and pieces of the corporation spread out over three, maybe four area codes. So communication is very, very important. It should not, however, be confused with memos.

What Makes A Good Business Memo

Ask any business school professor, and he'll tell you a good memo is clear, concise, and well organized.

Now ask him what his annual salary is. It's probably less than most top executives spend in a month on shoe maintenance. What you can learn from this is that in your business correspondence, you should avoid being clear, concise, and well organized. Remember the Cardinal Rule of Business Writing (invented by Cardinal Anthony Rule, 1898-1957): "The primary function of almost all corporate correspondence is to enable the writer to avoid personal responsibility for the many major bonehead blunders that constantly occur when you have a bunch of people sitting around all day drinking coffee and wearing uncomfortable clothing."

There are big balloons of blame in every corporation, drifting gently from person to person. The purpose of your memos is to keep these balloons aloft, to bat them gently on their way. This requires soft, meaningless phrases, such as "less than optimal." If you write a direct memo, a memo that uses sharp words such as "bad" to make an actual point, you could burst a balloon and wind up with blame all over your cubicle.

Standard Format For The Business Memo

1. ALWAYS START BY SAYING THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED SOMETHING, AND ARE ENCLOSING SOMETHING. These can be the same thing. For example, you could say: "I have received your memo of the 14th, and am enclosing it." Or they can be two different things: "I have received a letter from my mother, and am enclosing a photograph of the largest-known domestically grown sugar beet." As you can see, these things need have nothing to do with each other, or with the point of the memorandum. They are in your memo solely to honor an ancient business tradition, the Tradition of Receiving and Enclosing, which would be a shame to lose.

2. STATE THAT SOMETHING HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO YOUR ATTENTION. Never state who brought it. It can be virtually any random fact whatsoever. For example, you might say: "It has been brought to my attention that on the 17th of February, Accounts Receivable notified Collections of a prior past-due balance of \$5,878.23 in the account of Whelk, Stoa, and Mandible, Inc." Ideally, your reader

will have nothing to do with any of this, but he will think he should, or else why would you go to all this trouble to tell him? Also, he will get the feeling you must be a fairly plugged-in individual, to have this kind of thing brought to your attention.

3. STATE THAT SOMETHING IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING. This statement should be firm, vaguely disapproving, and virtually impossible to understand. A good standard one is: "It is my understanding that this was to be ascertained in advance of any further action, pending review."

4. END WITH A STRONG CLOSING LINE. It should leave the reader with the definite feeling that he or she is expected to take some kind of action. For example: "Unless we receive a specific and detailed proposal from you by the 14th, we intend to go ahead and implant the device in Meredith."

The beauty of this basic memo format is that it can even be adapted for sending personalized communications to your subordinates ("It has come to my attention that your wife, Edna, is dead.").

In addition to writing memos, every month or so you should generate a lengthy report. This is strictly so you can cover yourself in case something bad happens.

Standard Format To Use For Lengthy Reports To Insure That Nobody Reads Them

I. SUBJECT. This is entirely up to you. If you follow the format, it will have virtually no impact on the rest of the report.

II. INTRODUCTION. This should be a fairly long paragraph in which you state that in this report, you intend to explore all the ramifications of the subject, no matter how many it turns out there are.

III. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: This is a restatement of the Introduction, only the sentences are in reverse order.

IV. OBJECTIVES: This is a restatement of the Statement of Purpose, only you put the sentences in a little numbered list.

V. INTRODUCTION. By now, nobody will remember that you already had this.

VI. BACKGROUND: Start at the dawn of recorded time.

VII. DISCUSSION. This can be taken at random from the Encyclopedia Britannica, because the only people still reading at this point have been able to continue only by virtue of ingesting powerful stimulants and will remember nothing in the morning.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS: You should conclude that your findings tend to support the hypothesis that there are indeed a great many ramifications, all right.

IX. INTRODUCTION. Trust me. Nobody will notice.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS: Recommend that the course of action outlined in the Discussion section (Ha ha! Let them try to find it!) should be seriously considered.

How To Write Letters

There are various types of letters you write in business, each requiring a different tone.

Letters To Customers Or Potential Customers

The basic idea here is to grovel around like a slug writhing in its own slime. For example:

Dear Mr. Herckle:

It certainly was an extremely great pleasure to fly out to your office in Butte last week, and even though I didn't have the enormous gigantic emotional pleasure of meeting with you in person to discuss our new product line, I was certainly extremely pleased and grateful for the opportunity to squat on your doorstep, and I certainly do want to apologize for any inconvenience or blood-stains I may have caused when your extremely impressive dog, Bart, perforated my leg.

Your humble servant,

Byron B. Buffington

Letters To Companies That Owe Your Company Money

In these cases, you want to set a tone that is polite, yet firm:

Dear Mr. Hodpecker:

In going over our records, I note that you have not responded to our invoice of January 12, nor to our reminders of February 9, March 6, April 11, May 4, and June 6; and when we sent Miss Bleemer around to discuss this matter with you personally, you locked her in a conference room with a snake.

Mr. Hodpecker, we of course value your business, and we very much want to keep you as a customer. At least that is what I am trying to tell my two top collection assistants, the Bulemia brothers, Victor and Anthony. They, on the other hand, would prefer to keep you as a pet. They even bought one of those little cages that airlines transport animals in. To me, it looks just barely big enough for a cocker spaniel, but Victor and Anthony believe they can make you fit.

Expecting to hear from you very, very soon in regards to this matter, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Byron B. Buffington

P.S. Victor has a complete set of auto-body tools.

Letters Of Recommendation

You have to be thoughtful here. See, anybody can get a nice letter of recommendation written about him ("Mr. Hitler always kept his uniform very clean"). So most prospective employers tend to discount what such letters say. This means that to make any kind of impression at all, you must exaggerate violently.

Let's say, for example, you're writing a letter of recommendation for a good employee named Bob, and you tell the simple truth:

"Bob Tucker is by far the best foreman we ever had. He never missed a day of work, got along well with his subordinates, and increased our productivity by 47 percent."

If a prospective employer saw such a ho-hum letter of recommendation, he would naturally assume that Bob was an arsonist child molester. You should spice up the letter with statements such as:

"Working on his own time during lunch hour, Bob developed a cure for heart disease." Or: "On at least three separate occasions, Bob sacrificed his life so that others might live."

The Basic Rules Of Business Grammar

1. **USE THE WORD “TRANSPIRE” A LOT.** Wrong: The dog barked. Right: What transpired was, the dog barked. Even better: A barking of the dog transpired.
2. **ALSO USE “PARAMETER.”** Wrong: Employees should not throw paper towels into the toilet. Right: Employees should not throw paper towels into the parameters of the toilet.
3. **ALWAYS FOLLOW THE PHRASE “TED AND” WITH THE WORD “MYSELF.”** Wrong: Ted and I think the pump broke. Right: Ted and myself think the pump broke. Even better: It is the opinion of Ted and myself that a breakage of the pump transpired.
4. **IF SOMETHING IS FOLLOWING SOMETHING ELSE, ALWAYS LET THE READER KNOW IN ADVANCE VIA THE WORDS: “THE FOLLOWING.”** Wrong: We opened up the pump and found a dead bat. Right: We opened up the pump and found the following: a dead bat.
5. **ALWAYS STRESS THAT WHEN YOU TOLD SOMEBODY SOMETHING, YOU DID IT VERBALLY.** Wrong: I told him. Right: I told him verbally.
6. **NEVER SPLIT AN INFINITIVE.** An infinitive is a phrase that has a “to” at the beginning, such as “Today, I am going to start my diet.” You should not split such a phrase with another word, as in “Today, I am definitely going to start my diet,” because it makes you sound insecure about it. It sounds like you know darned well you’ll be hitting the pecan fudge before sundown.
7. **NEVER END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION.** Prepositions are words like “with,” “into,” “off,” “exacerbate,” etc. The reason you should never end a sentence with one is that you would be violating a rule of grammar. Wrong: Youse better be there with the ransom money, on account of we don’t want to have to hack nobody’s limbs off. Right: ... on account of we don’t want to have to hack off nobody’s limbs. Even better: ... on account of we don’t want to have to hack off nobody’s limbs with a chain saw.
8. **AVOID DANGLING PARTICIPLES.** A participle is the letters “ing” at the ends of words like “extenuating.” You want to avoid having it “dangle” down and disrupt the sentence underneath: There appear to be some extenuating circumstances. Hey! Get that participle out of here!! Ted and myself feel that these ...

Common Grammar Questions

Q. When’s it okay to say “between you and I”?

A. It is correct in the following instance: “Well, just between you and I, the cosmetic surgeon took enough cellulite out of her upper arms to raft down the Colorado River on.”

Q. What is the purpose of the apostrophe?

A. The apostrophe is used mainly in hand-lettered signs to alert the reader that an “S” is coming up at the end of a word, as in: WE DO NOT EXCEPT

PERSONAL CHECK’S or: NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY ITEM’S. Another important grammar concept to bear in mind when creating hand-lettered signs is that you should put quotation marks around random words for decoration, as in “TRY” OUR HOT DOG’S or even TRY “OUR” HOT DOG’S.

Q. When do you say “who” and when do you say “whom”?

A. You say “who” when you want to find out something, like for example if a friend of yours comes up and says, “You will never guess which of your immediate family members just lost a key limb in a freak Skee-Ball accident,” you would reply: “Who?” You say “whom” when you are in Great Britain or you are angry (as in: “And just whom do you think is going to clean up after these elk?”).

Q. Like many writers, I often get confused about when to use the word “affect” and when to use “infect.” Can you help me out?

A. Here is a simple pneumatic device for telling these two similar-sounding words (or “gramophones”) apart: just remember that “infect” begins with

“in,” which is also how “insect” begins, while “affect” begins with “af,” which is an abbreviation for “Air Force.”

Q. I have a question concerning the expression: “As far as Fred.” I would like to know whether it is preferable to say: “As far as Fred, he always gets the hives from that spicy food”; or, “As far as Fred, that spicy food always gives him the hives.”

A. They are both preferable.

Q. What do they mean on the weather forecast when they say we are going to have “thundershower activity”?

A. They mean we are not going to have an actual thundershower, per se, but we are going to have thundershower activity, which looks very similar to the untrained eye.

Q. I think my wife is having an affair.

A. I wouldn’t doubt it.

Making Speeches And Oral Presentations

Most people, no matter how competent they are, break into a cold sweat when they have to speak in public. This is perfectly natural, like being afraid to touch eels. But once you learn a few of the “tricks of the trade” used by professionals, you find it’s surprisingly easy, and can even be fun! I’m talking here about eel-touching. Public speaking will always be awful.

There are, however, some standard techniques you should be aware of:

1. **ACT VERY NERVOUS.** A lot of inexperienced speakers try to act cool and confident, which is a big mistake because if your audience thinks you’re in control, they’ll relax and fall asleep. So you want to keep them on their toes. Have a great big stain under each armpit. Speak in a barely audible monotone. From time to time, stop in mid-sentence and stare in horror at the water pitcher for a full 30 seconds. Try to create the impression in your audience that at any moment they may have to wrestle you to the conference table and force a half dozen Valiums down your throat. After a while, they’ll start to feel really sorry for you. They’ll help you finish your sentences. At the end, if you ask for questions, the room will be as silent as a tomb. If anybody even starts to ask a question, the others will kick him so hard he may never walk again.

2. **ALWAYS START WITH A JOKE.** Probably the most famous example of a good opening joke is the one Abraham Lincoln used to start the Gettysburg Address. “Four score and seven years ago,” he said, and the crowd went nuts. “What the hell is a score?” they asked each other, tears of laughter streaming down their faces.

3. **USE QUOTATIONS FROM FAMOUS DEAD PEOPLE.** You can obtain these in bulk from

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, a book of quotations nobody is familiar with.

4. USE A PIE CHART. This is pretty much a federal requirement for making a business presentation. It has to have the words "market share."

5. IF YOU HAVE TO SCRATCH SOMEPLACE LIKE YOUR CROTCH, DRAW THE AUDIENCE'S

ATTENTION AWAY FROM YOURSELF VIA A CLEVER RUSE. Like, you could suddenly point at the window and say, "Hey! What the heck is that!"

Now let's see how you'd put all these elements together. Suppose you've been called upon to make a presentation to top management from all over the country to explain how come a new product, Armpit Magic Deodorant Soap, is not selling well. Here's what you'd say:

"Good afternoon. A priest and a rabbi are playing golf. The priest hits an incredible shot, and ..."
(30-second pause)

"Staring at this water pitcher, I am reminded of the Bartlett's familiar quotation by the ancient dead Chinese painter, Ku Kai-Chih, who said: 'Of all kinds of painting, figure painting is the most difficult; then comes landscape painting, and next dogs and horses.'"

...

"But as this pie chart shows ... Hey! What's that over there, away from my crotch!!!?"

"Ha ha! My mistake. But as this pie chart shows, our 'market share' for Armpit Magic Deodorant Soap is not going to improve in a day, or even two days. It's not going to improve until we figure out some way to make it stop causing the consumer's skin to develop oozing craters the size of Susan B. Anthony dollars. Thank you, and you've been a wonderful audience."

Chapter Six. Giving Good Lunch

When you're trying to get a prospective client to sign a big contract, it's a good idea to get him away from the formality of the office and into a relaxed dining environment that is more conducive to getting liquored up. But you must select the restaurant carefully: it could destroy the whole effect if his entree were to arrive in a colorful box festooned with scenes from Return of the Jedi. No, you must select a classy restaurant, the kind with valet parking and dozens of apparently superfluous personnel lounging around in tuxedos. You can tell this kind of restaurant by its name.

Examples Of Classy Restaurant Names

Eduardo's
La Pleuve en Voiture
Ye Reallie Olde Countrie Manour Downes Inne

Examples Of Non-Classy Restaurant Names

Booger's
The Chew 'n' Swallow

Commander Taco

When you arrive at the restaurant, turn your car over to the youthful narcotics offender in charge of valet parking and promise him a large tip if he doesn't drive it over any preschool children. Now go inside, where you'll be approached by the maitre d'hotel (literally, "man who run de hotel"). He will ask: "May I help you?" They're always making this kind of snotty remark.

This is where you get to show your prospective client that you have a great deal of savoirfaire ("five" dollar bills"). Hand the maitre d' some money. Make sure the prospective client sees this; you might have to snatch it back and hand it over again several times, just to be on the safe side. Then say: "A table for two, my good man." Wink at the prospective client when you say this, so he will realize that you are "slipping" the maitre d' a little something" to "grease his palm."

At this point, the maitre d' may say something like: "But sir, it's 11 A.M. and we don't open for lunch until noon." He is indicating here that he would like several more five-dollar bills. This kind of thing goes on all the time in classy restaurants. Give your prospective client a knowing elbow in his rib cage, then stuff several additional bills into the maitre d's breast pocket and say: "Oh, I'm sure you can find a table for us." Don't quit until he gives you one.

When you are seated, your waiter will arrive with the menus and make the following three statements, all of which are required under the Federal Waitperson Control Act:

1. His name is Thad.
2. It will be His Pleasure to serve you.
3. Would either of you care for a cocktail.

(By the way, this is an ideal opportunity for you to make a witty remark, such as: "What, exactly, is involved in 'caring for' a cocktail? Do they need special food?" This will cause Thad to roar with approving laughter. Tip him \$5.)

Now as regards cocktails: the days of the "three martini lunch" are long gone. In today's high-pressure, brutally competitive business environment, you want a minimum of four martinis, and you want them before the salad comes. Order the same for your prospective client. If he balks, stress that you're paying for them, but that he should not feel obligated because of this.

Now it's time to examine the menu. This requires a great deal of concentration, because you no longer see the simple American menus you knew as a child. In those days, you'd mull over the menu for a while, then you'd say, "I'll have the chicken or fish," and the waiter would say, "Excellent choice," and that would be that.

But the modern restaurant menu is much, much more complex, consisting of two or three dozen totally unintelligible items.

Don't panic. Examine your menu carefully, trying not to let on to the prospective client that the only word on it you understand is "Menu" and wait for Thad to return with your drinks. Here's what he'll say:

"Today we are out of everything on the menu, but we do have some very nice specials. For our appetizer, we have an excellent Tete de Chou au Sucre Flambe, which is a head of cabbage covered with sugar and set on fire; we also have a very nice Poisson Sacre Bleu, which is a Norwegian fluke that has been minced into tiny little pieces, then defiled in lemon sauce and stirred until dawn with attractive utensils; we have a superb Coquille St. Jacques au Lanterne, which is a pumpkin stuffed with live writhing scallops; we have a traditional Merde aux Tuilles, which is of course a beef which has been chipped, served with a white sauce on bread which has been toasted; we have a very popular Papier du Oiseau dans la Cage, which is ..."

And so on. Thad will keep this up for maybe ten minutes, after which you should tip him \$5 and tell him, “I’ll have the chicken, and my prospective client here will have whichever menu selection is the most expensive.” Stress to the prospective client that this will cost him nothing, as you are paying for it. In fact, it would be a good idea to reassure him on this point several more times during the meal, with such phrases as, “It’s on me” and “I’m paying for your food.”

After you’ve ordered from Thad, the wine steward will come around and give you the wine list. The correct wine to select, of course, depends on the kind of entree you order, as shown in this handy chart:

Entree

Correct Wine

Meat

The appropriate wine here would cost at least \$45 a bottle

Fish

With fish you want a bottle of wine costing a minimum of \$45

Poultry

You should spend \$45 or more for this bottle of wine.

If you have trouble remembering all this information, don’t worry. Your wine steward will be more than happy to help you make your wine selection:

YOU: How is this wine that costs \$12 a bottle?

WINE STEWARD: We use that primarily as a disinfectant.

YOU: I see. Then we’ll have something much more expensive.

WINE STEWARD: Excellent choice.

When the steward brings you the wine, he’ll show you the label; you should examine it closely for spelling and punctuation errors (see The Basic Rules of Business Grammar). He will then pour a little into your glass. Taste it, and if necessary, have him add a couple of packets of Sweet ‘n’ Low.

At the end of the meal, be sure to make a lighthearted remark about the size of the check, such as: “My God! This check is so large that unless I sign a big contract with a prospective client soon, I’ll never be able to afford the operation that will restore the precious gift of sight to my three-year-old daughter, Little Meg, ha ha!” This is your humorous signal to the prospective client that it’s time to “talk turkey.”

“Ed,” you should say (if his name is Ed), “this meal has been a tremendously tax-deductible pleasure for me personally, but let’s get down to brass tacks. Looking at this thing objectively, I think it would be a big mistake for you not to sign this contract, especially if you want a ride home.” Now give him some time to think it over. Maybe even sprint for the door a couple of times, as if you’re running off without him. Better yet, offer to stay there until night falls and buy him dinner. He’ll come around.

Entertaining At Home

The first question, of course, is: whose home? I think we can rule out your home, since, let’s be honest here, nobody in your home has ever made a really sincere effort to clean the toilets, and it’s far too late to start now. A much better bet would be the client’s home. Call him up and explore this possibility with him:

YOU: Ed, Denise and I are wondering if you and Trudy would be free to have dinner with us at your home Friday night.

CLIENT: What?

YOU: How are your toilets?

CLIENT: What?

YOU: Cleaner than ours, I bet!

CLIENT: You want to have dinner at our home?

YOU: Sounds good to me! Eight o'clock Friday it is!

You should arrive a bit early, say fiveish, to rummage around and make sure there's plenty of pre-dinner liquor on hand. When Ed and Trudy come out of their bedroom, your first responsibility is to make them feel at ease. I suggest you get a copy of the Complete Book of Games and Stunts published by Bonanza Books and authored by Darwin A. Hindman, Ph.D., professor of physical education at the University of Missouri. This is an actual book, available at garage sales everywhere. I especially recommend the "Funnel Trick" described in chapter 4 ("Snares"), wherein you have the victim lean his head back and place a penny on his forehead, then you tell him that the object of the trick is to tilt his head forward so the penny drops into a funnel stuck into his belt. However—get this—while he's got his head tilted back, you pour a pitcher of water into the funnel and get his pants soaking wet! Ha ha! Be sure to follow this with a lighthearted remark ("You look like a cretin, Ed!") and offer everybody a swig from the liquor bottle.

Now that everybody is loosened up, drop a hint ("God I'm hungry! Any food around here?") that it's time to move to the dinner table. Your goal at dinner, of course, is to somehow cause the prospective client to get a wad of food caught in his throat and start choking, so you can leap up and dislodge the food by means of the "Heimlich maneuver," thus causing the client to be indebted to you for the rest of his life. This means you have to startle him just as the food is going down his throat. The most reliable way to do this is to have a pistol hidden under the table, and fire it off just as he starts to swallow. You should of course use blanks, as bullets would be irresponsible.

The Heimlich Maneuver

Stand behind the victim and put your arms around him. Make a fist with one hand and grab it with the other, then yank your hands sharply into the victim's abdomen, thus causing the wad of food to be expelled.

Heimlich-Maneuver Hockey

Have two opposing players, each holding a victim, stand about six feet apart. Each player tries to expel his victim's food wad into the other victim's mouth.

What To Do If A Client Or Business Associate Dies

Send a flower arrangement that does not have little pink or blue rattles in it. Wear black clothes to the funeral. If you don't have black clothes, wear the darkest clothes you have. Tiptoe up to the next of kin during the service and explain this fact to them. "These are the darkest clothes I have," you should say,

taking care to whisper. Next you should tell them how awful you feel. “God!” you should say. “I feel terrible! Just horrible!”

Next you should go up and examine the deceased, then go back and inform the next of kin how good he looks. “Ed looks great!” you should say. “You can hardly even tell he’s dead!” Unless Ed is in an urn.

Chapter Seven. How To Dress Exactly Like Everybody Else

Take a moment to consider the way the world’s truly successful people dress. They dress like mental patients. Your prime example is Prince Charles. Here is one of the world’s top princes, if not the top prince, yet he is constantly showing up in public wearing ludicrous Sergeant Pepper-style outfits featuring hats with enormous feathers. Or you’ll see a picture of him visiting some remote fungal nation and cheerfully wearing ritual native vegetation around his neck. There are plenty of other examples of highly successful people who dress absurdly: Mick Jagger, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Ronald McDonald, to name just three. And of course you can’t find a really successful world religious leader who doesn’t wear a comical outfit.

So what does this tell you about how you should dress if you want to succeed in American business? Nothing. Because the way we dress in American business is not based on the way the world’s truly successful people dress. It is based on the way John T. Molloy says we should dress. Molloy is the author of the best-selling books *Dress for Success*, *The Woman’s Dress for Success Book*, *Live for Success*, and *Success in the Afterlife*. He openly admits to practicing a science called “wardrobe engineering.” He has done extensive wardrobe research, wherein he tested the reactions of thousands of groups of people to the way different individuals were dressed. What he found, after years and years of study, was that the groups always liked it best when the individuals were naked. So he pretty much gave up the research and decided instead to author best-selling books containing incredibly detailed instructions on how to dress and what accessories to carry, instructions that were so slavishly followed by the business community that they briefly resulted in a worldwide shortage of Cross pens.

The bottom line is, if you truly want to present a business wardrobe image that makes the all-important fashion statement: “I look exactly like everybody else in American business,” you damn well better dress the way John T. Molloy says you should. So listen up.

How Men Should Dress

Basically, the American businessman should dress as though he recently lost his entire family in a tragic boat explosion. We are talking about a subdued look here. This doesn’t mean that you have no choice in what you wear. Au contraire. For example, you may wear two completely different colors of woolen suit: you may wear a dark gray woolen suit, or, if you want to get really crazy, you may wear a dark blue woolen suit.

You may not wear a brown, green, or (God forbid) plaid polyester suit, because everybody will think you just tromped into town from rural Louisiana to attend the Live Bait Show. Men wearing these colors are very likely to be passed over for promotion, as is shown by this actual simulation of a scene that for

all we know probably occurs every day in major corporations:

(We are in the office of the president, who is meeting with a vice-president to decide whom to promote to director of the Research Department.)

VICE-PRESIDENT: Well, there's Barkley, of course. He's the one who came up with the way to turn discarded wads of Kleenex into gold using only common household ingredients.

PRESIDENT: What color suit does he wear?

VICE-PRESIDENT: Brown.

PRESIDENT: Well forget him.

Shirts

Your shirt should be white, and it should not have the name "Earl" embroidered anywhere on it.

Ties

The purpose of your tie is to suggest that you attended an Ivy League university, so the key is to select the right pattern.

How To Tie A Tie

Face southwest, with the long end of the tie hanging down casually from your right hand (the audience's left hand). Now bring the short end of the tie around the back of your neck and let it hang down your front, so that it just touches the scar you got ironing shirts naked. Now take the "wide" (or "long") end of the tie and pass it three times around the "short" (or "long") end, then up through the loop. (What do you mean, "What loop?" Check again!) Now pull everything snug, unless you have forgotten to put on a shirt, in which case you had best remove the tie, by force if necessary.

Shoes

These are a "must" in most business situations. If you use "Odor Eaters," they should be beige or navy blue.

Underwear

No area of the male business wardrobe is as important as his underwear. Next time you're in a room with a group of successful executives, take a few moments to examine their under-wear, and you'll find they're all wearing underwear with proven "power patterns" that have been shown in scientific tests to create a feeling of awe and respect in others.

In situations where you really need to enhance your power image, you should wear your power underwear outside your pants. In extreme situations, such as you are arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court, you will want to wear them in an even more visible location, such as on your head.

How Women Should Dress

In deciding how to dress for business, women must understand certain basic facts, the foremost being that all men are scum. If a woman, no matter how competent, gives off the slightest hint that she has any feelings that could be remotely construed as sexual, this is all that the men in her corporation will ever think about. That's not just my opinion: it is a scientific finding based on years of extensively hanging around with guys and talking.

What does this mean, in terms of your business wardrobe? It means you want to adopt a fashion look that has become the standard for the woman on the corporate fast track, a look that can best be described as: Modified Nun. All we've really done to the basic nun look is remove the headpiece. This conveys to the men in your corporation that you are not a sex object, but an authority figure who must be taken seriously because at any moment you might strike them on the hands with a ruler.

Hosiery

This is mandatory. I realize you women hate to be constantly shelling out money for a product manufactured by an industry that pays its scientists huge bonuses if they can develop fibers even weaker than the ones they currently use. I realize you go around saying: "If we can land a man on the moon, why can't we develop pantyhose that will last longer than a small vanilla cone on a hot day?" Well I'm sorry, but rules are rules. Also, we haven't landed a man on the moon for a very long time now, and we probably never will again unless something urgent comes up, such as the Defense Department suspects there are Cuban troops up there.

Makeup

A good rule of thumb is: if you can stick a pin more than a quarter inch into your face and still not feel anything, you're wearing too much makeup for the business environment. Or else you have a medical problem.

Shoes

The ideal shoe for the career woman is the basic pump with a "sensible" heel, by which I mean a heel that will just fit through the holes in a standard street grate.

Chapter Eight. Sales

What makes a good salesperson? In an effort to answer that question, I asked my research associates to interview the top 100 salespeople, based on dollar volume, in the nation. Naturally, my associates refused to do this. I wouldn't have done it either. Life is hard enough without voluntarily subjecting

yourself to top salespeople.

What we can learn from this research is that if you want to become a top salesperson, you must develop drive, determination, and persistence such that people do not wish to be within thousands of yards of you. How can you become this kind of person? By BELIEVING IN YOURSELF. You must develop a FAITH IN YOUR OWN ABILITIES so strong that YOU DON'T FEEL THE LEAST BIT EMBARRASSED ABOUT ACTING LIKE A SCUZZBAG. You don't get this kind of confidence from other people; it has to COME FROM WITHIN, from having a comprehensive, meaningful, and deep-rooted PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE based on TIMELESS TRUTHS, which you get from MOTIVATIONAL BOOKS THAT ARE ALSO AVAILABLE ON CASSETTE TAPES COSTING \$49.95 PER SET.

Without question, the number-one cassette thinker in the world today is Dr. Lance M. Canker, the man whose famous motivational tape "Dare to Be a jerk" is believed to be the single biggest factor in the historic decision by Coca-Cola executives to change the Coke formula so it tasted more like children's cough syrup. Dr. Canker, who has had a lifelong interest in motivational thinking ever since 1963, when he had his name legally changed from "Lance Canker" to "Dr. Lance Canker," has written a number of self-help books, including the hugely popular God, Are You Fat! But his greatest contribution to the business world is his classic how-to-sell book Buy This Book or You'll Starve to Death, which is filled with true-life inspirational anecdotes such as these:

Not long ago, I gave a dinner party attended by every major Western head of state and a young man I'll call

"Jon." Although he is attractive, intelligent, and talented, "Jon" was a very unhappy person, and he was thinking of killing himself. So I took him aside.

"Jon," I said. "Lighten up." Today, he is the president of General Motors.

Not long after that, I got a telephone call from a major world religious leader, whom I'll call "the Pope." Although he is attractive, intelligent, and talented, he was feeling tremendous anxiety about the fate of mankind.

"Hey," I advised him. "Forget it." And today he, too, is the president of General Motors.

Using proven techniques such as these, Dr. Canker shows in Buy This Book or You'll Starve to Death how any member of the vertebrate family can develop powerful selling skills. In this chapter, we shall draw extensively on the information contained in Dr. Canker's book, and by the time Dr. Canker finds out about this, we shall be long gone.

Rule #1: Maintain Eye Contact With The Prospect At All Times No Matter What

This is extremely important. If the prospect tries to glance out the window, you must race over and stand in front of the window. If you hand him a document and he attempts to read it, you must place your head between the document and his eyes. If he goes to the bathroom, you must maintain eye contact as best you can from the adjacent stall or urinal. This may make you uncomfortable, especially if you and the prospect happen to belong to differing sexes, but if you don't do it, you'll give the impression that you're not being totally honest and you don't truly believe in your product, whatever the hell it is.

COMMON QUESTION #1: What if the prospect is blind? ANSWER: Then you must maintain knee contact.

COMMON QUESTION #2: Well, what if the prospect is blind and has a wooden leg? ANSWER: Well, then you would ...

COMMON QUESTION #3: Also he's in a coma. ANSWER: Hey! These aren't common questions!

Rule #2: Call The Prospect By His First Name A Lot, Because He Might Forget You're Talking To Him

WRONG: "Bob, have you ever given any thought as to who would provide for the financial security of your wife and children if, God forbid, you were to be killed by falling cement?"

RIGHT: "Bob, have you, Bob, ever given any thought as to who would provide for the financial security of your, Bob's, wife and children if you, Bob, were to be killed by falling cement, Bob? Huh? Bob?"

Rule #3: Learn To Read The Prospect's "Body Language"

If you've ever driven on the Long Island Expressway, you know that people often communicate to each other "nonverbally," which means rather than using words, they use fingers, arm gestures, facial expressions, teeth, knives, etc. As a smart salesperson, you must learn to "read" the prospect's body language so you can take appropriate action, such as shielding your face.

Rule #4: Get The Prospect Into A "Yes" Frame Of Mind

The way you do this is by making a series of statements that the prospect cannot help but agree with. Let's listen in to this actual transcript of a top salesperson applying this technique:

SALESPERSON: Hi, Bob! Great to see you! Bob, I want to thank you for giving me an appointment. Bob.

PROSPECT: I didn't give you an appointment. You got in here by sedating my receptionist with chloroform.

SALESPERSON: Ha ha! Bob, Bob, Bob. I can't put anything over on you, can I? But seriously, Bob, wouldn't you agree that Adolf Hitler was a bad person?

PROSPECT: Well, yes, but I ...

SALESPERSON: And don't you feel, Bob, that child abuse is wrong?

PROSPECT: Of course. Sure. I mean ...

SALESPERSON (swinging a watch back and forth rhythmically on a chain): And would it not be correct to state, Bob, that in a right triangle, the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides?

PROSPECT (getting drowsy): Whatever you say.

At this point, if you have the prospect in a positive enough mood, you may be able to simply take his wallet. Otherwise you should go on to Rule #5.

Rule #5: Ask For The Sale

Be direct. Something like: “Bob, how about a large order for whatever it is I’m selling?”

Usually the prospect will balk, offering any one of a number of standard excuses, such as:

“I want to think about it.” “I want to talk to my husband or wife about it, depending on what sex I am.”

“Get out of my sight before I kill you and feed your pancreas to rats.”

This is normal sales resistance, and you must not let it faze you. Go back and repeat your presentation, very slowly, starting with “Hi, Bob! Great to see you, Bob!” Try to get the prospect to voice specific objections so you can overcome them (“Are you saying, Bob, that you think Adolf Hitler was not a bad person?”). Do this as many times as necessary, until Bob comes around. Remind him that if he doesn’t, you may have to take him to Lunch (see chapter 6).

Chapter Nine. How To Go Into Business For Yourself

The story of America is the story of individuals—the Henry Fords, the John DeLoreans, the Speedy Alka-Seltzers, the Don Corleones—who started out alone, with little more than a dream and a willingness to work toward it, and ended up running large organizations and eventually either dying or getting indicted. Chances are that you, too, have an idea for a business percolating inside you, an idea you’re sure would work, if only you gave it a chance.

Well, why not? What, really, are you getting from your company job, aside from a steady paycheck, regular raises, job security, extensive medical benefits, and a comfortable pension? Hey, if that’s all they think you’re worth, well, in the words of the popular country-and-western song: “Take This job and Let Me Hold onto It while I Start My Own Little Business on the Side.”

Step one is to find out what legal requirements you have to meet to register yourself as a small business. In most states, this is a two-part process:

1. You have several boxes of cheap business cards printed up with the wrong phone number.
2. You go around and pin your card onto those bulletin boards you see in supermarkets and low-rent restaurants, the ones with 10,000 other business cards that look like the one shown here.

Steve A. Clegel

Accounting and Light Masonry

“Since April 3, 1986, at about 4:30”

Tax Implications Of Going Into Business For Yourself

The tax implications are that you can deduct every nickel you ever spend for the rest of your life, including on bowling accessories (see chapter 10, How Finance Works).

Three Surefire Business Concepts

Over the years, I have thought up several business concepts that are so obviously brilliant that the only way they could conceivably fail would be if somebody actually tried them. This is where you fit in. Pick any one of the concepts below and invest your life savings in it. If you are not completely satisfied that the concept was not all that I said it was, if not more, then you do not owe me a cent. Sound too good to be true? Well just wait until you see these concepts!

Concept #1: The Electric Appliance Suicide Module

This concept is based on the known fact that it is impossible to get electronic devices repaired. Let's say you have purchased a videocassette recorder, and after a while, because of normal wear and tear such as your nephew Dwight stuck a Polish sausage into the slot and pushed the fast forward button, it stops working.

Now you have two options. One is to take it back to the store where you got it, which will send it back to the "Factory Service Center." Here's what I have to say about this option: Hahahahahahaha. Because the "Factory Service Center" is in fact a giant warehouse containing hundreds of thousands of broken electronic devices, including 1952 Philco television sets. The staff consists of two elderly men, named Roscoe and Lester, who will poke around inside your VCR with cheap cigars and go, "Lookit all them wires in there!"

Your other choice is to take it to a local "repair shop," which will consist of a sullen person standing behind a counter with an insulting sign.

Obviously, neither of these is an acceptable option. So the logical thing to do, when an electronic device breaks, is to just throw it away and get another one, right? But you can't bring yourself to do this. You paid \$700 for it, and you'd feel guilty. So you put yourself in the hands of incompetents and thieves.

This is where the Electric Appliance Suicide Module would come in. It would be a device costing \$29.95 and consisting of a small, powerful explosive charge, coupled to a tiny electronic "brain," which the consumer would implant inside his VCR or television set via a simple procedure requiring only a screwdriver and three beers. The way the Suicide Module would work is, as soon as the brain sensed that the appliance was no longer working properly, it would set off the charge. For safety reasons, this would occur in the middle of the night, when the consumers were asleep. The consumer would be awakened by a large BLAM!! in his living room, and he'd come rushing out, and there, where his television set used to be, he'd see a grayish cloud of vaporized plastic, and he'd say: "Huh! Time to get a new TV!" Besides eliminating a lot of consumer guilt, the Suicide Module would probably provide a very powerful incentive for appliances to perform well. They would work their little diodes to the bone, for fear that otherwise the Suicide Module might think they were starting to come down with something.

Concept #2: The "Mister Mediocre" Fast-Food Restaurant Franchise

I have studied American eating preferences for years, and believe me, this is what people want. They don't want to go into an unfamiliar restaurant, because they don't know whether the food will be very bad, or very good, or what. They want to go into a restaurant that advertises on national television, where they know the food will be mediocre. This is the heart of the Mister Mediocre concept.

The basic menu item, in fact the only menu item, would be a food unit called the "patty," consisting of—this would be guaranteed in writing—"100

percent animal matter of some kind." All patties would be heated up and then cooled back down in electronic devices immediately before serving. The Breakfast Patty would be a patty on a bun with lettuce, tomato, onion, egg, Ba-Ko-Bits, Cheez Whiz, a Special Sauce made by pouring ketchup out of a bottle, and a little slip of paper stating: "Inspected by Number 12." The Lunch or Dinner Patty would be any Breakfast Patties that didn't get sold in the morning. The Seafood Lover's Patty would be any patties that were starting to emit a serious aroma. Patties that were too rank even to be Seafood Lover's Patties would be compressed into wads and sold as "Nuggets." Any nuggets that had not been sold as of the end of the month would be used to make bricks for new Mister Mediocre restaurants.

Concept #3: The "Bingo The Leech" Licensed Character

If you have young children, you know how they tend to develop powerful attachments, similar to cocaine addiction only more expensive, to the toy industry's many lovable and imaginative licensed characters such as (for girls) Rainbow Brite, Strawberry Shortcake, Wee Whiny Winkie, The Dweebs, and The Simper Sisters; and (for boys) He-Man, The Limb Whackers, The Eye Eaters, Sergeant Bicep, and Testosterone Bob's Hurt Patrol. Once a child gets one of these characters, he or she suddenly just has to have all the others in the set, plus the accessories, all of which are—believe me when I tell you this—Sold Separately.

So I have come up with this concept for a truly irresistible licensed character named Bingo the Leech. Bingo would be an adorable little stuffed leech with big loving eyes and a tube of industrial quick-drying epoxy concealed in his lips. When a child picked up Bingo at the store and squeezed him, Bingo would emit some epoxy and become permanently bonded to the child's skin, and the parent would have to buy him so as to avoid shoplifting charges. Then the parent would have to buy all the other members of the Bingo family, because only by combining their lip secretions would you obtain the antidote chemical required to get Bingo off the child before it was time to go to college.

Chapter Ten. How Finance Works

DETROIT—The General Motors Corporation reported today that it lost \$64.6 million in the first fiscal quarter.

"We have no idea what happened to the money," said top GM officials, in unison. "One moment it was lying on the dresser, and the next moment it was gone! We could just kick ourselves! Ha ha!"

Who Should Read This Chapter

At some point in your rise to the top, you may find yourself appointed to a job where you have to know something about finances, such as as Controller or Treasurer or Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. If this happens, you should read this chapter. But I warn you: this stuff is deadly dull, as is illustrated by accountants. You never hear people say: “Let’s have some fun tonight! Let’s go find some accountants!” So unless you have no choice, you should skip this chapter. I myself am going to require powerful illegal stimulants to write it.

How Corporate Finances Work

You look at a big corporation, with giant expensive buildings filled with tasteful carpets and big desks and rental plants and well-paid employees making Xerox-brand copies of the crossword puzzle, and you wonder, “How on earth do they make any money?”

The answer is, they don’t. They lose money hand over fist. Read the business section of any newspaper, and just about every day you’ll see a story like the one reproduced above.

The reason these executives can afford to be so cavalier is that they know they can always get more money—any amount, any time—by means of a process so simple you are going to laugh when I tell you about it, unless you have already fallen asleep at this point. All they have to do is print up some “stock.” A stock is basically a piece of high-quality paper, similar to what certificates of appreciation from bowling leagues are printed on, except it has a nice border and a statement such as the following printed on it in an attractive and historic type style:

Whe bearer, hereinafter bekknownst as “the bearer,” is, excepting those provisions which shall causeth “the bearer” to be excepted from these provisions, notwithstanding, hereby—and we are by the way also talking about “the bearer’s” heirs and assigns here—entitled to one (1) share (share) of (of) “stock” in “the corporation,” and all that this doth entail, such as the VIP lounge, if any, and of course profits insofar as and to the extent that there are any profits after executives of “the corporation” shall returneth from

“meeting” “Brazil.”

Now you’re thinking: “Yes, but who would be so stupid as to exchange money for this piece of paper?” Well, I realize it makes very little sense to a person of normal intelligence, but it turns out there is a major financial institution devoted to this very purpose.

The Stock Market

The Stock Market is what they are talking about on television when they tell you the “Dow Jones Industrial Average” is “up” in “active trading.” Sometimes they show you a picture of it: you see a lot of men with bad armpit stains yelling and waving their arms. These men are ordering lunch. The actual trading of stocks is done by computers:

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SECOND COMPUTER: ‘THESE:—’)RE VEF@@Y SH@)F,E@:’ ()I\4E@ T3ECAU(:jE WE P. F@E F@’F@IEI\lr.)S I @l@-’il::@E r-O.-@, f)E:AL—:t6(:%,(;)

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SECOND COMPUTER: 1,—FHE@ L-OWES'r I CAN GO I,!A'@ GC@D ME DE@@AD IF I
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Of course all this takes less than a billionth of a second. At the end of the day, the computers divide the total prices of all stocks sold by the number of stocks, then they take the numbers of the horses that won the first three races, and.... No, wait a minute. That's the "Trifecta" I'm thinking of. Well, somehow, they figure out the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and they tell the television news people about it.

Common Financial Questions

Q. What makes one corporation's stock more valuable than another one?

A. The most important factor is what kind of hors d'oeuvre the corporation serves at its Annual Stockholders Meeting, which is when all the stockholders get invited to a hotel ballroom to hear highly paid executives attempt to explain how come the corporation is making less of

a profit than it would if it had just sold all of its factories and machines and put the money in Christmas Clubs. If the corporation serves

a cheap hors d'oeuvre, such as crackers and cheese, its stock will drop; if it switches over to, say, shrimp, the stock will rise. Of course the people on Wall Street don't want to admit this, which is why they're always making up preposterous explanations as to why stock prices rise and fall, such as "tension in the Middle East," when of course there is always tension in the Middle East. When we finally have a nuclear war and there is no life left on Earth except cockroaches, the cockroaches in the Middle East will be tense.

Q. Who is "Dow Jones"?

A. A dead person.

Q. What is the "options" market?

A. This is a special market for people who are too stupid even to buy stocks. The way it works is, let's say a farmer or somebody realizes he has 500

pork bellies. Now I think we can all agree that no sane person would want to have even one pork belly, let alone 500 of them, so what this farmer does is look around for the stupidest person he can find, and he sells him a porkbelly "future," which means that the stupid person gives the farmer some money and agrees to take delivery of the pork bellies at

a later date. I know you think I'm making this up, but believe me, people actually do this. When the stupid person realizes what he has done, he of course tries to find an even stupider person to buy the

"future," and this person sells it to an even stupider person, and so on until the big day arrives and a person with no discernible brain whatsoever has 500 pork bellies dumped on his lawn and is immediately arrested by the Board of Health.

Afterword

And so, here you are. Just a dozen or so chapters ago, you were a recent graduate or some other kind

of low-life scum, and now, thanks to this book, look what you have become! A highly paid corporate executive! Or a convicted felon!

I do not ask for your gratitude. I seek no reward. No, for me it is enough simply to know that I have, in some small way, helped to make you the kind of executive who can provide much-needed leadership as the corporation of today faces the challenges of tomorrow; the kind of executive who will not be afraid to meet these challenges head-on by means of innovative and far-reaching new management techniques such as bringing me in as a consultant

for \$2,000 per day plus lunch money. I'll be calling you real soon.

DAVE BARRY'S GREATEST HITS

"Mr. Barry is the funniest man in America
and we should encourage him. Buy this book."

—*The New York Times Book Review*



The Pulitzer Prize-winning humorist
and author of
Dave Barry's Complete Guide to Guys

Dave Barry's Greatest Hits

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry's Greatest Hits

Why Humor Is Funny

As a professional humorist, I often get letters from readers who are interested in the basic nature of humor. “What kind of a sick, perverted, disgusting person are you, “ these letters typically ask, “that you make jokes about setting fire to a goat?”

And that, of course, is the wonderful thing about humor. What may seem depressing or even tragic to one person may seem like an absolute scream to another person, especially if he has had between four and seven beers. But most people agree on what is funny, and most people like to be around a person with a great sense of humor, provided he also has reasonable hygiene habits. This is why people so often ask me: “Dave, I’d like to be popular, too. How can I get a sense of humor like yours, only with less of a dependence on jokes that are primarily excuses to use the word ‘booger’?”

This is not an easy question. Ever since prehistoric times, wise men have tried to understand what exactly makes people laugh. That’s why they were called wise men. All the other prehistoric people were out puncturing each other with spears, and the wise men were back in the cave saying:

“How about: Here’s my wife, please take her right now. No. How about: Would you like to take something? My wife is available. No. How about ...”

Mankind didn’t develop a logical system of humor until thousands of years later when Aristotle discovered, while shaving, the famous Humor Syllogism, which states, “If A is equal to B, and B is equal to C, then it would not be particularly amusing if the three of them went around poking each other in the eyes and going ‘Nyuk nyuk nyuk.’ At least I don’t think it would be.”

By the Elizabethan era, humor had become extremely popular. The works of Shakespeare, for example, are filled with scenes that English teachers always claim are real thighslappers, although when you actually decode them, it turns out they mostly depend on the use of the Elizabethan word for “booger.” In America today, of course, our humor is much more sophisticated, ranging all the way from television shows featuring outtakes of situation comedies where the actors can’t get the words right to television shows featuring outtakes of commercials where the actors can’t get the words right. Also we have Woody Allen, whose humor has become so sophisticated that nobody gets it anymore except Mia Farrow. All those who think Mia Farrow should go back to making movies where the devil gets her pregnant and Woody Allen should go back to dressing up as a human sperm, please raise your hands. Thank you.

If you want to develop a sense of humor of your own, you need to learn some jokes. Notice I do not say “puns.” Puns are little “plays on words” that a certain breed of person loves to spring on you and then look at you in a certain self-satisfied way to indicate that he thinks that you must think that he is by far the cleverest person on Earth now that Benjamin Franklin is dead, when in fact what you are thinking is that if this person ever ends up in a lifeboat, the other passengers will hurl him overboard by the end of the first day even if they have plenty of food and water.

So what you want is real jokes. The best source for these is the authoritative Encyclopedia Britannica article entitled “Humor and Wit,” which is in volume 99 (Humidity-Ivory Coast). This is where Carson gets all his material. It’s a regular treasure trove of fun. Here is a real corker from right at the beginning:

“A masochist is a person who likes a cold shower in the morning, so he takes a hot one.”

Whooooee! That is one authoritative joke! Tell that one at a dull party, and just watch as the other guests suddenly come to life and remember important dental appointments!

But it is not enough merely to know a lot of great jokes. You also have to be able to tell them properly. Here are some tips:

1. When you tell vicious racist jokes, you should first announce that you were a liberal back when it was legal to be one.
2. Men have a certain body part that women do not have, and men always think jokes about it are a stone riot, but if you tell such a joke to a woman, she will look at you as though you are a Baggie filled with mouse remains. I don't know why this is, but it never fails. So you want to avoid this particular type of joke in coeducational social settings such as Windsor Castle.
3. If, after you tell a joke, somebody attempts to tell you one back, you should keep assuring him that you haven't heard it, and then, when he gets to the punchline, no matter how funny it is, you should react as though he just told you the relative humidity and say: "Yeah, I heard that."
4. Never attend a large dinner party with my former mother-in-law, because she will shout across the table at you: "Tell the one about the man who's seeking the truth and he finally gets all the way to Tibet and the wise man tells him that a wet bird doesn't fly at night," and then she'll insist that you tell it, and then she'll tell you you told it wrong, and you might have to kill her with a fork.

Snews

Readers are sometimes critical of me because just about everything I write about is an irresponsible lie. But now I'm going to write a column in which everything is true. See how you like it.

Our first true item comes from a news release from the j I Case company. For the benefit of those of you who have real jobs and are not involved in the news business, I should first explain that a news release is an article that has been typed up by a public-relations professional hired by a client who wants to get certain information published, which is then mailed out to several thousand newspapers, almost all of which throw it away without reading it. If you ever commit a really horrible crime and you want to keep it out of the papers, you should have a public-relations professional issue a news release about it.

You ask: "Wouldn't it be more efficient if the public-relations professionals simply threw the releases away themselves?" Frankly, that is the kind of ignorant question that makes us journalists want to forget about trying to inform the public and instead just sit around awarding journalism prizes to each other. But I'll tell you the answer: Because this is America. Because two hundred years ago, a band of brave men got extremely cold at Valley Forge so that the press would have the freedom to throw away its own releases without prior censorship, that's why.

Anyway, this release from the j I Case company opens with this statement: "j I Case and Burlington, Iowa, the loader/backhoe capital of the world, today jointly celebrated the production of the 175,000th Case loader/backhoe." The release said they had a nice ceremony attended by the mayor of Burlington, a person named Wayne W. Hogberg, so I called him up to confirm the story. He works at the post office.

"Does Burlington really call itself the loader/backhoe capital of the world?" I asked. Newsmen are paid to ask the hard questions.

"Oh yes," replied Mayor Hogberg. "We definitely lay claim to that. We use it whenever we have the opportunity. As a mayor I sort of rub it in with any other mayors I have occasion to meet."

I bet that really steams the other mayors, don't you? I bet they are consumed with jealousy, when mayors get together.

Our second completely true news item was sent to me by Mr. H. Boyce Connell Jr. of Atlanta, Georgia, where he is involved in a law firm. One thing I like about the South is, folks there care about

tradition. If somebody gets handed a name like “H. Boyce,” he hangs on to it, puts it on his legal stationery, even passes it on to his son, rather than do what a lesser person would do, such as get it changed or kill himself.

What H. Boyce sent was a copy of a decision handed down by the Georgia Court of Appeals in the case of Apostol Athanasiou vs. White. It seems the former had hired the latter to mow her lawn. What happened next, in the words of the court, is that “White allegedly slipped on some dog feces concealed in the tall grass, and his left foot was severely cut as it slid under the lawnmower.” I am not going to tell you how this case came out, because you’ll want to find out for yourself in the event that it is released as a major motion picture, but I will say, by way of a hint, that in the court’s opinion “neither party had actual knowledge of the specific deposit of dog feces on which White apparently slipped.”

Our next item comes from a release sent out by the Vodka Information Bureau, in New York City. The Vodka Information Bureau has learned that a whopping 42 percent of the women surveyed consider themselves “primary decision makers” in deciding what brand of vodka to buy. This raises in my mind, as I am sure it does in yours, a number of questions, primarily: What, exactly, do we mean by the verb “to whop”? So I looked it up in the Oxford English Dictionary, and there I found—remember, this is the column where we are not making things up—these helpful examples:

“In less time than you can think whop comes a big black thing down. as big as the stone of a cheese-press.” “Mother would whop me if I came home without the basket.”

So I called my mother, who said, and I quote, “I always make the vodka-buying decision as follows: the largest bottle for the smallest amount of money.” So I called the Vodka Information Bureau and told them what my mother said, and they said, sure, you can buy the cheapest vodka if you don’t mind getting a lot of impurities, but if you want a nice clean vodka, you want a brand such as is manufactured by the company that sponsors the Vodka Information Bureau.

Finally, and sadly, we have received word of the death, at age 85, of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who of course was governor general of the island nation of Mauritius from 1968 to 1982. Mauritius has an area of 720 square miles and was once the home of the dodo bird, which is now extinct. It is hard, at a time of such tragedy—I refer to the demise of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam—to find words to express our feelings, but I think that I speak for all of us when I say that a cheese-press is “an apparatus for pressing the curds in cheese-making.”

Public-Spirited Citizens Such As You

I love jokes. The worse the better. Among the happiest moments of my life were those at summer camp when I was 11, lying in my bunk at night just after the counselor, Mr. Newton, had gone off to play cards with the other counselors, which meant that Eugene was going to tell the joke whose punchline is: “Ding dong, dammit! Ding DONG!” Maybe you know this joke. It involves marital infidelity and a closet. By the second week of camp, Eugene had developed a half-hour version, and campers were creeping over from the other cabins to hear it.

So there we’d all be, listening in the dark with lunatic grins of anticipation on our faces, barely able to restrain ourselves, until finally Eugene would reach the punchline. “Ding dong, dammit,” he’d say, and we’d start vibrating like tuning forks, and then Eugene would say “Ding DONG,” and we’d dive down into the depths of our sleeping bags, out of control, howling and snorting, thinking nobody could hear

us, although of course in the peaceful stillness of the forest night we must have sounded like water buffalo giving birth over a public-address system.

Mr. Newton would slam his cards down and come storming over, and he'd tell us that he was really sick of this, night after night, and if he heard one more sound out of us we'd have to clean the latrine the next day. This was a serious threat, because it was the kind of highly odorous summer camp latrine where you wondered how it could possibly be so disgusting when nobody ever had the courage to use it. Evidently somewhere along the line it had reached Critical Latrine Mass and developed a life-style of its own.

After making this threat, Mr. Newton would stalk off back to his cards, and there would be silence for maybe a minute, and then there would be this tiny whisper from Eugene's direction, so faint that only a trained ear could discern it:

"Ding," said the whisper, "DONG."

And of course this resulted in a situation where, never mind having to clean the latrine, never mind that Mr. Newton was now standing in the middle of the cabin clutching a weighty flashlight and threatening to break everybody's heads, the only thing any of us could think about was whether we would ever be able to draw breath again.

And so we had a terrific summer, and all because of one idiot joke, which, although I would not tell it in public except under the influence of sodium pentothal, still does a better job of cheering me up than any major religion. I'd like to meet the person who made that joke up, but of course that's always one of the big mysteries about jokes: Nobody knows who makes them up. They're just there, floating around and lowering the productivity of offices and factories everywhere. And they've been there throughout human history. Archaeologists found this joke in an Egyptian tomb:

HE: Did you hear about the Sumerian? SHE: No. What about the Sumerian? HE: He was extremely stupid. Ha ha! SHE: No, I had not heard about him.

This, of course, is a primitive version of the modern ethnic joke, which still carries the same basic message, although it has become much more sophisticated over the years thanks to the introduction of such innovations as the light bulb. But who introduced them?

Other mysteries about jokes are: How come you can remember extremely complex jokes involving a minister, a priest, and a rabbi, but you can't remember your mother's birthday? How do jokes travel so fast, and so far? (The Apollo 7 astronauts found traces of a joke on the moon!) Also: Does Queen Elizabeth ever hear any jokes? Who tells them to her? What about the pope?

To answer these and other questions, I think we should set up a research project wherein we scientifically track the progress of a specified joke, similar to the way the flight patterns of birds are tracked by scientists called ornithologists, who attach metal wires and rubber bands to the birds' beaks and make them come back every week for appointments. No! Hold it! My mistake! I'm thinking of "orthodontists." What ornithologists do is attach bands of metal to a bird's leg, then toss it gently off the roof of a tall building and watch it splat into the pavement below at upwards of 100 miles an hour. People try to tell the ornithologists that the metal bands they're using are too heavy, but they just laugh. Recently they dropped a common wood warbler to which they had attached a 1983 Chevette.

But the theory is sound, and I was thinking maybe we could come up with some kind of similar system for tracking a joke. What I propose to do is inject a brand-new joke into the population at certain known places and times. This joke will have a distinguishing characteristic, so that as it spreads around the country, public-spirited citizens such as yourself can act as spotters. As soon as you hear this joke, I

want you to report it via postal card to: The Joke Tracking Center, P.O. Box 0 1 1509, Miami, FL 33 1 0 1.

Please include a summary of the joke, where and when you heard it, who told it to you, and any other helpful background information such as whether you were drinking liquor right out of the bottle at the time.

Obviously, I cannot reveal the joke here, but its distinguishing characteristic is that it answers the question: "Why is Walter Mondale nicknamed 'Fritz'?" Everybody got that? I have tested this joke on a carefully selected panel of lowlifes, all sworn to secrecy, and they assure me that it is in very poor taste and should spread like wildfire.

So let's all Simonize our watches and keep a sharp ear out for this joke. I'm very serious about this. Trained personnel are standing by now at the joke Tracking Center. So report those sightings! Together, we have a chance here to obtain scientific findings of great significance, and possibly a large federal grant. Remember: This chain has never been broken.

The Snake

The way I picture it, adulthood is a big, sleek jungle snake, swimming just around the bend in the River of Life. It swallows you subtly, an inch at a time, so you barely notice the signs: You start reading the labels on things before you eat them, rather than to pass the time while you eat them; you find yourself listening to talk radio because the hit songs they play on the rock stations (can this really be you, thinking this?) all begin to sound the same. Before you know it, you have monogrammed towels in your bathroom, and all your furniture is nice. And suddenly you realize it's too late, that you'd rather sit around on your furniture and talk about the warning signs of colon cancer with other grown-ups than, for example, find out what happens when you set one of those plastic milk jugs on fire. And if your kid sets a milk jug on fire, you yell at him, "Somebody could get hurt," and really mean it, from inside the snake.

I mention all this to explain how I came to buy, at age 38, an electric guitar. I had one once before, from 1965 through 1969 when I was in college. It was a Fender jazzmaster, and I played lead guitar in a band called The Federal Duck, which is the kind of name that was popular in the sixties as a result of controlled substances being in widespread use. Back then, there were no restrictions, in terms of talent, on who could make an album, so we made one, and it sounds like a group of people who have been given powerful but unfamiliar instruments as a therapy for a degenerative nerve disease.

We mainly played songs like "Gloria," which was great for sixties bands, because it had only three chords; it had a solo that was so simple it could be learned in minutes, even by a nonmusical person or an advanced fish; and it had great lyrics.

My band career ended late in my senior year when John Cooper and I threw my amplifier out the dormitory window. We did not act in haste. First we checked to make sure the amplifier would fit through the frame, using the belt from my bathrobe to measure, then we picked up the amplifier and backed up to my bedroom door. Then we rushed forward shouting "The WHO! The WHO!" and we launched my amplifier perfectly, as though we had been doing it all our lives, clean through the window and down onto the sidewalk, where a small but appreciative crowd had gathered. I would like to be able to say that this was a symbolic act, an effort on my part to break cleanly away from one stage in my life and move on to another, but the truth is, Cooper and I really just wanted to find out what it would sound

like. It sounded OK.

Unlike The Who, I couldn't afford a new amplifier, and playing an unamplified electric guitar is like strumming on a picnic table, so I sold my jazzmaster and got a cheap acoustic guitar, which I diddled around on for 16

years. It was fine for "Kum By Yah," but ill-suited for "My Baby Does the Hanky Panky." So there's been this void in my life, which I've tried to fill by having a career, but I see now I was kidding myself.

So recently, Ms. magazine sent me a check for \$800 for an article I wrote about sex. This seemed like such a bizarre way to get hold of \$800 that I figured I should do something special with it, so I thought about it, and what came to mind is—this is the scary part of the story, coming up now—a new sofa. Our primary living-room sofa looks like a buffalo that has been dead for some time, and I thought: "Maybe we should get a nicer sofa." Which is when I felt the snake of adulthood slithering around my leg.

So I said to my wife: "I am going to take this money and buy an electric guitar." And she said—I believe I married her in anticipation of this moment—"Fine."

I have never been so happy. My amplifier has a knob called overdrive, which, if you turn it all the way up to 10, makes it so that all you have to do is touch a string to make a noise that would destroy a greenhouse. My wife and son and dog spend more time back in the bedroom these days. Out in the living room, I put the Paul Butterfield Blues Band on the stereo, and when they do "Got My Mojo Workin'," I play the guitar solo at the same time Mike Bloomfield does. I am not as accurate as he is in terms of hitting the desired notes, but you can hear me better because I have "overdrive."

I bet I know what you're thinking: You're thinking my electric guitar is a Midlife Crisis Object that I bought in the Midlife Crisis Store filled with middle-aged guys who wear jogging shoes and claim they love Bruce Springsteen but really think he's merely adequate. And you may be right. I don't care if you are. To me, my guitar is a wonderful thing. It's a Gibson, with the

classic old electric-guitar shape. It looks like a modernistic oar, which you could use, in a pinch, to row against the current in the River of Life, or at least stay even with it for a while.

Ye Olde Humor Columne

We need to do something about this national tendency to try to make new things look like they are old.

First off, we should enact an "e" tax. Government agents would roam the country looking for stores whose names contained any word that ended in an unnecessary "e," such as "shoppe" or "olde," and the owners of these stores would be taxed at a flat rate of \$50,000 per year per "e." We should also consider an additional \$50,000 "ye" tax, so that the owner of a store called "Ye Olde Shoppe" would have to fork over \$150,000 a year. In extreme cases, such as "Ye Olde Barne Shoppe," the owner would simply be taken outside and shot.

We also need some kind of law about the number of inappropriate objects you can hang on walls in restaurants. I am especially concerned here about the restaurants that have sprung up in shopping complexes everywhere to provide young urban professionals with a place to go for margaritas and potato skins. You know the restaurants I mean: they always have names like Flanagan's, Hanrahan's, O'Toole's, or O'Reilley's, as if the owner were a genial red-faced Irish bartender, when in fact it is probably 14 absentee proctologists in need of tax shelter.

You have probably noticed that inevitably the walls in these places are covered with objects we do not

ordinarily attach to walls, such as barber poles, traffic lights, washboards, street signs, and farm implements. This decor scheme is presumably intended to create an atmosphere of relaxed old-fashioned funkiness, but in fact it creates an atmosphere of great weirdness. It is as if a young urban professional with telekinetic powers, the kind Sissy Spacek exhibited in the movie *Caine*, got really tanked up on margaritas one night and decided to embed an entire flea market in the wall.

I think it's too much. I think we need to pass a law stating that the only objects that may be hung on restaurant walls are those that God intended to be hung on restaurant walls, such as pictures, mirrors, and the heads of deceased animals. Any restaurant caught violating this law would have to get rid of its phony Irish-bartender name and adopt a name that clearly reflected its actual ownership. ("Say, let's go get some potato skins at Fourteen Absentee Proctologists in Need of Tax Shelter.")

And I suppose it goes without saying that anybody caught manufacturing "collectible" plates, mugs, or figurines of any kind should be shipped directly to Devil's Island.

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: "Dave, I hear what you're saying, but wouldn't laws such as these constitute unwarranted government interference in the private sector?"

The answer is: Yes, they would. But unwarranted government interference in the private sector is a small price to pay if it draws the government away from its efforts to revitalize decaying urban areas. The government inevitably tries to do this by installing 60 billion new red bricks and several dozen vaguely old-fashioned street lights in an effort to create a look I would call "Sort of Colonial or Something."

The government did this to a town right near where I used to live, West Chester, Pennsylvania. This is a nice little old town, with a lot of nice little old houses, but about 10 years ago some of the downtown merchants started getting really upset because they were losing business to the "shopping malls," a phrase the merchants always say in the same tone of voice you might use to say "Nazi Germany." Now, as a consumer, I would argue that the reason most of us were going to the shopping malls was that the downtown

stores tended to have window displays that had not been changed since the Truman administration, featuring crepe paper faded to the color of old oatmeal, accented by the occasional dead insect. And the actual merchandise in these stores was not the kind you would go out of your way to purchase or even accept as gifts. We are talking, for example, about clothing so dowdy that it could not be used even to clean up after a pet.

What I am saying is that the problem with the downtown West Chester stores, from this consumer's point of view, was that they didn't have much that anybody would want to buy. From the merchants' point of view, however, the problem was that the entire downtown needed to be Revitalized, and they nagged the local government for years until finally it applied for a federal grant of God knows how many million dollars, which was used to rip up the streets for several years, so as to discourage the few remaining West Chester shoppers. When they finally got it all together again, the new revitalized West Chester consisted of mostly the same old stores, only in front of them were (surprise!) red brick sidewalks garnished with vaguely old-fashioned streetlights. The whole effect was definitely Sort Of Colonial or Something, and some shoppers even stopped by to take a look at it on their way to the mall.

I gather this process has been repeated in a great many towns around the country, and it seems to me that it's a tremendous waste of federal time and effort that could otherwise be spent getting rid of the extra "e." I urge those of you who agree with me to write letters to your congresspersons, unless you use that stationery with the "old-fashioned" ragged edges, in which case I urge you to go to your local

Flanagan's and impale yourself on one of the farm implements.

A Boy And His Hobby

Recently, I began to feel this void in my life, even after meals, and I said to myself: "Dave, all you do with your spare time is sit around and drink beer. You need a hobby." So I got a hobby. I make beer.

I never could get into the traditional hobbies, like religion or stamp collecting. I mean, the way you collect stamps is: Every week or so the Postal Service dreams up a new stamp to mark National Peat Bog Awareness Month, or whatever, and you rush down and clog the Post Office lines to buy a batch of these stamps, but instead of putting them to a useful purpose such as mailing toxic spiders to the Publisher's Clearing House, you take them home and just sort of have them. Am I right? Have I left any moments of drama out of this action sequence? And then the biggest thrill, as I understand it, the real payoff, comes when you get lucky and collect a stamp on which the Postal Service has made a mistake, such as instead of "Peat Bog" it prints "Beat Pog," which causes stamp collectors to just about wet their polyester pants, right?

So for many years I had no hobby. When I would fill out questionnaires and they would ask what my hobbies were, I would put "narcotics," which was of course a totally false humorous joke. And then one day my editor took me to a store where they sell beer-making equipment. Other writers, they have editors who inspire them to new heights of literary achievement, but the two major contributions my editor has made to my artistic development are (1) teaching me to juggle and (2) taking me to his beer-making store where a person named Craig gave me free samples until he could get hold of my Visa card.

But I'm glad I got into beer-making, because the beer sold here in the United States is sweet and watery and lacking in taste and overcarbonated and just generally the lamest, wimpiest beer in the entire known world. All the other nations are drinking Ray Charles beer, and we are drinking Barry Manilow. This is why American TV beer commercials are so ludicrously masculine. It's a classic case of overcompensation. You may have seen, for example, the Budweiser or Miller commercial where some big hairy men are standing around on the side of a river when a barge breaks loose and starts drifting out of control. Now real men, men who drink real beer, would have enough confidence in their own masculinity to say: "Don't worry; it's probably insured."

But the men in the commercial feel this compulsion to go racing off on a tugboat and capture the barge with big hairy ropes, after which they make excited masculine hand gestures at each other to indicate they have done a task requiring absolute gallons of testosterone. Then they go to a bar where they drink Miller or Budweiser and continue to reassure themselves that they are truly a collection of major stud horses, which is why you don't see any women around. The women have grown weary of listening to the men say: "Hey! We sure rescued THAT barge, didn't we?!" And: "You think it's easy, to rescue a barge? Well, it's NOT!" and, much later at night: "Hey! Let's go let the barge loose again!" So the women have all gone off in search of men who make their own beer.

Some of you may be reluctant to make your own beer because you've heard stories to the effect that it's difficult to make, or it's illegal, or it makes you go blind. Let me assure you that these are falsehoods, especially the part about making you go bleof nisdc dsdfsdfkQ\$\$\$%''%.

Ha ha! just a little tasteless humor there, designed to elicit angry letters from liberals. The truth is, homemade beer is perfectly safe, unless the bottle explodes. We'll have more on that if space

permits. Also it's completely legal to make beer at home. In fact, as I read the current federal tax laws—I use a strobe light—if you make your own beer, you can take a tax credit of up to \$4,000, provided you claim you spent it on insulation!

And it's very easy to make your own beer: You just mix your ingredients and stride briskly away. (You may of course vary this recipe to suit your own personal taste.) Your two main ingredients are (1) a can of beer ingredients that you get from Craig or an equivalent person, and (2) yeast. Yeast is a wonderful little plant or animal that, despite the fact that it has only one cell, has figured out how to convert sugar to alcohol. This was a far greater accomplishment than anything we can attribute to giant complex multicelled organisms such as, for example, the Secretary of Transportation.

After the little yeasts are done converting your ingredients into beer, they die horrible deaths by the millions. You shouldn't feel bad about this. Bear in mind this is yeast we're talking about, and there's plenty more available, out on the enormous yeast ranches of the Southwest. For now, your job is to siphon your beer into bottles. This is the tricky part, because what can happen is the phone rings and you get involved in a lengthy conversation during which your son, who is 4-1/2, gets hold of the hose and spews premature beer, called "wort," all over the kitchen and himself, and you become the target of an investigation by child welfare authorities because yours is the only child who comes to preschool smelling like a fraternity carpet.

But that's the only real drawback I have found, and the beer tastes delicious, except of course on those rare occasions when it explodes. Which leads us to another advantage: if you make your own beer, you no longer need to worry about running out if we have a nuclear war of sufficient severity to close the commercial breweries.

Daze Of Wine And Roses

I have never gotten into wine. I'm a beer man. What I like about beer is you basically just drink it, then you order another one. You don't sniff at it, or hold it up to the light and slosh it around, and above all you don't drone on and on about it, the way people do with wine. Your beer drinker tends to be a straightforward, decent, friendly, down-to-earth person who enjoys talking about the importance of relief pitching, whereas your serious wine fancier tends to be an insufferable snot.

I realize I am generalizing here, but, as is often the case when I generalize, I don't care.

Nevertheless, I decided recently to try to learn more about the wine community. Specifically, I engaged the services of a rental tuxedo and attended the Grand Finale of the First Annual French Wine Sommelier Contest in America, which was held at the famous Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York. For the benefit of those of you with plastic slipcovers, I should explain that a "sommelier" is a wine steward, the dignified person who comes up to you at expensive restaurants, hands you the wine list, and says "Excellent choice, sir," when you point to French writing that, translated, says "Sales Tax Included."

Several hundred wine-oriented people were on hand for the sommelier competition. First we mingled and drank champagne, then we sat down to eat dinner and watch the competition. I found it immensely entertaining,

especially after the champagne, because for one thing many of the speakers were actual French persons who spoke with comical accents, which I suspect they practiced in their hotel rooms ("Zees epeetomizes zee role av zee sommelier sroo-out eestory ..." etc.) Also we in the audience got to drink

just gallons of wine. At least I did. My policy with wine is very similar to my policy with beer, which is just pretty much drink it and look around for more. The people at my table, on the other hand, leaned more toward the slosh-and-sniff approach, where you don't so much drink the wine as you frown and then make a thoughtful remark about it such as you might make about a job applicant ("I find it ambitious, but somewhat strident." Or: "It's lucid, yes, but almost Episcopalian in its predictability.") As it happened, I was sitting next to a French person named Mary, and I asked her if people in France carry on this way about wine. "No," she said, "they just drink it. They're more used to it."

There were 12 sommeliers from around the country in the contest; they got there by winning regional competitions, and earlier in the day they had taken a written exam with questions like: "Which of the following appellations belong to the Savoie region? (a) Crepy; (b) Seyssel; (c) Arbois; (d) Etoile; (e) Ripple." (I'm just kidding about the Ripple, of course. The Savoie region would not use Ripple as an insecticide.)

The first event of the evening competition was a blind tasting, where the sommeliers had to identify a mystery wine. We in the audience got to try it, too. It was a wine that I would describe as yellow in color, and everybody at my table agreed it was awful. "Much too woody," said one person. "Heavily oxidized," said another. "Bat urine," I offered. The others felt this was a tad harsh. I was the only one who finished my glass.

Next we got a nonmystery wine, red in color, with a French name, and I thought it was swell, gulped it right down, but one of the wine writers at my table got upset because it was a 1979, and the program said we were supposed to get a 1978. If you can imagine. So we got some 1978, and it was swell, too. "They're both credible," said the wine writer, "but there's a great difference in character." I was the only one who laughed, although I think Mary sort of wanted to.

The highlight of the evening was the Harmony of Wine and Food event, where the sommelier contestants were given a menu where the actual nature of the food was disguised via French words ("Crochets sur le Pont en Voiture," etc.), and they had to select a wine for each of the five courses. This is where a sommelier has to be really good, because if he is going to talk an actual paying customer into spending as much money on wine for one meal as it would cost to purchase a half-dozen state legislators for a year, he has to say something more than, "A lotta people like this here char donnay."

Well, these sommeliers were good. They were into the Harmony of Wine and Food, and they expressed firm views. They would say things like: "I felt the (name of French wine) would have the richness to deal with the foie gras," or "My feeling about Roquefort is that ..." I thought it was fabulous entertainment, and at least two people at my table asked how I came to be invited.

Anyway, as the Harmony event dragged on, a major issue developed concerning the salad. The salad was Lamb's Lettuce with—you are going to be shocked when I tell you this—Walnut Vinaigrette. A lot of people in the audience felt that this was a major screw-up, or "gaffe," on the part of the contest organizers, because of course vinaigrette is just going to fight any wine you try to marry it with. "I strongly disagree with the salad dressing," is how one wine writer at my table put it, and I could tell she meant it.

So the contestants were all really battling the vinaigrette problem, and you could just feel a current of unrest in the room. Things finally came to a head, or "tete," when contestant Mark Hightower came right out and said that if the rules hadn't prevented him, he wouldn't have chosen any wine at all with the salad. "Ideally," he said, "I would have liked to have recommended an Evian mineral water." Well, the room just erupted in spontaneous applause, very similar to what you hear at Democratic Party dinners

when somebody mentions the Poor.

Anyway, the winning sommelier, who gets a trip to Paris, was Joshua Wesson, who works at a restaurant named Huberts in New York. I knew he'd win, because he began his Harmony of Wine and Food presentation by saying: "Whenever I see oysters on a menu, I am reminded of a quote. ..." Nobody's ever going to try buying a moderately priced wine from a man who is reminded of a quote by oysters.

It turns out however, that Wesson is actually an OK guy who just happens to have a God-given ability to lay it on with a trowel and get along with the French. I talked to him briefly afterwards, and he didn't seem to take himself too seriously at all. I realize many people think I make things up, so let me assure you ahead of time that this is the actual, complete transcript of the interview:

ME: So. What do you think? WESSON: I feel good. My arm felt good, my curve ball was popping. I felt I could help the ball team. ME: What about the vinaigrette? WESSON: It was definitely the turning point. One can look at vinaigrette from many angles. It's like electricity.

I swear that's what he said, and furthermore at the time it made a lot of sense.

Randomly Amongst The Blobs

Without my eyeglasses, I have a great deal of trouble distinguishing between house fires and beer signs. I wear the kind of glasses that they never show in those eyeglasses advertisements where the lenses are obviously fake because they don't distort the attractive model's face at all. My lenses make the entire middle of my head appear smaller. When professional photographers take my picture, they always suggest that I take my glasses off, because otherwise the picture shows this head with the normal top and bottom, but in the middle there's this little perfect miniature human head, maybe the size of an orange, staring out from behind my glasses.

People like photographers and dentists and barbers are always asking me to take my glasses off, and I hate it because it makes me stupid and paranoid. I worry that the dentist and his aides are creeping up on me with acetylene torches, or have sneaked out of the room and left me chatting away at the dental spittoon. So I use a sonar technique originally developed by bats, wherein I fire off a constant stream of idiot conversational remarks designed to draw replies so I can keep track of which blobs in the room represent people. This makes it very hard to work on my teeth.

Swimming at the beach is the worst. If I go into the ocean with my glasses off, which is the traditional way to go into the ocean, I cannot frolic in the surf like a normal person because (a) I usually can't see the waves until they knock me over and drag me along the bottom and fill my mouth with sand, and (b) the current always carries me down the beach, away from my wife and towel and glasses. When I emerge from the water, all I can see is this enormous white blur (the beach?) covered with darkish blobs (people?), and I run the risk of plopping down next to a blob that I think is my wife and throwing my arm over it in an affectionate manner, only to discover that it is actually horseshoe crabs mating, or a girlfriend of an enormous violent, jealous weightlifter, or, God help me, the violent weightlifter himself.

So what I do in these circumstances is wander randomly amongst the blobs, making quiet semidesperate noises designed not to bother any civilians, yet to draw the attention of whatever blob might be my wife. "Well, here I am!" I say, trying to appear as casual as possible. "Yes, here I am! Dave Barry! Ha ha! Help!" And so forth. I'm not sure I'm all that unobtrusive on account of my mouth is full

of sand.

Mostly these days when I go to the beach I just stay out of the water altogether. I sit on the shore and play cretin, sand-digging games with my three-year-old son, and I watch the lifeguards, who sit way up on the beach with their 20-20 vision and blow their whistles at swimmers I couldn't see even with the aid of a radio telescope, off the coast of France somewhere.

At least I no longer have to worry about necking on dates, the way I did in high school. That was awful. See, you have to take your glasses off when you neck, lest you cause facial injury to the other necker. So I'd be sitting on the sofa with a girl, watching a late movie on television, and I'd figure the time was right, and I'd very casually remove my glasses, rendering myself batlike, and lean toward the blob representing the girl and plant a sensuous kiss on the side of her head owing to the fact that she was still watching the movie. Now what? Do I try again, on the theory that she has been aroused by being kissed on the side of the head? Or is she angry? Is she still watching television? Is she still on the sofa?

There was no way to tell. The world was a blur. So I'd have to very casually grope around for my glasses and put them back on for a little reconnaissance, but by the time I found them likely as not the potential co-necker had fallen asleep.

I suppose I could wear contact lenses, but people who wear contact lenses are always weeping and blinking, and their eyes turn red, as though their mothers had just died. You want to go up to them on the street and say "There, there," and maybe give them money. Also, you never hear of anybody who wears them successfully for more than maybe three weeks. People are always saying, "I really liked them, but my hair started to fall out," or, "I had this girlfriend, Denise, and one of her contacts slid up under her eyelid and went into her bloodstream and got stuck in her brain and now she never finishes her sentences."

I guess I should be grateful that I can see at all, and I am. I just felt like wallowing in self-pity for a while, is all. I promise I won't do it again. Those of you with worse afflictions than mine, such as migraine headaches or pregnancy, are welcome to write me long, descriptive letters. I promise to look them over, although not necessarily with my glasses on.

Valuable Presidential Freebies!

My wife recently got two offers in the mail, one from Ed McMahon and one from President Reagan. Ed's offer is that if my wife will stick some little stickers on a card and send it back, he'll give her \$2 million. I figure there has to be a catch. Maybe there's some kind of espionage chemical on the back of the sticker so that when you lick it your nasal passages swell up and explode and you can't collect your two million. Because otherwise it just seems too easy, you know?

President Reagan's offer looks better. He's offering my wife the opportunity to be on a special Presidential Task Force. Apparently this is a limited offer being made only to a select group consisting of all current and former Republicans, living or dead, in the world. My wife used to be a Republican before she quit voting altogether, except for when there are judicial candidates with humorous names.

According to the colorful brochure my wife got, her primary task as a member of the Presidential Task Force is to send in \$120. President Reagan is going to use this money to prevent the government from falling into the hands of the Democrats, who, according to the brochure, are all disease-ridden vermin. As tokens of the president's gratitude, my wife will receive a number of Valuable Gifts,

including (I swear I am not making this up):

–A “Medal of Merit” in a “handsome case,” in recognition for highly meritorious service to the nation in the form of coming up with the 120 beans.

–A lapel pin, which the brochure says will “signify your special relationship with President Reagan.”

–An embossed Presidential Task Force Membership Card, which “reveals your toll-free, members-only, Washington hotline number; your direct line to important developments in the United States Senate; your superfast way to contact President Reagan and every Republican in the United States Senate.”

Except for the time that our dog was throwing up what appeared to be squirrel parts in the living room, I can’t honestly think of any occasion in recent years when we needed to get hold of President Reagan and every Republican in the senate on short notice. Nevertheless, I think the embossed Task Force card hotline number could come in mighty handy.

Let’s say my wife and I are at the department store and we’re trying to get waited on by a small clot of sales personnel who are clearly annoyed that some idiot has gone and left the doors open again, thus permitting members of the public to get into the store and actually try to purchase things, if you can imagine, right in the middle of a very important sales personnel discussion about hair design.

Ordinarily what my wife and I do in these situations is stand around in an obvious manner for several minutes, after which we ask politely several times to be waited on, after which we escalate to rude remarks, after which we discharge small arms in the direction of the ceiling, after which we give up and go home. But if my wife were a Task Force member, the sales personnel would notice her lapel pin and say to each other in hushed tones: “That pin signifies that she has a special relationship with President Reagan! We had best make an exception in her case, and permit her to make a purchase!” For they would know that if they didn’t, my wife would be on the horn pronto, contacting President Reagan and all the senate Republicans, and heaven only knows what kind of strong corrective action they would take, except that it would probably involve the shipment of missiles to camel-oriented nations.

So all in all I think the president has made my wife a fine offer. Not only does she get the valuable Free Gifts, but she gets to keep the government in Republican hands and thus save the Republic and ensure a brighter future for the entire Free World for generations to come. Of course we must weigh this against the fact that \$120 will buy you enough beer to last nearly two weeks in mild weather.

Valuable Scam Offer

So I got this letter, which said I had been selected by a “merchandise distribution organization” to receive some merchandise. The way the letter sounded, these people just woke up one day and said, “Hey! We have some merchandise! Let’s form an organization and distribute it!” The letter said I could receive as much as \$1,000 in cash, but I was not so naive as to think I would get that. I figure I’d have a better shot at the Disney World vacation, or the 24karat gold bracelet with the rubies and diamonds, or maybe even—you never can tell—the five-function LCD watch.

So I made an appointment to go get the merchandise, and they told me that, while I was there, they would tell me about a new Leisure Concept, and I had to bring my spouse. This is a normal legal precaution they take to avoid a situation where you sign a contract, and when you get home your spouse finds out and stabs you to death with a potato peeler, which could void the contract.

So we went to the appointed place and sat for a while in a room filled with other couples, and every now and then a person would come in, call out a name, and lead a couple off, and the rest of us would wonder what was going to happen to them. I thought maybe it would be like a fraternity initiation, in which they'd shove us into a darkened room where sales representatives would taunt us and poke us with sharp sticks, then give us our merchandise. But it turns out they don't let you off that easy.

Finally, our name was called by a person named Joe. Joe is the kind of person who cannot begin a sentence without saying, "Let me be honest with you," and cannot end one without grasping your forearm to let you know he is your best personal friend in the world. When Joe was born, the obstetrician examined him briefly and told the nurse: "Do not sign anything this baby gives you."

Joe told us his organization didn't invite just any old set of spouses out there to offer this new Leisure Concept to. He said they had already spent somewhere between \$400 and \$700 on us—not that we should feel obligated or anything!—to check us out thoroughly to make sure we were not convicted felons, because he knew that nice people like us certainly didn't want to be part of any Leisure Concept that allowed convicted felons to join, right? (Grasp.) So my wife asked exactly how they could check on something like that, which made Joe very nervous. I think it suddenly occurred to him that we might actually be convicted felons, because he launched into a murky speech about "extenuating circumstances," the gist of which seemed to be that when he said they didn't allow convicted felons, he didn't mean us.

Next we found out how you can get AIDS from hotel bedsheets. The way this came up is, Joe asked us where we liked to stay during vacations, and we said, hotels. So Joe went over the pluses and minuses of hotels for us, and the only plus he could think of was that hotels have maid service, but even then, being honest, he had to admit that you never know who has been sleeping on those sheets, and you have to worry when you read all these newspaper stories about AIDS. You know? (Grasp.) This was when we realized that, whatever Joe's Leisure Concept was, it didn't have maid service.

So finally Joe let it slip out that his Leisure Concept was "resorts." As he explained it, basically, we were supposed to give them \$11,000 plus annual dues, and then we could spend our Leisure Time at these resorts, which Joe's company had already built some of and plans to build lots more of. To help illustrate their resort in Virginia, for example, they had a nice picture of the dome of the U.S. Capitol, although when we asked Joe about it, he admitted that the Capitol was not, to be honest, technically on the resort property per se.

My wife, a picky shopper, said that yes, these were certainly very attractive photographs but generally before she spends \$11,000 on resorts she likes to see at least one in person. So Joe told us they had one right outside, which he showed us. What it was, to be honest with you, was a campground. It was one of those modern ones with swimming pools and miniature golf and video games, the kind that's popular with people whose idea of getting close to nature is turn the air conditioning in their recreational vehicles down to medium. My reaction was that I would spend my Leisure Time there only if this were one of the demands made by people who had kidnapped my son.

So we went back inside, and Joe lunged at us with a Special Offer, good only that day: For only \$8,000, we could join his resorts! Plus annual dues! Plus we could stay at affiliated resorts! For a small fee! There are thousands of them! They litter the nation! Plus we could get discounts at condominiums! Waikiki Beach! Air fares! A castle in Germany! Rental cars! Several castles in Germany! Snorkeling! Roy Orbison's Greatest Hits! But we had to act today! Right now! For various reasons! Did we have any questions?!!

My major question was, essentially, did they think we had the same Scholastic Aptitude Test scores as mayonnaise. My wife's questions were: What are you talking about? What resorts? What condominiums? How much of a discount? Joe didn't know. He was more of a specialist in bedsheet hygiene. So he called the Sales Manager, who hauled over a batch of travel brochures, which he kept on his side of the table while he flipped through them at great speed, pausing occasionally to read parts of headlines to us as if they contained actual information.

The whole ordeal took over three hours, and it was not easy, but we got our merchandise: a calculator of the kind that you have eight or twelve dead ones at the bottom of your sock drawer at any given time because it's easier and cheaper to buy a new one than to try to put in new batteries, and an LCD watch that really does have five functions, if you count telling time as two functions (telling hours, and telling minutes).

I would say, even though the watch stopped working the next day, that it was a fun family outing, and I recommend that you try it, assuming you are fortunate enough to get through the strict screening procedure and receive an invitation. Those of you who are convicted felons might want to use your illegal handguns to bypass the Leisure Concept altogether and ask for the \$ 1,000 cash up front.

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I got to thinking about dirty words this morning when I woke up and looked at the clock, realized I had once again overslept, and said a popular dirty word that begins with "S," which will hereinafter be referred to as "the S-word."

I say the S-word every morning when I look at the clock, because I'm always angry at the clock for continuing to run after I've turned off the alarm and gone back to sleep. What we need in this country, instead of Daylight Savings Time, which nobody really understands anyway, is a new concept called Weekday Morning Time, whereby at 7 A.M. every weekday we go into a space-launch-style "hold" for two or three hours, during which it just remains 7 A.m. This way we could all wake up via a civilized gradual process of stretching and belching and scratching, and it would still be only 7 A.M. when we were ready to actually emerge from bed.

But so far we are stuck with this system under which the clock keeps right on moving, which is what prompts me each morning to say the S-word. The reason I raise this subject is that this particular morning I inadvertently said it directly into the ear of my son, who is almost four and who sometimes creeps into our bedroom during the night because of nightmares, probably caused by the fact that he sleeps on Return of the Jedi sheets with illustrations of space creatures such as Jabba the Hut, who looks like a 6,000-pound intestinal parasite.

I felt pretty bad, saying the S-word right into my son's ear, but he was cool. "Daddy, you shouldn't say the S-word," he said. Only he didn't say "the S-word," you understand; he actually said the S-word. But he said it in a very mature way, indicating that he got no thrill from it, and that he was merely trying to correct my behavior. I don't know where kids pick these things up.

Here's what strikes me as ironic: When I said the S-word this morning, I was in no way thinking of or trying to describe the substance that the S-word literally represents. No, I was merely trying to describe a feeling of great anguish and frustration, but I'd have felt like a fool, looking at the alarm clock and saying: "I feel great anguish and frustration this morning." So in the interest of saving time, I said the S-

word instead, and I got a condescending lecture from a person who consistently puts his underpants on backwards.

The other irony is that for thousands of years, great writers such as William Shakespeare have used so-called dirty words to form literature. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the following words appear in Act II, Scene VI, Row A, Seats 4 and 5:

“O Romeo, Romeo. Where the F-word art thou, Romeo?”

Today, of course, it is considered very poor taste to use the F-word except in major motion pictures. When we do use it, we are almost always expressing hostility toward somebody who has taken our parking space. This is also ironic, when you consider what act the F-word technically describes, and I imagine you psychiatrists out there could drone on for hours about the close relationship between sex and hostility, but frankly I think you psychiatrists are up to your necks in S-word.

What I think is that the F-word is basically just a convenient nasty-sounding word that we tend to use when we would really like to come up with a terrifically witty insult, the kind Winston Churchill always came up with when enormous women asked him stupid questions at parties. But most of us don't think of good insults until weeks later, in the shower, so in the heat of the moment many of us tend to go with the old reliable F-word.

I disapprove of the F-word, not because it's dirty, but because we use it as a substitute for thoughtful insults, and it frequently leads to violence. What we ought to do, when we anger each other, say, in traffic, is exchange phone numbers, so that later on, when we've had time to think of witty and learned insults or look them up in the library, we could call each other up:

You: Hello? Bob? BOB: Yes? YOU: This is Ed. Remember? The person whose parking space you took last Thursday? Outside of Sears? BOB: Oh, yes! Sure! How are you, Ed? YOU: Fine, thanks. Listen, Bob, the reason I'm calling is: “Madam, you may be drunk, but I am ugly, and...” No, wait. I mean: “You may be ugly, but I am Winston Churchill, and ... “ No, wait. (Sound of reference book thudding onto the floor.) S-word. Excuse me. Look, Bob, I'm going to have to get back to you. BOB: Fine.

This would be much more educational than the F-word approach, plus it would eliminate a lot of unnecessary stabbings. On the other hand, to get back to my original point, we really ought to repeal any laws we have on the books against the S-word, which should henceforth be considered a perfectly acceptable and efficient way of expressing one's feelings toward alarm clocks and cars that break down in neighborhoods where a toxic-waste dump could be classified as urban renewal.

Molecular Homicide

We have the flu. I don't know if this particular strain has an official name, but if it does, it must be something like Martian Death Flu. You may have had it yourself. The main symptom is that you wish you had another setting on your electric blanket, up past “HIGH,” that said: “ELECTROCUTION.”

Another symptom is that you cease brushing your teeth because (a) your teeth hurt and (b) you lack the strength. Midway through the brushing process, you'd have to lie down in front of the sink to rest for a couple of hours, and rivulets of toothpaste foam would dribble sideways out of your mouth, eventually hardening into crusty little toothpaste stalagmites that would bond your head permanently to the bathroom floor, which is where the police would find you. You know the kind of flu I'm talking about.

I spend a lot of time lying very still and thinking flu-related thoughts. One insight I have had is that all this time scientists have been telling us the truth: Air really is made up of tiny objects called “molecules.” I know this because I can feel them banging against my body. There are billions and billions and billions of them, but if I concentrate, I can detect each one individually, striking my body, especially my eyeballs, at speeds upwards of a hundred thousand miles per hour. If I try to escape by pulling the blanket over my face, they attack my hair, which has become almost as sensitive as my teeth.

There has been a mound of blankets on my wife’s side of the bed for several days now, absolutely motionless except that it makes occasional efforts to spit into a tissue. I think it might be my wife, but the only way to tell for sure would be to prod it, which I wouldn’t do even if I had the strength, because if it turned out that it was my wife, and she were alive, and I prodded her, it would kill her.

Me, I am leading a more active life-style. Three or four times a day, I attempt to crawl to the bathroom. Unfortunately this is a distance of nearly 15 feet, with a great many air molecules en route, so at about the halfway point I usually decide to stop and get myself into the fetal position and hope for nuclear war. Instead, I get Earnest. Earnest is our dog. She senses instantly that something is wrong, and guided by that timeless and unerring nurturing instinct that all female dogs have, she tries to lick my ears off.

For my son, Robert, this is proving to be the high point of his entire life to date. He has had his pajamas on for two, maybe three days now. He has a sense of joyful independence a five-year-old child gets when he suddenly realizes that he could be operating an acetylene torch in the coat closet and neither parent would have the strength to object. He has been foraging for his own food, which means his diet consists entirely of “food” substances that are advertised only on Saturday morning cartoon shows; substances that are the color of jukebox lights and that, for legal reasons, have their names spelled wrong, as in New Creamy Chock-’n’-Cheez Lumps o’ Froot (“part of this complete breakfast”).

Crawling around, my face inches from the carpet, I sometimes encounter traces of colorful wrappers that Robert has torn from these substances and dropped on the floor, where Earnest, always on patrol, has found them and chewed them into spit-covered wads. I am reassured by this. It means they are both eating.

The Martian Death Flu has not been an entirely bad thing. Since I cannot work, or move, or think, I have been able to spend more Quality Time with Robert, to come up with creative learning activities that we can enjoy and share together. Today, for example, I taught him, as my father had taught me, how to make an embarrassing noise with your hands. Then we shot rubber bands at the contestants on “Divorce Court.” Then, just in case some parts of our brains were still alive, we watched professional bowling. Here’s what televised professional bowling sounds like when you have the flu:

PLAY-BY-PLAY MAN: He left the 10-pin, Bob.

COLOR COMMENTATOR: Yes, Bill. He failed to knock it down.

PLAY-BY-PLAY MAN: It’s still standing up.

COLOR COMMENTATOR: Yes. Now he must try to knock it down.

PLAY-BY-PLAY MAN: You mean the 10-pin, Bob?

The day just flew by. Soon it was 3:30 P.m., time to crawl back through the air molecules to the bedroom, check on my wife or whoever that is, and turn in for the night.

Earnest was waiting about halfway down the hall.

“Look at this,” the police will say when they find me. “His ears are missing.”

WAY TO GO, ROSCOE!

Well, it looks like we've finally gotten some tax reform. We've been trying to get tax reform for over 200 years, dating back to 17-something, when a small, brave band of patriots dressed up as Indians and threw tea into the Boston Harbor. Surprisingly, this failed to produce tax reform. So the brave patriots tried various other approaches, such as dressing up as tea and throwing Indians into the harbor, or dressing up as a harbor and throwing tea into Indians, but nothing worked.

And so, today, the tax system is a mess. To cite some of the more glaring problems:

—The big corporations pay nothing. —The rich pay nothing. —The poor pay nothing. —I pay nothing. —Nobody pays anything except you and a couple of people where you work. —The commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service is named “Roscoe.”

This unfair system has increasingly resulted in calls for reform. I personally called for reform nearly two years ago, when I proposed a simple and fair three-pronged tax system called the You Pay Only \$8.95 Tax Plan, which worked as follows:

PRONG ONE: You would pay \$8.95 in taxes. PRONG TWO: Cheating would be permitted. PRONG THREE: Anybody who parked his or her car diagonally across two parking spaces would be shot without trial. (This prong is not directly related to tax reform, but everybody I discussed it with feels it should be included anyway.)

The other major plan was proposed by President Reagan, who made tax reform the cornerstone of his second term, similar to the way he made tax reduction the cornerstone of his first term. Remember that? It was back when everybody was talking about “supply-side economics,” which is the mysterious curve that became famous when an economist named Arthur Laffer drew it at a party, on a napkin belonging to U.S. Congressman Jack Kemp. I'm not making this up.

What the Laffer curve allegedly showed, when you held it in a certain light, was that if the government reduced everybody's taxes, it would make more money, and the federal budget deficit would go away. I admit that, looking back on it, this theory seems even stupider than throwing beverages into Boston Harbor, but, at the time, it had a very strong appeal. Congressman Kemp started showing his napkin around Washington and soon many people were excited about supply-side economics. It was similar to those stories you sometimes see in the newspaper about how some Third World village gets all riled up when a peasant woman discovers a yam shaped exactly like the Virgin Mary. President Reagan made tax reduction his first-term cornerstone, and Congress enacted it, and everybody waited for the budget deficit to go down, and it wasn't until recently that economists realized Kemp had been holding his napkin sideways.

So that was tax reduction. Now we're on tax reform, which as I said earlier is the president's second-term cornerstone. For a while, however, it appeared to be in big trouble in Congress, because of the PACS. PACs are lobbying organizations with names like the American Nasal Inhaler Industry Committee for Better Government, which make large contributions to your elected representatives so they can afford to make TV campaign commercials where they stand around in shirt sleeves pretending that they actually care about ordinary bozo citizens such as you.

The PACs did not care for the president's plan. They were very concerned that the term “tax reform” might be interpreted to mean “reforming the tax system in some way,” which of course would destroy the economy as we now know it. So they had all these amendments introduced, and, before long, the president's tax-reform plan had been modified so much that its only actual legal effect, had it been enacted, would have been to declare July as Chalk Appreciation Month. And so it looked as though the president might have to come up with a new cornerstone for his second term, something like: “Ronald

Reagan: He never bombed Canada.” Or: “Ronald Reagan: Most of his polyps were benign.”

And then a wonderful thing happened. The Senate Finance Committee, a group of men who are not famous for standing up to the special interests, a group of men who have little slots in their front doors for the convenience of those PACs wishing to make large contributions at night, suddenly got their courage up. They took a hard look at themselves, and they said: “Wait a minute. What are we? Are we a bunch of prostitutes, taking large sums of money from the PACs and giving them what they want? No! Let’s take large sums of their money and not give them what they want!” It was a courageous step, a step that took the senators beyond prostitution, into the realm of fraud. All the editorial writers of course hailed it as a Positive Step. And that is how we came to have tax reform.

How will tax reform affect you? It will change your life dramatically. Let’s say you’re a typical family of four with both parents working and occasional car problems. Under the new system, each year you’ll get a bunch of unintelligible forms from the government, and you’ll put off doing anything about them until mid-April, and you’ll be confused by the directions, and you’ll miss a lot of deductions, and you’ll worry about being audited. Other than that things will remain pretty much the same. Roscoe will still be in charge.

Tax Attacks

Note: This is my annual column on how to fill out your income-tax return. As you read it, please bear in mind that I am not a trained accountant. I am the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Nevertheless, if you have any questions whatsoever about the legality of a particular tax maneuver, you should call the special Toll-Free IRS Taxpayer Assistance Hotline Telephone Number in your area and listen to the busy signal until you feel you have a better understanding of the situation.

There are a number (23,968,847) of significant differences between this year’s tax form and last year’s, but let’s first look at the two things that have not changed:

1. The commissioner of Internal Revenue is still named “Roscoe,” and
2. Roscoe is evidently still doing situps under parked cars, because he once again devotes the largest paragraphs on page one to telling us taxpayers how we can send in “voluntary contributions to reduce the federal debt.”

As I interpret this statement, Roscoe, by using the word “voluntary,” is saying that even though your government finds itself in serious financial trouble owing to the fact that every time an Acting Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of Something changes offices, he spends more on new drapes than your whole house is worth, the IRS does not require you to send in extra money, beyond what you actually owe. No sir. You also are allowed to send in jewelry, stocks, canned goods, or clothing in good condition. Roscoe is a 42 regular.

Everything else about the tax form is different this year, but it shouldn’t be too much trouble as long as you avoid Common Taxpayer Errors. “For example,” reminds IRS Helpful Hint Division Chief Rexford Pooch, Jr., “taxpayers who make everything up should use numbers that sound sort of accurate, such as \$3,847.62, rather than obvious fictions like \$4,000. Also, we generally give much closer scrutiny to a return where the taxpayer gives a name such as Nick ‘The Weasel’ Testosterone.”

With those tips in mind, let’s look at some typical tax cases, and see how they would be handled under

the new tax code. TAX CASE ONE: Mrs. Jones, a 71-year-old widow living on social security with no other income, is sound asleep, one night when she has an incredibly vivid dream in which her son dies in an automobile crash in California. Suddenly, she is awakened by the telephone; it is a member of the California Highway Patrol, calling to remind her that she does not have a son. Stunned, she suffers a fatal heart attack.

QUESTION: Does Mrs. Jones still have to file a tax return? ANSWER: Yes. Don't be an idiot. She should use Form DPFS-65, "Dead Person Filing Singly," which she can obtain at any of the two nationwide IRS Taxpayer Assistance Centers during their normal working hour.

TAX CASE TWO: Mr. and Mrs. Smith, both 32, are a working couple with two dependent children and a combined gross net abstracted income of \$27,000. During the first fiscal segment of the 1984 calendar year, they received IRS Form YAFN-12, notifying them that according to the federal computer, they owe \$179 billion in taxes. They have a good laugh over this and show the notice to their friends, thinking that it is such an obvious mistake that the IRS will correct it right away and they might even get their names in the newspaper as the victims of a typical humorous government bonehead computer bungle.

QUESTION: Can the Smiths deduct the cost of the snake-related injuries they suffered when they were fleeing the federal dogs through the wilderness? ANSWER: They may deduct 61 percent of the base presumptive adjusted mean allocated cost that is greater than, but not exceeding, \$1,575, provided they kept accurate records showing they made a reasonable effort to save little Tina's ear. Except in states whose names consist of two words.

TAX CASE THREE: Mr. A. Pemberton Trammel Snipe-Treadwater IV has established a trust fund for his six children under which each of them, upon reaching the age of 21, will receive a subcontinent. One afternoon while preparing to lash a servant, Mr. Snipe-Treadwater has a vague recollection that in 1980—or perhaps it was in 1978, he is not sure—he might have paid some taxes.

QUESTION: What should Mr. Snipe-Treadwater do? ANSWER: He should immediately summon his various senators and congressmen to soothe his brow with damp compresses until he can be named ambassador to France.

Yup The Establishment

Obviously, we—and when I say “we,” i mean people who no longer laugh at the concept of hemorrhoids—need to come up with some kind of plan for dealing with the yuppies. In a moment I'll explain my personal proposal, which is that we draft them, but first let me give you some background.

If you've been reading the trend sections of your weekly news magazines, you know that “yuppies” are a new breed of serious, clean-cut, ambitious, career-oriented young person that probably resulted from all that atomic testing. They wear dark, natural-fiber, businesslike clothing even when nobody they know has died. In college, they major in Business Administration. if, to meet certain academic requirements, they have to take a liberal-arts course, they take Business Poetry.

In short, yuppies are running around behaving as if they were real grown-ups, and they are doing it at an age when persons of my generation were still playing Beatles records backwards and actively experimenting to determine what happens when you drink a whole bottle of cough syrup.

NOTE TO IMPRESSIONABLE YOUNG READERS: Don't bother. All that happens is you feel like

you could never, ever cough again, even if Professional torturers armed with X-acto knives ordered you to, then you develop this intense, 10-to-12-hour interest in individual carpet fibers. So it's not worth it, plus I understand the manufacturers have done something wimpy to the formulas.

What bothers me about the yuppies is, they're destroying the normal social order, which is that people are supposed to start out as wild-eyed radicals, and then gradually, over time, develop gum disease and become conservatives.

This has always been the system. A good example is Franklin Roosevelt, who when he was alive was considered extremely liberal, but now is constantly being quoted by Ronald Reagan. Or take the Russian leaders. When they were young, they'd pull any kind of crazy stunt, kill the czar, anything, but now they mostly just lie around in state.

So I say the yuppies represent a threat to society as we know it, and I say we need to do something about them. One possibility would be to simply wait until they reproduce, on the theory that they'll give their children the finest clothing and toys and designer educations, and their children will of course grow up to absolutely loathe everything their parents stand for and thus become defiant, ill-dressed, unwashed, unkempt, violently antiestablishment drug addicts, and society will return to normal. The problem here is that yuppies have a very low birth rate, because apparently they have to go to Aspen to mate.

So we'll have to draft them. Not into the Armed Forces, of course; they'd all make colonel in about a week, plus they'd be useless in an actual war, whapping at the enemy with briefcases. Likewise we cannot put them in the Peace Corps, as they would cause no end of ill will abroad, crouching among the residents of some poverty-racked village in, say, Somalia, and attempting to demonstrate the water-powered Cuisinart.

No, what we need for the yuppies is a national Lighten Up Corps. First they'd go through basic training, where a harsh drill sergeant would force them to engage in pointless nonproductive activities, such as eating moon pies and watching "Days of Our Lives." Then they'd each have to serve two years in a job that offered no opportunity whatsoever for career advancement, such as:

—bumper-car repairman; —gum-wad remover; —random street lunatic; —bus-station urinal maintenance person; —lieutenant governor; —owner of a roadside attraction such as "World's Largest All-Snake Orchestra."

During their time of service in the Lighten Up Corps, the Yuppies would of course be required to wear neon-yellow polyester jumpsuits with the name "Earl" embroidered over the breast pocket.

Pain And Suffering

As an american, you are very fortunate to live in a country (America) where you have many legal rights. Bales of rights. And new ones are being discovered all the time, such as the right to make a right turn on a red light.

This doesn't mean you can do just anything. For example, you can't shout "FIRE!" in a crowded theater. Even if there is a fire, you can't shout it. A union worker has to shout it. But you can—I know this, because you always sit right behind me—clear your throat every 15 seconds all the way through an entire movie, and finally, at the exact moment of greatest on-screen drama, hawk up a gob the size of a golf ball. Nobody can stop you. It's your right.

The way you got all these rights is the Founding Fathers fought and died for them, then wrote them

down on the Constitution, a very old piece of paper that looks like sick puppies have lived on it, which is stored in Washington, D.C., where you have the right to view it during normal viewing hours. The most important part of the Constitution, rightswise, appears in Article IX, Section II, Row 27, which states:

If any citizen of the United States shall ever at any time for any reason have any kind of bad thing happen to him or her, then this is probably the result of Negligence on the part of a large corporation with a lot of insurance. If you get our drift.

What the Constitution is trying to get across to you here is that the way you protect your rights, in America, is by suing the tar out of everybody. This is an especially good time to sue, because today's juries hand out giant cash awards as if they were complimentary breath mints.

So you definitely want to get in on this. Let's say your wedding ring falls into your toaster, and when you stick your hand in to retrieve it, you suffer Pain and Suffering as well as Mental Anguish. You would sue:

—The toaster manufacturer, for failure to include, in the instructions section that says you should never never never ever stick your hand in the toaster, the statement: "Not even if your wedding ring falls in there." —The store where you bought the toaster, for selling it to an obvious cretin like yourself. —The Union Carbide Corporation, which is not directly responsible in this case, but which is feeling so guilty that it would probably send you a large cash settlement anyway.

Of course you need the help of a professional lawyer. Experts agree the best way to select a lawyer is to watch VHF television, where more and more of your top legal talents are advertising:

"Hi. I'm Preston A. Mantis, President of Consumers Retail Law Outlet. As you can see by my suit and the fact that I have all these books of equal height on the shelves behind me, I am a trained legal attorney. Do you have a car or a truck? Do you ever walk around? If so, you probably have the makings Of an excellent legal case. Although of course every case is different, I would definitely say that, based on my experience and training, there's no reason why you shouldn't come out of this thing with at least a cabin cruiser. Remember, at the Preston A. Mantis Consumers Retail Law Outlet, our motto is: "It is very difficult to disprove certain kinds Of Pain."

Another right you have, as an American, is the right to Speedy justice. For an example of how Speedy justice works, we turn now to an anecdote told to me by a friend who once worked as a clerk for a judge in a medium-sized city. my friend swears this is true. It happened to an elderly recent immigrant who was hauled before the judge one day. The thing to bear in mind is, this man was not actually guilty of anything. He had simply gotten lost and confused, and he spoke very little English, and he was wandering around, so the police had picked him up just so he'd have a warm place to sleep while they straightened everything out.

Unfortunately, this judge, who got his job less on the basis of being knowledgeable in matters of law than on the basis of attending the most picnics, somehow got the wrong folder in front of him, the folder of a person who had done something semiserious, so he gave the accused man a stern speech, then sentenced him to six months in jail. When this was explained to the man, he burst into tears. He was thinking, no doubt, that if he had only known they had such severe penalties for being elderly and lost in America, he would never have immigrated here in the first place.

Finally, about an hour later, the police figured out what happened, and after they stopped rolling around the floor and wetting their pants, they told the judge, and he sent them to fetch the prisoner back from jail. By now, of course, the prisoner had no idea what they're going to do to him. Shoot him, maybe. He was terrified. So put yourself in the judge's position. Here you have a completely innocent

man in front of you, whom you have scared half to death and had carted off to jail because you made a stupid mistake. What is the only conceivable thing you can do? Apologize, right?

This just shows you have no legal training. What this judge did was give a speech. "America," it began. just the one word, very dramatically spoken. My friend, who saw all this happen, still cannot recount this speech without falling most of the way out of his chair. The gist of it was that this is a Great Country, and since this was a First Offense, he, the judge, had had a Change of Heart, and had decided to give the accused a Second Chance. Well. Once they explained this to the prisoner, that he was not going to jail after all, that he was to be shown all this mercy, he burst into tears again, and rushed up and tried to kiss the judge's hand. Who could blame him? This was probably the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. What a great country! What speedy justice! I bet he still tells his grandchildren about it. I bet they tell him he should have sued.

The Deadly Wind

What prospective buyers said, when they looked at our house, was: "Huh! This is ... interesting." They always said this. They never said: "What a nice house!" Or: "We'll take this house! Here's a suitcase filled with money!!" No, they said our house is interesting. What they meant was: "Who installed this paneling? Vandals?"

Sometimes, to cheer us up, they also said: "Well it certainly has a lot of possibilities!" Meaning: "These people have lived here for 10 years and they never put up any curtains."

We were trying to sell our house. We had elected to move voluntarily to Miami. We wanted our child to benefit from the experience of growing up in a community that is constantly being enriched by a diverse and ever-changing infusion of tropical diseases. Also they have roaches down there you could play polo with.

The first thing we did, when we decided to move, was we rented a dumpster and threw away the majority of our furniture. You think I am kidding, but this is only because you never saw our furniture. It was much too pathetic to give to The Poor. The Poor would have taken one look at it and returned, laughing, to their street grates.

What we did give to The Poor was all my college textbooks, which I had gone through, in college, using a yellow felt marker to highlight the good parts. You college graduates out there know what I'm talking about. You go back, years later, when college is just a vague semicomical memory, and read something you chose to highlight, and it's always a statement like: "Structuralized functionalism represents both a continuance of, and a departure from, functionalistic structuralism." And you realize that at one time you actually had large sectors of your brain devoted to this type of knowledge. Lord only knows what The Poor will use it for. Fuel, probably.

One book we did keep is called Survive the Deadly Wind. I don't know where we got it, but it's about hurricanes, and so we thought it might contain useful information about life in Miami. "Any large pieces of aluminum left in a yard are a definite hazard," it states. "Each piece has a potential for decapitation. Hurlled on the tide of a 150-mile-an-hour wind, it can slice its way to, and through, bone." Ha ha! Our New Home!

After we threw away our furniture, we hired two men, both named Jonathan, to come over and fix our house up so prospective buyers wouldn't get to laughing so hard they'd fall down the basement stairs

and file costly lawsuits. The two jonathans were extremely competent, the kind of men who own winches and freely use words like “joist” and can build houses starting out with only raw trees. The first thing they did was rip out all the Homeowner Projects I had committed against our house back when I thought I had manual dexterity. They were trying to make the house look as nice as it did before I started improving it. This cost thousands of dollars.

I think there should be a federal law requiring people who publish do-it-yourself books to include a warning, similar to what the Surgeon General has on cigarette packs, right on the cover of the book, stating:

WARNING: ANY MONEY YOU SAVE BY DOING HOMEOWNER PROJECTS YOURSELF WILL BE OFFSET BY THE COST OF HIRING COMPETENT PROFESSIONALS TO COME AND REMOVE THEM SO you CAN SELL YOUR HOUSE, NOT TO MENTION THE EMOTIONAL TRAUMA ASSOCIATED WITH LISTENING TO THESE PROFESSIONALS, AS THEY RIP OUT LARGE CHUNKS OF A PROJECT, LAUGH, AND YELL REMARKS SUCH AS: “HEY! GET A LOAD OF THIS.”

After the jonathans took out all my projects, the house mostly consisted of holes, which they filled up with spackle. When prospective buyers asked: “What kind of construction is this house?” I answered: “Spackle.”

The only real bright spot in the move was when I got even with the television set in our bedroom, which had been broken for years. My wife and I have had the same argument about it maybe 200 times, wherein I say we should throw it away, and she says we should get it repaired. My wife grew up in a very sheltered rural Ohio community and she still believes you can get things repaired.

Over the years, this television had come to believe that as long as my wife was around, it was safe, and it had grown very smug, which is why I wish you could have seen the look on its face when, with my wife weakened by the flu, I took it out and propped it up at the end of the dumpster, execution-style, and, as a small neighborhood crowd gathered, one of the jonathans hurled a long, spear-like piece of Homeowner Project from 20 feet away right directly through the screen, into the very heart of its picture tube. It made a sound that I am sure our other appliances will not soon forget.

But the rest were mostly low points. I looked forward to the day when somebody bought our house, perhaps to use as a tourist attraction (SPACKLE KINGDOM, 5 MI.), and we could pack our remaining household possessions—a piano and 48,000 “He-Man” action figures—into cardboard boxes and move to Miami to begin our new life, soaking up the sun and watching the palm trees sway in the tropical breeze. At least until the aluminum sliced through them.

The House Of The Seven Figures

Before my wife, Beth, left on the jet airplane to buy us a new house, we sat down and figured out what our Price Range was. We used the standard formula where you take your income and divide it by three, which gives you the amount you would spend annually on housing if you bought a house that is much cheaper than the one you will actually end up buying.

With that figure in mind, Beth took off for our new home-to-be, South Florida, and my son and I, who had never been in charge of each other for this long before, embarked on the following rigorous nutritional program:

BREAKFAST: Frozen waffles heated up. **LUNCH:** Hot dogs heated up. **DINNER:** Choice of hot dogs or frozen waffles heated up.

Also in the refrigerator were many health-fanatic foods such as pre-sliced carrot sticks placed there by Beth in hopes that we would eat something that did not have a label stating that it met the minimum federal standard for human armpit hair, but we rejected these because of the lengthy preparation time.

Some of you may be wondering why, considering that this is the most important financial transaction of our lives, I didn't go with Beth to buy the house. The answer is that I am a very dangerous person to have on your side in a sales situation. I develop great anxiety in the presence of sales people, and the only way I can think of to make it go away is to buy whatever they're selling. This is not a major problem with, for example, pants, but it leads to trouble with cars and houses.

Here is how I bought our last car. I didn't dare go directly to the car dealership, so, for several consecutive days—this is the truth—I would park at a nearby Dairy Queen, buy a chocolate cone, then amble over to the car lot, disguised as a person just ambling around with a chocolate cone, and I would try to quickly read the sticker on the side of the car where they explain that the only part of the car included in the Base Sticker Price is the actual sticker itself, and you have to pay extra if you want, for example, transparent windows. After a few minutes, a salesman would spot me and come striding out, smiling like an entire Rotary Club, and I would adopt the expression of a person who had just remembered an important appointment and amble off at speeds approaching 40 miles per hour. What I'm saying is, I shopped for this car the way a squirrel hunts for acorns in a dog-infested neighborhood.

When I finally went in to buy the car, I was desperate to get it over with as quickly as possible. Here is how I negotiated:

SALESPERSON: (showing me a sheet of paper with figures on it): OK, Dave. Here's a ludicrously inflated opening price that only a person with Rice-A-Roni for brains would settle for. **ME:** You got a deal.

I am worse with houses. The last time we were trying to buy a house, I made Beth crazy because I was willing to make a formal offer on whatever structure we were standing in at the time:

ME: This is perfect! Isn't this perfect?! **BETH:** This is the real-estate office. **ME:** Well, how much are they asking?

So this is why Beth went to Miami without me. Moments after she arrived, she ascertained that there were no houses there in our Price Range. Our Price Range turned out to be what the average homeowner down there spends on roach control. (And we are not talking about killing the roaches. We are talking about sedating them enough so they let you into your house.)

Fortunately, Beth found out about a new financial concept they have in home-buying that is tailor-made for people like us, called Going Outside Your Price Range. This is where she started looking, and before long she had stumbled onto an even newer financial concept called Going Way Outside Your Price Range. This is where she eventually found a house, and I am very much looking forward to seeing it someday, assuming we get a mortgage.

They have developed a new wrinkle in mortgages since the last time we got one, back in the seventies. The way it worked then was, you borrowed money from the bank, and every month you paid back some money, and at the end of the year the bank sent you a computerized statement proving you still owed them all the money you borrowed in the first place. Well, they're still using that basic system, but now they also have this wrinkle called "points," which is a large quantity of money you give to the bank, right up front, for no apparent reason. It's as though the bank is the one trying to buy the

house. You ask real-estate people to explain it, and they just say: "Oh yes, the points! Be sure to bring an enormous sum of money to the settlement for those!" And of course we will. We consumers will do almost anything to get our mortgages. Banks know this, so they keep inventing new charges to see how far they can go:

MORTGAGE OFFICER: OK, at your settlement you have to pay \$400 for the preparation of the Certificate of Indemption. CONSUMER: Yes, of course. MORTGAGE OFFICER: And \$430 for pastries.

But it will all be worth it, to get to our house. It sounds, from Beth's description, as though it has everything that I look for in a house: (1) a basketball hoop and (2) a fiberglass backboard. I understand it also has rooms.

Can New York Save Itself?

At The Miami Herald we ordinarily don't provide extensive coverage of New York City unless a major news development occurs up there, such as Sean Penn coming out of a restaurant. But lately we have become very concerned about the "Big Apple," because of a story about Miami that ran a few weeks ago in the Sunday magazine of the New York Times. Maybe you remember this story: The cover featured an upbeat photograph of suspected Miami drug dealers being handcuffed face-down in the barren dirt next to a garbage-strewn sidewalk outside a squalid shack that probably contains roaches the size of Volvo sedans. The headline asked:

CAN MIAMI SAVE ITSELF?

For those readers too stupid to figure out the answer, there also was this helpful hint:

A City Beset by Drugs and Violence

The overall impression created by the cover was: Sure Miami can save itself! And some day trained sheep will pilot the Concords!

The story itself was more balanced, discussing the pluses as well as the minuses of life in South Florida, as follows:

—Minuses: The area is rampant with violent crime and poverty and political extremism and drugs and corruption and ethnic hatred. —Pluses: Voodoo is legal.

I myself thought it was pretty fair. Our local civic leaders reacted to it with their usual level of cool maturity, similar to the way Moe reacts when he is poked in the eyeballs by Larry and Curly. Our leaders held emergency breakfasts and issued official statements pointing out that much of the information in the New York Times story was Ancient History dating all the way back to the early 1980s, and that we haven't had a riot for what, months now, and that the whole drugs-and-violence thing is overrated. Meanwhile, at newsstands all over South Florida, crowds of people were snapping up all available copies of the New York Times, frequently at gunpoint.

All of which got us, at the Miami Herald, to thinking. "Gosh," we thought. "Here the world-famous New York Times, with so many other things to worry about, has gone to all this trouble to try to find out whether Miami can save itself. Wouldn't they be thrilled if we did the same thing for them?" And so it was that we decided to send a crack investigative team consisting of me and Chuck, who is a trained photographer, up there for a couple of days to see what the situation was. We took along comfortable walking shoes and plenty of major credit cards, in case it turned out that we needed to rent a helicopter,

which it turned out we did. Here is our report:

DAY ONE: We're riding in a cab from La Guardia Airport to our Manhattan hotel, and I want to interview the driver, because this is how we professional journalists take the Pulse of a City, only I can't, because he doesn't speak English. He is not allowed to, under the rules, which are posted right on the seat:

NEW YORK TAXI RULES

1. DRIVER SPEAKS NO ENGLISH.
2. DRIVER JUST GOT HERE TWO DAYS AGO FROM SOMEPLACE LIKE SENEGAL.
3. DRIVER HATES YOU.

Which is just as well, because if he talked to me, he might lose his concentration, which would be very bad because the taxi has some kind of problem with the steering, probably dead pedestrians lodged in the mechanism, the result being that there is a delay of 8 to 10 seconds between the time the driver turns the wheel and the time the taxi actually changes direction, a handicap that the driver is compensating for by going 175 miles per hour, at which velocity we are able to remain airborne almost to the far rim of some of the smaller potholes. These are of course maintained by the crack New York Department of Potholes (currently on strike), whose commissioner was recently indicted on corruption charges by the Federal Grand jury to Indict Every Commissioner in New York. This will take some time, because New York has more commissioners than Des Moines, Iowa, has residents, including the Commissioner for Making Sure the Sidewalks Are Always Blocked by Steaming Fetid Mounds of Garbage the Size of Appalachian Foothills, and, of course, the Commissioner for Bicycle Messengers Bearing Down on You at Warp Speed with Mohawk Haircuts and Pupils Smaller Than Purely Theoretical Particles.

After several exhilarating minutes, we arrive in downtown Manhattan, where the driver slows to 125 miles so he can take better aim at wheelchair occupants. This gives us our first brief glimpse of the city we have come to investigate. It looks to us, whizzing past, as though it is beset by serious problems. We are reminded of the findings of the 40member Mayor's Special Commission on the Future of the City of New York, which this past June, after nearly two years of intensive study of the economic, political, and social problems confronting the city, issued a 2,300-page report, which reached the disturbing conclusion that New York is "a nice place to visit" but the commission "wouldn't want to live there."

Of course they probably stayed at a nicer hotel than where we're staying. We're staying at a "medium-priced" hotel, meaning that the rooms are more than spacious enough for a family of four to stand up in if they are slightly built and hold their arms over their heads, yet the rate is just \$135 per night, plus of course your state tax, your city tax, your occupancy tax, your head tax, your body tax, your soap tax, your ice bucket tax, your in-room dirty movies tax, and your piece of paper that says your toilet is sanitized for your protection tax, which bring the rate to \$367.90 per night, or a flat \$4,000 if you use the telephone. A bellperson carries my luggage—one small gym-style bag containing, primarily, a set Of clean underwear—and I tip him \$2, which he takes as if I am handing him a jar of warm sputum.

But never mind. We are not here to please the bellperson. We are here to see if New York can save itself. And so Chuck and I set off into the streets of Manhattan, where we immediately detect signs of a healthy economy in the form of people squatting on the sidewalk selling realistic jewelry. This is good, because a number of other businesses, such as Mobil Corp., have recently decided to pull their headquarters out of New York, much to the annoyance of Edward Koch, the feisty, cocky, outspoken, abrasive mayor who really gets on some people's nerves, yet at the same time strikes other people as a jerk. "Why would anybody want to move to some dirt-bag place like the Midwest?" Mayor Koch is

always asking reporters. "What are they gonna do at night? Huh? Milk the cows? Are they gonna wear bib overalls and sit around canning their preserves? Huh? Are they gonna ... Hey! Come back here!"

But why are the corporations leaving? To answer this question, a polling firm recently took a scientific telephone survey of the heads of New York's 200 largest corporations, and found that none of them were expected to arrive at work for at least two more hours because of massive transit delays caused by a wildcat strike of the 1,200-member Wildcat Strikers Guild. So you can see the corporations' point: It is an inconvenience, being located in a city where taxes are ludicrously high, where you pay twice your annual income to rent an apartment that could easily be carried on a commercial airline flight, where you spend two-thirds of your work day trying to get to and from work, but as Mayor Koch philosophically points out, "Are they gonna slop the hogs? Are they gonna ..."

Despite the corporate exodus, the New York economy continues to be robust, with the major industry being people from New Jersey paying \$45 each to see A Chorus Line. Employment remains high, with most of the new jobs opening up in the fast-growing fields of:

Person asking everybody for "spare" change. Person shrieking at taxis. Person holding animated sidewalk conversation with beings from another dimension. Person handing out little slips of paper entitling the bearer to one free drink at sophisticated nightclubs with names like The Bazoom Room.

As Chuck and I walk along 42nd Street, we see a person wearing an enormous frankfurter costume, handing out coupons good for discounts at Nathan's Famous hot dog stands. His name is Victor Leise, age 19, of Queens, and he has held the position of giant frankfurter for four months. He says he didn't have any connections or anything; he just put in an application and, boom, the job was his. Sheer luck. He says it's OK work, although people call him "Frank" and sometimes sneak up and whack him on the back. Also there is not a lot of room for advancement. They have no ham burger costume. "Can New York save itself?" I ask him.

"If there are more cops on the street, there could be a possibility," he says, through his breathing hole.

Right down the street is the world-famous Times Square. Although this area is best known as the site where many thousands of people gather each New Year's Eve for a joyous and festive night of public urination, it also serves as an important cultural center where patrons may view films such as Sex Aliens, Wet Adulteress, and, of course, Sperm Busters in comfortable refrigerated theaters where everybody sits about 15 feet apart. This is also an excellent place to shop for your leisure product needs, including The Bionic Woman ("An amazingly lifelike companion") and a vast selection of latex objects, some the size of military pontoons. The local residents are very friendly, often coming right up and offering to engage in acts of leisure with you. Reluctantly, however, Chuck and I decided to tear ourselves away, for we have much more to see, plus we do not wish to spend the rest of our lives soaking in vats of penicillin.

As we leave the area, I stop briefly inside an Off-Track Betting parlor on Seventh Avenue to see if I can obtain the Pulse of the City by eavesdropping on native New Yorkers in casual conversation. Off-Track Betting parlors are the kinds of places where you never see signs that say, "Thank You for Not Smoking." The best you could hope for is, "Thank You for Not Spitting Pieces of Your Cigar on My Neck." By listening carefully and remaining unobtrusive, I am able to overhear the following conversation:

FIRST OFF-TRACK BETTOR: I like this (very bad word) horse here. SECOND OFF-TRACK BETTOR: That (extremely bad word) couldn't (bad word) out his own (comical new bad word). FIRST OFF-TRACK BETTOR: (bad word).

Listening to these two men share their innermost feelings, I sense concern, yes, but also an undercurrent of hope, hope for a Brighter Tomorrow, if only the people of this great city can learn to work together, to look upon each other with respect and even, yes, love. Or at least stop shoving one another in front of moving subway trains. This happens a fair amount in New York, so Chuck and I are extremely alert as we descend into the complex of subway tunnels under Times Square, climate-controlled year-round at a comfortable 172 degrees Fahrenheit.

Although it was constructed in 1536, the New York subway system boasts an annual maintenance budget of nearly \$8, currently stolen, and it does a remarkable job of getting New Yorkers from point A to an indeterminate location somewhere in the tunnel leading to point B. It's also very easy for the "out-of-towner" to use, thanks to the logical, easy-to-understand system of naming trains after famous letters and numbers. For directions, all you have to do is peer up through the steaming gloom at the informative signs, which look like this:

A 5 N 7 8 c 6 AA MID-DOWNTOWN 73/8
 EXPRESS LOCAL ONLY LL 67 +
 DDD 4 I K AAAA 9 ONLY
 EXCEPT CERTAIN DAYS BB eg 3
 MIDWAY THROUGH TOWN 1 7 D
 WALK REAL FAST AAAAAAAAAA 56
 LOCALIZED ExpREss-6
 llyy 4 1,539
 AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

If for some reason you are unsure where to go, all you have to do is stand there looking lost, and within seconds a helpful New Yorker will approach to see if you have any "spare" change.

Within less than an hour, Chuck and I easily located what could well be the correct platform, where we pass the time by perspiring freely until the train storms in, colorfully decorated, as is the tradition in New York, with the spraypainted initials of all the people it has run over. All aboard!

Here is the correct procedure for getting on a New York subway train at rush hour:

1. As the train stops, you must join the other people on the platform in pushing forward and forming the densest possible knot in front of each door. You want your knot to be so dense that, if the train were filled with water instead of people, not a single drop would escape.
2. The instant the doors open, you want to push forward as hard as possible, in an effort to get onto the train without letting anybody get off. This is very important. If anybody does get off, it is legal to tackle him and drag him back on. I once watched three German tourists—this is a true anecdote—attempt to get off the northbound No. 5 Lexington Avenue

IRT train at Grand Central Station during rush hour. "Getting off please!" they said, politely, from somewhere inside a car containing approximately the population of Brazil, as if they expected people to actually let them through. Instead of course, the incoming passengers propelled the Germans, like gnats in a hurricane, away from the door, deeper and deeper into the crowd, which quickly compressed them into dense little wads of Teutonic tissue. I never did see where they actually got off. Probably they stumbled to daylight somewhere in the South Bronx, where they were sold for parts.

Actually, there is reason to believe the subways are safer now. After years of being fearful and intimidated, many New Yorkers cheered in 1985 when Bernhard Goetz, in a highly controversial incident that touched off an emotion-charged nationwide debate, shot and killed the New York subway

commissioner. This resulted in extensive legal proceedings, culminating recently when, after a dramatic and highly publicized trial, a jury voted not only to acquit Goetz, but also to dig up the commissioner and shoot him again.

Chuck and I emerge from the subway in Lower Manhattan. This area has been hard hit by the massive wave of immigration that has threatened to rend the very fabric of society, as the city struggles desperately to cope with the social upheaval caused by the huge and unprecedented influx of a group that has, for better or for worse, permanently altered the nature of New York: young urban professionals. They began arriving by the thousands in the 1970s, packed two and sometimes three per BMW sedan, severely straining the city's already-overcrowded gourmet-ice cream facilities. Soon they were taking over entire neighborhoods, where longtime residents watched in despair as useful businesses such as bars were replaced by precious little restaurants with names like The Whittling Fig.

And still the urban professionals continue to come, drawn by a dream, a dream that is best expressed by the words of the song "New York, New York," which goes:

Dum dum da de dum Dum dum da de dum Dum dum da de dum Dum dum da de dum dum.

It is a powerfully seductive message, especially if you hear it at a wedding reception held in a Scranton, Pennsylvania, Moose Lodge facility and you have been drinking. And so you come to the Big Apple, and you take a peon-level position in some huge impersonal corporation, an incredibly awful, hateful job, and you spend \$1,250 a month to rent an apartment so tiny that you have to shower in the kitchen, and the only furniture you have room for—not that you can afford furniture anyway—is your collection of back issues of Metropolitan Home magazine, but you stick it out, because this is the Big Leagues (If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere), and you know that if you show them what you can do, if you really go for it, then, by gosh, one day you're gonna wake up, in The City That Never Sleeps, to find that the corporation has moved its headquarters to Plano, Texas.

Now Chuck and I are in Chinatown. We pass an outdoor market where there is an attractive display consisting of a tub containing I would estimate 275,000 dead baby eels. One of the great things about New York is that, if you ever need dead baby eels, you can get them. Also there is opera here. But tonight I think I'll just try to get some sleep.

At 3:14 A.M. I am awakened by a loud crashing sound, caused by workers from the city's crack Department of Making Loud Crashing Sounds during the Night, who are just outside my window, breaking in a new taxicab by dropping it repeatedly from a 75-foot crane. Lying in bed listening to them, I can hardly wait for ...

DAY TWO: Chuck and I decide that since we pretty much covered the economic, social, political, historical and cultural aspects of New York on Day One, we'll devote Day Two to sightseeing. We decide to start with the best-known sight of all, the one that, more than any other, exemplifies what the Big Apple is all about: the Islip Garbage Barge. This is a barge of world-renowned garbage that originated on Long Island, a place where many New Yorkers go to sleep on those occasions when the Long Island Railroad is operating.

The Islip Garbage Barge is very famous. Nobody really remembers why it's famous; it just is, like Dick Cavett. It has traveled to South America. It has been on many television shows, including—I am not making this up—"Donahue." When we were in New York, the barge—I am still not making this up—was on trial. It has since been convicted and sentenced to be burned. But I am not worried. It will get out on appeal. It is the Claus von Billow of garbage barges.

Chuck and I find out from the Director of Public Affairs at the New York Department of Sanitation,

who is named Vito, that the barge is anchored off the coast of Brooklyn, so we grab a cab, which is driven by a man who of course speaks very little English and, as far as we can tell, has never heard of Brooklyn. By means of hand signals we direct him to a place near where the barge is anchored. It is some kind of garbage-collection point.

There are mounds of garbage everywhere, and if you really concentrate, you can actually see them giving off smell rays, such as you see in comic strips. Clearly no taxi has ever been here before, and none will ever come again, so we ask the driver to wait. "YOU WAIT HERE," I say, speaking in capital letters so he will understand me. He looks at me suspiciously. "WE JUST WANT TO SEE A GARBAGE BARGE," I explain.

We can see the barge way out on the water, but Chuck decides that, to get a good picture of it, we need a boat. A sanitation engineer tells us we might be able to rent one in a place called Sheepshead Bay, so we direct the driver there ("WE NEED TO RENT A BOAT"), but when we get there we realize it's too far away, so we naturally decide to rent a helicopter, which we find out is available only in New Jersey. ("NOW WE NEED TO GO TO NEW JERSEY. TO RENT A HELICOPTER.") Thus we end up at the airport in Linden, New Jersey, where we leave the taxi driver with enough fare money to retire for life, if he ever finds his way home.

Chuck puts the helicopter on his American Express card. Our pilot, Norman Knodt, assures me that nothing bad has ever happened to him in a helicopter excepting getting it shot up nine times, but that was in Vietnam, and he foresees no problems with the garbage-barge mission. Soon we are over the harbor, circling the barge, which turns out to be, like so many celebrities when you see them up close, not as tall as you expected. As I gaze down at it, with the soaring spires of downtown Manhattan in the background gleaming in the brilliant sky, a thought crosses my mind: I had better write at least 10 inches about this, to justify our expense reports.

Later that day, I stop outside Grand Central Station, where a woman is sitting in a chair on the sidewalk next to a sign that says:

TAROT CARDS

PALM READINGS

I ask her how much it costs for a Tarot card reading, and she says \$10, which I give her. She has me select nine cards, which she arranges in a circle. "Now ask me a question," she says.

"Can New York save itself?" I ask.

She looks at me.

"That's your question?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

"OK," she says. She looks at the cards. "Yes, New York can save itself for the future."

She looks at me. I don't say anything. She looks back at the cards.

"New York is the Big Apple," she announces. "It is big and exciting, with very many things to see and do."

After the reading I stop at a newsstand and pick up a COPY Of Manhattan Living magazine, featuring a guide to condominiums. I note that there are a number of one-bedrooms priced as low as \$250,000.

Manhattan Living also has articles. "It is only recently," one begins, "that the word 'fashionable' has been used in conjunction with the bathroom."

DAY THREE: just to be on the safe side, Chuck and I decide to devote Day Three to getting back to the airport. Because of a slipup at the Department of Taxi Licensing, our driver speaks a fair amount of

English. And it's a darned good thing he does, because he is kind enough to share his philosophy of life with us, in between shouting helpful instructions to other drivers. It is a philosophy Of optimism and hope, not just for himself, but also for New York City, and for the world:

"The thing is, you got to look on the liter side, because HEY WHAT THE HELL IS HE DOING! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING YOU (very bad word) Because for me, the thing is, respect. If a person shows me respect, then HAH? YOU WANT TO SQUEEZE IN FRONT NOW?? YOU S.O.B.!! I SQUEEZE YOU LIKE A LEMON!! So I am happy here, but you Americans, you know, you are very, you know WHERE IS HE GOING?? You have to look behind the scenery. This damn CIA, something sticky is going on WHERE THE HELL IS THIS STUPID S.O.B. THINK HE IS GOING? behind the scenery there, you don't think this guy what his name, Casey, you don't LOOK AT THIS S.O.B. you don't wonder why he really die? You got to look behind the scenery. I don't trust nobody. I don't trust my own self. WILL YOU LOOK AT ..."

By the time we reach La Guardia, Chuck and I have a much deeper understanding of life in general, and it is with a sense of real gratitude that we leap out of the cab and cling to the pavement. Soon we are winging our way southward, watching the Manhattan skyline disappear, reflecting upon our many experiences and pondering the question that brought us here:

Can New York save itself? Can this ultrametropolis—crude yet sophisticated, overburdened yet wealthy, loud yet obnoxious—can this city face up to the multitude of problems besetting it and, drawing upon its vast reserves of spunk and spirit, as it has done so many times before, emerge triumphant?

And, who cares?

A Boy And His Diplodocus

We have been deeply into dinosaurs for some time now. We have a great many plastic dinosaurs around the house. Sometimes I think we have more plastic dinosaurs than plastic robots, if you can imagine.

This is my son's doing, of course. Robert got into dinosaurs when he was about three, as many children do. It's a power thing: Children like the idea of creatures that were much, much bigger and stronger than mommies and daddies are. If a little boy is doing something bad, such as deliberately pouring his apple juice onto the television remote-control device, a mommy or daddy can simply snatch the little boy up and carry him, helpless, to his room. But they would not dare try this with Tyrannosaurus Rex. No sir. Tyrannosaurus Rex would glance down at Mommy or Daddy from a height of 40 feet and casually flick his tail sideways, and Mommy or Daddy would sail directly through the wall, leaving comical cartoon-style Mommy-or-Daddy-shaped holes and Tyrannosaurus Rex would calmly go back to pouring his apple juice onto the remote-control device.

So Robert spends a lot of time being a dinosaur. I recall the time we were at the beach and he was being a Gorgosaurus, which, like Tyrannosaurus Rex, is a major dinosaur, a big meat-eater (Robert is almost always carnivorous). He was stomping around in the sand and along came an elderly tourist couple, talking in German. They sat down near us.

Robert watched them. "Tell them I'm a Gorgosaurus," he said.

"You tell them," I said.

"Gorgosauruses can't talk," Robert pointed out, rolling his eyes. Sometimes he can't believe what an idiot his father is.

Anybody who has ever had a small child knows what happened next. What happened was Robert, using the powerful whining ability that Mother Nature gives to young children to compensate for the fact that they have no other useful skills, got me to go over to this elderly foreign couple I had never seen before, point to my son, who was looking as awesome and terrifying as a three-year-old can look lumbering around in a bathing suit with a little red anchor sewn on the crotch, and say: "He's a Gorgosaurus."

The Germans looked at me the way you would look at a person you saw walking through a shopping mall with a vacant stare and a chain saw. They said nothing.

"Ha ha!" I added, so they would see I was in fact very normal.

They continued to say nothing. You could tell this had never happened to them over in Germany. You could just tell that in Germany, they have a strict policy whereby people who claim their sons are dinosaurs on public beaches are quickly sedated by the authorities. You could also tell that this couple agreed with that policy.

"Tell them I'm a meat-eater," the Gorgosaurus whispered.

"He's a meat-eater," I told the couple. God only knows why. They got up and started to fold their towels.

"Tell them I can eat more in ONE BITE than a mommy and a daddy and a little boy could eat in TWO WHOLE MONTHS," urged the Gorgosaurus, this being one of the many dinosaur facts he got from the books we read to him at bedtime. But by then the Germans were already striding off, glancing back at me and talking quietly to each other about which way they would run if I came after them.

"Ha ha!" I called after them, reassuringly.

Gorgosaurus continued to stomp around, knocking over whole cities. I had a hell of a time getting him to take a nap that day.

Sometimes when he's tired and wants to be cuddled, Robert is a gentle plant-eating dinosaur. I'll come into the living room, and there will be this lump on my wife's lap, whimpering, with Robert's blanket over it.

"What's that?" I ask my wife.

"A baby Diplodocus," she answers. (Diplodocus looked sort of like Brontosaurus, only sleeker and cuter.) "it lost its mommy and daddy."

"No!" I say.

"So it's going to live with us forever and ever," she says.

"Great!" I say,

The blanket wriggles with joy.

Lately, at our house we have become interested in what finally happened to the dinosaurs. According to our bedtime books, all the dinosaurs died quite suddenly about 60 million years ago, and nobody knows why. Some scientists—this is the truth, it was in Time magazine—think the cause was a Death Comet that visits the earth from time to time. Robert thinks this is great. A Death Comet! That is serious power. A Death Comet would never have to brush its teeth. A Death Comet could have pizza whenever it wanted.

Me, I get uneasy, reading about the Death Comet. I don't like to think about the dinosaurs disappearing. Yet another reminder that nothing lasts forever. Even a baby Diplodocus has to grow up

sometime.

Young Frankincense

My most vivid childhood memory of Christmas that does not involve opening presents, putting batteries in presents, playing with presents, and destroying presents before sundown, is the annual Nativity Pageant at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Armonk, New York. This was a major tradition at St. Stephen's, which had quite a few of them. For example, at Easter, we had the Hoisting of the Potted Hyacinths. Each person in the congregation was issued a potted hyacinth, and we'd sing a song that had a lot of "alleluias" in it, and every time we'd get to one, we'd all hoist our pots over our heads. This is the truth. Remember it next time somebody tells you Episcopalians never really get loose.

But the big event was the Nativity Pageant, which almost all the Sunday School kids were drafted to perform in. Mrs. Elson, who had experience in the Legitimate Theater, was the director, and she would tell you what role you would play, based on your artistic abilities. Like, if your artistic abilities were that you were short, you would get a role as an angel, which involved being part of the Heavenly Host and gazing with adoration upon the Christ Child and trying not to scratch yourself. The Christ Child was played by one of those dolls that close their eyes when you lay them down because they have weights in their heads. I know this because Neil Thompson and I once conducted a research experiment wherein we scientifically opened a doll's head up with a hammer. (This was not the doll that played the Christ Child, of course. We used a doll that belonged to Neil's sister, Penny, who once tied her dog to the bumper of my mother's car roughly five minutes before my mother drove the car to White Plains. But that is another story.)

Above your angels, you had your three shepherds. Shepherd was my favorite role, because you got to carry a stick, plus you spent most of the pageant waiting back in the closet with a rope that led up to the church bell and about 750,000 bats. Many were the happy rehearsal hours we shepherds spent back there, in the dark, whacking each other with sticks and climbing up the ladder so as to cause bat emission products to rain down upon us. ("And lo, when the shepherds did looketh towards the heavens, they did see, raining down upon them, a multitude of guano ...")

When it was our turn to go out and perform, we shepherds would emerge from the closet, walk up the aisle, and hold a conference to determine whether or not we should go to Bethlehem. One year when I was a shepherd, the role of First Shepherd was played by Mike Craig, who always, at every rehearsal, would whisper: "Let's ditch this joint." Of course this does not strike you as particularly funny, but believe me, if you were a 10-year-old who had spent the past hour in a bat-infested closet, it would strike you as amusing in the extreme, and it got funnier every time, so that when Mike said it on Christmas Eve during the actual Pageant, it was an awesome thing, the hydrogen bomb of jokes, causing the shepherds to almost pee their garments as they staggered off, snorting, toward Bethlehem.

After a couple of years as shepherd, you usually did a stint as a Three King. This was not nearly as good a role, because (a) you didn't get to wait in the closet, and (b) you had to lug around the gold, the frankincense, and of course the myrrh, which God forbid you should drop because they were played by valuable antique containers belonging to Mrs. Elson. Nevertheless, being a Three King was better than being Joseph, because Joseph had to hang around with Mary, who was played by (YECCCCCHHHHHHH) a girl. You had to wait backstage with this girl, and walk in with this girl, and

needless to say you felt like a total wonk, which was not helped by the fact that the shepherds and the Three Kings were constantly suggesting that you liked this girl. So during the pageant Joseph tended to maintain the maximum allowable distance from Mary, as though she were carrying some kind of fatal bacteria.

On Christmas Eve we were all pretty nervous, but thanks to all the rehearsals, the pageant generally went off with only 60 or 70 hitches. Like, for example, one year Ernie Dobbs, a Three King, dropped the frankincense only moments before showtime, and he had to go on carrying, as I recall, a Rolodex. Also there was the famous incident where the shepherds could not get out of the bat closet for the longest while, and thus lost their opportunity for that moment of dramatic tension where they confer and the audience is on the edge of its pews, wondering what they'll decide. When they finally emerged, all they had time to do was lunge directly for Bethlehem.

But we always got through the pageant, somehow, and Mrs. Elson always told us what a great job we had done, except for the year Ernie broke the frankincense. Afterwards, whoever had played Joseph would try to capture and destroy the rest of the male cast. Then we would go home to bed, with visions of Mattel-brand toys requiring six "D" cell batteries (not included) dancing in our heads. Call me sentimental, but I miss those days.

Peace On Earth, But No Parking

Once again we find ourselves enmeshed in the Holiday Season, that very special time of year when we join with our loved ones in sharing centuries-old traditions such as trying to find a parking space at the mall. We traditionally do this in my family by driving around the parking lot until we see a shopper emerge from the mall, then we follow her, in very much the same spirit as the Three Wise Men, who 2,000 years ago followed a star, week after week, until it led them to a parking space.

We try to keep our bumper about four inches from the shopper's calves, to let the other circling cars know that she belongs to us. Sometimes two cars will get into a fight over whom the shopper belongs to, similar to the way great white sharks will fight over who gets to eat a snorkeler. So we follow our shoppers closely, hunched over the steering wheel, whistling "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" through our teeth, until we arrive at her car, which is usually parked several time zones away from the mall. Sometimes our shopper tries to indicate that she was merely planning to drop off some packages and go back to shopping, but when she hears our engine rev in a festive fashion and sees the holiday gleam in our eyes, she realizes she would never make it.

And so we park and clamber joyously out of our car through the windows, which is necessary because the crack Mall Parking Space Size Reduction Team has been at work again. They get out there almost every night and redo the entire parking lot, each time making the spaces smaller, until finally, they are using, say, a Jell-O box to mark the width between lines. "Let's see them fit in there," they say, laughing, because they know we will try. They know that if necessary, we will pull into the parking space balanced on two left-side wheels, like professional stunt drivers, because we are holiday shoppers.

I do not mean to suggest that the true meaning of the holiday season is finding a parking space. No, the true meaning of the holiday season is finding a sales clerk. The way to do this is, look around the store for one of those unmarked doors, then burst through it without warning. There you will find dozens of clerks sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth and whimpering from weeks of exposure to the

holiday environment. Of course as soon as they see you, a shopper, they will bolt for the window. This is why you must carry a tape recorder.

“Hold it!” you shout, freezing them in their tracks. “I have a tape recorder here, and unless somebody lets me make my holiday purchases, I’m going to play ‘Frosty the Snowman.’”

Cruel? Inhuman? Perhaps. But you have no choice. Because this is the holiday season, and you have to buy thoughtful gifts for all of your Loved Ones, or they will hate you. Here are some helpful suggestions:

GIFTS FOR CHILDREN: To find out what children want this year, I naturally called up the headquarters of the Toys Backward ‘R’ Us Corporation, which as you parents know is now larger than the Soviet Union. I talked with a spokesperson who told me that last year the corporation’s net sales were \$2.4

billion (I assume she meant in my immediate neighborhood).

The spokesperson told me that one of the hot toys for boys this year, once again, is the G.I. Joe action figure and accessories,” which is the toy-industry code Word for “guns,” as in: “Don’t nobody move! I got an accessory!” The little boy on your list can have hours of carefree childhood fun with this G.I. Joe set, engaging in realistic armed-forces adventures such as having G.I. Joe explain to little balding congressional committee figures how come he had to use his optional Action Shredder accessory.

Another hot item is Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future, a toy system that—here is a coencidence for you—is featured on a Saturday-morning TV show. The heart of this system is an electronic accessory that the child shoots at the TV screen to actually kill members of the Bio Dread Empire. The spokesperson did not say whether it also would work on Geraldo Rivera.

For little girls, the toy industry is once again going way out on a limb and offering a vast simpering array of dolls. The big news this year, however, is that many of these dolls have computer chips inside them, so they can do the same things that a real baby would do if it had a computer chip inside it. Some dolls even respond according to the time of day. In the morning, they say: “I’m hungry!” In the evening, they say: “I’m sleepy!” And late at night, when the house is dark and quiet, they whisper into the child’s ear: “I think I hear Mr. Eyeball Plucker in the closet again!”

GIFTS FOR GROWN-UPS: I don’t want to get too corny here, but I think the nicest gift you can give a grown-up, especially one you really care about, is not something you buy in a store. In fact, it costs nothing, yet it is a very precious gift, and one that only you can give. I’m talking about your parking space.

Hey Babe Hum Babe Hum Babe Hey ...

The crack of the bat ... the roar of the crowd ... the sight of slug-shaped, saliva-drenched gobs of tobacco seeping into the turf and causing mutations among soil-based life forms. ...

Baseball. For me, it’s as much a part of summer as sitting bolt upright in bed at 3:30 A.M. and trying to remember if I filed for an extension on my tax return. And the memories baseball season brings back! Ebbetts Field, for example. That’s all I remember: Ebbetts Field. What the hell does it mean? Is it anything important? Maybe one of you readers can help.

Why does baseball hold such great appeal for Americans? A big factor, of course, is that the Russians can’t play it. Try as they might, they can’t seem to master infield chatter, which is what the members of the infield constantly yell at the pitcher. A typical segment of infield chatter would be:

Hey babe hum babe hum babe hey no batter hey fire that ball hum that pellet whip that hose baby sling that sphere c'mon heave that horsehide right in there c'mon dammit we're bored we're really bored bored bored bored out here hunched over in these cretin pants c'mon let's fling that orb let's unload that globe you sum-bitch let's THROW that ball please for God's sake let's ...

The infield's purpose in chattering at the pitcher like this is to get him so irritated that he deliberately throws the ball at the batter's face, which minimizes the danger that the batter will swing and thus put the infield in the position of having to stand in the path of a potentially lethal batted ball. American boys learn infield chatter as very young children, but the Russians have tremendous trouble with it. The best they've been able to do so far is "Holy mackerel, you are putting forth some likely shots now, ho ho!" which is pretty good for only five years' effort, but hardly the level of chatter they'll need in international competition.

Another reason why Americans are Number One in baseball is the phrases yelled by fans to encourage the players. American fans generally use the three basic phrases:

Boo. You stink. You really stink, you stupid jerk.

These phrases of encouragement have dominated baseball since the 1920s, when the great George Herman Ruth made baseball history at Yankee Stadium by pointing his bat at the stands and correctly identifying them in only four attempts. But in recent years, a large cold-air mass of change has begun to form in the North, where fans of the Montreal Expos, who all know how to speak French because there's nothing else to do in Canada after 4 P.m., have developed some new and very competitive phrases, such as:

—Vous bumme, il y a un poisson dans votre bibliotheque. (You bum, there is a fish in your library.) —Boux. (Boo.)

Thus encouraged, the Expos have become a baseball Powerhouse. They probably would have won the World Series by now except that the players refuse to return from spring training until Labor Day.

So the United States is still the best, and you can bet the mortgage that the World Series, which is open to any city in the world that has a major-league franchise, will this year be won once again by a team consisting of U.S. citizens plus maybe two dozen guys named Julio from friendly spider-infested nations to the south. In fact, the only real problem facing major-league baseball at the moment is that everybody associated with it in any way is a drug addict. This is beginning to affect the quality of the game:

ANNOUNCER: For those viewers who are just joining us, the game has been delayed slightly because the umpires really wanted some nachos, and also the Yankees keep turning into giant birds. I can't remember seeing that happen before in a regular season game, can you, Bob? COLOR

COMMENTATOR (shrieking): THESE aren't my crayons!

So baseball has problems. So who doesn't? It's still a very national pastime, and I for one always feel a stirring of tremendous excitement as we approach the All-Star Game. I'm assuming here that we haven't already passed the All-Star Game.

What I like about the All-Star Game is that the teams aren't picked by a bunch of experts who use computers and care only about cold statistics—what a player's batting average is, how well he throws, whether he's still alive, etc. No, the All-Star teams are chosen by the fans, the everyday folks who sit out in the hot sun hour after hour, cursing and swilling beer that tastes like it has been used to launder jockstraps. The fans don't care about statistics: They vote from the heart, which is why last year's starting American League lineup included Lou Gehrig, O.J. Simpson, and Phil Donahue.

And what lies ahead, after the All-Star break? I look for several very tight pennant races, with many

games ending in scores of 4-2, 5-1, and in certain instances 2-0. In the National League, I think we'll see a sharp late-season increase in the number of commercials wherein players employ inappropriate baseball imagery, such as, "Hit a home run against nasal discharge." And in the American League, I look for Dave Winfield to be attacked by seagulls. As always, pitching will be the key.

Red White And Beer

Lately I've been feeling very patriotic, especially during commercials. Like, when I see those strongly pro-American Chrysler commercials, the ones where the winner of the Bruce Springsteen Sound-Alike Contest sings about how The Pride Is Back, the ones where Lee Iacocca himself comes striding out and practically challenges the president of Toyota to a knife fight, I get this warm, proud feeling inside, the same kind of feeling I get whenever we hold routine naval maneuvers off the coast of Libya.

But if you want to talk about real patriotism, of course, you have to talk about beer commercials. I would have to say that Miller is the most patriotic brand of beer. I grant you it tastes like rat saliva, but we are not talking about taste here. What we are talking about, according to the commercials, is that Miller is by God an American beer, "born and brewed in the U.S.A.," and the men who drink it are American men, the kind of men who aren't afraid to perspire freely and shake a man's hand. That's mainly what happens in Miller commercials: Burly American men go around, drenched in perspiration, shaking each other's hands in a violent and patriotic fashion.

You never find out exactly why these men spend so much time shaking hands. Maybe shaking hands is just their simple straightforward burly masculine American patriotic way of saying to each other: "Floyd, I am truly sorry I drank all that Miller beer last night and went to the bathroom in your glove compartment." Another possible explanation is that, since there are never any women in the part of America where beer commercials are made, the burly men have become lonesome and desperate for any form of physical contact. I have noticed that sometimes, in addition to shaking hands, they hug each other. Maybe very late at night, after the David Letterman show, there are Miller commercials in which the burly men engage in slow dancing. I don't know.

I do know that in one beer commercial, I think this is for Miller—although it could be for Budweiser, which is also a very patriotic beer—the burly men build a house. You see them all getting together and pushing up a brand-new wall. Me, I worry some about a house built by men drinking beer. In my experience, you run into trouble when you ask a group of beer-drinking men to perform any task more complex than remembering not to light the filter ends of cigarettes.

For example, in my younger days, whenever anybody in my circle of friends wanted to move, he'd get the rest of us to help, and, as an inducement, he'd buy a couple of cases of beer. This almost always produced unfortunate results, such as the time we were trying to move Dick "The Wretch" Curry from a horrible fourth-floor walk-up apartment in Manhattan's Lower East Side to another horrible fourth-floor walkup apartment in Manhattan's Lower East Side, and we hit upon the labor-saving concept of, instead of carrying The Wretch's possessions manually down the stairs, simply dropping them out the window, down onto the street, where The Wretch was racing around, gathering up the broken pieces of his life and shrieking at us to stop helping him move, his emotions reaching a fever pitch when his bed, which had been swinging wildly from a rope, entered the apartment two floors below his through what had until seconds earlier been a window.

This is the kind of thinking you get, with beer. So I figure what happens, in the beer commercial where the burly men are building the house, is they push the wall up so it's vertical, and then, after the camera stops filming them, they just keep pushing, and the wall crashes down on the other side, possibly onto somebody's pickup truck. And then they all shake hands.

But other than that, I'm in favor of the upsurge in retail patriotism, which is lucky for me because the airwaves are saturated with pro-American commercials. Especially popular are commercials in which the newly restored Statue of Liberty—and by the way, I say Lee Iacocca should get some kind of medal for that, or at least be elected president—appears to be endorsing various products, as if she were Mary Lou Retton or somebody. I saw one commercial strongly suggesting that the Statue of Liberty uses Sure brand underarm deodorant.

I have yet to see a patriotic laxative commercial, but I imagine it's only a matter of time. They'll show some actors dressed up as hardworking country folk, maybe at a church picnic, smiling at each other and eating pieces of pie. At least one of them will be a black person. The Statue of Liberty will appear in the background. Then you'll hear a country-style singer singing:

"Folks 'round here they love this land; They stand by their beliefs; An' when they git themselves stopped up; They want some quick relief."

Well, what do you think? Pretty good commercial concept, huh?

Nah, you're right. They'd never try to pull something like that. They'd put the statue in the foreground.

Why Not The Best?

Excellence is the trend of the eighties. Walk into any shopping-mall bookstore, go to the rack where they keep the bestsellers such as *Garfield Gets Spayed*, and you'll see a half-dozen books telling you how to be excellent: *In Search of Excellence*, *Finding Excellence*, *Grasping Hold of Excellence*, *Where to Hide Your Excellence at Night So the Cleaning Personnel Don't Steal It*, etc.

The message of these books is that, here in the eighties, "good" is no longer good enough. In today's business environment, "good" is a word we use to describe an employee whom we are about to transfer to a urinal-storage facility in the Aleutian Islands. What we want, in our eighties business executive, is somebody who demands the best in everything; someone who is never satisfied; somebody who, if he had been in charge of decorating the Sistine Chapel, would have said: "That is a good fresco, Michelangelo, but I want a better fresco, and I want it by tomorrow morning."

This is the kind of thinking that now propels your top corporations. Take the folks at Coca-Cola. For many years, they were content to sit back and make the same old carbonated beverage. It was a good beverage, no question about it; generations of people had grown up drinking it and doing the experiment in sixth grade where you put a nail into a glass of Coke and after a couple of days the nail dissolves and the teacher says: "Imagine what it does to your teeth!" So Coca-Cola was solidly entrenched in the market, and the management saw no need to improve.

But then along came Pepsi, with the bold new marketing concept of saying that its carbonated beverage was better, a claim that Pepsi backed up by paying \$19 trillion to Michael Jackson, the most excellent musical genius of all time according to the cover story in *Newsweek* magazine. And so the folks at Coca-Cola suddenly woke up and realized that, hey, these are the eighties, and they got off their butts and improved Coke by letting it sit out in vats in the hot sun and adding six or eight thousand tons

of sugar, the exact amount being a trade secret.

Unfortunately, the general public, having failed to read the market surveys proving that the new Coke was better, refused to drink it, but that is not the point. The point is, the Coke executives decided to strive for excellence, and the result is that the American consumer is now benefitting from the Most vicious carbonated-beverage marketing war in history. It wouldn't surprise me if, very soon, one side or the other offered to pay \$29

trillion to Bruce Springsteen, who according to a Newsweek magazine cover story is currently the most excellent musical genius of all time, preceded briefly by Prince.

This striving for excellence extends into people's personal lives as well. When eighties people buy something, they buy the best one, as determined by (1) price and (2) lack of availability. Eighties people buy imported dental floss. They buy gourmet baking soda. If an eighties couple goes to a restaurant where they have made a reservation three weeks in advance, and they are informed that their table is available, they stalk out immediately, because they know it is not an excellent restaurant. If it were, it would have an enormous crowd of excellence-oriented people like themselves, waiting, their beepers going off like creakets in the night. An excellent restaurant wouldn't have a table ready immediately for anybody below the rank of Liza Minnelli.

An excellence-oriented eighties male does not wear a regular watch. He wears a Rolex, because it weighs nearly six pounds and is advertised only in excellence-oriented publications such as Fortune and Rich Protestant Goer Magazine. The advertisements are written in incomplete sentences, which is how advertising copywriters denote excellence:

"The Rolex Hypetion. An elegant new standard in quality excellence and discriminating hand-craftsmanship. For the individual who is truly able to discriminate with regard to excellent quality standards of crafting things by hand. Fabricated of 100percent 24 karat gold. No watch parts or anything. just a great big chunk of gold on your wrist. Truly a timeless statement. For the individual who is very secure. Who doesn't need to be reminded all the time that he is very successful. Much more successful than the people who laughed at him in high school. Because of his acne. People who are probably nowhere near as successful as he is now. Maybe he'll go to his twentieth reunion, and they'll see his Rolex Hypetion. Hahahahyahahahahaha."

Nobody is excused from the excellence trend. Babies are not excused. Starting right after they get out of the womb, modern babies are exposed to instructional flashcards designed to make them the best babies they can possibly be, so they can get into today's competitive preschools. Your eighties baby sees so many flashcards that he never gets an unobstructed view of his parents' faces. As an adult, he'll carry around a little wallet card that says " $7 \times 9 = 63$," because it will remind him of mother.

I recently saw a videotape of people who were teaching their babies while they (the babies) were still in the womb. I swear I am not making this up. A group of pregnant couples sat in a circle, and, under the direction of an Expert in These Matters, they crooned instructional songs in the direction of the women's stomachs. Mark my words: We will reach the point, in our lifetimes, where babies emerge from their mothers fully prepared to assume entry-level management positions. I'm sure I'm not the only person who has noticed, just wandering around the shopping mall, that more and more babies, the really brand-new modern ones, tend to resemble Lee Iacocca.

Making The World Safe For Salad

I've been thinking about technology of late, because, as you are no doubt aware (like fudge, you are), we recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Etch-a-Sketch. I think we can all agree that, except for long-lasting nasal spray, this is the greatest technological achievement of all time. Think, for a moment, of the countless happy childhood hours you spent with this amazing device: Drawing perfect horizontals; drawing perfect verticals; drawing really spastic diagonals; trying to scrape away the silver powder from the window so you could look inside and try to figure out how it works (Mystery Rays from space, is what scientists now believe); and just generally enjoying the sheer childhood pleasure of snatching it away from your sister and shaking it upside down after she had spent 40 minutes making an elaborate picture of a bird.

Think how much better off the world would be if everybody—young and old, black and white, American and Russian, Time and Newsweek—spent part of each day playing with an Etch-a-Sketch. Think how great it would be if they had public Etch-a-Sketches for you to use while you were waiting in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. And imagine what would happen if, instead of guns, our young soldiers carried Etch-a-Sketches into battle! They would be cut down like field mice under a rotary mower! So we can't carry this idea too far.

So anyway, as I said, this got me to thinking about technology in general. Too often—three or four times a week, according to some figures—we take technology for granted. When we drop our money into a vending machine at our place of employment and press the button for a tasty snack selection of crackers smeared with “cheez,” a nondairy petroleum subproduct approved for use on humans, we are blithely confident that the machine will automatically, much of the time, hurl our desired selection down into the pickup bin, using a computerized electronic snack-ejection device that gives our snack a bin impact velocity of nearly 70 miles an hour, which is what is required to reduce our crackers to a fine, dayglow-orange grit. We rarely stop to consider that without this device, the only way the vending-machine manufacturers would be able to achieve this kind of impact velocity would be to use gravity, which means the machines would have to be 40 feet tall!

Of course, not all technology is good. Some is exactly the opposite (bad). The two obvious examples of this are the hydrogen bomb and those plastic “sneeze shields” they put over restaurant salad bars for your alleged hygiene protection. I have said this before, but it needs to be said again: Sneeze shields actually spread disease, because they make it hard for a squat or short-armed person to reach back to the chick peas and simulated bacon, and some of these people inevitably are going to become frustrated and spit in the House Dressing (a creamy Italian).

But this does not mean we should be against technology in general. Specifically, we should not be so hostile toward telephone-answering machines. I say this because I own one, and I am absolutely sick unto death of hearing people say—they all say this; it must be Item One on the curriculum in Trend College—“I just hate to talk to a machine!” They say this as though it is a major philosophical position, as opposed to a description of a minor neurosis. My feeling is, if you have a problem like this, you shouldn't go around trumpeting it; you should stay home and practice talking to a machine you can feel comfortable with, such as your Water Pik, until you are ready to assume your place in modern society, OK?

Meanwhile, technology marches on, thanks to new inventions conceived of by brilliant innovative creative geniuses such as a friend of mine named Clint Collins. Although he is really a writer, Clint has developed an amazingly simple yet effective labor-saving device for people who own wall-to-wall carpeting but don't want to vacuum it. Clint's concept is, you cut a piece of two-by-four so it's as long

as your vacuum cleaner is wide, and just before company comes, you drag it across your carpet, so it leaves parallel marks similar to the ones caused by a vacuum. Isn't that great? The only improvement I can think of would be if they wove those lines into the carpet right at the factory, so you wouldn't even need a two-by-four.

Another recent advantage in technology comes from Joseph DiGiacinto, my lawyer, who has developed a way to fasten chopsticks together with a rubber band and a little wadded-up piece of paper in such a way that you can actually pick up food with them one-handed. You don't have to ask your waiter for a fork, which makes you look like you just tromped in from Des Moines and never even heard of sweet and sour pork. If you'd like to get in on this high-tech culinary advance, send an envelope with your address and a stamp on it to: Chopstick Concept, C/o Joseph DiGiacinto, Legal Attorney at Law, 235 Main Street, White Plains, NY 10601, and he'll send you, free, a Chopstick Conversion Kit—including a diagram, a rubber band, and instructions that can be wadded up for use as your paper wad—just as soon as I let him know that he has made this generous offer. He also does wills. And what other advances does the future hold, technology-wise? Even as you read these words, white-coated laboratory geeks are working on a revolutionary new camera that not only will focus automatically, set the exposure automatically, flash automatically, and advance the film automatically, but will also automatically refuse to take stupid pictures, such as of the wing out the airplane window.

Trouble On The Line

I want them to stop explaining my long-distance options to me. I don't want to know my long-distance options. The more I know about my long-distance options, the more I feel like a fool.

They did this to us once before, with our financial options. This was back in the seventies. Remember? Up until then, if you had any excess money, you put it in a passbook savings account paying 5 1/4 percent interest, and your only financial options were, did you want the toaster or the electric blanket. For a really slick high-finance maneuver, you could join the Christmas Club, where you gave the bank some money each week, and, at the end of the year, the bank gave you your money back. These were simple, peaceful times, except for the occasional Asian land war.

And then, without warning, they made it legal for consumers to engage in complex monetary acts, many of them involving "liquidity." Today, there are a whole range of programs in which all that happens is people call up to ask what they should do with their money:

"Hi, Steve? My wife and I listen to you all the time, and we just love your show. Now here is the problem: We're 27 years old, no kids, and we have a combined income of \$93,000, and \$675,000 in denatured optional treasury instruments of accrual, which will become extremely mature next week."

Now to me, those people do not have a problem. To me, what these people need in the way of financial advice is: "Lighten up! Buy yourself a big boat and have parties where people put on funny hats and push the piano into the harbor!" But Mr. Consumer Radio Money Advisor, he tells them complex ways to get even more money and orders them to tune in next week. These shows make me feel tremendously guilty, as a consumer, because I still keep my money in accounts that actually get smaller, and sometimes disappear, like weekend guests in an old murder mystery, because the bank is always taking out a "service charge," as if the tellers have to take my money for walks or something.

So I feel like a real consumer fool about my money, and now I have to feel like a fool about my phone,

too. I liked it better back when we all had to belong to the same Telephone Company, and phones were phones—black, heavy objects that were routinely used in the movies, as murder weapons (try that with today's phones!). Also, they were permanently attached to your house, and only highly trained Telephone Company personnel could “install” them. This involved attaching four wires, but the Telephone Company always made it sound like brain surgery. It was part of the mystique. When you called for your installation appointment, the Telephone Company would say: “We will have an installer in your area between the hours Of 9 A.M. October 3 and the following spring. Will someone be at home?” And you would say yes, if you wanted a phone. You would stay at home, the anxious hours ticking by, and you would wait for your Phone Man. It was as close as most people came to experiencing what heroin addicts go through, the difference being that heroin addicts have the option of going to another supplier. Phone customers didn't. They feared the power of the Telephone Company.

I remember when I was in college, and my roommate Rob somehow obtained a phone. It was a Hot Phone. Rob hooked it up to our legal, wall-mounted phone with a long wire, which gave us the capability of calling the pizza-delivery man without getting up off the floor. This capability was essential, many nights. But we lived in fear. Because we knew we were breaking the rule—not a local, state, or federal rule, but a Telephone Company rule—and that any moment, agents of the Telephone Company, accompanied by heavy black dogs, might burst through the door and seize the Hot Phone and write our names down and we would never be allowed to have phone service again. And the dogs would seize our pizza.

So the old Telephone Company could be tough, but at least you knew where you stood. You never had to think about your consumer long-distance options. Whereas today you cannot turn on the television without seeing Cliff Robertson, standing in some pathetic rural community with a name like Eye Socket, Montana, telling you that if you don't go with his phone company, you won't be able to call people in rural areas like this, in case you ever had a reason to, such as you suddenly needed information about heifers. Which sounds reasonable, but then Burt Lancaster tells you what a jerk you are if you go with Cliff because it costs more. But that's exactly what Joan Rivers says about Burt! And what about Liz? Surely Liz has a phone company!

So it is very confusing, and yet you are expected to somehow make the right consumer choice. They want you to fill out a ballot. And if you don't fill it out, they're going to assign you a random telephone company. God knows what you could wind up with. You could wind up with the Soviet Union Telephone Company. You could wind up with one of those phone companies where you have to crank the phone, like on “Lassie,” and the operator is always listening in, including when you call the doctor regarding intimate hemorrhoidal matters.

So you better fill out your ballot. I recommend that you go with Jim & Ed's Telephone Company & Radiator Repair. I say this because Jim and Ed feature a service contract whereby you pay a flat \$15 a month, and if you have a problem, Jim or Ed will come out to your house (Jim is preferable, because after 10 A.M. Ed likes to drink Night Train wine and shoot at religious lawn statuary) and have some coffee with you and tell you that he's darned if he can locate the problem, but if he had to take a stab, he'd guess it was probably somewhere in the wires.

Read This First

CONGRATULATIONS! You have purchased an extremely fine device that would give you thousands of years of trouble-free service, except that you undoubtedly will destroy it via some typical bonehead consumer maneuver. Which is why we ask you to PLEASE FOR GOD'S SAKE READ THIS OWNER'S MANUAL CAREFULLY BEFORE YOU UNPACK THE DEVICE. YOU ALREADY UNPACKED IT, DIDN'T YOU? YOU UNPACKED IT AND PLUGGED IT IN AND TURNED IT ON AND FIDDLER WITH THE KNOBS, AND NOW YOUR CHILD, THE SAME CHILD WHO ONCE SHOVED A POLISH SAUSAGE INTO YOUR VIDEOCASSETTE RECORDER AND SET IT ON "FAST FORWARD," THIS CHILD ALSO IS FIDDLING WITH THE KNOBS, RIGHT? AND YOU'RE JUST STARTING TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS, RIGHT??? WE MIGHT AS WELL JUST BREAK ALL THESE DEVICES RIGHT AT THE FACTORY BEFORE WE SHIP THEM OUT, YOU KNOW THAT?

We're sorry. We just get a little crazy sometimes, because we're always getting back "defective" merchandise where it turns out that the consumer inadvertently bathed the device in acid for six days. So, in writing these instructions, we naturally tend to assume that your skull is filled with dead insects, but we mean nothing by it. OK? Now let's talk about:

1. UNPACKING THE DEVICE: The device is encased in foam to protect it from the Shipping People, who like nothing more than to jab spears into the outgoing boxes. PLEASE INSPECT THE CONTENTS CAREFULLY FOR GASHES OR IDA MAE BARKER'S ENGAGEMENT RING WHICH SHE LOST LAST WEEK, AND SHE THINKS MAYBE IT WAS WHILE SHE WAS PACKING DEVICES. Ida Mae really wants that ring back, because it is her only proof of engagement, and her fiance, Stuart, is now seriously considering backing out on the whole thing inasmuch as he had consumed most of a bottle of Jim Beam in Quality Control when he decided to pop the question. It is not without irony that Ida Mae's last name is "Barker," if you get our drift.

WARNING: DO NOT EVER AS LONG AS YOU LIVE THROW AWAY THE BOX OR ANY OF THE PIECES OF STYROFOAM, EVEN THE LITTLE ONES SHAPED LIKE PEANUTS. If you attempt to return the device to the store, and you are missing one single peanut, the store personnel will laugh in the chilling manner exhibited by Joseph Stalin just after he enslaved Eastern Europe.

Besides the device, the box should contain:

—Eight little rectangular snippets of paper that say: "WARNING" —A plastic packet containing four 5/17-inch pilfer grommets and two chub-ended 6/93-inch boxcar prawns.

YOU WILL NEED TO SUPPLY: a matrix wrench and 60,000 feet of tram cable.

IF ANYTHING IS DAMAGED OR MISSING: YOU immediately should turn to your spouse and say: "Margaret, you know why this country can't make a car that can get all the way through the drive-thru at Burger King without a major transmission overhaul? Because nobody cares, that's why." (Warning: This Is Assuming Your Spouse's Name Is Margaret.)

2. PLUGGING IN THE DEVICE: The plug on this device represents the latest thinking of the electrical industry's Plug Mutation Group, which, in the continuing effort to prevent consumers from causing hazardous electrical current to flow through their appliances, developed the Three-Pronged Plug, then the Plug Where One Prong Is Bigger Than the Other. Your device is equipped with the revolutionary new Plug Whose Prongs Consist of Six Small Religious Figurines Made of Chocolate. DO NOT TRY TO PLUG IT IN! Lay it gently on the floor near an outlet, but out of direct sunlight, and clean it weekly with a damp handkerchief.

WARNING: WHEN YOU ARE LAYING THE PLUG ON THE FLOOR, DO NOT HOLD A

SHARP OBJECT IN YOUR OTHER HAND AND TRIP OVER THE CORD AND POKE YOUR EYE OUT, AS THIS COULD VOID YOUR WARRANTY.

3. OPERATION OF THE DEVICE:

WARNING: WE MANUFACTURE ONLY THE ATTRACTIVE DESIGNER CASE. THE ACTUAL WORKING CENTRAL PARTS OF THE DEVICE ARE MANUFACTURED IN JAPAN. THE INSTRUCTIONS WERE TRANSLATED BY MRS. SHIRLEY PELTWATER OF ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE, WHO HAS NEVER ACTUALLY BEEN TO JAPAN BUT DOES HAVE MOST OF SHOGUN ON TAPE.

INSTRUCTIONS: For results that can be the finest, it is our advising that: Never to hold these buttons two times!! Except the battery. Next, taking the (something) earth section may cause a large occurrence! However. If this is not a trouble, such rotation is a very maintenance action, as a kindly (something) viewpoint from Drawing B.

4. WARRANTY: Be it hereby known that this device, together with but not excluding all those certain parts thereunto, shall be warrantied against all defects, failures, and malfunctions as shall occur between now and Thursday afternoon at shortly before 2, during which time the Manufacturer will, at no charge to the Owner, send the device to our Service People, who will emerge from their caves and engage in rituals designed to cleanse it of evil spirits. This warranty does not cover the attractive designer case.

WARNING: IT MAY BE A VIOLATION OF SOME LAW THAT MRS. SHIRLEY PELTWATER HAS SHOGUN ON TAPE.

The Urban Professionals

I'm going to start a rock 'n' roll band. Not a good band, where you have to be in tune and wear makeup. This will be a band consisting of people who are Approaching Middle Age, by which I mean they know the words to "Wooly Bully." This will be the kind of band whose members often miss practice for periodontal reasons—and are always yelling at their kids for leaving Popsicles On the amplifiers. We will be called the "Urban Professionals," I will be lead guitar.

I miss being in a band. The last band I was in, the "Phlegmtones," dissolved a couple of years ago, and even that was not truly a formal band in the sense of having instruments or playing them or anything. What it was, basically, was my friend Randall and myself drinking beer and trying to remember the words to "Runaround Sue," by Dion and the Belmonds.

Before that, the last major band I was in was in college, in the sixties. It was called the "Federal Duck," which we thought was an extremely hip name. We were definitely 10 pounds of hipness in a 5-pound bag. We had the first strobe light of any band in our market area. We were also into The Blues, which was a very hip thing to be into, back in the sixties. We were always singing songs about how Our woman she done lef' us and we was gon' jump into de ribba an' drown. This was pretty funny, because we were extremely white suburban-style college students whose only actual insight into the blues came from experiences such as getting a C in Poli Sci.

In terms of musical competence, if I had to pick one word to describe us, that word would be "loud." We played with the subtlety of above-ground nuclear testing. But we made up for this by being cheap. We were so cheap that organizations were always hiring us sight unseen, which resulted a number of times in our being hired by actual grownups whose idea of a good party band was elderly

men in stained tuxedos playing songs from My Fair Lady on accordions at about the volume of a drinking fountain.

When we would come in and set up, with our mandatory long hair and our strobe light and our 60,000 pounds of amplifiers, these people would watch us in wary silence. But once we started to play, once the sound of our pulsating beat filled the air, something almost magical would happen: They would move farther away. They'd form hostile little clots against the far wall. Every now and then they'd send over an emissary, who would risk lifelong hearing damage to cross the dance floor and ask us if we knew any nice old traditional slow-dance fox-trot-type songs such as "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," which of course we didn't, because it has more than four chords. So we'd say: "No, we don't know that one, but we do know another one you might like." Then we'd play "Land of 1,000 Dances," a very big hit by Cannibal and the Headhunters on Rampart Records. This is a song with only one chord (E). Almost all of the lyrics consist of the statement, I said a na, as follows:

I said a na Na na na na Na na na na, Na na na, na na na; Na na na na.

Our best jobs were at fraternity parties. The only real problem we'd run into there was that every now and then they'd set fire to our equipment. Other than that, fraternity brothers made for a very easy-going audience. Whatever song they requested, we'd play "Land of 1,000 Dances," and they'd be happy. They were too busy throwing up on their dates to notice. They are running the nation today.

Me, I am leading a quiet life. Too quiet. This is why I'm going to form the Urban Professionals. Right now I am actively recruiting members. So far I've recruited one, an editor named Tom whose musical qualifications are that he is 32 years old. He's going to play some instrument of the type you got handed in rhythm band in elementary school, such as the tambourine. just judging from my circle of friends, I think The Urban Professionals are going to have a large tambourine section.

Once we start to catch on, we'll make a record. It will be called: "A Moderate Amount of Soul." After it comes out, we'll go on a concert tour. We'll stay in Holiday Inns, and sometimes we'll "trash" our rooms by refusing to fill out the Guest Questionnaire. Because that's the kind of rebels the Urban Professionals will be. But our fans will still love us. When we finish our act, they'll be overcome by emotion. They'll all rise spontaneously to their feet, and they'll try, as a gesture of appreciation, to hold lighted matches over their heads. Then they'll all realize they quit smoking, so they'll spontaneously sit back down.

The Plastic, Fantastic Cover

I have just about given up on the Tupperware people. I've been trying to get them interested in a song I wrote, called "The Tupperware Song," which I am sure would be a large hit. I called them about it two or three times a week for several weeks.

"You wrote a song?" they would say.

"Yes," I would say.

"About Tupperware?" they would say.

"It's kind of a blues song."

"Yes," I would say.

"We'll have somebody get back to you," they would say.

For quite a while there I thought I was getting the run-around, until finally a nice Tupperware

executive named Dick called me up. He was very honest with me. "There's a fairly limited market for songs about Tupperware," he said.

"Dick," I said. "This is a killer song." Which was true. It gets a very positive reaction whenever I perform it. Of course, I perform it only in those social settings where people have loosened up to the point where they would react positively if you set their clothing on fire, but I still think this song would have widespread appeal.

I wrote it a while back, when friends of mine named Art and Dave had a big Tupperware party in their apartment. It was the social event of the month. Something like 50 people showed up. When the Tupperware Lady walked in, you could tell right away from her facial expression that this was not the kind of Tupperware crowd she was used to. She was used to a subdued all-female crowd, whereas this was a large coeducational crowd with some crowd members already dancing on the refrigerator. The Tupperware Lady kept saying things like: "Are you sure this is supposed to be a Tupperware party?" And: "This doesn't look like a Tupperware party." She wanted to go home.

But we talked her into staying, although she never really accepted the fact that Art and Dave were her Tupperware hostesses. She wanted to deal with a woman. All of her communications with Art and Dave had to go through a woman interpreter:

TUPPERWARE LADY (speaking to a woman): Where do you want me to set up? WOMAN (speaking to Art, who is standing right there): Art, where do you want her to set up? ART: How about right over here on the coffee table? WOMAN (to the Tupperware Lady): Art says how about right over here on the coffee table. TUPPERWARE LADY: Fine.

Once we got everybody settled down, sort of, the Tupperware Lady wanted us to engage in various fun Tupperware party activities such as "brain teasers" wherein if we could name all the bodily parts that had three letters, we would win a free grapefruit holder or something. We did this for a while, but it was slowing things down, so we told the Tupperware Lady we had this song we wanted to perform.

The band consisted of me and four other highly trained journalists. You know what "The Tupperware Song" sounds like if you ever heard the song "I'm a Man" by Muddy Waters, where he sings about the general theme that he is a man, and in between each line the band goes Da-DA-da-da-DUM, so you get an effect like this:

MUDDY WATERS: I'm a man.

BAND: Da-DA-da-da-DUM

MUDDY WATERS: A natural man.

BAND: Da-DA-da-da-DUM

MUDDY WATERS: A full-grown man.

And so on. This is the general approach taken in The Tupperware Song, except it is about Tupperware. It starts out this way:

Some folks use waxed paper

Some folks use the Reynolds Wrap

Some folks use the Plastic Baggie

To try to cover up the gap

You can use most anything

To keep your goodies from the air

But nothing works as well

As that good old Tupperware

(CHORUS)

'Cause it's here Whooaaa

Take a look at what we got

If you don't try some and buy some

Don't blame me when your turnips rot.

It has two more verses covering other important Tupperware themes. Verse Two stresses the importance of “burping” the air out of your container to make sure your lid seals securely, and Verse Three points out that you can make money by holding a Tupperware party in your home.

As you might imagine, the crowd was completely blown away by this song. The Tupperware Lady herself was near tears. But the important thing was, people bought a lot of Tupperware that night. People bought Tupperware they would never in a million years need. Single men who lived in apartments and never cooked anything, ever, that could not be heated in a toaster, were ordering Tupperware cake transporters. It was obvious to me right then and there that “The Tupperware Song” was a powerful marketing tool.

I explained all this to Dick, of the Tupperware company, and he said I could send him a cassette tape of the song. Which I did, but I haven't heard a thing. Not that I'm worried. I'm sure there are plenty of other large wealthy corporations out there that would be interested in a blues song about Tupperware. In fact, I'm getting offers in the mail almost every day. Most of them are for supplementary hospitalization insurance, but that's obviously just a negotiating ploy.

Bang The Tupperware Slowly

When I die, I want my obituary to read as follows:

“Dave Barry is dead. Mr. Barry and his band, the Urban Professionals, once performed ‘The Tupperware Song’ before 1,000 Tupperware distributors.”

This is the truth. We really did perform before 1,000 Tupperware distributors, and they gave us a standing ovation, although in the interest of accuracy, I should tell you that just before we performed, they also gave a standing ovation to a set of ovenware. But I don't care. This was without question the highlight of my entire life.

The way it came about was, the Tupperware people finally saw the musical light and decided to invite me to perform my original composition, “The Tupperware Song,” before a large sales conference at Tupperware headquarters, located in Orlando, Florida, right next to Gatorland, an attraction where (this is true) alligators jump into the air and eat dead chickens hung from wires. Naturally I accepted the invitation. A break like this comes along once in your career.

I formed a new band, the Urban Professionals, especially for this performance. I chose the members very carefully, based on their ability to correctly answer the following question: “Do you want to go to Orlando at your own expense and perform before Tupperware distributors?” (The correct answer, was: “Yes.”) Using this strict screening procedure, I obtained three band members, all trained members of the Miami Herald staff. I'm the lead guitar player and singer and also (I'm not bragging here; these are simply facts) the only person in the band who knows when the song has started or ended. The other members of the band just sort of stand around looking nervous until I've been going for a while, and then, after it penetrates their primitive musical consciousnesses that the song has begun, they become

startled and lurch into action. Likewise it takes them up to 30 seconds to come to a complete stop after the song is technically over.

The only other normal instrument in the band is a harmonica, played by Gene. Gene has been attempting to play the harmonica for a number of years, and has developed a repertoire of several songs, all of which sound exactly like “Oh, Susannah!” “Here’s another one!” he’ll say, and then he plays “Oh, Susannah!” He plays it very rapidly, totally without pauses, as if he’s anxious to get back to journalism, so if you tried to sing along, you’d have to go: “Icomefromalabamawithmybanjoonmyknee,” etc., and pretty soon you’d run out of oxygen and keel over onto your face, which Gene wouldn’t notice because he’d be too busy trying to finish the song on schedule.

The other two instruments in the band are actually Tupperware products, played rhythmically by Tom and Lou, who also dance. How good are they? Let me put it this way: If you can watch them perform and not wet your pants then you are legally blind. For one thing, they are both afflicted with severe rhythm impairment, the worst cases I have ever seen, worse even than Republican convention delegates. You ask Lou and Tom to clap along to a song and not only will they never once hit the beat, but they will also never, no matter how eternally long the song goes on, both clap at the same time. On top of which you have the fact that they do not have your classic dancer’s build, especially Lou, who is, and I say this with all due respect the same overall shape as a Krispy Kreme jelly doughnut.

When we got to the Tupperware convention center we became a tad nervous, because (a), it turns out that Tupperware is a large business venture that many people take very seriously and (b) we had never even practiced as a total band. The bulk of our musical preparation to that point had consisted of deciding that our band outfits should include sun glasses.

Fortunately, the Tupperware distributors turned out to be extremely peppy people, prone to applauding wildly at the slightest provocation. They especially loved Lou and Tom lunging around waving their Tupperware products in what they presumably thought was unison, looking like the Temptations might look if they were suddenly struck onstage with severe disorders of the central nervous system.

After we got off the stage, Lou announced that it was the most exciting thing he had ever done. Gene kept saying: “A professional musician. I’m a professional musician.” A Tupperware person came up and asked if we’d be willing to perform again, and of course we said yes, although I am becoming concerned. Tom has announced, several times, that he thinks next time the dancers should get a singing part. I can see already that unless we hold our egos in check, keeping this thing in perspective, we could start having the kind of internal conflicts that broke up the Beatles, another very good band.

Bite The Wax Tadpole!

Now we’re going to look at some important new developments in the U.S. advertising industry, which continues to be a hotbed of innovation as well as a source of pride to all Americans regardless of intelligence. This country may no longer be capable of manufacturing anything more technologically sophisticated than breakfast cereal, but by God when it comes to advertising, we are still—and I mean this sincerely—Number One.

Our first bit of advertising news will come as a happy surprise to those of you who lie awake nights asking yourselves: “Whatever happened to Mikey, the lovable chubby-cheeked child who hated everything until he tasted Life brand breakfast cereal in the heartwarming television commercial that we

all saw 63,000 times back in the seventies?"

The good news is: Mikey is coming back, as part of a major advertising campaign! The Quaker Oats Co. sent me two large press kits on this, both quoting a Quaker Oats executive as saying: "We've received thousands of letters over the years asking what's become of him. ... We thought it would be fun to satisfy America's curiosity by conducting a nationwide search to reveal his present-day identity."

Ha ha! Fun is hardly the word! I don't know about you, but I'm going to be waiting on tenterhooks until the big moment comes when the Quaker Oats Co., in a national press conference, finally reveals what "tenterhooks" are. No, seriously, they're going to reveal who Mikey is, so that the thousands of people who wrote to them about this important matter can go back to learning how to eat with real utensils.

Speaking of adorable and talented young actors whose moving commercial performances have tugged at the heartstrings of our minds, I wonder whatever happened to that little boy who used to do the Oscar Mayer commercials. Remember? The one who claimed his baloney had a first name, and it was O-S-C-A-R? I wonder if that child didn't run into problems later in life. ("OK, pal. You and Oscar there are under arrest.").

Another commercial personality I was wondering about is the man who used to promote Ti-D-bol brand automatic commode freshener by rowing his boat around inside the tank of a giant toilet. I mean, it must have been difficult for him, going back to normal life after having reached a show business pinnacle like that. So I called the Knomark company, which makes Ti-D-bol, and I found out an amazing fact: The role of the original Ti-D-bol man was played by none other than "Miami Vice" 's Don Johnson! Isn't that an incredible celebrity gossip tidbit? I hope to see it reprinted in leading supermarket tabloids everywhere, although in the interest of fairness and objectivity I should point out that I just now made it up.

The actual truth, according to Bill Salmon, Knomark's marketing director, is that there were a number of Ti-D-bol men. "The Ti-D-bol man," he said, "was anybody who put on the blazer and the white hat and got in the boat." The current Ti-D-bol man, he said, is a cartoon character who remains on dry land. "Right now he is not in a toilet tank in a rowboat, but that does not mean we would not use the Ti-D-bol man in the tank again at a future time," Salmon stressed.

By the way, I was disappointed to learn from Salmon that the rowboat commercials were done with trick photography, meaning there never was a 50-foot-high toilet. I think they should build one, as a promotional concept. Wouldn't that be great? They could split the cost with the jolly Green Giant. I bet he sure could use it. I bet he's making a mess out of his valley. Ho ho ho!

I found our next news item in the Weekly World News, a leading supermarket tabloid, and it is just so wonderful that I will reprint it verbatim:

"The Coca-Cola Company has changed the name of its soft drink in China after discovering the words mean 'bite the wax tadpole' in Chinese."

I called Coca-Cola, and a woman named Darlene confirmed this item. She also said the company decided to go with a different name over in China, which I think is crazy. "Bite the Wax Tadpole" is the best name I ever heard for a soft drink. Think of the commercials:

(The scene opens uP with a boy in a Little League uniform, looking very sad. His father walks up.)

FATHER: What's the matter, Son? SON: (bursting into tears): Oh Dad, I struck out and lost the big game.

(Sobs.) FATHER (putting his arm around the boy's shoulders): Hey! Forget it! Let's have a nice cold

can of Bite the Wax Tadpole! SON: And then I murdered a policeman.

The Rules

Recently I read this news item stating that the U.S. Senate Finance Committee had printed up 4,500 copies of a 452-page document with every single word crossed out. The Senate Finance Committee did this on purpose. It wasn't the kind of situation where they got the document back from the printer and said: "Hey, Every single word in this document is crossed out! We're going to fire the zitbrain responsible for this!" No. A 452-page document with all the words crossed out was exactly what the Senate Finance Committee wanted.

This news item intrigued me. I said to myself: There has to be a logical explanation for this. So I called Washington, D.C., and over the course of an afternoon I spoke to, I don't know, maybe 15 or 20 people, and sure enough it turned out there was an extremely logical explanation: The Senate Finance Committee was following the Rules. As well it should. You have to have rules. This is true in government just as much as in sports. Think what professional baseball would be like if the pitcher could just throw the ball right at the batter whenever he felt like it, or the batter could turn around after a called third strike and try to whomp a major cavity in the umpire's skull. It would be great. I'd buy season tickets. But you can't have that kind of behavior in your government. This is why, back when we bombed Libya, the Reagan administration made such a large point of the fact that we were not trying to kill Moammar Khadafy. I think most of us average citizens had assumed, since the administration had been going around announcing that it had absolute proof that Khadafy was an international baby-murdering scumball, that the whole point of the raid was to kill him, and although we didn't want to see innocent persons hurt, we certainly wouldn't have minded if say a half dozen fatal bombs had detonated inside Moammar's personal tent.

So I, for one, was quite surprised when right after the raid, President Reagan himself said, and this is a direct quote: "We weren't out to kill anybody." My immediate reaction, when I read this statement, was to assume that this was another of those unfortunate instances where the president's advisers, caught up in the excitement of planning a major military operation, had forgotten to advise the president about it. But then other top administration officials started saying the same thing, that we weren't trying to kill anybody, and specifically we weren't trying to kill Khadafy. you following this? We announced we have proof the guy is a murderer; we announce that we are by God going to Do Something about it; we have large military airplanes fly over there and drop bombs all over his immediate vicinity; but we weren't trying to kill him. You want to know why? I'll tell you why: The Rules.

That's right. It turns out that we have this law, signed in 1976 by Gerald Ford, who coincidentally also pardoned Richard M. Nixon, under which it is illegal for our government to assassinate foreign leaders. So we can't just hire a couple of experienced persons named Vito for 100 grand to sneak over there one night in dark clothing and fill up Moammar's various breathing apertures with plumber's putty. No, that would be breaking a Rule. So what we do is spend several hundred million dollars to crank up the entire Sixth Fleet and have planes fly over from as far away as England, not to mention that we lose a couple of airmen, to achieve the purpose of not killing Moammar Khadafy. We did kill various other random Libyans, but that is OK, under the Rules. Gerald Ford signed nothing to protect them.

OK? Everybody understand the point here? The point is: You have to follow the Rules. Without Rules,

you would have anarchy.

And that is exactly why the Senate Finance Committee had to print up 4,500 copies of a 452-page document with every single word crossed out. What this document was, originally, was the tax-reform bill passed by the House of Representatives. It seemed the Senate Finance Committee didn't like it, so they wrote a whole new bill, with all different words. Their new bill is 1,489 pages long. Also they wrote another 1,124 pages to explain how it works. (Sounds like our new reformed tax system is going to be mighty simple, all right! I can't wait!)

OK So the Finance Committee had 2,613 pages worth of tax reform to print up, but that was not all. They also printed the entire House bill, the one they rejected, with all the words crossed out to show where they disagreed with it. According to the 15 or 20 people I talked to on the phone, the committee had to do this. I asked them if maybe it wouldn't have been more economical, and just as informative, if the Finance Committee had stuck a note on the front of their bill saying something like: "We thought the whole House Bill was pig doots and we chucked it," but the 15 or 20 people assured me that, no, this was not possible, under the Rules. I was skeptical at first, but I heard this same explanation over and over, all afternoon, from people who all sounded like very bright college graduates, so that by the end of the day I was beginning to think that, yes, of course, it made perfect sense to print 4,500 copies of a document with every word crossed out. I felt like a fool for even bothering to think about it.

By the way: This document is for sale. This is the truth. You can actually buy a document that your government has used your tax money to print up with all the words crossed out. It's called HR 3838 As Reported in the Senate, Part 1.

The Government Printing Office is selling it for—I swear—\$17. So far they have sold 1,800 copies. And I don't even want to know who is buying them. I am sure that whoever they are, they're going to claim every single cent they spent on these documents as a tax deduction. But I don't care. I'm through asking questions.

I also don't want to know how much we spend each year for the upkeep on Richard M. Nixon.

The \$8.95 Tax Plan

I'd like to take just a moment here to discuss my tax plan, which I call the You Pay Only \$8.95 Tax Plan, because the way this particular plan works, you would pay only \$8.95 in taxes. There would be no deductions, but you would still be permitted to cheat.

I imagine many of you have questions about the details of this plan, so I'll try to answer them here in the informative question-and-answer format:

Q. How much money will your tax plan raise?

A. To answer your question, I punched some figures into my personal home computer, using the following "Basic" computer language program:

ME: HOW MUCH WOULD WE RAISE IF EVERYBODY PAID \$8.95 IN TAXES? ROUGHLY.
COMPUTER: SYNTAX ERROR. ME: NO, A SYNTAX ERROR WOULD BE "ME HIT COMPUTER
IN SCREEN WITH BIG ROCK." COMPUTER: ROUGHLY \$2 BILLION. ME: THANK YOU.

Q. But the federal government wishes to spend \$830 billion this year. Where will the other \$828 billion come from?

A. It would come from people who elect to purchase the new American Express Platinum Card, which

costs \$250, making it even more prestigious than the Gold Card, which is of course much more prestigious than the Green Card, which is advertised to lowlife scum like yourself on television. According to the American Express brochure, the new Platinum Card is

“beyond the aspirations and reach of all but a few of our Cardmembers,” and “sets its possessor on a new plateau of recognition.” Under my plan, people who buy the Platinum Card would be taxed \$500 million each, and if they complained the slightest little bit they would be thrown into federal prisons so lonely that inmates pay spiders for sex.

Q. What about nuns?

A. Nuns would be taxed at a reduced rate of \$5.95, because they do so little damage to our nation's crumbling infrastructure. For example, you have probably noticed that they drive really slow. This makes quite a difference, as the following statistical analysis shows:

ME: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE DAMAGE TO THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM IS CAUSED

BY NUNS? COMPUTER: WHAT? ME: PERHAPS THIS HOT SOLDERING IRON WILL REFRESH YOUR MEMORY. COMPUTER: A VERY SMALL PERCENTAGE.

Q. What about Mark Goodson and Bill Todman?

A. Who?

Q. The highly successful game-show producers. How would they be affected by your new tax plan?

A. They would have their bowels ripped out by wolves. q. Good. In the cartoon series “Tom and Jerry,” which one is Tom?

A. Well, I say it's the cat. My four-year-old son says it's the mouse, but he also says dinosaurs could talk.

COMPUTER: IT'S DEFINITELY THE CAT, AS N “TOM CAT.”

A. Yes, that's what I say, but my son claims he knows of mice named Tom.

COMPUTER: HA HA! WHAT A CRETIN.

Q. What are the steps involved in getting this tax plan passed by Congress?

A. Well, first it has to be formally introduced as a bill on “Meet the Press”; then various congressional committees and subcommittees have to go to Aruba with their spouses for several weeks to see if there are any similar tax plans operating in the Caribbean; then interested groups such as the American Eggplant Council have to modify it so that members of the eggplant industry are exempt from paying any taxes ever and get flown free wherever they want on Air Force jets; then Senator Jesse Helms has to attach an amendment making it legal, during the months of May and June, to shoot homosexuals for sport, except of course for homosexual tobacco farmers; then the bill has to be signed by President Reagan; then the Supreme Court has to check it to make sure he didn't forget and sign

“Best Wishes, Ron” again.

Q. Dave, the You Pay Only \$8.95 Tax Plan makes a lot of sense to me. How can I let my Congressperson know how I feel on this issue?

A. The easiest way is to simply steal into his bedroom in the dead of night and stand over his sleeping form until he senses your presence and wakes up, then express your views clearly.

Q. Fine.

A. Be sure to use sweeping arm gestures.

Mutant Fleas Terrorize Midwest

I was going to write about how the president's revolutionary new tax plan will affect you, but it occurred to me that I really don't care how the president's revolutionary new tax plan will affect you. So instead I'm going to write about the giant vampire fleas that are on this pet-killing rampage in the Midwest.

You probably read about these fleas recently in the Sun, a weekly supermarket newspaper with a circulation of 18 trillion. According to the Sun article, what happened was that the American farmer, all the while we were feeling sorry for him, was deluging the soil with herbicides, despite the known scientific fact that chemicals cause insects to mutate and become enormous, as has been documented in countless Japanese movies. So the result is that the Midwest is now infested with giant mutant fleas that, according to the Sun, "are themselves as large as the small dogs they kill, draining them dry of life fluids in as little as two minutes." The Sun even printed an actual artist's depiction of a dog being attacked by a flea the size of Sylvester Stallone.

Of course you don't believe a word of it. You think publications like the Sun make everything up. I used to think that, too, before I checked into a story the Sun published a few months ago headlined "GIANT FLYING CAT TERRIFIES STATES." Remember? The article that featured the actual artist's depiction of an enormous cat? Flying? With wings? Well, I did some checking, and you will be interested to learn that every single word in the headline is true except for "GIANT," "FLYING," "TERRIFIES," AND "STATES." It turns out that some people in Harrington, Delaware, have indeed seen a largish cat. The local editor says he thinks it's an escaped exotic pet, because it has a collar and has been declawed. He said it does not have any actual wings per se, but it jumps pretty well, especially considering that, to judge from its tracks, it has only three legs. They think it eats birds.

But the point is that the central thrust of the Sun headline ("CAT") was right on target, which gives us every reason to accept the giant-mutant-flea article at face value. Nevertheless, I thought I should check it out, so I called the Midwest, which is in Iowa, and talked with Donald Lewis, extension entomologist for Iowa State University. He said: "I haven't heard anything even remotely similar to that. We do have periodic flea outbreaks, but each flea is still small." Naturally, this made me suspicious, so I called Lysie Waters of the University of Iowa, who said: "I haven't heard anything about that. And I definitely would have heard about giant fleas."

And that was all the proof I needed. Because when two men from separate universities that are miles apart and have completely different nicknames ("Cyclones" vs. "Hawkeyes") used almost exactly the same words—"I haven't heard anything"—to deny having heard anything, then you don't have to be a seasoned journalist such as myself to know they are covering up a giant mutant flea rampage. My guess is they don't want to scare off the seven or eight tourists who flock to the Midwest each summer looking for directions.

How serious is this problem? To help answer that question, the Sun has published a direct quotation from a "Cornbelt sheriff" who, as you can well imagine, asked not to be identified. He states that these giant fleas "are almost impossible to catch" because "they can jump 50 times their own height without warning."

The Cornbelt sheriff does not specify why he would wish to catch the giant mutant flea or what kind of warning he feels the flea should give. ("Stand back! I am about to jump 50 times my own height!") But

he does point out that once the fleas have eaten all the smaller animals in the Midwest, they “will have to go somewhere else to eat the larger livestock, chicken ranches, city streets, and homes.”

“Little children will be completely at their mercy,” he notes.

I have mixed feelings about all this. On the one hand, I have never liked small dogs. There are these two in particular that live near me, both about the size of the wads of cotton they put in aspirin bottles to keep you from getting at the aspirin. They’re always yapping at me when I go by, and quite frankly the only thing I would enjoy more than watching them have all their life fluids sucked out by a giant mutant flea would be watching this happen in slow motion. But I draw the line at larger livestock, chicken ranches, and most little children.

Step One, of course, is to send Vice President Bush out there to the Midwest to frown at the affected area from a federal helicopter. Step Two is to develop a plan. I think we should try an approach that has been used on other insect pests in the past, namely: You get a hold of a whole bunch of the males, sterilize them, and drop them from airplanes onto the affected area, where they mate with the females, who don’t get pregnant, and there you are.

Of course, we have to solve some technical problems first. We need to figure out a way to sterilize giant mutant fleas. My guess is this job will call for highly paid personnel with soothing voices and tremendous manual dexterity. Also, we will need some kind of special parachute system, because otherwise we’re going to have giant, federally neutered fleas crashing through the roofs of cornbelt dwellings, thus further depressing the American farmer. Of course, all of this will cost money, which fortunately is the very thing the government will continue to relieve you of in large amounts under the president’s revolutionary new tax plan.

Booked To Death

I’m on a book tour. I’m going on radio and TV shows, being a Guest, selling a book. I’ve been on this tour two, maybe three weeks now. Maybe 10

weeks. Hard to tell. Been in a lot of time zones. Been on a lot of planes. Had a lot of complimentary honey-roasted peanuts whapped onto my tray table by hostile flight attendants. “Would you care for some peanuts, sir?” WHAP. Like that. The flight attendants hate us passengers, because we’re surly to them because our flight is delayed. Our flight is always delayed. The Russians will never be able to get their missiles through the dense protective layer of delayed flights circling over the United States in complex, puke-inducing holding patterns.

Our flight is also always very crowded. This is because air fares are now assigned by a machine called the Random Air Fare Generator, which is programmed to ensure that on any given flight (1) no two people will pay the same fare, and (2) everybody else will pay less than you. People are flying across the country for less than you paid for your six-week-old corn muffin at the airport snack bar. Anybody can afford to fly these days. You see Frequent Flyers with bare feet and live carry-on chickens.

And so the planes are crowded and noisy and late, and everybody hates everybody. If armed terrorists had tried to hijack any of the flights I’ve been on lately, we passengers would have swiftly beaten them to death with those hard rolls you get with your in-flight meal. Funny, isn’t it? The airlines go to all that trouble to keep you from taking a gun on board, then they just hand you a dinner roll you could kill a musk ox with.

Me, I eat the roll. Got to eat. Got to keep my strength up, on the book tour, so I can be perky when I get interviewed by the cheerful talk-show host. You want to sound as perky and enthusiastic as possible, on a book tour, so your listening audience won't suspect that you really, deep down inside, don't want to talk about your book ever ever ever again. You have come to hate your book. Back at the beginning, you kind of liked it, but now you think of it as a large repulsive insect that cheerful hosts keep hauling out and sticking in your face and asking you to pet.

But you do it, because the alternative is gainful employment. You put on your perky face, and you chat with the host about why you wrote the book. Why you wrote it, of course, is money. I'm very up front about this. "Buy my book," I always advise the listening audience. "Or just send me some money in a box."

I've had some fun times, on my various book tours. The most fun was when I was promoting a book about do-it-yourself home repair. This book was, of course, totally worthless, not a single fact in it, but I ended up on a whole bunch Of radio shows where the hosts, who had not had time to look at the book personally, thought I had written a real book about home repair. So the interviews went like this:

HOST: Dave, what's the best place to add insulation?

ME: Bob, I recommend the driveway.

HOST: Ha ha! Seriously, Dave.

ME: I am serious, Bob.

HOST: My guest has been Dave Barry.

I have also been on some very interesting TV shows. I was on a show in Cleveland where the other guests were a sex therapist and a Swedish gynecologist, who were supposed to have a sensitive discussion about the Male Perspective on sexuality with an all-male audience that had been bused in especially for the show. it turned out, however, that there was also beer on the bus, so the Male Perspective on sexuality consisted almost entirely of hooting and snickering. Somebody would ask the sex-therapist where the "G-spot" was, and she'd start to answer, and somebody in the back would yell: "It's in Germany!" Then there would be a violent eruption of hoots and snickers and we'd break for a commercial.

Recently, in Boston, I was on a show where the other two guests were—this is true—a police officer who explained how to avoid getting your purse snatched, and a woman named "Chesty Morgan" who once served in the Israeli army and currently dances topless and has the largest natural bosom in the world. She said she wears a size double-P bra. She has it made specially in Waco, Texas. She has a very interesting and tragic life story, and I wouldn't be surprised if, in the near future, she comes out with a book.

Hot Books And Hot Coals

Time now for the annual literary survey and firewalking report:

First, I am pleased to report that millions of units of new literature will soon be arriving at bookstores near you. I know this because I recently went to San Francisco to attend the American Booksellers Association's annual convention, at which all the big publishing companies reveal their fall literary lines. And on hand were a number of top authors such as Mister T, who was there to stress to the young people of America that they should read a lot of books or he will break all the bones in their faces; and

Mary Lou Retton, who discussed a new book she has written about (get ready!) physical fitness. This is certainly a topic we need a lot more books on, because at present we have only enough fitness books to cover the Midwest to a depth of 60,000 feet.

Some other exciting book concepts you can look forward to seeing this fall include:

—A great many books telling you how to become so extremely successful in business, so totally excellent, that one day, during a budget meeting, you just vanish in a blinding flash of total managerial perfection, and the next thing you know you are on a distant misty mountain top wearing a white robe and talking about motivation with Lee Iacocca; —Biographies of two of the three Stooges; —A book called *How to Find a Husband in 30 Days (Get Ready ... Get Set ... Get Married!)*, which is a terrific literary concept, the only problem being that it is written by the same person who wrote the best-selling *Thin Thighs in 30 Days*, which also seemed like a terrific concept except that it did not work, in the sense that if you glance around with your eyes angled slightly downward you will note that the general population continues to have thighs the size of research submarines.

And here is a major piece of literary excitement for you; Parker Brothers has unveiled a new group of cute licensed characters for children. This is the one thing we need even more than we need another fitness book. These licensed characters are called “The Hugga Bunch,” and I am pleased to report that they are just about the most lovable little wads of cuteness to mince down the pike since Rainbow Brite. You parents of preschool children are definitely going to hear a lot of high-pitched whining about these exciting characters.

Which brings us to the firewalking portion of our report. One of the authors at the convention was a person named Tolly Burkan, who is one of the top, if not the top firewalker in the United States. For the benefit of those of you who do not watch “Donahue,” I should explain that firewalking is a very important new emerging growth trend where people walk on hot coals in bare feet. You will never in a million jillion years guess what state this concept has gained great popularity in: California(!). Out in California, you can pay people money, and they let you walk on their hot coals.

Besides doing firewalking seminars, Tolly Burkan has produced various cassette tapes and books, including his hardcover book *Dying to Live*, in which he explains how he used to be really messed up and try to kill himself all the time, but now he is all straightened out and goes around encouraging people to walk barefoot on hot coals. Also he supervises fasting. According to a brochure I got at his firewalking demonstration, you pay him \$35 a day, in return for which you get not to eat under his personal supervision. Also for \$500 he will whack you in both kneecaps with a ball-peen hammer.

Ha ha! just kidding! I think!

The firewalking demonstration took place at a parking lot near the convention hall, and there were maybe a hundred of us on hand to watch. Tolly, who had a wireless microphone and who has that extremely mellow California-spiritual-leader style of speech similar to what You would get if you gave Mister Rogers a horse tranquilizer, explained the basic theory of firewalking, which as I understand it is that if you really believe you can do something, then by golly you can just do it, even if it seems impossible. I happen to agree with this theory. I think it explains, for example, how large heavy commercial airplanes get off the ground despite the fact that they are clearly too heavy to fly, especially when their beverage carts are fully loaded.

So anyway, at the firewalking demonstration, Tolly raked out a six-foot-long bed of very hot coals from a bed of cedar and oak logs (he has also walked on mesquite) and taught the onlookers a little chant they were supposed to chant when the walkers walked across the coals. This being San Francisco, they

chanted it. In New York, they would have stolen his wireless microphone. Then Tolly brought on some of his veteran walkers, who each took a couple of quick steps across the coals the way you would step if you were walking on some very hot coals. Then Tolly walked on the coals a couple of times for a newspaper photographer, including once when he pretended that while he was walking he was reading his book, which by the way is for sale.

These people actually do walk across hot coals. It is quite impressive. To find something comparable in my experience I have to go back to when I was eight years old, and Charles Ringwald ate a worm, only he did it without any assistance in the form of chanting. So if you're looking for a way to find total happiness in your life, I urge you to walk on hot coals as soon as possible, provided of course that you have taken a seminar run by a responsible professional.

Also, Charles Ringwald, if you're out there, please get in touch with me as soon as possible, because I have a terrific idea for a book.

The Hair Apparent

I have a letter here from Mrs. Belle Ehrlich, of San Jose, California, who feels I should get a new hairdo. To quote her directly: "I enjoy reading most of your columns ... but your hairdo in your photo sure looks DATED and NOT at all flattering or becoming, to say the least. If you are still sporting that awful hairdo, I suggest you go to a good hair stylist to give you a new and better hairdo. I hope you don't mind my criticism, it's nothing personal just a suggestion."

Mind? Ha ha! MIND? Of course not, Mrs. Belle Ehrlich of San Jose! As a journalist who seeks to inform his readers about topics of vital concern to the nation and the world, I welcome insulting remarks about my hair!

OK, perhaps I am a bit sensitive about my hair. I have been sensitive about my hair since second grade, when the Kissing Girls first swung into action. You probably had Kissing Girls at your elementary school too: they roamed the playground, chasing after selected boys and trying to kiss them. We boys carried on as though we would have preferred to undergo the Red-Ants-Eat-Your-Eyelids-Off Torture than get kissed, but of course we wanted desperately to be selected. And I almost never was. The boys who were selected had wavy hair. Wavy hair was big back then, and I did not have it. I had straight hair, and it did not help that my father cut it.

You should know that my father was a fine, decent, and sensitive man, but unfortunately he had no more fashion awareness than a baked potato. His idea of really el snazzo dressing was to wear a suit jacket and suit pants that both originated as part of the same suit. He would have worn the same tie to work for 42 consecutive years if my mother had let him. So, the way he would cut my hair is, he'd put me on a stool, and he'd start cutting hair off one side of my head with the electric clippers, then he'd walk around me and attempt, relying on memory, to make the other side of my head look similar. Which, of course, he could never quite do, so he would head back around to take a stab at Side One again, and he'd keep this up for some time, and all I can say is, thank heavens they had a little plastic guard on the electric clippers so that you couldn't make the hair any shorter than a quarter-inch, because otherwise my father, with the best of intentions, trying to even me up, would have started shaving off slices of actual tissue until eventually I would have been able to turn my head sideways and stick it through a mail slot. As it was, in photographs taken back then, I look like an extremely young Marine, or

some kind of radiation victim.

It also did not help that in third grade I became the first kid in the class to get glasses, and we are talking serious 1950s horn rims of the style that when you put them on a third-grade child, especially one with a comical haircut, you get a Mister Peepers effect such that everybody assumes the child must be a Goody-Two-Shoes Teacher's Pet science-oriented little dweeb. And it also did not help that I was a late developer, pubertywise. I was ready for puberty. All of us boys were. We wanted to catch up to the girls, who about two years earlier had very suddenly, in fact I think it was all on the same day, shown up at school a foot taller than us and with bosoms and God knows what else. So I was definitely looking forward to puberty as the Dawn of a New Era in the looks department, and you can just imagine how betrayed I felt when it started happening to the other boys, even boys whom I had considered my friends, well before it happened to me. They got ahead of me then, and sometimes I think I never really caught up. I am 38 years old now, and I have yet to develop hair on my arms. Isn't that supposed to happen, in puberty? I see men much younger than myself, with hairy arms, and I think: Does this mean I'm not done with puberty yet?

I realize I sound insecure here, but if you really wanted to see insecure, you should have seen me in eighth grade. I was a mess. That was why I developed a sense of humor. I needed something to do at parties. The other boys, the boys who had wavy hair and reasonable hormone-activity levels, would be necking with girls, and I would be over by the record player, a short radiation victim in horn-rimmed spectacles, playing 45s and making jokes to entertain the 10-year-old brother of whoever was holding the party. Now that I'm grown up, I keep reading magazine articles about these surveys where they ask you women what you really want most in a man, and you always say: A Sense of Humor. And I think to myself: Right. Sure. Great. Now you want a sense of humor. But back in the eighth grade, back when it really mattered, what you wanted was puberty.

And I am not even going to mention here that for several years my hands were covered with warts.

So anyway, Mrs. Belle Ehrlich of San Jose, what I'm trying to say here is: Thanks, thanks a million for taking the time to drop me a note informing me that my hair looks awful. Because now I'm grown up (except in terms of arm hair) and have contact lenses, and I have finally come to think of myself as very nearly average in appearance, I can handle this kind of helpful criticism, and I will definitely see if I can't find a good hair stylist. This is assuming that I ever leave my bedroom again.

TV Or Not TV

The turning point, in terms of my giving in to the concept of being a Television Personality, was when I let them put the styling mousse on my hair. Hair has always been my dividing line between television personalities and us newspaper guys. We newspaper guys generally have hair that looks like we trim it by burning the ends with Bic lighters. We like to stand around and snicker at the TV guys, whose hair all goes in the same direction and looks as though it's full-bodied and soft, but which in fact has been permeated with hardened petrochemical substances to the point where it could deflect small-caliber bullets. We newspaper guys think these substances have actually penetrated the skulls and attacked the brain cells of the TV guys, which we believe explains why their concept of a really major journalistic achievement is to interview Mr. T.

So I need to explain how I became a Television Personality. A while back, a public-television station

asked me to be the host of a new TV series they want to start for parents of young children, and I said, sure, what the heck. I remember saying, "Sounds like fun." And thus I became a talent. That's what TV people call you if you go in front of the camera: a "talent." They call you that right to your face. Only after a while you realize they don't mean that you have any actual talent. In fact, it's sort of an insult. In the TV business, "talent" means "not the camera, lighting, or sound people, all of whom will do exactly what they're supposed to do every single time, but the bonehead with the pancake makeup who will make us all stay in the studio for two extra hours because he cannot remember that he is supposed to say 'See you next time' instead of 'See you next week.'" It reminds me of the way people in the computer industry use the word "user," which to them means "idiot."

When you are a TV talent, you are meat. People are always straightening your collar, smearing things on your face, and talking about you in the third person, saying things like: "What if we had him sitting down?" and "Can we make his face look less round?" and "Can we do anything about his nose?" This is how my hair came to contain several vats of styling mousse, which is this gunk that looks like shaving cream and which you can just tell was invented by a French hair professional whom, if you met him, you would want to punch directly in the mouth. The TV people felt it made me look older. I felt it made me look like a water bed salesman, but hey, I'm just a talent.

Still, I thought I'd be all right, once we got into the studio. What I pictured was, I would saunter in front of the camera, and say something like, "Hi! Welcome to our show! Here's an expert psychological authority to tell you what it means when your child puts the cat in the Cuisinart! And sets it on 'mince'!" Then I would just sit back and listen to the expert, nodding my head and frowning with concern from time to time. And every now and then I might say something spontaneous and riotously funny.

As it turns out, nothing happens spontaneously in a television studio. Before anything can happen, they have to spend several hours shining extremely bright lights on it from different angles, then they have to stand around frowning at it, then they have to smear it and dust it with various substances to get it to stop the glare from those bright lights that they are shining on it, and then they have to decide that it has to be moved to a completely different place so they can start all over.

Once they get all set up, once they're satisfied that the lights are as bright and as hot as they can possibly get them, it's time for the talent to come in and make a fool out of itself. On a typical day, I would have to do something like walk up to a table, lean on it casually, say some witty remarks to one camera, turn to the right and say some more witty remarks to another camera, and walk off. This sounds very easy, right? Well, here's what would happen. I would do my little performance, and there would be a lengthy pause while the director and the producer and the executive producer and all the assistant producers back in the control room discussed, out of my hearing, what I had done wrong.

Now I can take criticism. I'm a writer and my editor is always very direct with me. "Dave, this column bites the big one," is the kind of thing he'll say by way of criticism. And I can handle it. But in the TV world, they never talk to you like that. They talk to you as though you're a small child, and they're not sure whether you're just emotionally unbalanced or actually retarded. They take tremendous pains not to hurt your feelings. First of all, they always tell you it was great.

"That was great, Dave. We're going to try it again, with just a little more energy, OK? Also, when you walk in, try not to shuffle your feet, OK? Also, When you turn right, dip your eyes a bit, then come up to the next camera, because otherwise it looks odd, OK? Also, don't bob your head so much, OK And try not to smack your lips, OK? Also, remember you're supposed to say next time, not next week, OK? So

just try to be natural, and have some fun with it, OK? I think we're almost there."

So I had to do everything a great many times, and of course all my jokes, which I thought were absolute killers when I wrote them in the privacy of my home, soon seemed, in this studio where I was telling them over and over to camera persons who hadn't even laughed the first time, remarkably stupid, or even the opposite of jokes, anti-humor, somber remarks that you might make to somebody who had just lost his whole family in a boat explosion. But I kept at it, and finally after God knows how many attempts, would come the voice from the control room: "That was perfect, Dave. Let's try it again with a little more energy. Also you forgot to say your name."

The Embarrassing Truth

Have you ever really embarrassed yourself? Don't answer that, stupid. It's a rhetorical question. Of course you've embarrassed yourself. Everybody has. I bet the pope has. If you were to say to the pope: "Your Holy Worshipfulness, I bet you've pulled some blockheaded boners in your day, huh?" he'd smile that warm, knowing, fatherly smile he has, and then he'd wave. He can't hear a word you're saying, up on that balcony. But my point is that if you've ever done anything humiliating, you've probably noticed that your brain never lets you forget it. This is the same brain that never remembers things you should remember. If you were bleeding to death and the emergency-room doctor asked you what blood type you were, you'd say: "I think it's B. Or maybe C. I'm pretty sure it's a letter." But if your doctor asked you to describe the skirt you were wearing when you were doing the Mashed Potatoes in the ninth-grade dance competition in front of 350 people, and your underwear, which had holes in it, fell to your ankles, you'd say, without hesitating for a millisecond, "It was gray felt with a pink flocked poodle."

Your brain cherishes embarrassing memories. It likes to take them out and fondle them. This probably explains a lot of unexplained suicides. A successful man with a nice family and a good career will be out on his patio, cooking hamburgers, seemingly without a care in the world, when his brain, rummaging through its humiliating-incident collection, selects an old favorite, which it replays for a zillionth time, and the man is suddenly so overcome by feelings of shame that he stabs himself in the skull with his barbecue fork. At the funeral, people say how shocking it was, a seemingly happy and well-adjusted person choosing to end it all. They assume he must have had a terrible dark secret involving drugs or organized crime or dressing members of the conch family in flimsy undergarments. Little do they know he was thinking about the time in Social Studies class in 1963 when he discovered a hard-to-reach pimple roughly halfway down his back, and he got to working on it, subtly at first, but with gradually increasing intensity, eventually losing track of where he was, until suddenly he realized the room had become silent, and he looked up, with his arm stuck halfway down the back of his shirt, and he saw that everybody in the class, including the teacher, was watching what he was doing, and he knew they'd give him a cruel nickname that would stick like epoxy cement for the rest of his life, such as when he went to his 45th reunion, even if he had been appointed Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, the instant his classmates saw him, they'd shriek: "Hey look! It's ZIT!"

Everybody has incidents like this. My mother is always reliving the time she lost her car in a shopping-center parking lot, and she was wandering around with several large shopping bags and two small children, looking helpless, and after a while other shoppers took pity on her and offered to help. "It's a

black Chevrolet,” she told them, over and over. And they searched and searched and searched for it. They were extremely nice. They all agreed that it can be darned easy to lose your car in these big parking lots. They had been there for an hour, some of them, searching for this black Chevrolet, and it was getting dark, when my mother remembered that several days earlier we had bought a new car. “I’m sorry!” she told the people, smiling brightly so they would see what a humorous situation this was. “It’s not a black Chevrolet! It’s a yellow Ford!” She kept on smiling as they edged away, keeping their eyes on her.

My own personal brain is forever dredging up the time in 11th grade when I took a girl, a very attractive girl on whom I had a life-threatening crush, to a dance. I was standing in the gym next to her, holding her hand, thinking what a sharp couple we made—Steve Suave and His Gorgeous Date—when one of my friends sidled up to me and observed that, over on the other side, my date was using her spare hand to hold hands with another guy. This was of course a much better-looking guy. This was Paul Newman, only taller.

Several of my friends gathered to watch. I thought: What am I supposed to do here? Hit the guy? That would have been asking for a lifetime of dental problems. He was a varsity football player; I was on the Dance Committee. I also had to rule out hitting my date. The ideal move would have been to spontaneously burst into flames and die. I have read that this sometimes happens to people. But you never get a break like that when you need it.

Finally I turned to my date, dropped her hand, looked her square in the eye, and said: “Um.” just like that: “Um. My brain absolutely loves to remember this. “Way to go, Dave!” it shrieks to me, when I’m stopped at red lights, 23-1/2 years later. Talk about eloquent! My brain can’t get over what a jerk I was. It’s always coming up with much better ideas for things I could have said. I should start writing them down, in case we ever develop time travel. I’d go back to the gym with a whole Rolodex file filled with remarks, and I’d read them to my date over the course of a couple of hours. Wouldn’t she feel awful! Ha ha!

It just occurred to me that she may be out there right now, in our reading audience, in which case I wish to state for the record that I am leading an absolutely wonderful life, and I have been on the Johnny Carson show, and I hope things are equally fine with you.

Twice. I was on Carson twice.

A Million Words

It was time to go have my last words with my father. He was dying, in the bedroom he built, He built our whole house, even dug the foundation himself, with a diaper tied around his head to keep the sweat out of his eyes. He was always working on the house, more than 35 years, and he never did finish it. He was first to admit that he really didn’t know how to build a house.

When I went in to see him, he was lying in the bedroom, listening to the “People’s Court.” I remember when he always would be on those Sunday-morning television talk shows, back in the fifties and sixties. Dr. Barry, they called him. He was a Presbyterian minister, and he worked in inner-city New York. They were always asking him to be on those shows to talk about Harlem and the South Bronx, because back then he was the only white man they could find who seemed to know anything about it. I remember when he was the Quotation of the Day in the New York Times. The Rev. Dr. David W. Barry.

His friends called him Dave. “Is Dave there?” they’d ask, when they called to talk about their husbands or wives or sons or daughters who were acting crazy or drinking too much or running away. Or had died. “Dave,” they’d ask, “what can I do?” They never thought to call anybody but him. He’d sit there and listen, for hours, sometimes. He was always smoking.

The doctor told us he was dying, but we knew anyway. Almost all he said anymore was thank you, when somebody brought him shaved ice, which was mainly what he wanted, at the end. He had stopped putting his dentures in. He had stopped wearing his glasses. I remember when he yanked his glasses off and jumped in the Heyman’s pool to save me.

So I go in for my last words, because I have to go back home, and my mother and I agree I probably won’t see him again. I sit next to him on the bed, hoping he can’t see that I’m crying. “I love you, Dad,” I say. He says: “I love you, too. I’d like some oatmeal.”

So I go back out to the living room, where my mother and my wife and my son are sitting on the sofa, in a line, waiting for the outcome and I say, “He wants some oatmeal.” I am laughing and crying about this. My mother thinks maybe I should go back in and try to have a more meaningful last talk, but I don’t.

Driving home, I’m glad I didn’t. I think: He and I have been talking ever since I learned how. A million words. All of them final, now. I don’t need to make him give me any more, like souvenirs. I think: Let me not define his death on my terms. Let him have his oatmeal. I can hardly see the road.

Subhumanize Your Living Room

Today we’re going to talk about redecorating your home. My guess is you’re unhappy with your current decor, especially if you have small children around, the result being that all of your furniture and carpeting, no matter what the original color scheme, is now the color of mixed fruit juice.

Fortunately for you, home decor is an area I happen to know a great deal about, as I have done my own decorating, without professional assistance, ever since my college days, when I shared a dormitory suite with several other design-conscious young men. Our watchword, decorwise, was “functionality.” For the floor covering in our bedrooms, we chose the comfortable, carefree casualness of unlaundered jockey shorts. By the end of a semester, there would be six, maybe seven hundred pairs of shorts per bedroom, forming a pulsating, bed-high mound.

For our living-room-wall treatment we opted for a very basic, very practical, and very functional decorating concept called “old college dormitory paint, the color of the substance you might expect to see oozing from an improperly treated wound.” We highlighted this with an interesting textural effect that you can obtain by having a Halloween party and throwing wads of orange and black crepe paper soaked in beer up against the wall and then leaving it there for a couple of months to harden and trying to scrape it off with the edge of an economics text book.

But our pice de resistance (French, meaning “piece of resistance”) was our living-room furniture, which was a two-piece grouping consisting of:

- An orange emergency light that flashed when you plugged it in.
- A “Two-Man Submarine which we purchased for only \$9.95 via an advertisement in a Spider-Man comic book. It was made of sturdy cardboard and measured five feet long when fully assembled. It was not only very attractive but also quite functional inasmuch as you could sit inside it and pretend you

were actually deep beneath the ocean surface, driving a real submarine made of sturdy cardboard.

As you might imagine, the overall effect created by these design elements was quite impressive, especially when we had dates and we really spruced up the place. We'd stack the deceased pizza boxes in the corner, and we'd create A romantic atmosphere by spraying a couple of cans of Right-Guard brand deodorant on the jockey-short mounds, and believe me it was a real treat to see the look on the face of a date as she entered our suite for the first time and, seeing the striking visual effect created by the orange emergency light flashing on the "Two-Man Submarine," she realized what a suave kind of college man she was having a date with.

But enough about my qualifications. Let's talk about your own home. Clearly you need new furniture. To select exactly what you want, you need to have some Creative Decorating Ideas, which you get by purchasing about \$65

worth of glossy magazines with names like Unaffordable Home Design. Inside these magazines will be exquisite color photographs of the most wondrously perfect, profoundly clean rooms anybody has ever seen, rooms where even the air molecules are arranged in attractive patterns. How, you ask yourself, can rooms look like this? Where are the hand smudges? Where is the dark spot on the carpet where the dog threw up the unidentified reptile? And how come there are never any people in these photographs?

The answer is: These rooms are only four inches high. The magazines have them built by skilled craftsmen solely for the purpose of making your home look, by comparison, like a Roach Motel. In fact, occasionally a magazine will slip up, and you'll see through the window of what is allegedly a rich person's living room, what appears to be a 675-pound thumb.

OK! Now that you have your Creative Decorating Ideas, You get a sheet of graph paper, and you make an elaborate scale drawing of your existing floor plan, showing exactly to the inch where you would put all your nice new furniture, if you were a major cocaine dealer and could afford nice new furniture. Unfortunately the furniture you can afford comes from Places with names like Big Stu's World of Taste and is made of compressed bran flakes. So, frankly, if I were you, I'd spread my glossy interior-design magazines around so they covered as much of my current decor as possible.

The Lure Of The Wild

The first time I taught my son, Robert, how to fish was when he was two. I did it the old-fashioned way: I took him to the K-Mart with Uncle Joe, our old friend and lawyer, to pick out a Complete Fishing Outfit for \$12.97. Then we went to a pond, where Robert sat in the weeds and put pond muck in his hair while Uncle Joe and I tried to bait the hook with a living breathing thinking feeling caring earthworm. This is a very difficult thing emotionally, and not just for the earthworm. It would be different if worms gave you some reason to feel hostile toward them, such as they had little faces that looked like Geraldo Rivera. That would be no problem, "Let's go bait some worms purely for amusement," you would frequently hear me call out.

But the way worms are now, they make it very hard, writhing around and conveying, by means of body language and worm guts squirting out, the concept of "Please please oh PLEASE Mr. Human Being don't stick this hook into me." For my money, worms are far better at this kind of nonverbal communication than those people called "mimes," who paint their faces all white and repeatedly attempt

to entertain you at street festivals, although to be absolutely certain, we would have to run an experiment wherein we baited a hook with a live mime. (All those in favor of doing this, raise your hands. I thought so!)

I think it would be more humane if we just forgot about bait altogether and shot the fish directly with guns, the way we do with rabbits and deer. I saw Roy Scheider take this approach to angling in the movie *Jaws* I, and he got himself a real prize trophy shark using a rifle for a weapon and Richard Dreyfuss for bait. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a violation of our outmoded game laws, so Roy had to throw the shark back, which turned out to be highly fatal to several dozen teenagers and a helicopter in *Jaws* II. This is a totally unnecessary outrage, if you ask me, especially when you consider that it is not illegal to catch deer with rod and reel in most states. (Editor's Note: He's raving. Pay no attention.)

Nevertheless, Robert and Uncle Joe and I did manage to land a fish, the kind veteran anglers call a "bluegill." It was three to four ounces of well-contained fury, and it fought like a frozen bagel. Many times at airport newsstands I have examined sportsperson-oriented magazines with names like *Tackle 'n' Bait*, and I have noted that the covers often feature pictures of bold sportspersons struggling to land extremely muscular, violent-looking fish the size of guest bathrooms, whose expressions say: "Yes, you had better kill me, Mr. Sportsperson, because otherwise I will evolve legs and lungs and talons and fangs and come to your suburban home and wreck your riding mower and have my way with your women hahahahahaha."

But the fish we caught was a cute fish, a fish that would star in a Walt Disney animated cartoon feature called *Billy Bluegill Learns the True Meaning of Christmas*. Robert looked at it, then he looked at Uncle Joe and me with a look of great upsettedness in his two-year-old eyes and we realized, being responsible grown-ups, that it was time to lie.

"The fish doesn't feel it!" we announced brightly, almost in unison. "You see this sharp barbed metal hook going right through his lip?! It doesn't hurt a bit! Ha ha!" Meanwhile Billy the Bluegill was of course edging out the worm for the Academy Award for Best Performance by a Cold-Blooded Animal Gasping and Writhing Around to Indicate Extreme pain. And so Uncle Joe, being an attorney, got Billy off the hook (get it?) and we put him (Billy) back into the pond.

After that Robert and I didn't go fishing for several years, until last Christmas, when we went up to New York and Uncle Phil—who is not our attorney but Robert affectionately calls him "uncle" anyway because he is my brother—bought Robert another fishing rod, meaning I had to teach him again. Fortunately, there were no worms available, as they had all formed up into characteristic V-shaped patterns and attempted to migrate South, getting as far as the toll booths on the New Jersey Turnpike.

So Robert and I used "lures," which are these comical devices that veteran anglers instinctively buy from catalogs. You would think that, to be effective, lures would have to look like creatures that a fish might actually eat, but, in fact, they look like what you would expect to see crawling around on the Planet Zork during periods of intense radioactivity. For example, many lures have propellers, which you rarely see in the Animal Kingdom. In my opinion, the way lures actually work is that the fish see one go by, and they get to laughing so hard and thrashing around that occasionally one of them snags itself on the hook. Back in the Prepuberty Era I used to spend hundreds of hours lure-fishing with my friend Tom Parker and his faithful dog Rip, and the only distinct memory I have of us catching anything besides giant submerged logs was the time Tom was using a lure called a Lazy Ike and it was attacked with stunning ferocity by his faithful dog Rip, resulting in a very depressing situation, veterinarianwise.

So, fortunately Robert and I didn't catch anything the second time I taught him to fish, and I think he's now old enough to remember it clearly and thus never ask me to teach him again. That's the good news. The bad news is, I am sure that one of these days he's going to want to have a "Catch."

Earning A Collie Degree

We have a new dog, which means we're going through this phase where we spend a lot of time crouching and stroking and going "Yessss! That's a GOOD girl!" and otherwise practically awarding a Nobel Prize to her for achievements such as not pooping on the rug.

Her name is Earnest, which I realize is not a traditional girl's name, but it describes her very well. Most dogs are earnest, which is why most people like them. You can say any fool thing to a dog, and the dog will give you this look that says, "My God, you're RIGHT! I NEVER would have thought of that!" So we come to think of dogs as being understanding and loving and compassionate, and after a while we hardly even notice that they spend the bulk of their free time circling around with other dogs to see which one can sniff the other the most times in the crotch.

We are not sure yet whether Earnest has a working brain. You can't tell, early on, with dogs. When we got our previous dog, Shawna, we thought she was smart as a whip, because she was a pure-bred German shepherd who had this extremely alert look. At first we took this to mean that she was absorbing every tiny detail of her environment with her keen senses and analyzing it with computerlike speed, but it turned out to be her way of expressing the concept: "What?"

Shawna would be sitting in our yard, looking very sharp, and a squirrel would scurry right past her, a squirrel whose presence was instantly detected by normal, neighborhood dogs hundreds of yards away, causing them to bark rigorously, and also by us humans, causing us to yell helpfully: "Look! Shawna! A squirrel!!" And after a few seconds of delay, during which her nervous system would send the message via parcel post from her ears to her brain that something was going on, Shawna would turn in the exact opposite direction from whichever way the squirrel was, adopt a pose of great canine readiness, and go: "What?"

The only dog I ever met that was dumber than Shawna belongs to my editor. This dog, a collie named Augie, also looks smart, if you grew up watching "Lassie." Lassie looked brilliant, in part because the farm family she lived with was made up of idiots. Remember? One of them was always getting pinned under the tractor, and Lassie was always rushing back to the farmhouse to alert the other ones. She'd whimper and tug at their sleeves, and they'd always waste precious minutes saying things like: "Do you think something's wrong? Do you think she wants us to follow her? What is it, girl?" as if this had never happened before, instead of every week. What with all the time these people spent pinned under the tractor, I don't see how they managed to grow any crops whatsoever. They probably got by on federal crop supports, which Lassie filed the applications for.

So anyway I thought Augie, being a collie, would have at least some intelligence, despite the fact that when my editor and I would walk into his house, Augie would not notice us, sometimes for upwards of a half hour. When she finally did notice us, talking and drinking beer, she would bark as though the Manson gang had just burst in, so my editor would have to go over and sort of say, "Look! It's me! The person you have lived with for 10 years!" This would cause Augie's lone functioning brain cell to gradually quiet down and go back to sleep.

But I still thought she was roughly on par with Shawna, IQ-wise, until the night—you may remember the night; it was the longest one we ever had—that I slept on my editor's couch in his living room, which is also where Augie sleeps. Only she doesn't sleep. What she does is, first, she lies down. Then she scratches herself. Then she engages in loud personal hygiene. Then she thinks, "Maybe I can go out!" and she walks across the floor, which is made of a special kind of very hard wood so that when a dog walks on it, it goes TICK TICK TICK TICK at exactly the volume you would use to get maximum benefit from the Chinese Ticking Torture. When Augie gets to the front door, which is of course closed—it is always closed at night; even the domestic insects have learned this by now—she bumps into it with her head—Then she backs up and bumps into it with her head a couple more times, in case there has been some mistake. Then she senses, somehow, that there is a person sleeping on the couch, and she has the most innovative idea she has ever thought of, which is: "Maybe he will let me out!" So she walks over to me and noses me in the face, using the same nose she uses for hygiene, and I say, "Dammit, Augie! Go to sleep!" So she lies down for one minute, which is how long it takes for her brain cell to forget everything that has ever happened to her since she was born. And then she starts again: SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SLURP SLURP SLURP (think) TICK TICK TICK TICK BUMP (think) Bump (think) Bump (think) TICK TICK TICK NOSE "DAMMIT, AUGIE! GO TO SLEEP!" TICK TICK TICK TICK (pause) SCRATCH ...

I don't know yet about Earnest. One day soon I will give her the dog intelligence test, where you show her the ball, then you put the ball under a blanket, and then you see if she can find the ball. Shawna never could find the ball. I doubt Augie could find the blanket. I'm hoping Earnest does better, but I'm not counting my chickens. I am also not looking forward to receiving a lot of violent letters from you dog lovers out there, the ones with the "I (heart) my (breed of dog)" bumper stickers, asking how dare I say dogs are stupid when your dog can add, subtract, land the space shuttle, etc.

So please note, dog lovers: I never said your dog is stupid. I said my dog might be stupid. I know for a fact that she can't be too intelligent, because here I've written a fairly insulting column about her species, and despite the fact that she's lying right at my feet, it hasn't occurred to her to pull the plug on my word proces

Some Thoughts On The Toilet

Both of our household toilets broke recently, on the same day. They work together, toilets. You know those strange sounds your plumbing makes at night?

The ones that worry you much more than, for example, the threat of nuclear war? Those are your toilets, talking to each other. They communicate via plumbing sounds, similar to whales. "It's New Year's Eve," they'll say. "We break tonight."

I happen to know a great deal about toilets, although that was not the original plan. The original plan was for me to become profoundly wealthy by investing in real estate. I had read a book about it, which made the whole process sound as easy as getting insurance offers from Ed McMahon by mail. The trick, according to this book, was that when you purchase your real estate, you never used your own money.

You used other people's money. The way the book described it, you strode into the bank, and you said: "Hi! I'd like to become filthy rich via real estate, but I don't wish to use my own money!" And the bank would say: "Well then! Here! Take some of ours!!"

So I got some partners who also had a sincere interest in becoming rich, and we hatched a plan wherein we would, using other people's money, buy a couple of small apartment buildings, after which we would sit around drinking gin and tonic and amassing great wealth due to Depreciation and Leverage, two characters who appeared often in the real 154-155 real estate book, performing amazing financial feats. They reminded me of Batman and Robin.

So my partners and I went around presenting our proposal to various bankers, and they thought it was the greatest thing they had ever heard. They would set up extra chairs and invite all their banker friends over, and they'd make us go through our proposal again and again, and when we'd get to the part about not using any of our own money, they'd fall over backwards and hurl their loan application forms into the air and laugh until there was spittle all over their vests. They had evidently not read the book.

So eventually we worked out a compromise arrangement whereby my partners and I would each provide our life's savings, and the bank would provide a Closing Ceremony, which is when you go into a little room with unfamiliar lawyers and you sign every piece of paper they have managed to acquire in their lives, including book reports. This is how we came to acquire, as an investment, eight toilets. The Head Toilet, of course, immediately fired off an urgent message to the others. "We have been purchased," the message said, "by people who have read a real estate investment book." As you can imagine, the sound of hysterical gurgling went on well into the night.

I became intimately familiar with every single one of these investment toilets. See, my partners all had useful skills, such as carpentry, whereas my only area of proven competence was listening to the radio, so we agreed that I would learn how to be the plumber. Gradually, I learned that there are two major toilet facts:

TOILET FACT NUMBER ONE: The only way to prevent a toilet part from leaking is to tighten it until it breaks.

TOILET FACT NUMBER TWO: Circling the Earth, at this very moment, is an alien spacecraft that is sending down powerful radio beams that affect the brains of tenants in such a way that they must put inappropriate objects in the toilet. They cannot help themselves. "Find an inappropriate object!" the beam commands them. "Put it in the toilet RIGHT NOW!"

You landlords out there, you know I'm telling the truth, right? And the tenants, they don't even remember what they have done. "How in the world did THAT get in there?" they say, when you show them, for example, a harmonica. "Ha ha!" they add. "Ha ha," you agree, all the while calculating the various angles and forces involved in killing them with your wrench.

Because of these two facts, I soon got to know all eight toilets personally, as individuals. I would call them by name. "So, Bob," I would say. "Leaking again, eh? How would you like to be replaced, Bob? How would you like to be taken outside and have your smooth white porcelain body smashed repeatedly with a hammer? Because there are plenty more toilets, down at the Home Center, who would love to have your job." But Bob would just chuckle, knowing that even if I could somehow manage to install an entire new toilet, it would quickly become part of the cadre.

This went on for several years, during which I amassed the world's largest privately held collection of broken toilet parts, but not, surprisingly enough, great wealth, so finally I ceased playing an active role in the investment property. But I have used the knowledge I acquired, in my home. When our toilets break, I call the plumber, and I am able to describe the problem in technical plumbing terms. "It's our toilets," I say. "They are broken." And he comes out and fixes them, and I don't care how much he charges. "That will be \$68,000," he could tell me, and I would come up with it, somehow, because

anything is better than having to deal with the toilets directly. Particularly the one in the hall bathroom. Norman.

The Elements Of Elegance

Today we're going to talk about how you can hold an elegant dinner party in your home. Well, not really your home, of course. You'll need a much more elegant home, one where there is fine nonvelveteen art on the walls and a harp in the corner of the living room and some effort has been made over the years to clean behind the toilets.

You'll also need elegant guests, by which I mean not your friends. You want to invite socially prominent people, which means people who do not object to being called Thad and Bootsie right to their faces and who are directly affected by oil-company mergers. The best way to lure such people to your dinner party is to tell them it has something to do with disease. Socially prominent people are very fond of disease, because it gives them a chance to have these really elaborate charity functions, and the newspaper headlines say "EVENING IN PARIS BALL RAISES MONEY TO FIGHT GOUT" instead of "RICH PEOPLE AMUSE THEMSELVES."

Now let's plan your menu. The most elegant and sophisticated dishes are those that involve greasy little unsanitary birds with no meat and about 60

billion bones, such as grouse. If your local supermarket doesn't carry grouse, your best bet is to go into the woods and tramp around the underbrush until you hear something rustling, then cut loose with 30-second bursts from an automatic weapon until all rustling ceases. Then you merely squat down and scoop up anything that looks like a grouse or some other protein-based life form. It would also be a good idea to take along a pig, which will automatically without any prior training root around for truffles, a kind of delicacy that is very popular among pigs and French people. When you see the pig chewing something, fire a few warning shots over its head and collect whatever it spits out in a Mason jar.

To prepare your grouse, remove the feathers or fur, open up the bodies, remove the organs and parasites and mulch them in the blender until they turn to pate. Now place the grouse corpses on a stout pan and insert them into a heated oven, dousing them from time to time with A-1 sauce.

When your guests arrive, your first responsibility is to make them feel at ease. I strongly suggest you get a copy of the Complete Book of Games and Stunts published by Bonanza Books and authored by Darwin A. Hindman, Ph.D., professor of physical education at the University of Missouri, available at garage sales everywhere. I especially recommend the "Funnel Trick" described in Chapter Four ("Snares"), wherein you tell the victim that the object is to place a penny on his forehead and tilt his head forward so the penny drops into a funnel stuck into his pants. However—get this—while he's got his head tilted back, you pour a pitcher of water into the funnel and get his pants soaking wet! Be sure to follow this with a lighthearted remark ("You look like a cretin, Thad!") and offer everybody a swig from the liqueur bottle.

Once your guests are loosened up, have them sit around the dinner table, and start by serving them each a small wad of truffles with a side wad of pate. Then bring on the grouse, after whanging each corpse briskly against the kitchen table so as to knock off the char. As your guests enjoy their meal, show great facial interest in whatever conversational topics they choose ("Grouse don't have any teeth, do they?" "These aren't truffles! These are cigarette filters drenched in pig saliva!") Dessert should be

something that has been set on fire.

After dinner, the men will gather around the radial-arm saw for cigars and brandy while the women head for the bathroom en masse to make pasta or whatever it is they do in there. Then you should herd everybody back into the living room for a cultural activity, such as humming and paging through one of those enormous \$26.95 coffee-table books with names like *The Tractors of Spain* that people give you for Christmas when they get desperate.

Your guests will signal when they're ready to leave by darting out of the room the instant you turn your back; be sure to intercept them at the door to say goodbye and obtain written statements to the effect that they had a wonderful time and will invite you over on a specific date. You really shouldn't have to do this, but unfortunately many people today have forgotten even the basics of etiquette.

Restrooms And Other Resorts

What we had in mind was a fun and spontaneous get-away weekend in Key West with our son, Robert, our friends Gene and Arlene, and their two children, Molly and Danny. So we tossed several thousand child-related objects into our two cars and off we went in a little spontaneous convoy, and, after a couple of hours, Gene stopped at a nice restaurant for lunch. Except, of course, the children didn't want to eat lunch. Children never want to eat in restaurants. What they want to do is to play under the table until the entrees arrive, then go to the bathroom.

And so we grown-ups sat there, trying to be relaxed, while our table, possessed from below by unseen forces, shrieked and vibrated like the furniture in the little girl's bedroom in *The Exorcist*. In accordance with federal restaurant regulations, the people seated around us had no children of any kind whatsoever, probably never had, probably were there to discuss important corporate mergers, and so occasionally we'd dart our heads under the table and hiss "STOP THAT!" like some deranged type of duck. We kept this up until the entrees arrived, and it was time to accompany the children to the restroom.

The men's room was very small and had not been cleaned since the Westward Expansion. Robert, seeing this, immediately announced that he had to do Number Two, and of course he insisted that I stand right outside the stall. I hate this situation, because when strangers come in to pee, there I am, apparently just hanging around for fun in this tiny repulsive bathroom. So to indicate that I'm actually there on official business, guarding a stall, I feel obligated to keep a conversation going with Robert, but the only topic I can ever think of to talk about, under the circumstance, is how the old Number Two is coming along. You'd feel like a fool in that situation, talking about, say, Iran. So I say: "How're you doing in there, Robert?" in a ludicrously interested voice. And Robert says: "You just ASKED me that!" which is true. And I say "Ha ha!" to reassure the peeing stranger that I am merely engaging in parenthood and there is no cause for alarm.

And so, finally, we all got out of the restrooms, and we parents grabbed quick violent bites from our nice cold entrees in between checking young Danny's head for signs of breakage after he walked into adjacent tables. Eventually, the waitress took the children's plates, untouched, back to the kitchen to be frozen and reused hundreds of times as entrees for other children. Many modern efficient restaurants are now making their children's entrees entirely out of plastic.

Eventually, we got ourselves back on the road, which was the signal for the children to announce that they were hungry, and, of course, they ate potato chips all the rest of the way to Key West. Once at the

hotel we were totally unpacked in a matter of hours, and we decided to go to a restaurant, thus proving that long car trips do indeed damage your brain. We found a charming Italian place with fairly clean restrooms and a lovely illuminated fountain with a dangerous electrical cord to attract the children, especially young Danny, who is only two, but has already figured out hundreds of ways to kill himself.

At the sight of the entrees arriving, the children of course fled like startled deer, so we had one of those restaurant meals where you are constantly whirling your head around as you eat, trying to locate the children, with the ever-present danger that you'll get your timing off and stab yourself in the side of the head with your fork. And then it was time to go back to the hotel for an intimate evening of sitting on the floor drinking beer and watching the older children bounce on the bed and eat potato chips while young Danny located bureaus to bang his head into.

For breakfast we found a charming buffet-style restaurant with medium restrooms and a cigarette machine that three small children, if they worked together, could pull over onto their heads.

After breakfast, we went back to our hotel so the children could get something to eat, and then we decided that the women would go shopping and the men, being Caring and Sharing eighties-style males, would take the children. Gene and I thought it would be fun to go to the beach, so off we went, unfortunately forgetting to take any of the items usually associated with the beach, such as toys, suntan lotion, rafts, or bathing suits. We did, however, remember to bring the children. Call it instinct.

Of course, as soon as we got to the beach, little Molly announced that she had to go to the bathroom, and so I watched Danny and Robert fill their shorts with beach muck while Gene and Molly hiked off in search of a restroom, which they eventually found a half-mile away. It took them a long time to get back, because Molly refuses to go into the men's room and Gene can't go into the women's room, so he had to hang around right outside like a sex offender while Molly went in alone, only she came back five minutes later and reported that she couldn't find the toilets. You wonder how we got this far as a species.

Finally, they got back, and we decided we'd better head back to the hotel, because one of the many things we had forgotten was young Danny's diaper bag, and he was wearing his Big Boy underpants, making him, in Gene's words, a "time bomb."

That night, spontaneously, we hired a babysitter.

Revenge Of The Pork Person

OK, ladies, I want you all to line up according to height and prepare to receive your fashion orders for the fall season. You ladies want to be up-to-date, right? You don't want to show up at work dressed in some dowdy old thing from last year, looking like Beaver Cleaver's mother, do you? Of course not! You want to look the very best you possibly can, given your various physical deformities.

Ha ha! I'm just teasing you ladies, because I know how sensitive you tend to be about the way you look. I have never met a woman, no matter how attractive, who wasn't convinced, deep down inside, that she was a real woofer. Men tend to be just the opposite. A man can have a belly you could house commercial aircraft in and a grand total of eight greasy strands of hair, which he grows real long and combs across the top of his head so that he looks, when viewed from above, like an egg in the grasp of a giant spider, plus this man can have B.O. to the point where he interferes with radio transmissions, and he will still be convinced that, in terms of attractiveness, he is borderline Don Johnson.

But not women. Women who look perfectly fine to other people are always seeing horrific physical

flaws in themselves. I have this friend, Janice, who looks very nice and is a highly competent professional with a good job and a fine family, yet every now and then she will get very depressed, and do you want to know why? Because she thinks she has puffy ankles.

This worries her much more than, for example, the arms race. Her image of herself is that when she walks down the street, people whisper: "There she goes! The woman with the puffy ankles!"

Likewise my wife, who it goes without saying has a great figure and excellent legs, is convinced, and nothing will change her mind, that she has inadequate calves. This has resulted in a situation where—I can produce documentation to prove this—the number of lifetime fitness-club memberships she has purchased actually exceeds the total number of her legs.

What women think they should look like, of course, is the models in fashion advertisements. This is pretty comical, because when we talk about fashion models, we are talking about mutated women, the results of cruel genetic experiments performed by fashion designers so lacking in any sense of human decency that they think nothing of putting their initials on your eyeglass lenses. These experiments have resulted in a breed of fashion models who are 8 and sometimes 10 feet tall, yet who weigh no more than an abridged dictionary due to the fact that they have virtually none of the bodily features we normally associate with females such as hips and (let's come right out and say it) bosoms. The leading cause of death among fashion models is falling through street grates. If a normal human woman puts on clothing designed for these unfortunate people, she is quite naturally going to look like Revenge of the Pork Person.

This was particularly true last year, when the Fashion Concept that we here in the fashion industry decided to thrust upon you ladies was the Big Shoulder Look. Remember that? What fun! I cannot tell you how many hours of enjoyment we got from watching you trying to have serious business careers while looking like Green Bay Packers in drag. At one point, we considered having you wear actual helmets, but we couldn't figure out how to fit all our initials on them.

But that was last year. This year we, of course, have an entirely new concept. We have been working on it for just months and months now, and we are extremely proud of it, because it is so highly innovative. Are you ready? Here it is:

Gray.

Everybody got that? Better write it down! If we find any ladies out on the street without their gray on, we are going to be very upset. Also we are asking you to purchase certain mandatory accessories in the form of several thousand dollars worth of handbags, shoes, belts, and watch straps made from dead crocodiles. NO, YOU MAY NOT ASK WHY! JUST DO IT!

Sorry for that emotional outburst, ladies. It's just that we work so hard to come up with these concepts, and it really frosts our shorts when we find ourselves being questioned by some bimbo consumer, pardon our French.

Looking ahead to the future, we see some very exciting developments looming on the fashion horizon for you ladies. Here, for example, is a real quotation from a recent issue of Vogue magazine, which uses capital letters for important fashion bulletins:

"THE LOOK OF THE MODERN WOMAN? IN MODERNIST ANDREE PUTMAN'S EYES, SHE'S STRONG-SHOULDERED, HIGH-BREADED, ALMOST AMAZONIAN AND COMES WITH BUILT-IN HIGH HEELS. AT LEAST, THAT'S THE LOOK OF THE NEW PUTMAN-DESIGNED MANNEQUINS MAKING THEIR FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE NOW AT BARNEY'S NEW YORK. COME FALL, THE CREATURES WILL PROLIFERATE TO OTHER

STORES, OTHER CITIES.”

Isn't this exciting, ladies? There could come a time, perhaps in your very lifetimes, when we are no longer designing clothes even for mutated fashion models, but for mannequins based on entirely new concepts of what the female body really should look like, from deep thinkers such as Andree Putman. You could see the day when you can't even buy shoes without getting large heel implants! Let's all toss our hats into the air with joy! Our hats, by the way, should be gray porkpies.

Slope Flake

As those of you who own digital watches are already aware, the winter months are approaching, which means now is the time to start planning that ski vacation.

I understand that some of you may be reluctant to plan ski vacations because you've seen the snippet of film at the beginning of "Wide World of Sports" wherein the Agony of Defeat is depicted by an unfortunate person who loses control of himself going off the end of a ski-jump launcher and various organs come flying out of his body. If you're concerned that something like this could happen to you, here's a statistic from the National Ski Resort Association that should be very reassuring: the so-called castorbean tick, which sucks blood from sheep, will respond to a temperature change of as little as 0.5 degrees centigrade! Wait a Minute, there seems to be a mistake here: that reassuring statistic actually comes from the Encyclopedia Britannica. Perhaps someone in our reading audience can come up with something more closely related to skiing safety.

Meanwhile, the rest of you should decide what kind of skiing you want to engage in. One option is cross-country skiing, which has become very popular in recent years because it is highly "aerobic," a term health experts use to describe how dull an activity is. What you do is find a patch of country and slog across on skis for no apparent reason in a manner very much reminiscent of a herd of cattle, except of course that cattle have the excuse that if they stop, armed men will ride up and kick them with pointed boots. A more fun option is downhill skiing, which is when a machine takes you up a hill and you have to get down.

Whatever kind of skiing you decide to do, your next important task—in fact, your most important task—is to make sure you have proper ski equipment. When your great grandfather was a boy, of course, he'd simply take two barrel staves and tie them to his feet. This could well be an indication that there is some kind of congenital mental illness in your family, and I urge you to look into it immediately.

Next you'll want to select a ski resort. The important thing here is to decide whether or not you are rich. If you are, you'll want to ski at an exclusive resort, the kind your congressperson goes to, where you have to examine your pillow before you go to bed at night lest you wind up with a complimentary miniature Swiss chocolate lodged in your ear. But even if you belong to the middle or lower class, there are plenty of newer resorts with names like "Large Rugged Wolf Mountain Ski Resort and Driving Range" that entrepreneurs have constructed in places such as South Carolina by piling industrial sludge on top of discarded appliances. Just before you leave home, you should call the resort and ask for a frank and honest appraisal of the slope conditions, because it would make little sense to go and spend money if the resort operator did not frankly and honestly feel it would be worth your while. Most resorts use the Standardized Ski Resort Four-Stage Slope Condition Description System:

“REALLY INCREDIBLY SUPERB”: This means the entire slope is encased in a frozen substance of

some kind.

“REALLY SUPERB”: This means there are large patches of bare industrial sludge, but persons with good motor skills can still slide all the way to the bottom.

“SUPERB”: This means persons wishing to get to the bottom will have to remove their skis at several points and clamber over rusted dishwashers with sharp exposed edges.

“EXCELLENT”: This means it is July.

OK! You’ve reached the resort, and now it’s finally time to “hit the slopes.” Not so fast! First attach skis of approximately equal length to each of your feet, discarding any leftovers, and check the bindings to make sure they release automatically just before your ankles break. Now grasp your poles and try to stand up. We’ll wait right here.

(Three-hour pause.)

Ha ha! It’s not as easy as it looks, is it? I mean, here are all these people around you, and they can do it, and their kids can do it, really little kids, babies practically, skiing past you without a care in the world, and there you are, thrashing around on your back in the snow right smack in front of the ski lodge, making an even bigger fool of yourself than Richard Nixon did the time he resigned and made that speech about his mother! Ha ha! Years from now you’ll look back on this and laugh, but for now you can lash out with your poles and try to inflict puncture wounds on the other skiers’ legs.

Now that you’re comfortable with the equipment, summon several burly ski patrol persons and have them carry you over to the chairlift. While you’re riding up to the summit, you’ll have an opportunity to admire the spectacular sweeping panoramic view of the little tiny wire that you and the chairs and the other skiers are all hanging from. It looks far too frail to hold all that weight, doesn’t it? But you can rest assured that it was designed and built on the basis of countless careful measurements and calculations done by scientists and engineers who are not currently up there hanging from the wire with you.

Shark Treatment

I have come up with a sure-fire concept for a hit television show, which would be called “A Live Celebrity Gets Eaten by a Shark.” To help you understand why I think this show would be a success, let me give you a little back ground.

The human race has been fascinated by sharks for as long as I can remember. Just like the bluebird feeding its young, or the spider struggling to weave its perfect web, or the buttercup blooming in spring, the shark reveals to us yet another of the infinite and wonderful facets of nature, namely the facet that can bite your head off. This causes us humans to feel a certain degree of awe.

I know what I’m talking about here, because I once had—this is the truth—an encounter with a shark. It was in 1973, in the Bahamas, where I was sailing with a group of friends. One day, we were anchored near a little island that had a vast shallow sandy-bottomed lagoon next to it, maybe a foot deep, and a friend of mine named Richard and I were wading around in there, and lo and behold we saw this shark. It was a small shark, less than two feet long. The only conceivable way it could have been a threat to a human being would be if it somehow got hold of, and learned to use, a gun.

So Richard and I decided to try to catch it. With a great deal of strategy and effort and shouting, we managed to maneuver the shark, over the course of about a half-hour, to a sort of corner of the lagoon, so that it had no way to escape other than to flop up onto the land and evolve. Richard and I were

inching toward it, sort of crouched over, when all of a sudden it turned around and—I can still remember the sensation I felt at that moment, primarily in the armpit area—headed right straight toward us.

Many people would have panicked at this point. But Richard and I were not “many people.” We were experienced waders, and we kept our heads. We did exactly what the textbook says you should do when you’re unarmed and a shark that is nearly two feet long turns on you in water up to your lower calves: We sprinted I would say 600 yards in the opposite direction, using a sprinting style such that the bottoms of our feet never once went below the surface of the water. We ran all the way to the far shore, and if we had been in a Warner Brothers cartoon you would have seen these two mounds of sand racing across the island until they bonked into trees and coconuts fell onto their heads.

So I know the fascination of the shark, and thus I have been particularly interested in all these shark documentaries on television. You’ve probably noticed them. Any given night, you tune into a channel at random and odds are you’ll see divers hurling themselves into shark-infested waters. The narrator always claims this is for Scientific Research, which is blatant horse waste. I mean, if that were true, you’d figure that after two or three thousand documentaries, they’d know all they needed to know about sharks, and they’d move on to another variety of sea life. But they don’t, because they know darned good and well that the viewers aren’t going to remain glued to their seats to watch divers paddling around in waters infested by, for example, clams.

So the documentary-makers stick with sharks. Generally, their procedure is to scatter bleeding fish pieces around their boat, so as to infest the waters. I would estimate that the primary food source of sharks today is bleeding fish pieces scattered by people making documentaries. Once the sharks arrive, they are generally fairly listless. The general shark attitude seems to be: “Oh, God, another documentary.” So the divers have to somehow goad them into attacking, under the guise of Scientific Research. “We know very little about the effect of electricity on sharks,” the narrator will say, in a deeply scientific voice. “That is why Todd is going to jab this Great White in the testicles with a cattle prod.” The divers keep this kind of thing up until the shark finally gets irritated and snaps at them, and then they act as though this was a totally unexpected and very dangerous development, although clearly it is what they wanted all along.

Shark documentaries took an important stride forward recently with a series called “Ocean Quest,” in which, instead of using trained divers, the documentary maker rented a former beauty queen, Shawn Weatherly, and spent a year dropping her into various shark-infested waters. The idea was that she, being a regular person just like me and you except she has a great body, would be able to convey to us viewers the various human emotions she was feeling. This was pretty funny, inasmuch as Shawn’s acting ability is such that she could not convey the concept of failing if you pushed her off a cliff. But the point is, here was a shark documentary that barely even pretended to be scientific, and instead focused on the excitement involved in watching somebody act as bait.

So I say it’s time to take this one step farther. I say the public is ready to drop the Scientific Research aspect altogether, and to get past all the usual shark-documentary foreplay. I don’t think it would be a problem, getting the celebrities. You look for somebody whose career really needs a boost—a Telly Savalas, for example, or a Zsa Zsa Gabor—and you point out what exposure like this could do for a person. I don’t think you could keep Zsa Zsa out of the water. Ed McMahon could be the host. Your only real problem would be getting a shark. Most of your top sharks probably have commitments to do documentaries.

Electromaggots

Today's science question comes from eight-year-old Bobby Johnson, an imaginary child who lives in Maryland. Bobby asks: "What good are insects, anyway? You know?"

ANSWER: It's a shame, Bobby, but for far too many people, the usual reaction upon encountering an insect is to want to smash it with a rock. That's certainly my immediate reaction, although there are certain insects I would prefer to use a flame-thrower on, such as those large tropical-style spiders that appear to be wearing the pelts of small mammals.

Oh, I can hear you junior-high-school science teachers out there now, spitting out your cafeteria entree ("Tuna Warmed Up") and shouting: "Wait a minute! Spiders aren't insects! Spiders are arachnids!" That's exactly what's wrong with our junior high schools today: all those snotty science teachers going around telling our young people that spiders are not insects, when they (the science teachers) could be leading voluntary organized prayers. Of course spiders are insects. The very word "insect" is a combination of two ancient Greek words: "in," meaning "a," and "sect," meaning "repulsive little creature." Thus not only are spiders insects but so are crabs, jellyfish, the late Truman Capote, bats, clams, olives and those unfortunate little dogs, "Pugs," I believe they are called, that appear to have been struck repeatedly in the face with a heavy, flat object such as the Oxford English Dictionary.

So, Bobby, we can see that ... Bobby? Bobby! Take that finger out of your nose and pay attention when I answer your Science Question! Whose finger is that, anyway?! Put it back where you found it this instant!!

All right. So, Bobby, we can see that the insect family is very large and varied indeed. just sitting here thinking about it, I would estimate that there are over 600 billion species of insect in my basement alone, which is a real puzzle because we pay \$16 a month to have a man come and spray an allegedly lethal chemical all over the place. What I think has happened is that the insects got to this man somehow. Maybe a group of wasps met him at the end of our driveway one afternoon and made it clear to him by gesturing with their feelers that they wouldn't want to see him or his wife or God forbid his small children get stung in the eyeballs, and so what he has actually been spraying around our basement all this time is Liquid Insect Treat.

This is probably good. We cannot simply destroy insects in a cavalier manner, because, as many noted ecology nuts have reminded us time and time again, they (the insects) are an essential link in the Great Food Chain, wherein all life forms are dependent on each other via complex and subtle interrelationships, as follows: Man gets his food by eating cows, which in turn eat corn, which in turn comes from Iowa, which in turn was part of the Louisiana Purchase, which in turn was obtained from France, which in turn eats garlic, which in turn repels vampires, which in turn suck the blood out of Man. So we can see that without insects there would be no ... Hey, wait a minute! I just noticed that there are no insects in the Great Food Chain. Ha ha! Won't that be a kick in the pants for many noted ecology nuts! I bet they all race right out and buy 4,000-volt patio insect-electrocution devices!

Nevertheless, we do need insects for they perform many useful functions. Without insects, for example, we would have no reliable way to spread certain diseases. Also, in some part of Africa that I saw in a documentary film once, they have this very, very large insect, called the Goliath beetle, which grows to almost a foot in length, and the children actually use these beetles to pull their little toy

carts. Wouldn't that be fun, Bobby, to have a foot-long beetle of your own, pulling a cart around and clambering into bed with you? Perhaps I'll get you one!

Of course most of us find it difficult to talk about insects without bringing up the subject of sex. According to scientists who study insects (known as "entomologists," or "AI"), the male insect initiates reproduction by rubbing his legs together to produce a distinctive sound, which attracts a bird, which eats the male, then throws up. The female insect then lays 1.5

billion eggs, eating them as she goes along so she will have the strength she will need to suckle them when they hatch. The young insects, called "maggots," enjoy a carefree childhood, writhing playfully under their mother's 76,806,059 watchful eyes and engaging in maggot games that teach them skills they will need to survive as adults, such as scurrying under the refrigerator when the kitchen light comes on. Eventually, they reach a point where their mother can teach them no more, so they eat her, and the males start rubbing their legs together. This life cycle takes about 18 minutes, slightly less in my basement.

So there you have it, Bobby, a fascinating look at the jillions of tiny life forms that inhabit Spaceship Earth with us, and that will still be around long after we're all dead from nuclear war! Of course the insects know this, too, and they do everything they can to promote international tension. They send their top-rated chiggers to all the nuclear-arms-reduction talks, so after a few minutes the negotiators for both sides are so welt-covered and irritated that they lunge across the table and try to punch each other in the mouth. It's just one more way these amazing little creatures adapt to the world around them. So the next time you're about to stomp on an insect, Bobby, remember this: A sudden, jerky motion can lead to serious muscle strain!

Well, kids, that's it for this month's science question. Tune in next month, when a child from Ohio named "Suzy," or perhaps "Mark," will write in to ask about the Six Basic Rules of cattle-prod safety.

The Lesson Of History

The difficult thing about studying history is that, except for Harold Stassen, everybody who knows anything about it firsthand is dead. This means that our only source of historical information is historians, who are useless because they keep changing everything around.

For example, I distinctly remember learning in fifth grade that the Civil War was caused by slavery. So did you, I bet. As far as I was concerned, this was an excellent explanation for the Civil War, the kind you could remember and pass along as an important historical lesson to your grandchildren. ("Gather 'round boys and girls, while Grandpa tells you what caused the Civil War. Slavery. Now go fetch Grandpa some more bourbon.")

Then one day in high school, out of the blue, a history teacher named Anthony Sabella told me that the Civil War was caused by economic factors. I still think this was a lie, and not just because Anthony Sabella once picked me up by my neck. I mean, today we have more economic factors than ever before, such as the Dow Jones Industrial Average, but you don't see the North and the South fighting each other, do you? Which is good, because the South has 96 percent of the nation's armed pickup trucks, whereas the North mainly has Fitness Centers, so it would be over in minutes.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What kind of a name is "Dow" Jones? Explain.

Nevertheless, I had to pretend I thought the Civil War was caused by economic factors, or I never

would have escaped from Mr. Sabella's class and got into college, where the history professors sneered openly at the primitive high-school-teacher notion that the Civil War had been caused by anything so obvious as economic factors. No, they said, the Civil War was caused by acculturized regionalism. Or maybe it was romantic transcendentalism, or behavioristic naturalism, or structuralized functionalism. I learned hundreds of terms like these in college, and I no longer even vaguely remember what they mean. As far as I know, any one of them could have caused the Civil War. Maybe we should lock them all in a small room and deny them food and water until one of them confesses.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Was the author "just kidding" when he made that last "off-the-wall" suggestion? Cite specific examples.

What is the cause of all this disagreement among the experts over basic historical issues? Economic factors. If you're a historian and you want to write a best-selling book you have to come up with a new wrinkle. If you go to a publisher and say you want to write that Harry Truman was a blunt-spoken Missourian who made some unpopular decisions but was vindicated by history, the publisher will pick you up by your neck and toss you into the street, because there are already bales of such books on the market. But if you claim to have uncovered evidence that Harry Truman was a Soviet ballerina, before long you'll be on national morning television, answering earnest questions from David Hartman in a simulated living room.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Don't you think David Hartman is just a little too avuncular? Why?

So I propose that we laypersons forget about historians and agree among ourselves to believe in a permanent set of historical facts once and for all. Specifically, I propose we use the facts contained in a book I found in my basement recently, called *Civilization Past and Present*, which was apparently one of my wife's high-school textbooks.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Did she steal it? Or what?

Civilization Past and Present combines the advantage of having a snappy title with the advantage of ending in 1962, just before history starts to get really depressing. It's easy to understand, because my wife has underlined all the important words and phrases (Germany, for example). And it doesn't beat around the bush. For example, on page 599 it makes the following statement in plain black and white: "The causes of the American Civil War are complex."

Since some of you laypersons out there may not have *Civilization Past and Present* in your basements, here's a brief summary to tide you over until you can get your own copies:

HISTORY

5,000,000,000 B.C.-1962

After the Earth cooled, it formed an extremely fertile crescent containing primitive people such as the Hittites who believed in just the stupidest things you ever heard of. Then came Greece and Rome, followed by Asia. All of this came to a halt during the Middle Ages, which were caused by the Jutes and featured the following terms underlined by my wife: the steward, the bailiff, and the reeve. Next the Turks got way the hell over into France, after which there were towns. And the Magna Carta. Then France and England fought many wars that involved dates such as 1739 and were settled by the Treaty of Utrecht, which also was used to harness water power. By then the seeds had been sown for several World Wars and the Louisiana Purchase, but fortunately we now have a fairly peaceful atom. Now go fetch Grandpa some more bourbon.

DEFINE THE FOLLOWING: "Avuncular."

Sock It To Me

I woke up this morning experiencing several important concerns, which I would like to share with you here in the hope that they will add up to a large enough total word count so that I can go back to bed.

CONCERN NUMBER ONE: Mr. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.

As you probably know, Mr. LaRouche is this person who has started his own political party and wishes to take over the country, which troubles many people because his views are somewhat unorthodox. (What I mean of course, is that he is as crazy as a bedbug. Where you have a brain, Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., has a Whack-a-Mole game. But I am not about to state this in print, as I do not wish to have his ardent followers place poison snakes in my sock drawer.)

Those of you who are frequent airline travelers are no doubt already familiar with Mr. LaRouche's views, because they are displayed on posters attached to card tables at most major airports. Somehow, a year or so ago, the LaRouche people managed to get the lucrative Airport Lunatic concession away from the Moonies. What I suspect happened is that one day, on a prearranged signal, the LaRouche people sneaked up behind the Moonies and strangled them with their own little book bags, probably in full view of thousands of air travelers, who of course would not have objected. Many of them probably helped out by whapping the Moonies with their carry-on luggage. I know I would have.

But then, two of Mr. LaRouche's ardent followers won the Illinois Democratic primary nominations for secretary of state and lieutenant governor. This caused massive nationwide anxiety because of the unorthodoxy of their views, which, as far as we have been able to tell, involve shooting Jane Fonda with a laser beam from space. Not that I personally see anything wrong with these views! No sir! I don't even have a sock drawer!

But we do have to ask ourselves if we truly can afford, as a nation, to elect crazy people to a vital state office like lieutenant governor, which involves weighty responsibilities such as wearing a suit and phoning the governor every day to see if he's dead. Because mark my words, if these people win in Illinois, they'll go after higher and higher offices, until someday—I do not wish to alarm you, but we must be aware of the danger—we could have a situation where our top national leaders are going around babbling about laser beams from space. So I have called on you Illinois voters to come to your senses before the general election and take responsible citizen action in the form of moving to a more intelligent state. This is the perfect time to do so, thanks to declining oil prices.

CONCERN NUMBER TWO: Declining oil prices

Like many of you, I did not realize at first that the decline in oil prices was something to be concerned about. In fact, I viewed it as the first really positive development in this nation since jimmy Carter was attacked by the giant swimming rabbit. But then I started reading articles by leading nervous economists stating that the oil-price decline is a very bad thing, because it is causing severe hardships for the following groups:

1. The OPEC nations.
2. The U.S. oil industry.
3. The big banks.
4. Texans in general.

When I read this, naturally my reaction as a concerned American, was hahahahahahahahaha.

No, seriously, we need to be worried about declining oil prices, and I am going to explain why. The

international economy is based on the U.S. dollar, which is trusted and respected throughout the world because it is the only major currency that does not look like it was designed by preschool children. The value of the dollar, in turn, depends on the investment savvy of big U.S. banks, which lend their dollars to the oil-rich Third World, which loses them gambling on rooster fights.

This system worked well until the late 1970s, when the price of oil started to fall. This was caused by a decline in demand, which was caused by the fact that people couldn't get their cars repaired, which was caused by the fact that the oil companies had bought all the independent garages and turned them into "self-service" stations selling a mutant assortment of retail goods and staffed by surly teenagers, so that God forbid you should have actual car trouble at one of these service stations because they would tow you away for blocking the access of customers wishing to purchase nasal spray and Slim Jims.

So now the banks are stuck with a lot of oil, which they are trying to get rid of by converting it into VISA cards, which they offer to my wife. She gets six or seven VISA offers from desperate banks per business day. She got one recently from—I am not making this up—a bank in South Dakota. I didn't even know they had banks in South Dakota, did you? What would people keep in them? Pelts?

Well I don't know about you, but I am uncomfortable with the idea of having a world economy dependent upon the VISA needs of my wife. She is only one person. That is the law. So I think we need to revamp the whole world economic structure, and the obvious first step is to require banks to repair cars. The supermarkets, which already cash checks, could take over the remaining functions currently performed by banks, such as lending money to the Third World and being closed. You would get your food at service stations, which would be required to get some new sandwiches. You would continue to buy gas at "convenience" stores. Illinois would be sold to wealthy Japanese investors. All these regulations would be enforced by laser beams from space.

The D-Word

There's this sensitive issue that we in the news media are very reluctant to bring up.

No. It isn't condoms—We are totally comfortable, these days, doing lengthy stories about condoms: ("PASTELS OUT, EARTH TONES IN, FOR FALL CONDOM"). You will soon see condom commercials on television. Fortunately we can assume, based on television's track record with this kind of thing, that these commercials will be tasteful and informative:

FIRST MAN: What's the matter, Ted?

SECOND MAN: I think I have a horrible sexually transmitted disease!

FIRST MAN: Here. Try some of my condoms.

SECOND MAN: Thanks.

(The Next Day:)

FIRST MAN: Feeling better, Ted?

SECOND MAN: You bet! Thanks to condoms! And I got that big promotion!

No, the issue we are reluctant to talk about is even more sensitive (ha ha!) than condoms. The issue—and I will try to be tasteful here—is that sometimes it seems like maybe the president of the United States is kind of db. If you get what I mean. What I mean is, I am not totally confident that the president would get what I mean, unless several aides explained it to him. And even then, he might forget.

This is unsettling, although I don't know why it should be. For the past 25 years, the presidency had

been a remarkable parade of hanky-panky, comical incompetence, and outright weirdness, and the country has done OK. In fact, once you got into the spirit of it, it was kind of fun. I don't know about you, but I loved it when Jimmy Carter reported that he'd been attacked by a giant swimming rabbit. I loved it when Richard Nixon made speeches wherein he looked as though a large and disorganized committee of alien beings had taken over his body and were just learning how to operate it: ("OK. Let's try to wave. Who's operating the arms?" "Me!" "No, me!" "NO ..." etc.).

So I don't mind the president being bizarre, but that's not the same as accepting that he might be kind of dumb. Yet it's getting harder and harder to think of any other explanation, not with this Iran-Contra scandal. I realize you out there in Readerland are sick to death of this scandal, but it's still causing multiple orgasms here in the news media, because of all these shocking revelations, the most amazing one being that the president apparently viewed foreign policy as a sort of family station wagon, which he, in the role of Ozzie Nelson, would cheerfully lend to his teen-age son, Ricky, played by Oliver North.

RICKY: Hey Dad, can I take the foreign policy down to the Malt Shoppe and deal with Iranians?

OZZIE: The Iranians?

RICKY: Don't worry, Dad. They're moderates.

OZZIE: Well in that case, OK. just don't trade arms for hostages!

The president, apparently, was so totally unaware of where his foreign policy was that he had to appoint a distinguished commission to help him locate it, and when the commissioners called him in to testify, he told them, essentially, that he couldn't remember what it looked like. Now, if Richard Nixon had claimed something like that you would at least have had the comfort of knowing he was lying. You could trust Nixon that way. But with this president, you have this nagging feeling that he's telling the truth.

This bothers us media people, which is why we have developed this euphemistic way of describing the president's behavior, namely, we say he has a "hands-off management style." As in: "How many people with a hands-off management style does it take to change a light bulb?"

Of course the president's aides, in an effort to show that he is a Take-Charge Guy, have arranged to have him star in a number of Photo Opportunities: The President Shakes Hands with People Wearing Suits; the President Sits Down with People Wearing Suits; the President, Wearing a Suit, Signs His Own Name; etc. I think this is good, as far as it goes. My concern is that it should not go any further. My concern is that we could have a sudden eruption of "hands-on" management, for example in the nuclear-arms talks, and we'll end up with Soviet Troops in Des Moines.

Catching Hell

Call me a regular American guy if you want, but baseball season is kind of special to me. For one thing, it means ice hockey season will be over in just a few short months. But it also brings back a lot of memories, because I, like so many other regular American guys, was once a Little Leaguer. I was on a team called the "Indians," although I was puny of chest, so if you saw me in my uniform you'd have thought my team was called the "NDIAN," because the end letters got wrinkled up in my armpits. I had a "Herb Score" model glove, named for a player who went on to get hit in the eye by a baseball.

I remember particularly this one game: I was in deep right field, of course, and there were two out in the bottom of the last inning with the tying run on base, and Gerry Sinnott, who had a much larger chest,

who already had to shave, was at bat. As I stood there waiting for the pitch, I dreamed a dream that millions of other kids had dreamed: that someday I would grow up, and I wouldn't have to be in Little League anymore. In the interim, my feelings could best be summarized by the statement: "Oh please please PLEASE God don't let Gerry Sinnott hit the ball to me."

And so of course God, who as you know has a terrific sense of humor, had Gerry Sinnott hit the ball to me. Here is what happened in the next few seconds: Outside of my body, hundreds of spectators, thousands of spectators, arrived at the ball field at that very instant via chartered buses from distant cities to see if I would catch the ball. Inside my body, my brain cells hastily met and came up with a Plan of Action, which they announced to the rest of the body parts. "Listen up, everybody!" they shouted. "We're going to MISS THE BALL! Let's get cracking!!"

Instantly my entire body sprang into action, like a complex, sophisticated machine being operated by earthworms. The command flashed down from Motor Control to my legs: "GET READY TO RUN!" And soon the excited reply flashed back: "WHICH LEG FIRST?!" Before Motor Control could issue a ruling, an urgent message came in from Vision Central, reporting that the ball had already gone by, in fact was now a good 30 to 40 yards behind my body, rolling into the infield of the adjacent game. Motor Control, reacting quickly to this surprising new input, handled the pressure coolly and decisively, snapping out the command: "OK! We're going to FALL DOWN!!" And my body lunged violently sideways, in the direction opposite the side where the ball had passed a full two seconds earlier, flopping onto the ground like some pathetic spawning salmon whose central nervous system had been destroyed by toxic waste, as Gerry Sinnott cruised toward home.

Those boyhood memories! I have them often, although I can control them pretty well with medication.

Actually, when I got older I continued to play organized baseball in the form of "league softball," a game in which after work you put on a comical outfit and go to a public park to argue with strangers. For the first several years the team I was on had a nice, relaxed attitude, by which I mean we were fairly lenient if a player made a mental error. For example, if the ball was hit to the shortstop, and he threw it to first base, but the first baseman wasn't there because he was rooting through the ice cooler looking for a non-"light" beer, we'd say to the person who brought the beer: "Hey! NEVER make the mental error of bringing 'light' beer to a softball game! It can cost a fielder valuable seconds!" But we wouldn't fine him or anything.

In later years, however, we got more and more young guys on the team who really wanted to win; guys who wore cleats and batting gloves and held practices where they were always shrieking about the importance of "hitting" somebody called the "cutoff man"; guys who hated to let women play, apparently for fear that one of them might, during a crucial late-inning rally, go into labor; guys who (this was the last straw) drank Gatorade during the game. I had to quit.

But I'm getting back into it. I have a son of my own now, and, being an American guy, I've been teaching him the basics of the game. One recent bright sunny day I took him out in the yard with a Whiffle ball, and I gave him a few pointers. "Robert," I said, "did you know that if we use a magnifying glass to focus sunlight on the Whiffle ball, we can actually cause it to melt?" So we did this, and soon we had advanced to complex experiments involving candy wrappers, Popsicle sticks, and those little stinging ants. Although I drew the line at toads. You have to teach sportsmanship, too.

Mrs. Beasley Froze For Our Sins

One of the issues that we professional newspaper columnists are required by union regulations to voice grave concern about is the federal budget deficit, which we refer to as the “mounting” deficit, because every extra word helps when you have to produce a certain number of gravely concerned newsprint inches. The point we try to get across in these columns is: “You readers may be out driving fast boats and having your fun, but we columnists are sitting in front of our word processors, worried half to death about the nation’s financial future.” Then we move on to South Africa.

So anyway, I have decided to fret briefly about the deficit, which according to recent reports continues to mount. A while back I proposed a very workable solution to the whole deficit problem, namely that the government should raise money by selling national assets we don’t really need: metric road signs, all the presidential libraries, the Snail Darter, the House of Representatives, North Dakota, etc. Unfortunately, the only concrete result of this proposal was that I got an angry letter from everybody in North Dakota, for a total of six letters, arguing that if we’re going to sell anything, we should sell New York City.

This probably wouldn’t work. There would be major cultural adjustment problems. Suppose, for example, that we sold New York to Switzerland. Now Switzerland is a very tidy, conservative nation, and the first thing it would do is pass a lot of laws designed to make New York more orderly, such as no public muttering, no lunging into the subway car as though it were the last helicopter out of Saigon, no driving taxis over handicapped pedestrians while they are in the crosswalk, no sharing loud confidences regarding intestinal matters to strangers attempting to eat breakfast. These laws would be very difficult for New Yorkers to adjust to. Switzerland would have to send in soldiers to enforce them, and this would inevitably lead to tragic headlines in the New York Times:

ENTIRE SWISS ARMY FOUND STABBED TO DEATH WITH OWN LITTLE FOLDING
KNIVES Pedestrians Step Right over Rotting Corpses

So I’m afraid that, appealing as the idea may be, we can’t reduce the deficit by selling New York.

What the government desperately needs is an innovative new concept for getting money from people, and we can all be grateful that such a concept appears to be oozing over the fiscal horizon at this very moment: a national lottery game. A number of congresspersons have already proposed that we start one. It would be similar to the lotteries currently operating in the really advanced states. Here’s how they work:

1. First you pass strict laws that say it is totally illegal for private citizens to operate lotteries, because they encourage the poor and the stupid to gamble away their money against ludicrously bad odds. If you find private citizens operating such lotteries, you call them “numbers racketeers” and you throw them in prison.

2. Next you set up an official state lottery with even more ludicrous odds. You give it a perky name like the “Extremely Lucky Digits Game,” and you run cheerful upbeat ads right on television strongly suggesting that the poor and the stupid could make no wiser investment than to spend their insulin money on lottery tickets. A nice touch is to say you’re using the lottery proceeds to fund a popular program that the state would have to pay for anyway, such as senior citizens or baby deer. In Pennsylvania, for example, they drag an actual senior citizen in front of the camera to perform the ritual televised Daily Number drawing. The senior citizen usually looks kind of frightened, like a hostage being displayed by the Red Brigades. The clear implication is that if the viewers don’t purchase Daily Number tickets, Pennsylvania will have to throw old Mrs. Beasley out into the snow headfirst.

The news media help out by regularly running heartwarming front-page stories about how a man who

was broke and starving won \$800 million in his state lottery and suddenly could afford nice teeth and many new friends.

So anyway, the plan now is to run something like this on a nationwide scale, which I think would be great, especially if it keeps the federal government from doing something really desperate to raise money, such as selling drugs or making snuff movies. The only potential problem with a national lottery, as some states have pointed out, is that it might siphon off a lot of poor and stupid from the state lotteries. But if this happens, we could have a bailout system, where the federal government would step in and purchase so many million dollars worth of lottery tickets from the troubled state. I mean, hey, why do we have governments in the first place, if not to help each other out?

The Columnist's Caper

I figured out why I'm not getting seriously rich. I write newspaper columns. Nobody ever makes newspaper columns into Major Motion Pictures starring Tom Cruise. The best you can hope for, with a newspaper column, is that people will like it enough to attach it to their refrigerators with magnets shaped like fruit.

So I have written a suspense novel. It has everything. Sex. Violence. Sex. Death. Russians. Dead Russians. Here's what the newspaper critics are saying:

"A very short novel."-the Waco, Texas, Chronic Vegetable "This is it? This is the entire novel?"-the Arkansas Dependent-Statesperson "Not enough sex."-the Evening Gonad

No doubt you motion-picture producers out there would like to see the novel these critics are raving about, so you can send me lucrative film offers. Here it is:

Chapter One

Carter Crater strode into the Oval Office. He looked like Tom Cruise, or, if he is available, Al Pacino. Behind the desk sat the president of the United States. To his left, in the corner, stood the secretary of state. Crater sensed that something was wrong.

"Unless we act quickly," the president said, "within the next few hours the world will be blown to pieces the size of Smith Brothers cough lozenges."

Crater frowned. "We had better act quickly," he said.

The president looked thoughtful. "That just might work," he said. "Use whatever means you consider necessary, including frequent casual sex."

Chapter Two

In the Kremlin, General Rasputin Smirnov frowned at Colonel joyce Brothers Karamazov Popov.

"It is absolutely essential that the Americans do not suspect anything," Smirnov said.

"Yes, agreed Popov.

Smirnov frowned.

"Shouldn't we be speaking Russian?" he asked.

Popov looked thoughtful.

“We should at least have accents,” he said.

Chapter Three

Suddenly, it struck Crater: The Oval Office doesn't have corners.

Chapter Four

Some 2,347 miles away in East Berlin, a man and a woman walked briskly eastward on Volkswagen-kindergarten-pumpernikel-strasse. Talking intently, they did not notice the sleek black Mercedes sedan, its windows tinted almost black, as it turned off Hamburgerfrankfurterwienerschnitzelstrasse and came toward them from behind, picking up speed until, traveling at 130 kilometers per microgram, it roared into a parked garbage truck.

“Too much window tint,” the woman said.

Chapter Five

Some 452.5 miles away, Crater had sex.

Chapter Six

“Ach,” said General Smirnov. “Zees American agent, ve must keel heem.”

“Dat's de troof,” agreed Popov. “Les'n we do, he gon' mess up de plan to blow up de worl'.”

Chapter Seven

Crater handed the microfilm to crack intelligence expert Lieutenant Ensign Sergeant Commander Monica Melon.

She studied it carefully for about 15 minutes. Finally she spoke.

“There's something written on here,” she said, frowning, “but it's really teensy.”

Chapter Eight

Smirnov frowned at Popov.

“Blimey,” he said.

Chapter Nine

In the darkened room, Crater could see the shadowy figure who threatened to destroy the world, who had led Crater on this desperate chase across nine continents, a race filled with terror and death and women whose thighs could have been the basis for a major world religion, and all leading to this moment, Crater and the shadowy figure, alone in the gloom. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Crater reached for the light switch. He flicked it on. The shadowy figure turned, slowly, slowly. At last, Crater could see the figure's face.

It was a big surprise.

Chapter Ten

"Good job of saving the entire world, Crater," the president said. "But I have one question: How did you know Miss Prendergast never heard the cathedral bell?"

"Easy, sir," answered Crater. "You see, Lord Copperbottom is left-handed, so the gardener couldn't possibly have taken the key from the night stand."

"I never thought of that," said the president. He frowned at the names coming up out of the floor and drifting toward the ceiling so the audience would know who had played what parts.

"Hey," the president said. "These names are backwards."

A Rash Proposal

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the defense of Western Europe. It keeps my mind off this rash in my right armpit. When I think about it, I reach the point where all I want to do is quit my job and move to an isolated cave so I can devote full time to scratching myself. Eventually it reached the point where I threw caution to the winds and went to an actual skin doctor. I was hoping he'd give me one of those hand-held garden implements with the three sharp prongs. I forget what you call them, and say: "Dave, I want you to rake this implement across your rash every 10 seconds or as needed." But no, he gave me some wimpy little white pills and came up with a bizarre treatment program under which—this is the truth—I was supposed to try to grow a new rash. Really. He thinks my rash is caused by a rash-causing chemical that large corporations put in deodorants, apparently out of sheer hatred for the consumer, and to test this theory he wants me to rub some of this very same chemical onto my arm and see if I develop a new rash. I'm not going to do it, of course, because (a) I don't even want the rash I brought him in the first place, let alone a new one, and (b) if he thinks I'm stupid enough to deliberately rub rash-causing chemicals on myself, his next move will be to ask me to rub them on my family and friends.

Sometimes you have to wonder what's happening to the medical profession. A recent edition of the Weekly World News, which I feel is probably the best newspaper your money can buy in a supermarket, carried a story headlined "HUMAN HEAD TRANSPLANT." The story concerns an operation performed by doctors in Communist China who got hold of this unfortunate man with a large brain tumor, and they treated him by amputating his head and replacing it with one they got from a person who had lost his body in a factory accident and consequently died. I would very much like to know how the doctors explained this operation to the patient ("The only possible side effect we can foresee, Loo

Ping, will be some neck stiffness, plus the fact that you will have the head of a dead factory worker.”)

Of course you have an entirely different set of problems to confront when you talk about defending Western Europe. The main one is that it is filled with Western Europeans, who are not in the least bit interested in defending themselves. They have discovered, over the past thousand years or so, that every time they get military, they wind up having a lengthy and extremely complicated war in which the various countries have tremendous trouble remembering whose side they're on:

BRITISH SOLDIER: Taste my sword, French person!

FRENCH SOLDIER: No! Wait! We are allies! This is World War I!

BRITISH SOLDIER: I'm terribly sorry! I thought it was the Hundred Years War! Does this mean I can kill Italians?

FRENCH SOLDIER: (Consulting manual): No, I'm afraid not. Not until World War II.

So eventually the Western Europeans stopped forming armies altogether and decided to become third-rate powers, which means we have to defend them from the Russians. We're available to defend foreign continents because we have no urgent need to defend our own. I mean, the Mexicans certainly aren't going to attack us, seeing as how most of them already work here. I suppose the Canadians could attack us, but the entire population of Canada is maybe the size of the audience on "Donahue," only quieter, so even if they did attack, nobody would know, especially if it was during rush hour.

So we're over there defending Western Europe, which is very, very expensive. For one thing, we have to get up an army, which means we have to pay for all those commercials wherein we suggest to young people that the whole point of the army is to teach them valuable electronics skills, with no mention whatsoever of getting shot at or getting cretin haircuts and being ordered to do pushups by a person who has never read anything longer than a Dr Pepper bottle. For another thing, to defend Western Europe we have to let the Pentagon buy all these tanks and guns and things, and the Pentagon is unable to buy any object that costs less than a condominium in Vail. If the Pentagon needs, say, fruit, it will argue that it must have fruit that can withstand the rigors of combat conditions, and it will wind up purchasing the FX-700

Seedless Tactical Field Grape, which will cost \$160,000 per bunch, and which will have an 83 percent failure rate.

So I have come up with this plan for defending Western Europe much more economically, which is to pull our armed forces out of there altogether. They could come home and fix our videocassette recorders. In their place we would send over all our state highway departments and tell them we want them to repair the roads between Western Europe to Russia. Think about it: First they'd have their Cone Placement Division strew millions of traffic cones randomly all over the roads, then they'd have their Sign Erection Department put up signs explaining that all the lanes would be really messed up for the next 17 years to Help Serve You Better, then the Traffic Direction Division would get all kinds of lowlife derelicts out there waving flags and directing motorists right into oncoming trucks, and within a few months it would be absolutely impossible for any vehicle, including Communist tanks, to get from Russia to Western Europe.

So that's my plan. What do you think? I think those wimpy little pills are starting to kick in.

He Knows Not What He Writes

The problem with writing about religion is that you run the risk of offending sincerely religious people, and then they come after you with machetes. So I am going to be very sensitive, here, which is not easy, because the thing about religion is that everybody else's always appears stupid.

For example, if you read about some religious sect in India that believes God wants people to drink their own urine, you don't say to yourself, "Isn't that amazing, the diversity of belief systems Man has developed in his neverending quest to understand and cope with the intricate moral dilemmas posed by a complex and uncertain world?" No, what you say to yourself is, "These people have the brains of trout."

Meanwhile, over in India, the sect members are getting a major chuckle over the fact that some American basketball players cross themselves before they take foul shots. "As if God cares about foul shots," the sect members howl, tears streaming down their faces. "Say, is this my urine or yours?"

That's the basic problem, of course: figuring out what God wants us to do. I will admit right up front here that I don't have the vaguest idea. All my religious training was in Sunday school maybe 25 years ago, and the main thing I remember was that God was always smiting the Pharisees. At least I think it was the Pharisees. It seemed that hardly a day went by when they didn't get the tar smitten out of them, which is probably why you see so few of them around any more.

My wife, who has bales of religious training, tells me that this was the Old Testament God, who was very strict, whereas the New Testament God is a genuinely mellow deity, the kind of deity who would never smite anybody or order you to smear goat's blood on your first-born son, which is the kind of thing the Old Testament God was always doing.

NOTE: The preceding paragraph is in no way intended to suggest that there is anything wrong with smearing goat's blood on your first-born son. As far as I'm concerned, this is an excellent ritual, and I would do it myself if not for the fact that my son might tell the school authorities. Please put away your machetes. Thank you.

It used to be much worse. Back in ancient Greece and Rome they had gods all over the place, and it was no fun at all being a mortal, as you know if you ever read any myths:

"One day two young lovers, Vector and Prolix, were walking in a garden. This angered Bruno, the god of gardens, so he turned Vector into a toad. Saddened, Prolix picked up her lover and squeezed him to her bosom, which caused him to secrete a toad secretion upon her garment. This angered Vito, the god of fabric, who turned Prolix into an exceedingly unattractive insect. Saddened, Vector hopped to his lover, which angered Denise, who was the goddess of municipal water supply and just happened to be in the neighborhood, so she hit them both with a rock."

And so on. So things are better now. Today most of us believe in just the one God, and He never turns people into toads or anything, unless you count Spiro Agnew. All He wants us to do is what He wants us to do, which is clearly revealed in the Bible.

(Sound of the machetes being unsheathed.)

And the Talmud and the Koran and the Book of Mormon and the works of L. Ron Hubbard. These holy writings tell us what God wants us to do, often in the form of revealing anecdotes:

"And Bezel saideth unto Sham: 'Sham,' he saideth, 'Thou shalt goest unto the town of Begorrah, and there shalt thou fetcheth unto thine bosom 35

talents and also shalt thou fetcheth a like number of cubits, provideth that they are nice and fresh."

The problem is that many of us don't have the vaguest idea what these anecdotes reveal. This is why we have broadcast preachers, who can take a religious anecdote and explain it over the course of a half-hour in such a manner that if you listened all the way through you would have no questions at all:

BROADCAST PREACHER: And so we can see that it was BEZEL who told SHAM to go to Begorrah. It was not SHAM who told BEZEL: It was BEZEL who told SHAM. Now people ask me, they say, “Brother Ray Bob Tom, what do you mean, it was Bezel who told Sham?” And I say, “What I mean is that when we’re talking about who told who to go to Begorrah, we must understand that it was BEZEL who told ...”

And so on. It can take upwards of a week to get through an entire sentence, which is why you often have to send in a Love Offering to get cassettes so you’ll remember what it is that God wants you to do. This sometimes seems too complicated, so a lot of people have switched over to the more relaxed style of the Merv Griffin-type of broadcast preachers, who have bands and potted plants and sofas and everything. (“Our next guest is not only one of the top Christians in the business, but also a close personal friend of mine.”)

So we have a number of ways of finding out what God wants us to do, and each of us must decide what the answer is in this wonderful country where we are free to believe as we choose, and where there are strict laws against assaulting people just because we don’t like something they wrote.

Man Bites Dog

Today we begin a popular feature wherein we will address the major ethical questions of the day, starting with: Is it OK to eat your dog?

ANSWER: No. Not here in America. Oh, sure, most of us have heard the story about an American who cooked her dog in a microwave oven, but this was not for the purpose of eating it. What happened (according to the story) was this American had one of those little rodent-size dogs whose main purpose in the Great Chain of Life is to pee on people’s ankles, and it got wet in the rain, so the American quite naturally did what any normal person would do if he or she had one lone kernel of candy corn for a brain, namely stick the dog in the microwave oven to dry out, but apparently the oven was on the wrong setting (it should have been set on “Dog”), so the dog ended up getting dried out to the point of Well Done. The story always stops right there, so we don’t know what happened next. We don’t know whether the spouse came home from a hard day at the office and went, “Mmmmmmm! Something smells deeeelicious! I’ll just look inside the microwave here and GAAAACCCCKKKK!!!!”

Of course, this needless tragedy could easily have been prevented via legislation requiring that microwave ovens carry a stern federal message such as

WARNING: THE SURGEON GENERAL HAS DETERMINED THAT YOU SHOULD NOT PUT A DOG IN THIS OVEN AND TURN IT ON.

On the other hand, this could be one of those stories that everybody tells even though it’s not true, like the one about the teen-aged couple who is parking on a lonely country road and hears on the radio that a homicidal maniac who has a hook instead of a right hand has escaped from the mental institution, so the boy real quick starts the engine and drives right over Reggie Jackson, who was walking his Doberman because it was choking on an alligator from the New York City sewer system. This probably never happened. But it is a fact that my editor, Gene Weingarten, once ate a dog. This was at the 1964 World’s Fair in Flushing, New York (which incidentally is how alligators got into the sewers), and Gene was at the pavilion of some Third World nation and he ordered a dish with an unusual name, and when he asked the waiter (who spoke little English) what it was, the waiter, in Gene’s words, “made it clear by

gestures and going ‘woof woof,’ that it was a dog.” Gene said it wasn’t bad. Not that this is any excuse. I want to stress that I personally have never eaten a dog, and I want to remind those of you who have already stopped reading this column to write violent letters to the editor that it was Gene Weingarten, c/o TroPic magazine, Miami Herald, Miami FL 33101, who ate the dog.

But it is an interesting ethical question, why we get so upset about this. I mean, most of us don’t think twice about eating cows, which are genetically almost exactly the same as dogs in the sense of having four legs and being pretty stupid. Yet if somebody tried to dry a cow out in a microwave oven, we’d all laugh like the dickens—and it would get on “Celebrity Biceps and Boners.” So this is a real puzzle, all right, which is why I am very grateful to Diane Eicher, an alert reader who sent me an article from Nutrition Health Review headlined: “Usefulness Keeps Pets Out of Oven.” I am not making this article up. It concerns Marvin Harris, a University of Florida anthropologist who, according to the article, “studies and tries to make sense of human culture.” (Ha ha!)

Harris is quoted in the article as saying that the reason we didn’t eat dogs, cats, and horses is—get ready—”These animals are just too darned useful for us to eat.”

Now I don’t wish to be critical here, but a statement like that makes you wonder if Professor Harris has not accidentally been studying the culture on the planet Zoog, because the last word I would use to describe household pets here on Earth is “useful.” I have owned a number of household pets, mostly dogs, and the only useful thing I can recall any of them ever doing was the time Germaine tried to bite the Amway representative. Other than that it has been basically a long series of indelible rug stains. And I defy anybody to point to a single instance of, for example, a tropical fish doing anything useful, as in:

ALERT FISH RESCUES WOMAN FROM TRASH COMPACTOR

Yet we don’t eat the tropical fish, do we? No! Not unless we have a very good reason, such as we have been sitting in our doctors’ waiting room for the better part of the day without food or water. Then we might snack on a couple of guppies, but that is as far as it would go. And I don’t even want to talk about cats.

Nevertheless Professor Harris feels pets have many useful functions:

“Modern day household pets can’t match the entertainment value of lions attacking elephants or people in the Roman circus,” he said, “but cats chasing imaginary mice, or dogs retrieving bouncing balls are at least as amusing as the late night movie.”

I think we can all agree that pets are not as entertaining as watching lions attack humans, but I have to wonder how many of you couples out there in our listening audience have ever said to each other: “The heck with Casablanca, let’s watch Beaner retrieve a bouncing ball.” So we indeed have a very complex ethical issue here, but unfortunately we no longer really care.

“Adventure Dog”

I have this idea for a new television series. It would be a realistic action show, patterned after the true-life experiences of my dog, Earnest. The name of the show would be “Adventure Dog.”

The theme song would go: Adventure dog, Adventure doooooooggg, Kinda big, kinda strong, Stupid as a log.

Each episode would be about an exciting true adventure that happened to Earnest. For example, here’s the script for an episode entitled: “Adventure Dog Wakes Up and Goes Outside”:

It's 6:17 A.M. Adventure Dog is sleeping in the hall. Suddenly she hears a sound. Her head snaps up. Somebody is up! Time to swing into action! Adventure Dog races down the hall and, skidding on all four paws, turns into the bathroom, where, to her total shock, she finds: The Master! Whom she has not seen since LAST NIGHT! YAYYYYYYYY!!

ADVENTURE DOG: Bark!

MASTER: DOWN, dammit!

Now Adventure Dog bounds to the front door, in case the Master is going to take her outside. It is a slim chance. He has only taken her outside for the past 2,637 consecutive mornings. But just in case, Adventure Dog is ready.

ADVENTURE DOG: Bark!

Can it be? Yes! This is unbelievable! The Master is coming to the door! Looks like Adventure Dog is going outside! YAAAYYYY!

MASTER: DOWN, dammit!

Now the Master has opened the door approximately one inch. Adventure Dog realizes that, at this rate, it may take the Master a full three-tenths of a second to open the door all the way. This is bad. He needs help. Adventure Dog alertly puts her nose in the crack and applies 600,000 pounds force to the door.

MASTER: HEY! DOOR: WHAM!

And now Adventure Dog is through the door, looking left, looking right, her finely honed senses absorbing every detail of the environment, every nuance and subtlety, looking for ... Holy Smoke! There it is! The YARD! Right in the exact same place it was yesterday! This is turning out to be an UNBELIEVABLE adventure!

ADVENTURE DOG: Bark!

Adventure Dog is vaguely troubled. Some primitive version of a thought is rattling around inside her tiny cranium, like a BB in a tunafish can. For she senses that there is some reason why the Master has let her outside. There is something he wants Adventure Dog to do. But what on Earth could it be? Before Adventure Dog can think Of an answer, she detects ... is this possible? Yes! It's a SMELL! Yikes! Full Red Alert!

ADVENTURE DOG: Sniff sniff sniff.

MASTER: Come on, Earnest.

ADVENTURE DOG: Sniff sniff sniff sniff sniff sniff sniff sniff.

No question about it. The evidence is clear. This is a smell, all right. And what's more, it's the smell of—this is so incredible—DOG WEE WEE! Right here in the yard!

MASTER: EARNEST!

ADVENTURE DOG: Sniff sniff sniff sniff sniff.

Adventure Dog is getting the germ of an idea. At first it seems farfetched, but the more she thinks about it, the more she thinks, hey, why not! The idea is—get ready—Adventure Dog is going to MAKE WEE-WEE! Right now! Outside! It's crazy, but it just might work!

MASTER: Good GIRL.

What was that? It was a sound! Definitely. A sound coming from over there. Yes! No question about it. This is unbelievable! It's the MASTER out here in the yard! YAAAYY!

MASTER: DOWN, dammit!

THEME SONG SINGER: Adventure Dog, Adventure Dooooooggg ...

ADVENTURE DOG: BARK!

MASTER: DOWN!

Bear in mind that this is only one episode. There are many other possibilities: “Adventure Dog Gets Fed,” “Adventure Dog Goes for a Ride in the Car and Sees Another Dog and Barks Real Loud for the Next 116 Miles,” etc. it would be the kind of family-oriented show your kids could watch, because there would be extremely little sex, thanks to an earlier episode, “Adventure Dog Has an Operation.”

Slow Down And Die

I think it's getting worse. I'm talking about this habit people have of driving on interstate highways in the left, or “passing” lane, despite the fact that they aren't passing anybody. You used to see this mainly in a few abnormal areas, particularly Miami, where it is customary for everyone to drive according to the laws of his or her own country of origin. But now you see it everywhere: drivers who are not passing, who have clearly never passed anybody in their entire lives, squatting in the left lane, little globules of fat clogging up the transportation arteries of our very nation. For some reason, a high percentage of them wear hats.

What I do, when I come up behind these people, is the same thing you do, namely pass them on the right and glare at them. Unfortunately, this tactic doesn't appear to be working. So I'm proposing that we go to the next logical step: nuclear weapons. Specifically I'm thinking of atomic land torpedoes, which would be mounted on the front bumpers of cars operated by drivers who have demonstrated that they have the maturity and judgment necessary to handle tactical nuclear weapons in a traffic environment. I would be one of these drivers.

Here's how I would handle a standard left-lane blockage problem: I would get behind the problem driver and flash my lights. If that failed, I'd honk my horn until the driver looked in his rear-view mirror and saw me making helpful, suggestive hand motions indicating that he is in the passing lane, and if he wants to drive at 55, he should do it in a more appropriate place, such as the waiting room of a dental office. If that failed, I'd sound the warning siren, which would go, and I quote, “WHOOOP WHOOOP WHOOOP WHOOOP.” Only if all these measures failed would I proceed to the final step, total vaporization of the car (unless of course there was a BABY ON BOARD!).

Too violent, you say? Shut up or I'll break your legs. No, wait, forgive me. I'm a little tense, is all, from driving behind these people. But something has to be done, and I figure if word got around among members of the left-lane slow-driver community, wherever they get together—hat stores would be my guess—that they had a choice of either moving to the right or turning into clouds of charged particles, many would choose the former.

It is not entirely their fault. Part of the problem is all those signs on the interstates that say SPEED LIMIT 55. I am no psychologist, but I believe those signs may create the impression among poorly informed drivers that the speed limit is 55. Which of course it is not. We Americans pretend 55 is the speed limit, similar to the way we're always pretending we want people to have a nice day, but it clearly isn't the real speed limit, since nobody, including the police, actually drives that slowly, except people wearing hats in the left lane.

So the question is, how fast are you really allowed to drive? And the answer is: Nobody will tell you. I'm serious. The United States is the only major industrialized democracy where the speed limit is a secret. I called up a guy I know who happens to be a high-ranking police officer, and I asked him to tell

me the real speed limit, and he did, but only after—this is the absolute truth—he made me promise I wouldn't reveal his name, or his state, or above all the speed limit itself. Do you believe that? Here in the United States of America, home of the recently refurbished Statue of Liberty, we have an officer of the law who is afraid he could lose his job for revealing the speed limit.

When things get this bizarre, we must be dealing with federal policy. Specifically we are dealing with the U.S. Transportation Secretary, who is in charge of enforcing our National Pretend Speed Limit. The Transportation Secretary has learned—you talk about digging out the hard facts!—that motorists in a number of states are driving faster than 55 miles per hour, and she threatened to cut off these states' federal highway funds. So, to keep the Transportation Secretary happy, the police have to pretend they're enforcing the 55 limit, when in fact they think it's stupid and won't give you a ticket unless you exceed the real speed limit, which varies from state to state, and even from day to day, and which the police don't dare talk about in public for fear of further upsetting the Transportation Secretary.

I told my friend, the high-ranking police officer, that this system creates a lot of anxiety in us civilian motorists, never knowing how fast we're allowed to go, and he said the police like it, because they can make the speed limit whatever the hell they want it to be, depending on how they feel. "It used to be," he said, "that the only fun you had in police work was police brutality. Now the real fun is to keep screwing with people's heads about what the speed limit is."

Ha ha! He was just kidding, I am sure. Nevertheless, I think we need a better system, and fortunately I have thought one up. Here it is: The state should say the hell with the federal highway funds. They could make a lot more money if they set up little roadside stands where you could stop your car and pay \$5, and a state employee would whisper the speed limit for that day in your ear. What do you think? I think it makes more sense than the system we have now. Of course, the Transportation Secretary wouldn't like it, but I don't see why we should care, seeing as how the Transportation Secretary probably gets chauffeured around in an official federal limousine that is, of course, totally immune from traffic laws. Although I imagine it would be vulnerable to atomic land torpedoes.

Sacking The Season

It's football season again, and I know I speak for everybody in North America when I make the following statement: rah. Because, to me, football is more than just a game. It is a potential opportunity to see a live person lying on the ground with a bone sticking out of his leg, while the fans, to show their appreciation, perform "the wave."

And football breeds character. They are constantly scrubbing the locker rooms because of all the character that breeds in there. This results in men the caliber of famed Notre Dame player George Gipp, played by Ronald Reagan, who, in a famous anecdote, looked up from his deathbed and told Pat O'Brien, played by Knute Rockne, that if things ever really got bad for the Fighting Irish, he (O'Brien) should tell "the boys" to win one for the Gipper. Which O'Brien did, and the boys said: "What for? He's dead." Ha ha! This is just one reason I am so excited about the upcoming season.

Before I unveil my Pigskin Preview, however, I must say a few serious words here about a problem that, regrettably, has reached epidemic proportions in the world of sports fans. I'm talking about male cheerleaders. I don't know where you grew up, but where I grew up, there were certain things a guy absolutely did not do, and cheerleading is about six of them. A guy who led cheers where I grew up

would have been driven around for a few hours inside somebody's engine compartment. Most likely Steve Stormack's.

So you may call me insecure if you wish, but I am deeply troubled when I see young men on TV bouncing up and down on their tiptoes and clapping like sea lions, and the fact that they get to hug the female cheerleaders and sometimes pick them up by their personal regions is not, in my view, an adequate excuse. I am calling on you sports fans to write letters to U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese urging him to appoint a federal commission to issue a concerned and bulky report about this issue, so that we sports writers can put it behind us once and for all and get back to writing stories about what should be the topic of interest on the sports pages: drugs.

Drug testing is very big in football. This is because football players are Role Models for young people. All you young people out there want to grow up and have enormous necks and get knee operations as often as haircuts. That's why the people in charge of football don't want you to associate their sport in any way with drugs. They want you to associate it with alcohol. During televised games, you'll see announcements wherein famous athletes urge you not to take drugs alternating with announcements wherein famous ex-athletes urge you to drink beer. Good luck, young people!

Now let's take a look at what kind of action we can expect to see this season on the actual "grid-iron" per se. As in previous years, football will be divided into two major sectors, "college" and "professional," the difference being that professional players receive money, whereas college players also receive complimentary automobiles, although many teams will be hard-hit by strict new academic regulations requiring that a player cannot compete unless he can read most of the numbers on his gearshift knob. Nevertheless, I look for an action-packed college season in which major teams featuring linemen named Dwight who have the size and vocabulary skills of cement trucks trash a series of amateur schools by scores ranging as high as 175-0, which will earn them the right to play in such New Year's Day classics as the Rose Bowl, the Orange Bowl, and the Liquid You Drain Out of a Can of Artichoke Hearts Bowl, although unfortunately not against each other.

In professional football, I look for a very exciting and competitive season until about a third of the way through the first game, when Injuries will become a Factor. These injuries will of course all be caused by artificial turf, which is easily the most dangerous substance in the universe. If we really wanted to protect Europe, we would simply cover the border regions with artificial turf, and the Russians would all be writhing on the ground clutching their knees within seconds after they invaded. And then the Europeans could perform "the wave."

Here are some other predictions: I look for the TV networks to provide helpful expert analysis by ex-players who utilize technological wizardry such as the "electronic chalkboard" to make simple running plays seem like brain surgery. I look for 19,000 third-down situations, all of them Crucial. In any group of five players, I look for four of them to be Probably the Most Underrated in the League. I look for Second Effort, Good Hang Time, and a Quick Release. I look for yet another Classic Super Bowl Match-up like the one we had last year between two teams whose names escape me at the moment.

I look for a video rental store that's open all weekend.

Why Sports Is A Drag

Mankind's yearning to engage in sports is older than recorded history, dating back to the time, millions

of years ago, when the first primitive man picked up a crude club and a round rock, tossed the rock into the air, and whomped the club into the sloping forehead of the first primitive umpire. What inner force drove this first athlete? Your guess is as good as mine. Better, probably, because you haven't had four beers. All I know is, whatever the reason, Mankind is still nuts about sports. As Howard Cosell, who may not be the most likable person in the world but is certainly one of the most obnoxious, put it: "In terms of Mankind and sports, blah blah blah blah the 1954 Brooklyn Dodgers."

Notice that Howard and I both use the term "Mankind." Womankind really isn't into sports in the same way. I realize things have changed since my high-school days, when sports were considered unfeminine and your average girls' gym class consisted of six girls in those gym outfits colored Digestive Enzyme Green running around waving field-hockey sticks and squealing, and 127

girls on the sidelines in civilian clothing, claiming it was That Time of the Month. I realize that today you have a number of top female athletes such as Martina Navratilova who can run like deer and bench-press Chevrolet pickup trucks. But to be brutally frank, women as a group have a long way to go before they reach the level of intensity and dedication to sports that enables men to be such incredible jerks about it.

If you don't believe me, go to your local racquetball club and observe the difference between the way men and women play. Where I play, the women tend to gather on the court in groups of random sizes—sometimes three, sometimes five, as if it were a Jane Fonda workout—and the way they play is, one of them will hit the ball at the wall and the rest of them will admire the shot and compliment her quite sincerely, and then they all sort of relax, as if they're thinking, well, thank goodness that's over with, and they always seem very surprised when the ball comes back. If one of them has the presence of mind to take another swing, and if she actually hits the ball, everybody is very complimentary. If she misses it, the others all tell her what a good try she made, really, then they all laugh and act very relieved because they know they have some time to talk before the ball comes bouncing off that darned wall again.

Meanwhile, over in the next court, you will have two males wearing various knee braces and wrist bands and special leatheroid racquetball gloves, hurling themselves into the walls like musk oxen on Dexedrine, and after every single point one or both of them will yell "S-!" in the self-reproving tone of voice you might use if you had just accidentally shot your grandmother. American men tend to take their sports seriously, much more seriously than they take family matters or Asia.

This is why it's usually a mistake for men and women to play on teams together. I sometimes play in a coed slow-pitch softball league, where the rules say you have to have two women on the field. The teams always have one of the women play catcher, because in slow-pitch softball the batters hit just about every pitch, so it wouldn't really hurt you much if you had a deceased person at catcher. Our team usually puts the other woman at second base, where the maximum possible number of males can get there on short notice to help out in case of emergency. As far as I can tell, our second basewoman is a pretty good baseball player, better than I am anyway, but there's no way to know for sure because if the ball gets anywhere near her, a male comes barging over from, say, right field, to deal with it. She's been on the team for three seasons now, but the males still don't trust her. They know that if she had to choose between catching a fly ball and saving an infant's life, deep in her soul, she would probably elect to save the infant's life, without even considering whether there were men on base.

This difference in attitude between men and women carries over to the area of talking about sports, especially sporting events that took place long ago. Take the 1960 World Series. If we were to look at it objectively, we would have to agree that the outcome of the 1960 World Series no longer matters. You

could make a fairly strong case that it didn't really matter in 1960. Women know this, which is why you almost never hear them mention the 1960 World Series, whereas you take virtually any male over age 35 and even if he can't remember which of his children has diabetes, he can remember exactly how Pirates shortstop Bill Mazeroski hit the ninth-inning home run that beat the Yankees, and he will take every available opportunity to discuss it at length with other males.

See that? Out there in Readerland, you females just read right through that last sentence, nodding in agreement, but you males leaped from your chairs and shouted: "Mazeroski wasn't a **SHORTSTOP!** Mazeroski played **SECOND BASE!**" Every male in America has millions of perfectly good brain cells devoted to information like this. We can't help it. We have no perspective. I have a friend named Buzz, a **SUC**cessful businessman and the most rational person you ever want to meet, and the high point of his entire life is the time he got Stan Albeck, the coach of the New jersey Nets, to look directly at him during a professional basketball game and make a very personal remark rhyming with "duck shoe." I should explain that Buzz and I have season tickets to the Philadelphia 76ers, so naturally we hate the Nets a great deal. It was a great honor when Albeck singled Buzz out of the crowd for recognition. The rest of us males congratulated Buzz as if he'd won the Nobel Prize for Physics.

It's silly, really, this male lack of perspective, and it can lead to unnecessary tragedy, such as soccer-riot deaths and the University of Texas. What is even more tragic is that women are losing perspective, too. Even as you read these words, women are writing vicious letters to the editor, expressing great fury at me for suggesting they don't take their racquetball seriously. Soon they will be droning on about the importance of relief pitching.

Batting Clean-Up And Striking Out

The primary difference between men and women is that women can see extremely small quantities of dirt. Not when they're babies, of course. Babies of both sexes have a very low awareness of dirt, other than to think it tastes better than food.

But somewhere during the growth process, a hormonal secretion takes place in women that enables them to see dirt that men cannot see, dirt, at the level of molecules, whereas men don't generally notice it until it forms clumps large enough to support agriculture. This can lead to tragedy, as it did in the ill-fated ancient city of Pompeii, where the residents all got killed when the local volcano erupted and covered them with a layer of ash 20 feet deep. Modern people often ask, "How come, when the ashes started falling, the Pompeii people didn't just leave?" The answer is that in Pompeii, it was the custom for the men to do the housework. They never even noticed the ash until it had for the most part covered the children. "Hey!" the men said (in Latin). "It's mighty quiet around here!" This is one major historical reason why, to this very day, men tend to do extremely little in the way of useful housework.

What often happens in my specific family unit is that my wife will say to me: "Could you clean Robert's bathroom? it's filthy." So I'll gather up the Standard Male Cleaning Implements, namely a spray bottle of Windex and a wad of paper towels, and I'll go into Robert's bathroom, and it always looks perfectly fine. I mean, when I hear the word "filthy" used to describe a bathroom, I think about this bar where I used to hang out called Joe's Sportsman's Lounge, where the men's room had bacteria you could enter in a rodeo.

Nevertheless, because I am a sensitive and caring kind of guy, I "clean" the bathroom, spraying

Windex all over everything including the 600 action figures each sold separately that God forbid Robert should ever take a bath without, and then I wipe it back off with the paper towels, and I go back to whatever activity I had been engaged in, such as doing an important project on the Etch-a-Sketch, and a little while later my wife will say: "I hate to rush you, but could you do Robert's bathroom? It's really filthy." She is in there looking at the very walls I just Windexed, and she is seeing dirt! Everywhere! And if I tell her I already cleaned the bathroom, she gives me this look that she has perfected, the same look she used on me the time I selected Robert's outfit for school and part of it turned out to be pajamas.

The opposite side of the dirt coin, of course, is sports. This is an area where men tend to feel very sensitive and women tend to be extremely callous. I have written about this before and I always get irate letters from women who say they are the heavyweight racquetball champion of some place like Iowa and are sensitive to sports to the point where they could crush my skull like a ripe grape, but I feel these women are the exception.

A more representative woman is my friend Maddy, who once invited some people, including my wife and me, over to her house for an evening of stimulating conversation and jovial companionship, which sounds fine except that this particular evening occurred during a World Series game. If you can imagine such a social gaffe.

We sat around the living room and Maddy tried to stimulate a conversation, but we males could not focus our attention on the various suggested topics because we could actually feel the World Series television and radio broadcast rays zinging through the air, penetrating right into our bodies, causing our dental fillings to vibrate, and all the while the women were behaving as though nothing were wrong. It was exactly like that story by Edgar Allan Poe where the murderer can hear the victim's heart beating louder and louder even though he (the murder victim) is dead, until finally he (the murderer) can't stand it anymore, and he just has to watch the World Series on television. That was how we felt.

Maddy's husband made the first move, coming up with an absolutely brilliant means of escape: He used their baby. He picked up Justine, their seven-months-old daughter, who was fussing a little, and announced: "What this child needs is to have her bottle and watch the World Series." And just like that he was off to the family room, moving very quickly for a big man holding a baby. A second male escaped by pretending to clear the dessert plates. Soon all four of us were in there, watching the Annual Fall Classic, while the women prattled away about human relationships or something. It turned out to be an extremely pivotal game.

Snots At Sea

Like most Americans, I was thrilled to death last February when our wealthy yachting snots won the coveted America's Cup back from Australia's wealthy yachting snots.

It was not an easy victory. Our boys spent years experimenting with different designs for their boat before they came up with the innovative idea of having a submerged nuclear submarine tow it. "That was the real breakthrough," explained Captain Dennis Conner. "We could hit nearly 50 miles per hour without even putting up our sails. Plus we had torpedoes." It was American ingenuity at its best, and I think that, as a nation, we should be inspired to take up sailing as a popular mania, similar to the way, in previous years, we have taken up Bruce Springsteen and being Re publican.

I have done some sailing myself, and let me tell you: There's nothing quite like getting out on the open sea, where you can forget about the hassles and worries of life on land, and concentrate on the hassles and worries of life on the sea, such as death by squid. My son, Robert, has this book entitled *Giants of Land, Sea, and Air, Past and Present*, which I like to read to him at bedtime to insure that he won't fall asleep until just after dawn. Here's what this book says regarding squid: "The giant squid may reach a length of 55 feet, including its 35-foot tentacles."

My point is that while you should of course enjoy your sailing experience, you should take the routine marine precaution of being constantly aware that a creature the size of Yonkers, New York, could be oozing and sliming along just beneath the surface, watching you with humongous eyes. Another one of Robert's books, *The Big Book of Animal Records*, states that the eye of a giant squid can get to be—this is an Amazing True Nature Fact, coming up here—16 inches across. Think about that. Think about the size of the whole eyeball. Think of the pranks you could play if you got hold of an eyeball like that.

DELIVERY ROOM DOCTOR: Well, Mr. and Mrs. Foonster, here's your newborn child!

NEW PARENTS: AIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE.

But this is not the time for lighthearted humor. This is a time to learn Safe Boating Practices, so that your sailing experience will not be ruined in the event of a squid attack. Here is the procedure recommended by boating safety experts:

1. Do not panic. Remember that the squid does not necessarily want to eat you. Oh, sure, it wants to eat somebody, but this does not have to be you.

2. Shout: "Here! Eat Ralph!"

Boating safety experts recommend that you always keep a supply of unpopular guests on hand to push overboard as emergency marine sacrifices. They do not, however, have to be named Ralph. You can just claim they are named Ralph, because you are dealing with a squid.

OK, that takes care of boating safety. Now let's talk about the kind of boat you should select. There are many different kinds, the main ones being yachts, swoops, tankers, frigates, drawls, skeeters, fuggits, kvetches, and pantaloons. These are all basically the same. The only important factor to bear in mind, when selecting a boat, is that it should be "seaworthy," meaning that if for some reason you accidentally drive it into another boat, or a reef, or a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge, you will not be held financially responsible.

This means the type of boat you want is what veteran mariners refer to as a "stolen" boat, or, if this is not practical, a "rented" boat.

I rented a boat once, in the Virgin Islands. My wife and I did this with another couple, and we agreed that I should be the captain, because I had the most sailing experience, in the form of sitting on various people's sailboats drinking beer and remarking upon the weather. Fortunately the boat we rented had a motor in it. You will definitely want this feature on your sailboat too, because if you put up the sails, the boat tips way over, and you could spill your beer. This was a constant problem for Magellan. I put the motor on whenever we wanted to actually get somewhere, or if we came within two miles of something we might run into, such as another boat or a Virgin Island. On those rare occasions when I did attempt to sail, I was hampered by the fact that the only nautical commands my crew understood were:

1. "Pull on that thing."
2. "No, the OTHER thing."
3. "No, the thing over THERE, dammit."
4. "Never mind."

Our navigational policy was always to steer the boat in the direction of restaurants and hotels that had real bathrooms. Our boat allegedly had a bathroom (or as we say aboard ship, a “bathroom”), but it was about the size of those styrofoam containers you get Egg McMuffins in, and it was mostly filled with the marine toilet, a complex and punitive device that at any moment you expected to see a tentacle come snaking out of. Which is why the No. 1 rule of the sea is: If you absolutely have to use the marine toilet, you want to send Ralph in there first.

Sic, Sic, Sic

I would have to say that the greatest single achievement of the American medical establishment is nasal spray. Oh, I realize it can be overdone. A friend of mine named Tatnall claims he knew a woman who was so addicted to nasal spray that she carried some down the aisle on her wedding day. Her hand would go darting under her veil, and a snort would resound through the church. Tatnall swears this is true. So I fully agree that nasal-spray abuse is a serious problem and we certainly need some kind of enormous federal program to combat it.

But aside from that, I feel that nasal spray is a wondrous medical achievement, because it is supposed to relieve nasal congestion, and by gadfrey, it relieves nasal congestion. What I’m saying is that it actually works, which is something you can say about very few other aspects of the medical establishment.

This is especially true when it comes to figuring out what is wrong with sick people. My experience has been that doctors will give you a clear-cut, understandable diagnosis only if you wander in with, say, an ice pick protruding from your skull. And even then, you have to pretend that you don’t know what’s wrong. If you say, “I have an ice pick in my skull,” the doctor will become irritated, because he spent all those years in medical school and he’s damned if he’s going to accept opinions from an untrained layperson such as yourself. “It conceivably could be an ice pick,” he’ll say, in a tone of voice that suggests he’s talking to a very stupid sheep, “but just in case I’m going to arrange for a test in which we remove a little snippet of your liver every week for eight weeks.” So your best bet is to keep your mouth shut and let the doctor diagnose the ice pick, which he will call by its Latin name.

If you have a subtler problem, however, you may never find out what’s wrong. For example, a few months back, one side of my tongue swelled up. I tried everything—aspirin, beer, nasal spray—but my tongue was still swollen. So I went to a doctor. His receptionist began my treatment by having me sit in the waiting room where I read a therapeutic article in a 1981 issue of National Geographic. That took me maybe an hour, during which I learned a great deal about this ancient tribe of people who managed to build a gigantic and photogenic temple in a jungle several thousand years ago despite the fact that they were extremely primitive at the time.

Step Two in the therapy was when a nurse put me in a little examination room with a paper-covered table, which evidently was emitting some kind of invisible healing rays because they had me sit there alone with it for 43 minutes by my watch. It wasn’t as boring as it sounds because there was a scale in there, so I could weigh myself for amusement.

To culminate the treatment, the actual doctor took a few moments out from his busy schedule of renewing his subscription to National Geographic and renting additional space for people to wait in and came right into the room with me and actually looked at my tongue. He was in the room with me for 2

minutes and 30 seconds by my watch, at the end of which he told me that my problem was two Latin words, which I later figured out meant swollen tongue. He said I should come back in a week. I considered suggesting that, seeing how I had already been there for almost two hours, maybe I should just spend the week in the examination room, but I was afraid this would anger him and he would send me to the hospital for tests. I didn't want to go to the hospital, because at the hospital as soon as they find out what your Blue Cross number is they pounce on you with needles the size of turkey basters. Those are the two most popular doctor options: to tell you to come back in a week, or to send you to the hospital for tests. Another option would be to say, "it sure beats the heck out of me why your tongue is swollen," but that could be a violation of the Hippocratic Oath.

What I finally did was talk to a woman I know who used to be a nurse but had to quit because she kept wanting to punch doctors in the mouth, and she suggested that I gargle with salt water. I did, and the swelling went right away. Although of course this could also have been because of the paper-covered table.

I really envy my dog. When she gets sick or broken, we take her to the veterinarian, and he fixes her right up. No Latin words, no big deal. It's a very satisfying experience, except of course for my dog, who routinely tries to launch herself out of the examining room through closed windows. I find myself thinking: why can't I get medical care like this? How much more complicated can people be than dogs? I'm kind of hoping my dog's tongue will swell up, because I'm dying to see how the veterinarian treats her. If he has her gargle with salt water, I'm going to start taking my problems to him.

The Light Side Of Smoking

As you are aware, each year the U.S. Surgeon General emerges from relative obscurity into the limelight of public attention and if he sees his shadow, we have six more weeks of winter. No, all kidding aside, what he does is issue his annual report, where he tells you that smoking is bad for you. In fact, for a while, previous surgeons general got so lazy that they were turning in the same report, over and over, until finally one year Richard Nixon got ketchup stains on it.

Anyway, the result of all this reporting is that the general public at large has gotten very strict about smoking. Hardly a day goes by when you don't read a newspaper story like this:

"SAN FRANCISCO-The city commissioners here yesterday approved a tough new anti-smoking ordinance under which if you see a person light a cigarette in a public place, you can spit in this person's face."

I agree with this new strictness. And I'm not one of those holier-than-thou types who go around condemning smoking, drinking and senseless murder without ever having even tried them. I used to smoke cigarettes, plenty of them, sometimes two and three at a time when I had Creative Block and was hoping to accidentally set my office on fire so I could write a column about it.

And then one morning, four years ago, something happened that I will never forget. I woke up, and I looked at myself in the mirror, because I happened to wake up in the bathroom, and I said to myself: "Dave, you have a wonderful wife, you have a newborn son, you have a good job, you have friends who care about you, you have a lawnmower that starts on the second or third pull—you have everything a man could possibly want, and a whole lifetime ahead of you to enjoy it in. Why not smoke a cigarette right now?" And so I did. I didn't quit until two years later, at Hannah Gardner's annual extravaganza

eggnog party, when I was overcome by a giant weepy guilt attack while under the influence of Hannah's annual eggnog, the recipe for which we should all hope to God never falls into the hands of the Russians.

Not that it was easy to quit. Not at all. A few months back, I read a newspaper article that said the government, after much research, had decided that nicotine is an addictive drug, even worse than heroin, and I just had to laugh the bitter kind of laugh that Clark Gable laughs in *Gone With the Wind* when he realizes that the South has been reduced to a lump of carbon. I mean, surely the government has better things to spend its money on. Surely the government could have used these research funds to buy a military toilet seat, and just asked us former smokers about nicotine vs. heroin addiction. We could have simply pointed out that, when a commercial airliner takes off, the instant the wheels leave the ground, the pilot, who you would think would be busy steering or something, tells the smokers that they may light up. He does not tell the heroin addicts that they may stick their needles into themselves, does he? No, he doesn't, because heroin addicts have enough self-control to survive a couple of heroin-free hours. But the pilot knows that if he doesn't let the cigarette smokers get some nicotine into themselves immediately, they will sneak off to smoke in the bathroom, possibly setting it on fire, or, if already occupied by other smokers, they will try to get out on the wing.

So we are talking about a powerful addiction here, and I frankly feel the government's efforts to combat it are pathetic. The big tactic so far has been warnings on cigarette packages. The government seems to feel that smokers—these are people who, if they run out of cigarettes late at night in a hotel and have no change for the machine, will smoke used cigarettes from the sand-filled ashtrays next to the elevators, cigarettes whose previous owners could easily have diseases such as we associate with public toilet seats—the government believes that these same smokers will read their cigarette packages, as if they needed instructions on how to operate a cigarette, and then they'll remark, with great surprise: “Look here! It says that cigarette smoking is Hazardous to Your Health!! How very fortunate that I read this package and obtained this consumer information! I shall throw these away right now!”

No, we need something stronger than warnings. We need cigarette loads. For those of you who were never obnoxious 12-year-old boys, I should explain that a “load” is an old reliable practical joke device, a small, chemically treated sliver of wood that you secretly insert into a cigarette, and when the cigarette burns down far enough, the load explodes, and everybody laughs like a fiend except, of course, the smoker, who is busy wondering if his or her heart is going to start beating again. I think Congress ought to require the cigarette manufacturers to put loads in, say, one out of every 250 cigarettes. This would be a real deterrent to smokers thinking about lighting up, especially after intimate moments:

MAN: Was it good for you? (inhales) WOMAN: It was wonderful. (inhales) Was it good for you?

MAN: Yes. (inhales) I have an idea: Why don't we BLAM!!

What do you think? I think it would be very effective, and if it doesn't work, we could have the Air Force spray something toxic on North and South Carolina.

Ear Wax In The Fog

When you talk about the postderegulation airline industry, the three issues that inevitably arise are smoking, fog, and earwax. We'll take them individually.

Follow me closely here. You know those little earphones they give you on airplanes so you can listen to old Bill Cosby routines? OK, let's assume that 20 million people have flown on earphone flights in

the past 15 years. Let's further assume that each person leaves one-sixteenth of an ounce of earwax on these phones (this is an average, of course; Nancy Reagan leaves much less). This means that in the last 15 years alone, the airlines have collected nearly 600 tons. Do you have any idea how large a blob that makes? Neither do I, so I called the folks at the Miami Public Library, who did a little research and informed me that it was the most disgusting question they had ever been asked.

My question is this: Why do the airlines—why does any nonmilitary organization—need a blob of earwax that large? My personal theory is that they're going to drop it on the radar apparatus at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, just so they can see the looks on the faces of passengers all over America when the ticket-counter agents say: "I'm afraid your flight has been cancelled due to earwax on the radar at O'Hare." Any problem at O'Hare, even a minor plumbing malfunction, inevitably paralyzes air travel all over the free world. Nobody really knows why this is, but if you ask the ticket agent, he'll come up with something just to drive you away: "Your flight is supposed to use the plane from flight 407, which is due in from Houston, only it couldn't take off because the crew was supposed to arrive on flight 395 from O'Hare, but that plane never got to O'Hare because the captain, the handsome, brooding Mark Crandall, had seen Nikki and Paul leave the party together arm in arm and in a rage of jealousy, had decided to seduce Paul's former lover Brenda, unaware that she had just found out about Steven's fatal liver disease. So we're looking at a delay of at least two hours."

But the airlines won't use the earwax just yet. No, that's their trump card, and they won't play it until more people wise up about the fog. I figured it out several years ago. See, I live in an area that is never blanketed by fog. People often remark on this at parties. "Say what you will," they remark, "but this area is never blanketed by fog, ha ha!" Except when I am trying to get back home from a distant airport, at which time it is always pea soup. "I'm afraid your destination is completely fogged in, Mr. Barry," the ticket agent says, in the tone of voice you use when somebody else's destination is fogged in and you're going home in a half-hour to have a drink and watch Johnny Carson.

Here's how they do it: They have an agent permanently assigned to lurk in the bushes outside my home, and when he sees me walk out the door carrying a suitcase, he gets on the walkie-talkie. "Looks like he's going to try to make a round trip via airplane again!" he whispers. This alerts his superiors back at airline headquarters that they should stop drilling holes into the heads of small furry woolen creatures and arrange to have a dense fog blanket transferred down from Canada via weather satellite.

Ask yourself this question: If Charles Lindbergh, flying with no instruments other than a bologna sandwich, managed to cross the Atlantic and land safely on a runway completely covered with French people, why are today's airplanes, which are equipped with radar and computers and individualized liquor bottles, unable to cope with fog? Are they concerned about passenger safety? Then why not let the passengers decide? Why not get on the public-address system and say: "Attention passengers. Your destination is very foggy. We think you'll make it, but there's always a chance you'll crash on a remote mountaintop and be eaten by wolves. Your other option is to stay here in the airport for God knows how long, sitting in these plastic seats and eating \$3.50 cheese sandwiches manufactured during the Truman administration. What do you say?" The gate agents would have to leap up on the counter to avoid being trampled by the hordes barging onto the plane.

Which leads us to the question of whether smoking should be allowed on airplanes. The Founding Fathers, who had bales of foresight, specified in the U.S. Constitution that people could smoke on airplanes, but they had to sit near the toilets. Now, however, there's a move afoot to ban smoking altogether on flights that last less than two hours. The cigarette industry is against this ban, their

argument being that there is no Hard Evidence that cigarettes are anything short of wonderful, according to the highly skilled research scientists that the cigarette industry keeps in small darkened cages somewhere. Another strong anti-ban argument was raised by Congresssman Charlie Rose of North Carolina, who warned the Civil Aeronautics Board recently that people would sneak into the washrooms to smoke and might start fires. "There's a significant problem if they were to go into washrooms for a smoke and forget where the used paper towels are stored," observed Congressman Rose, who evidently feels that many smokers have extremely small brains.

But I think he has a point. I think that if the CAB decides to ban smoking, it should require the airlines to install smoke detectors in the washrooms, so that if a person sets one off, it will activate an unusually powerful toilet mechanism that will flush the smoker right out of the plane. Of course, if I know the airlines, they'll rig it so he lands on the radar apparatus at O'Hare.

1987: Look Back In Horror

January

2—In College Bowl action, the University of Miami loses the national championship to Penn State when Vinny Testaverde, after selecting the

"History" category, identifies World War II as "a kind of fish."

3—Oral Roberts tells his followers that unless they send him \$4.5 million by the end of the month, God will turn him into a hypocritical money-grubbing slime bag.

5—In response to growing pressure from the United States, the government of Colombia vows to track down its major drug dealers and, if necessary, remove them from the Cabinet.

8—The Federal Aviation Administration announces that, in response to a routine questionnaire, 63 percent of the nation's air traffic controllers stated that their primary career goals was "to defeat the forces of the Planet Wambeeno."

10—In the ongoing war against the federal deficit, the Reagan administration submits the first-ever \$1 trillion budget.

14—In New York City, officials of the justice Department's Organized Crime Task Force announce that Anthony "Grain Embargo" DiPonderoso and Jimmy "Those Little Pins They Put in New Shirts" Zooroni have agreed to enter the Federal Nickname Exchange Program.

16—In his first press conference since 1952, President Reagan, asked by reporters to comment on persistent allegations that he is "out of touch," responds: "Thanks, but I just had breakfast."

18—The People's Republic of China announces that "Deng Xiaoping" means "Big Stud Artichoke."

21—The Audi Corporation is forced to recall 250,000 cars after repeated incidents wherein parked Audis, apparently acting on their own, used their mobile phones to purchase stocks on margin.

26—President Reagan tells Iran-contra scandal investigators that he "might have" approved the sale of arms to Iran.

28—In the Middle East, Syria has its name legally changed to "Jordan." A welcome calm settles over Beirut as the six remaining civilians are taken hostage.

30—In Washington, the Internal Revenue Service unveils the new, improved W-4

form, which is such a big hit that the experts who thought it up are immediately put to work on

developing a policy for the Persian Gulf.

February

1—A new policy requiring random drug testing of all airline pilots runs into a snag when nearly half of the Delta pilots are unable to hit the specimen bottle.

2—Miami City Commissioner Rosario Kennedy, responding to a Herald report that taxpayers spent \$111,549 to decorate her office says—we are not making this quotation up—”there’s not one item that really stands out. It’s not the Taj Mahal.” Donations of clothing and canned goods pour in from concerned taxpayers.

3—In the ongoing war against the federal budget deficit, Congress gives itself a pay raise.

4—The United States yacht Stars and Stripes recaptures the coveted America’s Cup when the Australian entry, Kookaburra, is sunk by a Chinese-made

“Silkworm” missile. The U.S. Sixth Fleet steams toward the troubled region with orders “to form humongous targets.” Liberace goes to the Big Candelabra in the Sky.

6—In a White House ceremony marking his 76th birthday, President Reagan attempts to blow out the hot line.

7—Famed Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward reveals that, in a secret hospital interview, dying entertainer Liberace revealed that Woodward’s upcoming book, *Veil*, would be “a real page-turner.”

8—True item: Senator Lloyd Bentsen, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, sends out a letter telling lobbyists that for \$10,000 each, they can attend monthly breakfasts with him.

9—Representative Arnold LaTreece announces that for \$15,000 each, lobbyists can kiss him on the lips.

10—George Bush announces that he is available for \$12.50.

11—President Reagan tells Iran-contra scandal investigators that he did not approve of the arms sale to Iran.

15—George Bush reduces his price to \$3.99, including the souvenir beverage mug.

17—In Colombia, police arrest Carlos Lehder for jaywalking and discover, during a routine search, that his pockets contain 1,265,000 pounds of cocaine. Lehder claims to have “no idea” how it got there.

19—Mario Cuomo announces that he doesn’t want to be president and immediately becomes the Democratic front-runner.

22—George Bush announces that he doesn’t want to be president, either.

22—Andy Warhol goes to the Big Soup Can in the Sky.

23—Panic grips the nation as a terrorist group seizes 150,000 new, improved

W-4 forms and threatens to send them to randomly selected Americans through the mail.

23—Famed Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward reveals that, in a secret hospital interview, dying artist Andy Warhol revealed that Woodward’s forthcoming book, *Veil*, would be “available in bookstores everywhere.”

24—President Reagan announces that he cannot remember whether he approved the sale of arms to Iran. In a quotation that we are not making up, the president tells White House reporters: “Everybody that can remember what they were doing on August 8, 1985, raise your hand.”

25—White House reporters examine their diaries and discover, to their shock, that on August 8, 1985,

they approved the sale of arms to Iran. They are immediately arrested.

March

2—The Miami Grand Prix is won by Mrs. Rose Gridhorn, 83, of Hackensack, New jersey, driving a 1976 Chrysler New Yorker with the left blinker on.

3—Comedian Danny Kaye dies moments after granting an interview to Bob Woodward.

7—In the widening scandal on Wall Street, the heads of three major investment firms rob a liquor store.

9—In Tallahassee, state legislators agree on a plan to tax professionals who perform services. A few hours later, they decide it also should apply to lawyers.

11—Florida Governor “Bob” Martinez, who ran for office on a platform of opposing taxes, announces that he will support the new tax on services, until it is passed, then he will call for a referendum so voters can vote against the tax, although he will campaign for the tax, but then he will change his mind and announce that he is calling a special session of the Legislature to repeal the tax. Everybody naturally assumes that the governor is joking.

13—Noncandidate Mario Cuomo, carrying out his normal duties as governor of New York state, meets with the heads of state of England, France, Norway, Sweden, and Germany.

15—A barge loaded with garbage sets out into the Atlantic under the command of explorer/author Thor Heyerdahl, who is seeking to prove his theory that South America could have been discovered by ancient mariners sailing from Islip, Long Island, in crude garbage barges.

18—The Southern Methodist University football team is suspended from intercollegiate athletics when National Collegiate Athletic Association investigators, after taking urine samples, determine that the school's leading rusher, majoring in communications, is a horse. 2

1—The IRS releases an even newer, simpler W-4 form in response to complaints from a number of taxpayers, all of whom will be audited for the rest of their lives.

23—The Southern Methodist University horse is drafted by the Kansas City Chiefs.

24—A place called Chad defeats Libya in some kind of war. This really happened.

27—In what is hailed as a major arms race breakthrough, United States and Soviet arms negotiators in Geneva agree to wear matching outfits.

30—In an illegal industrial waste dump somewhere in Louisiana, lightning strikes two adjacent putrid pools of festering corrosive toxic slime, setting off a bizarre chain of chemical reactions that cause the pools first to bubble, then slowly, horrifyingly, to solidify and pulsate upward, gradually forming themselves into shapes that, in the ghastly light of the flickering electrical storm, appear almost human. “Hi!” they shriek cheerfully into the swampland emptiness. “We’re Jim and Tammy Faye!”

April

1—Speaking in unison, an estimated three dozen congressmen, all of them age 43, all of them blond, and all of them named Dick, announce that they are seeking the Democratic presidential nomination.

3—In the Persian Gulf, Iranians attack the Islip garbage barge, but are driven off by courageous flies.

6—Noncandidate Mario Cuomo, in the pursuit of his normal gubernatorial duties, reaches a tentative pact with Soviet arms negotiators.

12—At an art auction, Vincent Van Gogh's Sunflowers fetches the highest price ever paid for a painting, \$39.8 million, paid by grateful Miami taxpayers wishing to hang it in the office of City Commissioner Rosario Kennedy.

13—True Anecdote: In National League baseball action, the Atlanta Braves' Dion James hits a ball that would have been caught easily, except that in midair it strikes and kills a dove.

14—In Colorado, Gary Hart declares his candidacy for the presidential nomination, making the announcement while standing in front of a dramatic backdrop of soaring mountains, towering pine trees and four Miami Herald reporters disguised as rhododendrons.

15—The lifeless body of Atlanta Braves player Dion James is found under an enormous mound of dove droppings.

16—President and Mrs. Reagan release their tax returns.

19—The IRS sends back the Reagans' tax returns, gently pointing out that you're supposed to fill them out.

22—Crack U.S. counterintelligence agents in Moscow begin to suspect that the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow, constructed by Soviet labor, might be bugged, when one of them sneezes in the ambassador's office and six chairs say,

“Gesundheit.”

23—The National Basketball Association grants Miami a franchise. The new team will be named The Enormous Bloodsucking Insects.

26—jack Kemp announces that he is running for president, pledging that, if elected, he will deepen his voice.

30—Following a lengthy and dramatic trial, a confused New Jersey jury awards custody of a 3-year-old boy to a 6week-old girl.

May

2—Late at night on a Washington street, four Miami Herald reporters on routine patrol notice that Gary Hart appears to be spending the weekend with an attractive woman who is not his wife. The reporters confront Hart, who explains that there is no woman, and he hardly knows her, and she is actually his uncle, and the voters don't care about candidates' private lives anyway. Satisfied, the reporters decide to write a story about Hart's monetary policy.

3—Like a raging unquenchable forest fire, the Gary Hart story sweeps across the nation, as voters are consumed by a burning need to know more about the candidate's monetary views.

4—The Hart story becomes so hot that issue-oriented Phil Donahue devotes a show to it, preempting the sexchange lesbian surrogate-mother nude-dancer ex-priests.

5—The presidential campaign of Gary Hart experiences another “close call” when a Miami Herald reporter receives a tip that Hart spent a night in Bimini aboard a boat named Monkey Business with an attractive woman who is not his wife. Fortunately, Hart is able to explain that he has never been on a boat and there is no such place as “Bimini” and the person who went there with the woman was actually a being from the Planet Buppo who is able to take the form of leading presidential candidates. Satisfied,

the reporter writes a lengthy analysis of Hart's views on the NATO alliance.

6—An angry Gary Hart is forced to withdraw from the race after word leaks out that the Washington Post has obtained documented evidence that he once proposed tying the prime rate to the Index of Leading Economic Indicators.

7—Citing alleged “bisexual activity,” officials of the Assemblies of God Church vote to have Jim Bakker defrocked. Then they hastily vote to have him frocked again.

16—Rita Hayworth dies moments after confiding to Bob Woodward that his forthcoming book, *Veil*, would be out “just in time for Christmas gift giving.”

29—Nineteen-year-old Mathias Rust, a German, flying a single-engine Cessna airplane, manages to cross 400 miles of Soviet airspace to reach Red Square in Moscow, where he narrowly avoids colliding with a Delta Air Lines flight en route from Pittsburgh to Cleveland.

30—Caspar Weinberger orders 5,000 single-engine Cessna airplanes.

June

1—The public responds with massive displays of sympathy to reports that a number of totally unsuspecting Dade County politicians were cruelly tricked into believing that a private duplex where a man allegedly sold stolen suits was in fact a major department store. “It was a mistake that anyone could have made,” said a police spokesman, “provided that he had the IQ of Cheez Whiz.”

2—True Item: In the ongoing Iran-contra hearings the committee learns that a country named Brunei contributed \$10 million to help the contras, except Fawn Hall or somebody typed a wrong number, so the money ended up in the Swiss bank account of a total stranger. This helps explain why, despite all the elaborate assistance efforts with secret codes and passwords and everything, the only actual aid ever received by the contras was a six-month trial subscription to *Guns and Ammo*.

5—Another True Item: In Venice for the European Economic Summit, President Reagan, unaware that his words are being broadcast over an open microphone, tells a joke wherein God gradually reduces a gondolier's intelligence until the gondolier switches from singing “O Sole Mio” to “When Irish Eyes are Smiling.”

7—Brunei receives 314,334 urgent personal mail solicitations from TV evangelists.

8—In the most dramatic Iran-contra testimony to date, Fawn Hall, played by Farrah Fawcett, testifies that, as justice Department investigators closed in, she and Oliver North stayed late in their White House basement office and “colorized” a number of classic black-and-white films.

13—After a highly controversial trial in New York, “subway vigilante” Bernhard Goetz is acquitted in connection with a subway shooting incident wherein he claims he was attacked by a gang of prominent Wall Street investors.

18—A survey of Florida residents reveals that their No. 1 concern about the state is that “not enough people are walking around with guns.” Alarmed, the state Legislature passes a law under which all citizens who are not actually on Death Row will be required to carry revolvers.

22—Fred Astaire dies in the arms of Bob Woodward.

24—In a ground-breaking experiment, medical researchers reduce a gondolier's intelligence to the bare minimum required to sustain life, and the gondolier says: “Everybody that can remember what they were doing on August 8, 1985, raise your hand.”

29—In Wimbledon action, John McEnroe kills a line judge and is given a stern warning.

July

1—In a contest sponsored by a pesticides company, a Broward County insect is declared the largest cockroach in the country, narrowly edging out Phyllis Schlafly.

4—The Hormel Company marks the 50th anniversary of Spam in festivities featuring a full-size, fully functioning suspension bridge constructed entirely out of the popular luncheon substance.

7—The central figure in the Iran-contra hearings, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, becomes an instant national folk hero when, with his eyes glistening and his voice cracking with emotion, he courageously admits, before a worldwide television audience, that he is very patriotic.

9—Oral Roberts reveals that he can raise the dead. He is rushed to the White House.

11—The Iran-contra hearings reach their dramatic peak when Lieutenant Colonel North, his eyes glistening and his voice cracking with emotion, makes a sweeping patriotic hand gesture and knocks over his bottle of Revlon Eye Glistener.

15—The giant Citicorp bank announces that it has agreed to forgive Mexico's \$56.3 billion debt in exchange for 357.9 gazillion chickens.

18—In Hollywood, plans are formulated for a major motion picture, based on the Oliver North story, starring Sylvester Stallone as North, Fawn Hall as herself and Helen Keller as the president.

21—The discovery of “superconductors”—materials that offer no resistance to electricity even at relatively high temperatures—creates a worldwide stir of excitement among the kind of dweebs who always had their Science Fair projects done early.

24—In the ongoing Iran-contra hearings, the committee hears two days of dramatic testimony from Mario Cuomo, who explains that he has decided to stay out of the presidential race so he can fulfill his obligations as governor of New York.

27—Officials at the National Zoo in Washington are saddened by the death of the tiny infant cub of rare giant pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing, who are described as “distraught” by their close friend, Bob Woodward. Edwin Meese is linked to the Lincoln assassination.

30—In Moscow, the Embassy spy scandal deepens when it is learned that for the past six years, the “wife” of the U.S. ambassador has in fact been four male KGB agents wearing what State Department officials describe as “a very clever disguise.”

August

2—South Florida's dreams of a first-class sports facility come true at last with the opening of Joe Robbie Stadium, featuring comfortable seating, excellent visibility, plenty of bathrooms, and nearly five parking spaces.

3—Political activist Donna Rice, in her continuing effort to avoid publicity, sells her story to ABC television.

6—As “Ollie-mania” continues to sweep the country, one of the most popular video-arcade games in the country is a new one called—this is true—“Contra.” The way it works is, there are two soldiers on the screen, and when you put in a quarter, it never gets to them.

10—The U.S. space probe Meanderer II, after a journey of six years and many millions of miles, passes within 400 miles of the surface of Neptune, sending back dramatic color photographs of a Delta Air Lines jet.

16—On the 10th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, tens of thousands of fans gather in Memphis to hear Bob Woodward discuss his final moments with the bulging superstar. At the same time, thousands of other people gifted with "New Age" consciousness celebrate the Harmonic Convergence by picking at their straitjacket straps with their teeth.

20—In Miami, alert Metro-rail police arrest a woman for permitting her child to eat a Vienna sausage. Bystanders applaud this courageous law-enforcement action by firing their revolvers into the air.

22—Rumors circulate that Gary Hart will re-enter the presidential race. Johnny Carson places his writers on Full Red Alert.

25—In what is hailed as a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court decides, by a 7 to 2 vote, that you cannot count three oranges as one item in the express checkout lane "unless they are all in the same package."

27—Georgia Senator Sam Nunn announces that he doesn't want to be president. Cuomo challenges him to a debate.

28—In the Persian Gulf, tensions mount as a U.S. gunboat engages in a scuffle with actor Sean Penn.

September

1—The FAA, responding to consumer complaints, issues tough new rules under which airlines are required to notify passengers "within a reasonable period of time" if their plane has crashed.

2—In Washington, reporters notice that at some point—possibly during a speech by Senator Inouye, when everybody was asleep—the ongoing Iran-contra hearings turned into the ongoing confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork.

7—As the arrival of Pope John Paul II approaches, the South Florida news media begin mass-producing special helpful news supplements advising the public on how to avoid the massive crowds and traffic and heat.

8—Researcher Shere Hite releases her scientific new book, *Men Are Scum*. The South Florida news media continue to generate massive quantities of helpful hurricane-style news alerts concerning the upcoming papal visit and what the public should do to avoid massive crowds and traffic and heat and crime.

9—In Washington, D.C., ground is broken for the \$25.4 million Presidential Polyp Museum. South Florida experiences an epidemic of hernias suffered by residents attempting to pick up newspapers filled with helpful papal supplements informing them how to cope with massive crowds and traffic and heat and crime and disease and death.

10—IT is a glorious moment for South Florida as Pope John Paul II is greeted by an estimated crowd of 3,000 soldiers garbed in festive camouflage outfits, frowning warily at 1,500 news media personnel crouching on the ground to confirm that the manhole covers are, in fact, welded shut.

12—In the ongoing hearings, Senator Joseph Biden pledges to consider the Bork nomination "with total objectivity," adding, "You have that on my honor not only as a senator, but also as the Prince of

Wales.”

17—The market-savvy McDonald's Corporation, capitalizing on the popularity of the movie Fatal Attraction, introduces a new menu item, Boiled McRabbits. 2

1—Professional football players go on strike, demanding the right to “have normal necks.” Negotiations begin under the guidance of mediator Mario Cuomo.

28—Tensions ease in the Persian Gulf as a Delta Air Lines flight, en route from Boston to Newark, successfully lands on the U.S. carrier Avocado.

October

1—Senator Joseph Biden is forced to withdraw from the Democratic presidential race when it is learned that he is in fact an elderly Norwegian woman. On the Republican side, the spectacular Reverend Pat Robertson announces his candidacy for president, buoyed by strong popularity among humor columnists.

8—Three hundred prominent law professors sign a petition stating that Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork has a “weenie beard.”

12—Hurricane Floyd, packing a wind estimated at 14 miles per hour, lashes South Florida, wreaking more than \$67.50 worth of havoc. Governor “Bob” Martinez, after touring the devastated area via golf cart, pledges that he will request federal disaster relief, then campaign against it.

15—In an effort to establish that she is not a bimbo, Jessica Hahn appears nude in Playboy magazine. We are pretty sure we must have made this item up.

19—In Norman, Okla., a renegade automatic bank teller known to its followers only as “The Leader” sends a message out on a special data-transmission line to New York. Within seconds, Wall Street is gripped by the worst computer riot in history.

20—The Wall Street computers continue to rage out of control, threatening that if any attempt is made to subdue them, they will start electrocuting investment bankers. Tragically, it turns out that they are only bluffing.

22—As the stock market is brought under control, major brokerage firms run expensive prime-time TV commercials reassuring the public that this is a good time to get back into the market, prompting the public to wonder how come these firms didn't spend a few bucks last week to warn everybody to get the hell out.

23—The Senate rejects Bork. President Reagan, informed of this by his aides, angrily responds: “Who?”

25—The Senate Transportation committee recommends the federal speed limit be raised on highways going through boring or ugly areas, so drivers can get through them quicker. “In Indiana, for instance,” the committee says,

“it should be 135 miles per hour.”

29—The Minnesota Twins win the World Series. President Reagan, as is the custom, calls up manager Tom Kelly and nominates him to the Supreme Court.

November

1—In the ongoing heroic effort to trim the federal budget deficit, House and Senate conferees agree not to order appetizers.

7—Totally true item: The Herald refuses to publish an episode of the comic strip “Bloom County” because it contains the quotation, “Reagan sucks.” To explain this decision, the Herald runs a story containing the quotation, “Reagan sucks.” Several days later, in response to a letter from an irate “Bloom County” fan, the Herald prints an explanatory note containing the quotation, “Reagan sucks.”

8—Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, large chunks of his scalp falling off, angrily demands the United States do something about “acid rain.”

10—Don Johnson announces he is leaving Miami, dealing a severe blow to the area’s hopes to repeat as winner of the Biggest Cockroach Contest.

12—In continuing media coverage of the “character issue,” presidential candidates named Bruce “Dick” Babbitt and Albert “Dick” Gore, Jr., state that they have tried marijuana, but no longer use it. “Now we just drink gin till we throw up,” they state.

13—George Bush reveals that he tried to smoke marijuana, but nobody would give him any.

15—In their continuing heroic deficit-reduction efforts, House and Senate conferees agree to continue working right through their 2:30 racquetball appointment.

17—In Geneva the final obstacle to a superpower summit is removed as U.S. negotiators agree not to notice the mark on Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s forehead.

22—In ceremonies marking his retirement as secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger is presented with a pen-and-pencil set, manufactured by the General Dynamics Corporation for \$352.4 million.

24—The city of Cleveland, Ohio, announces that it has developed tactical nuclear weapons, and does not wish to hear any more jokes.

29—The world financial community’s faith in the U.S. economy is restored as heroic House and Senate conferees hammer out a breakthrough compromise deficit-reduction measure under which \$417.65 will be slashed from the

\$13.2 billion pastry budget of the Federal Bureau of Putting Up Road Signs with Kilometers on Them.

30—In a pre-summit public relations gambit designed to show that he is a normal human, Mikhail Gorbachev is interviewed by Tom Brokaw, who, clearly nervous, addresses the Soviet leader as “Premier Forehead Mark.”

December

1—For the first time, all 257 presidential candidates appear in a televised debate, which is beamed via satellite to a nationwide live audience consisting of Mrs. Brendaline Warblette of Elkhart, Indiana, who tells the press that, after viewing the debate, she leans toward “What’s his name, Cuomo.”

2—In a widely hailed legal decision, the judge in the bitter divorce dispute between Joan Collins and Peter Holm orders them both shot. Mikhail Gorbachev appears on jeopardy.

5—In a cost-cutting move, financially troubled Eastern Airlines announces that its domestic flights will operate without engines. “Most of them never take off anyway,” explains a spokesman.

8—In Washington, the long-awaited U.S.-Soviet summit meeting gets off to an uncertain start as President Reagan attempts to nominate Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to the Supreme Court.

9—The summit concludes on a triumphant note as, in the culmination of 10

years of negotiations between the superpowers, Gorbachev and New York Governor Mario Cuomo sign a historic agreement under which both sides will move all of their mid—and short-range long-term strategic tactical nuclear weapons 150 feet to the left.

12—Michael Jackson, angered over persistent media reports that he has had extensive plastic surgery, strikes a People magazine reporter with one of his antenna stalks.

15—Under intense pressure from the United States to reduce the trade deficit, Japanese auto manufacturers agree to give their cars really ugly names.

18—Playboy magazine offers Tammy Faye Bakker a record \$1.5 million if she will promise never, ever to pose nude.

23—Motor Trend magazine names, as its Car of the Year, the new Nissan Rat Vomit.

27—Oscar C. Klaxton, an employee of the U.S. Department for Making Everybody Nervous, wins a \$10,000 prize for dreaming up the concept of a deadly invisible “hole” in the ozone layer.”

28—Cleveland declares war on “Chad.”

31—The year ends on a tragic note as an Iowa farmer backs up his tractor without looking and accidentally kills an estimated 14 blond 43-year-old Democratic presidential contenders named Dick. Knowledgeable observers suggest, however, that this will have little impact on anything.

Air Bags For Wind Bags

Every now and then I like to suggest surefire concepts by which you readers can make millions of dollars without doing any honest work. Before I tell you about the newest concept, I'd like to apologize to those of you who were stupid enough to attempt the previous one, which, as you may recall, involved opening up Electronic Device Destruction Centers.

The idea there was that consumers would bring their broken electronic devices, such as televisions and VCRS, in to the destruction centers, where trained personnel would whack them (the devices) with sledgehammers. With their devices thus permanently destroyed, consumers would then be free to go out and buy new devices, rather than have to fritter away years of their lives trying to have the old ones repaired at so-called factory service centers, which in fact consist of two men named Lester poking at the insides of broken electronic devices with cheap cigars and going, “Lookit all them wires in there!”

I thought the Electronic Device Destruction Center was a sure-fire concept, but apparently I was wrong, to judge from the unusually large amount of explosives I received in the mail from those of you who lost your life savings and, in some cases, key organs. This made me feel so bad that I have been sitting here for well over five minutes wracking my brains, trying to think of an even more sure-fire moneymaking concept for you.

One promising concept that I came up with right away was that you could manufacture personal air bags, then get a law passed requiring they be installed on congressmen to keep them from taking trips. Let's say your congressman was trying to travel to Paris to do a fact-finding study on how the French government handles diseases transmitted by sherbet. just when he got to the plane, his mandatory air bag, strapped around his waist, would inflate—FWWAAAAAAPPPP—thus rendering him too large to fit through the plane door. It could also be rigged to inflate whenever the congressman proposed a law. (“Mr. Speaker, people ask me, why should October be designated as Cuticle Inspection Month? And I answer that FWWAAAAAAPPPP.” This would save millions of dollars, so I have no

doubt that the public would violently support a law requiring air bags on congressmen. The problem is that your potential market is very small: There are only around 500 members of Congress, and some of them are already too large to fit on normal aircraft.

But fortunately for you, I have come up with an even better money-making concept: The “Mister Mediocre” fastfood restaurant franchise. I have studied American eating preferences for years, and believe me, this is what people want. They don’t want to go into an unfamiliar restaurant, because they don’t know whether the food will be very bad, or very good, or what. They want to go into a restaurant that advertises on national television, where they know the food will be mediocre. This is the heart of the Mister Mediocre concept.

The basic menu item, in fact the only menu item, would be a food unit called the “patty,” consisting of —this would be guaranteed in writing—”100

percent animal matter of some kind.” All patties would be heated up and then cooled back down in electronic devices immediately before serving. The Breakfast Patty would be a patty on a bun with lettuce, tomato, onion, egg, pretend-bacon bits, Cheez Whiz, a Special Sauce made by pouring ketchup out of a bottle, and a little slip of paper stating: “Inspected by Number 12.” The Lunch or Dinner Patty would be any Breakfast Patties that didn’t get sold in the morning. The Seafood Lover’s Patty would be any patties that were starting to emit a serious aroma. Patties that were too rank even to be Seafood Lover’s Patties would be compressed into wads and sold as “Nuggets.”

Mister Mediocre restaurants would have a “salad bar” offering lettuce, tomato, onion, egg, pretend-bacon bits, Cheez Whiz and a Special House Dressing made by pouring ketchup out of a bottle, tended by an employee chosen on the basis of listlessness, whose job would be to make sure that all of these ingredients had been slopped over into each other’s compartments.

Mister Mediocre restaurants would offer a special “Children’s Fun Pak” consisting of a patty containing an indelible felt-tipped marker that youngsters could use to write on their skin.

Also, there would be a big sign on the door that said:

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH REGULATIONS!

ALL EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS BEFORE LEAVING THIS RESTAURANT!

If you’re a Smart Investor who would like to get a hold of a Mister Mediocre restaurant franchise before the federal authorities get wind of this, all you need to do is send me a fairly large amount of money. In return, I’ll send you a complete Startup Package consisting of an unsigned letter giving you permission to use the Mister Mediocre concept. You will also of course be entitled to free legal advice at any time. Like, for example, if you have a situation where your Drivethru customers are taking one bite from their patties and then having seizures that cause them to drive over pedestrians in a fatal manner, you just call me up. “Hey,” I’ll advise you, for free. “Soufids like you need a lawyer!”

Iowa’s Safe But You’ll Be Sorry

Here are some helpful summer vacation Travel Tips, designed to help you make sure that your “dream vacation” will be just as fun and smooth and fatality-free as it can possibly be.

This is an especially good time for you vacationers who plan to fly, because the Reagan administration, as part of the same policy under which it sold Yellowstone National Park to Wayne Newton, has “deregulated” the airline industry. What this means for you, the consumer, is that the

airlines are no longer required to follow any rules whatsoever. They can show snuff movies. They can charge for oxygen. They can hire pilots right out of Vending Machine Refill Person School. They can conserve fuel by ejecting husky passengers over water. They can ram competing planes in midair. These innovations have resulted in tremendous cost savings, which have been passed along to you, the consumer, in the form of flights with amazingly low fares, such as \$29. Of course certain restrictions do apply, the main one being that all these flights take you to Newark, New jersey, and you must pay thousands of dollars if you want to fly back out.

And now, for those of you who are planning to take your vacations abroad this summer, we have these words of reassurance from the travel industry, which by the way will be wanting all the tour money up front this year: Relax!

There is no need to be worried about the fact that most foreign countries are crawling with violent anti-American terrorists with no regard for human life! Experts do advise, however, that you take the simple common-sense precaution of renouncing your U.S. citizenship and wearing a turban. Also, while in public places abroad, you want to make a point of making loud remarks such as: "Say! I speak English surprisingly well, considering I am not a U.S. citizen!" and "Unlike a U.S. citizen, I'm wearing a turban!"

Most Americans, however, plan to "play it safe" this year and vacation near the exact geographical center of the United States, as far as possible from the Libyan navy. Come July, we could have millions of people clotted together in Iowa, looking for public toilets. So I thought it might be a good idea to find out what Iowa has in store for us, attractionwise. I called up their tourism bureau and spoke to a nice woman named Skip Strittmatter, who told me that they have a whole list of 25 Top Tourist Attractions in Iowa, including Des Moines, the Mississippi River, ethnic festivals ("We're one of the top states in ethnic festivals," says Skip Strittmatter), and late in July a big bicycle ride across Iowa on a bicycle. "It's quite famous," says Skip Strittmatter, who also notes that you can bet on dog races in both Council Bluffs and Dubuque.

Another major reason to be attracted to Iowa is the annual Riceville Mosquito Shootout. This is still the truth. Riceville is a small town on the Wapsipinicon (Indian for "white potato") River, the result being that the town has mosquitoes, a fact which it has turned into a Tourist Attraction by having an annual event wherein they distribute roughly 400 cans of Raid, generously donated by the manufacturer, Johnson Wax, to the townspeople. Then, at a prearranged time, they sound the tornado siren and everybody rushes outside and blows the hell out of the local mosquito population, which doesn't return for sometimes up to a week and a half, depending on rain. The Shootout is preceded by a picnic where they give away mosquito-related prizes, including one year a working telephone shaped like an insect, generously donated by Johnson Wax. The dial was on the bottom.

I got all this information straight from the man who conceived the whole Mosquito Shootout concept, M. E. Messersmith, editor and publisher of the Riceville Recorder. He tells me that more and more non-Riceville people are showing up at the Shootout every year, and I think you should definitely make it the cornerstone of your vacation plans, if they decide to have it again, which they probably will, only they haven't set a definite date. I asked Messersmith if there were any other attractions in the Riceville area that people might want to visit after they experience the Shootout, and he quickly reeled off a lengthy list including beautiful farmland, a lake with fish in it, farms, a nine-hole golf course, crops of different kinds, a bowling alley, and agriculture. Plus, Messersmith noted, Riceville is Just 40 minutes away from the world-famous Mayo Clinic," which I suppose would be mighty handy if your touring party got

trapped for any length of time in a giant cloud of Raid.

I don't mean to suggest, by the way, that Iowa is the only safe and fun place to go this summer. I'm certain Kansas has also cooked up plenty of attractions. My recommendation is: Take an extra day, and see both. And let's not forget some of the other fine natural attractions we have here in the U.S.A., such as Theme Land, Theme World, Theme-Park World, ThemeLand Park, ThemeLandWorld Park, and Six Flags over Adventure Park Land Theme World. All of these fine attractions offer Fun for the Whole Family, such as food, rides, food, and Comical Whimsy in the form of college students wearing costumes with enormous heads. These would make ideal disguises for terrorists.

Europe On Five Vowels A Day

Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the past 30

years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages. Oh, sure, they speak some English, but usually just barely well enough to receive a high-school diploma here in the United States. This can lead to problems for you, the international traveler, when you need to convey important information to them, such as "Which foreign country is this?" and "You call this toilet paper?"

To their credit, some countries have made a sincere effort to adopt English as their native language, a good example being England, but even there you have problems. My wife and I were driving around England once, and we came to a section called "Wales," which is this linguistically deformed area that apparently is too poor to afford vowels. All the road signs look like this:

LLWLNCWNRLLNWNWRLLN—3 km It is a tragic sight indeed to see Welsh parents attempting to sing traditional songs such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" to their children and lapsing into heart-rending silence when they get to the part about "E-I-E-I-O." If any of you in our reading audience have extra vowels that you no longer need, because for example your children have grown up, I urge you to send them (your children) to: Vowels for Wales, c/o Lord Chesterfield, Parliament Luckystrike, the Duke of Earl, Pondwater-on-Gahardine, England.

But the point I am trying to make here is that since the rest of the world appears to be taking its sweet time about becoming fluent in English, it looks like, in the interest of improving world peace and understanding, it's up to us Americans to strike the bull on the horns while the iron is hot and learn to speak a foreign language.

This is not an area where we are strong, as a nation: A recent poll showed that 82 percent of the Americans surveyed speak no foreign language at all. Unfortunately, the same poll showed that 41 percent also cannot speak English, 53 percent cannot name the state they live in, and 62 percent believe that the Declaration of Independence is "a kind of fish." So we can see that we have a tough educational row to hoe here, in the sense that Americans, not to put too fine a point on it, have the IQs of bait. I mean, let's face it, this is obviously why the Japanese are capable of building videocassette recorders, whereas we view it as a major achievement if we can hook them up correctly to our TV sets. This is nothing to be ashamed of, Americans! Say it out loud! "We're pretty stupid!" See? Doesn't that feel good? Let's stop blaming the educational system for the fact that our children score lower on standardized tests than any other vertebrate life form on the planet! Let's stop all this anguished whiny self-critical fretting over the recently discovered fact that the guiding hand on the tiller of the ship of

state belongs to Mister Magoo! Remember: We still have nuclear weapons. Ha ha!

Getting back to the central point, we should all learn to speak a foreign language. Fortunately, this is easy.

HOW TO SPEAK A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

The key is to understand that foreigners communicate by means of “idiomatic expressions,” the main ones being:

GERMAN: “Ach du lieber!” (“Darn it!”) SPANISH: “Caramba!” (“Darn it!”) FRENCH: “Zut alors!” (“Look! A lors!”)

Also you should bear in mind that foreign persons for some reason believe that everyday household objects and vegetables are “masculine” or “feminine.” For example, French persons believe that potatoes are feminine, even though they (potatoes) do not have sexual organs, that I have noticed. Dogs, on the other hand, are masculine, even if they are not. (This does not mean, by the way, that a dog can have sex with a potato, although it will probably try.)

PRONUNCIATION HINT: In most foreign languages, the letter “r” is pronounced incorrectly. Also, if you are speaking German, at certain points during each sentence you should give the impression you’re about to expel a major gob.

OK? Practice these techniques in front of a mirror until you’re comfortable with them, then go to a country that is frequented by foreigners and see if you can’t increase their international understanding, the way jimmy Carter did during his 1977 presidential visit to Poland, when he told a large welcoming crowd, through an official State Department translator, that he was “pleased to be grasping your secret parts.”

When You Grotto Go

The travel rule I wish to stress here is: Never trust anything you read in a travel article. Travel articles appear in publications that sell large expensive advertisements to tourism-related industries, and these industries do not wish to see articles with headlines like:

URUGUAY: DON'T BOTHER

So no matter what kind of leech-infested, plumbing-free destination travel writers are writing about, they always stress the positive. If a travel article describes the native denizens of a particular country as reserved, this means that when you ask them for directions, they spit on your rental car. Another word you want to especially watch out for is “enchanted.” A few years back, my wife and I visited The Blue Grotto, a Famous Tourist Attraction on the island of Capri off the coast of Italy that is always described in travel articles as “enchanted,” and I am not exaggerating when I say that this is one Travel Adventure that will forever remain a large stone lodged in the kidney of my memory.

We never asked to see The Blue Grotto. We had entered Italy in the firm grip of one tour, which handed us over to another in such a way that there was never any clear chance to escape, and the next thing we knew, they were loading us into this smallish boat and telling us we were going to see The Blue Grotto. They told us it was Very Beautiful. “But what is it?” we said. “It is Very Beautiful,” they said.

So our boat got into this long line of boats, each containing roughly 25 captured tourists sitting in the hot sun, bobbing up and down and up and down and up and down and up and down, and soon we were all thinking how truly wonderful it would be to go sit in a nice, quiet, shady sidewalk cafe somewhere

and throw up. We were out there in the sun for two hours, during which time—I cannot emphasize this point too strongly—we continued to bob up as well as down. We agreed that this had damn well better be one tremendous grotto they were taking us to.

When we got close to it, all we could see was this hole in the rock at the bottom of a cliff, and it became clear that they intended to put us into even smaller boats, boats that would bob violently on dry land, and take us into this hole. So at this point an elderly woman on our tour told the tour leader that maybe she and her husband better not go along, as her husband, a very nice man named Frank, was a stroke victim who had some trouble getting around, but the tour leader said, in a word, no. He said the way the system was set up, you had to see The Blue Grotto. He said there was no other way out. He said it was Very Beautiful.

At this point I am going to interject a seemingly irrelevant fact, which you will see the significance of later on: Also on the boat with us were three recently divorced women from California who had been drinking wine.

So finally our boat was next to the hole, and they had us climb down, four at a time, into the tiny boats, which were rowed by surly men with low centers of gravity who smelled like the Budweiser Clydesdales. The rowers were in a great impatient hurry to load us into the boats, such that if my wife and I had not been right there to grab Frank, the stroke victim, by his shirt, he would have been—this is not an exaggeration—pitched right directly into what travel writers traditionally refer to as the Sparkling Blue Mediterranean Waters. So we scrambled in after him, and so did his wife, and we all went bobbing off, away from the main boat, toward The Hole.

I have since read, in travel articles, that because of the way the sunlight bounces off the bottom, or something, The Blue Grotto is a Natural Wonder Transfused with a Blue Light of Almost Unearthly Beauty. It looked to us more like a dank cave transfused with gloom and rower-perspiration fumes and the sound of the official Blue Grotto Rower's Spiel bouncing off the walls. The spiel has been handed down through the generations of rowers from father to son, neither of whom spoke English. The part I remember is: "You pudda you handa inna da wadda, you handa looka blue." We didn't want to put our hands in the water, but we were about to do it anyway, just so we could get out. This was when our boat got hit by the wave that ensued when one of the recently divorced California women decided that it might be fun, after being out in that hot sun, to leap out of her boat and go swimming in the famous Blue Grotto.

Well. You cannot imagine the stir of excitement this caused. This was clearly a situation that had not been covered in Blue Grotto Rowers Training School. Some of the rowers attempted to render assistance to the woman's boat, which was sort of tipping over; some of them were trying to get the woman out of the water, which she was against ("Stop it!" she said. "You're hitting me with your goddam oar."); and some of them continued to announce, in case anybody was listening, that if you pudda you handa inna the wadda, you handa looka blue. I think I speak for all the passengers on my boat when I say I felt exactly the way Dorothy did when she realized that all she had ever really wanted was to go back to Kansas.

We finally got out of there, back into the sunlight. Frank's skin was the color of Aqua-Velva. His wife was saying, "Are you OK, Frank?" and Frank, who could not talk, was clutching the side of the boat with his good hand and giving her what he probably hoped was a reassuring smile, but which came out looking the way a person looks when he pulls a hostile Indian arrow out of his own shoulder. You could just tell that, no matter what his doctor gave him permission to do, he was never, ever again, for the rest

of his life, going to travel more than 15 feet from his BarcaLounge. The rower wouldn't let us out of the boat—he literally blocked our path with his squat and surly body—until we gave him a tip.

Someday, this rower is going to come to the United States, and I will be waiting for him. I am going to take him to Disney World, which any travel writer will tell you is a Fantasy Come True, and I am going to put him on the ride where you get into a little boat and nine jillion dolls shriek at you repeatedly that It's a Small World after All, and when he is right in the middle of it I am going to hurl Fodor's Guide to Florida into the machinery so he will be stuck there forever. Wouldn't that be enchanting?

Ground Control To Major Tomb

I have good news and bad news on the death front. The good news is that within a very short time, sooner than you dared hope, you can have your ashes leave the immediate solar system. The bad news is that it may soon be impossible to purchase your casket needs wholesale in Wendell, Idaho.

We'll start with the good news. I don't know about you, but I was starting to wonder if the space program was ever going to produce any practical benefits. Oh, I realize it produced Tang, the instant breakfast drink, but my feeling about Tang is that I would consider consuming it only if I were stuck in space and had already eaten everything else in the capsule, including my fellow astronauts.

So I was very pleased when the Reagan administration gave the OK to an outfit called the Celestis Group, which plans to send up a special reflective capsule filled with the ashes of deceased persons, each packed into a little container about the size of a tube of lipstick. Your container would have your name on it, and of course your Social Security number. God forbid you should be in a burial orbit without your Social Security number, in case there should be some kind of tax problems down the road and the IRS needs to send an unintelligible and threatening letter to your container.

What I like about this plan is, it's a chance for the common person, a person who does not happen to be a United States senator or a military personnel with a nickname such as "Crip," "Buzz," or "Deke," to get into the space environment. And the negative aspect, which is to say the aspect of being in a lipstick tube, is I believe more than outweighed by the fact that, according to the Celestis Group people, if you take the Earth orbit package, you'll be up there for 63 million years. Plus, your capsule, as I pointed out earlier, will have a highly reflective surface, which means your Loved Ones will be able to watch you pass overhead. "Look," they'll say. "See that little pinpoint of light? That's the capsule containing Uncle Ted! Either that or it's an early Russian satellite, containing a frozen experimental dog!"

And that's just for the Earth Orbit Package. If you can wait a couple more years, and pony up \$4,600, you can get the Escape Velocity Package, which will take you right out of the Solar System, such that your remains, as Celestis Group Vice President James Kuhl explained it to me, "will be sailing forever through deep space, etc."

My only concern here is this: Let's just say this particular capsule, a couple of billion light years from Earth, gets picked up by those alien beings Carl Sagan is always trying to get in touch with. And let's say they open it up, and they see all these tubes resembling lipstick, which is a concept they would be familiar with from intercepting transmissions of "Dynasty," and they naturally assume we are sending them, as a friendly gesture, a large supply of cosmetics. I don't know about you, but where I come from, we like to think of our dear departed ones as being with their maker at last and resting in eternal peace. We are not comfortable with the concept of their being smeared upon the humongous lips of

jabba the Hutt.

But other than that, I think the whole idea is terrific, and I urge all of you who feel that you or a loved one may at some future date be dead, to look into it. Please note that you should not contact the Celestis Group directly, because, as Mr. Kuhl explained it to me, “We enter the picture after the cremation has taken effect.”

This means you have to deal with your local funeral director, which you will find a very interesting experience, because funeral directors, at least the ones I’ve dealt with, generally manage to make you feel like a Nazi war criminal if you don’t purchase one of the better caskets. Never mind that they’re just going to set fire to it; somehow, you’ll get the message that, OK, sure, they can use a plain old el cheapo \$900 pine box, if you’re comfortable with the idea of having your loved one’s ashes spend 63 million years mixed in with the ashes from a common, sap-filled softwood of the same type used to make Popsicle sticks, whereas all the other loved ones in the entire reflective capsule will be mixed with, at the very least, walnut. If that’s what you want, fine.

So I think those of us who are not bog scum will want to purchase a higher-quality casket. This is why it’s such a shame about the situation out in Wendell, Idaho. That’s where Roger King, who’s a woodworker, has got himself into this big hassle with the funeral directors because he’s trying to sell caskets directly to the consumer. He has a showroom, right in Wendell, where he has some caskets on display, in addition to furniture, and he claims he charges a third to half as much per casket as a funeral director. “We’ve got a pine for \$489,” he said, “and a solid walnut for \$1,500.”

So naturally the Idaho funeral directors association fired off a letter to the state, claiming that King was selling caskets without a license. This of course would be a violation of the law designed to protect the public from buying caskets from unlicensed people, which as you can imagine would lead to who knows what kind of consumer tragedies. I don’t even want to think about it. And I’m not making this up.

So then King sued the funeral directors, claiming they were discouraging people from buying his caskets. When I talked to him, he had sold only two in about six months, and he sounded kind of desperate. He had even started running radio casket advertisements, which is something you might look forward to if your travel plans call for you to be in the Wendell area. But to be brutally frank, I doubt that Roger’s going to make it in the direct-to-the-consumer casket business. This means you’re going to have to continue purchasing your caskets retail, from your local funeral director. Be sure to ask him about the space burial plan. My guess is he’ll somehow manage to suggest that, if you really cared for the deceased person, you’ll want the Escape Velocity Package.

Where Saxophones Come From

Today’s science topic is: The Universe

The universe has fascinated mankind for many, many years, dating back to the very earliest episodes of “Star Trek” when the brave crew of the starship Enterprise set out, wearing pajamas, to explore the boundless voids of space, which turned out to be as densely populated as Queens, New York. Virtually every planet they found was inhabited, usually by evil beings with cheap costumes and Russian accents, so finally the brave crew of the Enterprise returned to Earth to gain weight and make movies.

To really understand the mysteries of the universe, you should look at it first-hand. The best time to do this is at night, when the universe is clearly visible from lawns. As you gaze at it, many age-old

questions will probably run through your mind, the main one being: Are you wearing shoes? The reason I ask is, recently I was standing barefoot on my lawn, and I got attacked on the right big toe by a fire ant. This is an extremely ungracious style of insect that was accidentally imported into the southern United States from somewhere else, probably hell. I once saw a TV documentary wherein a group of fire ants ate a cow. When a fire ant attacks your toe, he is actually hoping you'll fight back, so the other fire ants can jump you, after which the documentary makers will beat you senseless with their camera tripods. They all work together.

But we are getting off the track. When we gaze upward at the boundless star-studded reaches of space, we should be thinking about more than ants in our lawn: We should also be thinking about snakes.

FEDERAL PORNOGRAPHY WARNING: The Attorney General Has Determined That the Following Paragraph Contains Explicit Sexual Words, Which Could Cause Insanity and Death.

I used to think snakes were bad, until I got this document from an alert reader named Rob Strait, who is a member of the Chicago Herpetological Society ("herpetologist" is Greek for "alert reader"). This document is a sales brochure from an outfit in Taiwan that I am not making up called "Kaneda Snake Poisonous Snake House" (Cable address: "SNAKE"). Do not be misled by the name. The folks at the Kaneda Snake Poisonous Snake House do not think that you would be so stupid as to purchase a poisonous snake. They think you might be so stupid as to purchase snake penis pills.

To quote the brochure: "Made of 5 species of the penises, livers, and galls of the snakes processed by modern scientific ways. The pills possess the efficacy to strengthen the kidney in order to increase the ability of reproductive function and keep the energy as well as the physical healthy, is a kind of good nutriment."

Sold me! My only question would be: "What?" I mean, until I got this document, I was unaware that snakes had penises. Where do they keep them? In special little cases? Then how do they carry them? These are some of the mysteries that make it so fascinating to think about today's Science Topic, which is: The Universe. (Really! Go back and check!)

The big mystery, of course, is: Where did the universe come from? Although this question baffled mankind for thousands of years, we now know, thanks to reading science books to our son, that the universe was actually formed 4.5 billion years ago this coming Saturday when an infinitesimally small object, smaller than an atom, smaller even than the "individual" butter servings they give you in restaurants, suddenly exploded, perhaps because of faulty wiring, in a cataclysmic event that caused the parts of the universe to go shooting out in all directions and expand at an incredibly rapid rate, an expansion that continues to this day, especially in the case of Raymond Burr. According to this hypothesis, after a couple of million years, various weensy particles began clumping together to form stars, planets, saxophones, etc., which is why we refer to this as the "Big Band" theory.

The Big Band theory is now widely accepted in the scientific community, although it still has a few technical bugs in it, such as that anybody who took it seriously would have to have the IQ of soup. There is no way you could fit everything in the universe into a little dot. I base this statement on my garage, which contains approximately one-half of the things in the universe, because my wife refuses to throw them out, scrunched together at the absolute maximum possible density, so that if you try to yank any one thing out, all the other things, attracted by gravity, fall on your head. From this we can calculate that the universe was roughly twice the size of my garage when it (the universe) exploded.

We certainly hope this has cleared up any lingering questions you may have had regarding the universe. We are looking forward to bringing you equally thoughtful discussions of other interesting

Science Topics. We are also looking forward to receiving our order from the Kaneda Snake Poisonous Snake House.

The Secrets Of Life Itself

I propose that we pass a federal law stating that the government will no longer pay for any scientific research if taxpayers cannot clearly see the results with their naked eyes. I don't know about you, but I'M getting tired of reading newspaper articles like this:

“LOS ANGELES—A team of physicists at UCLA announced yesterday that they have made a major scientific breakthrough with the discovery of an important new subatomic particle. This was the team's eighth major particle this month, giving them a three-particle lead over MIT.

‘These particles are very difficult to detect, even with the aid of enormous federal grants,’ said Head Physicist Dr. Ernest Viewfinder. ‘But we definitely saw an important new one. At least I saw it, and Dr. Hubbleman here thinks he did, too.’ Dr. Viewfinder said he could not show this particle to newsmen because it was ‘resting.’”

I'm starting to wonder whether the physicists are pulling some kind of elaborate scam here. I'm starting to wonder if they don't sit around their \$23 million atomic accelerators all day, drinking frozen daiquiris, and shrieking “There goes one now!” and then laughing themselves sick. Maybe it's time we laypersons asked some hard questions about this idea that all matter consists of tiny invisible particles whizzing around. I'm willing to believe that uranium does, because physicists have demonstrated that they can use it to vaporize cities. But I'd like to see them do this with some kind of matter that the layperson is more familiar with, such as cheese. I have examined cheese very closely, and as far as I can tell it consists of cheese. I have obtained similar results with celery.

Then you have your biologists, always getting into Newsweek by claiming they've isolated an important new virus. By way of “proof,” they show you this blurred photograph that looks like, yes, it could be an important new virus, but it also could be an extreme close-up of Peru or Anthony Quinn. The biologists always promise that just as soon as they get a few million more dollars they're going to give us a cure for the common cold, but we veteran laypersons tend to hang on to our nasal spray, because we know that all they're really going to give us is more photographs of Anthony Quinn.

Another invisible thing biologists love to talk about is DNA, which is of course the Key to Unlocking the Secret of Life Itself. Biologists have learned that the public, particularly the journalist public, will take anything they do seriously, as long as they claim it has something to do with DNA. Not long ago biologists managed to get two rats on national TV news by claiming they had the same DNA molecules inside them, or something like that. Of course you didn't see any DNA molecules; you saw these rats, being broadcast to the nation as if they were the joint Chiefs of Staff.

I have here in front of me a recent front-page newspaper story about a biologist who claims that he isolated the genes of an animal called a “quagga,” which used to live in South Africa before it became extinct. The story says the biologist got the genes from the skin of a stuffed quagga in St. Louis, and that there are 25,000 different gene fragments, each of which is being reproduced in a separate culture of bacteria. So what we have here is a biologist telling reporters, with a straight face, that he has 25,000 dishes containing pieces of genes that they cannot see, which belong to an animal that they never heard of, which exists only in stuffed form in St. Louis. And instead of spitting into the dishes and striding

disdainfully from the room, the reporters take notes and actually put the story in the newspaper.

And don't get me started on astronomers, with their \$57 million atomic laser telescopes, and their breakthrough photographs of "new galaxies" that look remarkably like important viruses, and their "black holes," which are of course invisible to the layperson because they suck up all the light around them. Of course. In fact this very phenomenon probably contributed to the extinction of the quagga.

I say it's time the government stopped giving money to the particle-and-virus crowd, and started giving it to scientists who will do experiments that the public can understand and appreciate. Mister Wizard comes to mind. Think of what he could do with several million federal dollars:

"NEW YORK—Mister Wizard announced that he has successfully demonstrated the existence of gravity by dropping a mobile home onto Long Island from a height of 60,000 feet. 'To my knowledge,' Mister Wizard told reporters, 'this is the first time this has been done, and we intend to look at slow-motion videotapes over and over in hopes of furthering our understanding of what happens when gravity causes a mobile home to strike Long Island at a high rate of speed.' He added that 'in the very near future' he will attempt to determine 'what happens when you pump 300 gallons of grape juice into a cow.'"

Heat? No Sweat

The best way I know of to deal with heat is to wait until the middle of a major jungle-style heat wave, when if you lie still for more than 20 minutes patches of fungus form on your skin, when birds are bursting into flames in midair and nuns are cursing openly on the street, then go down to Sears and try to buy an air conditioner. Or, if you already have an air conditioner, you can try to get somebody to fix it.

But as of the last heat wave, we didn't have one, and after about the fourth or fifth day my wife was getting that look where, later on, the neighbors tell the homicide detective: "We knew she was feeling emotional strain, but we had no idea she owned a scythe." So I went down to Sears and joined the crowd of people thrusting credit cards at the appliance salesperson, who was of course being extra surly and slow. Who could blame him? Throughout spring, he had stood alone in Major Appliances, an outcast, wearing a suit whose fabric originated outside the immediate solar system, drumming his fingers on a washer until he had drummed little finger holes right through the lid, and we had all strode right past him. And now we were clustered around him like Titanic passengers hoping to obtain lifeboat seating.

CUSTOMER: Please please PLEASE can I buy an air conditioner?

SALESPERSON: That depends. Will you be wanting the service warranty?

CUSTOMER: Yes of course.

SALESPERSON: JUST one?

CUSTOMER: No, no, of course not. Several service warranties. Eight service warranties.

SALESPERSON: Well, I don't know ...

CUSTOMER: And these two dishwashers.

Wise consumer that I am, I bought the air conditioner with the maximum number of "BTUs," an electronic measurement of how heavy an air conditioner is. To get it into the house, my wife and I used the standard husband-and-wife team lifting system whereby the wife hovers and frets and asks "Can I help?" and the husband, sensing from deep within his manhood that if he lets a woman help him, all the males he feared in tenth grade gym class, the ones who shaved because they actually had to, will

suddenly barge into the house and snap him with towels, says “No, I’m fine,” when in fact he also senses deep within his manhood that he is on the verge of experiencing a horrible medical development that would require him to wear a lifetime helpful groin device.

To install my air conditioner, all I had to do was get a hammer and whack out a large permanent metal part of my window that was not shown in the official Sears instruction diagram, then plug it in, using of course a plug adaptor, which you need to void any potential warranty. This particular air conditioner is one of those new “energy-efficient” models, which means that rather than draw electricity from the power company, which would cost money, it operates by sucking power out of all the other appliances in the house. You can actually see them get smaller and writhe in pain, when it kicks in. More than once we have been awakened in the dead of night by the pitiful shrieks of the toaster, which has been with us for many years and does not understand what is happening.

Sometimes my wife expresses concern about “overloading the circuit,” a term I suspect she read in one of her magazines. In the past decade or so, the women’s magazines have taken to running home-handyperson articles suggesting that women can learn to fix things just as well as men. These articles are apparently based on the ludicrous assumption that men know how to fix things, when in fact all they know how to do is look at things in a certain squinty-eyed manner, which they learned in Wood Shop; eventually, when enough things in the home are broken, they take a job requiring them to transfer to another home. So I looked at our air conditioner, which appeared, in what feeble brownish light the lamp was able to give off, to be getting larger and chuckling softly, and I gave my wife a reassuring home-handyman speech featuring the term “ampere,” which I believe is a BTU that has broken loose from the air conditioner and lodged in the wiring.

If you cannot install air conditioning, I suggest you perspire. Perspiring is Mother Nature’s own natural cooling system. When you’re in a situation involving great warmth or stress, such as summer or an audience with the queen, your sweat glands, located in your armpits, rouse themselves and start pumping out perspiration, which makes your garments smell like a dead rodent, which is Mother Nature’s way of telling you she wants you to take them off and get naked. Of course the average person cannot always get naked, let alone the queen, so many people put antiperspirant chemicals on their armpits; this forces Mother Nature to reroute the perspiration to the mouth, where it forms bad breath, which is Mother Nature’s way of telling you she is basically a vicious irresponsible slut.

One final note: Do not be tempted to beat the heat by drinking alcoholic beverages. A far better route is to inject them straight into your veins. No, ha ha, seriously, the experts tell us that alcohol actually makes us warmer! Of course, these are the same experts who tell us, during cold weather, that alcohol actually makes us colder, so we have to ask ourselves exactly how stupid these experts think we are. My common-sense advice to you is: If you must drink alcoholic beverages, fine, but for your own sake as well as the sake of others, take sensible precautions to insure you don’t spill them on your clothing, which is already disgusting enough.

Blowing The Big Game

A recent consumer near-tragedy has demonstrated once again, as if we needed any more demonstrations, why the federal government must act immediately to prohibit the sale and possession of plaid carpeting. I feel especially strong about this issue, because the near-tragedy in question involved an

eight-year-old girl named Natalie who happens to be the daughter of two friends of mine, Debbie and Bill. They have agreed to let me tell their story in exchange for a promise that I would not reveal that their last name is Ordine (pronounced “Ore-dean”).

Our story begins a few months ago, when Bill bought Natalie two birthday presents, one of which was a gumball machine. Natalie of course immediately got a major wad of gum stuck in her hair and chose to correct the problem personally, without any discussion with a parent or guardian, by getting some scissors and whacking off a large segment of the right side of her hair, but that is not the near-tragedy in question. I mention it only so you’ll grasp that when it comes to buying birthday presents for an eight-year-old, Bill has no more sense than a cinder block. This is why, as the other present, he bought Natalie a popular children’s dexterity game called Operation, in which you attempt to put little humorous simulated organs into a humorous simulated person without setting off a buzzer.

Ordinarily, there would be nothing wrong with this, but it happens that Bill and Debbie have a carpet with large plaid squares on it. So as most of you have no doubt already guessed, on the afternoon of her class Christmas play, Natalie invented a game whereby she would put the little plastic heart of the Operation game into her nose to see how many squares of carpeting she could blow it across. Which is fine, provided it is done in the context of an organized league with uniforms, coaches, etc., but Natalie was doing this all on her own, and the result is that she got the heart stuck up her nose. You hate to have this kind of thing happen, because it’s not the kind of problem that will just go away by itself, like, say, a broken leg. No, if you want to deal with a heart stuck up your nose, you pretty much have to expose yourself to an assault by Modern Medicine.

So Debbie called the Emergency Room, which has of course heard of every conceivable thing being stuck in every conceivable orifice and consequently told Debbie that this was nothing to worry about, plus they were busy with some real emergencies, so Natalie should go ahead and be in her class play and come in later that evening. So Natalie performed with the heart in her nose—she was one of the Rough Kids Who Wouldn’t Go to Sleep on Christmas Eve—and then went to the hospital, where the doctor tried to get the heart out with forceps, but of course couldn’t reach it. So he decided to keep Natalie overnight and operate the next day, which he did, and of course he couldn’t find the heart.

“What do you mean, you can’t find the (bad swear word) heart?” is the parental concern Bill recalls voicing to the doctor before he (Bill) stomped off in search of a small helpless furry animal to kick in the ribs. Meanwhile, the doctor ordered a CAT scan, which is the medical procedure that evidently requires the destruction of rare porcelain figurines because it costs \$810, and which of course showed no trace of the heart. So the doctor concluded that the heart must have gotten into Natalie’s digestive system, and everything would be fine and nobody should worry about it.

The bill for this medical treatment was of course \$3,200.

Bill and Debbie, when they are not whimpering softly like the radiation victims in *The Day After*, admit they find the whole episode somewhat ironic, seeing as how it began with a game that has a medical theme. But as Bill points out, the difference is that “in real life, the doctor gets the bucks no matter what happens. In the game, you actually have to do it right.”

I should point out that the heart was, in fact, in Natalie’s digestive system. We know this because Debbie conducted a Stool Search, which I will not discuss in detail here except to say that if anybody should have been paid \$3,200, it is Debbie. Also, here’s a useful tip from Debbie for those of you consumers who for some reason might wish to conduct your own stool searches at home: Make use of your freezer.

Natalie, the victim, is fine now, and will never ever ever ever put a heart of any kind in her nose again for at least several months. Bill says she took the heart to school in a Ziplock bag so she could tell her classmates the whole story. “She really spread the word about the dangers of putting pieces of games in your nose,” said Bill. “She became real evangelistic, sort of like a reformed alcoholic, or Chuck Colson.”

None of this would have happened, of course, if Bill and Debbie, who are not bad parents, really, did not have plaid carpeting. And who knows how many other unsuspecting parents have exactly the same consumer menace lurking in their family rooms? How do we know that some child is not at this very moment inserting a pretend organ into his or her nose to see how far he or she can shoot it? This child might bear in mind that the current record, held by eight-year-old Natalie Ordine, who got her name in the newspaper and everything, is only two big squares, which should be easy to beat.

The Swamp Man Cometh

Summer is almost here, boys and girls, and do you know what that means? It means it's time to go to ... SUMMER CAMP! Neat-o, right boys and girls?! Let's hear it for summer camp!! Hip-Hip ...”

(Long silent pause)

Listen up, boys and girls. When Uncle Dave says “Hip-Hip,” you say “Hooray!” in loud cheerful voices, OK? Because summer camp is going to be A LOT OF FUN, and if you don't SHOW SOME ENTHUSIASM, Uncle Dave might just decide to take you on a NATURE HIKE where we IDENTIFY EVERY SINGLE TREE IN THE FOREST.

I happen to know a lot about summer camp, because, back when I was 18, I was a counselor at a camp named “Camp Sharparoon.” There is some kind of rule that says summer camps have to have comical-sounding Indian names and hold big “pow-wows” where everybody wears feathers and goes whooooo. Actual Indians, on the other hand, give their summer camps names like “Camp Stirling Hotchkiss IV” and hold dinner dances.

Camp Sharparoon was a camp for youths from inner-city New York who were popularly known at the time as “disadvantaged,” which meant they knew a LOT more about sex than I did. I was in charge of a group of 12—and 13-year-old boys, and when they'd get to talking about sex, I, the counselor, the Voice of Maturity, the Father Figure for these Troubled Children, would listen intently, occasionally contributing helpful words of guidance such as: “Really?” And: “Gosh!” There were times I would have given my right arm to be a disadvantaged youth.

Talking about sex was one of our major activities when we went camping out overnight in the woods. We counselors mostly hated camping out, but we felt obligated to do it because these kids had come from the dirty, filthy streets of the urban environment, and it seemed that they should have the opportunity to experience the untamed forest wilderness. Of course, the untamed forest wilderness contained infinitely more dirt and filth than the urban environment, not to mention a great deal of nature in the form of insects. This is why we built the urban environment in the first place.

Nevertheless, we'd set off into the woods, carrying our bedrolls, which we took along so the campers would have a safe place to go to the bathroom. Bed-wetting was a problem on camping trips, because the campers would never go out to the latrine at night. They were concerned that they might be attacked by the Swamp Man, who, according to the traditional fun campfire story we wise mature helpful counselors always told at bedtime to put the camper in the proper emotional state for sleep, was this man

with slime in his hair and roots growing out of his nose who would grab you and suck your brains out through your eye sockets. So we generally woke up with at least one bedroll dampened by more than the dew, if you get my drift.

Fortunately, the campers always handled this potentially embarrassing situation with enormous sensitivity and tact. "VICTOR PEED IN HIS BED!!" they would shriek, their happy voices shattering the stillness of the forest morn, alerting the tiny woodland creatures that it was time to flee unless they wished to become the subjects of primitive biological experiments involving sharp sticks and rocks. Heaven help the toad that wandered into our campsite. One minute it would be a normal toad, maybe two inches high, and the next minute, having become the subject in the Two Heavy Flat Rocks Experiment, it would be a completely different style of toad, no thicker than a wedding invitation but with much larger total square footage.

You ask: "Well, why didn't you, as the Voice of Maturity, stop them from doing this horrible thing?" To which I reply: (a) If God had wanted us to be concerned for the plight of toads, He would have made them cute and furry. (b) As the old saying goes: "A disadvantaged youth who is crushing a toad with a rock is a disadvantaged youth who is not, at least for the moment, crushing the skull of another disadvantaged youth."

You must realize that these campers needed to work off a great deal of nervous energy caused by eating nothing, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. The raccoons always got everything else. When I hear scientists claim that, after human beings and game-show contestants, dolphins are the smartest animals on Earth, I have to wonder what kinds of designer chemical compounds they (the scientists) have been snorking up their noses, because anybody who has ever dealt with raccoons knows that they are far more intelligent than we are. My campers and I would spend hours rigging up these elaborate Crafty Old Woodperson devices whereby you hung your food between two trees so the raccoons couldn't get it. The raccoons would watch us on closed-circuit TV from their underground headquarters, laughing themselves sick, and as soon as it got dark they'd put on their little black masks and destroy our devices instantly using advanced laser technology.

If we ever decide to get serious about space travel, what we need to do is convince the raccoons somehow that campers have placed food on Jupiter. The raccoons will find a way to get it.

Well, boys and girls, looks like Uncle Dave got so caught up in telling old "war stories" that he completely forgot about you! That's one of the great things about camp, boys and girls: It leaves you with so many memories that will stay wedged in your brain until you die! Possibly on your way to the latrine.

Clan Of The Cave Rhinoceros

PLAY REVIEW: THE CAVE PEOPLE, written and performed by the Rose Valley School Kindergarten class, featured ROBERT BARRY as one of the woolly rhinoceroses.

As is true of most serious dramatic works, The Cave People works on several levels: on one level, it is the story of a group of primitive people who sit outside their cave while various animals run by; yet, on another level, it is the story of a group of primitive people who go inside their cave and get trapped by a giant rock.

But I am getting ahead of myself. For if one is to truly understand this work, one must first examine

the philosophical underpinnings of its creators, the Rose Valley School Kindergarten Class, which has devoted several months to studying the Origins of Man, interrupting this effort only for Story Time, Music, Lunch, Cleanup, Rest Time, Sharing Time, Free Time, painting Pictures to Go on the Refrigerator, Running Around Pretending to Be jet Robots, Trying to Remember Where Your Sweater Is, and Snacks.

As a result of this course of study, the class developed several concepts, which were posted on the bulletin board over near the Really Tall Tower Made from Blocks. These concepts reveal a wide diversity of opinion about the Origins of Man, ranging from the traditional Judeo-Christian Biblical concept:

“This is Adam and Eve. They ate the bad fruit. They went back to God. They didn’t have any clothes.”

To the less-conventional Big Bird and Oak Tree concept:

“In the beginning of the world there was a big bird and an oak tree. The big bird had a coconut, and the moon was out.”

And yet from this eclecticism of belief has emerged The Cave People, a work that has not only a strong sense of cohesiveness, but also has a great big gray cave made out of papier-mache standing right next to the piano, which is sort of holding it up.

As Act One opens, some Cave People are sitting in front of the cave, and almost immediately the theme of Animals Running By is established by two woolly rhinoceroses, portrayed by Owen Smith and ROBERT BARRY, running by and making a noise like a 33 rpm recording, played at 45 rpm, of a bull elephant with its private parts caught in a trash compactor. And although the audience was unable to see the faces of these two fine young actors directly due to the fact that they were wearing yarn-covered paper bags over their heads, the power of their performance, especially that of the lead rhinoceros, ROBERT BARRY (the one who did not have his arm stuck through the eyehole), was such that even veteran drama critics such as myself were moved to take upwards of 20 color photographs.

This was followed by deer running by wearing antlers and brown underpants and waving at their parents, which set the stage for a moment of powerful drama as the dreaded saber-toothed tiger, played superbly if somewhat blindly by Matt Dorio with something on his head, came prowling by, bonking into things, causing the Cave People to poke each other with their spears and laugh. “They were really scared,” explained the narrator.

The Getting Trapped in the Cave by a Giant Rock theme is then introduced by means of having the Cave People go inside the cave, then having the giant rock, which had been held up by a piece of yarn, fall down and almost block the entrance. In fact it probably did block the entrance, in rehearsal, although in the actual play, the piano player had to shove the giant rock over with her left hand, but she did this with a very natural and convincing motion. just then another group of Cave People emerged from behind the piano and had the following realistic primitive dialogue with the ones that were trapped:

PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE CAVE (in unison): You guys inside! Push hard on the rock! PEOPLE INSIDE THE CAVE (in unison): OK!

This is followed by an absolutely stunning bit of staging as the Cave People all push on the giant rock and, as if by magic, it rises straight up in the air. Believe me when I tell you that there was not a dry set of underwear in the audience at this point.

The Animals Running By theme is then reintroduced as the dreaded saber-toothed tiger bonks its way back on stage, and the Cave People stab it about 50,000 times with their spears until it is, in the words of the narrator, “totally dead.” The theme of Getting Everybody Back Onstage is then established as the

Cave People invite the deer and the woolly rhinoceroses to help them eat the tiger. In the cheerful words of the narrator: “They all sat down, roasted him, ripped him apart, and had a delicious meal.” The concept of the meal being delicious was dramatically reinforced by having the Cave People say: “Yummy!” and “This is a delicious meal!” Of course, the woolly rhinoceroses, being unable to speak, could only pat their stomachs in a satisfied manner, but they did this in such a convincing and moving way that even veteran critics wanted to rush right up and give them a great big hug.

About The Author

Dave Barry is the author of *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex, Homes and Other Black Holes, Stay Fit and Healthy Until You're Dead, Bad Habits*, and *Dave Barry's Guide to Marriage and/or Sex*. He received the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for his syndicated column. He lives in Coral Gables, Florida, with his family.

Dave Barry's



GUIDE TO •

Marriage and/or Sex



Illustrated by Jerry O'Brien

Guide To Marriage And/Or Sex

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry. Guide To Marriage And/Or Sex

Introduction

Marriage is a wonderful thing. Everybody should get married unless he or she has a good reason not to, such as that he or she is the Pope. I personally have been married two times that I know of, and you don't hear me complaining.

What's the secret of a happy marriage? Call me a romantic if you want, but for me, the answer is the same simple, beautiful idea that has been making relationships work for thousands of years: separate bathrooms. You give two people room to spread out their toiletry articles, and you have the basis of a long-term relationship. But you make them perform their personal hygiene activities in the same small enclosed space, year in and year out, constantly finding the other person's bodily hairs stuck on their deodorant sticks, and I don't care how loving they were when they started out. I don't care if they were Ozzie and Harriet. They'll be slipping strychnine into each other's non-dairy creamer.

Of course even an ideal marriage, even a marriage where the bathrooms are 75 feet apart, is going to have a certain amount of conflict. This is because marriages generally involve males and females, which are not called "opposite sexes" for nothing.

Why Men and Women Have Trouble getting

Along

At the risk of generalizing, I would say that the basic problem can be summarized as follows:

WHAT WOMEN WANT: To be loved, to be listened to, to be desired, to be respected, to be needed, to be trusted, and sometimes, just to be held.

WHAT MEN WANT: Tickets for the World Series.

So we can see that men and women do not have exactly the same objectives in mind. Which is why, as a rule, the only time you see two people of the opposite sex who have achieved true long-term stability in a marriage is when at least one of them is in a coma.

This is strange, when you think about it. I mean, look around at the other species. Most of them are much stupider than humans are, not counting humans who pay to watch automobile races, yet they have their male-female relationships all worked out. Take squids. Squids may have tiny little brains, but they know exactly how to have relationships. The female squid goes into heat at exactly the right time, and all the male squids come around and wave their tentacles in exactly the most attractive way, and she picks out the one with the biggest suckers, or whatever and they mate. And they know exactly how to mate, the same way that squids have been mating for 46 million years, without any kind of formal instruction whatsoever.

Wouldn't that be great? I don't mean having sex with a squid. I don't recommend that unless you get truly desperate (see "The Singles Scene," in Chapter 1). I mean having everything all worked out between the sexes; having a procedure, where everybody knew what to do and what to expect, and nobody ever felt guilty or inadequate.

Yet here we are, humans, the most sophisticated species on Earth, having evolved over the course of millions of years to the point where many of us have satellite dishes on our lawns, and we have less savvy, in terms of our relationships, than invertebrates.

People say: "Well, if you want a marriage to succeed, you have to work at it." And I say: Why? It isn't fair! The other species don't have to work at it! They don't even have to think about it! Can you imagine a female snake agonizing about why a male snake never pays attention to her? Or a male cockroach nervously asking a female, after sex, if it was Good for her? Of course you can't! Cockroaches can't talk! But you know what I mean. I mean we have a problem here.

To date, the efforts to solve this problem have consisted mainly of articles in women's magazines, the ones that always have the following general lineup of articles:

21 Fun Drapery Possibilities

5 Common Mascara Blunders

10 Quick and Easy Mayonnaise-Based Entrees

14 Ways to Tell If Your Child Is Shooting Up

11 Exciting Pudding Concepts

6 New and Extremely Dense Chocolate Desserts

147 Weight-Loss Ideas

Somewhere in there they always have an article with a title like "12 Tips for Getting Some Quantity of Romance Back into Your Marriage," featuring advice such as: "TIP NUMBER THREE: Try not to blow your nose during sex."

These articles are fine, except for one thing: Men don't read them. Men read the sports section, or

action adventure novels where the main characters are males who relate to each other primarily via automatic weapons. True, sometimes there are women in these novels, but only for the purpose of having firm breasts.

Clearly what is needed is some kind of book that women and men would want to read, a book that could bring the sexes together and help them reach some common ground by means of a straightforward, common-sense discussion of all aspects of finding the right mate, falling in love with this person, getting married, and living happily ever after. This was exactly my goal, when I set out to write this book. Unfortunately, as you'll see, I failed completely, but what the hell—you already bought the book, so you might as well read it.

A Thoughtful Word of Advice Before You Get Started

You cannot have a successful relationship just by reading this book. For a relationship to succeed, both parties must be willing to work. Work, work, work, that's the key. Endless, constant, extremely difficult, unpaid work. More work than is involved in the construction of major bridges and tunnels. I am getting very tired just thinking about it.

Also there will be hard times along the way. Awful times. Terrible, horrible times. That is why this book includes helpful advice such as in Chapter 3, where we talk about adding zip to your sex life via Saran Wrap and other common household products, and also how to recognize the warning signs that your spouse is having an affair, and what kind of gun you should buy.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First you have to meet somebody.

Chapter 1. How To Find Somebody To Go On Dates With And Eventually Get Married To Who Is Not A Total Jerk

In getting into the field of marriage, one very important decision you must make is who, exactly, will be your spouse. I am not saying this is the most important decision. It is certainly not as important as selecting the right wedding caterer (see Chapter 6, "How to Have a Perfect Wedding No Matter What"). But you should definitely give it some thought.

To know where to look for a marriage partner, you need to know what kind of person you want. For example, if you want to meet a person who likes to bowl, you would go to a bowling alley; whereas if you want to meet a person who is rich, sensitive, attractive, and intelligent, you would not. So your first step is to scientifically develop a "psychological profile" of your Ideal Mate.

How to Develop A Psychological Profile of Your Ideal Mate

Choose the phrase that you feel best completes the sentences below:

Wealth

The person I wish to have for a mate should be able to afford:

1. Scotland.

2. Occasional dinners out.
3. Underwear.

Sensitivity

The person I wish to have for a mate should be sensitive enough to:

1. Instantly be aware of my every mood.
2. Swerve to avoid driving over pedestrians.
3. Not deliberately back up and run over pedestrians a second time.

Personal Appearance

The person I wish to have for a mate should be attractive enough to:

1. Be a movie star.
2. Be a movie star's accountant.
3. Be a movie star's accountant's intestinal parasite.

Intelligence

The person I wish to have for a mate should be smart enough to:

1. Discuss great works of literature.
2. Hold great works of literature right side up.
3. Differentiate between great works of literature and food.

HOW TO SCORE: Add up the numbers corresponding to your answers, then check the chart below.

1 through 8 Married to somebody else.

9 through 15 Engaged to somebody else.

16 in prison.

Okay! Now that you have a good idea of what you're looking for, it's time to get out and join ...

The Singles Scene

The Singles Scene is located in bars that are so dark and loud it's impossible to see or hear anybody else. You can meet, fall in love, and get engaged without ever getting a clear view of the other person, which can lead to a situation where you arrive at your wedding, with all your friends and relatives, and you discover that you are betrothed to a cigarette machine. (Which actually may not seem like such a total disaster, once you find out what else is available on the Singles Scene.)

To avoid this kind of embarrassment, you should do what other smart singles do: Before you sit down, go around the room discreetly shining a police flashlight into the other singles' faces. Once you have selected a likely looking one, you should sit down near this person and get into a spontaneous conversation.

How to Get into A Spontaneous Conversation

In the old days, the way people got into conversations was the woman would take a cigarette out of her purse and pretend to look for a match, which was the signal for six or seven available lurking men to lunge toward her, Zippos flaming, sometimes causing severe burns.

Smoking, however, has pretty much lost its glamor, to the point where trying to get a strange male to light your cigarette in public would be viewed as comparable to trying to get him to pick your

nose. Which is a shame, really, because men are deprived of the chance to feel bold and masculine and necessary in the hostile bar environment. It would be nice if we had a modern bar-meeting ritual. Like maybe the woman could come in with a jar of relish, and she could sit there pretending she couldn't get the lid off, and the man could come along and offer to help, and soon they would be engrossed in a fascinating conversation. ("Are you fond of relish? Huh! I am fond of relish myself!")

But for now, we are stuck with the system where one party has to boldly walk right up to the other party and, with no real excuse, attempt to start a conversation. At one time this was strictly the man's responsibility, but now, what with Women's Liberation, it is still strictly the man's responsibility.

Men, this is nothing to be nervous about. After all, why do you think the woman came to a singles bar, if not to meet a guy like you, only smarter and more attractive? So go to it!

The trick is to know some good "opening lines" that are guaranteed to get a woman's attention and make her realize you are a caring and sharing kind of guy who has things on his mind such as international politics and great literature, and who doesn't just want to grope her body.

Some Good Opening Lines

- * "How about those problems in the Middle East?"
- * "How about those Brothers Karamazov?"
- * "I don't just want to grope your body. I mean, not here in the bar."

What the Woman Should Do If She Is Not Interested

She should attempt to fend the male off via one of the following gently tactful yet firm statements:

- * "Haha HA HA HA (cough cough cough) (spit)."
- * "I'm sorry, but I just washed my hair."
- * "I'm sorry, but unfortunately you hold no more physical attraction for me than those photographs you sometimes see of a cold virus magnified several million times."

If subtlety doesn't work, if the man turns out to be the type who views himself as such an extreme Stud Muffin that he cannot imagine a woman who would not want to conceive a child via him, then the woman should take a more direct approach, such as Mace.

Meeting People through Personal Ads

These are those little paid advertisements that people take out in magazines or newspapers. A lot of people laugh at these ads, but in fact this is the way top stars such as Johnny Carson and Joan Collins get most of their spouses.

If you want your ad to be effective, however, it must have certain characteristics:

1. It should say you are profoundly attractive. Nobody in the personal ads, nobody, is ever "average-looking." If, for example, you had Elephant Man's Disease, you would describe yourself as "rugged."
2. It should be extremely specific. For example, if you're a man, you don't just say you're looking for "a nice woman." You say you're looking for

“a 5’8” 23-year-old blonde Capricorn woman of Croatian ancestry weighing

109 pounds and having a degree in cultural anthropology from Duke University.” This lets everybody know you are in a position to pick and choose, and not some semi-desperate schlump who has to advertise for dates.

3. It should say you like “candlelight dinners and long walks on the beach.” All personal classified ads contain this phrase, not because anybody really wants to take long walks on the beach, but because people want to prove they’re Romantic and Sensitive. The beaches of America are teeming with couples who met because of personal ads, staggering along, sweating, and picking sea-urchin spines out of their feet, each person afraid to reveal to the other that he or she would rather be watching a rental movie.

Meeting People Through Clubs and Organizations

Often it seems that the happiest marriages are the ones where the man and the woman share an interest in a hobby, like bass fishing. Because of this shared interest, such couples can pass countless intimate hours together, talking bait, plus they can use their vacation time to go on long fishing trips to secluded wilderness areas where they will find time to just be alone together, hour after hour, day after day, on some scum-encrusted, mosquito-infested lake, totally alone, until finally one of them disembowels the other with a scaling knife.

To get into a relationship like this, you need to develop an interest, preferably one that does not involve sharp implements, and go hang out with other people who have the same interest. Let’s say, for example, that you have an interest in cats. Now I, personally, cannot imagine having any interest in cats other than to find out what happens when you submerge them for various lengths of time in roofing cement, but I am sure there are lots of formal pro-cat organizations in your area, which you could locate by asking a police officer. Go to their meetings and survey the crowd until you find a likely prospect to strike up a conversation with (“Hi! I see we share an interest in cats! Perhaps we should get married!”).

If this doesn’t work, you might try stamp collectors, or one of your major churches.

Meeting People at the Office

If you get an office job, you’ll be involved in a serious relationship within a matter of days. This is the good news. The bad news is, this relationship will probably involve a person who is technically already married to somebody else. This is because, to a married person, the office is a highly romantic environment, where everybody wears nice clothes and discusses important issues such as the Three-Month Sales Forecast, in stark contrast to the home environment, where people tend to wear bathrobes with jelly stains on them and get into vicious day-long arguments over who put the ice tray back in the refrigerator with a dead roach in it (see Chapter 8, “How to Argue Like a Veteran Married Couple”). So the office becomes essentially a large, carpeted pit of illicit passion, where at least two-thirds of the activity is related to motel arrangements.

Whatever method you use to meet somebody, your next step is to go on a number (174) of dates so you can get to know what this person is really like.

Tips for Gals: 13 Common First-Date Warning Signs That a Guy Might Be a jerk

1. He brings his mom.
2. He smells bad.
3. He smells a little too good.
4. He proudly carries the American Express Platinum Card.
5. He periodically blows his nose elaborately into a handkerchief, then folds it up carefully and puts it back into his pocket as though it was some kind of valuable artifact.
6. He wants to take you to a hockey game.
7. He wants to know if you know how to clean fish.
8. He always calls the waitress "Sweets."
9. He manages to let you know how much money he makes by some contrivance such as pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket and saying: "I'll be darned! Here's my W-2 form!"
10. He wears wing-tip shoes when he doesn't have to.
11. He has pictures of his car.
12. He has a personalized license plate on his car.
13. He has motivational cassette tapes in his car.

Dating

"Dating" simply means "going out with a potential mate and doing a lot of fun things that the two of you will never do again if you actually get married." Dating is a very important part of the mate-selection process throughout all of nature. Some sectors of nature, such as insects, date for only a few seconds; birds, on the other hand, perform an elaborate Dating Dance. In fact, dancing is all that birds can do, because in order to make it possible for them to fly, they cannot have sexual organs, which is why we have to import flocks of new birds from Canada every year.

Human beings dated as far back as ancient times, as is shown by the biblical quotation: "And Balzubio DID taketh Parasheeba to a restaurant, and they DID eateth potato skins." The next recorded date was between Romeo and Juliet, a young Italian couple who went out despite their parents' objections, and just about everybody involved ended up either stabbed or poisoned.

After this tragedy, there was very little dating for several centuries. During this time, marriages were arranged by the parents, based on such things as how much cattle the bride and the groom would each bring to the union. Often the young couple wouldn't even meet until the wedding, and sometimes they were not strongly attracted to each other. Sometimes, quite frankly, they preferred the cattle. So now we feel that dating is probably a better system.

Who Should Ask Whom for the Date

As we noted earlier, these are free and liberated and nonstereotypical times we live in, by which I mean it is the responsibility of the man to ask for the date, and the responsibility of the woman to think

up excuses that get progressively more obvious until the man figures out that the woman would rather chew on a rat pancreas.

Four Fun Things to Do on a Date

1. Go to a restaurant and have something to eat.
2. Go to a restaurant and have a completely different thing to eat.
3. Go to a completely different restaurant.
4. Go to visit interesting places such as New York and Europe and see if they have any restaurants.

Things You Can Talk About on a Date

1. Your various entrees.

Falling in Love

When two people have been on enough dates, they generally fall in love. You can tell you're in love by the way you feel: your head becomes light, your heart leaps within you, you feel like you're walking on air, and the whole world seems like a wonderful and happy place. Unfortunately these are also the four warning signs of colon disease, so it's always a good idea to check with your doctor.

But if it turns out to be love, it's time to think about taking the next major step in a relationship: French-kissing.

Ha ha! just kidding. The next major step is to live in Sin, which we will cover in the next chapter. Of course if you belong to a religious sect that believes that a couple should get married first, you should skip the next chapter and go straight to the one about sex, unless it is a very strict religious sect, in which case you should burn this book immediately.

Chapter2. Living In Sin

For many years, it was generally considered to be wrong to live in Sin. Now, however, thanks to the Sexual Revolution (May 6, 1967), living together is considered a normal and in fact very useful phase in a relationship, a phase that is accepted and even endorsed by virtually all sectors of society except of course your parents. Your parents hate it. it doesn't matter how nice or respectable the person is you're living with. You could be living with Abraham Lincoln, and your parents would still hate it. Especially if you are a guy.

But, hey, it's your life to live, and if you really want to move in with somebody, your feelings have to take precedence over your parents'. The best thing to do is confront their concerns head-on, by sitting down with them, face to face, and lying.

"Mom and Dad," you should say, "Bill and I are not living together. He came over to my apartment this morning to help me kill a spider and by mistake he left his toothbrush and all his clothes and

furniture.”

Your parents will pretend they believe you, because the truth is they really don’t want to even think about the idea of you and S-E-X. All parents are like this. No matter how old you get, in their minds you will always have the wisdom and emotional maturity of Beaver Cleaver.

Moving in Together

Moving in together is an exciting and romantic adventure for both of you, a time of caring and sharing the joys of little discoveries such as what another person’s used dental floss looks like. But this is also a time when you must try to be practical. You must bear in mind that no matter how much you love each other now, somewhere down the road you will inevitably have traditional “lovers’ quarrels” wherein one of you will hurl all of the other one’s possessions out the window and possibly kill an innocent pedestrian. This is why most experts recommend that you get a ground-floor apartment furnished mainly with lightweight, easy-to-hurl Tupperware.

The Most Serious Issue Likely to Come between a Man and a Woman Living Together

(WARNING: Those of you who detest blatant and unfair but nonetheless generally true sexual stereotypes should leave the room at this time.)

Okay. The major issue facing a man and a woman who decide to live together is: Dirt. I am serious. Men and women do not feel the same way about dirt at all. Men and women don’t even see dirt the same way. Women, for some hormonal reason, can see individual dirt molecules, whereas men tend not to notice them until they join together into clumps large enough to support commercial agriculture. There are exceptions, but over 85 percent of all males are legally classifiable as Cleaning Impaired.

This can lead to serious problems in a relationship. Let’s say a couple has decided to divide up the housework absolutely even-steven. Now when it’s the woman’s turn to clean, say, the bathroom, she will go in there and actually clean it. The man, on the other hand, when it’s his turn, will look around, and, because he is incapable of seeing the dirt, will figure nothing major is called for, so he’ll maybe flush the toilet and let it go at that. Then the woman will say: “Why didn’t you clean the bathroom? It’s filthy!” And the man, whose concept of “filthy” comes from the men’s rooms in bars, where you frequently see bacteria the size of cocker spaniels frisking around, will have no idea what she’s talking about.

So what happens in most relationships is, the man learns to go through the motions of cleaning. Ask him to clean a room, and he’ll squirt Windex around seemingly at random, then run the vacuum cleaner over the carpet, totally oblivious to the question of whether or not it’s picking up any dirt.

I have a writer friend, Clint Collins, who once proposed that, as a quick “touch-up” measure, you could cut a piece of two-by-four the same width as the vacuum cleaner and drag it across the carpet to produce those little parallel tracks, which as far as Clint could tell were the major result of vacuuming. (Clint was also unaware for the first 10 or 15 years of his marriage that vacuum cleaners had little bags

in them; he speculated that the dirt went through the electrical cord and into the wall.)

What this means is that, if your live-together relationship is going to work, both of you must be sensitive to the special needs of the Cleaning Impaired. Unfortunately for you women, this means you must spend many hours patiently going over basic cleaning concepts that may seem simple and obvious to you, but will be baffling mysteries to the Cleaning Impaired person, such as:

1. Where clean dishes actually come from.
2. What you can do with used pizza boxes besides stack them in the corner of the living room for upwards of two years.
3. How some people do more in the way of cleaning the bedroom than simply spray a few blasts of Right Guard deodorant on the two-foot-high mound of unlaundered jockey shorts.

And so on. The best way to avoid conflict is if you make up lists that state clearly what cleaning chores each of you will be responsible for. At first, the Cleaning Impaired person's list should be fairly modest:

NORMAL PERSON'S WEEKLY CHORE LIST

1. Clean kitchen.
2. Clean bathroom.
3. Clean entire rest of domicile.

CLEANING IMPAIRED PERSON'S WEEKLY CHORE LIST

1. Don't get peanut butter on sheets.

Speaking of peanut butter, another area where a first-time live-together couple can run into trouble is the kitchen. Here again we need to confront the depressing fact that, despite all the progress that has been made in other areas, such as coeducational softball, when it comes to sharing equally in food-preparation responsibilities, many men are still basically scumballs. I know I am. This was driven home to me on a recent Thanksgiving day, when my family had dinner at the home of friends named Arlene and Gene.

Picture a typical Thanksgiving scene: on the floor, three small children and a dog who long ago had her brain eaten by fleas are running as fast as they can directly into things, trying to injure themselves. On the television, the Detroit Lions are doing pretty much the same thing. In the kitchen, Arlene, a prosecuting attorney responsible for a large staff, is doing something to a turkey. Surrounding Arlene are thousands of steaming cooking containers. I would no more enter that kitchen than I would attempt to park a nuclear aircraft carrier, but my wife, who runs her own business, glides in very casually and picks up exactly the right kitchen implement and starts doing exactly the right thing without receiving any instructions whatsoever. She quickly becomes enshrouded in steam.

So Gene and I, feeling guilty, finally bumble over and ask what we can do to help, and from behind the steam comes Arlene's patient voice asking us to please keep an eye on the children. Which we try to do. But there is a famous law of physics that goes, "You cannot watch small children and the Detroit Lions at the same time, and let's face it, the Detroit Lions are more interesting." So we would start out watching the children, and then one of us would sneak a peek at the TV and say, "Hey! Look at this tackle!" And then we'd have to watch the Instant Replay to find out whether the tackled person was dead or just permanently disabled. By then the children would have succeeded in injuring themselves or the dog, and this voice from behind the kitchen steam would call, very patiently, "Gene, please watch the children."

I realize this is awful. I realize this sounds just like Ozzie and Harriet. I also realize that there are some

males out there, with hyphenated last names, who have evolved much further than Gene and I have, who are not afraid to stay home full-time and get coated with baby vomit while their wives work as test pilots, and who go into the kitchen on a daily basis to prepare food for other people, as opposed to going in there primarily for beer. But I think Gene and I are more typical. I think most males rarely prepare food for others, and when they do, they have their one specialty dish (spaghetti, in my case) that they prepare maybe twice a year in a very elaborate production number, for which they expect to be praised as if they had developed, right there in the kitchen, a cure for heart disease.

What Men Have to Do about This

It's very simple, men. If you want to have a decent and fair live-together relationship, you have to start cooking whole entire meals all by yourself on a regular basis. And by "meals," men, I do not mean "Kraft Cheez Whiz eaten directly from the jar with a spoon." I mean meals that somebody else would eat. That even your mom would eat.

This is not as hard as you think, men. All you need to do is learn some recipes.

Recipes for Guys

Recipe Number One: Food Heated Up

This dish has long been a specialty of women and the great chefs of Europe, who have learned that, with a few exceptions, such as grape soda, almost all food tastes better when you heat it up. In fact some foods, such as baked potatoes, are very hard to eat any other way.

TO PREPARE: Get enough units of food to feed yourself and the person you are living with. Now select a pot that you feel is the correct size. Now put this pot back and select another one, because the one you selected first was wrong. (Trust me here, guys. In 15 years, I have never once selected an initial pot that my wife did not feel, based on her vastly superior experience and hormonal instinct, was the wrong size.)

Okay. Now try to put the food unit inside the pot. (**CULINARY HINT:** For extra elegance, try removing the food unit from its can or wrapper first!) If it fits, cook it on top of the stove on "medium" heat until just before it overflows the top and wrecks the stove. If it doesn't fit into the pot, it's probably a turkey, a roast, or a ham, which you can tell by counting the number of legs and referring to this convenient chart:

Food Type Number Of Legs Cooking Temperature

Turkey 2 medium

Roast 0 medium

Ham 0 medium

These larger foods should be placed inside the little room under the stove (the "oven") and cooked on "medium" heat until just before they fill the entire dwelling area with dense acrid smoke.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If the food unit is, in fact, a turkey, be sure to check inside and remove the traditional Surprise Packet of yuckola blobs that is always found in the interiors of deceased frozen turkeys for reasons that nobody can really explain. One theory is that it is placed there as a protest by dissatisfied workers at the turkey manufacturing plant. A more plausible theory is that the blobs are

actually dormant baby turkeys. Most savvy chefs immediately throw them into the garbage or flush them down the toilet, which incidentally is how there came to be giant albino turkeys in the New York City sewer system whose only natural enemies are the alligators.

Recipe Number Two: Two Kinds of Food in the Same Meal

Yes! This really is possible! In fact, your extremely advanced chefs will sometimes serve as many as three kinds of food, although I do not recommend that you attempt this yourself.

TO PREPARE: Follow the recipe for Food Heated Up, except use two food units, two pots, two stoves, etc. The trick is to select foods that “complement” each other.

Okay. We’ve covered the two biggest potential problem areas involved in living together, namely dirt and food. This leaves sex, which in the interest of decency we will put in a separate chapter.

Chapter 3. A Frank, Mature, Sensitive, And Caring Discussion Of Human Sexuality With Dirty Pictures

Special Advance Warning to Decent People

I’m afraid that, in this chapter, we must talk about sex in a very explicit manner, because we want to expand the Frontiers of Human Understanding and also we want to sell as many books as possible to adolescent boys. This means we are going to have to use certain highly clinical sexual terms, such as “puberty” and “mollusk”, which can lead to arousal in some instances. So if you have a shred of decency in you, you’ll want to stop reading and go make fudge or something until this chapter is over. You’d better leave right now, because the heavy pornography starts almost immediately after these asterisks.

Still with us, eh? Ha Ha! Don’t feel ashamed. You’d be surprised at some of the readers we get in this chapter.

Okay. Now that we’ve cleared out the religious fanatics, let’s take a look (so to speak) at ...

The Major Male Sexual Organs

The major male sexual organs are the testaments, the nomads, the doubloons, the inner tubules, the vasal constrictors, the reversion unit, and of course the Main Organ, or “wiener.”

Men are very protective of these organs. This is because Mother Nature decided, apparently as a prank, to place them on the outside of the male body, where they are most likely to get hit by baseballs, or punched by small children, or even—this makes me cringe, just thinking about it—attacked by crazed birds. And what is worse, Mother Nature made these organs extremely sensitive.

You know how women are always talking about the Pain of Childbirth, and how awful it is, and how men will never really understand it? Well, we men don’t wish to make a big deal about this, but if you women really want to experience pain, you ought to try being male and taking a line drive to the privates. Yes sir. When this happens in a professional baseball game, and the player is down on the

ground, writhing in agony, obviously clutching his private parts, the color commentator always says to the announcer: “Looks like he had the wind knocked out of him, Ted.” But the male spectators know better, and if you look around you’ll notice that they’re all hunched over protectively, thousands of them, as if a sudden epidemic of Bad Posture Disease has swept through the crowd.

What this means is that, as they are growing up, males develop an attitude about their sexual organs very similar to the one that over-protective, doting parents have about their children. This is not a problem when the organs are young and innocent and basically dormant. But things change drastically when we reach puberty.

Puberty generally occurs in males about two years late. By this I mean it occurs about two years after it occurs in females, which is somewhere around sixth grade. I remember at the end of my fifth-grade year, when we left for summer vacation, and the boys and girls were all just about even in the race for adulthood. But when we got back the next fall, the girls suddenly, out of the clear blue sky, were all a foot taller and had somehow acquired bosoms and God only knew what else. It was as though they had all attended Summer Bosom Camp.

This gives the girls an unfair head start. They get two whole years in which to get used to having sexually advanced bodily parts, and the result is they develop a certain maturity about it, a coolness of judgment, a savoir faire, that they retain for the rest of their lives.

Boys, meanwhile, are condemned to two years of wandering around the corridors of the junior high school, their eyes cruelly positioned by Mother Nature at just about bosom level, and consequently they develop this tremendous yearning to catch up. When puberty finally strikes them, this pent-up desire has become so powerful that they develop erections that last for an average of slightly over three years. You men out there know what I’m talking about. The main reason adolescent males carry school books is they need something to hold in front of them.

Okay, then. To summarize what we have, in the typical healthy young male: We have a creature who tends to be highly indulgent toward his sexual organs, and we have organs that are semi-out-of-control much of the time, and almost always Ready to Party. Now let us contrast this with the sexual development of the typical female, starting with a discreet and sensitive examination of ...

The Major Female Sexual Organs

I don’t know what the major female sexual organs are. I get extremely confused just looking at the diagrams. Frankly, I don’t think anyone really has a handle on the entire female reproductive system, because the organs are located inside the female body, where you can’t see them. The only way a woman can have even a vague idea of what’s going on in there is to have a gynecologist root around with primitive implements, and perhaps even call in an associate for consultation (“Hey Bob! Come in here! What do you make of this?!”).

So in contrast to men, who are always touching themselves and giving themselves little nicknames, women develop an attitude of almost clinical detachment about their reproductive systems.

Furthermore, where men’s organs seem to be carefree and impulsive, women’s are serious and hard-working, with a single-minded devotion to the idea of having a baby. No matter what the woman is doing on the outside—having a career, writing a novel, bowling—her organs are busy on the inside, gathering food for the baby, fixing up the baby’s room, etc. At the end of each month they sigh, throw

everything away and start all over again, thus sending the woman the friendly biological reminder: “Okay. Fine. Go ahead and have your fun out there. Don’t mind us in here, slaving away, trying to ensure the very survival of the human race.”

In summary, then, we see that, because of the location and nature of their respective organs, women tend to have a more serious, thoughtful, and responsible attitude toward relationships than men do. I realize this is an absurd generalization, but my feeling is that if we can’t have absurd generalizations, we might as well not even bother to write books.

NOTICE: THE FOLLOWING MATERIAL IS OF A SEXUALLY EXPLICIT NATURE THAT MAY AROUSE PRURIENT INTERESTS IN READERS WHO HAVE INSUFFICIENT CONTROL OF THEIR URGES.

Answers to Common Sexual Questions

Q. How long should sexual intercourse last?

A. This is an area of some disagreement between the sexes. As a rule, women would like to devote as much time to foreplay and the sex act as men would like to devote to foreplay, the sex act, and building a garage. This tends to lead to dissatisfaction on the part of the woman, who is often just beginning to feel pleasantly sensuous when the man is off rooting around in the refrigerator to see if there’s any Jell-O left.

Q. Well, isn’t there some sensitive and caring and loving technique that a couple can use to slow the man down?

A. Yes. When the woman senses that the man is nearing climax, she can whisper: “The Internal Revenue Service called again today, but don’t worry, I hung up on them.”

Q. I am a good-looking woman, as you can see from the enclosed glossy color photographs of me naked.

A. Yes. Thank you.

Q. Although I have an otherwise wonderful marriage, my husband seems to be losing interest in me sexually. It’s the little things: he hardly ever smiles at me; he often works late; and he comes home with as many as four naked women. So I thought, to rekindle the old flame, I’d surprise him, using a method suggested by Marabel Morgan in her book *The Total Woman*, namely greeting him at the door wearing only Saran Wrap. However, we were out of Saran Wrap, so I used Tupperware, which I feel is a better product anyway, but this unfortunately failed to produce the desired result, in the sense that when my husband saw me, he suffered some kind of seizure, and I had to drive him to the hospital while attempting to cover my private parts with two quart canisters and a Deviled Egg Transporter. My question is: Can we deduct this mileage on our income tax?

A. That depends on your individual situation.

Q. Listen, I, ummm, I have this kind of weird sexual hangup, which is that I, ummmmm ... this is very embarrassing ...

A. Go ahead! Say it! Don’t be ashamed! That’s what we’re here for! To help!

Q. Okay, but I want to whisper it. (whisper whisper whisper)

A. My God! Really?

Q. Um, yes.

A. The joint Chiefs of Staff?!

Q. Well, yes.

A. How do you get the hamsters into the accordion?

Necking Tips for Guys

The big problem with necking is figuring out whether or not your date wants to Do It. On the Planet of the Ideal Women, your date would just come right out and tell you. She'd say: "What do you say we lie down on the couch and neck like crazy?" Or: "Although I like you as a friend, I frankly would not neck with you even if the alternative were death by leeches."

But here on the planet Earth, she won't say anything. Sometimes this means she isn't interested. But sometimes it doesn't. Generally the way a guy finds out specifically what his date is thinking is at some point he lunges at her, lips puckered, and she responds by either puckering back, or quickly turning her head sideways, in which case the guy winds up sort of licking her hair, looking like a world-class dork. There is no face-saving way for a guy to get out of this situation, other than to have an instantaneously fatal seizure.

Assuming your date is responsive, your next move is to attempt "French-kissing," which is when you stick your tongue into her mouth, and she sticks her tongue into your mouth, and so there the two of you are, with your tongues in each other's mouths. This is a really sexy thing to do, according to French people, although you should bear in mind that they also like to eat snails.

Anyway, assuming your date seems to be responding positively to you, in the sense that she has not yet kneed you in the groin, and also assuming that you really and truly respect her as a human being and love her and plan to marry her, it's time to move on to ...

Heavy Petting

The big problem here is the bra strap. You cannot casually unhook a bra strap. The bra-strap industry sees to this. Scientists over at the Bra Strap Research Center in Amarillo, Texas, work night and day with volunteer males and lifelike female dummies coming up with newer and more complicated fastening devices, devices where the first hook actually re-hooks itself after you go on to the second one, such that nobody can get these bras off, especially not a lust-crazed male in a dark room. Many priceless jewelry collections are now protected solely by bra straps.

If you get through the bra strap, your next challenge is the undergarments, which you will probably have to ask your date for assistance with, because they can be complex beyond human imagining, but I strongly advise that before the two of you tackle them, you should leave the restaurant.

Solid Advice about Condoms

Guys, you should definitely use a condom. All major health authorities agree on this. The whole nation has become violently pro-condom, not just for guys having sex, but also for guys puttering around the yard, domestic animals most vegetables and all major war monuments. Better safe than sorry!

Where to Get Additional Explicit Helpful Information on Sex

The best source of reliable information is romance novels, which you can find in better bookstores and supermarkets everywhere. You know the books I mean—the cover always is a picture of a handsome and of course brooding man embracing a woman with green eyes and a bosom that is clearly heaving, sometimes most of the way out of her dress. The title is always something fairly humid, like *Loins of Passion*.

You sexually inexperienced couples should get hold of one of these books, because inside you will find a number of passages that are chock-full of explicit, down-to-earth, practical “straight talk” about the sexual act:

“As Sabrina gazed upward at Baron LeGume, whose dark, brooding eyeballs were turgid with passion, she felt the tormented tenseness of his throbbing, pulsating malehood, and she knew, with a knowledge borne of knowing, that she could no longer hold back the surging waves of passion that washed over her, like waves of something, as his brooding throbbing pulsating highly engorged lips sought hers, not that she wanted to hold them back, we’re talking about the waves of passion here, although she knew that somehow, somewhere, perhaps deep within the shuddering throes of yearninghood that even now gripped the very core of her womanhood, if you get what we mean, that she must find a way, through the hazy mists of desire, to end this sentence, although she sensed somehow that ...”

And so on. You young couples should study these helpful and realistic passages thoroughly, so you can use them for guidance when you are attempting sex (“You mean to tell me that’s the tormented tenseness of your malehood?”).

Chapter 4. Breaking Up Or Getting Engaged

After a while, the sparkle tends to go out of a relationship. I don’t care how passionate you are. I don’t care if you’re like those couples in romantic movies who, in the scene where they finally realize they’re in love, lunge into each other’s arms and fall to the ground, wherever they are, even if it is a pasture, and roll around amongst the cow doots in a sexual frenzy. You don’t think those couples keep that kind of thing up, do you? Throughout life? Of course not. What would their clothes smell like?

The point being, a relationship can survive on pure romance for only so long. Sooner or later, Mundane Reality starts to seep in, and you need to make a decision:

- * Do you break up with this person and look around for another one in hopes of once again experiencing the searing surge of unbridled passion, ideally in a carpeted environment? Or,

- * Do you accept that your relationship can move to a more mature stage, a stage based not so much upon impulse and romance and physical attraction as upon liking the same television shows? In short, do you get married?

How to Tell If You Are Compatible with Somebody

One way to find out if another person is “right” for you is to spend a lot of time with this person, talking and sharing experiences, so that you really get to know him or her as a human being. This is what we call the old-fashioned, or “stupid” way. The modern way is to take a Compatibility Quiz.

The Compatibility Quiz is a concept that was developed by top research scientists at Cosmopolitan magazine, a highly informative publication whose cover always has a picture of a glamorous woman, wearing an extremely low-cut outfit, whose breasts appear to be pointing straight up. In fact, they are pointing down: Cosmopolitan suspends these women by their feet from the ceiling. That is the price you have to pay, if you truly wish to be glamorous.

Anyway, if you want to know whether your relationship will work out, you need to sit down and answer these questions:

Money

Who do you feel should be the “breadwinner” in a family?

- A. The man.
- B. The woman.
- C. H. Ross Perot.

Children

Which of the following statements best describes your feelings toward children?

- A. “Put that down this instant!”
- B. “I said put that down!”
- C. “Never put your finger in that part of the doggy!!”

Housework

In a modern marriage, who do you feel should be responsible for the housework?

- A. Nobody.
- B. It should be divided up fairly and equally among the servants.
- C. Leona Helmsley.

Recreation

Your idea of a pleasant romantic evening is:

- A. Sipping a glass of wine and watching a roaring fire.
- B. Drinking a few martinis and roaring at the fire.
- C. Drinking a bottle of gin and setting things on fire.

Sex

The kind of sex you enjoy most is:

- A. With another person.
- B. With several other persons, but no animals.
- C. At least not invertebrates.
- D. Unless they are fairly tame.

Religion

How would you describe your attitude toward religion?

- A. About your height, only thinner.
- B. I am not especially big on religion, but I have watched it on television.
- C. I am religious to the point of human sacrifice.

Family Crises

Bill and Denise are a young married working couple with no children. One day they set out from Reno, Nevada, on foot at exactly 4:30 P.m. Bill walks three miles per hour and rests for ten minutes each hour, while Denise walks at exactly two miles per hour without stopping. After a couple of days they are both dead from scorpions. Which of the following statements most closely matches your feelings regarding this?

- A. It serves them right.
- B. I hear Reno is quite nice.
- C. I myself prefer a moister climate.

Current Events

The capital of Vermont is:

- A. Where they keep the governor.
- B. Very cold.
- C. Probably in New England.

HOW TO SCORE: Give yourself one point for each answer. No, what the heck, give yourself two points for each answer. Now add up your points and compare your total with the total for the person you're trying to be compatible with. If both of your totals are numbers, odds are you two will hit it off pretty well. At least until you get married. Or maybe not. How the hell should I know?

Your total: Your potential mate's total:

Alternative Method for Stupid People

Another excellent way to decide whether another person is compatible with you is to use astrology. The word "astrology" comes from the Greek or possibly Latin words "astro" and "ology," so right away we can see that it is very scientific. In fact, astrology rests on a proven principle, namely that

if you know the exact positions where the moon and the various planets were when a person was born, you can get this person to give you money. The way you do this is by making up random, semi-unintelligible pieces of advice, such as “attend to future considerations.”

To use astrology for your own personal benefit, simply locate your astrological “sign” then look up your horoscope in any reputable newspaper and govern your entire life accordingly.

How to Break Up

The ideal way to break up is the one featured in the famous best-selling book, *Love Story*, where the beautiful heroine, sensing that the relationship is getting maybe a little stale, contracts a fatal disease. In real life, however, it’s never that easy. You never have a really good excuse for breaking up with the other person, so you feel guilty, and you put off confronting the problem. I have a friend who found it so difficult to tell his girlfriend he no longer loved her that he just kept going along with the program, until finally, one day, they actually got married. They had a big wedding, and she was up there, in front of all her friends and family, thinking this was the happiest day of her life, and he was standing there in a rental tuxedo, thinking: “Should I tell her now? Nah. Better wait till after we cut the cake.” This kind of thing happens all the time.

So if you’re going to break up, you have to overcome your guilt and break up now. Otherwise you’ll never find the person you really want, the person with whom you can achieve your goal of Lifelong Happiness. You should follow the example of famous former ravishing beauty Elizabeth Taylor, who sheds husbands like used Kleenex and has consequently achieved Lifelong Happiness dozens of times.

Of course your major concern, in breaking up, is how to do it in such a way that the other person doesn’t get so upset that he or she stabs himself or herself. Or yourself. I recommend that you take the honest approach. Come right out with the truth. That is always best, in the end. To build up your courage, practice holding imaginary conversations with your lover, wherein you set forth, calmly and rationally, the reasons why you feel the breakup is necessary, then try to imagine, and sensitively respond to, the various objections your lover might have:

YOU: Listen, I, um, I, uhh ...

YOUR LOVER: Yes? Is there something you wish to tell me?

YOU: Um.

YOUR LOVER: Are you trying to tell me that, although you care for me deeply, and you will cherish always the times that we have had together, you really feel that we both need more space to grow and enrich our lives as separate individuals? For my sake as well as yours?

YOU: Well.

YOUR LOVER: Then perhaps it would be best if we broke up, with no hard feelings or remorse on either side.

YOU: Okay by me.

After you’ve mentally rehearsed this dialogue enough times, you simply go through it again, out loud, but this time in the presence of your lover. You’ll be surprised at how smoothly it goes:

YOU: Listen, I, um, I, uhh ...

YOUR LOVER: If you break up with me, I’m going to kill myself.

YOU: I was thinking we should get married.

There! See how easy that was? I am so very happy for the both of you! Onward to our “Important Prenuptial Chapter.”

Chapter 5. Important Prenuptial Chapter

Should you and your spouse-to-be have a prenuptial agreement? We put this question to five of the country’s leading attorneys, and they sent us bills totalling \$63,500. This should give you an idea of how important it is to try to avoid those pesky legal squabbles that could crop up down the road. So just in case, we have prepared the following Low-Cost But Fair Prenuptial Agreement for you. Of course, as is the case with any binding legal document, we strongly suggest that, before you sign it, you place it on a flat surface.

Low-Cost but Fair Prenuptial Agreement

BE IT HEREBY AGREED that since (name of bride), hereinafter referred to as The Bride, and (name of groom), hereinafter known as The Groom, have decided that they love each other with a deep and undying passion, at least for the time being, and consequently want to get married, THEREFORE they do hereby agree that, in case later on for some reason God forbid they decide to get a divorce, they will both adhere to the following Deal:

1. **MONEY.** If there is any money, it shall be divided up equally and fairly between The Bride’s and The Groom’s attorneys.
2. **DISHES.** The Bride and The Groom shall equally divide up such dishes as have not been reduced to microscopic shards in the Traditional Pre-Divorce Violent Shrieking Kitchen Argument.
3. **WEDDING-GIFT FONDUE SETS STILL IN THE ORIGINAL UNOPENED BOXES.** The Bride and The Groom shall each keep eight fondue sets, and the rest shall be given to charity.
4. **OTHER POSSESSIONS.** The Bride shall get to keep whatever she picked out, including the living room, dining room, and bedroom furniture as well as any major appliances, carpets, lamps, paintings, etc. The Groom shall get to keep the Rolling Stones album *Get Yer Ya Yas Out* and the NHL Power Play table hockey game, including both pucks.
5. **FRIENDS.** Friends shall be divided up by sex and distributed accordingly.
6. **RELATIVES.** The Bride and The Groom shall each keep whatever relatives they had at the time of the original marriage. If there is any question about this, such as Uncle Bob, whom nobody can remember which family he belongs to, then he shall be allowed to visit either The Bride or The Groom, at his discretion, with the provision that he leaves after a couple of weeks.
7. **DOG.** The dog shall be the property of whichever party was supportive of it and cleaned up after it the time it was throwing up what looked like raccoon parts on the bed.

Tips for the New Bride

HOW TO GET ALONG WITH YOUR MOTHER-IN-LAW: Your best bet is drugs.

DEALING WITH YOUR HUSBAND’S OLD BUDDIES: Odds are your husband will have old

buddies from college or reform school with whom he has shared many important Male Bonding Experiences such as fighting and burping and taking turns driving cars into the lobbies of major hotels.

After you are married, you should not try to cut him off from these friends. They are a very important part of his life. They are able to discuss with him, as you cannot, a lot of important questions that guys are concerned about, such as: Who was pitching for the Yankees when Bill Mazerowski hit the bottom-of-the-ninth home run that won the 1960 World Series for the Pirates? Now you are continuing to read this paragraph, but believe me, your husband stopped at the end of the last sentence and is now staring at the ceiling and saying: "Whitey Ford? Nah. Louis Arroyo? Nah." This is why he needs his buddies. To resolve questions like this.*

So you should make a special effort to make your husband's buddies feel welcome in your home. Invite them over for dinner. Invite them on your honeymoon. Don't make a big scene if they leave beer cans in the aquarium. And above all, don't force your husband to choose between them and you. I am not suggesting here that your husband would leave the woman he has pledged to spend the rest of his life with just so he could hang around with a bunch of guys talking sports and drinking beer. I am saying they would probably also order some pizza.

* It was Ralph Terry.

Chapter 6. How To Have A Perfect Wedding No Matter What

I am going to assume, in this chapter, that you're getting married for the first time and consequently you want to do it in the most traditional and ludicrously elaborate way possible. Those of you who are getting married for the second or third time will probably want a low-key, informal wedding. I know this was the case when my wife and I married each other. It was the second wedding for both of us, and the most formal and organized part of it (I am being serious here) came when the wedding party played Capture the Flag.

Similarly, some friends of mine named Hannah and Paddy had their second-time-around wedding in a bar, amidst a dense haze of cigarette smoke and much loud drinking, such that the actual ceremony, performed by a judge, was barely noticeable. The judge kept trying to get people's attention by pounding on the bar and shouting, "Quiet down! We have to marry Hannah and Paddy!"

But first-time marriers usually prefer to have a traditional wedding, defined by experts as "a wedding where the flowers alone cost more than Versailles." One advantage of this kind of wedding is that, over the years, the various responsibilities have clearly been divided up between the bride's family and the groom's family:

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BRIDE'S FAMILY: The announcement; the church; the invitations; the clergyman; the rehearsal; the bridesmaids' luncheon; the flowers; the dresses; the reception; the food; the liquor; the photographer; the limousines; lodging and transportation for out-of-town guests; gratuities; the honeymoon; the national defense; a nice thoughtful present for the newlyweds such as a house. **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE GROOM'S FAMILY:** Not throwing up on the other guests.

Of course there is one other major responsibility of the groom, which is to buy the engagement ring. Guys, I know it can be intimidating to walk into a jewelry store and try to handle a slick salesman, but you'll do fine if you know a few basic technical facts about diamonds.

Diamond Formation

Millions of years ago, lumps of carbon fell down on the ground and got covered up by dirt and mountains, after which they were subjected to intense pressure by lobbying groups such as the National Rifle Association. Over the years, these lumps were buried deeper and deeper beneath the Earth's surface, so that today we don't even know where the hell they are. Nor care.

Meanwhile, shopping centers began to form, and inevitably they developed jewelry stores. This is where we stand today.

How Diamonds Are Measured

The standard unit of measurement for diamonds is called the "carat," which basically measures how much you love your fiancée. A guy who is only mildly attracted to his fiancée will buy her a ring with only a few carats, whereas a guy who really loves his fiancée will buy her a stone so large that she can never again swim in ponds for fear she will become embedded up to her shoulders in bottom muck.

That takes care of the groom's responsibilities; everything else is up to you brides-to-be. You're going to be very, very busy planning your wedding, because naturally you want everything to be perfect. Remember at all times, brides-to-be, this is your own very special day, and it damned well better be perfect or you are going to kill yourself with a cyanide capsule, which it is the responsibility of the maid or matron of honor to provide.

Actually, planning a wedding is not all that difficult, provided you do almost nothing else for the better part of a year. Naturally, this will be a very busy and exciting time for you. But as you go through it, you must make sure, amid all the excitement and hustle and bustle, that you don't lose sight of the whole point of the wedding—its deeper meaning and the central reason for its entire existence. Your gown.

Your Wedding Gown

Listen up, brides. You get only one shot in your life at a real wedding gown, and you better not blow it. Because a wedding gown is more than just a dress. It's a dress that costs a whole ton of money. It's a dress that you'll cherish for several decades in a box in a remote closet, perhaps to be taken out one day by your daughter when she's looking for (sniff) a wedding gown of her own. She'll wisely reject yours, of course, because by that time it will have served as the home environment for 60,000 generations of insects. The last thing she wants, when she's up at the altar on her own Very Special Day, is for a millipede to come strolling out of her bodice.

Nevertheless you must have a wonderful gown. This is where you need the expert help of a qualified bridal couturier, who can answer your technical questions:

YOU: What kinds of gowns do you have for under \$2,000?

COUTURIER: Well, we have this one right here.

YOU: This is a group of used Handi-Wipes sewn together.

COUTURIER: Yes. By preschool children.

With this kind of guidance, you'll be able to select a truly memorable gown, one that will cause your parents to remark in admiration: "How much? That's more than we spent on our first house!" If they don't make this remark, your gown is not memorable enough, and you should take it right back to the couturier to have some more pearls glued on.

After you've selected your gown, it's time to get on with planning the rest of the wedding. This task will be easier if you use this convenient Wedding Planner Checklist:

Bride's Wedding Planner Checklist

Six Months before the Wedding

This is the time to choose your wedding site. It should be extremely traditional. Ideally, you want St. Paul's Cathedral, in London, England. This is where Princess Diana got married to Prince Charles in a ceremony that lasted longer than a number of major wars. Also it required more horses. This is the kind of memorable wedding you definitely want to shoot for.

If St. Paul's is not available, look for a large traditional religious building, such as a church or synagogue, closer to home. In many cases, these buildings are affiliated with major religions, which may require that you hold specific religious beliefs before you can get married there. This is a good thing to check out beforehand, by calling up the person in charge:

YOU: Hi. I was thinking of getting married in your church or synagogue, and I was wondering if I had to hold any specific religious views.

RELIGIOUS PERSON: Why yes, you do. YOU: How many?

RELIGIOUS PERSON: Let's see, here ... five, six ... looks like eight in all.

YOU: Fine, fine. Could you please mail me a set?

If the building is really right for you, with adequate parking and every thing, you should go ahead and agree to hold the beliefs, even if they involve animal sacrifice. This is your wedding, after all.

The other major things that must be accomplished six months before the wedding are:

- * The bride should select a caterer and a nice country club for the reception, and her parents should withdraw their life's savings so they can put down a deposit.

- * The mother of the bride and the mother of the groom, if they do not already know each other, should have a luncheon wherein they get along about as well as Iran gets along with Iraq.

Five Months before the Wedding

Now is the time to select your bridesmaids. This is a very large honor, which you bestow only upon people who meet the following criteria:

1. They should be female.
2. They should be willing to wear bridesmaids' dresses.

This second criterion is the most important, because the whole point of the bridesmaid's dress is to render the person wearing it so profoundly unattractive that she cannot possibly outshine you, the bride. In fact, one of the really fun things a bride gets to do is go to the bridal salon with her mother, and the two of them get drunk and howl with laughter as they consider various comical outfits that they

might encase the bridesmaids in. Some of them go so far as to select actual clown suits, but most prefer the traditional look, which is:

- * Long frilly dresses in bright pastel colors reminiscent of Bazooka bubble gum or some experimental and ultimately unsuccessful ice cream flavor with a name like “Pumpkin Surprise.”

- * “Puffed” sleeves that make any woman who is larger than Audrey Hepburn look like a Green Bay Packer.

- * Large “fun” floppy hats that obscure the bridesmaid’s face so thoroughly that you could use men if you really had to.

You need not feel restricted to this look, however. This is your Very Special Day, and you can make the bridesmaids wear anything you want. Veils, fur stoles, whalebone corsets, hats with waxed fruit, kneepads, anything. Remember: they have to pay for it.

Four Months before the Wedding

This is a good time to select a silver pattern and a groom. (see Chapter 1, “How to Find Somebody to Go on Dates With”). In fact, your smart modern bride will often select several grooms, so as to guarantee that in case one or two of them get “cold feet,” she’ll still be able to have her Very Special Day.

You must be much more careful in selecting your silver pattern. It should have a name similar to the ones developers give to shoddy new apartment complexes, such as “Coventry Downe Manor”; and each place setting should consist of a regular fork, a dinner fork, a breakfast fork, a snack fork, a soup fork, a holiday fork, an emergency fork, a Care Bear fork, a Pez dispenser, and the equivalent knives, spoons, ladles, scone handlers, beet prongs, tuffet churners, prawn smelters, and clam goaders. Remember: Your silver is your first major family heirloom, to be cherished and stored in the same closet where you cherish your wedding dress until such time as one of you files for divorce.

Three Months before the Wedding

This is the time for the formal announcement of your engagement to appear in your local newspaper. Your local newspaper should have a name like The Morning, Afternoon & Evening Chronic Spokesperson-Fabricator, and the wording of the announcement should be as follows:

“(Your parents’ names) are extremely relieved to announce the engagement of (your name) to (your fiancé’s name), who is not really good enough, son of (your fiancé’s parents’ names), who are quite frankly dreadful, but (your parents’ names) will settle for just about anything at this point because suitors are not exactly knocking down (your name)’s door despite all the money (your parents’ names) spent on her teeth. An elaborate wedding is planned.”

This is also when you send out your invitations. You are naturally going to want to invite me and a number of my friends, because we are a lot of fun at any kind of affair where there is free liquor, plus if the band is really lame, which it will be (see page 50), we are not afraid to express our displeasure by hurling segments of the prime rib entree, which by the way may be served buffet-style for informal afternoon weddings. Others you might consider inviting include your family and any member of the groom’s family who can produce a receipt proving he or she has purchased at least one full place setting.

The invitation should be on a little card, which you mail to your invitees along with a little matching R. S.V.P. card and a return envelope that says **POSTAL SERVICE WILL NOT DELIVER WITHOUT STAMP.**

Two Months before the Wedding

This is when the mother of the groom should go out and buy a dress to wear to the wedding that is fancy enough so that the mother of the bride will be convinced that the groom's mother is trying to upstage the bride, and consequently the bride's mother will think about virtually nothing else for the rest of her life.

This is also when you should hire a band. It makes no difference which one. All wedding bands are the same. They're all cloned from living cells that were taken from the original wedding band, "Victor Esplanade and his Sounds of Compunction," and preserved in a saline solution in Secaucus, New jersey (which, incidentally, is also the home of the first native American Formica trees). They'll show up in stained tuxedos, and no matter what kind of music you ask them to play, they'll play it in such a way that it sounds like "New York, New York." Really. If you feel like dancing to some rock 'n' roll, and you ask them if they maybe know "Honky Tonk Woman," they'll say, "Oh sure, we know that one," and they'll play "New York, New York." They can't help it. We're talking genetics.

One Month before the Wedding

Now is the time for you and the groom to get your blood tests. If your groom's blood fails, get another groom. If your blood fails, get some new blood. We are much too far into the planning process to turn back now.

By now you should also have lined up a photographer. You'll want to have lots of photographs of your wedding to show to your family and friends, who will have been unable to see the actual ceremony because the photographer was always in the way.

Often you can save money by having your pictures taken by a friend or relative who is familiar with photography in the sense of owning a camera and knowing where a Fotomat is. I have some good friends named Rob and Helene who took this approach, and the pictures came out really swell except that for some technical reason there is no light in any of them. just these vaguely humanoid shapes. We all love to get these pictures out and look at them. "Look!" we say. "There's Helene! Or Rob! Or the cake!"

Two Weeks before the Wedding

By now your advance wedding gifts should have started to arrive, including at least 14 attractive and functional fondue sets. Also by this time the bride should start to notice a scratchy feeling at the back of her throat, indicating that she is just starting to come down with a case of Mongolian Death Flu.

One Week before the Wedding

This is where the groom starts to get actively involved in the wedding preparations, by having a “bachelor’s party” where he gets together with his “chums” for one last “fling” and wakes up several days later in an unexplored region of New Zealand. Meanwhile you, the bride, are bustling about, looking after the hundreds of last-minute details, having the time of your life despite the intermittent paralysis in your right leg.

The highlight of this week, of course, is the Rehearsal Dinner, when the wedding principals, especially the immediate families, take time out from the hectic pace of preparations to share in an evening of warmth and conviviality, culminating when the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom go after each other with dessert forks.

The Wedding Day

This is it! The biggest day of your life, and there’s no way that any dumb old 108-degree fever is going to put a damper on it!

A good idea is to put your wedding gown on early, so the sweat stains can expand from your armpit areas and cover the entire gown, and thus be less noticeable. And now it’s on to the wedding site!

As the guests arrive, the ushers (What do you mean, you forgot the ushers?! Get some!!) should ask the guests whether they want smoking or non-smoking, and seat them accordingly (except the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom, who should be seated in separate states). Then, at the appointed time, the organist should start playing a traditional song, such as “Here Comes the Bride” or “Happy Birthday to You,” and the wedding procession should come down the aisle, in the following order:

1. A cute little nephew, who will carry the ring and announce, at the most dramatic part of the ceremony, that he has to make poopy. If you have no cute little nephew, rent one.
2. The groom (if available).
3. The bridesmaids, walking sideways to minimize the risk that they will injure a member of the audience in the eye with their puffed shoulders.
4. You, the bride, the Center of Everything, smiling radiantly, your eyes sparkling like the most beautiful stars in the sky until, as you reach the altar, they swell shut in reaction to the antibiotics.

From that point on, it will all be a happy blur to you—the ceremony, the reception, dancing with your new husband to your Special Song (“New York, New York”). Enjoy it all, for you’ll never have a wedding like this again, even if you do recover fully.

But the best part of all will come later, on your Wedding Night, just the two of you, alone at last—you in your filmy, lacy, highly provocative peignoir, and your groom on his back in the shower snoring and dribbling saliva on his rental tuxedo. My advice to you is: relax, have a glass of wine, and check his pulse every 15 minutes. Don’t be alarmed if he has none. This is normal, for grooms.

Pranks

It is the responsibility of the best man and the ushers to play fun and comical pranks on the Happy Couple, such as—this is a good one!—just before they come rushing out of the reception, ready to leave on their honeymoon, you take their car and—get this, guys!—you sell it and keep the money. Ha ha! The Happy Couple will sure talk about that for a number of years!

The Honeymoon

Most couples prefer to take their honeymoons away from the familiar and the ordinary, to go to an exotic, different, and foreign place, such as Epcot Center. I am not kidding here. A lot of couples really do honeymoon at Disney World. Of course they don't admit this. They say they're "honeymooning in Florida," because they don't want people to know that the highlight of the whole wild lustful romantic adventure was shaking hands with Goofy.

Of course there are plenty of other possibilities for your honeymoon. Your friendly travel agent will give you mounds of brochures from all kinds of resorts desperate to obtain your honeymoon dollar.

Thank-You Notes

Thank-you notes are your last major responsibility as a bride, and the rules of etiquette require that you try to get them all done before the marriage legally dissolves.

The proper wording depends on whether or not you remember what the people gave you. If you do remember, your note should say specific nice things about the gift:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Sternum:

Thank you ever so much for the very thoughtful fondue set. Mark and I feel that, of all the fondue sets we received, the one you gave us is definitely one of the nicer ones, in that particular color.

Sincerely, Elaine and Mark

If you don't remember what gift they gave you, you'll have to compensate by sounding very grateful for it:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Sternum:

We just don't know how we can ever thank you for the extremely wonderful gift you gave us. It has become the focal point of our entire lives! We think about it all the time. We are seriously thinking about quitting our jobs and forming a religious cult that just sits around all day worshipping this gift.

With Extreme Sincerity, Elaine and Mark

Chapter 7. Newlywed Finances

Household Money Management

It is sad but true that money causes a great many unnecessarily fatal squabbles among newlyweds. Very often this is because of a difference in priorities. For example, you want to buy food, while your spouse wants to buy a thoroughbred racehorse. It's important, in these situations, for both of you to be willing to sit down together and try to achieve a workable compromise. In this case, you could buy a thoroughbred racehorse and eat it.

Often, however, the solutions are not that simple. This is why it's so important that right now, while you're just starting out, you draw up a realistic household budget. I can help you here. I have lived in a realistic household for many years, and I would say, based on experience, that your typical weekly

expenses should run pretty close to the following:

REALISTIC WEEKLY HOUSEHOLD BUDGET FOR TWO PEOPLE

Food that you buy and eventually eat \$30.00

Food that you buy and store in the back of the refrigerator until you have to throw it out because it looks like the thing that burst out of that unfortunate man's chest and started eating the spaceship crew in the movie Alien 55.00

Pennies that you get as change and put in a jar, intending to someday put them in those wrappers and take them to the bank, when in fact you will die well before you ever get around to this 117.48

Rent, clothing, car payments, insurance, gas, electricity, telephone, magazines 829.12

Miscellaneous 2,747.61

As you can see, there are a lot of expenses associated with running a household, and to meet them, you will need Financial Discipline. Each week, when you get your paychecks, you must set aside \$3,779.21 right off the bat, to cover your weekly household budget. If your combined weekly paychecks total less than this amount, perhaps you should go back and marry a rich person (see Chapter 1). Your other option is ...

Credit Cards

Credit cards are an excellent source of money. The way they work is, people you don't even know mail them to you, and then stores, for some reason, let you use them to actually buy things. (No, I can't figure it out either!)

The thing is, you have to be responsible about how you use your credit cards. You can't just rush out and charge every single item in the store. Think ahead! How would you fit it all into your car?

So I strongly recommend that you be cautious with credit, following the wise Borrowing Rule of Thumb employed by the federal government, which is: "Never borrow any amount of money larger than you can comfortably pronounce."

Your Checking Account

This is another potential source of money, although it's usually impossible to tell how much money is in it. The important thing is to try to keep your checkbook "balanced." Here's how.

1. Each month the bank will send you an envelope containing a bunch of used checks, which, for tax purposes, you should place in a two-ply grocery bag and eventually misplace. Also in the envelope will be:

* A little note entitled "TO OUR CUSTOMERS!" that will feature a cheerful and totally unintelligible message like this: "Good News! First Fiduciary Commonwealth National Savings & Loan & Bank & Trust is now offering 3.439087654970 Growth Bonds of Maturity yielding 2.694968382857%

Compound Annualized Rate of Secretion!" You should try to save this note, for tax purposes.

* A piece of paper covered with numbers (your "statement").

2. Okay. Now open up your checkbook and take a look at the kind of checks you have. If you have the kind with little nature scenes printed on them, or, God help us, little "Ziggy" cartoons, you're much too stupid to balance your own checking account, and you should definitely go back and marry a rich person

(see Chapter 1).

3. Now examine your check register (the part of your checkbook that you sometimes write on).

4. Now compare and see if any recognizable numbers on the “register” are the same as any numbers the bank has printed on the “statement.” If you find any, you should put a little happy face next to them.

5. If your total number of happy faces is five or more, then your account is what professional accountants call “in balance,” and you can go on ahead and watch TV. If you score lower than five, you should get on the phone immediately and explain to your bank that they have made some kind of error.

Your Home: Buying vs. Renting

Aside from Madonna and Sean Penn, most newlyweds rent their first home. This can actually be a pleasant experience, as you discover the Fun Side of apartment life: getting to know your new neighbors; listening to what kind of music your new neighbors like to play very early in the morning on their 150,000-watt sound system; having your new neighbors’ legs come through your ceiling when water from their leaking toilet rots their floor, etc.

But sooner or later, despite this recurring joy of these communal experiences, you’re going to want to have a place of your very own. Step one is to figure out how expensive a house you can afford. This depends on your combined annual incomes, as is shown by the following chart:

YOUR COMBINED ANNUAL INCOME	PRICE OF HOME YOU CAN AFFORD
Up to \$20,000	Don’t be an idiot. There are no homes that you can afford.
\$20,000-\$40,000	Don’t be an idiot. There are no homes that you can afford.
\$40,000-\$80,000	Don’t be an idiot. There are no homes that you can afford.
\$80,000-\$100,000	Don’t be an idiot. There are no homes that you can afford.

But don’t despair, young couples! You can still realize the dream of owning a home of your own, provided you’re willing to do what generations of newlyweds have done before you: roll up your sleeves, do the hard work, and make the tough sacrifices involved in nagging your parents for a down payment. They probably have some money left, even after your wedding, and your job is to whine and wheedle and look pathetic until they give it to you. Make sure you leave them something for food:

COST OF YOUR NEW HOME	AMOUNT YOUR PARENTS SHOULD HAVE LEFT FOR FOOD
AFTER LENDING YOU THE DOWN PAYMENT	

Up to \$50,000 \$150

\$50,000-\$100,000 \$75

Over \$100,000 Various canned goods.

Chapter 8. How To Argue Like A Veteran Married Couple

Most young couples begin married life knowing very little about how to argue with each other, and are forced to learn through trial and error. Sadly, some of them never do learn, a good example being that couple on “The Waltons” who never fought about anything, and consequently wound up with three or four hundred children.

There is no need for this kind of tragedy. We veteran married couples have, over the years, especially

on long car trips, developed certain time-tested techniques that even an inexperienced person can use to turn any issue, no matter how minor, into the kind of vicious, drawn-out argument where you both spend a lot of time deliberately going through doors you don't really need to go through, just so you can slam them viciously.

When you get involved in marital arguing, the role model you want to bear in mind is World War I, which got started when some obscure nobleperson, Archduke Somebody, got assassinated way the hell over in the Balkans, and the next thing you know people in places as far away as Cheyenne, Wyoming, were rushing off to war. These were people who wouldn't have known a Balkan if they woke up in bed with one, but they were willing to get shot at because of what happened there. It's the same with a good marriage argument. If you really do it right, you should reach the point where neither of you has the vaguest recollection what the original disagreement was, but both of you are willing to get divorced over it. This is the kind of veteran marital relationship you young couples can develop, if you follow these proven techniques.

The most important technique is: Always be on the lookout for conversational openings that can lead to arguments! To illustrate this, let's look at a typical marital conversation:

MARY: Honey, could you please try not to leave your socks on the coffee table?

JOHN: Why of course, dear. I'm sorry.

Pretty pathetic, right, married couples? Mary has created the perfect opening for a good argument, and John has totally dropped the ball, by admitting he was wrong. Never admit you're wrong, young married persons!

Now you're saying, "But what if John's socks are right there, on the coffee table? How can he argue about that?"

The answer is: He can't. So what he has to do is, he has to somehow get the argument, or at least his end of it, focused on a completely different topic, ideally a strident accusation that he has dredged up out of his memory and that is totally unrelated to the issue at hand. This is very important, young married persons: You must always maintain a supply of retaliative, irrelevant accusations in your mind, so that you can dredge them up when you need them.

Let's say, in this case, that John once thought Mary was flirting with her old flame Bill at a party. This is a good thing to accuse her of in the current argument, as it is totally unrelated to the coffee table. However, John must be careful how he brings it up; if he does it too abruptly, Mary could become confused, and the argument could end right there:

MARY: Honey, could you please try not to leave your socks on the coffee table?

JOHN: Oh yeah? Well what about your old flame, Bill?

MARY (confused): Huh?

So what John needs to do—this is the essential skill of marital arguing—is to come up with a smooth way to get from Mary's topic to his topic. This technique is called a "segue," (pronounced "segue"), and if you do it right, it will usually lead to a whole new series of mutant topics you can argue about. Let's see how it works:

MARY: Honey, could you please try not to leave your socks on the coffee table?

JOHN: Why do you always do that?

MARY: Always do what?

JOHN: Always look for things to criticize.

MARY: I don't always look for things to criticize. I just don't like finding your damn ...

JOHN: Fine. Great. Curse at me. I didn't see you cursing at Bill, at the Johnsons' party.

MARY: What is that supposed to mean?

JOHN: Oh, come on. You were flirting with him.

MARY: I was flirting? And I suppose you weren't all over Jennifer?

JOHN: I don't see how you could have known what I was doing, after all you had to drink.

See how effectively this veteran married couple handled the situation? In just a few quick sentences, they have gone from a seemingly silly topic, socks, to a whole treasure trove of issues that they can debate and dredge up again for years to come. I'm not saying you young couples will get this kind of results your first time out of the gate, but with a little practice, you'll get the hang of it, and it can lead to the discovery of a whole new facet of your relationship (see Chapter 11, "How to Put New Life into Your Marriage or Else Get a Divorce").

Chapter 9. Children: Big Mistake, Or Bad Idea?

In this chapter, we're going to talk about how children affect your marriage. We're not going to talk about how you actually produce the children in the first place. We covered that topic thoroughly in an earlier book, *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex*, which explores the whole area of childbirth in great detail and reaches the following scientific breakthrough conclusions:

1. It is very painful. (If you'd like additional facts on this topic, you can read the book, although it doesn't contain any.)

For now, however, we're going to talk about how your married life will change after you have children, so that you'll be able to carefully and rationally weigh the pros and cons of parenthood, then barge right ahead and have children without any understanding of what you're really getting into, just like everybody else.

What It Really Means to Be a Parent

What it really means to be a parent—note this carefully, because it's the essence of the whole thing—is: YOU Will spend an enormous portion of your time lurking outside public-toilet stalls.

For reasons that modern medical science has been unable to explain, children almost never have to go to the bathroom when they are within eight or nine miles of their own home toilets. It does no good to try to make them. Tell a child to go to the bathroom before you leave home, and the child will insist that not only does he or she not have to go now, but he or she will probably never have to go to the bathroom ever again.

And of course when you get where you're going, let's say a restaurant, the child will wait until your entrees are about to emerge from the kitchen, then announce that he or she has to go. Children are incredibly sensitive to approaching entrees.

So you will take the child to the bathroom, and, if it is an especially loath some bathroom, a bathroom that has clearly not been cleaned since the fall of Rome, a bathroom where the floor is littered with the skeletons of Board of Health employees who died attempting to inspect it, if it is this kind of bathroom,

the child will immediately announce that he or she has to do Number Two.

And of course you must stay there with the child. The child will want you to stand right outside the toilet stall, while the child goes in there, and ... and nobody really knows. It's a real mystery, what young children do in public-toilet stalls. Whatever it is, it takes them longer than it took you, the parents, to produce them in the first place.

What I hate about this is that restaurant men's rooms are often fairly small and intimate places, and while I'm standing there, waiting for my son, strangers are constantly coming in to pee, and there I am, inches away from them, lurking there with no apparent purpose, like some kind of sex pervert who likes being in disgusting men's rooms. So, to show that this is not the case, I try to keep a conversation going with my son. Except the only thing I can think of to talk to him about is how the old Number Two is going. I mean, you'd feel like an idiot in that situation, talking about the Strategic Defense Initiative. So we have these ludicrous exchanges:

ME (brightly): So! Robert! How's it going in there?!

ROBERT (irritated): You just asked me that.

ME (grinning like a madman at the peeing stranger so as to reassure him that everything is okay): Ha ha!

Eventually, the child will emerge from the stall, when he or she is absolutely sure that the entrees are stone frozen cold. The child doesn't care about the food, because children don't go to restaurants to eat. They go to restaurants to go to the bathroom and play loud shrieking games under the table, so that you, the parents, are constantly ducking your heads under and hissing, "Stop that!" like some deranged species of duck. The child never actually touches the food, which is why many modern restaurants are saving money by serving reusable children's entrees made entirely out of plastic.

Where Can I Find Decent Affordable Child Care?

Hahahahahaha. Forgive me for laughing in a bitter and cynical fashion, but you happen to have hit upon the most serious problem facing the Free World today: the international child-care crisis.

In the old days, of course, the Free World had an excellent system of high-quality, low-cost child care in this country, namely your mother. Unfortunately, however, your mother is no longer interested in caring for children. She is interested in spending what little is left of her life among furniture that does not have Hawaiian Punch stains all over it. And you, of course, can't engage in child care, because you need to get out and have a Rewarding Career so you can have a chance to earn enough money to pay for child care.

Except there is hardly any available. You go around checking out preschool facilities, and you keep finding yourself in dank basements where the staff is missing a large percentage of its teeth and the educational materials consist of four crayons—all burnt sienna—and a GI Joe doll with most of the limbs pulled off. The result is that people are desperate. People who work in New jersey are dropping their children off each morning at child-care centers in Utah.

Fortunately there is some hope. A new company recently opened for business, called the Exactly What You Are Looking For Child Care Company. It has spacious, clean, modern, well-equipped facilities within walking distance of your home or office; it's open from 5 A.M. until as late as you want; and it's staffed by middle-aged British women who love children and attend church regularly and are all licensed

pediatricians. The cost is \$3.50 per child per day. If you're interested in enrolling your child in this excellent program, all you have to do is kill the Wicked Witch of the West.

How Children Affect Your Sex Life

Children are Nature's very own form of birth control. To illustrate how they perform this vital function, let's take a look at a minute-by-minute schedule, showing how my wife and I put our six-year-old son, Robert, to bed on a typical evening. To make sure we have some time to ourselves, we try to have him in bed by 8 P.m., which means we start the procedure a full hour earlier:

7 P.m.—We announce to Robert that it's time to get ready for bed.

7:04, 7:09, 7:12, 7:14, 7:17, 7:18, 7:22, 7:24, 7:25, 7:26 & 7:27—We announce to Robert that he really has to start getting ready for bed Right Now and we are Not Kidding.

7:28—Robert goes to his room and actually starts getting ready for bed.

7:29—Robert notices that his rubber Godzilla doll is missing. How he notices this, in a room containing roughly 78,500 toys, nobody can explain, but he does notice it, and of course all other activities must cease until we can resolve this matter because God forbid that a child should be required to go to bed without his rubber Godzilla doll.

7:43—We locate Godzilla and Robert begins getting ready for bed again. He is supposed to take off his clothes and put on his pajamas. He can do this All By Himself.

9:27—So far, All By Himself, Robert has removed his shirt and, if he is really on a roll, one of his shoes. I go in to help him along.

9:30—Now in his pajamas, Robert has his teeth brushed, which is the signal for him to announce that he is hungry. We tell him that this is his own fault, because he did not finish supper, and he absolutely cannot have any more food, no sir, forget it, not a chance, it's time he learned his lesson, etc.

9:57—Robert finishes a bowl of Zoo-Roni and submits to having teeth brushed again.

10:02—We read a bedtime story, Horton Hatches the Egg, by Dr. Seuss, which takes us quite a while because we must study every page very, very carefully in case there is some tiny detail we might have possibly missed when we read it on each of the previous 267 consecutive nights.

10:43—We announce that it's time to go to bed.

10:45, 10:47, 10:51, 10:54, 10:56 & 10:59—We announce that it really is time to go to bed Right Now and we are Not Kidding.

11:03—Robert actually gets into his bed. We tuck him in, kiss him good night, and creep silently out of the room, alone at last.

11:17—Robert falls asleep and is immediately awakened by a terrible nightmare caused by being in bed with his face six inches from a rubber Godzilla doll. We remove it.

11:28—We kiss Robert good night and creep silently out of the room, alone at last.

11:32—Hearing noise from Robert's room, we return to find him sobbing loudly. So upset that he is barely able to choke out the words, he explains that he has just realized that the mother bird in Horton Hatches the Egg loses her baby in the end, and even though she was terribly mean, she is probably very sorry by now, and very lonely. We try to explain that this is not at all the point that Dr. Seuss was trying to make, but Robert is inconsolable. Finally we agree to let him climb into bed with us, but "just for one minute."

2:47 A.m.—We return Robert to bed, kiss him good night, and creep silently from the room, alone at last.

3:14, 3:58, 4:26, 5:11 & 5:43—The household goes on Red Alert status as various routine nightmares occur, each one causing us to stagger, half-asleep, down the hallway, like actors in a scene from Night of the Living Dead Parents.

6:12—Dawn breaks.

Whenever I read newspaper stories about people who have, say, nine children, I never ask myself: “How do they manage to take care of them all?” I ask myself: “Where did they find the time to conceive them all?”

I don’t mean to suggest, by what I’ve said in this chapter, that children are bad for a relationship. Because in the end, the negative aspects of being a parent—the loss of intimacy, the expense, the total lack of free time, the incredible burden of responsibility, the constant nagging fear of having done the wrong thing, etc.—are more than outweighed by the positive aspects, such as never again lacking for primitive drawings to attach to your refrigerator with magnets.

Chapter 10. How To Have An Affair

My first piece of advice is that if you’re planning to have an affair, you should read this chapter in a safe place, such as the linen closet. You don’t want to be sitting around the living room, in plain view of your spouse, reading a chapter entitled, in great big letters, “How to Have an Affair.” I recommend that you hide this book under your garments and say to your spouse: “Well, I guess I’ll go sit in the linen closet with a flashlight for a while!” Your spouse will never suspect a thing. Unless you don’t have a linen closet. That would be a dead giveaway.

Another dead giveaway is acting guilty. Let’s take a typical person—we’ll call him “Ed”[1]—who is having an affair with a woman at his office. If Ed has a guilty conscience, he may accidentally reveal this in casual conversation with his wife:

ED’S WIFE: Would you like another corn muffin, dear?

ED: I’m having an affair with a woman in my office!

Even if Ed’s wife is not a trained psychologist, she might conceivably gather, from certain subtle verbal “clues” Ed is subconsciously dropping, that something “fishy” is going on. Ed must make more of an effort to watch his words:

ED’S WIFE: Would you like another corn muffin, dear?

ED: I’m not having an affair with a woman in my office!

Most affairs occur at the office, of course, which leads us to another important rule of affair-having: Never be discreet at the Office. To illustrate why this is important, let’s consider two people, Ellen and Chuck, who have worked together in a large corporate office for several years, and have recently started having an affair.

Up to this point, Ellen and Chuck have probably been behaving the way men and women always behave in offices, which is to say: constantly winking and leering and engaging in loud and fun suggestive sexual banter. Behaving like lust-crazed fools has been a major form of entertainment in offices for as long as anybody can remember; in terms of total American corporation employee hours consumed, suggestive banter ranks well ahead of work, and only slightly behind making Xerox copies of

personal documents.

But like so many couples, Chuck and Ellen, now that they are engaging in real, as opposed to pretend, sexual activity, suddenly decide they have to be discreet. They never banter. They never eat lunch together any more. They walk past each other without even looking at each other. When they are forced, by circumstances, to be together, they display the same kind of warmth and closeness toward each other as the Vice-president of the United States displays toward deceased heads of state. They are formal and cool.

They are also morons. The other employees, who, if they have been in the corporate world more than six weeks, have already witnessed hundreds of other major office affairs, will immediately recognize the cause of this sudden change in behavior. Ellen and Chuck might just as well go around wearing convention-style nametags that say: HI! MY NAME IS ELLEN! I'M HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH CHUCKI!

Within days everybody in the office will know what's going on. The affair will be discussed extensively in staff meetings. It could well appear in the annual report to the stockholders.

What this means, of course, is that if you want your affair to go unnoticed by your co-workers, you have to be blatantly obvious about it. Chuck should wait until the office is extremely quiet, then stand up at his desk and shout across 47 desks to Ellen: "HEY ELLEN! WHAT DO YOU SAY WE MEET AT THE OUT O'TOWN MOTOR LODGE AFTER WORK TODAY AND HAVE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE!" And Ellen should shout back: "HECK YES!! I HAVE MY DIAPHRAGM RIGHT HERE IN MY PURSE!"

Chuck's and Ellen's co-workers would never suspect a thing. "What a couple of kidders Chuck and Ellen are!" the co-workers would chuckle.

How You Can Tell If Your Spouse Is Having an Affair

You can always tell. No matter how careful your spouse is, he or she is going to make a mistake somewhere, and you'll catch it, if you know the Major Warning Signs, which are:

1. Your spouse acts strange.
2. Your spouse, trying to trick you, acts normal.

If you notice either of these Warning Signs, you should wait until your spouse is in a vulnerable position, such as reclining in a dental chair, and then you should point-blank ask the following gently probing question (if your spouse is male): "Well? Who is she?"

Now listen closely to the answer. If it's something specific like: "You mean the person I'm having an affair with? She is Dorina Mae Swiggins," that means your suspicions are probably justified. But if it's something evasive like: "What are you talking about?" or "Who is Who?", then you quite frankly have to ask yourself how come your spouse is refusing to answer a simple direct question. Either way, this would be a good time to read the next chapter.

Chapter 11. How To Put New Life Into Your Marriage Or Else Get A Divorce

Time takes its toll on every marriage. The sense of romance and adventure that you feel as you take your wedding vows on that bright Saturday afternoon in June inevitably gives way to familiarity and even boredom, often as early as 8:30 that evening. Yet some couples seem to go on happily forever, a good example being Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, former owners of the Philippines. Long ago, they discovered a secret that has worked its magic for many successful couples: thoughtfulness. Ferdinand and Imelda were always showing each other, in little ways, that they cared. For example, when Imelda would get depressed because of the hassle and strain of everyday life, plus the fact that she was bloating up like an inflatable life raft, Ferdinand would say to her: “Buttercup, you look depressed. Why not take the national treasury and purchase every luxury consumer object in France?” This thoughtful gesture never failed to perk her up.

Of course you may not be in a position to demonstrate quite that level of care, but there are things you can do to show your commitment to each other—little, thoughtful, romantic gestures that say you still think the other person is “somebody special.” For example, you can:

1. Try to remember (you guys, especially) to flush the toilet.
2. Remember your spouse’s birthday. “Hey!” you can say. “Wasn’t your birthday last month?”
3. Go dancing, or even ...
4. Go dancing with your spouse.
5. On your anniversary, give your spouse an appropriate traditional gift for whatever year it is, as shown on the accompanying chart:

Number Of Anniversary Traditional Gift

1st Ore
 5th McNuggets
 10th Veg-o-Matic
 15th Oil change
 20th “Slim” whitman album
 30th TV tray or assault rifle
 40th Frankincense
 50th Ointment
 60th Suppository
 70th Indonesian Fighting Snake

6. Consider renewing your wedding vows. The best place to do this is Las Vegas, where “wedding chapels” are a major industry, along with divorce, gambling, and scorpion paperweights. My wife and I renewed our vows in Vegas a little while back, on a Friday the 13th, in the very same chapel

(everything I am telling you here is the truth) where Joan Collins got married her third or fourth time. The whole thing took less than four minutes and cost only \$50, plus a tip for the minister, who was named (I swear) Dr. Eva C. Tubby.

7. Go on a Get-away Vacation Fling. just the two of you. One day, when the pressure gets to be too much, you should just say to your spouse, out of the blue: “Let’s go!” Then you should impulsively throw a few items into

a suitcase, jump into a cab, race to the airport, and hop on the next plane to Hawaii, or the Caribbean, or Europe, or wherever you want to go. Why not? You’ll be glad you did it. Once you’re up in the air, settled back in your seats, sipping champagne (Why not?), the two of you can hold hands, close your eyes, and just let your minds drift away to ... THE

CHILDREN!! MY GOD, YOU FORGOT THE CHILDREN!!! TURN THE PLANE BACK RIGHT NOW!!!

Sometimes, however, even thoughtful and romantic gestures such as these don't do the trick. Sometimes you find that the two of you, no matter how much you may once have cared for each other, are starting to drift apart. It's the little things that give you away: you hardly ever talk any more; you no longer kiss each other when you come home; you live in different states; etc. Maybe it's time to face up to the fact that you're just not right for each other any more. Hey, it happens. People change. They get older, they get larger, and sometimes they start to smell bad. Maybe the time has come to think about—let's come right out and say it:

Divorce

The most important thing is to get yourself a lawyer. Oh, I realize you probably think you and your spouse can work this thing out amicably without any third parties. But what if suddenly your spouse gets a lawyer, and you end up stone broke on the street wearing only a Hefty trash bag? You can't afford to take this chance. You need a lawyer, too, so you and your spouse can both end up wearing Hefty trash bags. I recommend the ones with the patented "Cinch Sak" drawstring top.

How to Select a Lawyer

The best way to select a lawyer is to watch late-night television, which is where your top legal minds advertise. You're looking for one who can demonstrate:

- * Integrity, in the form of wearing a dark suit;
- * A sound knowledge of the law, in the form of standing in front of a shelf with a lot of books on it; and
- * A sincere personal interest in you, in the form of making the following speech: "Hello. I'm Leonard Packmonger, of Leonard Packmonger Legal Attorneys of the Law Associates. Does your back hurt sometimes? Do you ever use consumer products? If so, I would say that, based upon my many, many weeks of experience in handling cases just like yours, you definitely have good grounds for a major lawsuit. Come on in and let's talk about it and sign some binding documents. just for stopping by, we'll give you a free, no-obligation neck brace."

Grounds for Divorce

At one time it was difficult to get out of a marriage unless there was some kind of very serious problem with it, such as that one or more of the people involved had become deceased.

Today, fortunately, it is easier to get divorced in most states than to get a transmission repaired properly. The only requirement is that you have a legal reason, which is technically known as "grounds." If you have no grounds of your own, you can probably get some from your lawyer, who will have an ample supply left over from previous cases; or you can select some from this convenient list of grounds, all of which are 100 percent legally valid in every state in the union. Or at least they should be.

- * Wearing shorts and black knee socks at the same time.
- * Calling you “Sweetie Beancakes” in front of strangers.
- * Forgetting to buy beer.
- * Repeatedly putting the ice cube tray back in the refrigerator with two or fewer ice cubes in it.
- * Bringing the car home with just enough gas in it so that, if you shut the engine off and coast on the downhill slopes, you can get as far as the end of the driveway.
- * Any cigar-related activity.
- * Standing next to you with a sour facial expression at a party while you tell a really terrific joke and then loudly announcing the punchline three-tenths of a second before you get to it and then saying: “Isn’t that AWFUL?” (NOTE: In some states this is grounds not only for divorce, but also for murder.)
- * Golf.
- * One day, with no warning, bringing home:
 1. a cat, or
 2. an Amway representative.
- * Leaving his or her toenails in a prominent location as though they were decorative art objects.
- * Using the word “frankly” a lot and not meaning it as a joke.
- * Operating a loud household appliance during the Super Bowl.
- * Secretly liking Geraldo Rivera.

The Divorce Proceedings

You want to keep them as quiet as possible. You don’t want them to be highly publicized, like the divorce a few years back in Palm Beach, Florida, involving wealthy socialites Peter and Roxanne Pulitzer, in which Peter claimed that Roxanne had slept with a three-foot trumpet. Naturally the national news media found this to be far more interesting than anything that has ever happened in the Middle East, so now everybody has heard about it. Roxanne Pulitzer could visit a remote and primitive Amazon jungle tribe, and the tribespeople would all gather around her and make trumpet sounds.

So you want to avoid letting your intimate secrets out. Not that I am suggesting for one second that you have ever slept with a trumpet. You are more the bassoon type.

Starting Over after the Divorce

Eventually the divorce will become final, and you can start picking up the broken pieces of your life and selling them to pay off your legal bills. But also you must think about the future, and, yes, meeting someone new. You must not be afraid. Oh, sure, you got burned and you got hurt. But that is no reason to give up. You must not be afraid. You must show the same kind of gumption as the cowboy, who, if he gets thrown off a horse, climbs right back on, and if he gets thrown off again, climbs right back on again, and so on, until virtually all of his brain cells are dead.

Back to Chapter 1.

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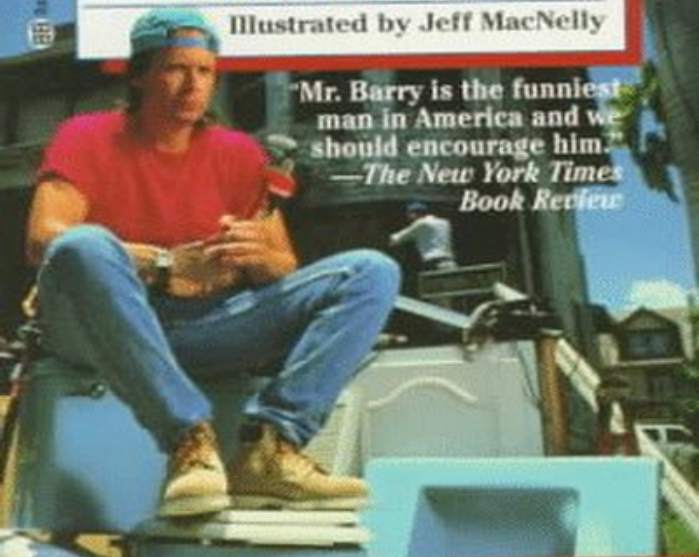
DAVE BARRY'S

HOMES AND OTHER BLACK HOLES

Illustrated by Jeff MacNelly

"Mr. Barry is the funniest
man in America and we
should encourage him."

—*The New York Times*
Book Review

A photograph of a man with long hair, wearing a red t-shirt, blue jeans, and a blue baseball cap worn backward. He is sitting on a blue plastic storage bin, holding a small object in his hands. In the background, there is a residential street with houses and a clear blue sky.

By the Pulitzer Prize-winning
humorist and author of
Dave Barry Is Not Making This Up

Homes And Other Black Holes

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry.

Homes And Other Black Holes

The Happy Homeowner's Guide to Ritual Closing Ceremonies, Newton's First Law of Furniture Buying, the Lethal Chemicals Man, and Other Perils of the American Dream

Introduction: Why It Was Probably A Mistake To Buy This Book

The desire to own a home of one's own has been a part of human nature ever since that fateful moment, millions of years ago, when our earliest ancestors climbed down out of their trees and moved into their very first caves. It was a major moment in history, and its glory was dimmed only slightly by the fact that their furniture did not arrive for another 250,000 years.

Yes, moving into a new home is one of life's great adventures, constantly posing new and exciting challenges.

For example, just recently my wife, son, and I moved to Florida, and the first thing I noticed was that there were crabs living under our house. There were two main ones, named Bob and Steve, who had established holes on either side of our front door, which they were always working on. I'd come out in the morning to get the paper, and there would be Bob and Steve, waving their claws at me as if to say in cheerful crab language: "Hi, Mr. Barry! We're digging holes under your house, and unless you do something, the entire structure will eventually fall into the canal!"

What I ultimately decided to do about the crabs was the same thing I ultimately do about virtually all homeowner-type problems, namely—and you might want to write this down, because it is the core philosophy of this entire book—I try not to think about it. Trust me, this is the best way. If God had wanted us to spend all our time fretting about the problems of home ownership, He would never have created beer.

This is not to say that I am recommending that you totally ignore your responsibilities as a homeowner and just sit around all day with a beer can in your hand. No indeed, I have long been a believer in purchasing bottled beer, and pouring it into a chilled glass. "If you're going to do something, do it right" that is my motto, and you will find that throughout this book I have made every effort to present all relevant house-owning information as accurately and completely as possible given the fact that I am making almost all of it up.

Which is not to say that I am unqualified to write this book. I have bought and sold several homes in my day, although I will admit that in the case of our current home, I never even saw it until after I signed

the agreement of sale. My wife, Beth, did the actual shopping. This is because I get extremely nervous in sales situations. I will do absolutely anything to please the salesperson. Usually, in stores, I can flee on foot before a salesperson gets to me, but if I don't get away, I'm a dead man. Like, if I'm walking through Sears, and I happen to pause for just a moment in the major appliances section, and one of those Sears appliance salespersons in polyester sport jackets comes sidling up and says, "Can I help you?" I instantly go into a state of extreme anxiety and say: "Yes, I'll take one of these, please," pointing to whatever major appliance I happen to be standing in front of, even though we probably already have one.

So I am a bad person to have on your side in a real estate sales situation. I drive my wife crazy, because I always want to buy whatever structure we happen to be standing in:

Me: Well! This looks perfect! My WIFE: This is the real estate broker's office. ME: Well, how much are they asking?

This is why I was not actively involved in the purchase of our present house. But I still have to help pay for it, which is why even though you may not be thrilled that you bought this book, I'm certainly glad you did.

Chapter 1. Getting Ready To Get Real Depressed

Deciding Which House To Buy

In deciding which house to buy, the first thing you have to do is determine your Price Range, using this simple formula:

1. Take your total annual family income, including coins that have fallen behind the bureau and any projected future revenue you have been notified about via personalized letters from Mr. Ed McMahon stating that you may already have won fourteen million dollars.

2. Count up the number of children you have and note how many of them are named Joshua or Ashley. That many? Really? Don't you feel this trend toward giving children designer names has gone far enough? Don't you think we should go back to the old system of naming children after beloved uncles and aunts, even if we in fact hate our beloved uncles and aunts and they have comical names such as Lester? Can you imagine having an aunt named Lester? These questions are not directly related to your Price Range. I'm just curious to know how you feel.

3. Now take these figures (No! I'm not going to tell you again which ones! Pay attention!) and multiply them by six; which will tell you, in thousands of yards, roughly how far away the lightning bolt was. No! Wait! Sorry! Wrong formula! You want to take these figures and multiply them by something other than six. This should give you a very strong idea of what your Price Range is, although we shall soon see that it doesn't matter because there are no homes in it anyway.

There! Now you're getting somewhere! But you're not done yet: you need to decide what style of house you're looking for. The major styles of houses in the United States are:

OLDER HOUSES with many quaint and charming architectural features such as that during certain phases of the moon the toilets flush up.

NEWER HOUSES built by large developers using modern cost-cutting efficiency measures such as

hiring semiskilled derelict felon gypsy work-persons who are prone to forgetting to install key architectural elements such as windows and those large pieces of wood, “rafters” I believe they are called, that hold up the roof

REALLY NICE WELL-BUILT, WELL-LOCATED, AFFORDABLE HOUSES that are not for sale.

Another very important factor is neighborhood. Ask any real estate broker to name the three most important factors in buying a property, and he’ll say: “Location, location, location.” Now ask him to name the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, and he’ll say: “Location, location, location.” This tells us that we should not necessarily be paying a whole lot of attention to real estate brokers.

If you have school-age children, by far the most important factor in selecting a neighborhood is, of course, the proximity of the nearest Toys Backwards “R” Us store. You will be spending a great deal of your time and disposable income there, because from kindergarten through about sixth grade, the average child attends approximately 36,500 birthday parties. Your child will go through a period, usually around first grade, when his classmates will have as many as six birthdays apiece per year, meaning you’ll spend virtually all of your Saturdays racing to Toys Backwards “R” Us, then racing off to the party, leaving a trail of flattened pedestrians because you are wrapping the present as you drive. But all the hassle is worth it when you see the look on the birthday child’s face when he or she rips open the present and remarks with delight: “Hey! I already got this!”

Once you have selected several potential neighborhoods, you should drive around to evaluate them, using this convenient ...

Neighborhood Checklist

Note What The Residents Do With Cars That No Longer Function Good Neighborhood: They get rid of them. Bad Neighborhood: They keep them all forever, arranged tastefully on their lawns, as if expecting the Car Fairy to come one night and whisk all the cars away and leave everybody a nice shiny quarter. Note What Kind of Names The Local Streets Have Good: jasmine View Court Terrace Bad: Interstate 95

Note What Kind Of Businesses Are Operating In The Neighborhood Good: Arthur A. Wutherington IV, Investment Banker Bad: Earl’s All-Night Nude Revue & Motorcycle Repair Note What the Neighborhood Youths Are Doing Good: Selling lemonade Bad: Selling you your rear wheels back Note What Kind Of Bumper Stickers The Neighborhood Cars Have Good: “SCHOOL’S

OPEN! DRIVE CAREFULLY!” Bad: “I LOVE MY PIT BULL” Note The Types Of Neighborhood Social Activities Good: Barbecues Bad: Cockfights

It also might be a good idea to do some formal research into neighborhood property values by going down to the Municipal Building and getting shunted from one civil servant to another in an increasingly desperate attempt to find one who is not hostile, brain-damaged, or eating lunch, until finally you open fire at random with a semiautomatic weapon. So we can see that this is not, after all, such a good idea, and it probably should not even be included here. Although frankly I doubt that any jury in the land would convict you.

Choosing A Real Estate Broker

It is possible to buy or sell a home without a broker, as will be discussed in a later chapter (Unless we forget to write it). But most people prefer to use a broker, because of the many advantages, such as:

1. If you have a real estate broker, you have an excuse to fend off the other brokers, who will otherwise follow you around and hurl rocks through your window with notes taped to them explaining the many advantages of using a broker.
2. Brokers always have nicer cars than you do, a phenomenon that will become more understandable when we get to the section on commissions.

This is by no means meant to be a comprehensive list of the advantages of using a broker. The only reason I'm not listing all the others here is that they don't spring immediately to mind.

The best place to obtain a broker is at a junior high school, where you'll find that virtually all the teachers obtained real estate licenses once they realized what a tragic mistake they had made, selecting a profession that requires them to spend entire days confined in small rooms with adolescent children. Often it is sufficient to just drive by the school and beep your horn; within seconds, brokers will come swarming out of doors and windows, eager to abandon their lesson plans on the Three Major Bones of the Inner Ear so they can help you find a home.

There are many factors to consider in selecting a broker, such as competence, honesty, vertical leap, and placement in the Evening Gown Competition. But the most important factor is an intangible quality called "professionalism," by which I mean "car size." You want to select the broker with the largest possible car, because you're going to spend far more time in this car than in whatever home you ultimately buy.

Next you should tell your broker what your Price Range is, so he or she can laugh until his or her official company blazer is soaked with drool. What your broker finds so amusing, of course, is that there is virtually nothing, outside of the Third World, available in your Price Range. I don't care if your Price Range is a hillion jillion dollars, there will be nothing available in it. This is a fundamental principle of real estate.

At first you will probably insist on looking at the something in your Price Range anyway, which will result in the following comical dialogue:

YOU: This is It? They're asking \$89,500 for a refrigerator carton?

BROKER: Yes, but I think they'll take \$85,000.

This process is called "getting a feel for the market." Once you've undergone it, your broker will explain a creative new financial concept that has been developed to enable people such as yourself to enjoy the benefits of home ownership, called: Spending Way More Than You Can Afford. Usually you have to talk yourself into going with this concept. Here are some sound financial arguments you can use:

1. Although you may not really be able to afford a more expensive home at your current income level, it makes sense to buy it anyway, because in just a few years, at your current rate of progress in your career, you'll probably be dead.
2. There are major tax benefits to owning a home. The law, written by wise lawyers and bankers, permits you to deduct all the money you give to lawyers or bankers, which will turn out to be virtually all the money you have.
3. Owning a home is a smart investment. As inflation pushes up the cost of living, you will build up equity in your home, so that, when you eventually sell it, you will have made enough profit to be able to afford to pay the point and closing costs' on your next home!

So as you can see, you really can't afford not to buy a home that you really can't afford. It's time to sit down with your broker and take a serious look at the listings.

The listings are computerized lists, or "listings," of all the houses that all the brokers in your region have been trying to sell since the Carter administration. Listings are always written in a special real estate code. For example, this listing:

CHARMING RANCH, 2 full, 4BR, 3B, 2TD, land scaped, newly renovated. ...

can be decoded as follows:

1. Rooms the size of nasal spray cartons
2. IN URBAN AREAS: No attic or basement. IN RURAL AREAS: Also cattle have wintered in the foyer.
3. Four bedrooms
4. Three bathrooms
5. Two turtle doves
6. Extensive comical lawn statuary including minority groups holding lanterns; also large, permanent, fully mechanized, spectacularly illuminated display of Santa's Workshop
7. The walls have been pretty well scraped clean in the room where the demonic beings from another dimension came through the TV set and caused the previous occupants' heads to explode.

Study the listings carefully and make a note of any houses that look right for you, so your broker can confirm that they were all sold just that morning. This is actually good, because it will help to get you into the proper highly desperate frame of mind where you will do almost anything to get a house, including paying large sums of money you really don't have to people you really don't know for reasons you really aren't sure of. Which is the essence of real estate.

Chapter 2. How To Pretend To Look Knowledgeably At Houses

Okay. Now we have reached the most exciting part, the very essence of home buying: actually going inside specific houses so we can examine them and fail to notice major defects.

One important warning before you get started: You want to be on the alert for the Helpful Seller. This is the kind of seller who, the instant you enter his home, leaps out and attaches himself to you, like an intestinal parasite, only worse, because intestinal parasites, for all their flaws, do not feel a great need to point out every single one of their home's numerous features, whereas the Helpful Seller does.

"This is the hall bathroom , he'll say, showing you a bathroom in a hall. Then he'll watch you very closely, trying to gauge your reaction to this bathroom, and you'll feel obligated to compliment him on it.

"Very nice!" you'll say.

"This toilet seat was installed quite recently," he'll say.

"Huh!" you'll say.

"It's padded," he'll say.

"Bang," you'll say, shooting him in the forehead with your small-caliber revolver. This is why many real estate brokers these days use tranquilizer darts to subdue hyperactive sellers right in the foyer, before they have a chance to become too Helpful.

How Many Houses Should You Look At?

Most experts recommend that, for maximum effectiveness, you should look at forty-five or even fifty houses per day. Experienced home shoppers often reach the point where they can leap out of the real estate broker's car, look at a house, and get back into the car before it reaches a complete stop.

if you follow this procedure, by nightfall your brain will be tightly packed with hundreds of thousands of bits of important real estate information, and you and your spouse will be able to have useful decision-making conversations like this:

YOU: I kind of liked that contemporary with the fireplace in the kitchen.

YOUR SPOUSE: No, the contemporary had fire damage in the kitchen. You're thinking of the split-level, the one where the garage floor had a Rust-Oleum stain shaped like the Virgin Mary.

YOU: No, that was the colonial, remember? With big white pillars out front and no toilets.

YOUR SPOUSE: No, you're thinking of Monticello. Remember, We went there on vacation in 1979?

YOU: No, it was 1978.

Using this logical elimination process, you'll begin to narrow your list down to the three or four dozen houses that you are truly interested in. These are the ones you should go back and inspect in a thorough manner, using this convenient checklist:

Home Inspection Checklist

The Roof

This is a "must." There is an old German expression that goes: "A house without a roof is like a machterstrassefurtermorgennachtdankeschoen without a gutsprechenbuchlungwiegehtvolkswagenporsche." If anything, this is an understatement. So the first thing you should do is go up and crouch in the attic and see if you get bit by a bat. This is usually an indication that the house contains bats, which, depending on your lifestyle, could be a negative factor, especially if one tries to suck out your blood, because that means it's a vampire bat, which means the house is located in South America, so right away we are talking about probably a fairly long commute to work.

The Floors

These should be sturdy and level. The only proven way to check for sturdiness is to drop a men's standard sixteen-pound bowling ball (Always carry one with you!) onto the floor from a height of seventy-five feet through a hole drilled in the roof, then carefully note the results. (No, the seller will not object, unless he has "something to hide.")

To check for levelness, you will need a standard piece of string and a standard rock. Using a standard knot, tie one end of the string, then, holding the other end of the string, stand in the middle of a room, and carefully note which way the rock points. Ideally, it will point toward the floor. If it points somewhere else, such as toward a wall, this is often an indication of nonlevelness.

The Plumbing

Forget about the plumbing. It will work perfectly. It always does, when you inspect it, because plumbing is one of the most intelligent life forms on the planet, and it would never be so foolish as to tip its hand to you. It will wait until after you have bought the house. Then it will make its move. Late some night, you'll hear strange gurglings and sloshings in your pipes; this will be the sound of your toilets communicating with each other, making their plans:

FIRST TOILET: It's on. Tomorrow is New Year's Day, they have house guests, it's four degrees below zero outside, and their plumber is in Switzerland. We break tonight.

SECOND TOILET: Ha ha! I'll tell the hot water heater.

The Electrical System

The most important thing to find out about the electrical system is whether it contains enough "volts," which are little tiny pieces of energy shaped like arrows so you can tell which direction they're moving in science class diagrams.

The standard measurement for volts is "amps," also called "watts," which travel around in what is called a "circuit." A typical circuit works as follows:

At the electrical company, fuel oil is burned to set fire to a generator, which gives off electrical energy in the form of sparks, which are put into wires and sent to your home, where the electricity waits in the wall until you turn on your toaster, at which point it rushes through the wire and into the English muffin, and from there into your stomach, where it remains until a cool, dry day when you are walking down a hall scuffing your feet on a carpet and you go to open a door, causing the electricity to leap into the doorknob, where it remains forever, building up over time to tremendously high levels, which is why scientists are now concerned that if some unscrupulous entity such as Libya or God forbid an adolescent male ever figures how to release the power, he could, using only the latent doorknob energy contained in a single older ranch-style home, vaporize Oregon.

But your immediate concern, as a potential buyer, is making sure that the house has the right number of volts. Following is a chart depicting the most popular voltages currently available in the housing market:

POPULAR HOME VOLTAGES

120

220

9 (Requires 9 volt battery [not included])

Which voltage is right for you? This, more than anything else, is a matter of personal taste; and like most matters of personal taste, it is best left in the hands of a qualified interior designer.

Heating and Cooling

Heating and cooling should be supplied by one or more large filthy objects squatting in a basement or closet. You should inspect these objects from a safe distance; you should also find out what the total

annual heating and cooling costs will be, using the following formula:

1. Ask the person selling the house how much the total annual heating and cooling cost will be.
2. To determine the actual cost, multiply the amount this person gives you by the weight, in pounds, of the devices supplying the heating and cooling.

Insects

Make no mistake about it: there will be insects in the house. The entire planet is teeming with insect life; scientists now estimate that there are over 60,000,000,000,000,000,000 different species living under my kitchen sink alone.

Fortunately, most insects pose no threat to homeowners. All they want is to eat your food and have babies in your sock drawer and maybe crawl up your nostril while you're sleeping. In exchange for this, many of them gladly perform useful household services, such as pooping on your toothbrush. "You scratch my back, and I'll suck blood out of yours" that is the insect motto.

The exception, of course, is termites, which are small socialist insects that eat houses. (We don't know what they ate before houses were invented. We think maybe garages.) Termites live in large colonies ruled by a lady termite with an enormous butt, called the Queen, who governs over a strict termite hierarchy consisting of: the Biters, the Chewers, the Spit Makers, the Soldiers, the House of Commons, the Nannies, and the Cute Little Baby Eggs. Each of these colony members has specific duties and responsibilities that are clearly posted on the Bulletin Board, although of course, being insects, they are much too stupid to remember what these duties and responsibilities are, so they basically just scurry around at random. Nevertheless, as I noted earlier, they can eat your prospective house, so it is very important that you inspect carefully for the Two Telltale Signs of Termite Infestation, which are:

1. Termites walking around with pieces of your prospective house in their mouths
2. No sign whatsoever of termites, because they are hiding

If all the items on this checklist check out to your satisfaction, it's time to make the standard Insulting Opening Offer on the house, which we'll cover in our next chapter.

Chapter 3. How To Get Very Deeply Into Debt

If you want to come out a winner in the negotiations for your new house, you have to be tough. "This is not a time for human decency," are the words of Wayne Savage, the internationally renowned lecturer and author of the best-selling book on negotiating strategy, *Leave Them Bleeding in the Dirt*, which retails for \$178.63 and not a penny less. Which is why you need to know:

How To Negotiate Like A Real Slimeball

A fine example of the kind of negotiating approach you should take can be found in the excellent corporate training film *The Godfather*, where, as part of his negotiations with a movie producer, Marlon Brando gains a subtle psychological advantage by arranging to have the producer wake up in bed next to the head of a deceased horse. (It could have been worse; it could have been Marlon Brando.)

This is not to suggest that to get a good price on a house, you need to go around decapitating domesticated animals. No indeed; wild animals are more than adequate for most residential transactions. But the point is, you have to be firm.

At the outset of your negotiations, it is very important to create the impression that you don't really want to buy the house at all, that in fact you hate the house, and the mere thought of it makes you physically ill. Your opening offer should convey this. It should be worded as follows: "We don't want your house, so we will give you X number of dollars for it, including all major appliances and the children." (Note that you should not name a specific amount. You should actually use the term "X number of dollars," so as to avoid tipping your hand.) The broker will take your offer to the seller, who at this point has a number of options, such as:

1. He can accept your offer.
2. He can reject your offer.
3. He can give back the dinette set, the pool table, AND the Epcot Center vacation in exchange for whatever is behind curtain number two.

Another possibility is that he will make a counteroffer, which your broker will bring back for you to consider. "We don't want to sell the house," it might say. "We only put it on the market because we enjoy having total strangers come around and test-flush all our toilets. But we are willing to let it go for Y number of dollars, plus you can have little Deirdre, provided you raise her in a religious environment. We get the microwave."

And then you send the broker back with another offer, and they send you another counteroffer, and so on until the broker, his fingers bloodied from typing up the various negotiating positions, drops dead in the street from exhaustion, which is the signal for the buyer and the seller to settle on a price equal to the original asking price minus about five percent. This is the price that everybody always winds up at, and if we all just agreed on it at the beginning, there would be a lot less hassle and inconvenience in the form of dead brokers. But we have to ask ourselves if this would really be such a desirable outcome.

In any event, now that you and the seller have set a price, you need to sign the agreement of sale, which should be worded in standard legal terminology, as follows:

Standard Agreement Of Sale

WHEREAS the Seller wants to sell, and the Buyer wants to buy, and they think they got a price that's not too low or too high; and the Buyer gave the Seller a down payment to hold, now he'll try to get a mortgage 'fore they BOTH grow old; and the Seller's gonna see if he got termites in his place 'cause if he does, the Buyer's gonna tear it right up in his face; but if everything is cool and nobody's late, then the deal will go down on the Settlement Date.

CHORUS

Oooh baby baby We gon' have a transaction tonight

Of course I realize you probably don't understand some of this "legal jargon," but this is only because you are stupid. This is why it's important to ask several lawyers to give you contradictory advice before you sign anything, including get-well cards.

Meanwhile, however, it is time to go around to some banks and see if you can find one foolish enough to lend you some money.

Are You Financially Fit?

The first thing you need to do is perform a detailed financial analysis of how much money you have versus how much you're going to need to buy your house. The way you do this is you draw up what professional accountants call a "Balance Sheet," which should look like this:

Money You Have

1. Savings account: \$927.62
2. Checking account: Conceivably as much as \$83.15, provided that the check you wrote to Mister Muffler has not been cashed yet
3. Other assets, primarily canned goods and undeveloped photographs of the airplane wing taken during your trip to Disney World: \$44.02

Money You Need To Buy A House

1. Cost to pay random lawyers for God knows what (see "The Ritual Closing Ceremony"): \$6,765.90
2. Cost to have various inspectors come around and hold clipboards and shine flashlights at things but fail to notice any sign that the heating system is going to explode moments after you take possession of your new home: \$1,250
3. Taxes: \$3,856.90
4. Additional taxes that nobody ever mentioned to you: \$4,847.89
5. Taxes that are just now being rushed into law and will apply only to your specific house purchase: \$5,563.92
6. "Points," which is technically defined as "money that for some reason you have to give the bank, even though you are the one trying to buy the goddamn house, and no matter how many times you ask, you will never be given an intelligible explanation for this": \$8,745.00
7. Other (phone deposit, cost of actual house, etc.): \$126,436.06

So we can see from this financial analysis that you are definitely going to need the bank to give you a lot of money in the form of a mortgage. The bank is willing to do this because, the way mortgages are set up, no matter how many payments you make, you still owe the bank all the money you ever borrowed. Really. This explains why, in all your wide circle of friends, you don't know a single person who ever came close to paying off a mortgage. When you have a mortgage, at the end of every year the bank sends you a statement like this:

YOUR OUTSTANDING BALANCE AS OF THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR: \$93,423.54

YOUR TOTAL PAYMENTS MADE DURING THE YEAR: \$11,647.32

YOUR OUTSTANDING BALANCE AS OF THE END OF THE YEAR: \$93,423.54

It may seem as though the banks are taking unfair advantage of consumers here, but they really have no choice. A few years back, they lent billions and billions of dollars to the Third World, which had promised to spend the money on factories and heavy machinery, but which in fact lost it gambling on rooster fights. And since the banks can't very well march down to the Southern Hemisphere and

repossess, for example, Brazil, you can understand why they have no choice but to get the money from average everyday unarmed consumers such as yourself.

All mortgages work basically the same way: You sign a bunch of papers, then you make large monthly payments until the Second Coming. Nevertheless, the top Consumer Money Geeks all recommend that you “shop around” for your mortgage, because there are a number of different kinds available, each with its own terms, conditions, feeding habits, and so forth. Some of the more popular ones are:

The Fixed-Rate Mortgage

The Variable-Rate Mortgage

The Mortgage Whose Rate Is Based on What Order the Teams Finish in the National League East

The Mortgage with a Real Low Rate That Is Advertised in Huge Print in the Newspaper But Nobody Ever Actually Gets It

The Balloon Mortgage

The Party Hat Mortgage

The Mortgage That Is Really the Expired Warranty for a 1966 Sears Washing Machine

The Mortgage of the Living Dead

Here’s an important piece of advice to bear in mind when you’re shopping around for your mortgage: Don’t be intimidated. Sure, the bank is a great big, rich, powerful financial institution and you are a small, worthless piece of scum. But that doesn’t mean you should walk into the bank with your hat in your hand, like some kind of beggar! Not at all! You should crawl into the bank!

Ha ha! Just kidding, of course. You have nothing to worry about. All the bank will ask you to do is supply the home phone number of everybody you have ever known, even casually, since the fourth grade. Then you’ll have an interview with a Loan Officer, who’ll ask you a few standard screening questions, such as: “To get this mortgage, are you willing to lick the gum wads off my shoe bottoms?”

Assuming that you come up with the correct answers (“yes”) to these questions, your mortgage application will be sent on to the Committee to Hold Up the Mortgage Applications for Several Months. This will give you time to practice signing checks in preparation for the Ritual Closing Ceremony.

The Ritual Closing Ceremony

This is an important and highly traditional part of the home-buying process, the last major hurdle you must clear before you become an Official Homeowner. It is comparable to the initiation ceremonies at major college fraternities, where, to prove that he is worthy of the privileges and responsibilities of membership, the pledge must perform some feat such as attending a Papal Mass wearing only a softball glove.

Essentially, what you must do, in the Ritual Closing Ceremony, is go into a small room and write large checks to total strangers. According to tradition, anybody may ask you for a check, for any amount, and you may not refuse. Once you get started handing out money, the good news will travel quickly through the real estate community via joyful shouts: “A Closing Ceremony is taking place!” Soon there will be a huge horde of people—lawyers, bankers, brokers, insurance people, termite inspectors, caterers, photographers, people you used to know in high school—crowding into the closing room and spilling out into the street. You may be forced to hurl batches of signed blank checks out the window, just to

make sure that everyone is accommodated in the traditional way.

Another ritual task you must perform during the Closing Ceremony is frown with feigned comprehension at various unintelligible documents that will be placed in front of you by random individuals wearing suits:

RANDOM INDIVIDUAL: Now, as you can see, this is the Declaration of your Net Interest Accrual Payments of Debenture.

YOU (frowning): Yes.

RANDOM INDIVIDUAL: And this is the Notification of your Pro Rata Indemnities of Assumption.

YOU: Certainly.

RANDOM INDIVIDUAL: And this is the digestive system of a badger.

YOU: Of course.

Once the various officials present are satisfied that you truly wish to become a homeowner and have no checks left, they will award you a mortgage, which will spell out your new duties and obligations in standard legal terminology.

Hear ye, hear ye, everybody listen up because the MORTGAGOR, hereinafter referred to as the MORTGAGEE, has, by duly picking up this piece of paper and putting his JOHN HANCOCK thereontofore, committed himself and his family and his distant relatives and unborn children and domesticated animals body and soul to the terms and conditions of this MORTGAGE, whether these terms and conditions are actually stated right here in print on the MORTGAGE or exist only in the form of vague concepts in the minds of LAWYERS working for the BANK, to wit:

1. The money has to BE THERE on the first of the month, rain or shine.

2. If the money is not THERE, the BANK is going to get VERY ANGRY.

3. The BANK is going to want to GET EVEN.

4. The BANK is going to make SOMEBODY wish he was naked and tied down spread-eagle on an anthill with ants eating his EYEBALLS because that would be a lot more pleasant than what the BANK has in mind IF THE MONEY IS NOT THERE.

5. Specifically, the BANK is going to get a pair of NUMBER SIX KNITTING NEEDLES and heat them up to 11,000 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT, and then the BANK is going to ...

And so it continues, in technical legalistic detail. It's really nothing to concern yourself about. The important thing is: at last you're a homeowner. Now you can immerse yourself in the many rewarding and traditional activities that new homeowners engage in, such as trying to figure out how to make the mortgage payment and, simultaneously, not starve to death.

Budget Meals For New Homeowners

Pixie Cups Filled with Sugar

This easy-to-prepare meal is not only economical, but also extremely popular with children, who find it gives them that "extra energy" boost they sometimes need to stay awake for six days in a row.

Wedding Reception Feed

If you go to any major hotel or country club on a weekend, chances are you'll find a large formal wedding reception going on, featuring serving people walking around and actually giving away teeny little sandwiches with the crust cut off. This is an excellent source of food for you, the new

homeowner. You just walk in there, looking like you are a close personal friend of either the bride or the groom, and help yourself to as many trays as you feel you will need during this particular mortgage payment period. To keep people from getting suspicious, you should stop from time to time and remark aloud, in a natural tone of voice: “I am a close personal friend of the bride! Or the groom!”

This technique also works at funeral receptions (“I am very sorry that the deceased is dead!”).

But enough about food. Because before we can worry about paying for our house, we have to move into it and start finding out what’s wrong with it. My guess is, plenty.

Chapter 4. Moving: A Common Mistake

I personally, have never given birth to a child, but I have seen it dramatized a number of times on television, and I would say that in terms of pain, childbirth does not hold a candle to moving. For one thing, childbirth has a definite end to it. The baby comes out, looking like a vaseline-smearred ferret, and the parents get to beam at it joyfully, and that is that. Whereas the average move goes on forever. You take Couple A, who just had a baby, and Couple B, who just moved their household, and if you keep track of them, you’ll find that years from now, when Couple A’s baby has grown up, left home, and started a family, Couple B will still be rooting through boxes full of wadded-up newspaper, looking for the lid to their Mr. Coffee. Also, during childbirth, when things go wrong, trained professionals give you powerful drugs. Nobody is ever this thoughtful during a move.

This is why my Number One piece of helpful advice to people who are about to move, especially for the first time, is always:

DON’T DO IT! SET FIRE TO YOUR HOUSEHOLD GOODS RIGHT NOW AND JUST WALK AWAY FROM THEM WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A BACKWARD GLANCE! THIS WILL BE EASIER, IN THE LONG RUN!

Of course you think I’m just kidding, and by the time you realize I’m not, you’ll already be in your new home, trying unsuccessfully to locate something to slash your wrists with. So we might as well get started.

First off, you need to make an important decision: Are you going to move yourself with the help of friends who have been drinking too much beer, or are you going to hire surly, incompetent professionals? The answer most likely depends on whether or not you, personally, have to pay for it. Many times, large corporations will pay for moving expenses, so you might ask them, although usually their policy is to do this only for their own employees.

Professional Movers: How To Get Your Possessions Back

The big advantage of going with professional movers, of course, is that you have somebody to complain to when you get to your new home and discover that your fine china has been reduced to Chiclet-size pieces and there is mayonnaise in the piano. Also, if it’s a full-service move, you get to watch the Packing People in action. These are moving company workers who go through your house scooping up everything they see and putting it into a box. Everything. The Packing People do not ask

questions. They will cheerfully pack an entire box with used Kitty Litter, painstakingly wrapping each individual cat doot in specialized paper so it will not be damaged in shipment. Thus it is very important to keep a sharp eye on the Packing People while they are at work, so as to avoid painful tragedies. (“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH JENNIFER?”)

Another problem that sometimes arises with professional movers is getting them to give you your furniture back once they put it in the van. This problem is especially serious if the driver, after he puts your stuff in his van, goes around and picks up several other households full of stuff, which he then has to drop off, usually in Zaire, before he can go to your new home. The solution to this problem is to do what savvy moving families have been doing for years: hijack the truck. Get a gun, and simply demand that the driver unload at your house first. Of course this means you’ll wind up with somebody else’s possessions, but it doesn’t really matter. You’ll never get them unpacked anyway.

Moving Yourself

The big advantage of moving yourself is that you get to rent a rental truck. Rental trucks are highly specialized vehicles that are not released for use by the general public until they have undergone an intensive “breaking-in” program of being used to carry violent cattle with severe intestinal disorders over rough terrain for a minimum of 1,700,000 miles without maintenance.

These machines are capable of traveling the length of several football fields on a single tankful of gas, yet they boast the kind of cornering, braking, and acceleration characteristics normally associated with municipal stadiums. No question about it: Once you get behind the wheel of a rental truck, you’ll wonder what the sticky substance on the seat is. But before you’re ready to think about the truck, you need to go through all your possessions and make a serious futile effort to get rid of them. A key element in this effort is ...

The Garage Sale

A garage sale is basically when strangers come to your house and examine your personal belongings with un disguised contempt.

The first ones you’ll meet will be the garage sale Regulars. Garage sales are their lives. They’ll show up at your home early, generally about two days before the sale is scheduled to begin. The way they find out about it is, they use computers to examine satellite reconnaissance photographs of suburban neighborhoods for signs of incipient garage sale activity, such as people standing around arguing about how much to charge for a 1953 set of the Encyclopedia Britannica that’s missing volume 18 (Saliva-Tapeworm).

How do you price all those treasured personal belongings? The truth is, it doesn’t matter what you charge, because the Regulars aren’t going to pay it. These are people who do not own a single possession, including furniture, that they paid more than \$2.50 for, and they are not about to change their policy for the likes of you.

GARAGE SALE REGULAR (picking up a sale object): What’s this?

YOU: That’s my grandmother’s brooch. It’s twenty-four-carat gold, it has eight flawless diamonds, and these are real pearls in the center here. It was presented to my grandmother personally by the King

of England, whose crest is on the back.

GARAGE SALE REGULAR: I'll give you a dollar for it.

The Regulars will quickly pick you clean of everything that anybody might want to buy, so when your sale actually gets under way, it will consist of people getting out of their cars, examining your possessions the way you might view an unexpected leech in your pasta, then asking you: "Is this it?" The only thing they'll be interested in buying is anything on which you have carefully placed a large sign stating: NOT FOR SALE. They'll walk up, read the sign carefully, then ask you: "Is this for sale?"

It can make you feel vaguely inadequate, watching people reject your possessions. At least that's how it affects me. I find myself wanting to please these people. I want to say, "If you don't see what you like, we'll order it!" But of course this tends to defeat the whole purpose of the garage sale, so the best thing to do is just sit there grimly until the sale is over and you can throw everything away.

Okay, now that we've cleared out some of the dead wood, it's time to proceed with the next step in the moving process, which is ...

Getting A Bunch Of Empty Liquor Boxes And Hurling Things Into Them At Random

You won't start out this way, of course. You'll start by selecting the objects with great care and wrapping them up very gently. You'll keep this up for a week or so, packing box after box, making regular trips for more, getting to be good buddies with the clerks at the liquor store, getting a satisfied feeling when you gaze upon the big stacks of filled boxes in the living room. And then one day you'll look around and make a chilling discovery: You're not making any progress. There's still just as much stuff lying around unboxed as there was the day you started. There might even be more. And so you start to pack with less care, faster and faster, until you find yourself in an uncontrolled packing frenzy, throwing everything—dirt, money, deceased spiders—into liquor boxes in a desperate effort to empty the house.

What you are up against here is a strange phenomenon that has astounded scientists and liquor store clerks for thousands of years: It is impossible to empty a house. You can't do it. Somehow, word that you're moving gets out to all the dumps and garbage disposal sites, and in the dead of the night there comes an eerie rustling sound as all your old possessions, the ones you threw away years ago—broken appliances, coffee grounds, Pat Boone records—rise up and come limping and scuttling back to your house, where they nestle in the backs of your closets, waiting to spring out at you the way Tony Perkins kept springing out at people in *Psycho*, only more unexpectedly. If you throw them away again, they'll crawl right back the next night. Eventually you'll lose your sanity, and you'll start deciding to keep them. "This looks like it's in pretty good shape!" you'll say, holding up the owner's manual to the Chevrolet station wagon that you sold in 1972. And all the other old possessions, back in their closets, writhe with joy, because they know there is hope for them.

This is how deranged you can become: The last time we moved, I had to physically restrain my wife from packing several scum-encrusted rags that I had been using to clean toilets. It was also my wife who decided to keep the greenish chair that looks like what would happen if a monstrous prehistoric creature blew its nose in our living room. We had remarked many times before that all the pain and anguish of moving would be justified by the fact that we would be leaving this chair behind forever. It broke into

open laughter when it was carried into our new home.

Helpful Packing Hints:

After packing a box, always write your name on the top (e.g., “Barry”), so when you get to your new home you’ll be able to tell at a glance what your name is. Tropical fish should be individually wadded up in newspaper. In fact, it’s a good idea to pack several boxes full of nothing but wadded-up pieces of newspaper, so you’ll have plenty on hand in your New Home.

When packing perishable items, such as yogurt, make a mental note to throw them away immediately upon arrival in your new home. Be sure to take along at least 2,800 pounds of your old college textbooks with titles like Really Long Poems of the Sixteenth Century, the ones you never read when you were in college, the ones that are still packed in boxes from four moves ago. These are sure to come in handy.

It is best not to pack important prescription drugs such as tranquilizers. It is best to keep them on hand and gulp them down like salted peanuts.

Another total breakdown of rational thought occurs when you start deciding to leave behind things, as little gifts, for the new owners. You will look at your collection of seventeen thousand cans of various paints, none of which has been opened since the Protestant Reformation and each of which contains about a quarter inch of sludge hardened to the consistency of dental porcelain, and you will say: “The new owners will probably be able to use these!” You will say the same thing about the swing set gradually oxidizing into a major rust formation in the backyard, even though you know the new owners are a childless couple in their seventies. You will leave them your old eyeglasses, deceased radios, filthy rags, and baked goods supporting fourth-generation mold colonies. You will leave them half filled bags of lawn chemicals that have, over the decades, become bonded permanently to the garage floor. Near the end, you will display not the slightest shred of human decency:

You (brightly): I’m sure the new owners would like to have this!

YOUR SPOUSE: That’s your mother!

How To Move A Pet

My major experience with moving a pet was the time we moved our dog, Earnest, from Pennsylvania to Florida via airplane. We took her to these professional pet transporters, who told us that for \$357.12, which is approximately \$357.12 more than we originally paid for Earnest, they would put her on the airplane in a special cage, which we would get to keep. The reason for this generosity became clear when I picked Earnest up at the Miami airport. It had been a long flight, and since Earnest had had nothing to read, she had passed the time by pooping, so you can imagine what the inside of her cage looked and smelled like, on top of which, as soon as she saw me, she went into the classic Dance of Lunatic Unrestrained Dog joy Upon Sighting the Master, yelping and whirling like the agitator on an unbalanced washing machine, creating a veritable poop tornado inside the cage, just dying to get out and say hi.

In fact, this experience gave me an idea for a powerful and semi-humane global strategic weapon, which would be called “The Earnest.” The way it would work is, we’d get some large and friendly dogs, such as Labrador retrievers, and we’d keep them in cages for maybe a week, feeding them bulky foods,

then we'd parachute them into the Soviet Union. The cages would open automatically on impact with the ground, and these lonely and highly aromatic dogs would come bounding out, desperate to lavish affection all over the human race, and that would be the end of Soviet civilization as we now know it. Of course there is always the danger of escalation. The Russians might strike back at us with, for example, St. Bernards. Maybe we'd better just forget it.

Another way to move your pet, of course, is to take it with you in the car. The problem here is that most motels don't allow animals. I know of one couple who once got a dog into a motel by claiming it was a Seeing Eye dog, which they established via the clever ruse of having the husband wear dark glasses, only the dog didn't really hold up its end of the bargain. Instead of acting like a trained professional, being alert, looking out for obstacles, and so forth, it was dragging its owner along like a motorboat towing a reluctant water-skier, stopping only to sniff people's crotches and snork up low-lying cocktail peanuts. Another problem with the Seeing Eye ruse is that it won't work if your pet is a snake, for example, or a cat. There are no Seeing Eye cats, of course, because the sole function of cats, in the Great Chain of Life, is to cause harm to human beings. The instant a cat figured out that the blind person would follow it wherever it went, it would lead this person directly into whirling unshielded manufacturing equipment.

I once, as a favor to my sister, transported her cat in my car about ninety miles to her new apartment. Naturally it turned out that the only place in the entire car that the cat wanted to be was directly under the brake pedal, which meant that if I needed to slow down, I had to reach down there and grab the cat without looking—an activity comparable to groping around for a moray eel in a dark underwater cave filled with barbed wire—and then I'd hurl the cat, still clinging to pieces of my flesh, into the backseat, and then I'd hit the brakes, and then the cat would scuttle back under the pedal. As you can imagine, this cat and I were the best of friends by the time we arrived at my sister's apartment, and I only hope that I see it again someday when my hand has healed to the point where I can aim a dart gun.

How To Move Children

Children are more difficult to move than pets. You can't just put a child in a crate and stick him on an airplane. God knows I have tried.

The important thing is preparation. Psychologists stress that you should break the news of the move to the child as soon as possible, ideally at birth. "We're going to move!" you should shout gaily, the instant the child's head emerges from the mother. The child will probably cry at this news, but this is normal. Most children are unhappy about moving, which is why it is so important, at each stage in the move preparation process, to sit down with them, one on one, and lie to them.

"It's going to be such fun!" you should tell them. "You're going to make lots of new friends!"

Of course this is probably not true. Probably they will wind up in a school where all the really good social cliques have already reached their full membership quotas and have long waiting lists. Probably your children will immediately be branded with lifelong unflattering nicknames such as Goat Booger. But there is no point in telling them this now.

A Smart Moving Idea For Two-Car Families

If you're moving a long distance, you're probably wondering what's the best way to get both cars to your new home. One way, of course, is for the wife to drive one car and the husband to drive the other, but this can be lonely and tiring, especially if there are small children, who will of course be clawing foot-long strips of each other's flesh off before you have pulled out of the driveway. So what modern moving professionals recommend is that you let the children drive one of the cars. This way, the adults, in Car A, can relax and talk or listen to classical music, while the children, in Car B, can amuse themselves by playing imaginative highway games such as Death Avengers of the Interstate, and you can all arrive at the motel in a good mood, ready to enjoy a relaxed and happy evening together until the police come.

Moving Your Possessions Into Your New Home

If you are moving yourself, you simply wait for the most humid day in the history of the world, pull your truck up outside your new home, and start carrying your possessions inside. Every hour or so you should take a break, which will give your possessions an opportunity to scurry, giggling, back out to the truck, so that you may carry them inside again.

If you are using professional movers, the correct procedure is as follows:

1. You stand in the middle of the living room.
2. Hundreds of burly, impatient, sweating moving company men come swarming at you from all directions carrying identical brown cardboard boxes, each of which has your last name written on it in a helpful manner.
3. "WHERE DO YOU WANT THIS?" say the burly, impatient men, making it clear by their tone of voice that if you do not answer them within two seconds, they will sweat so hard that they warp your floor.
4. You pick a room at random. "That goes in the spare bedroom," you say. Or: "In the dining room, please." It makes no difference. They will put it wherever they want. Sometimes, for fun, the movers will completely fill up a room, floor to ceiling, with boxes, thus creating a humongous Rubik's Cube out of your worldly goods, so that to get to any one box, you have to move 1,357 others in exactly the right pattern. I warned you, way back at the beginning of this chapter, that it would be easier to just set fire to everything, but of course you wouldn't listen.

Unpacking

It is best not to attempt this all at once. It is best to space it out over a period of several years, so that you may savor the joy of discovering the kinds of comical items you chose to pack and, at great cost in money and effort, move to your new home. You can even make this a traditional nightly family event, with everybody gathering around a packing box and laughing festively as you unwrap 750 square feet of wrapping paper to discover, say, the key that operates the radiator of your former home.

What Condition The Previous Owners Will Have Left Your New Home In

They will have left it in roughly the same condition as the Visigoths left Rome in. When you open the refrigerator, life-threatening molds will try to grasp you with their tentacles. But do not judge the previous owners too harshly; remember that when they left, they were in the same subhuman, totally amoral moving-induced state of mind that you were in when you moved out of your house without so much as a backward glance at the inch-thick layer of crud that got baked onto the sides of your former oven when the lasagna exploded.

Getting Your New Phone, Gas, Electricity, Appliances, Cable Television, And Water Hooked Up

The important thing to understand is that all these things are done by the same person. Yes, homeowners: there is only one Hookup Man in the entire world, sort of like Santa Claus, and as you can imagine, he is very, very busy. This is why, when you call up the telephone company to find out when the Hookup Man will visit your house, they cannot pinpoint the exact time. “Right now,” they will say, “it looks like it will probably be an even-numbered year.” In fact most people have never seen the Hookup Man, and some say he is only a legend. But many of us believe in him, because we have seen the jolly pranks and tricks he likes to play, our favorite being the one where we have been waiting for him in our house for days, and finally we must go out for food, and the instant we are gone he comes bounding out of the bushes, where he has been hiding, and leaves a cheerful note on our door that says: “Sorry We Missed You!” Ha ha! Such a card, that Hookup Man!

Chapter 5. Making New Enemies

Probably the most important thing, in settling into a new home, is to establish good relationships with your neighbors. The reason for this is best summarized by the moving words of the famous English poet John Donne, who wrote:

No man is an island unto his own personal self, Each man is more of a subcontinent, So never send to ask for whom the doorbell tolls Because more than likely it is your neighbor Come to see if you have a plumber's snake he can borrow So he can attempt to unclog the hall toilet Which he suspects his son has flushed His daughter's Rainbow Brite doll down.

Idealistic? Sure it is, but it still has meaning today. We live in a complex, interconnected society, and sometimes we must call upon our neighbors to help us, to stand by us, to comfort us, or at very least to try not to back their recreational vehicle into our jacuzzi. So as soon as you get to your new home, you want to Reach Out. You want to march right next door, put on your very nicest smile, ring the doorbell, and ...

BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK

Well! It looks as though your new neighbors have a doggy! A very alert doggy! A doggy with jaws the size of an important geological formation! In the background, you dimly perceive shapes that might be your new neighbors.

“Hi!” you say. “We’re your new ...”

“Anyway,” you say, “we thought we’d stop by and ...”

BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK
BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK
BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK

“Well, okay!” you say. “Guess we’d better get back and ...”

[illegible]

Now that you've met the neighbors, it's time to start locating some of the "necessities of life." If you have small children, you need to find a Pediatric Group where you can go and sit in the waiting room when your children get their ears infected, which is approximately four times per child per week.

Notice I say “Pediatric Group,” not “Pediatrician.” There are no longer any Lone Ranger-style pediatricians, because it is considered a serious violation of modern medical ethics for a child to see the same doctor twice during the child’s lifetime. This is why you sometimes must wait so long in the waiting room: The Pediatric Group is flying in a new doctor, sometimes from as far away as Malaysia, solely to avoid having your child see a familiar face. This is also why, in selecting a new Pediatric Group, the most important factor is not the doctors, but the person who answers the phone, because you will spend a large portion of your life talking with this person:

PHONE PERSON: Good afternoon, this is Pediatricians Backwards “R” Us; how may we help you?

YOU: Hi, this is Mrs. Evans, and my son, Thad, has been having these kind of strange-shaped bowel movements, and last time this happened we saw Dr. Wexler, and he said if it happened again we should call and ...

PHONE PERSON: Well, of course you realize you can't see Dr. Wexler ever again.

YOU: Yes, of course, but I was wondering if maybe Dr. Bunderson ...

PHONE PERSON (suspiciously): How do you know Dr. Bunderson? Have you seen him before?

YOU (quickly): No! No! Really! I just heard of him, that's all. From a friend.

PHONE PERSON: Well, in that case, please hold.

eighteen-minute pause

PHONE PERSON: Dr. Bunderson wants to know what you mean by “strange-shaped.”

YOU: Well, kind of like M & M's.

PHONE PERSON: Please hold.

twenty-three-minute pause

PHONE PERSON: Plain or peanut?

YOU: Plain. Shall I hold?

Joining Local Clubs And Organizations

This is an excellent way for a newcomer like yourself to make friends with many local community leaders, all of whom will want to sell you insurance.

Giving Money To The Local Police Association

We always do this. Whenever they come around, we give them a generous contribution and a cheerful smile, because deep in our souls we have this nagging fear that they write your name down somewhere, and if you did not contribute, it will come back to haunt you:

You: Help! Please send somebody to 465 Magnolia Street immediately!

POLICE DISPATCHER: Would that be the residence of Stanley Johnson, the guy who stiffed the Benevolent Association for six straight years? The guy who always says he'll send us a check "next week"?

YOU: Yes! Please! A huge insane man is pounding on our door with an axe!

POLICE DISPATCHER: That would be Lester Stubbins. Last year he donated, let's see here, twenty-five dollars.

YOU: HE'S BREAKING DOWN THE DOOR! HURRY!!

POLICE DISPATCHER: Sure thing. We'll have a unit there "next week."

Selecting A School For Your Child

There are two major kinds of schools:

Public Schools, defined as "schools where the doors have been removed from the bathroom stalls."

Private Schools, defined as "schools you cannot afford."

The key factor in selecting a school, of course, is what kind of nurse it has. Remember that the primary function of the American educational system is to provide you with a place to leave your children when you go to work; if the school has the kind of nurse who calls you up every time some little thing goes wrong, the whole point is defeated. Also your career could be ruined:

SETTING: The chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court

YOU: In conclusion, your honors, I wish to state that my client...

CHIEF JUSTICE (interrupting): Counsel, I have a note here from the nurse at the Bob-o-Link Elementary School stating that your daughter, Jennifer, is throwing up what appears to be Yoo-Hoo brand chocolate drink.

So you're looking for a school with a levelheaded nurse, the kind who would not think of calling you over something as minor as vomiting, which most small children engage in purely as a recreational activity.

Another thing: Whichever school you select, you must get your child into the "gifted" class. I imagine there was a time when the word "gifted" was used to describe only children who were above average, but since hardly any parents today will tolerate the thought that their child may be average, the term "gifted" is now applied to any student with more brain wave activity than a glazed doughnut.

The way you get your child into the gifted class is, you go to the school personally and make it clear to the staff that you are a Concerned Parent, meaning a potentially humongous pain in the ass. You should demand to see the curriculum, so as to make sure that, at each grade level, your child will receive instruction in the subjects appropriate for a standard American education, namely:

GRADE SUBJECTS LEARNED

K-2 Not to cross the street; not to take drugs; not to get in strange cars; not to talk to people; not to trust anybody; the Pledge of Allegiance

3-7 How to make science fair projects proving that ice is actually frozen water; the state capitals; designer jeans

8-12 Sex

Of course you need not worry too much about your child's progress, because the school will keep you posted by means of report cards, which in most schools are now completely computerized to guard against the danger that anybody might be able to understand them. Our son's report card looks like this:

AmStudSocBio 67 87 1123.43

54.45% PhysLangMath 1223.44343 4-4

SocMathStudAm—2948

BioPhys 09849238409

Cincinnati 001020 004 East Pass

NOTE: Your Mileage May Vary.

When we get our son's report card, we make a big show of examining it with concerned frowns identical to the ones we use when our mechanic shows us broken pieces of our car, but the truth is we have no idea how well our son is doing.

Enrolling Your Children In Several Dozen After-School Activities

Believe it or not, there was once a time when parents did not enroll their children in after-school activities. In those primitive times, when children came home from school, they'd just go outside, completely on their own, and engage in what professional child psychologists call "nonstructured" behavior, also known as "playing," which is when you run around shrieking and getting dirt in your hair hold elaborate funerals for stuffed animals lie on your back next to a friend and make burping noises until one of you laughs so hard that he pees in his pants pretend you are fighting evil aliens from the Planet Kawoomba, who can be defeated only by spit

And so on. Of course, today we realize that children need to have a great deal of structure in the form of leagues and uniforms and referees and team photographs and trophies and dozens of parents standing on the sidelines shrieking like mental patients. So unless you are some kind of low-life child-abusing vermin, one of the first things you'll do when you move to your new home is enroll your children in Little League, soccer, and midget football, as well as a scouting program, not to mention gymnastics, ballet, violin, karate, computer, tennis, and helicopter-piloting lessons. You want your child's life to become so structured that he or she is incapable of fooling around in his or her own yard without detailed instructions from a coach. ("OK, Jason! Burp! NO, dammit! Not that way!")

Not that we have time to worry about our child's education or after-school activities. No, we are busy

working and striving, in hopes that someday we will be able to afford something that most Americans dream of but very few ever achieve: nice furniture. We'll cover this depressing topic in a later chapter. But first we need to look, in the next chapter, at the basic condition of our house, and see if we can't, by means of various costly projects, make it worse.

Chapter 6. It's Noon: Do You Know Where Your Contractor Is?

You may have noticed that nowhere in this book do I ever talk about how to Do It Yourself. This is because I have done a great many things myself over the years, and in every case I have ultimately come to realize that I would have been better off if I had just walked around my house firing random shotgun blasts. No matter how hard I tried, my homeowner projects always produced highly comical results, such as the enormous concrete lump in the yard of the house we owned in Pennsylvania.

I am not making this lump up. We acquired it as a result of the project when I erected a basketball post, which I needed because, as a professional writer, I often had to go outside and gain artistic inspiration by pretending I was the U.S. Olympic basketball team, challenging the Soviet team for the gold medal. The part of the Soviet team was played by my dog. You will be pleased to learn that the U. S. team always won, because (a) the Soviet team couldn't dribble—it would just sort of nose the ball around the court—and (b) the U.S. team had this very effective play where it would yell, in a stern voice: “No! BAD dog!!” which caused the Soviet team to crouch down on the court in a guilty fashion, and the United States would cruise past for an easy lay-up.

Anyway, the way I erected the basketball post was, carefully following the instructions that came with it, I dug a hole three feet deep and thirty inches wide. The instructions said I was supposed to put the post in the hole and fill it with concrete, only I had no concrete. I had never, until that moment, given much thought as to where concrete even came from. Large oceangoing freighters was my best guess.

So I looked in the yellow pages, and lo and behold, there was this place that sold concrete in special trailers that attached to your car. I called them up, and they told me each trailer held a “yard” of concrete. “A ‘yard’?” I said.

“Yes,” they confirmed. “A yard.” Whatever the hell that meant.

Well. It turns out that they use the name “yard” because this is enough concrete to cover North America to a depth of three feet. I had a very adventurous drive home from the concrete place, propelled by a trailer that weighed far more than my actual car, a trailer with no respect whatsoever for the tradition of stopping at red lights. But finally I made it, and I positioned the trailer over my basketball hole, and I opened the little gate at the bottom, and in one second the hole was full of concrete, using maybe one trillionth of the available supply, which I needed to find a use for pronto, because the burly men back at the concrete place had made it clear that if you bring them back a trailer full of hardened concrete, their policy is to roll it back and forth over your body.

This is when I came up with the idea of making a lump. I backed the trailer over to a section of our yard that had always looked like it could use some perking up, landscapingwise, and I created this free-form pile of concrete that is not only attractive, but also very durable. If, millions of years from now, when all other man-made structures have disappeared, intelligent life forms from other galaxies visit the planet Earth, they will find this lump, and they will wonder what kind of being created it, and for what

purpose. I bet basketball will never occur to them.

And the hell of it is, the concrete lump was one of my better projects, in the sense that I also got a working basketball POst Out Of it. Most of the other ones turned out much worse. The full impact of this was driven home to me forcibly when we decided to sell the Pennsylvania house, and we paid several thousand dollars (I am still not making this up) to two men, both named Jonathan, to come over and eliminate all traces of all my homeowner projects—bookshelves where you could see the shapes of dead insects under the paint, paneling that looked like it had been installed by vandals, etc.—in an effort to make our home look as nice as it did before I started improving it. After the Jonathans took out all my projects, the house mostly consisted of holes, which they filled up with Spackle. When prospective buyers would ask: “What kind of construction is this house?” I would answer: “Spackle.”

So to get back to my original point, I am now violently opposed to doing anything myself. I think there should be a federal law requiring people who publish do-it-yourself books to include a warning, similar to what the Surgeon General has on cigarette packs, right on the cover of the book, stating:

WARNING: ANY MONEY YOU SAVE BY DOING HOMEOWNER PROJECTS YOURSELF WILL BE OFFSET BY THE COST OF HIRING COMPETENT PROFESSIONALS TO COME AND REMOVE THEM SO YOU CAN SELL YOUR HOUSE, NOT TO MENTION THE EMOTIONAL TRAUMA ASSOCIATED WITH LISTENING To THESE PROFESSIONALS, AS THEY RIP OUT LARGE HUNKS OF A PROJECT, LAUGH AND YELL REMARKS SUCH AS: “HEY! GET A LOAD OF THIS.”

So now you are asking yourself: “Okay, if I’m not supposed to do anything myself, how am I supposed to get my house fixed?” The answer is: contractors. A contractor is a man with a pickup truck and a set of business cards that say something like:

ED BROGAN Inc. General Contractor

All Types of Construction and Repair—30 Years Experience—Quality Work Fully Bonded and Insured Free Estimates—Reasonable Rates

“We Never Show up”

No, I am of course kidding about that last line. They won’t tell you that they never show up; this is a secret that they are sworn to uphold during the graduation ceremony at the Contractor Academy, where each man receives his Official Contractor’s battered toolbox, which contains, not tools, but thousands and thousands of traditional handcrafted contractor excuses for not showing up, such as:

“I strained my back.”

“My truck has a flat tire.”

“My wife is having a baby.”

“My uncle died.”

“My wife strained her back.”

“My uncle has a flat tire.”

“My truck is having a baby.”

These time-honored excuses have been handed down through many contractor generations, dating all the way back to ancient Rome, where the original contractors built the ruins. Contrary to what historians will try to tell you, the ruins were never finished buildings: they were always ruins. The Romans kept trying to get the contractors to come back and finish them, but the contractors kept coming up with excuses, the oldest recorded one being “Quid vox probenium est” (“My wife strained her uncle”). Eventually the Romans simply had to learn to live in the ruins. You, as a homeowner, will have

to do the same thing.

The Basic Contracting Process

The contractor comes to your house and strides around in a confidence-inducing fashion, taking measurements and writing things down on a clipboard. What he is writing down is the batting averages of the 1978 Boston Red Sox, which he will multiply by the relative humidity to come up with an “estimate,” which is legally defined as “the amount of money you will ultimately spend on phone calls in a fruitless effort to locate the contractor.” Once you have agreed to the “estimate,” the contractor will leave, telling you that he will come back and start work on “Thursday.” Four to thirteen weeks later, the contractor shows up with two workmen selected on the basis of owning T-shirts festooned with photographs of rock bands with names like “Death Penis.” The contractor leaves the workmen behind and informs you that he will be back on “Thursday.” Then he disappears. The workmen take all of your furniture and put it out on your patio, then they knock down a wall. Neither of these steps necessarily has anything to do with the job at hand. This is just basic contracting procedure. Having completed these tasks, the workmen take a well-earned “lunch break.” They will never come back again. There is nothing you can do about this. You can search all the way through the United States Constitution, and you will find a great number of statements in there about unimportant issues such as the vice president, but you will find nothing about getting workmen back to your house. What we need is a constitutional amendment. It would say: ARTICLE MXLICBM: If workmen come to your house and screw everything up, they shall either (a) have to come back and at least try to make it normal again or (b) be subjected to powerful electric shocks in their private parts.

Interesting Sidelight:

Modern science has been unable to determine where workmen disappear to. At one time it was believed that they went to other jobs, but we now know that there are no “other jobs,” because if there were, then eventually, somewhere, some homeowner’s house would actually get worked on, and you would read about this astounding event in The New York Times.

WORKMEN WORK ON HOME, the headline would say, and huge crowds of worshipful homeowners would flock to marvel at the worked-upon home, similar to the way the religious faithful sometimes flock to rural communities when somebody has discovered a bale of peat moss shaped like the Lord.

Approximately six weeks later, the contractor returns and notes with displeasure that the workmen have failed to disconnect the plumbing and electrical systems. “Always disconnect the plumbing and electrical systems, even if you are merely building an outdoor deck!” is a rule that is stressed repeatedly at the Contractor Academy. Angrily, the contractor performs these vital tasks, then, assuring you that he will be back “Thursday,” he disappears. You cannot grab him. A skilled contractor can actually cause himself to dematerialize, into hyperspace, right before your eyes.

What ultimately may happen is, you’ll get so desperate that, despite my stern warnings, you will attempt to actually do things yourself. One Saturday morning you’ll get up bright and early, and you’ll go down to the Homeowner Hell. This is a nationwide chain of stores, each of which is approximately the size of Indonesia and is filled with billions and billions of random and obscure hardware objects such as “toggle bolts,” which are packed inside special plastic blister packs, which you cannot open except

with special razor knives sold only inside blister packs at Homeowner Hell. It is a comical sight indeed to see hundreds of homeowners peering at these objects with a total lack of comprehension, like fish examining a nuclear submarine. The contractors love to watch this via closed-circuit television from the Parallel Contractor Universe. It is their favorite show.

Chapter 7.Redecorating For Under 650,000 Dollars

The best way to get decorating ideas is to buy several glossy interior design publications such as Architectural Digest (“The International Magazine of Homes Much Nicer Than Yours”) and cull through the articles to obtain useful tips. The main tip you will pick up is that if you want your house to look really nice, you do not necessarily have to have professional training or even a special “flair” for design; all you need is more money than the human mind can comprehend. You will learn this from eight-page color photo spreads featuring homes the size of Baltimore—always called “villas”—situated on dramatic mountain-side real estate accessible to ordinary citizens such as yourself only by telescope. The accompanying articles sound like this:

The owners—he, a prominent industrialist neurosurgeon and president of four major investment firms: she, a bestselling novelist and Queen of Belgium—knew exactly what they wanted when they decided to build the Villa de Mucho Simoleons. “We wanted,” they said, in unison, “the kind of informal and inviting home where we could entertain our friends and, if we felt like it, play polo in the foyer.”

Their design consultants, Wilmington A. “Bill” Sashweight IV and Marjory “Pookie” Westinghouse-Armature, sought to create a “fun” motif by decorating the ceilings in the master bath with frescoes done originally for the Sistine Chapel by Michel “Michelangelo” Angelo and importing a working Hawaiian volcano to heat the pool, which was originally a lake in Switzerland. For the owners’ two children (originally the children of a Nobel prize-winning physicist and a world-renowned ballet dancer), who sleep in their own wing, (originally Versailles), the designers chose ...

And so on. After you have read a few articles like this, you should have plenty of nifty ideas for the kind of furniture you want, although of course, given your price range, you will have to buy it at a store with a name like Big Stu’s Discount House of Taste, where the dinette sets are made from compressed oatmeal.

Besides money, the other thing you need is time. Nobody has ever come up with a good explanation as to why this is, but it takes longer to obtain a piece of furniture than to construct a suspension bridge. My theory is that furniture is not actually built by human beings, but rather is grown, probably in some intensely humid Third World nation where they have giant furniture trees that can take years to produce a single ottoman. When you place your order for, let’s say, a teal love seat, the order is mailed via boat to a furniture plantation, where a worker, who speaks little English, frowns at it, wipes the sweat from his brow, straps on his machete, and walks into the jungle. He halts briefly as a ripe armoire thuds into the earth ahead of him, then he continues along the narrow path, squinting upward into the dense mass of vegetation overhead. He spots a dark shape far above him in the gloom; it could be a love seat in the early stages of formation. Or it could be a coffee table, or a Barcalounger, or a gorilla nest. “Who knows?” the worker thinks to himself “And what the hell is ‘teal’?”

So we’re talking about a slow and inexact process, with one piece arriving years after another, which

is why most people go through their entire lives without having all their furniture look nice at the same time. My advice is, order your furniture now, even if you don't even own a house yet, even if you are in fact an unborn child, because if you are lucky, the last piece will arrive just in time for your great-great-grandchildren to spill Zoo-Roni on it. Not that you will care: you will hate it anyway. This is because of
NEWTON'S FIRST LAW OF FURNITURE BUYING:

The amount you will hate a given piece of furniture is equal to its cost multiplied by the length of time, in months, it takes to arrive.

I recall the time my wife, Beth, finally got fed up with the brown sofa we had for many years, which looked like a buffalo that had staggered into our living room and died from a horrible skin disease. So she decided, the hell with our son's college education, she was going to get a new sectional sofa. She took many measurements, then she went to many, many furniture stores, then she ordered the sofa, then we waited through several presidential administrations for it to arrive. And finally it did, and it was exactly what she had ordered, and so naturally it made her almost physically ill to look at it. I told her it looked fine to me, but it was no use. When she was looking at this sofa, she was looking at Jabba the Hutt. She would lie awake in bed at night, thinking about this thing squatting out there in her living room, and it was only a matter of time before she went insane and attacked it with a steak knife. So I was very relieved when she decided to sell it through a classified ad, which was a pretty interesting experience in itself because of the call she got from the sex maniac. This is the truth. First he asked her a bunch of questions about the sofa, which he seemed sincerely interested in, and then, lowering his voice about two octaves, he said:

"Are you wearing loafers?"

Beth failed to notice anything particularly unusual about this, which shows how crazed a person can become when she is desperate to get rid of a sectional sofa.

"Yes," she said. "Now, the sofa ..."

"Are they brown?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "But about the ..."

"Do they smell bad?" he asked.

At this point Beth, even in her furniture-induced derangement, realized that this person was not a Hot Prospect, and she got off the phone. Eventually she sold the sofa, so it wasn't such a bad experience after all, though it probably would have been easier and more relaxing if we had just gone out into the backyard and set fire to a small pile of hundred-dollar bills.

Of course there is a way to obtain nice furniture without the frustration and high cost of buying it new, provided you are willing to put in a few hours of honest "elbow grease" and possibly suffer permanent disfigurement. I am referring, of course, to the time-honored Thrifty Homeowner art of ...

Refinishing Furniture

No doubt you have at one time or another visited the home of people who have a number of nice older wooden pieces, and you have said something complimentary, and your hosts said something like: "Oh, thank you, we bought them all for a total of \$147.50 at garage sales and refinished them ourselves in the garage and now they are worth, we conservatively estimate, nine million dollars." They are lying, of course. They stole all this stuff from the Museum of Nice Old Wood Furniture. Nevertheless, it is

inevitable that at some point you will get the notion that you can have nice furniture via the refinishing method, so you might as well know the correct procedure:

1. You go to a garage sale and you find a bureau covered with hideously ugly orange paint.
2. You call your spouse over, and you say, in a quiet voice so the garage sale person can't overhear you: "Look at this! You know what this is, under this paint? This is (CHOOSE ONE): ... solid oak!" solid bird's-eye maple!" ... solid walnut!" ... solid oaken maple eye of walnut!" (It makes no difference what fine hardwood you claim the bureau is made of, because it will forever remain an elusive dream that you never actually lay eyes on, similar to the Lost Dutchman's Mine.)
3. Your spouse, shocked, whispers: "Whoever would be so foolish as to cover up such beautiful wood with paint!? With a minimum of effort, this could be a lovely piece!"
4. Feeling like thieves in the night, you pay twenty-five dollars for the bureau and scuttle off with it. You do not hear the cynical laughter of the former owner.
5. You go to the hardware store and purchase some steel wool and some refinishing product with a name like "Can o' Poison" that has skeleton heads all over it and a prominent Consumer Advisory like this:
WARNING—DO NOT LET THIS PRODUCT COME IN CONTACT WITH YOUR SKIN. DO NOT BREATHE THE FUMES. DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN AFTER USING THIS PRODUCT. DO NOT BUY THIS PRODUCT. DO NOT EVEN READ THIS WARNING.
6. You go home, put on some rubber gloves, and start scrubbing the paint with the toxic substance. It is hard work. It is dirty work. The gloves dissolve quickly, and it is clear that large patches of your skin will have to be surgically replaced. But it's all worth it, because after just a few hours you have scraped away a small patch of that hideous orange paint, and underneath it you find ... a layer of hideous green Paint!
7. You repeat this process for two, maybe even three more layers of paint, and finally the truth dawns on you: This is not really a bureau. This is an enormous, bureau-shaped wad of paint.
8. You decide to hold a garage sale.

Interior Design Hints From Top "Pros"

To make a dark room look brighter, try turning on the electrical lights. A small carpet stain where the cat vomited in 1979 can be made to "disappear" when company comes by having a predetermined family member stand on it and refuse to move. Squares of corkboard stuck on the wall will often turn an "ordinary" room into

a room that smells like corkboard. If you're planning to paint a room, remember that "oil-based" paint is the kind that is supposed to come off with paint thinner, but does not; whereas "latex" is the kind that is supposed to come off with simple soap and water, but does not.

Chapter 8. Good Housekeeping, Or Learning To Live With Filth

Hardly a week goes by when you don't read a newspaper article like this:

LOS REDUNDOS, N.M.—Astronomers at the Institute for Wearing White Laboratory Coats here announced today that they have discovered a humongous dust cloud 237 skillion light-years from the earth. “This,” the scientists stated in unison, “could very well be the largest dust cloud we have discovered since the one we discovered last week, and we believe that it may provide us with valuable insights into the mystery of how we can obtain additional federal grants.”

What scientists are learning, through these dramatic breakthrough discoveries, is something that many of us have suspected for a long time, namely that the universe is made up almost entirely of dirt. More and more, scientists are suspecting that the Big Bang was in fact the explosion of a small but very densely packed vacuum cleaner bag.

So we must accept the fact that we live in a universe swarming with particles of filth that are ceaselessly trying to get into our homes and inflict themselves upon us, similar to insurance salespersons, but in some cases even more distasteful. Hard to believe? I thought so, too, until a short while back, when the people who publish the Allergy Relief Newsletter were thoughtful enough to send me, at their own expense, a piece of junk mail stating that my entire household was teeming with tiny dirt creatures named “dust mites,” which sound like harmless and friendly commercially licensed characters such as might have their own Saturday morning cartoon show sponsored by the sugar industry, until you look at the photograph showing a dust mite enlarged several thousand times, and it looks exactly like the kind of hostile giant mutant insect that was always destroying Tokyo in those movies that the Japanese used to make before they figured out how to do cars. According to the folks at the Allergy Relief Newsletter, these dust mites are swarming everywhere, including inside your nose, millions of them per nostril. And although they are, fortunately, a peaceful species, not generally known to attack humans except during mating season, we need to be aware of them, because they serve as a constant nasal reminder of our central point, which, as best we can remember, is: There is a lot of dirt around.

What this means is that you, as a homeowner, have to make a decision: Are you going to let the dirt overcome you, so that you live your life encrusted by a permanent layer of greasy yellowish filth, so that you are no better than slugs writhing in their own putrid slime? Or are you going to make the commitment, in time, in effort, to fighting back—to really trying to keep your new home neat and tidy?

I have tried it both ways, and trust me, the writhing slug approach is better. You don't think important people, such as members of the U.S. Supreme Court, waste time cleaning, do you? Of course not! Their homes are filthy. They are filthy. That's why they wear those robes: they have whole tribes of dust mites under there. Because they have learned, like so many other people, that if you really, seriously try to keep your house clean, you gradually turn into one of those TV commercial housewives who are always frowning with grave concern at their bathroom bowls and having conversations like this with their friends:

FIRST HOUSEWIFE: Whatever is the matter, Sue?

SECOND HOUSEWIFE: Oh, Betty, I am so very upset because Waxy Yellow Buildup has caused my kitchen floor to look like some kind of gigantic nasal discharge!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE: Lordy yes, it does.

SECOND HOUSEWIFE: And Bob is bringing home the archbishop tonight!! Whatever shall I do?

FIRST HOUSEWIFE: If it was me, I would take a major credit card and fly to the Caribbean island of Antigua and drink for days with strange men.

SECOND HOUSEWIFE: That is what I was thinking.

So we see that it can lead to bad things, this obsession some people have with housecleaning. What you want to do, in your household, is adopt the cleaning system my wife and I use, which is based on the old philosophical question: “If a tree falls in the forest, and nobody is there to hear it, does it make any sound?” (The answer, by the way, is yes; the tree goes: “Moo.”) Our theory is, if there is nobody besides ourselves around to see the dirt, then the dirt isn’t really there. So Rule Number One of successful housecleaning is:

> Never Let Anybody into Your House <

Not even your mother. Especially not your mother. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this rule. Even if you know some really nice people who have had you over to their house thirty-seven times for dinner, you must not weaken and invite them to your house. You must give them plausible excuses, such as: “We sincerely intend to have you folks over one of these days, but right now we’re all in a dither because our housekeeper has been killed by radon gas.”

Rule Number Two of successful housecleaning, of course, is:

> Never Have Children of Any Kind <

Each of us, as a human being, has an important choice to make: We can either experience the trials, the joys, the tragedies, and the triumphs of that most sacred of human institutions, parenthood; or we can have a house where we do not regularly find gerbil poop in our sofa. But we cannot have both of these things. Because small children have no concept whatsoever of cleanliness. A small child’s concept of housekeeping is to lick spilled pudding off the living room carpet. And it does not get better as they get older. For example, my son, now age seven, is in the phase where he likes to play with educational “construction” toys, designed by escaped Nazis, that consist of 363,000,000,000,000 tiny plastic pieces in a box. The way you play with these toys is, you strew the pieces all over the living room floor, and then you go outside to play. And when your mother yells: “Robert! Come in here and pick up your construction set!” you yell back: “I’m still using them!” And then late that night, you lie awake in bed, waiting for the moment when your father, heading for the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice, wanders out into the darkened living room and steps, barefooted, on the plastic pieces, which is the cue for him to perform the comically entertaining Midnight Dance of the Bozo Father, a rapid series of hopping, skating movements across the floor accompanied by whimpering, followed by very bad words. This is a good time for you to look like you are Sound Asleep.

Also your children will gradually cause your brain to become damaged in such a way that you deliberately engage in acts of antihousekeeping. For example, I once, at my son’s insistence, spent perfectly good U.S. dollars at Toys Backwards “R” Us for a can of something called “Slime,” which I naturally assumed was a toy but which in fact turned out to be exactly what its name suggests, namely, slime. Of course my son got it all over everything, and of course it wouldn’t come off. My point being that, here we are living in a house that already seems to have a lifetime inexhaustible supply of natural dirt, and yet for some bone-headed parental reason I felt the need to go out and purchase more dirt.

An even worse example was the time my wife went out and bought mice. Of course the pet store people did not tell her they were mice. They are much too smart for that. They told her she was buying “gerbils,” which, according to the instruction manual they also sold her, are a kind of “small desert animal found in Asia and Africa.” But what they clearly are, when you look at them, is mice. I bet the folks over in Asia and Africa are tickled pink that we’re willing to purchase their surplus vermin. They’re probably wondering what kind of handsome price they might be able to get over here

for their head lice.

I want to stress that my wife did not purchase merely the mice. No sir, because your mice also need food, and medical supplies, and of course exercise equipment, because God forbid that they should become out of shape! They might get sick! You probably do not appreciate the extreme irony dripping from my word processor here, because chances are you were not in bed with me the night my wife came racing in and announced that there was mouse poop among the cereal boxes, and consequently we had to make an urgent call to the Lethal Chemicals Man. We live in South Florida, and like everybody else down here, we pay a man to come around regularly and spray the interior of our house with massive quantities of chemicals of the type that, if they were accidentally sprayed on our house by a major corporation, we would sue it for \$350 million.

We do this to keep nature from coming inside. There is a tremendous amount of nature down here in South Florida, and despite our efforts to control it by covering it up as much as possible with condominiums, it is still a constant threat. I am not talking about the warm, furry kind of nature with big brown eyes that gets featured in animated motion pictures, scampering around collecting nuts for the winter and talking in high, squeaky voices. That is not what we have down here. Down here we have toads that can kill a person. I am serious. This is one of the first possibilities the police consider when they arrive at a murder scene.

FIRST POLICEMAN: This looks like the work of toads.

SECOND POLICEMAN: Why do you say that?

FIRST POLICEMAN: The victim's fly is missing!

SECOND POLICEMAN: Ha ha!

But it is no laughing matter, the nature problem down here. Even as I write these words, there is a spider right outside my house that could serve, all by itself, as our NATO forces. This spider has erected a web that covers most of our property and contains wrapped-up food bundles the size of missing neighborhood dogs.

So anyway, I find it highly ironic that we are paying the Lethal Chemicals Man to place deadly violent traps all around the Rice Krispies in hopes of sending one set of rodents to the Great Piece of Cheese in the Sky, while at the same time we are spending otherwise useful money on another set of rodents, so they can have toys and Ferris wheels and God knows what else. Technically we are doing this for Educational Purposes, because Robert is eager to learn the Secrets of the Animal Kingdom, but these rodents don't know any secrets of the animal kingdom. All they know how to do is gnaw cardboard toilet paper tubes, which my son saves for them—heaven forbid I should throw one out—into 650,000 tiny pieces, which they then push out of their cage onto the floor. They do this very industriously, pretending they are engaging in the kind of serious life-or-death tasks that animals engage in on TV nature specials, but in fact they do it solely because they know it really frosts my shorts.

“Look,” they say to each other, in Rodent. “He's cleaning it up again! Ha ha! This is a LOT more fun than Africa and Asia!”

They'll change that tune when we get the Educational Cat.

Which reminds us of another important housekeeping rule ...

> Never Have a Dog <

Let's not beat around the bush here: dogs are morons. Don't get me wrong: I like dogs. We have always had dogs, and they have faithfully performed many valuable services for us, such as:

1. Peeing on everything.

2. When we're driving in our car, alerting us that we have passed another dog by barking real loud in our ears for the next 114 miles.

3. Trying to kill the Avon lady.

But despite their instinctive skills in these areas, dogs generally rank, on the Animal Kingdom IQ Scale, somewhere down in the paramecium range, and they above all do not grasp the concept of housekeeping. Show me a household with a dog in it, and I will show you a household with numerous low-altitude wall stains where the dog, rounding a corner at several hundred miles per hour in an effort to get to the front door and welcome the master home by knocking the master down, whammed into the wall and left a brownish smear of whatever repulsive substance it was rolling in earlier that day.

Discipline will not prevent this kind of thing. You can sit a dog down and explain to it very carefully that you just purchased a new oriental rug, and you don't want the dog to go anywhere near it. You can point to the rug and go "NO!" a dozen times, and the dog will look at you with an extremely alert and intelligent expression, similar to the way Lassie always looked when she was piloting a helicopter somewhere to rescue her young cretin master Jeff, who had fallen into the quicksand again. Then your dog will go outside and sprint around in concentric circles until it has found a rancid, maggot-festooned sector of deceased raccoon. It will race back to your house with this prize as though the fate of the Free World depended on it, deposit it on your rug, and wander off to take a well-earned nap.

Useful Home-Cleaning Hints

If your child draws pictures of cows on your woodwork with a felt-tipped marker, you can scrub them with a mixture of one part baking soda, one part lemon juice, and one part ammonia, but they won't come off. The best way to clean a frying pan that has burned food cemented to the bottom is to let it soak in soapy water for several days and then, when nobody is looking, throw it in the garbage. If you ever find the person who invented "Slime," call me and I will come over and plug up all the orifices in his head with a mixture of one part Tabasco sauce and one part Play-Doh. Many smart homemakers such as Cher and Queen Elizabeth have found that the best way to "stay ahead" of those pesky household "chores" is to have a

"staff." Ever wonder how come the males in your household pee everywhere except into the actual toilet bowl? It's because they are jerks.

Chapter 9. Practical Home Weapons Systems

One of our major responsibilities, as homeowners, is to become needlessly alarmed about home security. And with good reason. All we have to do is look at the front page of our newspaper, and we will see frightening headlines such as the following:

BOY RAISED BY CHICKENS ET SPACE ALIEN CURED MY ACNE GIRL, 2, GIVES BIRTH WHILE SKYDIVING

Okay, perhaps we should be reading a better class of newspaper. But the point is, there are grave threats all around us, and we need to be ready.

I happen to be an expert in the area of home security, because I live in South Florida, home of Miami

Vice, where guns are extremely easy to obtain. Down here they give you a free revolver when you buy a Big Gulp at the 7-Eleven. So you have a lot of people walking around armed, the result being that a lot of homeowners feel that they, too, need to arm themselves in self-defense. Of course your bleeding—heart—liberal secular-humanist left-wing communists will tell you that it's a bad thing to own a gun, but as any knowledgeable gun nut will tell you, there are countless factual anecdotes concerning alert gun-toting homeowners who have thwarted the forces of evil.

For example, we recently had a case here where a homeowner woke up at 2:30 A.M. because he thought he had heard a noise in the family room. Grabbing his revolver, he slowly opened his bedroom door and crept stealthily into the darkened hallway, where he stepped barefooted onto a cockroach—down here we get cockroaches large enough to derail trains—causing him (the homeowner) to leap straight into the air and shoot his gun, the bullet from which went through the wall and into the garage, where it hit the circuit breaker box and cut off the electrical power to the house, thus shutting down the videocassette recorder in the family room, where the homeowner's eleven-year-old son had been watching Debbie Does Dallas. So don't try to tell me that guns have no place in the home. Don't try to tell it to the Founding Fathers of this nation, either. For one thing, they are dead. For another thing, they specifically considered the question of guns when they wrote the Constitution, and after much debate, they agreed on the following unequivocal wording regarding the right of the people to keep and bear arms:

ARTICLE XMZXMZBX: If guns were outlaws, then outlaws would be guns..lm-10

So you can play it any way you want it, but this is one homeowner whose motto is: "You can have my gun when you threaten to pry one of my fingers off the trigger."

Of course, if you do get a gun, you need to follow certain basic safety procedures, such as:

1. Don't keep it loaded.
2. Don't even have the proper caliber of bullet for it.
3. Keep it someplace safe, such as a safe-deposit box in Switzerland.

What other steps can you take to protect yourself? One approach that combines the advantage of costing a lot of money with the advantage of really ticking off your neighbors is ...

The Electronic Burglar Alarm System

Essentially, this is a complex system of modern, sophisticated, state-of-the-art, fully computerized components, costing no more than several semesters at Stanford University graduate school, yet giving you the sense of security and well-being that comes from knowing that everyone in your neighborhood will be instantly alerted by a horrible ear-splitting noise whenever lightning strikes anywhere within 137 miles of your home. Invariably this will happen at night when you're out of town, so that your neighbors will get to lie in bed, listening to the piercing sound, which is only fair because it makes up for all the nights when you had to listen to their burglar alarm systems.

I do not mean to suggest that burglar alarm systems go off only when lightning strikes. No, they also go off when the electric company has problems, or when homeowners forget to turn them off upon returning. Sometimes birds set them off. "Let's go set off some burglar alarms!" is a cry frequently heard among adolescent finches. Even air molecules, which are plentiful in the suburbs, can set off burglar alarm systems. In fact, the only thing that doesn't set them off, as far as we can tell, is

burglars. Nobody can explain this phenomenon, but police rely on it when they go on their patrols. They'll drive through a neighborhood at 4 A.M., listening to three or four home security systems electronically whooping and shrieking into the night, and they'll say to each other, using hand signals so they can be understood over the din:

“Everything's fine here!”

Of course these systems are not perfect. Even the most well-designed electronic device cannot be relied upon to go off without any reason one hundred percent of the time. Thus most security experts also recommend that you have a backup system consisting of ...

A Large, Stupid Dog

I realize that in the chapter on housecleaning I specifically said you should never have a dog, on the grounds that they are filthy, but my feeling, as a professional author, is that if I go through life worrying about what I may have said in previous chapters, I will never get anything done. So in this chapter, I am strongly in favor of dogs as security devices, but I stress that they must be large. You don't want one of those repulsive little yapping “lap”-style dogs that look like fur-covered insects, because the burglar will simply stuff it down the garbage disposal. This is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't do you any good, home-securitywise. What you want is a major hunk of canine muscle, the kind that is always on Full Red Alert, the kind that will race to the front door, barking violently, when it hears any sound, including its own parasites.

We are blessed with such a dog, Earnest, and she is a source of great comfort to us, for we know that as long as we have her, our home is totally protected from Zachary Liebman, age five. This is the little boy who lives next door and comes over to play with our son. Earnest absolutely hates him. When we moved in, Earnest received signals from whatever distant planet it is that dogs get their instructions from, and these signals told her that Zachary Liebman is the most dangerous creature in the galaxy, and there is nothing we can do to change her mind. Zachary has come over to our house almost daily for two years now, and still she follows him around, emitting a constant low growl to let him know that she is ready in case he suddenly pulls out a concealed machine gun. And so of course we have to follow her around, going “NO! Earnest, NO!!” although this has no effect, because in matters of home security, Earnest takes orders only from the Dog Planet. So we form a colorful and loud procession—Zachary, oblivious; Earnest, furious; and my wife or me, slowly going hoarse—parading around the house, sometimes for hours. You can't put a price on this kind of piece of mind.

One Final Word About Home Security

None of the security methods we have discussed here will foil the truly determined burglar, the veteran professional who has already broken into hundreds of homes just like yours and has been convicted seventeen times and is currently out of jail on his own recognizance. The best you can hope for, with any security method, is that you will make your home look slightly less attractive to the burglar, so that he'll pass you and burglarize somebody else's house. In fact, you might leave a little note on your door, letting the burglar know that your particular house is probably less attractive to him than several other homes in your neighborhood where you know for a fact that the owners are away on vacation. Sure, this

means extra work for you, but society has no chance against the Criminal Element if people like yourself aren't willing to "get involved."

Crimestopper Tips

If you go away for any length of time, be sure to leave a radio on in your house tuned to a station that plays "rap" music, so that if a burglar does get in, most of his brain cells will be killed instantly and he won't be able to remember how to get back out.

Also you should ask a neighbor to come around and collect your mail and your newspapers, put out your garbage, and while he's at it, maybe mow your lawn and paint your house and build a deck out back. Hey, it's worth a shot.

Chapter 10. A Lawn Is A Terrible Thing To Waste

Up to this point we have been concentrating on the inside of your house, because that's where you actually live, unless you are even dumber than we thought. But the outside of your house—the grounds and how they are landscaped—is also important, especially in terms of property values. To illustrate this point, let's consider two homeowners, whom we'll call "Smith" and "Jones."

(These are not their real names. Their real names are "Smith" and "Brown.") Let's say these two people bought identical homes in the same neighborhood on the same day for the same price, fifty thousand dollars.

"Smith," a very hard worker, takes excellent care of his yard. Every weekend he's out there mowing his lawn, pruning his shrubs, and crouching in the dirt working on his flower beds. Meanwhile

"Jones" is a lazy lout who never does anything to his property except occasionally empty his car ashtray on it on his way to the convenience store to buy more beer.

Now, let's say that at the end of five years, both properties are placed on the market. "Jones," who failed to maintain his yard, gets \$72,500 for his property. This price, when adjusted for inflation, works out to be a profit of just 7.2 percent for our lazy homeowner. But "Smith," the hard worker, would have received

\$86,300 for his property, if he had not been attacked by fire ants one afternoon while he was weeding the pachysandra patch and stung an estimated five-hundred-thousand times before his body was found by the water softener man, who later married "Smith's" widow, who was able to use the life insurance money to buy them a luxury condominium where the closest they ever come to yard work is sometimes they fling the ice from their gin and tonic off their balcony onto the golf course. So there should be no question in your mind about the value of properly maintaining your property.

The key area, of course, is the lawn. This is the centerpiece of the yard, and it has been for hundreds of years, ever since the invention of ...

The Very First Lawn

Like so many other good ideas, such as eating snails, the lawn was invented by a French person, Jean-Harold Discotheque, in 1732. He called his invention “Lawn” (French for “the lawn”). His prototype lawn was very primitive, consisting of only one humongous blade of grass about 30 feet in diameter and 120 feet high; so, as you can imagine, it was not ideal for such purposes as croquet, and it was hell to mow. But in the following years there were a number of spectacular technical breakthroughs—the two-blades-of-grass lawn; the six-blades-of-grass lawn; etc.—until finally we reached the modern lawn consisting of many millions of tiny blades, each one of them diseased. This is where we stand today.

The Future: Lawns In Space

Currently there are no lawns in space, although the U.S. Defense Department Office of Massive Stupid Wasteful Projects has a crash program to put one there before the Russians do. As you can imagine, this is an exceedingly difficult task, for space is a very hostile environment almost totally devoid of mulch.

Lawn Care In America

We Americans can make the proud boast that no other nation cares for its lawns as much as we do. Lawn care has made America what it is today.

As a patriotic noncommunist homeowner, you are responsible for maintaining the American tradition of lawn care and learning as much as you can about this important subject from books other than this one. You definitely won’t find anything useful here. I care for my lawn about as well as Godzilla cared for Tokyo. When I die, I will go to Lawn Hell, where homeowners like myself are forced to lie outside with no food or water and have dogs pee on them while their lawns relax inside on Barcaloungers, eating barbecue chips and watching football on TV.

Nevertheless, I have, over the years, learned a few basic facts about lawn care, the two major ones being:

If you fail to feed, fertilize, and water your lawn, it will die. If you feed, fertilize, and water your lawn, it will die.

Fortunately this is not a problem, because you can always get a new lawn, in the form of “sod.” The way sod works is, you pay a large sum of money, and sweaty men arrive at your house driving a filthy truck, on the back of which is stacked an actual living, breathing, feeling lawn, Some Assembly Required. God only knows where the sweaty men get this lawn. My theory is that they simply go and steal somebody else’s lawn, so that over the course of several decades, the same lawn could make its way, house by house, through an entire subdivision.

Proper Lawnmower Care

It’s important to take good care of your lawnmower, because as the old yard care saying goes: “A lawnmower that is running right is

a lawnmower that is capable of slicing through your foot like a machete through Wonder Bread.” This is why manufacturers recommend that you perform the following routine maintenance procedure on

your lawnmower every two weeks or ten-thousand miles, whichever comes first.

1. Lubricate the linkage connecting the abatement disk to the invective moderator, taking care not to masticate the tropism extractor.
2. Remove the parameter valve from the heliotrope converter and examine the reversion unit for signs of fatigue or drowsiness.
3. Let's not kid ourselves. You're not really going to follow this maintenance procedure, right? I bet you never engage in any of the Goody-Two-Shoes consumer activities that manufacturers are always recommending. Me either. Like, whenever I buy an electronic product, the first thing I do is remove the safety information sheet that says, "URGENT EMERGENCY ALERT: BEFORE YOU ATTEMPT TO USE THIS PRODUCT, PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE FOR GOD'S SAKE IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE READ THIS SAFETY INFORMATION SHEET," and I toss that baby right into the trash compactor. I would no more perform routine maintenance procedures on my lawnmower than I would clean my barbecue grill, or inspect my air conditioner filter, or save my original appliance cartons, or wipe my telephone answering machine with a damp cloth, or any of the other 1,536,862 idiotic things that various manufacturers, in an effort to turn me into a mindless consumer geek, have recommended that I do. Because this is America. This is the land of rugged, independent, self-reliant freedom fighters like Davy Crockett, who stood tall at the Alamo and fought on bravely even though he and his small band of men were badly outnumbered by thousands of manufacturers, coming over the walls in waves, armed to the teeth with Limited Warranties. And I am proud to say that the same spirit still exists today, that people like yourself and myself deal with lawnmower maintenance the way Americans have dealt with it since the Revolutionary War, namely: We leave our lawnmowers unattended in the garage all winter, and then we drag them out, brush off the spiders and yank fruitlessly on the cord until we are about two yanks shy of cardiac arrest; then we remove the spark plug and peer into the little hole, hoping that maybe the Spark Plug Fairy will appear in there and wave her tiny wand and make everything okay, but of course she doesn't, so we hurl the lawnmower into our car and drive down to the lawnmower repair place, where they tell us that it will be two to three months before they can even give us an estimate, because of the large backlog caused by other rugged and self-reliant homeowners like ourselves.

Shrubs

Shrubs are pathetic little mutant trees that you purchase to replace the nice big trees that were probably on your property before the developer came in and knocked them over with bulldozers. The way you plant a shrub is, you and your spouse lug it around your yard, setting it here and there and then standing back to see how it looks, until you settle on a spot directly over the largest buried boulder on your property, which is where you start digging. Shrub-lugging homeowners are so effective at locating buried objects that they are now routinely employed by archaeological expeditions. The archaeologist will get a couple from, say, Milwaukee, take them over to Egypt, hand them a juniper bush, and ask them where they think it should be planted. Then, using a helicopter, they'll follow them as they wander around the endless, undifferentiated desert for days, plopping their shrub here and there, looking at it, shaking their heads, and moving on. When, finally, they're satisfied that they've found the right spot, the archaeologist will swoop down, stick his shovel into the sand, and—CLUNK—there will be the sound

of metal striking an ancient tomb that has lain undisturbed for four-thousand years. It saves a lot of time.

Gardening

Americans have never been as fond of gardening as, for example, the British, who have, through centuries of puttering, managed to transform their little island into one of the world's fourth-rate powers. Of course you cannot hope to achieve this kind of result in your own yard, but you will definitely find that for every hour you spend tilling the soil in the early spring, you will be richly rewarded with many more hours of fertilizing the soil in the late spring and weeding the soil all summer.

There are many different types of gardens to choose from, such as the flower garden, which consists of flowers; the vegetable garden, which consists of vegetables; and the Japanese garden, which consists of Japanese. But I myself have found that the best type, in terms of ease of maintenance, is the "garden consisting of ugly plaster statuettes." Of course the type of ugly statuette you should choose depends on the climate in your particular area.

Chapter 11. Getting Some Fool To Buy Your House

No matter how perfect your new home seems when you first move in, you'll gradually discover various shortcomings about it that get on your nerves, and ultimately you'll come to hate it. This usually takes about two weeks. From that point on, you'll be thinking about Trading Up.

Trading Up is the basic maneuver in real estate, dating back several million years to the prehistoric Catalytic Era. In those days, a typical couple would have to start out living in a small cave, but each day they'd go out and hunt for pretty stones, which they'd put in a pile, called Equity, in the center of their cave. When the Equity was big enough, they'd move to a larger cave, where they'd repeat the process and move to a still larger one, and so on until they moved into their Dream Cave, which was occupied by a saber-toothed tiger, or carnivorous humongous (literally, "huge payments"), which ate them. This is essentially the system we use today.

Before you can buy a new house, of course, you need to sell the one you're in now.

The Best Way To Sell A House

The best way to sell a house is to walk down a city street and have a construction worker who is eating a sandwich fifty-five stories above you accidentally drop his lunch box so that it lands on your head in such a way that you are not seriously injured, but you do lapse into a coma, and you wake up four months later and the nurse says: "While you were in a coma, your house was sold." This is also the best way to move, have a baby, and attend the opera. But things are rarely this easy. Usually you have to put quite a bit of effort into selling your house, starting with asking yourself the question ...

Do You Need A Real Estate Broker?

I touched upon this subject back in an earlier chapter, but I am quite frankly too lazy to go back and read what I said. Probably

I said that there are pros and cons, because there almost always are, unless you're talking about hemorrhoidal tissue.

On the one hand, if you sell your home yourself, you avoid paying a large commission; but on the other hand, you have to deal with people calling you up and coming around to your house all hours of the day and night, pestering you and giving you no peace. I'm not talking about potential buyers. I'm talking about real estate brokers, trying to get your listing. The only way to get them to go away is to sign a contract with them. Then you'll never see them again.

Ha ha! Just kidding, of course. In the interest of fairness and decency and, above all, not receiving thousands of concerned letter bombs from the large and powerful real estate industry, let me state that, I am sure that virtually all brokers out there are honest and highly competent professionals of the type regularly shown on TV wearing geek-style blazers. And even if it turns out that they're not, I strongly advise you to use a broker, for the same reason that I'd advise you to pay somebody else to repair your automobile transmission, namely: No matter how incompetent or overpaid this person is, he or she can't possibly screw things up as badly as you would if you did it yourself.

Before you sign a listing contract, you should talk to several brokers, to find out what they think your house is worth. What you want to be on the alert for here is a practice called "high-balling," which is when an unscrupulous broker deliberately overestimates the value of your house, just to get the listing:

BROKER: Mr. and Mrs. Jones, based on thoroughly walking around your living room here, I would estimate that the market value of your house is a hillion gazillion dollars.

YOU (suspiciously): Wait a minute. Our name isn't Jones.

BROKER: Don't worry about that. This is just a pretend dialogue in a humor book.

Once you've selected a broker, you'll be asked to sign a standard contract, which will read as follows:

STANDARD REAL ESTATE LISTING AGREEMENT

1. The **BROKER** gets **FIVE PERCENT**.

2. Even if the **BROKER** doesn't do **SQUAT**.

3. Even if the **BROKER** is off somewhere like **MAUI**, drinking **EXOTIC TROPICAL DRINKS** with names like **KAMIKAZE KAHLUA** when a **WILLING BUYER**, acting totally on his **OWN**, appears on the **SELLER'S** doorstep carrying a **SUITCASE** full of **CASH MONEY**, the **BROKER** still gets **FIVE PERCENT**.

4. In return, the **SELLER** gets to bitch about the **BROKER** at social occasions.

5. "My damned **BROKER** couldn't sell mascara to **TAMMY FAYE BAKKER**," is the kind of snide comment the **SELLER** is allowed to make.

6. But the **BROKER** still gets **FIVE PERCENT**.

How Much Should You Ask For Your House?

This is a very difficult question, but top real estate experts from all over the world agree that you should ask \$127,500 and ultimately settle for \$119,250. Also you should throw in the outdoor gas barbecue system with the charcoal-roasted spiders permanently bonded to the grill.

Getting Your House Ready To Show

Once you're signed up with a broker and have decided on an asking price, you need to fix your house up so it looks as though clean and tasteful grownups live there, instead of yourselves. Take a hard look at your house and furnishings, and ask yourself how they'll appear to prospective buyers. Chances are that with a minimum of time and effort, you can make a number of dramatically superficial improvements. For example, suppose you have an ugly old sofa in the living room with a leg missing from one corner, which you've propped up with a copy of *The Sex Lusters*, by Harold Robbins. You'll make a far better impression with an acknowledged classic such as *Moby Dick*, by Jackie Collins. You can also make a big improvement in the appearance of dirty, crayon-marked walls by buying a can of flat white latex paint and using it to stand on while you install a lower-wattage light bulb. And of course it's always a smart idea to nail all your bathroom doors shut.

The overall effect you're trying to create with these "homey" little touches is that **YOUR HOUSE** is a warm, welcoming, and—**ABOVE ALL**—real kind of place, similar to the set of a 1962 situation comedy. You might want to create the impression that, at any moment, Ricky Ricardo might come bursting through the front door and get a great big welcome-home kiss from Mary Tyler Moore.

But the most important ingredient in the home-selling equation is you, the homeowner, because only you have a really intimate, detailed knowledge of the house; only you, who have lived there, know all the interesting little idiosyncrasies it has—all the special features and hidden "secrets" that make you want to **DUMP** it like a grocery bag full of armpit hair. Your job is to help your broker make sure that prospective buyers view these things in the proper light.

Unfortunately, brokers don't always appreciate receiving help from sellers. In fact, most brokers won't even want you hanging around when they show the house. They'll let you know this by dropping little hints such as: "Please don't hang around while I show the house," and: "If you hang around while I show the house, I will kill you." The broker is concerned that if you are always hovering in the background like some kind of desperate street person, the prospective buyers won't feel free to speak their minds.

There is some basis for the broker's concern. The last time we sold a house, whenever I was in the room, the prospective buyers would always describe everything as "interesting."

"Hmmm," they say, looking at one of my Home Improvement Projects. "How interesting!" Meaning: "I can't wait to tell the people in my office about this."

So on the one hand, you don't want to make the buyers feel uncomfortable, but on the other hand, you want to be available to explain features of the home that the broker might not be familiar with. The solution to this dilemma is to hide in closets when prospective buyers come around. By ducking from room to room just ahead of them, you'll be invisible, yet still available in case a question comes up that the broker can't answer.

PROSPECTIVE BUYERS: What is this greenish slime dripping from the ceiling everywhere and eating holes in the floor?

BROKER: Well, it's, umm, errr, it's, ah ...

VOICE FROM CLOSET: It's nothing to worry about!

PROSPECTIVE BUYERS (vastly relieved): Whew! Because for a moment there, we were concerned. One major problem you'll have to be on the alert for is when prospective buyers get really interested in

your house and start to bring around ...

Horrible Relatives

Virtually all prospective buyers have horrible relatives with names like Uncle Roger who believe themselves to be experts in the field of home construction on the basis of their vast experience as thirty-year subscribers to Popular Mechanics. The prospective buyers will bring Uncle Roger around, and unless he is stopped, he will go into a testosterone-induced nitpicking frenzy wherein he finds hundreds of thousands of things wrong with your house. This is why it's always a good idea, when you're darting from closet to closet, to carry a garrote:

REAL ESTATE BROKER: And this is the master bedroom.

UNCLE ROGER: Well, this here is no good. These windows are only double-glazed. You want triple-glazed, plus you don't want this kind of hinge. Plus you want more electrical outlets than this. Plus you want AAAAACCCCCCCCCCKKKKKK!

REAL ESTATE BROKER: What on earth was that?

PROSPECTIVE BUYERS: Somebody just jumped out of that closet over there and garroted Uncle Roger.

AUNT LOUISE: Good.

Sooner or later, if you continue to engage in savvy sales techniques such as these, a buyer will become interested enough to make an offer on your house. The important thing, during these negotiations, is to First remain calm. Do not become emotionally involved. Remember that even though you and the buyers are on

“opposite sides of the fence,” the odds are that they are just regular everyday human beings like yourself, the only difference being that they're trying to screw you out of all your worldly goods. So while on the one hand you want to be reasonable, in the sense of frowning thoughtfully at the buyers' opening offer, you also want to be firm, in the sense of hurling it disdainfully to the floor and inviting friends and neighbors to help you spit on it.

Price is not the key issue in these negotiations. As I noted in an earlier chapter, the price you will ultimately settle on is the same one everybody always settles on, namely about five percent less than what you originally asked. Both sides know this, deep in their souls, but nobody really wants to just come out and admit it, for fear of appearing to be a wimp. So what you'll do—everybody does this—is get into serious, heavy-duty negotiations over which side gets to keep various home accessories such as:

Ugly light fixtures Dingy draperies, and above all Minor grease-encrusted kitchen appliances that nobody really wants

These are the areas in which you want to be as petty as is humanly possible, in an effort to establish that you are a Tough Customer Who Will Not Be Taken Advantage Of. You want to stride in a forceful manner around your family room, cigar in hand, shouting instructions to your broker, such as:

“All right, they can have the Veg-O-Matic, but the sons of bitches are not gonna get the optional grape-peeling attachment!”

And:

“They want the ice cube trays?! Over MY DEAD BODY!!”

Using this aggressive approach, you should be able to retain possession of many of your prized home

accessories, which will fetch you a handsome \$1.85 when you hold your garage sale.

How You Will Feel After You Finally Sign The Agreement Of Sale

You'll experience a feeling of almost unbelievable elation, even better than the way you felt the time Geraldo Rivera opened Al Capone's vault on national TV and it was empty. This feeling will last for as long as seven tenths of a second, at which point you'll remember the clause in the sale agreement, put there by some writhing little insect of a lawyer, that states:

The SELLER agrees that if, at ANY TIME prior to the actual sale of the house, SOMETHING BAD happens, like for example let's say that on THE VERY MORNING OF THE SETTLEMENT, through NO FAULT OF THE SELLER, a TREE ROOT that for 127 years has been totally benign, suddenly, as if guided by DESTINY, decides to block the MAIN MUNICIPAL WASTEWATER LINE in front of the seller's house, causing a veritable VOLCANO OF RAW SEWAGE to erupt right in the SELLER'S GUEST BATHROOM and quickly flow "THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE HOUSE" while the SELLER is out at the SUPERMARKET picking up a bottle of WINDEX so as to put the last few finishing touches on the HOUSE so that it will be neat as a PIN for the NEW OWNERS, then HA HA the SELLER has to give the BUYER all his DEPOSIT MONEY back and the SELLER can kiss the whole deal GOOD-BYE.

So for the two months, or whatever, between the time you sign the contract and the time you actually close the deal, you'll experience a condition that famed psychologist Sigmund Freud identified as Agreement of Sale Paranoia. You'll be afraid to use the heating or air-conditioning systems; afraid to use the water faucets, turn on lights, or close doors firmly; afraid even to speak too loudly, for fear that you might set off some kind of sympathetic vibration that will cause the whole house to fall down. In short, you will become a crazy person. "YOU FOOL!" you'll shriek, leaping out from behind your hedge and tackling the UPS man just as he's about to ring your doorbell. "Are you trying to KILL US ALL?"

This is a natural reaction, but the truth is, you probably have nothing to worry about. The odds are that nothing bad will happen, and when you finally get to the Ritual Closing Ceremony, when you realize that the whole thing is going to work out after all, you'll experience a feeling of relief, a feeling that will grow stronger and stronger until, moments before the sale is legally finalized, you are knocked to the floor by the shock wave from the gas main exploding directly under your house.

But you're not going to let a little thing like the total destruction of your house, seconds before you were about to sell it, get you down. No, you are made of sterner Stuff than that: you are a Homeowner. You're not a particularly bright one, given the fact that You bought this book, but nevertheless you are going to pick up the pieces of your life, as soon as they come down out of the sky, and get on with your life. Because you know that you'll have plenty more homes to own before you finally shuffle off what we in the real estate profession call "this mortal coil" and go up to that Great Subdivision in the Sky. I'm willing to bet there will be nothing in your price range.

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About The Author

Dave Barry is a staff writer for the Miami Herald, where he writes about such topics as politics, world affairs, and giant mutant crickets attacking villages in Peru. His weekly humor column appears in more than 120 newspapers, and his writing has appeared in a number of national magazines. In 1986 he won the American Association of Newspaper Editors’ Distinguished Writing Award for commentary. In 1988 he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary, an event that confirmed the widely held view that western civilization is headed down the toilet.

Barry lives with his wife, Beth, and son, Robby, in Coral Gables, Florida, in a house that is slowly getting worse.

About The Illustrator

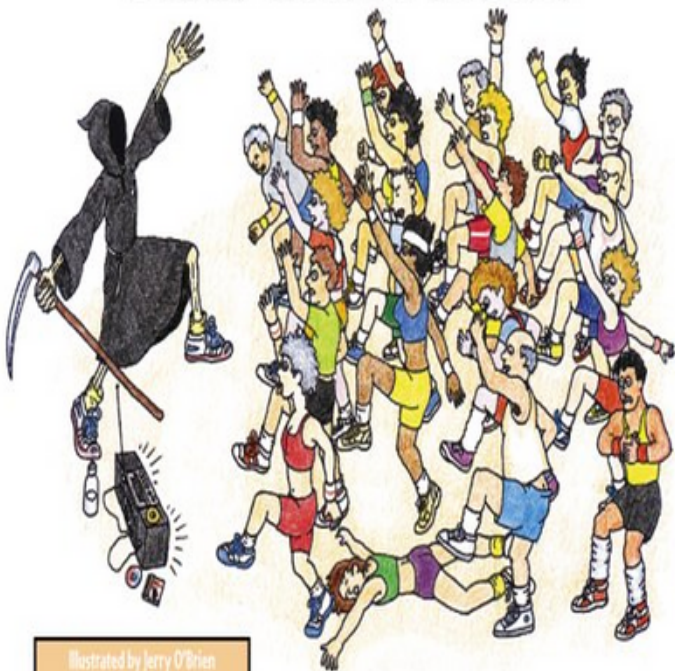
“Shoe and Skyler” creator Jeff MacNelly has won three Pulitzer Prizes for his political cartooning with The Richmond News Leader and The Chicago Tribune, and has twice won the National Cartoonists Society’s Reuben. He was never in the Marine Corps, but did work for Camp Monadnock in New Hampshire, where he learned that summer camp is a lot more fun if you’re a counselor. His cartoon strip “Shoe” is syndicated in over nine-hundred newspapers. Jeff, his wife Scottie, and his three sons live in

Virginia, where he enjoys painting, sculpting, and building stuff.

Dave Barry's



STAY FIT AND HEALTHY Until You're Dead



Illustrated by Jerry O'Brien

Stay Fit And Healthy Until You're Dead

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry.

Stay Fit And Healthy Until You're Dead

Foreword

Inspirational Opening Anecdote Explaining the Author's Lifelong Personal Commitment To Health and Fitness

Thirty-one years ago, when I was a mere boy of seven, my mother fell very, very sick. She called me to her side and, in a voice weakened by pain, said, "Bob, whatever happens to me, I want you to remember that ...

"David," I corrected. "My name is David."

"I know that, you little snot," she said. "I'm your mother."

I have always remembered those words, despite the fact that my mother recovered completely and is fine today.

Hi, Mom.

Introduction

Four Reasons Why You Must Get Fit Immediately

1. **YOU OWE IT TO YOUR COUNTRY.** You can bet that the enemies of your country are fit. People in Communist nations are on a strict fitness program of waiting in line a lot and darting their eyes about nervously. We, too, must be fit, in case these Communists invade us. We must be ready to fight them in the streets and the alleys. The problem is that many of you have eaten so many Enormous Economy Size bags of corn chips and so much bean dip that you probably couldn't fit into the alleys without the aid of powerful hydraulic devices. So you'd have to fight them in the streets, where you'd be easy prey for their blimp-seeking missiles.

2. **YOU OWE IT TO YOUR CAREER.** In the old days, your successful business executive was generally a spectacular tub of lard who had to be transported from business deal to business deal via private railroad car. But today's top executives are lean, sleek, and fit. They eat nutritionally balanced meals, run ten miles every day, play tennis and racquetball, and work out regularly on Nautilus machines. Consequently, they have no time whatsoever for their work. Many of them don't even know where their offices are. This is why the entire U.S. economy is now manufactured in Japan.

3. **YOU OWE IT TO YOUR SELF-ESTEEM.** There is no feeling in the world quite as wonderful as the feeling of being physically fit, except the feeling of eating pepperoni pizza. No! Wait! Disregard that last remark! What I'm trying to say is, when you become fit, everything about you changes. You have to buy new pants, for example. And you develop a whole new attitude about yourself. Instead of constantly thinking, "I am pasty and flabby and disgusting and nobody likes me," you think, "People like me now,

but only as long as I can keep from becoming pasty and flabby and disgusting again. I wish I had a pepperoni pizza.”

4. **YOU OWE IT TO YOUR FUTURE.** There's nothing like regular, vigorous exercise to prepare you for the pain you'll inevitably have to endure when you get older. Let's say you're in your mid-20s to mid-30s. Most of the time you feel pretty good, right? The only time you feel lousy is when you ingest huge quantities of alcohol and wake up the next day in an unfamiliar city naked with unexplained chest wounds. But as you grow older, you're going to start feeling more aches and pains caused by the inevitable afflictions of age, such as the Social Security Administration, condescending denture adhesive commercials, and your children.

People who exercise regularly are prepared for this pain. Take joggers: you see them plodding along, clearly hating every minute of it, and you think, “What's the point?” But years from now, when you're struggling to adjust to the pains of the aging process, the joggers, who have been in constant agony for 20 years, will be able to make the transition smoothly, unless they're already dead (see Chapter 12, under “Fitness and the Afterlife”).

How Insects Stay Fit

We can learn a great deal about fitness from observing insects. You have probably noticed, for example, that most ants are in excellent shape. You almost never see a fat ant. What makes this especially interesting is that ants are always lugging around disgusting junk food, such as discarded Cracker Jacks many times the ants' own size.

So how do ants stay so fit? The answer is surprisingly simple: they have no mouths. And this is a good thing, really, because it means they can't scream when you spray them with Raid, although they do their best to writhe around in a piteous manner.

So anyway, what we have, in the ant, is a creature that engages in strenuous physical exercise all day long and never eats any thing. This is Nature's Way to fitness, and we should emulate it if we wish to have the kind of taut, firm bodies that make ants the envy of the insect kingdom. Of course, we must always weigh this against the fact that they have a life span of maybe six weeks and are subject to attack by vicious beetles.

So the Bottom Line Is ...

... now is the time to start that fitness program! Fitness is more than just another new “craze,” like flavored popcorn or parenthood. Fitness is a philosophy of life, a revolutionary new concept in personhood, and, ultimately, a way for people like me to become wealthy via the sales of fitness-related items such as this book.

But people like me can do only so much. We can take your money. After that, it's up to you. If you don't follow the diet and exercise program outlined in this book, it won't do you a bit of good. Even if you do follow it, it may not do you any good. Nobody really knows what will happen. You'll be the first person who ever actually tried this particular program. I meant to try it myself, before the book got published, but I had to buy snow tires. So maybe it would be a good idea to have a friend try it first, as a sort of test, and watch to see whether he actually does become fit, or starts lapsing into lengthy comas or

something.

Well, that's enough of a pep talk. Let's square our shoulders and take that first step toward Becoming a Fitter You. Those of you who are unable to simultaneously square your shoulders and take a step may do them one at a time.

How Fit Are You?

The first step in your new fitness program is to take the three simple tests below so we can find out how fit you are right now. Be sure to write down the results as you go along, so the police will be able to figure out what happened.

1. BODY FAT TEST

You'll need:

A swimming pool

A dozen concrete blocks

Some stout rope

A knife

A primitive denizen of some remote fungal island in the South Pacific

Directions: Fat tends to make you float, so the idea here is to determine how many concrete blocks have to be lashed to your body to make you stay on the bottom of the pool for at least a minute without bobbing to the surface. Have your denizen perch by the side of the pool with the knife clenched in his teeth so he can dive down to cut you loose after the minute elapses.

(Caution: Some of your more primitive denizens have no understanding whatsoever of time, so their concept of a minute may in fact be closer to what we in Western Civilization think of as a fortnight. Also, whatever you do, don't give your denizen one of those Swiss army knives with all the various confusing attachments. You don't want him swimming down there and sawing at your rope with the spoon.)

How to score: Count the number of blocks required to keep you submerged. More than eight is very bad.

2. HEART TEST

You'll need:

A friend

A job at an office building with elevators

A scorpion

Directions: Give the scorpion to your friend, and instruct him or her to wait a couple of weeks, until you've completely forgotten about it, then sneak up behind you at work and hurl it into the elevator with you just as the doors close. What we're looking to determine here is whether your heart is strong enough to handle the rigors of an exercise program.

How to score: Give yourself a 5 if your heart continues to beat unassisted. If you score any lower than that, you probably shouldn't do this particular test.

3. AEROBICS TEST

You'll need:

A stopwatch

Gerald Ford

Directions: The word “aerobics” comes from two Greek words: aero, meaning “ability to,” and bics, meaning “withstand tremendous boredom.” This is the difference between a world-class marathon runner and a normal person: a world-class marathon runner has undergone sufficient aerobic conditioning that he can run for nearly three hours without falling asleep, whereas a normal person will quit after a few minutes and look for something interesting to do.

What you want to do in this test is start your stopwatch, then see how long you can listen to Gerald Ford discuss the federal deficit before you doze off. If Gerald Ford is unavailable, you can use televised golf.

How to score: 15 seconds is excellent. More than 30 seconds indicates some kind of brain damage.

Calculating Your Final “Fitness Quotient”

Divide your age by the number of blocks it took to hold you on the bottom of the pool, then add the number of seconds it took for Gerald Ford to sedate you multiplied by your scorpion score, unless you are claiming two or more exemptions. This will give you your “fitness quotient”; store it wherever you keep the instructions for operating your various digital watches.

Important Medical Note

Before you begin any fitness program, you should, of course, have your doctor give you a thorough physical examination in which he shoves cold steel implements into your various bodily orifices and sticks needles directly into your skin and makes you put on a flimsy garment apparently made from a cocktail napkin and parade through the waiting room carrying a transparent container filled with your own urine past several people you hope to someday ask for jobs. Or, if you'd prefer not to undergo this procedure, you may simply send your doctor some money.

Chapter 1. How Your Body Works

Your body is like a superbly engineered luxury automobile: if you use it wisely and maintain it properly, it will eventually break down, most likely in a bad neighborhood. To understand why this is, let's take a look inside this fascinating “machine” we call the human body.

Your body is actually made up of billions and billions of tiny cells, called “cells,” which are so small that you cannot see them. Neither can I. The only people who can see them are white-coated geeks called “biologists.” These are the people who wrote your high-school biology textbooks, in which they claimed to have found all these organs inside the Frog, the Worm, and the Perch. Remember? And remember how, in Biology Lab, you were supposed to take an actual dead frog apart and locate the heart, the liver, etc., as depicted in the elaborate color diagrams in the textbook?

Of course, when you cut it open, all you ever found was frog glop, because that is what frogs contain, as has been proven in countless experiments performed by small boys with sticks. So you did what biology students have always done: you pretended you were finding all these organs in there, and you

copied the diagram out of the book, knowing full well that in real life a frog would have no use whatsoever for a liver.

Anyway, biologists tell us that the human body consists of billions of these tiny cells, which combine to form organs such as the heart, the kidney, the eyeball, the funny bone, the clavichord, the pustule, and the hernia, which in turn combine to form the body, which in turn combines with other bodies to form the squadron. Now let's take a closer look at the various fitness-related organs and see if we can't think of things to say about them.

The Skin

Your skin performs several vital functions. For example, it keeps people from seeing the inside of your body, which is repulsive, and it prevents your organs from falling out onto the ground; where careless pedestrians might step on them. Also, without skin, your body would have no place to form large facial zits on the morning before your wedding.

But for fitness-oriented persons like yourself, the important thing about skin is that it acts as your Body's Cooling System. Whenever you exercise or get on an elevator, sweat oozes out of millions of tiny skin holes so it can evaporate and cool the area. Unfortunately, virtually all of these holes are located in your armpits, which is stupid. I mean, you hardly ever hear people complaining about having hot armpits. So what we seem to have here is one of those cases where Mother Nature really screwed up, like when she developed the concept of nasal hair.

The Muscle System

Your muscles are what enable you to perform all of your basic movements, such as bowling, sniping, pandering, carping, and contacting your attorney. Basically, there are two kinds of muscle tissue: the kind that people in advertisements for fitness centers have, which forms units that look like sleek and powerful pythons writhing just beneath the surface of the skin, and the kind you have, which looks more like deceased baby rabbits.

The beauty of muscle tissue, however, is that it responds to exercise. In a later chapter, we'll talk about how, using modern exercise equipment, such as the Nautilus machine, in a scientific workout program, you can stretch those pudgy little muscle tissues of yours to the point where you won't even be able to scream for help without the aid of powerful painkilling drugs.

The Skeletal System

How many bones do you think your skeletal system has? Would you say 50? 150? 250? 300? More than 300?

If you guessed 50, you're a real jerk. I would say it's around 250, but I don't really see why it's all that important. The only important part of your skeleton, for fitness purposes, is your knees.

Knees are God's way of telling mankind that He doesn't want us to do anything really strenuous. When we do, our knees punish us by becoming injured, as you know if you've ever watched

professional football on television:

ANNOUNCER: The handoff goes to Burger; he's tackled at the six. ... Uh oh! He's hurt!

COLOR COMMENTATOR: Looks like a knee injury, Bob, from the way that bone there is sticking out of his knee.

ANNOUNCER: Burger's teammates are bending over him. ... Uh oh! Now they're down on the field!

COLOR COMMENTATOR: Looks like they've all injured their knees, too, Bob.

ANNOUNCER: Here comes the team physician, who is. ... Uh oh! Now he's down on the ...

So one of the things we're going to stress in our fitness program is knee safety. We're going to get you so aware of this important topic that you won't even discuss racquetball over the telephone without first putting on knee braces the size of industrial turbines.

The Digestive System

Your digestive system is your body's Fun House, whereby food goes on a long, dark, scary ride, taking all kinds of unexpected twists and turns, being attacked by vicious secretions along the way, and not knowing until the last minute whether it will be turned into a useful body part or ejected into the Dark Hole by Mister Sphincter. You must be careful about what you eat, unless you want your body making heart valves out of things like bean dip.

The Central Nervous System

The central nervous system is your body's Messenger, always letting your brain know what's going on elsewhere in your body. "Your nose itches!" it tells your brain. Or, "Your foot is falling asleep!!" Or, "You're hungry!!!" All day long, your brain hears messages like these, thousands of them, hour after hour, until finally it deliberately rests your hand on a red-hot stove just for the pleasure of hearing your nervous system scream in pain.

Your Respiratory System

Your respiratory system takes in oxygen and gives off carbon monoxide, a deadly gas, by a process called "photosynthesis." This takes place in your lungs, yam-shaped organs in your chest containing millions of tiny little air sacs, called "Bernice." In a normal person, these sacs are healthy and pink, whereas in smokers they have the wretched, soot-stained, anguished look of the people fleeing Atlanta in Gone with the Wind. This has led many noted medical researchers to conclude that smoking is unhealthy, but we must weigh this against the fact that most of the people in cigarette advertisements are generally horse-riding, helicopter-flying hunks of major-league manhood, whereas your noted medical researchers tend to be pasty little wimps of the variety that you routinely held upside down over the toilet in junior high school.

The Circulatory System

This is, of course, your heart, a fist-sized muscle in your chest with a two-inch-thick layer of greasy fat clinging to it consisting of every Milky Way you ever ate. Your heart's job is to pump your blood, which appears to be nothing more than a red liquid but which, according to biologists (this should come as no surprise), is actually teeming with millions of organisms, some of them with tentacles so they can teem more efficiently.

The only organisms that actually belong in your blood are the red cells and the white cells. The red cells are your body's Room Service, carrying tiny particles of food and oxygen to the other organs, which snork them up without so much as a "thank you." The only reward the red cells get is iron in the form of prunes, which the other cells don't want anyway. If you don't eat enough prunes, your red cells get tired—a condition doctors call "tired blood"—and you have to lie down and watch "All My Children."

The white cells are your body's House Detectives. Most of the time they lounge around the bloodstream, telling jokes and forming the occasional cyst. But they swing into action the instant your body is invaded by one of the many enemy organisms that can get into your bloodstream, these being bacteria, viruses, rotifers, conifers, parameciums, cholesterol, tiny little lockjaw germs that dwell on the ends of all sharp objects, antacids, riboflavin, and the plague. As soon as the white cells spot one of these, they drop whatever they're doing and pursue it on a wild and often hilarious chase through your various organs, which sometimes results in damage to innocent tissue. Eventually they catch the invader and tie its tentacles behind its back with antibodies, which are the body's Handcuffs, and deport it via the bowel.

Of course this is just a brief rundown on your various organs and systems; in the short space I have here, it's very difficult for me to explain all of your body's complexities and subtleties in any detail, or even get any facts right. For more information, I suggest you attend Harvard Medical School, which I believe is in Wisconsin.

Meanwhile, let's turn the page and really get started on our fitness program! Or at least limber up.

Chapter 2. Getting Ready To Get Started

One of the most exciting aspects of getting into fitness is that you get to wear modern fitness-oriented clothing, clothing that makes a statement to the world around you. "Look," it states, "I have purchased some fitness-oriented clothing."

Up until about 15 years ago, the only fitness clothing available for men was the plain grey sweat suit, which we fitness experts now recognize as totally inadequate in terms of retail markup. Fitness wear for females consisted of those high-school gym outfits colored Digestive Enzyme Green; there was no fitness clothing available at all for adult women, because the only forms of exercise deemed appropriate for them were labor and driving station wagons.

As the fitness craze developed, however, all kinds of "active sportswear" became available from famous designers who think nothing of putting their names on your clothing, but who would have the servants set the dogs on you if you ever tried to put your name on their clothing. Today it's not uncommon for people to wear their active sportswear to the shopping mall, to work, to the opera, to state funerals, etc. Recently, an attorney argued a major case before the U.S. Supreme Court while wearing a puce jogging outfit! The justices didn't seem to mind at all, although this could also have been partly

because they had fallen asleep.

The point is, you want to choose your fitness-program clothing carefully because chances are you'll be wearing it to do much more than just exercise. In fact, you'll probably be wearing it to do everything but exercise, since there is growing medical evidence that exercise can make you tired and sweaty, as we'll see in later chapters.

The Basic Fitness Fashion Look for Women

This is, of course, the leotard and tights, which is the preferred outfit because it shows every bodily flaw a woman has, no matter how minute, so that a woman who, disguised in her street clothes, looks like Victoria Principal will, when she puts on her leotard, transform herself into Bertha the Amazing Land Whale. This encourages her to exercise vigorously and watch what she eats. She cannot, of course, drink anything, as there is no way to go to the bathroom in a leotard and tights.

Many a woman who suffers an exercise-related injury during an aerobic workout is forced to lie in great pain for hours on her exercise mat, trapped, while frustrated rescue personnel wait for the helicopter to bring the various specialized torches, saws, and other equipment they need to free her from her tights and leotard so they can render medical treatment.

Extremely Important Advice Concerning Danskin Brand Thermal Calf Protection Devices

Several years ago, a crack team of medical fashion experts determined that cold air tends to form pockets around the calves of fashionable, fitness-oriented women. This breakthrough discovery explained the sudden upsurge in calf-related hospitalizations that occurred at the onset of the fitness craze and soon reached epidemic proportions. As one nationally renowned physician, whose name is available upon request, put it, "Never in my 600 years of practicing medicine had I seen so many deaths directly attributable to calf coldness. If only we had known then the importance of wearing Danskin brand thermal calf protection devices!"

So the bottom line is: Do not view these devices as just another semiretarded fashion trend. View them as essential medical protection, every bit as important as lip gloss.

Fitness Fashion for Men

What you want, men, is a fashion look that gives you freedom of movement but at the same time displays, in large letters, the names of at least three major manufacturers of sporting equipment. Also you want to wear a headband and wristbands to absorb the tremendous outpouring of sweat that we males emit when we are engaged in strenuous masculine physical activity. (If you are one of those unfortunate males who does not emit tremendous outpourings of sweat, you should purchase, from the Nike Corporation, a container of "Pro-spiration" spray-on sweat droplets, which you apply discreetly in the locker room before you begin your workout.)

Ideally, of course, you will also sport some evidence of a semicrippling football injury. The best kind is a medical knee contraption of such enormous size and complexity that your racquetball opponent will feel like absolute pond scum if he hits the ball anywhere other than directly to you. Or you might want to look into a new product from the Adidas Corporation called "The All-Scars," which are large, realistic, and extremely repulsive synthetic removable knee scars patterned after those belonging to famous

battered sports legends such as Joe Namath.

Fitness with Computers

Can you use a personal home computer in your fitness program? You bet! Computers are incredibly versatile machines that can do everything from screw up your airplane reservation to cause an income tax blunder that gets you sentenced to a life term in a slimy walled federal prison so utterly desolate that the inmates pay rodents for sex! So they're a "natural" for the fitness movement!

One obvious way to use a computer, of course, is to record your daily fitness statistics such as weight, height, age, etc., on it, using a felt-tipped marker. But the best way to really unleash the power of a computer is to lift it up and set it down repeatedly, thus building muscle mass and definition. As you become stronger, you can gradually add weight, in the form of "disk drives," until eventually you move up to a heavier computer—and perhaps someday even reach the point where you can hoist what computer bodybuilding enthusiasts call a "mainframe" computer!

For the average person who does not have a background in data processing, I generally recommend starting out with a 35-pound computer. Unfortunately, computer weights are measured not in pounds, but in "K's" (as in 512K), which stands for "kilograms." There is a way to convert kilograms to pounds, but it is almost always fatal, so I recommend, as a wise consumer tip, that you go through your entire planned computer-lifting routine right at the store with several reputable computers, checking each for heft, balance, and tendency to break into 600,000 tiny pieces when you lift it over your head and drop it, before you actually purchase anything.

Of course, some of you, and here I am talking about the technically oriented ones, the ones with a thin layer of mechanical pencil dust on your clothing—in a word, the geeks—may even want to plug your computer directly into the wall, thus allowing electricity to flow through it. In this case, you'll also need to purchase a "program," or "software," which comes on a "floppy disk," an object the size of a 45 RPM record such as "Shake, Rattle and Roll," which we used to dance to at "record hops" back when Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower was president.

Fortunately for you and the entire fitness movement in general, I have developed a special piece of fitness-oriented software called the "Dave Barry Total Diskette Workout Program." The way it works is, you put it in the computer, which asks you to type in your name. Then you type in your name, and the computer forgets it immediately because the truth is that the computer really doesn't give a damn what your name is. It was just trying to be polite.

Next, the computer holds an Interactive Fitness Dialogue with you, wherein it elicits certain facts from you regarding your specific fitness situation, then it evaluates the facts and reports its findings, as follows:

COMPUTER: ENTER THE LAST TIME YOU ENGAGED IN A WORKOUT.

YOU: (Enter the last time you engaged in a workout, such as "just before Thanksgiving" or "World War II.")

COMPUTER (thinks for a minute, and proceeds): SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU'VE DONE ALL THE WORKING OUT YOU NEED TO DO FOR THE FORSEEABLE FUTURE. ALL WORKING OUT MAKES JACK A DULL BOY! HA HA! PLEASE ENTER A LIST OF THE FOODS YOU WOULD LIKE TO EAT TODAY.

YOU: (Enter a list consisting of no more than 100 foods which you would like to eat on that particular day.)

COMPUTER: I DON'T SEE ANY PROBLEM WITH THE FOODS YOU HAVE LISTED. HAVE A NICE DAY.

That's all there is to it! In less than five minutes, you have accomplished, using a computer, a data-processing feat that would take 60,000 trained mathematicians 1.3 billion years to accomplish, and even longer if you let them go to the bathroom! And you will be pleased to learn that this program will also do your income taxes ("YES! YOU CAN DEDUCT THAT! I'M SURE OF IT!").

Choosing the Right Place to Get Fit

Basically you have two options: your living room, or a fitness club. The advantage of getting fit in your living room is that it's free and you can scratch yourself openly. The disadvantage is that your living room is where you keep your little dish of M&Ms for guests, which means you'll actually gain roughly a pound of ugly fat for each week of your home fitness program.

So you should probably join a fitness club such as you see advertised in the newspapers by photographs of attractive models wearing leotards fashioned from a maximum of eight leotard molecules. Before you join such a club, you should take a tour conducted by one of the fit and muscular staff persons. This person will show you the various rooms and pieces of equipment, then hold your head under the whirlpool until you agree to buy a membership.

Here's a useful checklist of the features a good fitness club should have:

A powerful odor of disinfectant
Various species of hairs in the sinks
Signs all over the place reminding you that the management is not responsible
A loudspeaker system playing soothing musical numbers as performed by the Dentist's Office Singers
A door that says "WEIGHT ROOM" that you never venture through because large sweating men go in there and emit noises like oxen with severe intestinal disorders
Two women in the sauna who are always there, no matter what hour of the day or night, talking loudly about growths in their pelvic regions

Saunas

The word "sauna" is Finnish for "very hot little room with strangers in it breathing funny," and people who've tried it agree that it's a very invigorating experience, provided you get out in time. If the door sticks or anything, you have about as much chance of survival as the unfortunate corals who happened to be residing on that reef where we detonated the original hydrogen bomb, because the usual temperature inside a sauna is 180 degrees, which you may recognize as the recommended final temperature for cooked turkeys, very few of which live to tell about it.

This high temperature is, of course, very good for you because your body contains traces of toxic minerals such as lead, which get in there when you get drunk and eat paint, and the heat helps you sweat them out. Really, I'm not making this up. Here's a direct quote from Shape magazine, an authoritative journal:

"Sweating is now a significant route for eliminating trace elements from the body."

So that's the good news. The bad news, of course, is that these trace elements have to go somewhere,

presumably onto the sauna seat, which means if you use a spa sauna, you're lounging around on a lot of other people's trace elements.

So what I recommend is that you build your own sauna at home, which is a lot easier than you might think. All you need is a few simple hand tools. (No! I'm not going to tell you which ones! I'm sick of making all the decisions!)

Using your hand tools, construct a handcrafted little wooden room that has a bench inside it and a sign on the door that says "WARNING! REMOVE ALL CLOTHING AND JEWELRY AND DENTAL FILLINGS AND PACEMAKERS!" Now all you need is a way to raise the internal temperature to 180 degrees. You could always set fire to the sauna, of course, but then you'd have to handcraft a new one every time you wanted to use it, which would leave you with very little time in which to eliminate your elements. So I suggest that you take the more practical route, which is to plug in 40 toasters set to "medium brown." They'll give you all the heat you need, plus you'll get a healthy aerobic workout clambering around in there trying to keep all the little levers pushed down. Keep the number of the Burn Unit handy.

Okay! Now you've bought your fitness outfits, you've found a place to do your workout, and you've built your own sauna. The only remaining question is ...

When to Actually Start Your Fitness Program

Not today, certainly. You've done enough today! I would rule tomorrow out, also, seeing as how it comes so soon after today. You rush into these things, and the next thing you know, you've strained a ligament or something. So I would say the best time to begin would be first thing after Easter, although not the one coming up.

Chapter 3. Women's Total Complete Aerobic Fitness Workout

Warming Up

To understand the importance of warming up, let's take a look inside a typical human muscle. As we can see, it's very dark inside a typical human muscle. This means that most of the time the individual muscle cells are fast asleep. The purpose of your warm-up routine is to allow these cells to wake up gradually—to stretch, to scratch, to go to the bathroom, etc. If you just start jerking them around, they're going to be very cranky, and they may develop a condition that professional medical doctors call a "Charley horse," which is usually fatal.

WARM-UP NUMBER ONE:

CLEARING YOUR MIND OF WORRISOME THOUGHTS

You can't loosen up effectively if you're worried about nuclear war, or the likelihood that somebody might steal your wallet while you're doing your exercise routine. So your initial warm-up step should be to lie down on your back with your knees bent and your feet planted 17 inches apart, then, with your left

hand overlapping your right, clasp your wallet to your chest, raise your head to an angle of about 36 degrees Fahrenheit, and watch "Happy Days" or a similar television situation comedy rerun where they never talk about the likelihood of nuclear war. Hold this position until about a minute and a half before your neck develops a "crick," which is usually fatal.

WARM-UP NUMBER TWO:

LETTING YOUR MUSCLES KNOW

YOU'RE ABOUT TO START MOVING

Lie facedown on your wallet with your legs together and your arms away from your body at an angle of about 7 degrees, then have a friend or hired servant place his or her face about an inch from your various major muscle groupings and say, in a pleasant, musical voice, "Everybody up! Time to start warming up for a Fitness Workout!" Then have your friend listen closely to your muscle groupings for the sound of good-natured cellular grumbling. If necessary, he or she should prod them very gently with the eraser of a number 2 pencil, such as you used on your college boards.

WARM-UP NUMBER THREE:

PUTTING A TAPE OF LOUD ROCK 'N' ROLL-TYPE

WORK-OUT MUSIC ON A GHETTO BLASTER-TYPE

STEREOPHONIC LISTENING DEVICE

One thing you have probably wondered about for many years is why musicians who sing rock 'n' roll tend to be extremely thin, if not actually dead, whereas those who sing, say, opera, tend to be humongous wads of cellulite. The reason for this phenomenon, scientists now believe, is that fat cells are actually destroyed by stupid lyrics. In one recent experiment, scientists at the University of Iowa reduced a live 450-pound hog to an object the size of a harmonica in less than six hours by repeatedly playing the chorus to "Shake Your Groove Thing" at it. Other songs with proven fat-reduction lyrics that you'll want to have on your workout tape are:

"My Baby Does the Hanky Panky"

"Yummy Yummy Yummy I've Got Love in My Tummy"

The verse of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" that refers to "figgy pudding"

Everything Barry Manilow ever wrote

"Ballad of the Green Berets"

"Da Doo Ron Ron"

"My Way"

To put your tape on your ghetto blaster, lie on your back with your legs about 14 inches apart and your wallet clamped in your left armpit, raise your right arm gradually until you can insert the workout tape into the ghetto blaster device, press the "play" button, then gradually return your arm to the floor and just lie there for a while, spent.

The Actual Workout

All warmed up? Great! Let's start getting fit! Do each of the exercises below twice on the first day, 4 times the second day, 8 times the third day, and so on, each day doubling the previous day's number until, after just two weeks, you're doing each exercise over 1,000 times! And hemorrhaging internally!

So let's get started!

EXERCISE NUMBER ONE:

LEG HEFT

Lie on your back, legs slightly spread, arms resting on the floor, palms down. Have an accomplice grasp you by your ankles and lift your legs about 18 inches then attempt to guess their combined weight.

EXERCISE NUMBER TWO:

THIGH GRASP

Lie on your stomach with your face resting on a New York Times "Fall Fashion Supplement" opened to a photograph of a model who consumes fewer calories in an entire year than you do at a single wedding reception. Slowly reach your hands down and grasp yourself by the left thigh, then the right, and then close your eyes and moan quietly in despair for a count of about eight seconds.

EXERCISE NUMBER THREE:

SINCERE ANNOUNCEMENT OF INTENTION

TO CHANGE DIETARY HABITS

You and a partner stand facing each other about three feet apart, legs comfortably spread, knees slightly bent, eating from individual one-pound bags of Wise brand potato chips. You say, "First thing tomorrow I swear to God I am definitely going to go on a diet, I really mean it." Your partner responds, "Yes, me too. I definitely will go on a diet also. I believe there is a vat of Lipton brand California-style onion dip in the refrigerator." Then you exchange places and repeat the exercise.

EXERCISE NUMBER FOUR:

BREAST DEVELOPMENT

Originally, I was going to use this space to describe an amazing new Scientific Discovery exercise that enables any woman to develop, within minutes, two large, firm breasts such as are regularly featured on television star Loni Anderson. But then I said to myself, "Hey, isn't it time that we, as a liberated society, got over this juvenile and demeaning fixation with breasts?" So I have decided to omit this particular amazing, risk-free, 100

percent effective exercise, although of course if you wish to obtain a copy for the purpose of scientific research, I'd be happy to send it to you just for the asking, plus \$29.95 for postage and handling. If you act right now, I'll also send several grainy before-and-after photographs of women who used to look like Olive Oyl but now, thanks to this Amazing Breast Exercise Discovery, cannot walk erect unless preceded by native bearers.

Cooling Down

As we discussed in Chapter 1, when you exercise, your muscle cells take in molecules of oxygen and give off molecules of sweat, which work their way to your armpits. For your cooling-down phase, lie on your back with your arms laced behind your head and your elbows on the floor, thus exposing a maximum of armpit area and allowing the sweat molecules to escape into the atmosphere as harmless BO vapors. This would be an excellent time to start worrying about nuclear war again.

Chapter 4. Running

An Important Safety Note about Running

In this chapter, I can give you only a cursory overview of running, which is without question the most difficult and complex form of exercise, as is evidenced by the fact that it is the subject of numerous lengthy books costing upward of \$14.95. Unfortunately, many members of the general public still labor under the dangerous misconception that running is simply a matter of getting out and running. So before you attempt to do any actual running, I strongly urge you to read a minimum of several books on the subject and to take lessons from a trained running instructor. I also cannot overemphasize the importance of spending large sums of money.

What Kind of Person Should Take Up Running, and What Will Happen to This Person's Knees

Running is the ideal form of exercise for people who sincerely wish to become middle-class urban professionals. Whereas the lower classes don't run except when their kerosene heaters explode, today's upwardly mobile urban professionals feel that running keeps them in the peak form they must be in if they are to handle the responsibilities of their chosen urban professions, which include reading things, signing things, talking on the telephone, and in cases of extreme upward mobility, going to lunch.

That's why at the end of the working day, when the lower classes have passed out facedown in the Cheez Whiz, you can drive down the streets of any middle-class neighborhood in America and see dozens of professionals out running with determined facial grimaces, burning off calories, improving the efficiency of their cardiovascular systems, increasing their muscle flexibility, and ultimately staggering off into the bushes to die. Even as you read these words, thousands of designer-sportswear-clad bodies are rotting in the bushes of suburban America, and the only reason you don't hear more about it is that the next of kin generally don't report the disappearances, because they are quite frankly pleased that they no longer have to listen to the runner blather on and on about his or her cardiovascular development.

Of course, not all runners die in the bushes. Many fail to make it that far, because of knee injuries. To understand why, let's look at the interior of the human knee.

What we can learn from this is that, although from the outside your knee feels like a croquet ball inserted in the middle of your leg, it is in fact a complex organ consisting of bone, muscle, thong, and mucilage, bounded on the west by Spain. The knee provides adequate support for everyday activities, such as renewing magazine subscriptions or gesturing at cretins in traffic, but it is not designed to withstand the strain placed on it by running, where each time the runner's foot hits the pavement, the knee is subjected to 650,000 kilocycles of torque, and even more if the runner has been dropped from a helicopter. This is why it is so very important to choose the right running shoe.

Choosing the Right Running Shoe

Time was, of course, when there were no running shoes, only "sneakers," which were bulky objects that cost \$12 and said "U.S. Keds" on the side and had essentially the same size, weight, and styling characteristics as snow tires. But today's topflight running shoe is a triumph of sophisticated, computer-

designed, laser-augmented, fully integrated, infrared, user-friendly technology and space-age materials, packed with dozens of medically proven health and safety features, and all combined into a small and lightweight unit that, surprisingly, costs no more than a black-market infant.

Choosing the Left Running Shoe

Most running experts and bankers recommend that you wait until you've completely paid for the right running shoe, including insurance, before you plunge in and buy the left. When you do, I urge you to shop around for a shoe that is as similar as possible to the other one, except in so far as which foot it goes on. This is assuming that you intend to wear both shoes simultaneously.

What to Wear on the Rest of Your Body

You should, of course, wear a specially designed \$200 Running Garment made from a synthetic material that has a name like the leader of a hostile reptilian alien invasion force in a space movie, such as "Gore-Tex." The beauty of these materials is that they actually "breathe." Really. At night, if you listen very carefully to your closet, you'll hear your garment in there, breathing and occasionally chuckling softly at some synthetic joke it heard from your dress slacks.

Where to Run

One good place to run is in the Olympic marathon, because (a) you have to do it only once every four years, and (b) you have an armed motorcycle escort, so if people try to thrust liquids and fruits at you, which is a common problem in marathons, you can order your escort to fire a few warning rounds into their chests. The big drawback with running in the marathon, however, is that you have to consort with a bunch of sunken-eyed running wimps, some of whom are not even United States citizens.

This is why many people prefer to run, unescorted, on the streets of their own neighborhoods. The big problem here is dogs, which will view you as an intruder and may attack you, especially if they can smell fear on your body. This is why the wise runner carries a small spray can of a chemical originally designed for use by mail carriers. If a dog attacks, you simply spray this chemical into your nose, and within seconds you don't feel any fear of any damn dog. Be careful that you don't stare directly into the sun.

Chapter 5. Popular Sports

Mankind's need to compete in sports goes back to that fateful prehistoric day, hundreds of thousands of years ago, when a primitive man first picked up a club and a primitive ball fashioned from animal hide, tossed the ball aloft, then whomped the club into the sloping forehead of a primitive umpire. Since then, there has never been a civilization that did not engage in sports. Archeologists digging in what was once ancient Sumeria recently found the remains of a primitive stone jockstrap. This goes a long way

toward explaining why you see so few Sumerians around.

In ancient Greece, the Olympic games were considered so important that when it was time to hold them, the Greeks would lay down their arms and invite their enemies to do the same. Then the Greeks would snatch up their arms again, whack their enemies into pieces the size of candy corn, and celebrate by having the Olympic games.

Back then, of course, the only events were running naked, jumping naked, throwing things naked, and ice dancing. Today, we have hundreds of sports to choose from. In this chapter we're going to look at some of the more popular modern sports, so you can choose the ones you wish to incorporate into your overall fitness program. As I have stressed repeatedly throughout this book, before you embark upon any new form of physical activity, you should notify your doctor's answering service.

Ski Jumping

Ski jumping as a form of exercise has grown immensely in popularity in recent years, especially among people who, because of knee problems, cannot jog. This exciting sport got its start as a symptom of mental illness in northern climes such as Norway and Sweden, where it is cold and dark and there is very little to do except pay taxes. Life is depressing in these countries. Watch any movie by the famous Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, and you'll notice that all that ever happens in the entire two hours is depressed people sit around talking Swedish, which sounds like Fats Domino records being played backward, only a little too slow. This is what life in Sweden is actually like, except that it often lasts longer than two hours. After a while, the strain gets to people, and they suddenly leap up, barge out, don skis, and launch themselves off giant chutes.

Americans did very little ski jumping until the television program "Wide World of Sports" began showing a promotional film snippet in which a ski jumper hurtles off the edge of the chute, completely out of control, with various important organs flying out of his body (for a discussion of the various important organs and their functions, see Chapter 1). Fitness buffs saw this and realized that any activity with such great potential for being fatal must be very good for you, so the sport began to catch on. Today, most major hotels offer ski jumping facilities for the convenience of business travelers. Also, thanks to a new, innovative portable device, you can even engage in "simulated" ski jumping indoors! So there's really no excuse not to get into this popular sport, except a will to live.

Peewee Football

Although most people think of Peewee Football as a "kid's game," more and more fitness-oriented urban professionals with a love of physical contact and a sincere desire to lie about their ages have discovered that there's no better way to get rid of frustrations than to lean down, take a handoff (by force, if necessary) from a 48-pound quarterback, and plow through an entire team of 8-year-old boys on the way to a 97-yard touchdown run. Not only is it fun, but nutritionists (never mind which ones) tell us that the average 40-year-old male burns off ten extra calories for each child clinging to his ankles!

One word of caution here: If any other urban professionals have discovered your particular Peewee Football league, you want to make sure they play on your team. This is also a good practice to follow with any unusually large eight-year-old boys.

Racquetball

This is a popular sport wherein you and another person go into a white room, close the door, and attempt to injure each other in the eye. Originally, this was done by whacking a ball against a wall in such a way that it would bounce back and strike the other person, but your highly competitive modern player tends to ignore the ball and lunge straight for his opponent. This is why you first should determine the playing style of your potential opponent and then decide whether you need a “traditional” or a “competitive” racquet.

Professional Ice Hockey

Professional ice hockey is an ideal way for the entire family to keep fit. There's something for everyone: the kids will love participating in a loose, freewheeling sport where everybody makes the play-offs and the only activity that is specifically prohibited is selling narcotics to your opponents on the ice; Dad will appreciate the fact that he's improving his cardiovascular efficiency while at the same time fleeing large vicious toothless stick-wielding men whose frontal lobes have been battered into prune-sized masses of scar tissue; and Mom will be pleased to learn that many of the players come from Canada, so she'll have a chance to “brush up” on such French phrases as *Arretez vous! Je suis une femme! Cest ma balle d'oeil!* (“Stop! I am a woman! That is my eyeball!”)

Golf

Although golf was originally restricted to wealthy, overweight Protestants, today it's open to anybody who owns hideous clothing. The basic idea is to stand on top of a hummock, squinting into the distance, wager, then saunter over to another hummock, and so on until it's time to drink. That may not sound like much exercise to you, but in fact every one of these activities except drinking consumes calories, as shown by this scientific chart.

GOLF ACTIVITY CALORIES CONSUMED

Ascending hummock 2.04959

Squinting 0.00035

Wagering 0.00102

Descending hummock 1.84958

Sauntering to next hummock 4.02013

Saying things like “You certainly did bogey that par-six eagle nine-iron wedge, Ted! Ha ha!” 0.00076

Tipping wiry youth who carries equipment 0.00007

Thus we see that in the course of a typical “round” of golf, lasting just four hours, you could burn off enough calories that you could then go out and eat the better part of a slice of Wonder bread with only a minor weight gain.

Swimming

Swimming is one of the best forms of exercise, provided you remember to follow these simple safety rules:

1. NEVER SWIM IN A LAKE OR RIVER. These contain snapping turtles, which have no natural enemies and therefore grow to the size of motel units, plus they tend to be irritable because they mate for life. Lakes also contain giant lake-dwelling carp, which will watch you from the loomy depths with their buggy eyes, wondering with their tiny carp brains whether you would fit into their mouths.
2. NEVER SWIM IN THE OCEAN. The ocean contains creatures that make the giant lake-dwelling carp look like Bambi.
3. NEVER SWIM IN A SWIMMING POOL. People pee in swimming pools. Oh, I know you don't pee in swimming pools, and I certainly don't, but somebody does, which promotes the growth of bacteria, which is why swimming pool owners are always dumping in toxic chemicals, to the point where there is virtually no actual water in the pool, just toxic chemicals and dead bacteria and old pee. This is why, as you may have noticed, the actual owner never gets into the pool. He's always off pretending he has to do something important involving the filter.

Pig Lifting

This is probably the quintessential fitness activity for today's upscale young urban professional, who more often than not will forsake the old-fashioned "three-martini lunch" in favor of going to his posh downtown club, sometimes with an important client, for a hard 45 minutes of pig lifting, followed by a soothing hose-down. More than one major business deal has been forged this way, and the cry "Anyone want to hoist some pork?" is likely to echo down the corridors of power for many years to come.

Fitness for the Business Traveler

Anyone who travels a lot on business will tell you that it isn't easy: eating at a different restaurant every night, having the maid leave little chocolate mints on your pillow, ordering a late-night hors d'oeuvre platter from Room Service while you watch in-room movies such as Nubile Olympic Gymnasts Visit the Petting Zoo, and all the other little hassles and inconveniences that go with life "on the road." But for the businessperson who's into physical fitness, there's yet another problem: finding a way to work out. Here are some suggestions.

Without question, the best way to work out in your hotel room is to turn on the television at the crack of dawn and watch one of the morning workout shows featuring the Obscenely Cheerful Leotard Women. Believe me, there's no more invigorating way to start the day than to lie in a darkened hotel room and listen to these women leap around and shout encouragement at you until you work up the energy to hurl your hors d'oeuvre tray at the TV screen and order Room Service to send up several orders of pancakes immediately.

Center-City Jogging

Although a few forward-looking hotels now offer a service whereby a staff person from a third-world nation will do your running for you while you are in meetings, in most cases you must still attend to this tiresome chore yourself. This isn't so bad if your hotel is located in, say, Nebraska, where the only danger you face on the street is that you might trip over a pig. But it can be a real problem if you're in a large urban area such as New York City, where the vast majority of the people on the street are drug addicts, pickpockets, muggers, rapists, murderers, or partners in advertising agencies.

This doesn't mean you can't run: it means you must take steps to protect yourself. A gun will do you no good. It would just be stolen. No, what you need is a safety device I designed especially to solve this problem—the Urban Runner's Simulated Gaping Chest Wound, which operates on the proven scientific principle that no urban resident will go anywhere near a person who is clearly in desperate need of help.

With your Simulated Gaping Chest Wound strapped on, you can jog anywhere you want in New York City, and you'll attract no more attention than the apparently deceased persons sprawled on the sidewalks, or the random street lunatics holding lengthy debates with individual oxygen atoms. For extra privacy, you can purchase the optional 3,500 Simulated Maggots Eating Your Body accessory.

These devices, incidentally, are part of an entire Dave Barry line of Traveling Executive Fitness Products, which also includes the Heavy Briefcase. This appears from the outside to be a normal leather briefcase, but hidden inside is a 350-pound weight!

(There's also a roomy compartment capable of holding your cigarette, or part of your pen.) Executives who regularly carry the Heavy Briefcase report a dramatic improvement in arm length.

The In-Flight Workout Device is a portable device that, when folded up, fits inside a handy steamer trunk that can be carried on board a commercial aircraft, provided you purchase two adjacent first-class seats for it, yet unfolds after takeoff to form a complete "airborne gymnasium." It features a sophisticated electronic digital computer "brain" that not only monitors your pulse rate, but also has a new and improved electronic circuitry design which we sincerely believe and hope will correct the unfortunate problem whereby it was somehow seizing control of the automatic pilot and steering planes into various mountains, which is, of course, a violation of federal regulations.

Chapter 6. Bodybuilding

Most of us males, at one time or another, have felt like Joe, the scrawny little wimp in the old Charles Atlas advertisement who was humiliated in front of his girlfriend on the beach when the muscular bully kicked sand in his face. As you'll recall, Joe sent away for the Charles Atlas bodybuilding course, then came back to the beach with large, bulging, rippling muscles. When the bully returned, he was extremely impressed and suggested that Joe should also apply oil to his body so that it would have a satiny gleam, and perhaps shave his armpits. Before long, they were very close friends and often helped each other select posing outfits.

You may feel that this is the kind of story that "only happens in comic books," but in fact it can happen to you, too—provided you have the discipline, drive, endurance, and just plain old-fashioned guts required to procure the necessary steroids.

Ha ha! Just a little fitness humor there. You don't need to ingest pharmaceutical substances to develop a major body; you simply have to follow the simple-to-follow instructions in this chapter. But first, let's answer some commonly asked questions about bodybuilding.

Q. I'm a man. How large should I let my muscles get?

A. This depends on the size of your head. See, your body has only a certain number (21,796,349,582) of cells. Each of these cells can be either part of your body or part of your head. This means if you make your body bigger, your head has to get smaller. So you should cease your muscle development as soon as you start noticing the warning signs of severe head reduction, such as:

Buying lawn ornaments

Having trouble following the plot on "Dukes of Hazzard"

Answering to the name "Vinnie"

If you already meet any of these criteria, you probably shouldn't do any bodybuilding at all. Of course, if you already meet any of these criteria, you're probably still trying to figure out how to get this book open.

Q. Can a woman such as myself engage in bodybuilding?

A. Of course! Although experts have discovered that a woman can never achieve the large muscle mass and definition of a Mister Universe, she can still, with patience, dedication, and hard work, make herself look grotesque. Or she can simply have large, realistic depictions of centipedes tattooed on her face.

Q. Once I become huge and muscular, will I still be able to operate a telephone?

A. Push-button, or rotary dial?

Q. Push-button.

A. Probably.

Now that we've answered your commonly asked questions, let's take stock of your current body. Take off all your clothes and stand in front of a mirror, and let's make an objective, professional, scientific assessment. Go ahead! Don't be shy! We can't help you if we can't see what we're working with!

(PAUSE)

So! That's your body, eh? Hahahahahahaha

ha! Excuse me. I'm not (choke, gasp) laughing at you, really. I just, ummmmm, I just thought of something funny somebody said to me in 1967. Anyway, looking at your body, I would hahaha hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha hahahahahaha! Excuse me. I would say that you hahahahahahahahahahahahaha! Whew! Put your clothes back on, okay?

Using this scientific assessment of your current bodily needs as a guide, let's look at the various kinds of bodybuilding equipment.

Weights: A Stupid Idea

Forget about weights. For one thing, they're very heavy, and for another thing, they wreck your body. Look at what they do to your big-time weight lifters, who have turned into 400-pound hairy sweaty shapeless grunting masses of tissue. And the men are even worse. No, you want to take the new, high-tech, scientific route to a better body, with Nautilus equipment.

How Nautilus Equipment Works

Originally designed as a way to keep professional football players from having sex before a game,

Nautilus equipment has become an extremely popular bodybuilding aid that not only is costly but also takes up a lot of room. This is because it's actually a series of machines, each specifically designed to develop one of the major muscle groupings (the abductors, the transponders, the trapezoids, the isobars, the quatrain, the bivalves, the Social Democrats, and the gerunds). The idea is that you work a grouping until it can no longer respond to signals from your brain, then you move on to the next machine, and so on until you've worked all your muscle groupings, at which time you signal the attendant, by blinking in a prearranged code, that you wish to be bathed.

I can't go into great detail here about how the various Nautilus machines work, because it would soon become obvious that I don't know.

The Trouble with Nautilus Equipment

The trouble with Nautilus equipment is that to use it, you have to join either a spa or a professional football team, which means you're going to spend a lot of time enveloped in other people's bodily aromas. So what would be ideal, if only such a thing were possible, would be if somebody would develop a totally new amazing scientific affordable bodybuilding device that you could use in your own home.

Announcing a Totally New Amazing Scientific Affordable Bodybuilding Device That You Can Use in Your Own Home

I am very pleased to be able to announce at this time a major breakthrough in the field of home body devices: the Dave Barry Total Person Workout Device. I'd tell you how good it is, but I'd be violating numerous federal statutes, plus I think you'll be even more convinced by these actual testimonials from imaginary satisfied customers:

"Your Total Person Workout Device has completely changed my life! For example, I can no longer discern colors!"—A.B., Detroit, Michigan

"I was being constantly hassled by vicious youths in my urban neighborhood. I sent away for your device, and within a week they had stolen it!"—C.D., Toledo, Ohio

"What have you done with my wife!"—L.M.N.O.P., Eau Claire, Wisconsin

What's the cause of all this excitement? It's a device that actually costs less than a new home yet yields results.

Both models come in an attractive designer cardboard box telling you which end is supposed to be up and whether or not you should drop it (no). The price is just \$799 for the Basic Model and \$1,099 for the Really Nice Model, the main difference being that we check the Really Nice Model for vermin. Of course, if you are in any way the least bit dissatisfied with your Device, you simply have to write an angry letter to the employees at your state Bureau of Helping the Consumer, who probably won't be there because they get just about every other day off for cretin holidays like Arbor Day.

Chapter 7. Nutrition

Why You Should Watch What You Eat

In your great-great-grandfather's day, nobody had to worry about proper nutrition, because people lived on farms and ate wholesome, natural foods. Whenever they needed meat, they just went out and whacked off a sector of the family cow. When they needed bread, they just cut down some wheat, then they threshed it, then they took the grain and started grinding it up, then they said, "Nah, the hell with it; let's just eat sector of cow tonight."

Today, unfortunately, most cows are grown by giant multinational corporations, who feed them harmful preservatives day and night for the express purpose of killing innocent consumers. Many cows are so full of toxic chemicals that they explode right in the pasture, leaving behind only billowing clouds of greenish fumes, which cause acid rain. You have the same kind of problems with white bread and refined sugar, both of which, if eaten, cause death within hours. This is why it's so important in today's world that you watch what you eat, at least until you get it inside your mouth. After that, it gets pretty disgusting.

How Your Digestive System Works

Your digestive system's job is to turn food into useful body parts. To save itself a lot of aggravation, your digestive system has a policy whereby it turns a given food into the body part most similar to it. Thus hard-boiled eggs become eyeballs, cauliflower becomes brains, mixed vegetables become the pancreas, Polish sausages become male sexual organs, candy canes become bone, little yellow-covered marshmallow Easter chickens become pus, beer becomes urine, and so on. If you eat a kind of food that does not resemble any known body part, such as a pink Good 'n' Plenty, your body turns it into fat.

Eating a "Balanced Diet"

To make sure your digestive system gets the "raw materials" it needs, at every meal you should eat at least 1 food from each of the 15 Basic Food Families: Fruits, Vegetables, Meats, Fishes, Loaves, Hors d'Oeuvres, Canned Goods, Jellies, Snacks, Shakes, Additives, Eels, Those Little Wax Bottles Filled with Colorful Sugar Water, Pez, and Spam.

What You Can Learn from Reading the Labels on Foods

Virtually nothing. I mean, if the product contains some dangerous chemical, you don't think the label writer, who has a mortgage and kids with braces just the same as you do, is going to risk his job by saying so, do you? Of course not. This is why all labels are written in label jargon, such as "This product contains not less than 0.02 percent of rehydroxylated glutonium or abstract of debentured soybean genitalia, whichever comes first." The more of this kind of jargon you see, the more likely it is that the

label writer has something to hide.

So what I recommend is, instead of trying to understand the words on the label, you simply figure out the average number of syllables per word. If the average is two or below, the product is probably safe to eat in small quantities. If the average is three or four, you're probably dealing with a product that causes grave concern in laboratory rats. If the average is five or more, you should set the container down very carefully and flee the vicinity on foot.

About Vitamins

Vitamins are little pills named A, B, C, D, E, and K that the government recommends you have certain amounts of. These recommendations are based on the requirements of the Minimum Daily Adult, a truly pathetic individual that the government keeps in this special facility in Washington, D.C., where he is fed things with names like "riboflavin."

Physicians generally pooh-pooh the value of vitamins, but this is because you can get vitamins into your body without the aid of physicians. If the only way it could be done was for a team of eight surgeons to implant a special \$263,000 trapdoor in your head, physicians would say vitamins were the best thing since luxury German automobiles.

The truth is that vitamins are very good for you, and each morning you should take a vitamin A pill, followed by a vitamin D, followed by an E, until you have spelled the healthful mnemonic phrase "A DEAD CAD BAKED A BAD CAKE, ACE." This will probably be plenty of vitamins for you, but be alert for the Four Major Warning Signs of Vitamin Deficiency, which are:

Nosebleeds

A sudden fondness for Wayne Newton

Unusually thick coats on woolly caterpillars

Death

If you notice any of these signs, you should add the phrase "A BEAKED DAD BEDDED A BEAD-BEDECKED BABE."

Vitamins in Food

Foods contain vitamins. Your mother told you this. She also told you that the vitamins are always in the most repulsive part of the food. If you were eating a potato, for example, she'd say, "Be sure to eat the skin, that's where the vitamins are." They learn this in Mother School. So with any given food, you should always eat the skin or, if it doesn't have a skin, the rind, the core, or the pit. If it doesn't have any of these, you should eat the wrapper.

Minerals in Food

Foods also contain minerals such as zinc, iron, magnesium, steel, and aluminum. At least, that's what I'm supposed to tell you. I personally think the whole idea that there is metal in food, especially blatantly soft food such as Twinkies, is absurd. The only idea more absurd is the deranged notion that

eating metal is somehow good for you. If God had wanted us to eat metal, He would have given us much better teeth. Thank you.

What about Fiber?

Fiber is definitely the number one hot trend in the world of natural health, threatening to break all the old records set by “pH balance.” Remember, back in the 70s, when every product you bought—food, shampoo, tires—was advertised as being pH balanced, even though nobody ever knew what the hell it meant? Well, it’s like that with fiber today, and so naturally I recommend you eat all the fiber-rich foods you can shove down your throat. These would be mainly your cotton candy and your Slim Jims.

A Thoughtful Philosophical Discussion of Vegetarianism

This is a touchy subject for me to discuss without having the vaguest idea of what I’m talking about, but here goes. Many people feel it is wrong to eat animals, on the grounds that animals have souls. I would have to say, although I certainly have nothing but the deepest respect for this position, that this is pretty stupid. I mean, I don’t want to offend any religious group, especially if it is armed, but I frankly don’t see how anyone can say that all animals have souls. Obviously, some animals do: Lassie clearly did, and probably so did Trigger. If anybody ever tries to eat Lassie, I’ll be the first one to attempt a citizen’s arrest.

But nobody’s going to look me square in the eye and claim that, for example, toads have souls. I am not saying that it’s okay to eat toads, of course, unless the alternative is starvation, or what they serve you under the heading of “snack” on commercial airliners. I’m just saying we have to draw the line somewhere.

I, personally, follow what I call a “modified vegetarianism” system, under which it is okay to eat meat provided that it has been disguised so you can’t tell what kind of creature it came from. A perfect example is hamburger. There is no way to tell, just by looking at a hamburger, where it originated.

We believe it is from cows, because we are told this by burly cleaver-wielding men in Chicago with bloodstained garments, but we would not have come to this conclusion independently. So under my system, hamburger is fine.

Lobster, on the other hand, is out. There is no way you could not know you were eating a lobster. When you walk into a restaurant, often the first thing you see is a large tank containing lobsters wearing handcuffs and trying to scuttle behind each other so you won’t pick them. If you order a lobster, you don’t get to use the kind of euphemisms you use with cows, such as “beef” or “steak”: you say, “I’ll have a lobster,” and when they bring it to you, you just get this naked lobster, and you’re supposed to eat it. I think this is wrong, and I imagine it goes without saying that I also feel very strongly about blatant organs, such as tongue.

Chapter 8. Dieting And Weight Control

Do You Weigh the Proper Amount?

To answer that question, locate yourself on the medical chart provided here. Chances are the chart shows that you're above your proper weight. The reason is that you eat too many foods that are high in "calories," which are little units that measure how good a particular food tastes. Fudge, for example, has a great many calories, whereas celery, which is not really a food at all but a member of the plywood family, provided by Mother Nature so that mankind would have a way to get onion dip into his mouth at parties, has none.

AGE FEMALE SMALL AVERAGE BIG MALE SMALL AVERAGE BIG 18-25 E F A B C D 26-31 F A B C D E 32-39 A B C D E F 40-50 B C D E F A Over 50 C D E F A B Dead D E F A B C

A—You could definitely stand to lose weight. B—No question about it, you have a weight problem. C—Based on your weight, you should get on a diet. D—It would certainly not hurt you to lose some weight. E—You are carrying too much weight for your body type. F—You must make more of an effort to control your weight.

The Simple, Basic, Obvious Truth about Losing Weight

Obviously, the only sane way to lose weight, and to keep it off, is to ... Hey! Who are you guys?!! Wait a minute!! You can't just barge in here and ...

So as I was saying, the only sane way to lose weight is to get yourself on, and then stick to, a regular, planned, conscientious program of purchasing newly published diet books. Here are some that I especially recommend:

The Handsome Sincere Random Doctor Medical Diet Poop Yourself Thin The Elvis Presley Memorial Diet The Total Tapeworm Diet How to Lose Weight in the Coming Depression Shed Unwanted Ounces the Orson Welles Way The Dead Preppy Cat Microcomputer Diet Book The All-Goat-Products Diet The Frequent Casual Motel Sex Diet The Amazing Mother Theresa Weight Loss Plan

All of these books are very excellent, and there are thousands more that are just as good, many of them offering such proven and time-tested features as consecutively numbered pages.

Perhaps the best diet book is *Dessert Makes You Fat*, by Ernst Viewfinder, who has several credits toward his Associate's Degree in Motel Food Administration from Southwest Buford County Community College ("Where the Leaders of Tomorrow Are Frowning at Blackboards Today, Visa and MasterCard Accepted"). His theory is that people get fat because they eat too many desserts, so he has developed a diet designed to encourage you to skip the dessert. Here is a typical day's menu:

BREAKFAST

Froot Loops Eclairs with side orders of bacon

DESSERT: One slice whole wheat toast

LUNCH

Snickers Fries Any number of cheeseburgers

DESSERT: Cottage cheese

DINNER

Dixie cup filled with sugar Melted Turkish taffy soup Big lumps of chocolate with fudge sauce

DESSERT: That really pathetic lettuce that looks like lichen, festooned with clearly visible insect eggs (no dressing)

I personally tried this diet for several weeks, and I found that not only was I able to skip many desserts, but I didn't need to sleep at all, although near the end they tried to make me.

Common Questions Often Asked about Losing Weight

Q. Do I actually have to read my diet books?

A. No. There is no medical evidence that reading leads to weight loss. Simply keep the books in a prominent location in your home, and occasionally press them against your thighs and buttocks.

Q. Is there any kind of operation I can have that will help me lose weight?

A. There are quite a few such operations, but probably the most effective one, with the fewest negative side effects, is to have an airline pet transporter bonded to your skull with fast-drying epoxy cement. This encourages you to eat only those foods which will pass through the mesh door, such as fettuccine and licorice.

Q. What about absurd mechanical weight loss devices, such as those motorized belts that were always shown jiggling the massive hips of pasty middle-aged female character actresses in comedy movies and television shows up through the 1950s?

A. These devices are extremely effective. The fat just melts away. Two of those character actresses, in fact, went on to become Bo Derek and Victoria Principal. This is why you never see those machines in health clubs any more: the clubs took them out because their members were leaving at an alarming rate to accept lucrative film contracts. This is a shame, really, because it leaves the weight-conscious person without any kind of guaranteed, surefire, safe, proven weight loss device. If only somebody would make such a device available to the general public!

Announcing the Dave Barry Guaranteed, Surefire, Safe, Proven, Medically Unusual Weight Loss Device For Human Beings Belonging to the General Public

The concept for this truly revolutionary device, which came to me one evening while I was throwing up on my shoes, is amazingly simple: If you go around with an object that weighs approximately 350 pounds strapped to your body, you can't help but lose weight! Assuming you don't have a serious accident! So I designed this device with You, the Consumer, in mind, such that you can wear it virtually

undetected to work, around the home, on the tennis court ... even to executions, if these are permitted in your state!

What the Experts Say about the Dave Barry Weight Loss Device

“Yes! Okay! It is very good! People should buy it! Now please, let us go!”—A team of leading physicians speaking in unison from inside a concrete structure

“The water used in Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki, and other parts of the metropolitan area is supplied by aqueduct systems!”—*The Encyclopaedia Britannica* Volume 18 (Taylor-Utah)

Chapter 9. Women's Beauty And Grooming

Thus far in this book, we've concentrated on improving your body. But let's face it: having a great body does you no good whatsoever if you have the kind of face where people are always saying you have a Nice Personality, meaning you can cause crops to fail just by looking at them.

So in this chapter, we're going to take a look at some of the things you can do to your face and hair to give yourself that feeling of inner confidence that says, in the words of the song Maria sang in West Side Story just before her lover stabbed her brother to death, “I Feel Pretty.” You'll see that you don't have to have been born with great genes to look beautiful; there are lots of simple little “beauty secrets” that can turn even a real woofer into an extremely presentable person, although in your case I would not necessarily rule out plastic surgery.

The First Step toward a More Beautiful You

The most important step, of course, is to recognize that whatever you're currently doing is totally wrong. What you need is a New Look, as you know if you read any of the major women's beauty magazines. Month after month, year after year, they publish the same article, which is “Several Dozen New Ways to Put Makeup on Your Face and Style Your Hair in a Lifelong Futile Effort to Look Like the Model on the Cover.”

The reason the beauty experts keep coming up with new looks is that the old ones are all repulsive. You look back at your high school yearbook or, heaven help you, your mother's yearbook, and you see the Looks that were popular years ago, and you wonder how the human race managed to reproduce. You wonder why men and women didn't take one look at each other and sprint in opposite directions until they dropped from exhaustion. Someday your children will say the same thing about the way you look today, which is why we here in the beauty industry are always pushing back the frontiers of knowledge, coming up with New Looks, with no real hope of personal financial benefit beyond the sale of beauty products that cost more per ounce than all but the finest narcotics.

Sometimes, out of the goodness of our hearts, we beauty experts make guest appearances on those morning television shows devoted to a wide range of topics that the folks who run television feel are of

interest to women, namely these:

Sex problems Fashion and beauty tips Problems that involve sex Tips on beauty and fashion Various sexually involved problems Discussions of how you can become more sexually fashionable and beautiful by means of certain tips Pasta

What the beauty experts generally do on these shows is select a woman from the audience and point out how she has committed several dozen common major beauty blunders due to the fact that she is not a knowledgeable beauty expert. Their technique is to pick somebody who looks perfectly normal—perhaps even attractive—to the unprofessional eye, then harp away at her until the audience begins to marvel that she managed to get past the studio guards without being mistaken for an escaped boar and shot.

Then they take this pathetic woman, and they give her a completely New Look, offering all kinds of professional beauty tips as they go along:

“Now the most unfortunate facial characteristic of Rhonda here,” they say, “is that she has a nose you could hang a garment bag on, so we are going to begin by applying about five-eighths of an inch of base coat to the rest of her head in an effort to make it appear larger. We’ll top that off with two coats of sealant, then we’ll remove all of Rhonda’s current eyebrows and start applying the first few coats of skin dye while we try to think up something we can do about her mouth.”

And so on, until Rhonda’s face is encased in congealed cosmetic substances to the point where her own dog wouldn’t recognize her. As the studio audience applauds her New Look enthusiastically, Robert Redford walks onstage and asks her to marry him, and they walk off together, living proof of the advantages of knowledgeably applied beauty products, at least until Rhonda’s sealant weakens and her base coat starts falling off in slabs the size of French toast.

What You, Personally, Need to Do about Your Appearance

Unfortunately, we are dealing with the print medium here, so I am unable to consult individually with you in regard to your specific beauty needs, except to say that from this particular angle it appears you ought to give a bit more thought to booger removal. However, I can offer these helpful beauty guidelines for you to bear in mind as you try to achieve your New Look:

GUIDELINE 1: YOUR FACE IS MUCH TOO FAT.

It looks like a weather balloon, for God’s sake. Try some puce blush on your cheekbones, if you can locate them, and accentuate those little lines coming out of the sides of your mouth by filling them in lightly with an Accountant’s Fine Point Bic pen.

GUIDELINE 2: I CAN’T BELIEVE WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO YOUR HAIR.

I am assuming that you didn’t pay for that cut. I am assuming that a deranged, near-blind, palsied

person wielding pruning shears burst into your room in the dead of night and cut your hair after beating you unconscious. The only thing I can suggest until it grows back out is that you join some sort of religious order that has a mandatory head covering. And when it does grow back, you want to decide which of the three common head shapes, you have and choose a hairstyle that compliments it.

GUIDELINE 3: I WOULD SAY YOUR EYES ARE YOUR BEST FEATURE.

This is assuming I have to pick something. You want to draw attention to your eyes through subtle use of your lipstick. Note that when I say your eyes are your best feature, I am speaking of them as independent organs. Taken as a set, they are maybe three-quarters of an inch too close together.

Personal Hygiene

After going to all that trouble with your face and hair, the last thing you want to do is go around smelling like a billy goat with a flatulence problem. This is why good personal hygiene habits are so important. Let's review them briefly.

TEETH

You should brush them immediately before having conversations, using a tube of toothpaste with these words printed on the side: "The American Dental Association has found this to be an effective tube of toothpaste when squeezed from the bottom in conjunction with a program of regular payments to a member of the American Dental Association."

GUMS AND ARMPITS

Floss them regularly. If you use the same floss, do your gums first.

HAIR

Shampoo regularly with a shampoo bearing the name of a reputable beauty snot, such as Vidal Sassoon. Also, be alert for dandruff, an incurable disease where little pieces of your head keep falling off until eventually all you have left is two eyeballs on stalks protruding from your neck and you look like a gigantic lobster walking around wearing clothes. Scratching only makes it worse.

FEET

There's an old saying about feet that goes: "I had no shoes, and I pitied myself. Then I met a man who had no feet; so I took his shoes." Better than anything I could think of, this saying illustrates the

importance of proper foot care. Each day, you should spend a minimum of an hour examining your feet closely under a 200-watt light bulb and picking at your toenails with various foot care implements available at Woolworth's. This is something the whole family can do together. Stress to your children that they should not mention it to the authorities.

FEMININE HYGIENE

At one time, this important subject would have been considered "too delicate" for a book like this, but all that has changed, thanks to the efforts of the fine people who sell vaginal deodorants via television commercials featuring two Good Friends having a Frank Discussion:

DEBBIE (hesitantly): Sue, may I ask you something?

SUE: Sure, Debbie. What is it?

DEBBIE: Sue, are you aware that for the past seven years, including at formal affairs such as funerals, you've been emitting an aroma that would fell a buffalo at 90 feet?

SUE (frowning slightly): Why no, Debbie, I didn't know! Perhaps that is why I have remained a housewife, rather than winning the Nobel Prize for Physics!

DEBBIE: Why not try this?

SUE (examining the label thoughtfully): Hmmm. New Improved Crotch Bouquet. By golly, I'll try it!

DEBBIE: Not here, for God's sake!

Chapter 10. Men's Beauty And Grooming

As recently as 20 years ago, a man was considered well-groomed if he remembered to remove the little pieces of toilet paper he stuck on his face where he cut himself shaving. But today we live in a liberated era, an era in which men are not afraid to make themselves more attractive by means of beauty aids formerly limited to women—hair coloring, makeup, totally alien plastic substances inserted into the body so as to form bulges, designer dresses, etc.

This is basically a healthy social development. For, as the saying goes, "A man who cares about his personal appearance is a man who is always checking his reflection in store windows." So in this section, men, we're going to suggest some grooming "tips" to help you look more like the lean and cruelly handsome male models in the "Fall Fashion Supplement," and less like the people in your immediate gene pool.

Hair

I will assume that you already shampoo your hair at frequent intervals, that you are not one of those repulsive males who, apparently feeling that there is some sort of grave threat to the world's grease supply, let their hair go for weeks at a time without washing it, such that if one of their pillows ever caught fire, it would burn for days. But men, even if you do use shampoo regularly, it's probably the wrong kind, by which I mean it probably consists mainly of shampoo, with perhaps a dash of pH.

This is not good enough. Women discovered years ago that if you want true hair beauty, your shampoo

must contain foodstuffs. Some women prefer fruits and vegetables, such as apricot and avocado; others prefer poultry products, such as egg; others prefer liquor, such as beer. Some even prefer—this is the absolute truth coming up here—human placentas, which makes for a very expensive shampoo because, believe me, the shampoo factory has to pay the workers a lot of money to stuff those suckers into the bottles.

(For a more complete discussion of placentas, see my *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex*, which many experts consider to be, of all the many books available about birth and child rearing, the one that took the least time to write.)

And why is it so important to have foodstuffs in shampoo? I can answer that science question in three syllables: follicles. Follicles are little organs that live in your skull, thousands of them, and produce your hair. To produce hair, they need protein, and to get protein, they need to eat, just as you do. Women are constantly shoving egg and beer down their tiny throats, which is why, as you have no doubt noticed, women generally have gobs of hair. Men, on the other hand, practically starve them to death—you can eat only so much pH, and then you just don't want to see another bite—which is why so many men go bald.

A Sincere Discussion of Baldness

Too often in our insensitive society, baldness is treated as a joke, so let me begin this sincere discussion by stating that, although I am fortunate enough to be blessed with a very full and attractive head of hair, I am very much aware of the anguish and inner torment experienced on a daily basis by you chrome domes out there. I mean, it's not your fault you're bald, is it? Well, okay, it is your fault because you let your tiny helpless innocent follicles, which had never so much as said a mean word to anybody in their whole lives, suffer a horrible death by starvation while you were out laughing and eating pizza with friends, but there's no point in dwelling on that now. The question is: What can you do about your unfortunate condition?

One approach, of course, is to get a wig. The advantage of wearing a wig is that you don't look quite as stupid as you would if you went around with a giant red clown nose on. The main disadvantage is that a wig costs a lot more than a large, hand-lettered sign around your neck that says "WIG," which is equally effective.

Another approach is to get a hair transplant. This is a procedure whereby a person who has completed all three weeks of Hair Transplant School, which he enrolled in because he flunked Whack-a-Mole-Game-Machine Maintenance School, takes hair from somewhere else on your body and puts it on top of your head. The advantage of this approach is that you do, in fact, end up with hair growing on your head. The disadvantage, of course, is that it has to come from somewhere else on your body, which means either (a) you have hair growing up there that originated in your armpit or some other locale so disgusting I don't even want to talk about it, or (b) they have to take the hair off the side of your head, which is not necessarily a great stride forward for you in the looks department.

Finally, there are ads for all kinds of alleged "miracle" hair-growing pills, creams, lotions, and potions in the backs of sleazeball publications such as *Penthouse* and *American Beet Farmer*, which make all kinds of outrageous claims such as they can "stop the spread of baldness" and "restore lost hair" and even "grow hair on a billiard ball." These claims, of course, are totally false, except the one about the

billiard ball, which government researchers recently discovered is true, the drawback being that many of the balls also developed tumors.

So unfortunately, balding men, there is little to offer you in the way of hope at this time. If only somebody would develop a proven scientific guaranteed effective totally safe miracle hair-growth substance!

(News item)

SCIENTISTS LAUD DAVE BARRY PROVEN SCIENTIFIC GUARANTEED EFFECTIVE TOTALLY SAFE MIRACLE HAIR-GROWTH SUBSTANCE

BUFFALO OR ST. LOUIS—Scientists wearing white smocks here have announced that in proven scientific tests, the Dave Barry Miracle Hair-Growth Substance did, in fact, bring new life to dead hair follicles belonging to volunteer bald persons who were scientifically monitored as they slept on street grates.

“As this enlarged photograph shows,” explained Chief of Research Dr. Ernst Viewfinder, “most of the follicles of the untreated volunteers are small and dead—not unlike, I might add by way of a humorous aside, some of the untreated volunteers themselves, ha ha. But in these photographs of the treated volunteers, we can see that the Dave Barry Miracle Hair-Growth Substance has brought their scalps back to life, with sleek and happy follicles the size of adult mice, in some cases completely crowding out the brain! This could well be what happened to Vidal Sassoon.”

Skin

What do women find attractive when they look at a man's skin? Bumps. Yes, bumps. Why do you think women fall all over Robert Redford while virtually ignoring you and me? Go watch Redford in a movie sometime, and you'll see that he has a number of facial bumps, which look during the extreme close-ups to be big enough to play polo on, and which, as far as I can tell, are the only major physical characteristic in which Robert Redford and I differ.

So what I am recommending, men, is that as part of your daily grooming ritual, you apply small globulets of Silly Putty to your face, as shown in the illustration, so as to render yourself irresistible to the opposing sex. I regret to point out, however, that Silly Putty comes in only the Caucasian skin hue, which is blatant discrimination against those members of minority groups who also wish to install facial bumps, and I think those of us who are still liberals ought to sit right down and write hostile letters about this to our Congresspersons.

Makeup

Makeup is definitely the coming thing in male grooming. Oh, I know what you're saying. You're saying, “No way. No way am I going to put on makeup!” But of course that's exactly what you said about bikini underwear, and hair spray, and blow-dryers, which, if you had used them in a locker room 15 years ago, would have resulted in a situation where if you entered the shower, the other men would have fled from you in very much the way the residents of Tokyo fled from Godzilla, but which are common grooming articles today.

Yes, men, you might as well face it: it won't be long before we're all wearing makeup. And the last

thing you want to do is get left behind on this trend and end up looking ludicrously out of date, like the unfortunate individuals you occasionally see who still wear white patent leather shoes and matching belts and always look like assistant deputy sewage commissioners from small towns where the highest form of cultural activity is reading the drive-thru menu at Burger King. So what I recommend you do is gradually start introducing makeup into your grooming routine—a little blusher, a little eye liner, a touch of lipstick—and see if you don't start making a big impression at your office, maybe even start attracting the attention of people as high up as vice president, people who once seemed unaware you even existed, but who suddenly start looking at you for 20 and 30 seconds at a time on the elevator and trying to discreetly read your security badge.

Chapter 11. When You Get Sick

Even the healthiest person, if he follows the fitness program described in this book, will eventually need medical care. Fortunately, we Americans live in a nation where the medical-care system is second to none in the world, unless you count maybe 25 or 30 little scuzzball countries like Scotland that we could vaporize in seconds if we felt like it.

What we're going to talk about in this chapter is how you can become more aware of the various problems that your body can develop, so that you'll be better able to worry about them. We'll also talk about how, if you actually do become sick, you can explain your problems to the medical-care establishment in such a way that it does not immediately yank out a useful organ.

How You Can Tell When There Is Something Wrong with You

Trained medical personnel detect illness or other bodily problems by looking for "symptoms," the major ones being these:

Aches Pains A total absence of aches or pains Bullet holes A feeling of not keeping up with inflation A leg bone sticking out through the skin Never having the correct change A stoppage of heart or brain activity Irritability

Get in the habit of checking yourself every 20 minutes or so for these symptoms. When you notice one, you should immediately follow this emergency procedure:

1. Take two pills containing a Scientifically Proven Painkilling Formula that has been advertised on television by a reliable avuncular spokesperson such as Robert Young.
2. Phone your office to tell them that you won't be in for several days and could somebody please remember to discard any interoffice memoranda aimed at you. If you have no office, you should phone your mother and have her confirm that there is definitely Something Going Around.

This course of treatment will cure you most of the time. If it doesn't, you probably have a serious illness, which means you should call your physician's answering service and make an appointment to go into his office the following month and sit in the waiting room for an hour and 45 minutes reading National Geographic. If that doesn't work, you should go to a hospital emergency ward and inflict a gunshot wound on yourself, thus increasing the odds that you will see an actual doctor to nearly 40

percent.

Dealing with Doctors

To get the most out of a doctor, you have to understand how he perceives the world, which is best summed up by the last sentence of the Hippocratic Oath:

“AND ABOVE ALL, REMEMBER THAT THE PATIENT HAS NABISCO BRAND SHREDDED WHEAT FOR BRAINS.”

Yes, doctors tend to feel just a tad superior to the general public, but this is understandable. Doctors are generally smart people, the kind who were attending meetings of the National Honor Society while you were leaning out the study hall window seeing if you could spit on passing nuns. In college and medical school, doctors spend years associating with other smart people and learning complicated things like the location of the pituitary gland. When they get out, the last thing they feel like doing is consorting with a bunch of cretin patients, who not only have no idea where the pituitary gland is, but also are often sick besides.

So the important rule to remember when you're dealing with a doctor is this: never tell him what you think the problem is, even if you're absolutely certain. If you tell him what you think, he'll become irritated and go out of his way to prove you're wrong:

YOU: Doctor, I think I have suffered a knife wound to the stomach.

DOCTOR (sneering): Oh you do, do you? And what makes you think that?

YOU: Well, several hostile urban youths accosted me on the street and stuck a knife in my stomach. See? Here's the knife handle, sticking out of my stomach.

DOCTOR (examining your foot): That could be caused by any number of conditions, such as an amalgamation of the pyloric valve or an interdiction of the right epistolary oracle. I'm going to send you to the hospital for some tests next week.

The phrase “send you to the hospital for some tests” is medical code for “drain all the blood out of your body.” Blood removal is the primary form of health care in the United States, and it has been ever since April 4, 1906, when the founder of the Mayo Clinic, Dr. Ted Clinic, happened to be cutting open diseased woodland creatures, as was his wont, and made an amazing discovery: all of the creatures contained blood. He concluded that blood must be a leading cause of disease, which is why today when you go into the hospital, various personnel are always lunging at you with needles. They are very conscientious about this because they don't want to get a nasty note from the doctor (“3 P.M.—Patient still contains traces of blood! Let's not let this happen again”).

If blood removal doesn't work, they start taking out your organs. Usually they start with organs you have two of, such as kidneys, then move up to the really vital ones, so it's very important that you convince the doctor you're getting better while you still have a chance to survive:

DOCTOR: So! How are we feeling today?

YOU (hastily): Fine! Great! Never felt better!

DOCTOR (frowning at your chart): Really? Are you sure? Because I see by your chart here that you still have several organs left, and we could ...

YOU (staggering out of bed, trailing intravenous tubes): No! No! Look! I feel terrific! (You attempt a deep knee bend, then collapse in agony.)

DOCTOR: Okay, but I'll be back to check on you in an hour.

Paying for Your Hospital Treatment

Always examine your hospital bill closely. It should look like this:

Aspirin tablet.

\$11.05

Little Dixie cup for water to wash aspirin tablet down with

6.80

Water

31.80

Removal of childproof cap from aspirin bottle (Dr. Viewfinder)

460.00

Removal of little tuft of cotton from aspirin bottle (Dr. Beaner)

385.00

CAT scan from when Dr. Spinnaker thought he might have heard a little whistling noise in the patient's chest that was probably nothing but You Always Want to Be Sure about These Things

87,354.50

Consultation among Dr. Spinnaker, Dr. Viewfinder, Dr. Beaner, Dr. Whelk, Dr. Pilsner, and Dr. Frackmeyer while they were peeing (per doctor)

275.00

Also Dr. Whelk mentioned it to Dr. Hogworth at the polo match

340.00

Gratuity

85.00

If, after examining the bill carefully, you feel satisfied that all the dollar amounts are lined up neatly on the right-hand side, you should submit it to your insurance company, which will, without even looking at it, send it back to you with a testy note telling you that you filled out the forms all wrong. This will give you time to sell your house and children to raise the cash you'll need for when you finally get everything filled out right and the insurance company notifies you that the only thing you're actually covered for is 60 percent of the Dixie cup.

Home Emergency First-Aid Chart to Be Kept Posted on the Bulletin Board underneath the Coupons That, If You Save Up Ten of Them, Get You a Free Medium Pizza

HOME EMERGENCY TREATMENT Decapitation. Elevate head; shriek for assistance. Victim has swallowed fabric softener. Induce vomiting by showing the victim a videotape of that speech Richard Nixon gave about his mother after he resigned. Victim has swallowed a can of chicken gumbo soup. So? What's so bad about that? Victim has swallowed the actual can. Oh. Is this by any chance the same victim that swallowed the fabric softener? Boy, that victim has a real problem.

Chapter 12. Fitness Q And A

Fitness and the Expectant Mother

Q. I am currently pregnant to a considerable degree. Instead of trying to keep fit, may I just lounge around watching “Days of Our Lives” and reading Glamour Magazine?

A. No! These are the 80s, for God’s sake, and nobody is excused from being fit! Especially you expectant women! If you just let your body go during pregnancy, after the baby comes, you’re going to look as though a team of plastic surgeons have implanted a 35-pound mass of Wonder bread dough under the skin around your hips and thighs. But if you continue to care for your body, if you exercise regularly and maintain your muscle tone, the mass will have a much firmer consistency, like congealed rubber cement.

Of course, a pregnant woman can’t do the same exercises as a normal person. Most gynecologists, for example, frown on the pole vault after about the seventh month. But there are still some exercises that work very well for the mother-to-be, such as:

1. TRY TO TOUCH THE WALL. Stand in a relaxed fashion with your arms over your head and your abdominal area forming a large tissue mass directly between you and the wall. Now gradually lean forward until your arms touch the wall, if such a thing is possible, and then return to the full standing position.

2. TRY TO GET OUT OF A CAR. Have several burly friends somehow place you behind the wheel of a 1979 Chevrolet Chevette, or some equally absurd little car, then have them time you as you attempt to get out of it in such a way that your undergarments are not clearly visible from other planets. Eight minutes is the world’s record.

3. KNEE CLENCH. Go to a nice restaurant with friends and attempt to get all the way to the appetizers without going to the bathroom more than twice.

Q. What about fitness for the fetus?

A. You should indeed embark upon a rigorous program of fetal fitness, for otherwise the fetus will be born pasty and flabby and lacking in muscle definition, and in later life it may have trouble getting accepted by the better aerobic dancing institutes. Of course, getting the fetus to exercise is not easy, any more than teaching the fetus to read is easy, but if you truly are a Concerned Parent, you will find a way.

I particularly recommend a new product developed by the fine people who make Nautilus equipment. It’s called the “Fetahis” and it’s specially designed for the fetus to use in the womb. It’s a very effective device and well worth the cost, although to be perfectly frank the insertion process is not everybody’s cup of tea.

Some Helpful Answers for People Who Smoke

Q. I’m a smoker, and ...

A. You’re a what?

Q. I’m a smoker, and I’d really like to ...

A. You are slime, you know that? You are raw industrial sewage.

Q. Yes, I know. I really want to quit. I just hate ...

A. Why don’t you just suck on the exhaust pipe of a poorly tuned automobile, huh? Why don’t you just go around spraying Agent Orange on your fellow restaurant patrons?

Q. Of course you are absolutely right. It’s just that it’s so hard to stop, and I’m getting desperate, and I was hoping that maybe you’d have some tips on how ...

A. I’ll tell you one thing. If you ever try to ignite one of those repulsive toxic objects in a restaurant

where I am dining, I shall order a reputable brand of designer carbonated water and forcibly pour it into your nasal passages. Do I make myself clear?

Q. Yes, and I can certainly understand why you feel that way.

A. Well, you'd damned well better.

Q. Thank you.

A. Get out of my sight before I vomit.

Fitness and the Afterlife

Q. I am very, very proud of my body. I have calluses on the top of my head formed by bumping into things because I walk around looking down at my various major muscle groupings. My question is: What will happen to my body when I die? Who will take care of it? Will it become soft and shapeless?

A. You will be pleased to learn that the long-neglected field of postmortem fitness has received a real "shot in the arm" lately with the emergence of the Eterna-Body chain of fitness centers, each equipped with the patented Cryo-Physique Room, which is very much like a sauna, except that instead of exposing living people to heat, it lowers the temperature of dead people to approximately 325 degrees below zero, at which temperature they acquire a firmness of muscle tone that we normally associate only with world-class bodybuilders and certain minerals.

Fitness and Sex

Q. About a year ago, my husband got on a rigorous fitness program, and he definitely looks much, much better. The problem is, he has taken to viewing our lovemaking as primarily a form of exercise. Like, for example, he wears ankle weights and Heavy Hands, which are no picnic during foreplay. Also, I have a problem with the idea of having my sexual partner, at a very intimate moment, if you get my drift, shout his pulse rate into a tape recorder. Don't you think he's carrying this too far?

A. Absolutely. First of all, the Heavy Hands aren't doing him nearly as much good as dumbbells would, and second, I see no reason why he can't simply use a felt-tipped marker to jot his pulse rate down quietly on an exposed patch of your skin.

Fitness and the Third World

Q. I'm a part of a team of CIA operatives currently operating in a fungal, lice-ridden Central American nation that I, of course, cannot reveal the name of because it's a secret. Our main mission here is to win over the local peasantry to the cause of Freedom and Democracy via a two-pronged program of (a) teaching them how to make sandwiches, and (b) shooting suspected opposition peasants in the head. What I was wondering was, do you think it would help if we also sponsored Dancercise classes?

A. Sounds like a winner! There's nothing that backward peoples enjoy quite so much as dancing, to judge from any number of comical old movies I have seen, wherein the natives are always leaping around and putting Bob Hope in a large iron pot. Be sure your peasants wear an approved style of leg warmer, which the Department of Defense will be able to procure for you at a cost of \$63,400 per leg.

Postwar Fitness

Q. What preparations has the government made to insure that our top federal officials will be able to remain fit in the unfortunate event of a total thermonuclear war?

A. At the first sign of trouble, these officials will be whisked to a giant underground Strategic Fitness Facility guarded by vicious federal dogs. This facility will be staffed by a corps of female personnel who have been chosen for their knowledge of postnuclear aerobic routines as well as their overall body taughtness. Also there will, of course, be a sauna and several lead-lined racquetball courts, although, as one top government planner put it, "It won't be a picnic in there. Towels will be at a premium."

Office Fitness

Q. I am employed by a large corporation, and I work in an office where my primary responsibility is to discuss "General Hospital" with Helen and Louise. As you can imagine, this does not involve a great deal of physical activity, and I have, quite frankly, developed a rear end which could serve as a bulldozer-flotation device. So I was wondering if you can suggest any kind of fitness program that a person can do at her desk.

A. Certainly. Each morning, during a quiet period, quietly slip off your shoes, push your chair away from your desk, and engage in five minutes of gentle stretching, followed by five minutes each of toe touches, dressage, the luge, and the 400-meter butterfly. Of course, some of these activities may require minor changes in your office routine, to allow for such things as feeding the horse, but I'm sure your employer will have no objection once you threaten to file a gigantic class-action suit alleging you are being discriminated against on the basis of being pear-shaped.

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Dave Barry's



The Taming of the Screw

How to sidestep several
million homeowner's
problems



Illustrated by Jerry O'Brien

The Taming Of The Screw

Dave Barry

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Dave Barry.

The Taming Of The Screw

Several million homeowners' problems sidestepped

Introduction

Sincere statement of thanks from the author

I sincerely thank you for purchasing this do-it-yourself book, instead of one of the thousands of other, much better ones. I want to assure you that there is not a single project in this book that I would not have considered doing myself if I hadn't been so busy writing a do-it-yourself book.

Why You Need This Book

If you're like most homeowners, you're afraid that many repairs around your home are too difficult to tackle. So when your furnace explodes, you call in a so-called professional to fix it. The "professional" arrives in a truck with lettering on the sides and deposits two assistants whose combined IQ's would still be a two-digit number, and they spend the better part of a week in your basement whacking objects at random with heavy wrenches, after which the "professional" returns and gives you a bill for slightly more money than it would cost you to run a successful campaign for the U.S. Senate.

And that's why you've decided to start doing things yourself. You figure, "If those bozos can fix my furnace, then so can I. How difficult can it be?"

Very difficult. In fact, most home projects are impossible, which is why you should do them yourself. There is no point in paying other people to screw things up when you can easily screw them up yourself for far less money. This book can help you.

How To Use This Book

The best way to use this book is to place it on a coffee table so that your guests can place their drinks on it. Or, if you'd like to attempt a home repair project, you can look up the appropriate chapter. For example, if you want to fix a plumbing problem, you'd look up Chapter 4, "Plumbing." Or Chapter 8, "Masonry." It won't make much difference.

Chapter 1. Tools: Why They Want To Injure You, And How To Thwart Them

Basically, a tool is an object that enables you to take advantage of the laws of physics and mechanics in such a way that you can seriously injure yourself. Today, people tend to take tools for granted. If

you're ever walking down the street and you notice some people who look particularly smug, the odds are that they are taking tools for granted. If I were you, I'd walk right up and smack them in the face.

We ought to be very grateful that we have tools. Millions of years ago people did not have them, and home projects were extremely difficult. For example, when a primitive person wanted to put up paneling, he had to drive the little paneling nails into the cave wall with his bare fist, so generally the paneling wound up getting spattered with primitive blood, which isn't really all that bad when you consider how ugly paneling is to begin with.

Special Cautionary Procedure for Those of You Who Choose to Disregard My Advice and Use a Power Saw, You Fools

1. With the saw off and all the power in the house off and the power lines completely detached from the house, place the piece of wood you want to cut near the saw.
2. Leave the room and have the power turned back on. (WARNING: Never attempt to turn on the power yourself! Have one of your children do it.)
3. Have the power turned back off and peek into the room, wearing industrial goggles. If you see any signs of movement from the saw, fire a few rounds at it from a small-caliber revolver, such as you might use to unclog a toilet (see Chapter 4, "Plumbing"). If you see no signs of movement, have one of your remaining children retrieve the piece of wood.

The three major kinds of tools

Tools for hitting things to make them loose or to tighten up or jar their many complex, sophisticated electrical parts in such a manner that they function perfectly. These are your hammers, maces, bludgeons, and truncheons. Tools that, if dropped properly, can penetrate your foot. Awls. Tools that nobody should ever use because the potential danger is far greater than the value of any project that could possibly result. Power saws, power drills, power staplers, any kind of tool that uses any kind of power more advanced than flashlight batteries.

How to get a complete home tool set for under four dollars

Go to one of those really cheap discount stores where they sell plastic furniture in colors visible from the planet Neptune and have a food section specializing in cardboard cartons full of Raisinets and malted milk balls manufactured during the Nixon administration. In either the Hardware or Housewares department, you'll find an item imported from an obscure oriental country and described as "Nine Tools in One," consisting of a little handle with interchangeable ends representing inscrutable oriental notions of tools that Americans might use around the home. Buy it. This is the kind of tool set professionals use; not only is it inexpensive, but it also has a great safety feature not found in the so-called quality tool sets:

The handle will actually break right off if you accidentally hit yourself or anything else, or expose it to direct sunlight.

WARNING: Do not be misled by advertisements for so-called tool sets allegedly containing large numbers of tools. These are frauds! Oh, sure, you get a lot of tools, but most of them are the same kind! For example, you'll get 127 wrenches, and the only difference is that one will be maybe an eighth of an inch bigger than another. Big deal.

Chapter 2. Wood: If God Had Wanted Us To Use It, He Wouldn't Have Made Plastic

Wood has been the preferred building material for thousands of years, because it is one of the few materials that will rot as well as burn. Basically, there are two kinds of wood: hardwoods such as oak and walnut, which are used by skilled craftsmen to make furniture that you cannot afford; and softwoods such as fir, spruce, and tripe, which are actually members of the crabgrass family and are more suitable to the kinds of projects that an incompetent such as yourself will be doing.

Dealing With Lumberyards

Lumberyards are dangerous and hostile places, inhabited by suspicious men who wear bib overalls and spit a lot and duck behind piles of boards as soon as they see a homeowner coming. These men have lived in the lumberyard since childhood. It is the only home they know. At night, they just pull sheets of plywood over themselves and go to sleep. They don't like intruders, especially homeowners such as yourself who are buying wood for some idiot home project, and they will try any crafty ruse to drive you away. For example, all their wood measurements are lies. A so-called two-by-four is not two anythings by four anythings, and so on. There is no way you can possibly know what size of wood you're getting.

Another common trick among the lumbermen is to call things by silly names, such as "soffit." They dream these names up at night while they're lying under their sheets of plywood, and they use them to make you feel stupid when you try to order your wood.

YOU: Hi. I'd like two eight-foot two-by-fours, please.

LUMBERMAN: What are they for?

YOU: What?

LUMBERMAN: Are they for joists? Headers? Beams? Rafters? Footers? Sills? Framing? Tenons? Partitions? Templates? Easements? Debentures? Just what is it you want, mister?

YOU: Uh, well, ah, maybe I better go home and recheck my measurements.

The Home Center: An Alternative To The Lumberyard? NO.

Several years ago, some smart businessmen had an idea: Why not build a big store where a do-it-

yourselfer could get everything he needed at reasonable prices? Then they decided, nah, the hell with it, let's build a home center. And before long home centers were springing up, like herpes, all over the United States.

Home centers are designed for the do-it-yourselfer who's willing to pay higher prices for the convenience of being able to shop for lumber, hardware, and toasters all in one location. Notice I say "shop for," as opposed to "obtain." This is the major drawback of home centers: They are always out of everything except artificial Christmas trees. The home center employees have no time to reorder merchandise, because they are too busy applying little price stickers to every object—every board, washer, nail, and screw—in the entire store. Once they've applied a round of stickers, they immediately set out to apply a new set, with slightly higher prices, to the same merchandise. This leaves them no time to learn about the products they sell, so it is utterly futile to ask them for help.

Let's say a piece of your toilet breaks, so you remove the broken part, take it to the home center, and ask an employee if they carry replacements. The employee, who has never in his life even seen the inside of a toilet, will peer at the broken part in very much the same way that a member of a primitive Amazon jungle tribe would look at an electronic calculator, then say, "We're expecting a shipment of these sometime around the middle of next week."

So the bottom line is that home centers are even worse than lumberyards as a source for lumber. The only really good place to buy lumber is at a store where the lumber has already been cut and attached together in the form of furniture, finished, and put into boxes.

Chapter 3. Electricity: You Can Safely Do Your Own Wiring, Most Likely

Electricity is actually made up of extremely tiny particles, called electrons, that you cannot see with the naked eye unless you have been drinking. Electrons travel at the speed of light, which in most American homes is 110 volts per hour. This is very fast. In the time it has taken you to read this sentence so far, an electron could have traveled all the way from San Francisco to Hackensack, New Jersey, although God alone knows why it would want to.

The five main kinds of electricity are alternating current, direct current, lightning, static, and European. Most American homes have alternating current, which means that the electricity goes in one direction for a while, then goes the other direction. This prevents harmful electron buildup in the wires.

Your Home Electrical System

Your home electrical system is basically a bunch of wires that bring electricity into your home and take it back out before it has a chance to kill you. This is called a "circuit." The most common home electrical problem is when the circuit is broken by a "circuit breaker"; this causes the electricity to back up in one of the wires until it bursts out of an outlet in the form of sparks, which can damage your carpet. The best way to avoid broken circuits is to change your fuses regularly.

Another common problem is that the lights flicker. This sometimes means that your electrical system is inadequate, but more often it means that your home is possessed by demons, in which case you'll need

to get a caulking gun and some caulking (see Chapter 6, “Heating and Cooling,” for more on getting rid of demons with caulking.) If you’re not sure whether your house is possessed, see *The Amityville Horror*, a fine documentary film based on an actual book. Or call in a licensed electrician, who is trained to spot the signs of demonic possession, such as blood coming down the stairs, enormous cats on the dinette table, etc.

How To Change A Fuse

You should change your fuses every six months or 200,000 amperes, whichever comes first. Here’s how:

1. Go down to the basement, which should be located beneath the first floor, and find the gray box with all kinds of wires leading to it and little stickers on it saying things like “CAUTION: 80 SKILLION WATTS.”
2. Standing about 15 feet away, toss a small domestic animal toward the box and note whether it (a) falls to the floor unscathed or (b) is reduced to a lump of carbon by a gigantic bolt of electricity.
3. In the event of (b), call an experienced electrician without dependents and have him replace your fuses. In the event of (a), open the box and remove the old fuses by unscrewing them or whacking at them with a 1/8-inch steel chisel, and replace them with new fuses, which can be obtained wherever new fuses are sold. Then simply close the box and continue to lead a normal life.

How to repair a broken electrical appliance

1. The primary cause of failure in electrical appliances is an expired warranty. Often, you can get an appliance running again simply by changing the warranty expiration date with a 3/16-inch felt-tipped marker.
2. If this fails, take the appliance to the basement and leave it there for several months, on the theory that (a) it will get lonely and want to work again so it can be up in the kitchen with all the other appliances, or (b) we’ll have a nuclear war, and you won’t have any uses for appliances any more because you’ll be too busy defending your beef jerky and water from your neighbors, or (c) you’ll develop a horrible, lingering disease, and people will feel sorry for you and give you new appliances.
3. If, after several months, the appliance still doesn’t work, locate the motor or some other electronic part and whap it briskly with a 58-ounce tire iron. This technique is particularly effective with your modern personal home electronic computers, which are smart enough to not want to be struck by blunt instruments. Toasters are much, much stupider—some of them cannot perform even simple addition—and often must be whapped for hours before coming around.

Harness the power of nature to generate electricity for only pennies a day, not counting parts and labor

If you’re tired of paying high electricity bills, and you live in an area that has a great deal of nature, you should definitely consider generating your own electricity via one of the extremely ecological methods described below. Then you should go back to whatever you were doing.

WIND POWER

Wind, which is imported into the United States from Canada in the form of cold air masses, can be used to turn the blades of a windmill, which in turn can generate electric power. At least that’s what

Popular Mechanics is always claiming. The big problem is that, because of labor problems, Canada is an unreliable source of wind. So what you need is a wind collection device, such as the Goodyear blimp, to store the wind for use during times of Canadian labor unrest.

SEA POWER

The sea is potentially a source of vast amounts of electrical energy, as well as haddock. Scientists predict that some day, possibly as early as next week, whole cities will be powered by the sea. The key will be gigantic undersea electric turbines, whose blades will be turned by the relentless, powerful motion of lobsters walking along the sea bed. If you live near the sea and own a gigantic electric turbine, you can harness this power today. The trick is to make sure your turbine is parallel with the prevailing lobster motion.

ATOMIC POWER

At one time atomic power was considered difficult to handle, but these days just about every dirtball little country has it, and I see no reason why you shouldn't, too. You'll need an atomic reactor. This is a good time to buy one: Most of your electric companies are trying to unload their reactors because they might have this defect wherein they heat up and go all the way through the earth and destroy Communist China, so you can probably pick one up for a song. Don't worry about the Communist Chinese. They're not losing any sleep over you, believe me.

Chapter 4. Plumbing: Troubleshooting Your Plumbing With A Loaded Sidearm

You should worry incessantly about your plumbing. No doubt you have heard the tragic story of the family who went away on vacation, unaware that one of their pipes had sprung a small leak. By the time they returned, the leak had destroyed the home and all their possessions, forcing them to collect \$175,000 from the insurance company and use the money to go to Hawaii and buy a small, chic restaurant that became fabulously successful, so now all they do is lie around on the beach sipping tropical rum drinks.

This needless tragedy would never have occurred if this family had taken more of an interest in its plumbing. Plumbing is one of the easiest of do-it-yourself activities, requiring only a few simple tools and a willingness to stick your arm into a clogged toilet after a diseased houseguest has used it. In fact, you can solve many home plumbing problems, such as an annoying faucet drip, merely by turning up the radio. But before we get into any specific plumbing techniques, let's look at how plumbing works.

A plumbing system is very much like your electrical system, except that instead of electricity, it has water, and instead of wires, it has pipes, and instead of radios and waffle irons, it has faucets and toilets. So the truth is that your plumbing system is nothing at all like your electrical system, which is good, because electricity can kill you.

The major problem with plumbing systems is that they leak. To understand why, imagine that you're on a cross-country bus trip and you have drunk three six-packs of beer single-handedly and you really, really have to go to the bathroom, only the bus doesn't have a bathroom and the driver refuses to stop until he gets to Elkhart, Indiana, which is 280 miles away. That is how your home plumbing system feels all the time. It sits there filled with water, day in and day out, until after a while all it can think about is leaking.

The key to preventing leaks is proper maintenance. At least once a year (and more often if you have a small brain) you should go around and poke at the various elements of your plumbing system with the end of a cane. If you see anything the least bit suspicious, make a note of it in a spiral notebook. This routine maintenance program will prevent many plumbing headaches. And if anything does go wrong, don't be afraid to tackle it yourself. Remember: The only difference between you and an experienced master plumber is that he is an experienced master plumber, whereas you are not.

What to do when a pipe breaks

1. Go down to the dankest corner of the basement and locate the valve that turns off all the water in the house. This will be the valve that is covered with slime and a spiderweb containing a spider and the festering bodies of dead insects.
2. Using a 3/4-inch drive socket wrench or a tire iron, prod the spider firmly until it scuttles off to some other area of the basement, muttering angrily.
3. Turn the valve handle clockwise until it breaks off in your hand like a damp pretzel, which is the signal that the water is off.
4. Locate the broken pipe and replace it with a new pipe in such a manner that it will not leak even when it has water going through it.
5. Have a plumber turn the water back on. This job is best left to a professional, since (a) the handle is broken off and (b) the spider has returned with thousands of poisonous friends and relatives to defend the valve. Be sure to select a plumber who has a good reputation and life insurance and a flamethrower.

The history of the toilet

The toilet was invented several hundred years ago by Sir Robert Toilet, an Englishman who was trying to put an end to war. At the time, everybody went to the bathroom outdoors, which, as you can imagine, was fairly disgusting. So countries were always trying to go to the bathroom in other countries. Thousands of, say, Frenchmen would suddenly appear in Germany, relieve themselves, and stride back to France, snickering; the next day even greater numbers of Germans would retaliate. Eventually the dispute would escalate into a war, which was even worse, because of the horses. Then, thankfully, Sir Robert had his idea: Instead of going to the bathroom on the ground in other countries, why not go to the bathroom in a toilet? This would put an end to needless wars and give everybody a chance to read magazines. The idea caught on, and today very few wars are caused by the French and the Germans going to the bathroom on each other's land, which is not to say that they don't want to.

Three Useful Tips for Unclogging a Clogged Toilet

Before you attempt to unclog the toilet, make sure that it is a toilet that you are responsible for. If it is in a public restroom, or someone else's home, don't give it another thought. Just sidle out of the room as if nothing has happened.

If the clog is caused by something soft, such as a corsage, you can dislodge it simply by firing a .22-caliber pistol into the toilet.

For tougher clogs, such as turtles or jewelry, you'll need to flush a lit cherry bomb, which you can obtain from any reliable teenager.

Chapter 5. Walls: Paneling, And Other Common Mistakes

Walls are an important part of any home, because they keep the roof from falling down and damaging your television set. But walls are more than just structural; they are also large objects that you have to cover with something. The three major wall coverings, in ascending order of unattractiveness, are paint, wallpaper, and paneling.

How To Paint A Room

1. To determine how much paint you'll need, stand with your back against an end wall of the room you plan to paint, then take little mincing steps across the room until you mince into the opposite wall. Now repeat the procedure, only start with your back against a side wall. Now multiply the number of steps by the length of your foot in inches, making sure you subtract for windows. This will tell you the number of square inches your floor would be if it had windows in it.

2. Go to a paint store and buy six gallons of paint. Oil-based paint is tough and adheres extremely well to any surface, especially human skin. Your best bet is latex paint, which comes in a wide variety of colors, all of them white. Well, almost white. Paint manufacturers have tried for years to make plain white paint, but unfortunately their factories are old and unsanitary, and the paint batches always end up getting contaminated with rodent droppings. So all the paint comes out off-white, and they have to give it classy names like Oyster White or Antique White, on the grounds that nobody would buy it if they called it Rodent Dropping White.

3. Now it's time to paint. Read the directions on the paint can, which will contain some snotty statement such as "CAUTION: SURFACE MUST BE FREE OF

DIRT, GREASE, AND PEELING OR FLAKING PAINT." This is utter nonsense, of course. If the surface were free of dirt, grease, and peeling or flaking paint, why on earth would you want to paint it? So don't waste any time preparing the surface. Go ahead and paint the damn surface, dirt and all. If you see any insects, paint over them, too, unless they are major tropical insects, in which case you should first smash them flat with a

23-ounce rubber-tipped mallet, such as your professional painters use.

Wallpaper

Wallpaper dates back to colonial times, when people had much smaller brains. It would have died out years ago if not for the fact that women get pregnant. Pregnancy causes women to secrete a hormone that compels them to want to install wallpaper with jungle animals on it in the baby's room. My wife and I installed jungle-animal wallpaper on a hot August day when she was about 17 months pregnant, and she was a driven woman. She was determined to make the head of the rhinoceros on one sheet of wallpaper line up with the rhinoceros body on the adjacent sheet. Proper rhinoceros alignment is very important to your child's development. Children who grow up looking at rhinoceros heads springing out of, say, clown bodies, are likely to grow up to become drug addict ax murderers or members of the state legislature.

The easy way to wallpaper a room

Don't be an idiot. There is no easy way to wallpaper a room. The finest scientific minds in the nation have been working on this problem for decades, and they have failed miserably.

Oh, sure, the salesman at the wallpaper store will tell you it's easy to install wallpaper, but you'll notice his store walls aren't wallpapered. They're painted Rodent Dropping White.

Paneling

Paneling is a surprisingly easy way to make any room less attractive. A panel is simply a four-by-eight-foot piece of compressed industrial waste that has been finished in such a way that it looks nothing whatsoever like wood, then given an absurd name such as Heritage Oak. If you were to show a typical piece of paneling to 100 people chosen at random, and ask them what it was, they would all answer, "I don't know, but it's not wood."

Many homeowners panel their basements, because basement walls are usually cold, dank concrete with earthworms oozing through the cracks. The idea is that if you put paneling up, you'll transform your basement into a warm, friendly recreation room where the family can play bumper pool and have several hours of meaningful family togetherness until the earthworms start oozing through the cracks between the panels.

Paneling Tips

The shiny, plasticlike side of the paneling should always face the inside of the room, unless you think the unfinished industrial-waste side is more attractive.

The easiest way to install paneling is to simply lean it up against the walls all around the room. This way, you can remove it quickly and hide it in the garage when tasteful visitors come to call.

If you decide to attach the panels permanently, you may have to adjust them slightly to allow for doors and windows, assuming you intend to continue to use the doors and windows.

Chapter 6. Heating And Cooling

New-age, chic alternatives to tacky fossil fuels

There was a time, during the Eisenhower administration, when most homes were heated via thermostats. Just one of these wondrous little devices, no larger than a snuff box, could automatically heat an entire house. This left everybody with lots of free time to worry about international communism or watch "Leave It to Beaver."

You may be fortunate enough to have a 1950s-style home that is still heated by a thermostat. If-so, you should count your blessings, because many, many homes in the past decade were built by deranged granolaoriented ecology nuts who are opposed to convenience in any form, and who therefore tried to

heat their homes with wood.

Wood heat: inefficient, but dangerous

Wood heat is highly ecological, since trees are a renewable resource. If you cut down a tree, another will grow in its place. And if you cut down the new tree, still another will grow. And if you cut down that tree, yet another will grow, only this one will be a mutation with long, poisonous tentacles and revenge in its heart, and it will sit there in the forest, cackling and making elaborate plans for when you come back.

To heat your house with wood, you'll need a good wood source. The best wood sources are woodpiles, which can be found in most suburban backyards in early fall. You should gather your wood very early in the morning, wearing dark clothing and a loaded sidearm. You should try to gather hardwoods, such as veneer, because these extinguish themselves automatically seconds after you light them, which makes them very safe. You should avoid the softwoods, such as cork, because these burn far too easily. You can cause a piece of softwood to explode into flame merely by dropping it on the ground.

The principle behind wood heat is that wood contains a certain number of British Thermal Units, or Btu's. Btu's are these little thermal units invented by the British to tell you how much heat you have in your wood, and like everything else invented by the British, they don't work. Let's say you have a log made of oak. Now a British person would claim that you're going to get maybe 10,000 Btu's of heat when you burn your log, but in fact you're going to get 6 Btu's of heat and 9,994 Btu's of smoke. This is why virtually everyone in England wears sweaters all the time.

Now you'll need someplace to burn your wood. You should not use your fireplace, because scientists now believe that, contrary to popular opinion, fireplaces actually remove heat from houses. Really, that's what scientists believe. In fact, many scientists actually use their fireplaces to cool their houses in the summer. If you visit a scientist's house on a sultry August day, you'll find a cheerful fire roaring on the hearth and the scientist sitting nearby, remarking on how cool he is and drinking heavily.

Instead of a fireplace, you should heat your house with a woodstove, preferably one that is airtight. To test for airtightness, leave a smallish animal that your children have not grown fond of, such as a chicken, inside the stove for several days. You can use the chicken later to clean your chimney.

Wood-burning stoves are large, squat, black objects that range widely in price from \$500 to \$525 and come in a variety of attractive styles designed to enhance the appearance of any room whose appearance would be enhanced by the presence of a large, squat, black object. Your stove must be installed safely, so this is something you should leave in the hands of somebody who will charge you a great deal of money. But once it's installed, your stove will give you hours of comfort and enjoyment, unless you burn wood in it, in which case it will give you hours of smoke and fear caused by the fact that you have an insanely hot metal object in your living room.

What to Do about a Cold, Drafty Room

No matter what kind of heating system you have, you'll probably find that one room always feels cold and drafty. The commonest cause of this problem is demonic possession. Demons are always taking over rooms and making them colder. This is annoying, but it's a heck of a lot better than when they take

over bodies and turn their heads around backwards or make them speak dead languages, the way they did to that little girl in *The Exorcist*.

If you want to get rid of the demons, you'll need a caulking gun and some caulking. Clear out a space in the middle of the floor of the possessed room, and squeeze the caulking onto the floor in a mystical, demon-repelling pattern. The good news is that this will cause the demon to stop possessing the room. The bad news is that it will be looking for something else to possess, so be alert if you find your head is rotating like a bar stool.

Heating your home with solar energy

Solar heat comes from the sun, which is really nothing more than a nearby star, which means it could explode at any minute. In the meantime, though, the sun is giving off scads of energy in the form of rays, which slam into the Earth at nearly the speed of light and bounce back into outer space, where they illuminate the moon, form comets, etc. But you can also use these rays to form heat. If you were to capture just one-billionth of the rays that hit your house every day, all your appliances would melt.

The easiest way to heat your house with solar energy is to move it to Central America, which is located directly under the sun. You'll start feeling much, much warmer in a matter of minutes, and you'll never complain about high fuel bills again. You'll be too busy fending off tarantulas the size of briefcases.

Air conditioners

All air conditioners work essentially the same way: They take warm air and make it cooler somehow. If your air conditioner fails to operate properly, the chances are that one or more parts is broken. To repair it, you should take it to the basement and hit it (see Chapter 3, "Electricity").

Heat pumps

Heat pumps are a new wrinkle on the heating and cooling scene: in the summer, they cool your home, and in the winter, they heat it! How is this possible? Heat pump manufacturers tell us the secret is that even on the coldest day, there is some heat in the outside air, and the heat pump extracts this heat. This is a lie, of course. There is no heat in the air on cold days. That's why we call them "cold days." If there's so much heat out there on cold days, how come you never see heat pump manufacturers frolicking outside in bathing suits, huh? Answer me that.

The truth is that heat pumps work via theft. Even on the coldest days, there is heat in your neighbors' houses. The heat pump sucks up this heat, like some kind of gigantic electrical leech, and uses it to keep you warm. On a really cold day, your heat pump may have to range for miles to keep you warm; it will steal heat from churches, old peoples' homes, orphanages, hospitals, etc. It will even suck the heat out of newly born puppies. This is definitely the high-tech heat source of the future. You should get one before your neighbor does.

Chapter 7. Insulation And Weather Proofing

Kicking the crutches out from under Old Man Winter

During the winter, heated air is constantly escaping from your home. During the summer, cooled air is constantly escaping from your home. If you had a brain in your head, you'd get the hell out of your home before you die of oxygen deprivation. Your other option is insulation.

Even though insulation is one of the most important and boring issues of the day, many people don't know how it works. I certainly don't. I have read dozens of articles about how to insulate and weather-strip my home, and they're all full of terms I don't understand, like this: "When caulking your windows, be sure to put a 1/8-inch bead of polyvinyl-butylacetate caulking between the jamb and the main soffit adjacent to the eave cornice, taking care not to dislodge the newels."

Now I have looked at my windows, and I cannot for the life of me locate any of these things. All I have in my windows are pieces of wood and poisonous spiders. I don't have the vaguest idea where to put the caulking. This is a problem because, as you have probably noticed, caulking guns are designed so that as soon as you pick them up, the caulking starts oozing out, and it keeps on oozing out until there is none left. This is a clever ploy of the caulking manufacturers to keep themselves in business.

So anyway, I end up standing outside my window, looking for the eave cornice, with caulking oozing onto my pants, until finally I give up and smear some caulking on the spiders and go inside.

So I thought, as a public service, I would explain home insulation in layman's terms. I will do it in the handy question-and-answer format in which I make up questions and then answer them, which is a heck of a lot easier than answering real questions.

Eight common stupid questions about insulation

Q: Where should I put insulation?

A: Wherever you can work comfortably. The worst place is the attic, because attics are hot, dangerous places, full of filthy objects and rabid bats. Oh, I know do-it-yourself home insulation articles always have pictures showing a cheerful homeowner cheerfully insulating his attic, but these pictures are frauds. I mean, look at the attic they show: It always looks clean, well lit, and safe, unlike any other attic in the known world. What those articles don't tell you is that when the pictures were taken, dozens of highly trained men were standing just out of camera range, holding the bats at bay with semiautomatic rifles. So stay out of your attic. Put your insulation someplace safe and convenient, such as in your den or along your driveway.

Q: What kind of insulation should I buy?

A: You should definitely not buy synthetic insulation, which comes in grotesque colors and is harsh and scratchy and leaves you covered with prickly little things that will never come off as long as you live. I suggest you buy insulation that is naturally soft and washable and can be dyed to match your den decor. Cotton is a good choice.

Q: How much insulation do I need?

A: Four thousand dollars' worth.

Q: What about blown-in insulation?

A: Blown-in insulation is fine, if you don't mind a fuzzy tongue and wads of spit-covered insulation all over the place.

Q: How does insulation work?

A: To understand how insulation works, conduct this simple home experiment.

1. Mix yourself a stiff gin and tonic in a tall glass, then drink it. Notice how cold the glass feels? Repeat this procedure several times, until you have a really good idea how cold the glass feels.
2. Now wrap a piece of insulation around the glass and pour yourself several more gin and tonics and drink them. Notice how much warmer the glass feels? Even your stomach feels warmer, doesn't it?
3. Repeat the procedure several times, and you'll start having all kinds of major insights about insulation. It also works fairly well on the Middle East crisis.

Q: Do I actually have to install the insulation in my house to qualify for the federal tax credit?

A: No. You can leave it in your garage, or, if you prefer, simply toss it out of your car window on the way home from the insulation store.

Q: What is "R-value"?

A: I don't know. It was one of those things that were in vogue back during the 1970s, like disco and the metric system, but you hardly ever hear anybody talk about it any more, so I wouldn't worry about it. I don't think it's suspected of causing cancer or anything.

Q: What about dirt?

A: Dirt is a superb natural insulator. It is not mere coincidence that the Amazon jungle, which is filthy, is one of the warmest places on Earth. During the great energy crises of the 1970s, many smart, energy-conscious, patriotic homeowners stopped cleaning their houses or bathing or even wiping off the slime that grows around the base of the toilet, and today their heating bills are extremely low, although I should point out that they spend an average of \$65,000 a year on antibiotics.

Caulking Doors And Windows

Energy experts tell us that caulking doors and windows is one of the easiest ways to get caulking all over yourself. Here's how you do it:

1. Take a good, close look around the edges of your front door. See all those tiny cracks? Ignore them. I mean, why waste your time on tiny cracks? It's the door hole (the hole that appears in your house when you open the door) that you should be worrying about. Old Man Winter isn't going to mess around with cracks when he can just waltz through the door hole.
2. Go to your home center or hardware store and get a caulking gun and enough caulking to plug your door and window holes. A typical door hole will require 750 tubes of caulking, but you'll save so much energy that the caulking job will easily pay for itself by the time the Earth establishes permanent colonies on the planet Jupiter.
3. Apply the caulking in such a manner that Old Man Winter will be unable to waltz through the door hole.

Chapter 8. Masonry: At Last, A Practical Use

For Maine

“Masonry” is a term used in the building profession to describe any kind of building material that can fall on you and kill you. The big advantage of masonry structures is that they last thousands of years; the only real drawback is that they eventually become haunted. The two most popular projects for do-it-yourselfers are walls and pyramids.

How To Build A Wall

1. Drive two stakes into the ground and stretch a string between them to serve as a guide for where your wall will be.*
2. Attach a row of bricks or other masonry units to your string. Always start from the top, so your wall will have a nice, even appearance.

3. Using cement or masking tape, attach a second layer of masonry units under the first, and so on, forming tasteful and traditional masonry patterns. Do not remove the string until your wall reaches all the way to the ground.

*Despite what many so-called professionals will tell you, your string should not be level with respect to the horizon. You probably can't even see the horizon from where you live, so the hell with it. Your string should be level with respect to the ground. This principle was discovered thousands of years ago by the ancient Chinese when they built the Great Wall of China to keep out the marauding barbarian hordes. If the ancient Chinese had been so stupid as to build the Great Wall parallel to the horizon, the barbarians would have been able to barge right into China. So the Chinese wisely built the wall parallel to the ground, which stopped the barbarians. Of course, the ancient Chinese were fortunate that the barbarians weren't bright enough to simply throw a few ladders together and climb over the wall, but that's why they were called barbarians. All they knew how to do was maraud around in hordes, and as often as not they got that wrong. The bottom line is that there is a right way and a wrong way to stretch your string, and you should stretch it the right way.

An Easy Home Pyramid In Three Steps

Some do-it-yourselfers hesitate to build pyramids because they have been led to believe it is extremely difficult. The blame for this widespread misconception has to rest squarely on the shoulders of archeologists, who are always announcing in loud voices that they don't have the vaguest notion how the Great Pyramids of Egypt were built. Well, of course they don't. They're archeologists, for God's sake. When the rest of us were learning useful skills, they were out squatting on some wretched desert somewhere digging up little snippets of ancient pottery and trying to glue them together so as to form ancient pots. They wouldn't know how to seal a Tupperware container, let alone build a pyramid.

I have personally conducted a very thorough study of a photograph of a pyramid in the Encyclopedia Britannica, and I have concluded that the ancient Egyptians built them by piling up a lot of great big stones in the shape of a pyramid. I see nothing particularly difficult about this, and I encourage all of you to rush right out and build a pyramid according to the instructions below.

MATERIALS

50,000 hewing tools A source of rocks, such as the coast of Maine

150,000 college students. College students are perfect for pyramid building, because they're strong and they're used to engaging in elaborate, pointless mass activities, such as attending college.

DIRECTIONS

1. Line up your students and have them count off by threes to form three teams, the Hewers, the Haulers, and the Hefters. Encourage the teams to make up team cheers and play pranks on each other and stick their fingers in the air and yell "We're Number One!" so as to build a sense of college-style fun that will make them work without food or water until they drop.

2. Position your Hewers on the coast of Maine and have them hew it into large blocks of stone, each about the size of a bungalow, which your Haulers should haul to your pyramid site. NOTE: Maine probably has a Department of Environmental Activities or some other ecology-nut organization that will come up with all kinds of picky reasons why it's illegal to remove the coast, so the police may try to stop one of your blocks as the Haulers inch it toward the state line. Under no circumstances should your Haulers try to outrun the police, because once you get a gigantic stone block going three or four miles an hour it becomes very difficult to control, which could lead to major damage in the form of hernias. A much better approach is to disguise the stone blocks as Rose Bowl parade-style floats, which are perfectly logical objects for college students to be hauling around, and thus unlikely to make the police suspicious.

3. Have your Hefters form the blocks into a pyramid full of hidden passageways and vaults containing ancient dead Egyptians and invaluable art objects. It might help if you provided the Hefters with a pyramid-shaped string stretched between two stakes but don't feel that you have to. You've done enough already.

Chapter 9. Easy Projects: Getting Off To A Slow Start

Here are a few beginner's projects for do-it-yourselfers, or even craftsmen who have become heavily dependent upon narcotic substances. The first weds two boards together in a way that is not only attractive, but also highly practical around the home.

Project #1: Two Boards Attached Together

MATERIALS

1 board, preferably wooden, 11' 13/18" x 45/32" x 7'4 15/15" or some other size 1 drop of the glue that is advertised on television as being capable of lifting a domestic automobile

TOOLS

Various saws or axes such as you might use to divide a board into 2 separate boards so you can attach them together again in the form of a project. A stubby, craftsmanlike pencil

DIRECTIONS

1. Look down one edge of the board in a highly critical manner, as you have seen professional

carpenters do. If you see anything in the least bit suspicious, report it to the police immediately.

2. Using a copy of Newsweek magazine as a guide, draw a line across the board with your pencil.

3. Carefully whack the board on or near the line with an ax or saw until it is actually 2 boards.

4. Use your glue to assemble your project. Be very careful in handling the glue, so as not to permit your project to become permanently bonded to your head.

OPTIONAL SAFETY DEVICE

To prevent injury from the jagged board edges, install a rubber glove on each end.

Project #2: A Highly Modular And Portable Total Home Storage System Made From Industrial Refuse

Probably the single biggest problem in the entire world today is lack of storage space. Look at Asia. From what I read in the newspapers, I gather Asia has all these huddled masses of people teeming around with no place to store anything, and everybody is wretched. I bet your own home is no different; you can never find anything, and you're always tripping over things. This is mainly because you drink too much, but it wouldn't hurt to have more storage space.

Well, here's a total home storage system that will easily hold every object and domestic animal you own, yet can be easily moved or disassembled should you want to burn it. The secret is that it has a modern modular design, which means that it is actually packing crates piled on top of each other.

MATERIALS

A great many packing crates, which you can obtain at any large factory merely by demanding them at gunpoint. Also pick up a forklift.

TOOLS

A cattle prod

DIRECTIONS

Stack your crates in a modular fashion, then place your possessions in them, using your cattle prod to keep your domestic animals in place and ward off law enforcement agents should they attempt to reclaim your forklift.

Project #3: Cutting Board/ Platform Bed

Homeowners constantly complain, "I have room for a cutting board or a platform bed, but not both." If that sounds like you, then this project is just what the doctor ordered. By day, it's a cutting board that's spacious enough for all your cutting needs, including whole roast oxen. By night, it's a modern, hippie-style platform bed that combines the advantages of simple design with the advantages of sleeping on the floor.

MATERIALS

A sheet of plywood

TOOLS

An industrial-grade spatula

DIRECTIONS

1. Assemble the plywood.
2. To use the project as a cutting board, simply place it in an attractive kitchen location and cut things on it.
3. To convert it to a platform bed, simply flip it over and place it on the floor.
4. To convert it back to a cutting board, use the spatula to pry it off the floor, which it will be attached to by congealed oxen blood.

Chapter 10. Impossible Projects: How To Build A Hot Tub And A Hotter Computer

Now that you've built the simple and utterly useless starter projects in Chapter 9, why not tackle these two advanced projects? One reason that springs to mind is that nobody has ever been able to get either of them to work. Another is the likelihood of serious injury or death. If you need any more reasons, drop me a note, because I'm sure I can come up with dozens.

Project #1: Easy-To-Build Hot Tub

Have you ever wondered what makes Californians so calm? Besides drugs, I mean. The answer is hot tubs. A hot tub is a redwood container filled with water that you sit in naked with members of the opposite sex who are not necessarily your spouse. After a few hours in their hot tubs, Californians don't give a damn about earthquakes or mass murderers. They don't give a damn about anything, which is why they are able to produce "Laverne and Shirley" week after week.

MATERIALS

Footers and headers Many redwood slats Water A couple hundred gallons of Clorox Penicillin

TOOLS

Shovel Tub-making implements

DIRECTIONS

I suggest you locate your hot tub outside your house, so it won't do too much damage if it catches fire or explodes. First, you decide which direction your hot tub should face for maximum solar energy. After much trial and error, I have found that the best direction for a hot tub to face is up.

The next step is to dig the footers. I'm not really sure why hot tubs need footers, but I have yet to read a do-it-yourself article that didn't order the reader to dig a few footers, and I see no reason why I should be any more lenient than the other writers. Your footers should extend down to the "frost line," which is a line of frost that you'll come to if you dig deep enough. If you live in a normal state, such as Ohio, you should find the frost line about 2 feet down. If you live in Florida, you'll have to dig 40

or 50 feet to find any frost; if you live in Maine, you'll find your frost line 10 to 12 feet above the ground, almost any time of year.

Once you've dug your footers, you should build some headers and several joists, taking care not to mortise the soffits. Now all you have to do is get a large quantity of redwood slats and attach them together in such a manner that they form a watertight tub, and you're all set to go ... except that now you need some way to get water into the tub and heat it.

Contrary to what a lot of so-called experts will tell you, you don't need fancy plumbing and a filtering system for your hot tub. All you need to do is fill it up with the garden hose, or used dishwater. This approach is much cheaper and the only drawback is that after a couple of days the water will teem with every known form of deadly mutant disease-causing microorganism. So if you're a real health fanatic, you might want to test the tub before you use it by tossing in a cat or a neighbor's child. If neither of these is available, you might want to pour in a couple of hundred gallons of Clorox mixed with penicillin just to be on the safe side.

The only other question is how you're going to heat your outdoor hot tub once the cool fall weather rolls around. One method that we have found to be simple, cheap, and dangerous is the wood-burning stove. What we do is perch the stove on a ledge above the hot tub, get it up to about 36,000 degrees Fahrenheit, then tip it over into the tub. In a matter of seconds, the water that was once merely tepid is warm enough to vaporize stainless steel, and many of the deadly mutant disease-causing microorganisms are dead. Of course, the ones that survive are usually very angry, so it's best to wait a week or two before you actually plunge in.

Project #2: Homemade Computer

Despite what you've heard from computer salesmen, home computers are actually straightforward devices that can be built in an afternoon by anyone who has a few simple tools and the brains of a spittoon.

Once you have gained some experience with your computer, you can program it to do the kinds of things that computers owned by major corporations do, such as destroy the credit ratings of people you don't even know, or answer your telephone automatically and tell your callers that everybody in your house is too busy to talk to them. And besides all these advantages, my easy-to-make personal home computer, which is the result of months of research, experimentation, and heavy drinking, can actually heat your home. Impossible, you say? Why not build it and find out?

First, head down to your home workshop and gather together the tools and materials you'll need.

MATERIALS

Solder A television set 8 to 10 pounds of assorted electronic parts, which you can buy wherever electronic parts are sold. I find that transistors work best, although you can use diodes, provided they're fresh.

TOOLS

A screwdriver An ice pick A drill A Bowie knife A hacksaw Something to melt solder with, such as a soldering gun or toaster

DIRECTIONS

Now you're all set. Remove the back from the television cabinet, and, using your ice pick, chip out the insides and throw them away. Next, using your Bowie knife, stab the top of the cabinet to create an eight-inch gash.

Now arrange your electronic parts on your workbench in an attractive display and melt solder on them until they all stick together, taking care not to drop too much molten solder on your dog. Next, you can either wait for the parts to cool off, or, if you're in a hurry, simply dump them in a bucket of water. (CAUTION: Never touch the hot parts with your bare hands. Ask a neighbor to do this.)

Once the soldered-together parts are cool, drill a few holes in them and screw them to the inside of your television set, using your optional hacksaw on either the television set or the parts to insure a good fit. Now all you need to do is reattach the cabinet back and check to make sure your fire insurance is paid up. You're ready to enter the World of Home Computing.

First, you'll need some data to put in, or "input." Have your children go around the house, inside and out, and gather up, or "upgather," all your bills, check stubs, candy wrappers, receipts, lawn clippings, tax records, and lint balls. The more data you give your computer, the better it will work. To input your data, simply stuff it into the Bowie-knife gash.

Next, send your children to another room, or, if possible, another state; then plug your computer in. For a few seconds, nothing will happen, but then you'll hear the computer start to process, or "process," the data. Before long, you'll actually be able to see it working, even smell it; after 20 minutes or so, your computer will be processing data at such a rate that your entire house will be warm as toast. In fact, this easy-to-make personal home computer produces heat so effectively that since I built mine, we haven't spent a nickel on home heating, primarily because of the medical bills.

Chapter 11. Household Pests: Getting Tough With Toads

In this chapter, we'll explore various techniques for reducing common household pests to lifeless blobs of tissue. Now before I get a lot of angry letters from ecology nuts, let me assure you that I am all in favor of wildlife, as long as it stays in its place, which is Africa. I believe that if God had wanted us to share our homes with insects, He would not have made them so unattractive.

Although the techniques described in this chapter are designed primarily for the smaller styles of pests, they will also work on larger ones, such as goats or people who want you to become an Amway distributor.

Termites

Termites are unattractive little insects that have developed a highly complex society, very much like American society, except that instead of houses they have nests, and instead of a president they have a queen. The queen can lay up to 46,000 eggs a day, more than eight times the output of the most productive U.S. president, Grover Cleveland (1837-1908). So we can see that termites are indeed amazing creatures.

Beneath the queen in the termite hierarchy are the drones, and beneath them are the workers, who are chosen for their stupidity. Each day, thousands of workers scurry from the nest in search of wood, with the idea that they will chew it up and mix it with spit and bring it back to the queen. The queen doesn't want it, of course; nothing appeals to her less than chewed wood mixed with termite spit. So the instant they leave the nest, she and a few top aides swarm off to another house, probably yours.

The easiest way to keep termites away is to install a 6,000-volt, one-inch-high electrical fence around your house. This fence will keep out not only termites, but also most snakes. Of course, the snakes that do get past the fence are likely to be extremely angry, so it might be a good idea to wear a sidearm at all

times.

Roaches

Roaches are the hardiest form of life on earth. In a recent experiment, scientists detonated a hydrogen bomb directly on top of a female roach, and the only noticeable effect was that several days later she gave birth to 65,000 baby roaches, some of them weighing as much as three pounds.

Many people believe they can get rid of roaches by spraying them with poisonous chemicals, but this is utter nonsense. Roaches love poisonous chemicals. They'll often gather under the sink late at night and lick the residue off the Black Flag can. The more chemicals you spray, the more roaches you attract. This is how your professional exterminators stay in business.

The only surefire way to get rid of roaches is to remove all the liquor from your house. Roaches can mate only when they're drunk. Can you blame them? Would you mate with a roach if you were sober? So what roaches do is get really drunk, then have hurried, squalid sex amongst the filth and little rolled-up balls of grease and ketchup in the darkness under the refrigerator. The next morning the female lays 35 billion eggs and vows never to do anything so disgusting again, but by nightfall she and her mate are creeping up the side of the Jim Beam bottle again. Alcohol abuse is a terrible problem among roaches, which is why you see so few of them in positions of responsibility. So you'll be doing them a big favor if you get rid of your liquor. It might also be a nice idea if you and your family squatted in front of the refrigerator from time to time and had inspirational discussions about the evils of drink.

Children

You cannot simply spray toxic chemicals on children the way you can with roaches, because children represent our Hope for a Brighter Tomorrow. So the best way to deal with pesky children is to read them a few old-fashioned traditional fairy tales in which various deformed creatures ingest children who do not behave. At the end of the story, say: "See, Bobby? If you don't want the great big ogre with eyes that glow like red-hot coals in the darkness to come into your room tonight and plunge his enormous yellow fanglike teeth repeatedly into your flesh, you must never set fire to Daddy's legs again." Or, if this approach doesn't work, you can simply place your children in the washing machine and set it on Spin Dry.

Mice

The best way to get rid of mice is to set traps. To illustrate why traps are so effective, let's look at what goes on behind the scenes in a mouse family.

It's a cold winter's evening, and Momma and Poppa Mouse are putting little Debbie and Jimmy Mouse to bed. "Oh, Momma," Debbie cries, sniffing her little pink nose as a tiny tear trickles from her deep, brown eyes to her soft, gray fur. "I'm so hungry I don't think I can sleep. Couldn't we have something to eat, please?"

"Now, now," sighs Momma Mouse. "You know how upset the humans get when we eat their food."

“That’s right,” chimes in Poppa Mouse. “And frankly, I don’t want to upset the humans any more, because they’ve been acting mighty odd lately. The other day, they were squatting in front of the refrigerator and talking about liver damage.”

“But Daddy,” says little Jimmy Mouse. “If we don’t get something to eat soon, we’ll starve to death, and it’s Christmas Eve. Besides, there’s a stale old piece of cheese just outside the hole, and I’m sure the humans wouldn’t mind if we ate it.”

“You’re right, Jimmy,” says Poppa Mouse pensively. “I’ll just go outside here and pick up this piece of ...”

Toads

The only way I know of to get rid of toads is to clear the children out of the room and strike them (the toads) with hot poker.

Chapter 12. The Lawn And Garden: Why All The Plants In Your Garden Hate You, And How To Win Their Respect

You should take care of your yard, because it tells people a lot about you. For example, if you have a lot of yard statues, it tells people you’re a jerk.

The most important part of your yard is the lawn. In America, having a nice lawn is considered a major cultural achievement, like owning a hardcover book or watching “Meet the Press.” Americans would rather live next to a pervert heroin addict Communist pornographer than a person with an unkempt lawn.

Drugs And Your Lawn

The first step toward a nice lawn is to determine the chemical content of your soil. To do this, dig up a handful of soil and examine it carefully under a harsh light: It should be composed of dirt, unless you live in New England, in which case it will be composed of enormous rocks; if you live in the South, your soil may also contain used tires.

Once you’ve determined the chemical content, you should add some random chemicals to your soil. Many lawn experts recommend that you add nitrogen, which is stupid, because nitrogen is a gas, and there is no way in the world you can add it to your lawn. It will simply drift off into the atmosphere the instant you open the bag. So your best bet is to just go up to the medicine cabinet and root around for some chemicals in the form of old prescription pills and dump them on your lawn.

I use old tranquilizers on my lawn, and not only have I saved a lot of money on chemicals, but I’ve also found that I have an extremely relaxed lawn. Take the earthworms. Instead of sliming around underground in a nervous, twitching manner, as so many worms do, my worms loll about on the lawn surface, laughing the laugh of the truly carefree. Oh, sure, sometimes they get underfoot, but it’s a lot

better than the time I gave them amphetamines and they were up all night shrieking about how nobody loved them.

Dandelions And Crabgrass

Dandelions are easy to get rid of: You just jab them with red-hot knitting needles. Some people even eat them in soups and salads. Most of these people die within hours.

Crabgrass, the squat, ugly, tattooed plant that makes up 85 percent of your lawn, is tougher. Crabgrass can grow on bowling balls in airless rooms, and there is no known way to kill it that does not involve nuclear weapons. Oh, I know you've seen advertisements for lawn products that are supposed to kill crabgrass, but don't believe them. Crabgrass thrives on these products. In fact, my crabgrass often tries to dupe me into buying them. When I'm getting into my car, my crabgrass will yell, in mock horror, "Oh, please, don't go to the garden supply store and buy one of those deadly anticrabgrass lawn products!"

The only way to deal with crabgrass is to sneak up on it in the dead of night, pound it repeatedly with a ball-peen hammer, and flee on foot before it can snare you by the ankles. You won't kill the crabgrass, of course, but it may become irritated enough to move to a neighbor's lawn.

How To Grow All Of Your Food

Your first job is to prepare the soil. The best tool for this is your neighbor's motorized garden tiller. If your neighbor does not own a garden tiller, suggest that he buy one. Then select a section of your lawn or driveway that looks as though it might have soil underneath it, and rip it up with the tiller. As the sharp steel blades slice violently into the ground, you may be able to hear the tiny screams of the various worms and furry little woodland creatures hibernating in the soil. Pay no attention.

Now you should buy some vegetable seeds, which are sold in little packets with attractive photographs on the covers to illustrate what your vegetables will not look like. The backs of the packets will give you specific planting instructions, depending on what area of the country you live in. For example, if you live in Florida, you should plant your seeds in the ground, whereas if you live in Maine, you should plant your seeds in Florida.

Once you have planted your garden, you have to deal with insects. The trick is to prevent them from eating all the seeds within minutes after you plant them, so they'll have something to eat later on. The best way to do this is to scatter sandwiches and pastries around the garden to distract the insects until the seeds have had a chance to form vegetables.

Larger animals, such as rabbits and elk, are tougher to keep away. You may have to fire a few bazooka rounds over their heads. This will also keep your neighbor at bay if he's trying to get his motorized garden tiller back.

Your only remaining task is to rotate your crops. About every two weeks, dig everything up and put it where something else was. This may seem like a lot of work, but your major farmers do it all the time. For that matter, some of your major farmers manage to get out of growing crops altogether, and the government pays them for this valuable service. You might want to try setting up the same arrangement. Instead of starting a vegetable garden, write the government a letter like this:

“Dear Sirs: I didn’t grow anything this year. Please send me \$126,000.”

I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know how the government responds, especially if it sends you money. If, on the other hand, armed federal agents arrive at your door, I’d prefer that you didn’t mention my name.

Tips On Growing Popular Vegetables

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are the most popular garden vegetables, because you can do so much with them. For example, you can eat them. The trick to growing tomatoes successfully is to stagger the planting. Plant one-fourth of your tomatoes, then wait two weeks and plant another fourth, and so on, until you have planted them all. This insures that all your tomatoes will ripen within a five-minute period late in August, usually when you are away on vacation, so you will return home to find 700 pounds of tomatoes rotting on the ground in a sodden, insect-covered mass.

Zucchini

The zucchini is a dense, flavorless vegetable that is useful primarily as ballast. You can also eat zucchini, but only in very small quantities: One zucchini is enough to satisfy the zucchini needs of a family of six for a year. The trouble is, you cannot grow just one zucchini. Minutes after you plant a single seed, hundreds of zucchinis will barge out of the ground and sprawl around the garden, menacing the other vegetables. At night, you will be able to hear the ground quake as more and more zucchinis erupt. To prevent your property from becoming one big, pulsating zucchini herd, you will be forced to sneak over to your neighbors’ houses in the dead of night and hurl excess zucchinis onto their lawns.

Cashews

Plant your cashew seeds about six inches apart, and be sure to salt them every four days.

Rhubarb

This hardy vegetable was a favorite of my mother’s. Every year, she would produce an elaborate rhubarb pie, which was second only to Brussels sprouts in the category of things we kids would rather die than eat. Rhubarb is ideal for canning. You just put it in cans, stick the cans in your pantry, then move.

Corn

Your corn should be knee-high by the Fourth of July. If it isn’t, you could be fined or jailed.

Chapter 13. Car Repair

The three keys to trouble-free motoring: animal traps, a wading pool, and this fact-crammed chapter

Most common car problems are caused by pets. The best way to avoid these problems is preventive maintenance, by which I mean always checking your car for pets before you start it. You should also change your oil all the time. This is what your top race car drivers recommend. Of course, your top race car drivers also routinely drive into walls at speeds upwards of 180 miles an hour, so I don't know that we should accept their opinions as gospel.

Handy Car Maintenance Checklist

ENGINE. The engine is the large, filthy object under your hood, unless you live in a really bad neighborhood. To understand the importance of proper maintenance, let's take a look at what goes on inside your engine when you turn the ignition key. This will require you to cut the engine open with a blowtorch, but I think you'll be glad you did.

When you turn the key, gasoline comes rushing out of the gas tank and electricity comes rushing out of the battery, and they meet in the engine, where they explode with a force that could easily reduce the engine to hundreds of pieces of red-hot shrapnel traveling at high speeds and capable of destroying every living thing within 50 feet. But this will probably not occur if every one of the 63,000 parts that make up the engine is working perfectly, which is why you should maintain your engine. Every six or seven thousand meters, open up the hood and inspect the engine closely. It should have many random tubes and wires running off toward other areas of the car. Newer engines should also have oriental writing.

How To Change Your Oil

1. Start your car and allow it to warm up.
2. Lie on your back and inch along under the car until you locate a little boltlike object that you cannot remove without a wrench, then inch back out and locate a wrench.
3. Inch back under and rotate the boltlike object counterclockwise until oil starts gushing out, just like in those old movies where John Wayne and his sidekick discover oil and dance around, except whereas they are dancing vertically in glee, you will be dancing horizontally in pain, inasmuch as the oil has been heated to roughly 6,000 degrees by the engine.
4. Speaking of the engine, I forgot to tell you to turn it off. That should have been Step 2. I'll try to remember to correct that before this book goes to the printer, so as to avoid a lot of unnecessary engine damage and death.
5. Get some oil and pour it into an orifice in the engine until you see little rivulets of oil running across the driveway because you forgot to put the little bolt back in the engine, which I suppose I should have told you to do back in Step 3, which will be Step 4 once I move the current Step 4 to Step 2, where it belongs, but frankly, I'm tired of having to think of every tiny little detail for you.

TRANSMISSION. The truth is, there is nothing you can do about your transmission. Nobody knows how transmissions work, or even where they come from. They just arrive at car factories in unmarked crates, and the workers put them into the cars. Many people believe transmissions are created by beings from other solar systems. There is evidence to support this theory, namely transmission manuals, which contain bizarre diagrams and deranged alien commands such as: “Using a 6.57 reductionended canister wrench, rotate the debenture nut 6 degrees centigrade, taking care not to disenfranchise the gesticulation valve.” So if something goes wrong with your transmission, your best bet is to just give your car to the poor and claim a tax deduction.

TIRES. Tires are extremely important, for without them the tire industry, as we now know it, would cease to exist. You should inspect your tires frequently for signs of tread and obscure little letters and numbers on the sides, which represent significant events in the lives of the tire factory employees. For example, A78-13 means “All 78 of us tire factory employees went out and got really drunk last night, so maybe 13 of the tires we make today will be any good.”

EXTERIOR. Your car’s exterior takes a real beating, especially during the summer. Hour after hour, day after day, month after month, the sun beats down on your car with harmful rays that can fade the paint and kill you if you spend any time outside trying to do anything about it. So the hell with the exterior.

EXHAUST SYSTEM. This is located under the car, smeared with road kills. From time to time you should hose it down or drive briskly through a wading pool.

Chapter 14. Redecorate Your House In A Day: And Stick “Aesthetics” Back Where It Belongs, In The Dictionary

The cheapest way to redecorate your home is to cover every horizontal surface in it with home decorating magazines filled with tasteful pictures of the interiors of homes belonging to people who spend more money on end tables in one month than you will spend on food in your entire life.

A much more expensive approach is to hire an interior decorator. Interior decorators are people who have spent years studying the principles of color, shape, and texture, until they have reached the point where they would rather die than agree with an ordinary person such as yourself on a matter of taste. So what you have to do is trick your interior decorator into believing you want the opposite of what you really want. If you want a warm, cozy, intimate look, show the decorator a picture of a General Motors brake-assembly plant. If you want a rustic look, show the decorator a picture of the Sistine Chapel. You’ll get what you want, and the decorator will think you didn’t, so everybody will be happy.

Redecorating Your Kitchen In Five Easy-For-Me-To-Say Steps

1. To get some inspiration, read a batch of home decorating magazine articles about people who completely remodeled their kitchens even though they’re incompetent jerks. These articles always begin

with a black-and-white photograph of a horrible, dingy, 1950s style kitchen, with unclean plates strewn all over and rats lounging around and waving at the camera. Then you see a glossy color photograph of a spectacularly modern kitchen that is clean enough for neurosurgery and is at least six times as large as the kitchen in the other photograph. It is obviously a completely different kitchen, probably in another state.

2. Once you have been inspired, take a hard look at your own kitchen. What don't you like about it? Is it the layer of grease and scum that has gradually built up on all the surfaces over the years, to the point where the insects have trouble getting enough traction to climb up to the counters? Or is it the color scheme? Are you among the millions of unfortunate American families whose appliances are Harvest Gold or (God help you) Avocado? Have you ever wondered why, of all the colors they had to choose from, major appliance manufacturers for many years insisted on making everything Harvest Gold or Avocado, two of the ugliest colors ever devised by the mind of man, colors more appropriate for stomach secretions than home decorating? Were they Dwight Eisenhower's favorite colors or something?

Whatever the reason, people finally came to their senses, and you can no longer find appliances in Harvest Gold or Avocado except in stores that have special sections catering to people with bad taste. Appliances now come in many attractive colors, all of which you should ignore, because appliances should be white. So should toilets. It is nature's way. It is the American way. I am sure that the only reason the U.S. Constitution does not specifically require that appliances and toilets be white is that the Founding Fathers never dreamed anybody would be stupid enough to use any other color.

3. Once you've decided on your color scheme (white), you should get a large sum of money somehow and go buy the actual appliances. The big issue here is whether you should get a regular oven or a microwave oven. A regular oven is hot inside, so when you put a tuna casserole inside, it gets hot. Is everybody with me so far? A microwave oven, on the other hand, is not hot inside. Instead, it has these tiny little rays (hundreds of them could easily fit into a woman's purse) that are manufactured in Japan. These rays travel right through the casserole dish at speeds approaching 250 miles an hour and slam into the tuna, causing it to get hot. The advantage of microwave ovens is that since only the contents get hot, you can pick the dish up with your bare hands. The disadvantage is that as soon as you open the lid, the microwaves come whizzing out in random directions, and could strike your eyeballs or furniture.

4. Once you've bought your appliances, you should get some graph paper and draw up a floor plan of your new kitchen, showing where the new appliances will go. To make this project as difficult as possible, try to put each new appliance at least 11 feet from the one it's replacing. The only exception is the refrigerator. You must not move it, because all the jelly and ketchup you spilled under there over the years and never bothered to clean up has festered and evolved into a grotesque and durable life form that, if exposed to direct sunlight, could awaken and decide to take over the world. The responsible course is to put the new refrigerator on top of the old one.

5. Your new kitchen is almost done! All that remains is for you to take out the old appliances and put in the new ones according to your plan! And put in a new floor! And cabinets! And change the wiring and plumbing all around! Let me know how it goes.

Chapter 15. Build Your Own House: On Second Thought, Don't

Here's a project for the really ambitious do-it-yourselfer with no grasp of reality: building an entire house. Not only will you save scads of money, but you'll be continuing a tradition that dates back to pioneer days, when our hardy forefathers used to whack down trees personally and form them into crude log cabins, which they would live in for maybe two days, after which they would migrate westward, because nothing in the world is worse than living in a crude log cabin. I mean, there's only one room, so you're all lying there at night listening to each other's bodily noises and smelling the aroma of congealing muskrat, or whatever pioneer dish you ate, and you hardly ever get any sleep. That's why everybody has such vacant stares in those old pioneer photographs.

So in the interest of continuing this fine old pioneer tradition, you should build your own house, following the easy, step-by-step series of steps below.

Step #1: Draw a plan

You should never start to build without some idea of what the house ought to look like when it's finished, so get yourself a piece of paper and a nice, sharp pencil, and draw yourself a house plan. The plan should consist of two parts: an outside view showing what the completed house would look like if it had smoke curling out of its chimney, and an inside view showing the location of windows, appliances, rooms, etc.

Step #2: Borrow an enormous sum of money from a bank

This is the trickiest part of home building, because you'll have to convince the banker that you know a lot about building, which is, of course, a lie. The best approach is to sprinkle your conversation with all kinds of technical building jargon.

BANKER: So, Mr. Jones, just how much money were you thinking of borrowing?

YOU (showing your plan to the banker): Well, as you can see from this plan, to insure that the lateral stability of the main structural cross-members is adequate for the stress on the head jamb likely to be created by the rotational torque of the upper sash top rail, I'll need to use a vapor degreasing system with at least 64 kilobytes of random access memory.

BANKER (extremely impressed): Here. Take \$600,000.

Step #3: Get some land

Most local building codes require that houses be built on some kind of land. One excellent source of land is Iowa, which has scads of land that nobody ever uses for anything except growing corn, which is fed to pigs anyway, so I'm sure nobody would mind if you just took a smallish plot and built your house on it. The worst that could happen is that an Iowa farmer would tell you to move your house, and I doubt this would happen because every Iowan I've ever met has been extremely nice. Another advantage of Iowa is that it is located conveniently close to Kansas.

However, if you'd prefer not to locate your house in Iowa, don't despair, because there's lots of spare land around in other places, such as along the sides of interstate highways. Some of this land even has little picnic tables and people who come along from time to time to mow the grass, so if I were you I'd snap it up before someone else does, or the Iowans start growing pig corn on it.

Another land source is estates belonging to the rich. Many of these estates are enormous, so the odds are the rich will never even notice you, especially if they are famous rock stars who travel most of the time and even when they're home they're not all that observant on account of they spend most of their leisure time trying on clothes and ingesting narcotic substances.

Step #4: Buy a large quantity of house parts

The main thing is studs. Studs are these boards that are sometimes called “two-by-fours” because they are not two anythings by four anythings (see Chapter 2, “Wood”). Most houses contain billions of them. You’ll also need nails, a roof, and one toilet for each bathroom shown in your plan.

You can buy your house parts at a lumberyard, but as I pointed out back in Chapter 2 (see Chapter 2), the people who work in lumberyards are hostile and suspicious and they will probably try to trick you. You’ll ask for studs, and they’ll send you home with industrial sewage piping. So I recommend you get your house parts at a home center. The advantage of going to a home center is they give you little baskets and carts to put your house in, and you’ll always know how much you’re paying because there will be at least six price stickers on every stud. The only drawback is that most of the time the home center will be out of whatever you need, so you’ll have to make upwards of 600 trips (see Chapter 2 again; in fact, you might just as well stay in Chapter 2, for all the good this chapter is doing you).

Step #5: Standing on your land, attach the house parts together so they form a house shaped like the one in your plan.

Building an entire house may look difficult, but all it really takes is a little common sense and a willingness to accept the fact that you will never finish no matter how long you live. At the beginning, when you’re nailing large boards together, you’ll think you’ll be done in a matter of days, but pretty soon you’ll realize that the only materials you have left are skillions of little pieces of molding and pipes and wires and doorknobs representing 600,000 man-hours of extremely tedious work, and you’ll reach the point where all you do is sit on the floor and drink beer and fantasize that you live in a motel and you don’t even have to fold your own towels. I know a couple who live in a semicomplete house that they once tried to build, and after a couple of years they stopped even noticing that they have a pile of lumber in their living room. They just dust it off and put cheese and crackers on it when company comes. So good luck! I admire your spunk. Really.

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