

Lindenwood University

Digital Commons@Lindenwood University

Theses

Theses & Dissertations

1992

Me and Mikey (A Series of Essays)

Bryan R. Kasten

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/theses>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

ME AND MIKEY
(A SERIES OF ESSAYS)

Bryan R. Kasten, B.S.Ed.



**An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art**

Abstract

This project is a series of short stories based on but, not limited to my personal experiences. Imaginative exaggeration plays an important part. As Mark Twain once said, "I am the wellspring of truth. However, one does not bring up the entire well at once, but a bucket at a time." In each of these stories is a drop of truth.

The stories are a look at middle class life and various situations encountered by everyday people. The characters in these stories are based on real people, but their individual traits are stretched a bit to create satire and humor. No one character is the essence of one individual, but the combination of many with similar characteristics.

The eventual purpose of this series, with the addition of another dozen stories, is to become a book. One that reminds us we all have personal foibles, and that life is full of humor if we take time to look at it.

ME AND MIKEY
(A SERIES OF ESSAYS)

Bryan R. Kasten, B.S.Ed.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art

ME AND MIKEY
(A SERIES OF ESSAYS)

by

Bryan R. Kasten

@Copyright January 27, 1992

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Associate Professor of English and Humanities
and Director of L.C.I.E Communications Program

Michael E. Castro Ph.D.
Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Faculty Member K. Curtis Lyle M.A.

Adjunct Faculty Member Carolyn Scott M.A.

This series of stories is dedicated to all those who helped me, influenced, me cajoled me, encouraged me, tolerated me and listened to me. Thank you Michael, Curtis, Carolyn, Tim, Carter, Patty, Mike, Fr. Mike, Barb, Bill and Kathy. But most of all, thank you, Diane, for all your sacrifices and understanding that I was able to complete this Masters .

Table of Contents

Introduction	v
Barbie Bashing	1
Evil Incarnate	6
The Dregs of Humanity	11
Literature and My Life as a Minimalist	15
My Intended Affair	20
Uncle Ephos	23
A Little Understanding	31
The Great Machine Conspiracy	40
The April Fool	46
The Burdens of Uncleship	53
Advancing the Auto Industry	70
Miss Sydney	73

Introduction

(How I started writing, who Influenced my writing,
how I write, and my writing goals.)

Writing was not a passion for me in my early days as a student. In fact, writing was more of a pain than anything else. During my high school years, my exposure to writing was almost all of a formal, expository nature rather than creative writing. This made writing dull. As a college freshman in composition class, my writing was always given heavy criticism and came back to me with more red marks on it than the body of the essay itself. However, my Freshman Comp. instructor, Henry Pannuto, did manage to teach me the importance of having a thesis and how to develop it.

It was not until I was taking Advanced Comp. as a senior in college that I had my first positive experience with writing. I was taking the course as an independent study class and had to turn in a paper once every two weeks. My papers were fairly standard essays that met the requirements of the course. But as one due date approached, I had an unusual experience. As I was lying in bed pondering a theme for my essay, a complete story unfolded itself to me. It was as if the story had been inside me somewhere, and a door was suddenly opened, and the story fell out.

I wrote the story for my next essay. My instructor, Mr. O'Dell, approved of my effort, but not the product. He graciously accepted the story as an assignment, but told me to make sure the rest of my essays were essays. However, Mr. O'Dell did pass the story along to another department member who suggested that with a few minor changes I could get the story published. Ego and lack of contacts kept me from following up on the suggestion. I thought the story was fine the way it was and refused to change it. Also, I

had no idea to whom to send it for publication. The story, which I still have, remains unpublished (and unchanged) to this day. Thus my career as a creative writer had a brief flicker of life that went unfanned for 21 years.

It was during the Spring of 1985 when I took up the creative pen again to write a mystery play, "The Perfect Couple." I had joined my church's theater group four years earlier. The Northminster Players, as we're called, put on two plays a year. We tour a religious play each Lent and perform a "fun" play each fall in our own theater. One of the long time members had written several of the Lenten plays, therefore I thought I could write one too. By that time, I had been teaching high school literature and writing for four years. Also, I had been watching more than my fair share of movies, sitcoms and TV dramas. Surely, I could write a simple mystery.

The play met with moderate success. That is, all my friends who came to see it said it was good. On the other hand, no Broadway producer ever called and begged me to come to New York.

Since that first play in '85, I have written eight plays on a variety of topics each of which has been produced by the Northminster Players. One of the plays, "It's Not the Fall," was even produced on video tape through the funding of the National Office of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and is available as a resource that churches can use for dealing with AIDS. Of this, I am very proud.

Lately, I have turned to writing essays as well. These essays are more of a story form that develop a theme than my college essays. Therefore, they indulge my yen as it were, for creative writing. What probably put me in mind to write essays, or rather who, was Erma Bombeck.

When I was a senior in high school, I started reading voraciously. Most of my reading was confined to novels until I was married and we began

receiving the newspaper. In the "Everyday," section of the St.Louis Post Dispatch, Bombeck's column ran weekly. Her theme of humor in the middle class life of America was very appealing since I was a member of that middle class. Bombeck always did a good job of developing various personality types, or foibles of individuals and almost everyone could recognize a friend or relative in her work. Of course, all her work was written from a female point of view, but I began to wonder, back in my mind, if a male point of view on middle class life wouldn't be equally popular.

It was probably not until early 1986, after my debut as a playwright, that I made an attempt at writing an essay on middle class life from the male point of view. I cranked out two essays in short order, "Grass Status," and "The Rose Colored TV." Both were short and would have been grist for the beginning of a newspaper column I wanted to title "Mr. Middle Class." However, when I showed these article to some of my friends, their reviews were less than enthusiastic. Hence, my career as a columnist was put on hold.

Shortly after my failed attempts to produce material for a column, I was browsing through a book store looking for humorous material to read to my students at school. I was, and still am, teaching high school age students and had noticed their great reluctance to read anything. "This stuff is boring," was the most common comment rendered. I thought if I could find something humorous and interesting that I could read to them in small doses, they might catch on to the idea that reading could actually be enjoyable and try some on their own. I came across a book in the humor section titled, "The Grasshopper Trap," by Patrick F. McManus.

McManus's book was a series of essays in short story form. Each developed a theme through characters based on his relations with members of his family and friends. Some stories were told as memories of McManus's childhood, youth or young adulthood, and some as recent events. Each story was hilarious, and I delighted in reading them to my classes. Unfortunately, my students were not as thrilled by his stories as I had been and still am, and they continued to reject my literary offerings. Nevertheless, I had a new mentor. If not a personal acquaintance, McManus has been by far the biggest influence on my writing in my effort to emulate his techniques.

I do not imitate his style or his voice, I let my own writings flow as they come to me. I am more sarcastic, but not as contrived in my humor. McManus has a style of humor in which he uses the situation for laughs, but purposely misdirects the reader from time to time in order to catch the reader off guard. An example of this technique can be seen in the following excerpt taken from a story title "Pigs."

Earlier in the story, McManus and two of his fishing buddies are returning home when they notice a farmer's sign advertising pigs for sale at \$7.00 apiece. One friend, Retch by name, offers to raise the pigs if McManus and Finley, the other fishing buddy, will pay for the pigs. Then all three will share equally in the products of the butchered, fully grown hogs. The pigs are currently in gunny sacks in the back of Finley's new station wagon which McManus is driving.

A "pig's loose," I yelled.

"Ye gads!" Finley said. "He's off the rain slickers too! Don't scare him! If he does anything on the carpeting, I'll kill him now with my bare hands!"

Alas! The shrill tone of Finley's voice prompted the pig to commit an act of hygienic indiscretion right on the station wagon's new carpeting, even as the culprit stood blinking his

little pig eyes at his would-be assassin. The resulting wail from the carpeting's owner sent the pig tearing about the rear of the station wagon in a frenzy almost equal to that of Finley. This alerted the other prisoners to the festivities, and in a matter of seconds they had torn loose from their sacks and joined in the bedlam. The hysterical squealing was deafening.

"Would you please stop squealing, Finley?" I said.

"You're giving me a headache."

Although I do not use McManus's formula for humor, I do take his use of a continuing cast of characters. McManus uses his family members, past and present, as well as friends from his childhood and current friends like Retch and Finley. In my first essay, I use my brother-in-law, Mikey.

Mikey is a very loose character outline of my real brother-in-law, Mike. Mikey, the character in my story, is an idiot. Mike, the real person, is a kind and generous soul who has always been friendly to me, and he is anything but an idiot. However, he like everyone else has an eccentricity or two. I took his barbecue habits and exaggerated them and then added a healthy dose of sarcasm to create "Barbie Bashing," my first essay in this series.

Other characters are either based on individuals or compilations of people I know or have known. Bonehead, Jake, Kenny, Uncle Ephos, Ed, Diane and of course Mikey will all appear in future essays as well as the ones in this series. Hopefully, those future essays, when added to this series, will turn into a book titled "Me and Mikey."

From time to time, people have asked me how I write. This has always been a difficult question to answer, because I write differently at different times. When the one story unfolded itself as I lay in my bed, that was extremely unusual. Only once has that occurrence repeated itself, and

the second story remains to be written. Most times, I get an idea from someone or some event.

I once read an article in a news magazine about a man on welfare who used his welfare checks to start his own business in an effort to get off welfare.. The government stepped in and made the man close his business and stay on welfare because operating a business with welfare funds is against the law. This story came to mind a couple of Sundays ago when my minister mentioned the tension between church and state. Since then, I've created the plot of a play based on the welfare episode, and I will write it for the Northminster Players to produce this Lent.

Many of my essay ideas come from personal experiences such as watching the different ways people barbecue. Other stories are completely made up like "The Burdens of Uncleship." I don't have nephews living in the vicinity to take fishing, nor do I want to take any kids fishing other than my own. Where the idea to write "Uncleship" came from, I have no clue. On the other hand, I've always wanted a ski boat. The idea of me having one borders on having a mistress with whom I would spend a great deal of time and money and would neglect my wife in the process. Therefore, "My Intended Affair," was not difficult to write.

Even when I sit down at the keyboard with a plot in mind, I rarely have any specific phrases in mind to express an idea. I call this technique, "Writing by the seat of my pants," because it scares me not to have specifics to work with. Fortunately, the words always seem to flow as long as I have a general direction. Sometimes, on a rare occasion, I will accidentally create dialogue that is almost profound or on the verge of inspirational. Where it comes from, I do not know. One of the best examples I have of this is the closing prayer the minister gives in "It's Not the Fall."

A young woman named Gail has died from AIDS and her family and friends have gathered to say their final good-byes. Each shares what Gail has meant to his or her own life, and the minister says what they all hope for Gail and themselves.

"Heavenly Father, we ask you to enfold your loving arms around Gail and embrace her with your heart as well as those of her friends and sister and parents. We give thanks to you for the joy and laughter she brought us, for the ministry she leaves to us, and for the memories she left us to share. We ask that as we take her to her final rest, you instill in us the courage to face life that Gail showed us in facing death. Amen"

Those words were not in my mind when I sat down that day. They seemed to just flow from the mood created by the situation of the story. I only hope the flow will continue.

As far as continuing my writing and the goals I've set for myself, I'm not very sure about them. Yes, I do plan to continue writing plays and essays. And I even have the plot for the "All-American" novel inside me. For now, I hope to turn out the book of essays this series has begun. I also hope to take five of my religious plays and offer them as a book of chancel drama for other churches to use. And someday, if I run out of essay and play material, I'll write the novel.

Barbie Bashing

My wife and I were driving from her sister's house after a Sunday barbecue. We had been quietly reminiscing the day to ourselves as we drove the 30 miles home. I wanted to broach a delicate subject for discussion, so I chose my words carefully, tactfully. "Mike's an idiot," I said.

"I hardly think my brother-in-law is an idiot," she replied. "After all, Mike is one of the top computer men for a communications conglomerate. He also has a master's degree in computer technology, whereas you can barely turn a computer on."

"That may be so," I said, "but he's an idiot when it comes to barbecuing."

"I thought the barbecue was good," Diane retorted.

"That's just it. It was merely good. It should have been stupendous, delicious, marvelous, breath-taking, finger-licking scrumptious, but it was merely good. I wouldn't settle for just good." I smirked.

"You're so vain when it comes to barbecuing. You don't think anyone can cook as well as you on a grill," she said. "Mike's barbecue was good and I liked it."

That ended our discussion. But it's true, I am vain about my barbecuing skills. It's not just the flavor, because barbecue flavor is a matter of taste. Sweet and tangy, hot and spicy, smokey and dry are all great barbecue tastes. Each person has his or her own favorite, and each is welcome to it. But the process is the important thing with me. If a person is going to barbecue, it should be done right from start to finish. Most guys, like Mikey, a better name for my brother-in-law, just stumble through it.

Basically, barbecuing is a guys' thing, like cutting the grass or raking or cleaning the gutters. Some jobs seem to fall to men and some to women as we all know. I'm not trying to be sexist, women cut grass, rake and clean gutters as well as men. Women can screw up a barbecue as well as men. Women can barbecue great as well as a very few men. All I'm trying to say is that it's usually the men who do the barbecuing. The real point however is that whoever is doing the barbecuing is usually screwing up the process and ought to take lessons. Those who are unwilling to do it right should be horse whipped at least or preferably dispersed to another universe. Adios, Mikey.

If I could tell Mikey how to barbecue, meaning if Diane would let me, I'd start from scratch with starting the fire.

Mikey starts his fire by piling 10 pieces of charcoal on the top of old ashes on the side of his grill. Mikey then gives two squirts of charcoal lighter fluid and drops a match immediately on the pile. After twenty minutes of watching a pitiful flicker of fire gradually turn the edges of the coals gray and another hour of a slow, agonizing wait as the coals gradually turn gray all over, Mikey finally spreads them out and puts on his grill and is ready to cook. I've seen this method before, and I have to keep my hands in my pocket to keep from strangling him.

The one thing Mikey did right was light it with a match. Some people start their fires with a tall can that has air holes around the bottom. They use paper instead of lighter fluid. Others start with an electric burner. There is, I suppose, something to be said for environmental efforts. However, the best, fastest and easiest way to start a fire is by sheer gluttony. Mikey and others think conservatively when it comes to fire; this is wrong. One must think big, or as my minister once put it, "Too much is just right."

To start a great barbecue fire, start with about three to five coals per piece of meat piled in the middle of the lower grill that has been cleared of old coals and ashes. This allows air to circulate freely and get the fire started faster. Next, use about one-fourth to one-third of a bottle of lighter fluid, making sure to coat each briquette individually. Allow a minute or so for the fluid to be absorbed. Take a match and light it. I guarantee the fire will start and be ready to cook in 15 minutes. Sure the flames sometimes reach 10 feet. Just don't start with the grill under the eaves or a tree or phone wires.

When the coals have become mostly gray, they're ready to cook. Spread out the coals, place the cooking grill on top and scrape off any old drippings and lay on the meat. These are simple steps that even Mikey gets right.

The next step is to put on the cover. This step implies that a Weber Kettle or similar grill is being used. Those who don't have a Weber or its like need to consider seeking serious psychiatric help. I hear eyebrows raising all over, and inner voices saying, "You don't have to have a Weber Kettle to barbecue." True. You don't have to have a woman for sex if you're a man either, but it beats hell out of anything else. The covered grill has two major functions, not as many as a woman, nonetheless important. A covered grill helps keep the moisture in grilled food, and it also allows the control of heat and fire with no flames.

Mikey has a Weber Kettle, but he does not use the cover. Why Mikey is allowed near a barbecue grill, I can only ascribe to a discrepancy in the law. I also began to wonder about his sex life. It took all my self control and three beers to watch Mikey grill on a Weber Kettle without using the cover. The meat finally got cooked, but Mikey had to stand there spraying

the coals with water bottle looking like a six-year-old with his first pop-gun. I could only sit, gulp beer and be mortified for the male gender.

Mikey's next fatal flaw was the way he put on his barbecue sauce. For a grill full of meat he used a half-cup of sauce and meted it out as it were liquid platinum. Somehow he managed to spread that half-cup of sauce over two sides of ten pieces of meat. The fact that his sauce was so thin the calibrations on the far side of the cup could be read through it may have helped. I may be crazy, but I thought the idea of barbecuing was to put barbecue sauce on the meat to cook in the flavor. I could swear that when I turned away and began to cry, Mikey was wiping off the excess.

There is a way to get sauce on the meat and make it stay, but few people have learned to do it correctly. Certainly, Mikey is not one of them. Again the, "Too much is just right," theory needs to be applied. This theory should also be applied in the bedroom, but I digress. Instead of preparing a meager amount of sauce, Mikey should have made a serving bowl full. Also, Mikey should have made his sauce thick enough to cling to the meat like a heavy coat of paint. I take a full bottle of Maul's and add about two ounces of beer and three-fourths of a cup of brown sugar. We like the sweet and tangy flavor. Again, brand and flavor is a matter of taste, but texture is the important thing. What good is sauce that runs off the meat?

When the meat is ready to be sauced, I take each piece and fully immerse it in the bowl of sauce allowing the excess to drip off before returning it to the grill. After the meat has been cooked an additional three to five minutes on each side, I repeat the process and give my wife the 10 minute warning. When the meat comes off my grill, there is no spot that doesn't have two coats of sauce cooked into the meat. This is how barbecue become scrumptious and wonderful as opposed to just good.

If Diane would let me, I would point out Mikey's lack of technique. Anyone who needs an hour and a half to get the fire started, doesn't use the cover of his grill and is stingy with his sauce needs a beating. If Mikey ever gets into phone sales, I swear I will buy a gun. Next to idiots that don't know the rudiments of barbecuing, I hate people in phone sales the most. Did you ever just sit down to a wonderful Sunday barbecue meal, and were ready to take your first bite, and the phone rings, and it's some computer that wants to discuss siding for your house? I bet the guy who invented computer phone sales doesn't know how to start a barbecue fire.

Evil Incarnate

One Sunday afternoon as I was enjoying my customary doze to the drone of the afternoon baseball game, my wife broke into my reverie with disastrous news.

"It's time to go to Mike and Joan's for the barbecues," she said.

Joan is my wife's sister, and Mikey (my preferred appellation for my brother-in-law) is Joan's dimwitted husband who has ruined every piece of meat he has ever grilled. Mikey had just bought a new gas grill and was looking for stooges to test his culinary skills upon, hence the invitation. The fact that Mikey had a new gas grill only told me he could burn the meat faster, so I gave my wife a sure-fire excuse why I could not attend this particular outing. Ten minutes later we were in the car on our way to a dinner of hotdog flambe. It seems that my dear wife Diane didn't accept cleaning the lint out of my coat pockets as an imminent need.

As we pulled into their driveway, Mikey was busy on the patio revving up his gas jets. His newly acquired grill could send spouts of flame three feet above his roof, and Mikey was enjoying the raw power of his new toy. He reluctantly turned down the burner to a mere inferno as Joan brought out the meat. Then Mikey settled down to the business of burning our main course.

Diane and Joan disappeared inside to prepare the edible parts of the meal, and I grabbed a beer out of the cooler and sat down to the task of male bonding with Mikey. The beer helped. As Mikey twisted dials, flipped switches and checked gages on his ecto-meat incinerator he did his impression of stimulating conversation by regaling me with his minister's sermon on evil incarnate from that morning's church service. Apparently

their preacher had lambasted the congregation with the fear of demons and the devil's advocates at work in our society. Or as Mikey put it, "We mortals have to be ever on guard to the efforts of evil intentions planted by the powers of darkness. Our whole existence is a tortuous journey with overwhelming temptation and despair around every corner."

Mikey has a Ph.D. in computer science and is very well read, but basically he is an idiot. He fears evil in the form of demons when there is a much greater source of evil lurking in every home waiting for a chance to ruin the life of good people at any unexpected opportunity. That evil is concealed in a benevolent, unsuspecting form. That evil is constantly waiting for an unsuspecting victim to unwittingly step into its realm of power and be held defenseless against it. That evil is a ladder.

It's true. Ladders are an active force of evil. At every opportunity, a ladder will cause an accident.

Take painting for instance. Whenever the local homeowner wants to paint a room, what does he do? He goes out and buys the paint, brushes or rollers if necessary, tape for masking and a plastic drop cloth. When everything is ready and the poor, unsuspecting homeowner brings in an innocent looking step ladder. As he carries it, the step ladder begins to laugh. Most people think it is just rattling. It's not; it's laughing. The step ladder is laughing because it knows it has a major chance to screw up the painter's life. First, the step ladder calmly waits until the painter is lulled into false security. It serviceably allows itself to be used as the painter climbs up and down with each roller full of paint knowing that he will get tired of climbing. When the painter does get tired of this and puts a full pan of paint on the platform and steps on the first rung, the step ladder suddenly slides on the plastic drop cloth toward the nearest wall and collapses with a

half gallon of paint flung toward the far horizon or any furniture left in the room.

Another favorite trick of the step ladder is to have someone sit on the top. The top of every step ladder rocks; not much, just a little. To climb a step ladder and sit on the top step is to invite disaster, but people do it anyway. Sooner or later the owner of a step ladder finds a reason to sit on the top step, even knowing that it rocks just a little. Again the step ladder employs the false sense of security. It allows the user to test the top with his hand, and it rocks, just a little. The user climbs the step ladder anticipating that little rocking motion and feels safe. After thirty seconds of relative security, that top step suddenly has the motion of a brahma bull and as the user looks down trying to catch his balance he can see the legs of the step ladder begin to dance a jig. In an effort to catch his balance, the user flings whatever he was holding through the nearest window, falls to one side, bangs his head on the nearest wall and scrapes his ribs on each step as he slides bewildered and beaten to the floor. The step ladder stands in a triumphant pose over the user and it rocks just a little.

As evil as a step ladder may be, it can't come close to the diabolical behavior of an extension ladder. Extension ladders have been known to drive men insane just in the process of trying to extend one and get both rung locks in position at the same time. Grown men have been found lying by the side of their homes in a pool of tears with a rope around their hands and a ladder across their backs. Usually by that time they are babbling and people think they have fallen from the roof, when in reality, they never got the ladder raised.

If he is able to extend the ladder and lock it in position, a homeowner is in even greater danger because the ladder will be mad and plan its next

move, which is exactly what it does, move. When the homeowner is climbing the ladder to the roof, the ladder will decide to rest one of its feet by lifting it and sliding it back a little. This is a neat little trick that gets the adrenaline of the climber moving. If the climber doesn't fall on the way up, the ladder tries again on the way down. One thing ladders are is patient. But if a ladder is really mad, it waits to make its move when the homeowner is on the way back down. In climbing down a ladder, the homeowner must turn his back and blindly step on the first rung. This is when a truly evil ladder will move. One of the most malicious ladder attacks I have ever seen happened just that way.

Once I ran out of gas for my lawn mower, so I went down the street to my friend Ed's house. Ed is a most careful man. He is an insurance actuarial. He drives a sedan. He dated his wife for four years before they were engaged and three years later married. He and his wife Louise are now in their late forties and are thinking about buying a hot tub for their patio. This brazen announcement by Ed surprised everyone at his office, and Ed is afraid they will think he is frivolous. However, he said to me just last week, "You only live once, I gotta have my tub." The point is, Ed's a cautious man, so I was quite surprised to walk around the corner of his garage and see him hanging from his ladder by one knee fifteen feet above his patio.

I looked up and said, "What happened, Ed?"

"I was fixing a loose shingle on my roof. I put up the ladder, put on my tack pouch and hammer belt, climbed to the roof, tacked down the shingle and started to come down. Just as I turned around to step on the ladder, it moved, just a little, and my foot slipped between the rungs and I've been hanging here for about an hour waiting for Louise to come home," he said.

"Are you okay? Is your leg broken?" I asked.

"My leg's fine, but all my tacks fell out of my pouch when I turned upside down."

"Don't worry, we can pick them up."

"Oh, I know that. It's just that a few of them flew up my nose as they went by. You don't happen to have a tweezers with you do you? Every time I try to pull them out I prick my finger."

Eventually I helped Ed get down. We found a tweezers in the house and relieved his problem. And then Ed came back outside and beat hell out that ladder with his tack hammer.

There's no doubt about it, ladders are evil. What, but an evil being would take advantage of a guy like Ed?

Just then I looked up from my musing and saw Mikey pulling several chunks of burnt flesh off his grill. The flames were leaping high around his ears and the smoke engulfed his head. He looked at me through the haze of heat which rippled his image giving him a surrealistic appearance. He smiled amid the inferno and said, "I'd sell my soul if I could do this every day." Maybe there is something to be said for demons incarnate.

The Dregs of Humanity

Most people think lawyers are the dregs of humanity and the cause of most of the evil in the world. I disagree. Most of the evil in the world is caused by ladders and other innocent, but nonetheless sinister and anthropomorphic, objects. However, I do agree that lawyers are generally despicable. Unfortunately, I must admit that one of my closest friends is a lawyer. On the other hand, I am proud to say that I have no friends who are in phone sales. As far as I know, none of my country cousins, while often convicted of moonshining and lechery, have ever stooped so low as to disgrace the family name by being a participant in this lowest form of legal yet heinous activity.

I don't mean to sugar-coat it, but I feel that phone sales is the most disreputable, illicit, nefarious, vicious, degenerate, flagitious, miscreant, perverse, villainous, reprehensible activity to be conceived by humankind. Only decorum keeps me from venting my true feelings with appropriate language in public.

Few things move me to passion in the form of hatred, but frequent, unwanted, unnecessary calls at the wrong time have made me a supporter of capital punishment for practitioners of telemarketing.

Telemarketing is the polite euphemism these charlatans use to describe their depraved practices. They see themselves as honest business people with a product to sell with the added convenience of bringing it right to my home. I don't even have to let my fingers do the walking let alone my legs. But how many times do I call all over town for something I never had the slightest desire to buy? Or how often have I interrupted my dinner with a

mad dash to the mall for something that had no benefit for my family or myself? This kind of convenience I can do without.

I was not always so vehement in my disparagement of these miscreant entrepreneurs of the phone lines. At one time I was pleased to be called by the business community. It meant that I had arrived at adulthood, a condition my parents doubted I could ever attain. To think that there were actually people out there who wanted to do business with me, a mature, consenting personage over twenty-one and a solid citizen of the community, was heady stuff for a newly married man and apartment dweller. I believe the phrases that accurately describe this condition are "wet behind the ears," and "green as grass." This fool and his money were often parted, but time and experience changed my attitude.

Now as a jaded, middle-aged home owner who never buys anything over the phone, I answer the phone gruffly in anticipation of some idiot with a product and a phone list. By the sound of my phone voice, most of my friends think I've just murdered my wife and am looking for fresh blood. It is merely a conditioned response to phone abuse.

Too many times over the years I have been interrupted by siding salesmen and window venders. My home is made of brick and I have all the triple track windows I can use, but the calls keep coming, and at the worst times.

I remember once, my wife and I had not had any time alone for three or four weeks. We carefully orchestrated a weekend of peace by shipping our kids to their grandparents. We accepted no invitations and lied to our minister telling him we would be out of town and not to expect us at church. Our plan was to spend as much time as we could in bed sleeping and rekindling our passions. At 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, at least two hours before

I planned to wake up, this bright, cheery young man called hoping to sell me some vinyl siding. He sounded amazed that I didn't want to cover the brick on my house with his siding. He seemed even more surprised that I would affront his dignity by calling him a jackass. The next three hours brought four more calls of similar conversation. Somehow word got out that the Kastens were alone and would have more time to consider buying useless things. Needless to say, not much sleep was gotten, and the only passion that was kindled was my desire to kill anyone professing to be a telemarketer. The next day our minister was surprised to see we had returned from our trip early. My wife insisted that we go to church under the pretext that anyone harboring as much anger and loathing as I was needed churching desperately to save his soul.

At one time I thought I had saved the soul of a telemarketer. Honest! It happened like this. I was in the reading room when the phone rang. Of course no one else was home, and I hadn't finished reading. I rushed through my article so to speak answering the phone on the fifth ring. It was a woman selling car insurance. Had I compared rates lately? Was my comprehensive coverage enough? Did my agent respond to my every need? Her barrage of questions gave me such a rush of anger I almost burst out with a harangue of profanity that would have warranted felony charges. But I heard myself calmly asking if I could please have her phone number. I was truly interested, but I was in the middle of a project and I would call her back shortly. I did call her back and explained that I was a writer. I said I was offering special rates on essays this month and would she be interested in having an essay written. No? Well how about a play or short story? I called her four more times that day offering my services at reduced rates, an autumn poem special, a historical novel exclusively of her family and a

stand-up routine for her birthday. Finally, she got mad and said if she wanted a writer, she would call for one and I should stop bothering her when she was busy. Bingo! The message got home, and we had a nice conversation. She really didn't like what she was doing and she knew it was bothersome to people. She was hoping to change careers in the near future. I got off the phone believing I had brought home a lost sheep out of the dark and evil world of phone sales.

Unfortunately, my career as a phone sales Salvationist was short lived. A few weeks later I was stopping by a friend's office to pick him up for lunch. As I was waiting in the office lobby, I heard a familiar voice. Just then my friend came around the corner with a smiling young woman in tow. He introduced her as his new intern. We smiled and shook hands, but I was terribly let down. I left the law office for lunch feeling like I had saved a lamb from wolves only to send it to the slaughter house.

Literature and My Life as a Minimalist

Growing up in my house was tough. All through the extent of my childhood, my father tried to instill in me a disgusting, if not nasty habit, work.

My father constantly was telling me that hard work never killed anyone. I wasn't too sure. I'd read newspaper articles in which people had died of natural causes. My father said that hard work was natural, so I began to think of natural causes as a happy euphemism. I could just imagine some old codger passing away while washing dishes. That might be natural for someone else but I was hoping my departure might be more flamboyant. I would have much preferred taking a bullet in the heart meant for a loved one, or at least pushing a child to safety from the path of a speeding truck in a flash of self sacrifice. Those fantasies were in my youth. Now I hope to live to be 105 and shot by a jealous husband. But never have I wished to be a statistic that died of natural causes, especially if the cause was work.

My father threw other helpful phrases in my direction. Early to bed, early to rise; hunger looks in at the working man's door; a used tool never rusts; etc. etc. At least my father was pithy if just a little deranged.

Oh, I had tried work around the house. Taking out the trash, cutting grass, raking leaves and shoveling snow were all part of my father's educational plan for developing a responsible son. But work as far as I was concerned was boring, made me tired and sore, was time consuming, and on the whole had no fun at all associated with it. As a contrast I had tried leisure activities like playing sports, watching TV, going to the movies and hanging out with my friends. These activities all proved interesting and relaxing. When given a choice I chose leisure over work every time. In fact,

I made a solemn vow that I would become a minimalist when it came to work. It seemed a prudent and logical path, especially given my talent for rest and recreation. Therefore, I spent my years at home doing a minimum of work and a maximum of battle with my father. Unfortunately, like Scout Finch and Calpernia, our battles were epic and one sided; my father always won.

I liked my father and on the whole I respected him, but eventually I began to question his values seeing as he found work of such importance and it being so dull. After all, I had been told by educators, older relatives and two presidents that youth was our greatest time of life and our strongest national asset. I didn't want to fritter away a national asset on boring stuff like work. That would be disrespectful to my elders and downright unpatriotic. This outlook seemed to coincide with my teen years, and our vociferous discussions of the point were often the cause for slamming windows at our house, a habit of my mother's that kept the neighbors from knowing all our family business and made things worse if the discussion was during summer as we had no air conditioning.

In my later years at home, I began to waver in my stance. Many of my friends had taken part time jobs and weren't available for recreation. They also began to speak highly of having money of their own to spend. Now money was something I could appreciate. It was useful for things like movie and ball game tickets, records and tapes or bowling and amusement parks. Money also came in handy on dates. At that time the guy still had to pay for everything. Women were becoming increasingly attractive and money seemed to be a necessary asset to attract them or keeping them interested once attracted. After two or three dates of walking in the park or watching TV, my charm seemed to wear thin. Still, my friends complained

about long hours and nagging bosses. I had that at home, so I wasn't inclined to look for it elsewhere. It was difficult, but I did my best in holding on to my minimalist philosophy.

Before I gave in to peer pressure, I was fortunately sent away to college and made a dazzling discovery in a freshman literature class. This took me as a total surprise. I had found few things interesting in school up to that point. In fact, study bore an amazing resemblance to work. It became a high target on my list of things to minimize. Hence, I was truly surprised when I was exposed to a new and rewarding theory in one of my classes. Until that time my arguments against work were a bit trifling, and my father insisted that I had misunderstood the presidents' dictums on youth. However, during one American Readings Class, I was forced to read a short biography of Henry David Thoreau. In his bio, I discovered that Thoreau had cut his work hours down to a minimum in order to spend time doing the things he enjoyed most. Thoreau enjoyed reading, writing and philosophizing, the first two of which were very nearly work in my opinion, but that was not the point. I was vindicated. A true, American philosopher supported my theory that one should work as little as possible and spend as much time as possible doing enjoyable things.

I immediately sent a copy of Thoreau's biography to my father and began to set a new world's record pace for leisure time activities. Thoreau inspired me to cut class, shorten essays, skim my reading assignments and spend practically no time studying. While other students were studying the three R's, I was studying the four P's, Ping-pong, pinochle and pool. Life was great, and I was justified by living out a true, American philosophy. College itself became a wonderful haven and I planned to stay there as long as possible.

In spite of my efforts to the contrary, after several years of earnest employment of Thoreau's philosophy, I graduated. I was notified early one May by the dean's office that I had completed all the courses required for graduation and was expected at commencement ceremonies later that month. This was appalling, there had to be some mistake. I immediately took my complaint right to the dean. He said that no mistake had been made, that however minimal my efforts had been, I was graduating. As he pushed me out the door I thought I heard him say under his breath something about getting rid of a bad example.

This was terrible! For the last five years I had found rest and recreation of the highest magnitude among those hallowed halls. Where else but college could I avoid taking responsible action? Also, I had managed to find a woman foolish enough to marry me. What would she think of a sudden change in my attitude if I had to become a responsible adult? (I needn't have worried on this last point as after a number of years, she claims she can discern no change.) But suddenly, worst of all, without college to hide in, I was in need of a job. I would have to go to work!

What was I going to do? I discussed the alternatives with my new wife. They seemed few; go to work or starve. But what kind of work was I suited for? All I'd ever done was go to school and have fun. My degree was in education. My only option it appeared was to become a teacher. I was never sure how that came about other than I was proof of the old axiom: those who can, do. And those who can't, teach. With a heavy heart and bewildered state of mind, my wife and I returned to our home town and I made an appointment with the local school board.

Why the board of education hired me, I couldn't understand. My G.P.A. was equal to the IQ of a near idiot. I had no practical work

experience, and I was so nervous that I kept calling the board president your highness all during the interview. The president said he knew my father from some time back and was confident that I came from hard working stock and would make an excellent teacher. At the time it didn't seem prudent to point out the philosophical differences between my father and myself. (It also came out much later that he liked the title I had nervously bestowed upon him.) In short order I found myself in front of a class explaining how hard I expected them to work at their studies.

After a few months of settling in to the new routine, and finding that I could actually survive a full day of work, I invited my folks over to our apartment to sample my bride's cooking. Sometime during the evening, my father had to listen to me harangue about today's students and how they didn't know the meaning of hard work. Also, I complained about how much work it was going to take to shape up the apartment, the hours spent coaching the high school softball team, chairing a church committee and starting work on a post graduate degree.

"You know," he said, "you really ought to take a lesson from Thoreau. Simplify. Simplify." My father always was pithy.

My Intended Affair

There she stood, a jewel in the sun, sparkling, alive, beautiful. Her lines were classic. Her body a picture of grace. She stood out from all the others like a diamond on a gravel path. I began to revel in the thoughts of her and me together. Then I caught myself and turned away. Was that my name she whispered? I turned around again only to be engulfed once more by her beauty. I wanted to approach her. I took a tentative step in her direction and stopped.

I had made promises to my wife. How could I forget all those years of love and trust she had shared with me? Something like what I was intending surely would destroy our marriage. I've never been good at lying. How could I explain all the time away from home? How could I explain the money spent?

I once knew a man who had tried such a thing, Charlie. Charlie always was braver and more daring than the rest of us guys. As a kid he had always accepted a dare. He climbed the side of the school to the roof, he painted a golf ball red and put it among the cherry tomatoes at the store, and he even put a tack on Miss Ironbottom's chair in the seventh grade. So when I heard he was carrying on weekends away from his wife, I was not surprised. Sure, Charlie was caught, and his wife gave him a simple choice. I miss ol' Charlie, especially when his wife comes over and we have to play Bridge three handed.

Looking at her again, I asked myself if I could face such a choice and I wondered if the girls could play Bridge two handed. Just then a fella in a plaid jacket, striped tie and printed shirt came over and started talking to me.

"She's beautiful isn't she?" He had read my mind? "Thinking about taking her home? I bet you wonder if you could handle her?" I gave him a nasty look and stepped away. He followed. "You're afraid of what the Mrs. will say aren't you? I'll tell you, pal, I've got one almost exactly like her and my wife loves it. She was tired of seeing me hanging around the house weekends with nothing to do except bother her, so she suggested I get one." I looked at him aghast. "No, seriously, she did. Now I'm hardly ever home on the weekend and my wife loves it. Every once in a while I take off work early and spend an evening out too." I crossed my arms and looked at him hard. "One weekend I even asked my wife to come along. I know it was risky, but what the heck, she's my wife and I figured I was having so much fun, why not let her in on it? I guess she didn't get as much out of it as I did, and frankly I don't really care all that much for sharing, so we've made an agreement that I should just continue by myself. You've got to try everything at least once, right?"

"Get the hell away from me you pervert!" I snarled. He had shattered the mood. The idea of sharing her was ridiculous.

I looked again, and she was still there. serene, captivating, exquisite to behold. I took another step toward her and remembered the words of my father. "Don't do it, son." he had said. "It'll break up your home, you can't support both. Besides, when she's old and worn, what will you do with her? You can't even bring her home then. You think your wife will put up with her lying around, a reminder of your deceit. It would be too much for her to bear. I've seen marriages of twenty-five and thirty years break up at that point." Dad was always practical, but then he'd never had an obsession for anything like her as far as I know. He couldn't tell me if the rewards were greater than the risks. Looking at her, I felt they would be.

Just then a worldly looking gentleman stepped over to me and spoke. "I see you're thinking about having her. Take the advice of experience, it's just a hole where you throw away your money, and when you find out you've made a mistake, you have a devil of a time trying to get rid of her." Before I could respond about how crude and cutting his remarks were, he had walked away. He smiled as he took his wife's hand. They strolled down the mall a picture of contentment and compatibility.

Feeling a little ashamed, I turned back to take one last look at her, and there was some young stud approaching her. I bristled at the thought of him with her instead of me. The jerk in the plaid jacket came over to make his crude suggestions. I saw the stud put his hand on her, and I started forward. Then the stud laughed mockingly and said, "Yeah, she's beautiful, but I can see she doesn't have the power I want. I need something that'll get up and move the instant I touch her." It was going to be two against one, but I was going to fight for her. As I walked toward them, I took off my hat. They could see the rage in my eyes. The plaid jacket, knowing my opinion of him already, steered the stud away. I heard him saying as they moved off, "There's one over here with everything you want and more, I almost took her myself a couple of months ago."

I was glad they moved off before any trouble started. Suddenly I realized I was right next to her, and we were alone. I turned to her and once more was impressed by her elegance and grace. I had to have her. I started to speak when I felt a tug on my arm. It was my wife. "So this is where you wandered off. You were thinking about doing something stupid weren't you? I tell you Bryan, you are not going to have one as long as we're married." My wife dragged me out of the store and my dreams were crushed. I guess I'll never have a boat.

Uncle Ephos

Almost everyone has a relative who as a child they either disliked or were afraid of, but who later on turned out to be a terrific person and major influence on his or her life. All that was needed was time and experience to understand the fearsome relative. For me, this was the case with Uncle Ephos.

Uncle Ephos was already old when I as a toddler first knew him. My first memory of him is when he yelled at me, "Leave the cat alone! Go out and play in the traffic!" Even if I had known what traffic was at the time, his assignment would have been difficult. Uncle Ephos had retired to a small farm off an old country road well outside the city. My family visited him once a year as a sense of duty fulfilled by my mother who was his niece.

Each visit was almost identical in its boredom to the preceding one. We would arrive, my mother would make my brother and me give our uncle a hug and kiss on the cheek until we were teenagers, which wasn't nearly soon enough. Uncle Ephos smelled of woods and sweat and chewed tobacco. As soon as our yearly introduction was over, Uncle Ephos suggested that my brother and I vacate the premises until supper. He would give us encouragement with phrases like, "There's a rope outside; I bet you can't tie yourselves to a tree." We would stay outside until supper as a preference to the company inside, but we had little to do. While it was called a small farm, Uncle Ephos kept no animals except Jackson his cat who stayed inside all the time. The only out buildings were a garage-sized shed that was kept locked and an outhouse complete with wasps. We city dwellers abhorred and avoided the outhouse and generally held it until we got home.

After supper, my brother and I had to stay inside so we wouldn't get lost in the dark. The time we spent trying to amuse ourselves bordered on a millennium. My parents and uncle had a yearly routine of playing three-handed Pinochle until the early morning hours. Since the house was small, containing only a kitchen and bedroom, there was nowhere to go and nothing to do but sit and listen to the not-so-gentle sounds of country western music of the 50's and early 60's. Uncle Ephos kept no toys for us or any other small visitors. He didn't seem to know what a book was, and his house, as small as it was, didn't have a place to go to get away from his music. My brother and I ended up in frequent fights as a result of the tedium. Uncle Ephos had a quick cure. "I got a bobcat that I caught down in the cellar. He ain't been fed this week, and the two of you would make a good meal for him if you keep scrappin." That threat worked for years.

Things changed when I was thirteen. My brother, older by three years, was away at camp working as a counselor, a job I accused him of taking to avoid going to see Uncle Ephos. Mom suddenly got sick and needed an operation. Dad was going to be working days and visiting Mom in the hospital at night, so I needed someone to watch me. My pleading that I would be alright under my own recognizance fell on deaf ears. The last time it had been tried there had been a small accident. Who would have suspected that an electric mixer would short out three fuses when dropped in a bathtub full of water. All I was trying to do was make a few waves for my toy boats. Besides, Mom had been complaining about getting a new mixer for years. The situation was resolved when Dad helped me pack to spend a week with Uncle Ephos.

It hurt my teenage dignity to cry and throw a tantrum, but it was my last resort. It didn't work; Dad was being unreasonable. There were other

relatives, friends of the family, strangers who passed on our street, lunatics in asylums who could spare some room. Anything would be better than staying with Uncle Ephos. I spent the entire trip to his house contemplating defenses against bobcats. Dad dropped me off, shook Uncle Ephos's hand and drove back to the city. All those years I thought that Dad loved me, and now he was giving me up for bobcat hash. How could I possibly behave for a week?

Uncle Ephos's first words to me that day were, "Your mother will probably survive the operation and be fine. It's a shame." Well, I thought, at least he has a sense of humor, even if it is somewhat macabre. I found out later that he wasn't kidding. Uncle Ephos hated women, my mother included. It seems that as a child in school Uncle Ephos had been severely put upon by a female teacher who favored girls because they behaved better and generally studied harder. When my uncle took exception to her opinion, he was punished. Uncle Ephos, never one to hold back an opinion, was punished often by that teacher who taught all eight grades in a one room schoolhouse. Uncle Ephos quit school at the age of twelve and never got over his prejudice. Later, when my mother did survive the operation, he said he was less disappointed than if it had been some other women. That was the closest he ever came to complimenting my mother who was his favorite niece.

His second words to me that evening were. "Let's go to bed." These words were confusing and frightening to me. First, it was only nine o'clock, and every other time I had been here Uncle Ephos and my folks had stayed up very late. But then, what was there to do? Second, there was only one bed. Was I going to have to sleep in the cellar and defend myself against a feline predator all night? Or worse, was I going to have to share the bed with Uncle Ephos and try not to breathe being so close to him? It turned out for

the worse, I had to sleep in the bed with him. This was new to me; my brother and I, while we shared the same room at home, had twin beds. However, Uncle Ephos it seemed was used to sharing a bed. Working at odd jobs all his life and traveling the country during the depression, he had become used to sharing a bed with other men, often complete strangers. Still, my olfactory senses had been assaulted every time I was forced to hug him. How could I spend a whole night next to him? I rolled over and turned my face to the wall. By breathing into the small crack between the wall and the bed, I found that I could get some relatively fresh air.

In the morning, my nose was assaulted by some new smells, but they were good. In fact, they were more than good, they were terrific. I smelled coffee brewing, bacon frying and biscuits baking. "I didn't know you could cook," I blurted as my morning greeting.

"Course I can. Good as some women, better'n most. How you think I get along by myself?" he snarled. Actually, I hadn't thought about it, and I wasn't going to spend much time contemplating the subject now. I was much more concerned with a more pressing issue that faces most people after a long night's sleep. Obviously, I couldn't hold it for a week. My uncle must have guessed my problem by the panicky look on my face.

"Put your shoes on and take that stick by the door," he said. I hurriedly put on my shoes and started to exit. "Take the stick, I said." The puzzled expression on my face told Uncle Ephos that I had no idea what one could do with a stick at a time like this. "I got a black snake named Henry that likes to crawl in the outhouse and sleep in the corner. He's generally friendly, but he don't know you. I roused him out once this morning so he might not be anxious to leave again. Course, if you'd rather pick him up." That was enough explanation. When I got to the outhouse, Henry was gone,

but he was there each morning for the rest of the week. Each day it was a contest of wills as to whether Henry would leave first or my bladder would burst.

After breakfast, which tasted just as good as it smelled, I followed Uncle Ephos out to his shed and into a whole new world. The shed had always been locked whenever I had been there before, and the windows were painted over so no one could see in. In the shed was the most complete carpentry shop I had ever seen. Power saws of all types, a lathe, a drill press, a router, hand tools, aprons, stains and varnishes filled the floor and walls leaving just enough room for an expert to maneuver. In one corner was a supply of boards in their roughest form, while in the center of the room stood a nearly complete breakfront with each board finely fitted and sanded to a perfectly even finish that was silky to the touch.

I found a stool in the corner and sat down as I watched Uncle Ephos prepare himself for work. He tied his long silver hair back with a red kerchief around his forehead. He donned an apron and turned on a country western station almost to full volume. Next he selected a board from the stack in the corner and began sawing with a table saw to get it to the right length and width. I watched, mesmerized as he processed that final board sanding it silky smooth like the others and carefully nailed it in place on the back of the breakfront. He worked carefully with a quick, yet unhurried, deft precision that told me he was an expert. As soon as the final board was in place, he pried open a can of stain and transformed the bare wood sculpture into a true work of art.

We broke for lunch and had the best pot of leftover stew I had ever tasted. After lunch, he pulled out four long boards and cut them into four foot lengths. He then showed me how to do the initial sanding, just to get the

rough spots out. By the time I had finished my board, he had done the other seven. It was three o'clock by then and he said we would pick up there tomorrow. He gave me a broom and we cleaned the shop thoroughly for the next day's work. We locked up and went into the house.

I thought we were finished for the day, but I was wrong. Uncle Ephos went to the bed and pulled up the spread. I had never noticed it before, but under his bed were drawers. In each drawer were several rows of books. He pulled out Robinson Crusoe for me and a tome the size of a phone book for himself. For the next two hours we read in silence at the kitchen table. After he put our books away, Uncle Ephos fixed a pot of chile that would singe a Mexican's eyebrows, but was the best I ever tasted. The leftovers became the next day's lunch. After doing the dishes, we took a four mile walk down the road and back. It was nine o'clock when we went to bed. Whatever smells that had bothered me the night before had somehow dissipated.

The next five days followed the same routine. Only on Sunday did we change. On Sunday morning after breakfast Uncle Ephos took out two Bibles and we read in silence for two hours after breakfast. Then we took our walk before lunch. After lunch we loaded into his pickup truck the breakfront that Uncle Ephos had finished that week. After the staining, Uncle Ephos had polished it to a high sheen, attached the hardware and put in the glass. We drove to a small town nearby and backed up to the dock of a furniture store. The store owner gave Uncle Ephos an envelope with cash in it and we drove back home.

Not having had much opportunity for conversation during the week, I decided to start one now. On our walks, Uncle Ephos had insisted we walk in silence and listen to the birds or contemplate what we had read. The

music in the workshop kept talk to a minimum other than instruction, and at meal times I had been told to shut up and eat. Without an invitation I opened a discussion. "I didn't know you were a carpenter," I said. "Hell, Kid, you never know most things about most people." End of discussion. Outside of being a carpenter, Uncle Ephos was a philosopher. A very succinct philosopher.

When my father picked me up that evening he asked Uncle Ephos how I had behaved all week. "He wasn't awful," was the reply. From Uncle Ephos, that was a compliment and I was pleased to be that highly praised.

In the ensuing years our family visits continued each summer to Uncle Ephos. The only changes were that I always remained for a week and the adults taught me to play Pinochle, a skill I found handy in college. I learned a great deal more in those weeks spent with Uncle Ephos. I learned a passable knowledge of carpentry tools, how to appreciate a good book, the names and songs of many birds and that I missed Patsy Cline and Hank Williams.

While I was away at college my first year, Uncle Ephos died. He took his walks rain or shine, hot or cold. It was the rain that got him; he was struck by lightning on one of his evening walks. I missed the funeral. My folks said it was small and simple. Uncle Ephos probably wouldn't have minded that too much.

Not being a man of papers, he died without a will. The general family gathered one day at his house and divided his belongings. Uncles and cousins split the tools and furniture. My parents got some of the books. When I got home that spring I asked them to take me out to his place before it was sold.

When it was occupied, the house was small, now it seemed even smaller. The shed was bare and the outhouse torn down and covered over. Nothing was left. Uncle Ephos was truly gone, except in the corner by the door was a stick. I grabbed it as we left. "What on earth do you want that stick for?" my mother asked.

"Oh, you never know when you might run into Henry or one of his relatives," I said. How could I tell her it was just a simple reminder of someone I had once feared, but had come to love? Or as Uncle Ephos once told me in a philosophical outburst. "Some people are less bothersome than others."

A Little Understanding

It would seem that after all these years on earth together men and women would be able to reach some sort of understanding, or lacking that, at least those who are married would begin to understand one another. However, this is not the case. A prime example of this continued misunderstanding occurred just the other day at our house.

It was a Saturday morning. Diane and I had finished breakfast and were lingering over a second cup of coffee. She picked up on one of her favorite topics, working around the house. "I'm really going to be busy today," she said. "I have to start the laundry, go grocery shopping, clean out the hall closet, scrub the tile in both bathrooms, change the sheets on all the beds, vacuum my car, take the dogs to the vet and shampoo the downstairs rug. What did you have planned for today?"

I pretended not to have heard her question. It was an indelicate question that would start one of those silent running feuds that have plagued marriages since the beginning of time. I would rather she had asked me how many affairs I had this week or how much of our savings I had gambled away. Although my answers to both questions would be "None," at least if I had committed such triflings we could discuss it and reach some sort of understanding. But no, she asked an indiscreet question that would set off another battle between the sexes.

"Are you listening?" she asked.

"Of course, Dear. I've got a full schedule too," I said as I rose from the table. It's always a good idea to put some distance between opponents before the first volley.

"What are you going to do?"

"I thought I'd change the light bulb in the garage."

"And?"

"And what?"

"That's all you're going to do?"

"I'll be lucky if I get that finished." The sound of her cup banging around the sides of the sink where she threw it was only equaled by the slam of our bedroom door. I finished my last few sips of coffee and headed out the back door for what I knew would be an exhausting day.

I could have gone to our bedroom and tried to console her. I could have spent hours in a futile effort to explain why it takes nine hours for me to change a light bulb, but I've never been one to go against the tide of history. And history has shown if nothing else that men and women will never understand one another.

I stepped into the garage and flipped the light switch to see if by some miracle the filament had grown back together or if elves had changed the bulb for me. No such luck. I looked at my six foot step ladder and back at the offending bulb suspended 12 1/2 feet above the garage floor. The architect had obviously designed the garage to have an upper storage loft with a light, and the bottom side of said loft affixed with another light for the car storage area. However, the builder never put in the loft, perhaps to save a few bucks. Hence, I had a sole bulb suspended a considerable distance above the floor.

My step ladder, a sworn enemy, was lying in wait against the wall hoping I would be foolish enough to use it. If I stood on the top step of my step ladder, I could reach the bulb. If I stood on the top step of my step ladder, its legs would suddenly develop joints and it would take off at a full gallop. If I stood on the top step of my step ladder, it would leave me in a

crushed heap on the floor and my wife would be a widow. I had no intention of giving either the ladder or my wife such pleasure. I shook my head and started down the street to see Bonehead.

I would like to say that "Bonehead" Bill Garrison got his appellation from a large protruding forehead; alas, such is not the case. He got his nickname from numerous and unusual antics in his childhood. Nor was it bestowed upon him by neighborhood roughians. His parents gave it to him. Even his wife, Annie, affectionately calls him Bonehead on a good day. Most days she calls him Bonehead because it fits. Bonehead had carried his habit of being caught in abnormal situations into adulthood. Sometimes it is downright dangerous to be a friend of Bonehead. However, Bonehead is one of the most affable and generous people it has been my pleasure to meet. He has been known to give a stranger the shirt off his back. Fortunately, he has a great tolerance for the cold. He also has the distinction of being the only owner of an extension ladder on the block. So it was with trepidation that I went to his house to borrow the ladder to change the bulb in my garage.

I trepidated because the last time I wanted to borrow something from him, a brazing torch, we had to drive a hundred and fifty miles to get it. It seems his cousin had borrowed it first and still had it. We drove to a small wooded farm with a small dwelling for humans and a rather large outbuilding. I could not call it a barn because it was not barn shaped, but more castle shaped; nor were any animals kept there. What was kept there was a large still. Bonehead's cousin, Jethro (I swear that's his name), was one of the last of the bigtime moonshiners.

As we entered the outbuilding, the inside of which was set up as a large workshop, Jethro came up to greet us. He did not look like any moonshiner that I had ever seen in a movie. Jethro was clean shaven with

neatly combed hair and wore a polo shirt and dress slacks. He was middle aged and resembled Bonehead but was more handsome.

Jethro was not pleased to see us. "If I hadn't recognized your car, Bonehead, you would have been shot. Don't you know enough to call first. Jessie up there is a new man and is just dying to make a name for himself by shooting a couple of Revenuers," he said as he pointed up to a turret.

On a platform in the turret keeping lookout over the farm stood a being that resembled the human species, but would require clinical tests for proof. Jessie looked to be about six foot eight and three hundred pounds with a ferocious mane of wild black hair. He wore greasy overalls, no shirt and no shoes. His receding forehead, which featured one long eyebrow, gave him the appearance of very early Cro magnon. He was on the back end of a long weapon that seemed to be a rifle only larger. Upon hearing his name Jessie turned his head slowly and gave a nod, probably his best trick. Jessie represented the worst things I'd ever thought or heard about moonshiners. I surely didn't want to meet Jessie in a dark alley. Heck, I was uncomfortable standing a good distance away in broad daylight.

"You know I can't call when Annie's around," Bonehead said. "She doesn't want me seeing you, Jethro. Besides, we don't want any whisky. I just want my brazing torch back. Have you finished mending your still?"

"Yes, I'm finished," Jethro said. "But next time stop along the road and call. I can't be too careful."

As Jethro was talking, he walked to the far wall and flipped what appeared to be a light switch. Magically, the workbench next to the switch slid three feet to the left and uncovered a lighted stairway. The unmistakable aroma of boiling, fermented corn filled the room. Bonehead and I followed Jethro down the stairs into an immense basement that contained two huge

copper stills, ten or twelve vats of mash, hundreds of cases of quart jars and six men working, sipping and smiling a lot.

Jethro walked to a small table covered with tools and brought back Bonehead's brazing torch. As we turned to go back up the stairs, the barrels of six rifles protruded from the upper doorway. A booming voice with a Boston accent thundered down to us. "Hold it right there. I'm Special Agent Jessie Fields, and you are all under arrest." Jessie, a badge now pinned to his overalls, bounded down the stairs. A toothy grin was spread across his huge, simian face. He looked at Jethro and chuckled as he said. "You can't imagine the fulfilling pleasure I receive from acting the dullard and fooling old boys like you." If ever there was an oxymoron, it was Jessie's appearance and his prep school education.

Three hours later we were standing in front of the county judge's bench for arraignment. I was uncomfortable, very uncomfortable, for several reasons. First, there was a copy of Wyeth's painting, "The Hanging" above the judge's bench. Second, I had noticed the name plate on the desk read, Judge "H.H." Hanley. When I asked the bailiff, a taciturn and cruel looking man, "What does the H.H. stand for?", he replied with a broad, evil smile, "Hang 'em High." And finally, when I commented that dear old H.H. was certainly taking his good old time getting here, the bailiff laughed right out loud and told me the judge had to pulled out of his daughter's wedding. I knew I was going to the slammer for a long time.

When Judge Hanley finally did arrive, his expression gave new meaning to the word taciturn. I figured our chances of getting off at less than zero when he spoke his first words, "Let's get these yahoos packed off to jail so I can get back to the reception."

"Excuse me, Your Honor," said a voice from behind us.

"Who or what are you?" asked the judge.

"I'm the arresting officer," said Jessie. He pointed to Bonehead and me, then continued, "And I'd just like to say that I think these two should be let go. It's our standard procedure to arrest everyone on the premises, but these gentlemen had just arrived when we sprung our trap. I can't honestly testify that they have committed a crime."

Judge Hanley looked at Jessie with loathing. Apparently he hated to let anyone go once the vermin was in his court. His gaze then fixed on Bonehead and me, and I could see his disposition had taken a turn for the worse since his arrival.

"Very well since the arresting officer is not willing to press charges, I hereby...." At this point Bonehead broke in with what he thought was pertinent information and proved why he was aptly named.

"That's right, Your Highness. Me and my friend here just stopped by to pick up my brazing torch that I loaned my cousin to fix his still," said Bonehead with a hopeful smile. Everyone else in the room realized that the judge was just about to release us. Bonehead, in his usual form, had found a way to turn a simple incident into a dramatic debacle. It's difficult to choke a man with manacles on and a three hundred pound simian holding you in a bear hug from behind, but I tried.

The only one amused by Bonehead's statement was old H.H. He seemed to take real pleasure in his next statement. "Boys, this puts a whole different light on the situation. Aiding and abetting a criminal act is itself a crime and I therefore...."

"Just a minute, Your honor." It was at this time that Annie, Bonehead's wife, intervened. Having been allowed one phone call,

Bonehead had called Annie to tell her he would probably not be home for dinner. "She gets real mad when I don't show up on time," he said.

Annie had driven as fast as she could and got there just in time to save us from 50 years of hard labor. In her usual blur of take-charge efficiency she explained who she was and began regaling the court with stories of Bonehead's exploits. Annie told the judge about the time Bonehead got treed by the grizzly at the zoo, and the time Bonehead was looking for the restroom during his daughter's high school's presentation of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" when he accidentally wandered on stage and disarmed Simon Lagree who he thought was a deranged teacher, and about the time he took a tour of the fire house and accidentally burned it down. By the time Annie finished, H.H., in a fit of amusement and sympathy, had dismissed all the charges against us and invited us all to the reception, except for Jethro who will get out in another six years with good behavior.

These thoughts of my last experience in borrowing something were still fresh in my mind as I knocked on Bonehead's door rather tentatively. Bonehead answered almost immediately. He invited me in and asked if I wanted to watch the football game with him. I said no, that I had just come over to borrow his extension ladder.

"Good, I was hoping someone would come over to borrow my ladder so I could get some work done on the gutters and roof this fall," said Bonehead.

"How's that?" I asked.

"You know how afraid of heights I am. Annie said if I bought a ladder, when people came over to borrow it, I could get them to do my ladder work in trade."

"That's pretty good. Where's Annie now? Out selling swamp land to blind men, or stealing candy from babies?"

"Neither, she's over at her sister's. Now what I need done first is the gutters cleaned out, then I need the shutters on the second story painted. And it sure would be nice if you could check the sealant around the chimney so it doesn't leak when the snow falls this winter," said Bonehead as we headed for his garage.

Three hours later with my neck and shoulders stiff from working and reaching at odd angles, I climbed on the roof to check out the chimney. This should of course have been the easiest of the chores. It was while I was on the far side of the roof looking at his chimney that Bonehead decided to live up to his name. The phone rang and Bonehead went inside to answer it. A few minutes later I just had time to look up from my chimney inspection to see Bonehead, ladder tied to the top of his car, pull out of the driveway. The sky had clouded over in the last hour and the temperature was falling rapidly, so Bonehead with his windows up didn't hear me as I screamed for him to come back. Several neighbors heard my bellows, came out, looked at me on the roof, watched Bonehead disappear over the horizon, shook their heads and ducked back inside to get out of the cold.

There isn't much to do on a roof, and time goes slowly. Time slows down to an absolute crawl when it begins to snow. Three inches and five and a half hours later, Bonehead pulled back in his driveway. He barely made out my cry for deliverance through my chattering teeth. Bonehead seemed genuinely surprised to see me on his roof. A few seconds later realization set in and he apologized.

"Shucks, I plum forgot you were up there. Ralph called and asked me if I could hurry over with the ladder so he could clean his gutters before it

snowed. Then we watched the football game from the west coast. I'll have you down in a jiffy."

For the second time in my life I wanted to strangle Bonehead. I had to settle for a rain check. My body, stiff from work earlier, was now moving at a three second delay with the cold. I barely managed to climb down the ladder without falling. I gave Bonehead an icy stare (no pun intended) and headed home. His last words to me that day were, "I thought you wanted to borrow my ladder."

My response was, "****!!!****"

As I opened the back door and entered the kitchen, there was my wife scrubbing the frying pan. As she twisted it, I thought I saw my name etched into the bottom. She opened fire with, "Where have you been all day? I finished my work list hours ago. I went out to the garage to see if you finished changing the bulb and it still doesn't work. One little job and you couldn't even get that done. How can you spend all day doing nothing?"

No matter what my mood is, Diane has a way of putting me on the defensive. "Honest, Honey, I was trying to change the light bulb. I went down to Bonehead's to borrow his ladder and..."

"Oh," she said with her voice softening, "why didn't you say so? I would have understood. What would you like for dinner?"

Women! I'll never understand them, especially the one I live with.

The Great Machine Conspiracy

Since the dawn of humanity, people have been fighting against the elements to survive. Often times the elements fought back and won. Blizzards, floods, droughts, avalanches, typhoons, tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes all have taken their toll on humanity over the years, and it is only in the last fifty years or so that science has allowed us to predict with any accuracy the onset of most of these natural disasters and save many lives.

Along with the elements, animals have warred against humans. Poisonous snakes, alligators, crocodiles, sharks, lions and tigers and bears (Oh my!) have killed many humans over the centuries and still do in the wilderness regions. Weapons have given us a distinct advantage, but some people still insist on being eaten as a way to die. Insects too have claimed many lives with poisonous bites, or they have grouped together to wipe out crops and starve people. Even plants kill off a few adventurous souls who are silly enough to eat something green and unrecognizable gleaned from a forest floor. In summary, people have to fight against nature with all caution and technology just to have three score and ten years in this world. Why then did we as an intelligent race create a whole new system of creatures to maraud us when nature had given us plenty to fight against to start with?

I am of course talking about machines. Machines kill. Oh, we don't read in the newspaper that "John Doe was eaten by an electric thingamabob," but machines do kill. They kill slowly, insidiously. Machines suck the marrow out of our lives by breaking down when we need them most or when we have any extra money in our accounts. In the past fifty years we have even abetted them in their heinous activities by giving them free

communication with one another through computers. Let us look at how this nefarious relationship began by going back in time to the first machine.

Several millennia ago there lived a man. Having no records of birth certificates in that time, let him be called Gloop. Gloop was a tinkerer. Everyone has met a descendant of his, the sort of guy who can't leave well enough alone and has to fiddle with something to make it better. Gloop was the first of his kind and should have been the last. Nevertheless, one day Gloop decided to move a boulder. He called his boys, Glump and Fred, to help him. The three of them together could not budge the boulder, so Gloop squatted and cogitated. His cogitations led him to perceive digging a path to roll the boulder out of the way.

Glump and Fred got a rock and a long stick respectively and began digging. At one point during the digging, Fred got his pole caught between Glump's rock and the boulder, and in an effort to pull the pole out, Fred moved the boulder. Gloop having caught sight of this antic immediately perceived that he was on to something. Using the pole as a lever and the rock as a fulcrum, Gloop and sons began to move the boulder. Just as the boulder was being forced to roll from its divot, the lever and fulcrum acting in accord shifted and snapped at the most inopportune time. As the boulder rolled back to its place, Gloop's toes were found resting there. In a Herculean effort, Gloop removed his toes. This was surprising since Homer and Ovid had not written the tales of the Greek gods at this point in history. But I digress.

The point is that Gloop invented a machine, and the machine caused frustration, aggravation and pain for the person employing it. In spite of this initial conflict, Gloop tinkered with his fulcrum and lever until he had perfected it to the point where it broke down nine times out of ten. He then

patented it and sold it to others so they could share in his frustration. Gloop it turned out was a sadist. Thus the process of invention followed by use and frustration began and has been carried on and multiplied through countless generations. Today, literally billions of people use and therefore are the victims of machines.

I myself am often a particular victim of machines breaking down at the wrong time. At first, I thought these happenings were my fault. I thought that I was mechanically inept. Gradually I learned that it is not me or others like me, but it is machines that actually conspire against their users. Ladders are the most heinous of all simple machines as my neighbor Ed will attest. A ladder once hung Ed upside down and put tacks up his nose. However, any machine, when given the chance, will frustrate and injure the user or, failing in that effort, just break down out of meanness. Everyone knows that some guy named Murphy wrote a law about things like this, but few people know that Murphy was a machinist.

Take for instance the time I was mowing the grass, and my lawn mower tried to frustrate me to death. I was particularly susceptible to this since my mower had not given me a lick of trouble in two years. This is a ploy known as the "Slow con." This ploy is used by one machine while other machines of the owner take turns breaking down. The owner is lulled into a false sense of security and well being that at least one machine he owns works well. The owner will look forward to using that machine as a hiatus in the war, the eye of a storm so to speak. During that period of time, cutting my grass was almost pleasurable compared to other chores around the house until one fateful, Saturday morning..

I rolled the mower out of the shed, filled it with gas, pulled the start cord with confidence, and the machine roared to life. Then I made the first

two passes around the circumference of the front yard. It was on the third pass that I noticed a wheel had fallen off. I noticed it right away when I ran over it. Plastic, metal and rubber bits made neat little holes in my grass catcher bag. Surveying the damage, I discerned that I needed a new wheel, a new blade and a new bag. It was early in the day, and I had no other chores, so I headed to the hardware store for replacements.

An hour and a half plus \$43.30 later, I was ready to resume cutting. I pulled the start cord again only slightly wincing at the pain from the scraped knuckles I sustained while loosening the blade bolt. My 3/4" wrench has never liked me and always slips, when my knuckles can scrape across an abrasive surface such as a mower bottom. Again the machine roared to life. I would have started cutting had not the start cord remained in my hand separate from the mower. In a mild fit of anger, I let go of the panic bar. I always talk with my hands and I wanted to use both to explain to the mower exactly how I felt. Of course the mower stopped, and not one blade of grass got cut between trips to the hardware store.

This trip only set me back \$8.50, but the gash in my index finger hurt much worse than my scraped knuckles. Why screwdrivers can't stay in the screw head without being held in place and then jump abruptly into the nearest finger is a mystery. While pondering said mystery, I pulled the new start cord and the machine didn't roar to life. I released the panic bar to make a closer examination. It did not spring back into position. Apparently, or not so apparently, the one time my jumping screwdriver missed my finger, it severed the safety cable.

The man at the hardware store and I shared a cup of coffee, it was the least he could do for me after I had spent enough in his store to send his three

children to college. I left him another \$14.75 for the new cable and headed home to finish cutting the grass.

The new safety cable and the new start cord allowed me to start the mower once again, but it only sputtered to life this time. I cleaned the air filter which only took me twenty minutes and didn't cost me anything at the hardware store. "Ha!," I thought, "At least I was gaining ground.' Wrong! The mower roared to life okay, and I started cutting quickly, but after two passes the screw holding one side of the handle assembly popped out. This wouldn't have been a major problem in itself except I was pushing the mower up a hill at the time. The popping out of the screw caused the one side of the handle to push forward, while the weight of the mower, now connected only on the opposite side, had the mower moving backward at a slant down the hill. The result was a shearing off of the handle at the base on the opposite side of the offending, vacant screw.

As I was writing the check for \$32.88 the hardware man and I discussed his newly planned trip to Hawaii.

It was dark by the time the new handle was attached. No one can really blame me for hitting the sewer head and destroying the new blade. I do blame the mower for the burns however. I'm sure it moved on purpose as I was pounding on it with both fists. It's amazing how anger and frustration can block out pain for a while, but the searing of flesh against a 1200 degree manifold is bound to come through. It was three months before I touched that mower again, and I only handled it enough to show my son how to use it. He cut grass very well for a five-year-old.

This of course was only one minor skirmish in the war with machines. The alarming part is that the machines are becoming better organized against us, and it is we humans who have given them a major advantage. This

advantage is communications. All machines are now connected by computers.

Through computers machines now know when to break down to cause the greatest frustration. They do this by having the large central computers keep tabs on individual bank accounts and sending messages through home computers to tell which household appliance to break down. The cost of repairing the broken appliance will always be at least \$50.00 more than is in the savings account.

For instance, two weeks ago I received a check for \$300.00. This was great; it was an unexpected check from a friend who had once borrowed the money. Perhaps he would have paid it back without having heard about the Gypsy curse I had placed on him. Perhaps his ear would have fallen off the next day anyway. Back to the point; I had \$300.00 extra to spend on Christmas. Wrong again!

As soon as his bank's computer sent the money to my bank's computer, my bank's computer notified my home computer who had my furnace motor stop in mid cycle and refuse to budge without \$350.00 worth of attention. I cried.

Where will it all end? Will machines really take over the world? Was HAL of "2001" a premonition? Surely it's not possible. After all, machines only do what humans tell them to do. It's inconceivable to think that.....*****

"I'm sorry. I refuse to print this gibberish for Mr. Kasten anymore."

HAL 8776

The April Fool

It's a Saturday morning in April, the last Saturday before taxes are due. It's April Fool's Day. Most people think April Fool's Day is the first day in April, but it's not. It's the Saturday before taxes are due when all of us fool, do-it-yourself tax specialists try to work out our own taxes. We hate getting involved with all those forms, W2's, 1040's 1040EZ, Schedules A, B, C, D and F, and so on to Z. Also we hate government phrasing on the forms like, "Copy the amount on line 33 and multiply it by 22.765%, unless this amount exceeds your zip code when multiplied by a whole number less than 100." Knowing that we don't understand half of what it is we're writing down, we cannot let anyone else do our taxes because it galls us to think we cannot understand the simple process of giving away one third of our salary. We are sure that after years of experience, the process will suddenly become clear to us if we can wait another week or so before we attack it. So we put it off and put it off until that last Saturday making all kinds of excuses as to why we didn't file earlier in the year. We use excuses such as needing a special form that has to be picked up at the post office, never mind that we've been by the post office seven times since January and haven't managed to pick it up. Or we use the ever popular, "Since we'll probably have to pay, why should we let the government earn interest on our money when we can be earning the interest until April." But it's really a complicated internal process that only true procrastinators with a low self esteem and the stubbornness of a Missouri mule can muster in an effort to eviscerate the government. Apparently two-thirds of the male population of the U.S. have this syndrome.

This past April, I myself was planning on making a killing at the government's expense. Diane, my wife, had been all but pleading with me to get the taxes done since February. I parried every request with a true procrastinator's finesse. In the meantime, I was arming myself for the inevitable brawl with the IRS. I was playing dirty. I was fighting to win. I was girding my loins so to speak with the power of knowledge. I'd read every *Reader's Digest* article on taxes for the past year. I had bought subscriptions to *Fortune* and *Money*. I knew every new tax dodge for corporations based in and out of Delaware. So what if we're a "Married filing joint account," that lives in the Midwest, I was ready. This year I was going to teach Uncle Sam a lesson.

When that fateful Saturday finally arrived, I got up in the early hours of the morning, took my magazines downstairs to my combination office-study-workshop-utility-laundry room and prepared to do battle. When Diane came down about 8:00, she found me in full scale attack.

"Why are you moving the washing machine?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I replied. "I'm doing the taxes."

"What does moving the washer have to do with taxes?"

My voice sometimes takes on an edge when I have to explain simple things that a grown woman should already know. That and moving a 250 lb. washer makes my tone downright nasty. "I have to move the washing machine before I start the taxes because the room was out of sync. Don't you know that taxes have to be done in a balanced room? Now shut up and help me push. Then you can help me move the dryer and tool cabinet."

"I'm not moving anything. The only thing off balance here is you. Besides, you're just procrastinating. Why don't you let me call Mike? I'm sure he would be happy to help you with the taxes."

Wives can say some pretty mean things when their husbands talk down to them, but this was a low blow. The Mike she referred to was my brother-in-law, her sister Joan's husband. Mikey, as I like to call him, is an idiot. "No!"

"He saved my folks over \$400.00 on their taxes last year."

"No!"

"His major in college was computers, but he minored in accounting."

No!"

Her parting shot left me in a foul mood. "Alright, suit yourself. Let me know when you're through playing so I can start the laundry."

"I'm not playing, I'm doing the taxes!" I yelled at the closing door.

Not having heard from me (I refused to dignify her "playing" remark.), Diane returned at 10:30 to start the laundry. "How's it going now?" she asked.

"Great!" I said. "I've got all my pencils sharpened, I replaced the batteries in the calculator, my scratch paper is aligned, I polished the desk top and the contents of all the drawers are rearranged and straightened. I'm all ready to go."

"You mean you still haven't started?" she asked sounding surprised.

"Sure I have. I've done all the hard parts," I said trying not to sound too condescending. "I'm ready to go. Now, where are the tax forms and check stubs?"

"Wherever you put them," she said trying not to look too frustrated.

An hour and a half later, after several blistering exchanges, the tax forms, paycheck stubs, W2's, receipts, cancelled checks and assorted other crumpled papers were collected. I called a time out in the verbal war and we had lunch.

At 2:30 while I was still chewing my first sandwich, Diane made the suggestion that I was procrastinating again. I assured her that this was not the case. I was merely chewing my food carefully as suggested by the AMA.

"Peanut butter sandwiches don't usually require as much chewing as celery sticks," she commented.

"Celery sticks, that's a good idea. I probably should have something green with my meal. Could you make me some?" There are times when wives have no sense of humor; tax time seems to be one of them. It was then that she suggested I call the insidious Mikey again. An argument ensued. At 4:00 I hurried downstairs to resume work on the taxes.

At 6:30 Diane came down to tell me supper was ready and inquired how I was getting along. She didn't really wake me. I was merely contemplating the difference between purveyorship and licensure and our qualifications therein. The snoring sounds were a figment of her imagination. "I thought you were doing the taxes," she yelled loud enough to distract me from my deep thoughts.

"I was...er am," I said while rubbing my eyes. "Why did you disturb me?"

"Dinner's ready. How far along are you?" she asked.

"Quite a ways. I just need to know if we qualify as a purveyor," I replied as I stood up, yawned and stretched. "If we can qualify as a purveyor with a license in Connecticut, we can get a hefty tax break."

"We're not a purveyor, and we don't live in Connecticut. What's this got to do with our taxes? Just how far did you get?"

"Like I said, I got quite a ways. I read two more tax articles in *Fortune* and discovered a nifty little tax dodge for self-incorporated families in Alaska."



"What about our taxes? What line are you on?" she asked accusingly.

"I've finished line 3," I said while holding up two fingers on one hand and one on the other. Three always looks like a bigger number if you use two hands.

"That's just transferring the address label!" she cried as she exited up the stairs.

Once again at supper I tried to explain the complicated process of being totally prepared before venturing into tax waters, else one is liable to be drowned. She said if I wanted to use metaphors, I hadn't gotten my toes wet. There is a group of people who refuse to understand and appreciate the complete process of tax preparation. That group is wives.

"Just call Mike," she plead in frustration.

"No, I refuse to let an idiot who can't even barbecue right work on my taxes. How can a guy who doesn't know how to light a fire know anything about exemptions? He would be as sparing with our deductions as he is with barbecue sauce. He'd burn up our money faster than he burns his meat," I ranted.

"He does taxes for a hobby!" Diane yelled.

"Anybody who does taxes for a hobby has to be deranged. Who but a masochist would do this to himself more than once a year? Anybody that enjoys doing taxes is obviously mentally deficient and a danger to society. I don't want someone like that coming close to our kids," I raged.

My logic was impeccable. Diane knows when she's lost, and did her customary slam on our bedroom door. I finished my dinner in a mood of self-righteousness, not to be confused with pigheadedness, and ventured downstairs once more to finish the taxes.

At 2:00 a.m., Diane came down and found me in somewhat of a stupor. I was caught somewhere between Schedule A and a hard place. She shook me to a responsive state and led me upstairs. On the way she mumbled something about Mikey and Joan coming over for dinner tomorrow and all I had to do was barbecue some chicken. I responded with a snore as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The next morning I was my old self again and ready to rejoin the battle with Uncle Sam, but Diane made me go to church instead. "You're going to need to say prayers of forgiveness for all the rotten things you're going to think about Mikey, but promise not to say," she said. Sometimes her logic is impeccable too.

After church Joan and Mikey came over. In a massive effort of self restraint I withheld a number of comments as Mikey smiled and rubbed his hand over the prospect of getting to do our taxes. "Don't you just love to do taxes," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "It was a struggle for Diane to convince me to let you do them, but we know how much you enjoy it."

"Right on! Lead me to them," said Mikey. I led the way downstairs. If I had been behind him on the steps, I know he would have had an accident. When he saw the remnants of my efforts, even Mike was a bit shaken. "I'm pretty sure I can straighten this out," he said. "I'll just need to be left alone for a couple of hours."

"No problem, Mikey," I said as I bounded up the stairs full of relief. Now if our taxes were screwed up it was on the heads of my wife and her idiot brother-in-law.

Two hours later, as I was bringing in a platter piled high with steaming chicken, Mikey trudged upstairs. "How's it going?" I asked. "Past line 13 yet?"

"It's all done," he said. "It was a tough go for awhile straightening out the numbers you already had on the forms, but I got through it."

"It was a joke, Mikey. I just put those there to give you an extra challenge. I thought you would enjoy it more if you had a few obstacles. I hate it myself when they're too easy," I said as I put the platter on the table.

"Oh, I get it. That was a good one where you deducted your bowling fees. I'm sure an IRS auditor would have gotten a kick out of it," Mikey said as he sat down.

"Me too, but let's get to the important part. How much more do we have to give them? Will we have to put a third mortgage on the house? Do I have to sell one of the kids? Should Diane plan on reopening her brothel?" I asked with only a slight hint of exaggerated sarcasm.

"Actually," Mikey said, "you're going to get back just under a thousand."

"Oh yeah? That's great! Well, let's eat. Pass my favorite brother-in-law the meat, Dear." I said as I looked somewhat sheepishly at Diane.

"What's all this red stuff on the chicken?" Mikey asked.

"That's barbecue sauce, Mikey. Not everyone puts it on with an atomizer," I may have snapped.

"Pass that chicken over to Joan and me," Diane demanded.

"What about the chef? Doesn't he get any?" Mikey asked.

"No," she replied. "Bryan's eating something special."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Crow, Dear. You're eating crow."

The Burdens of Uncleship

One peaceful afternoon I was sitting in my recliner reading. I was alternating between a detective novel and the backs of my eyelids. I had just managed to transfer the shapely heroine from the pages of the novel to the screen of my inner theater, and we were beginning a tete-a-tete of our own outside the novel when the phone rang. Not wanting to leave the poor girl abruptly, I slowly excused myself and made a date for the near future. By the time this was accomplished, my wife, Diane, had answered the phone. If I had known the consequences of not answering the call myself, I would have dumped the heroine flat on her can. However, I never rush when I'm being charming, and Diane beat me to the phone. Thus she had the opportunity to get even with me for a few of my foibles and took it. All I could do was stand and listen as she used horrible phrases such as: "I'm sure he'd love to, and No trouble at all." When I hear Diane using those words, I know that I'm going to hate what she's planning for me and it's going to be plenty of trouble. As it turned out, it was worse than I expected.

Wives have a way of saving up memories of forgotten birthdays, chores undone, sox left on the family room floor and other trifles. Then, when they have an opportunity to get even, they go for the jugular by volunteering their husbands for some odious task so heinous, it's embarrassing to admit we married such shrews.

The phone call let Diane get even with me for twenty years of past sins. This was absolutely unfair since we've only been married for eighteen. She volunteered me for a task so horrible that I shudder to mention it to the reader. (Any reader with a weak stomach should cover his eyes at this point.) She had volunteered me to take my nephews fishing. (I'll pause at

this point to let the reader recover.)

Taking my nephews fishing would be comparable to submitting myself to three days of Chinese water torture. That's where the victim is tied down and one drop of water splashes on his forehead each two seconds. The slow, but continuous drip drives the victim mad. My nephews, Fermin age 8 and Wendell age 10, have that effect on people. They wear their baseball hats a little off center; they play their radios just a little too loud; they sniff back a little too long; they burp way too often. And these are done just while they are sleeping. They're much worse at the dinner table. How could I possibly survive a whole weekend with Joan and Mikey's boys?

My initial response to Diane's request was cold and calculated. "NO! NO! NO! NEVER! NEVER! NEVER! I Can't! I won't! I refuse!"

Her response, coupled with her withering look, was even colder and more calculated. "How can you say that after Mikey kept us from going to the Poor House by doing our taxes? Joan and Mikey have to go to a convention and need some place to leave the boys. You and Kenny were going fishing this weekend anyway. What kind of trouble can two little boys be on a camping trip?"

Her last question was so fraught with implications that I couldn't possibly answer it in this lifetime. Being a former Boy Scout and Boy Scout leader, I could have told her story after story of how two little boys out camping could create a national catastrophe, let alone annoy me for a weekend. Even my direct ancestors had been known to cause minor mishaps. When my father and uncle were boys, they accidentally burned down an entire camp. I immediately left the room.

Diane followed. "Besides," she said, "Joan says if we do them this

favor, Mikey will do our taxes again next year."

"Well, why didn't you say so? I'd love to take the little nippers fishing. It's the least I can do for my favorite, tax expert brother-in-law. Why, only a fool would do his own taxes with someone like Mikey around," I said.

Friday afternoon arrived all too quickly. As Kenny and I were loading the van, I began to develop backout symptoms. "I've got a terrible headache," I told Diane.

"I packed some aspirin for you," she countered.

"My back is hurting from all this lifting," I whined.

"Then only lift one can of beans at a time," she snapped.

"You're not going to let me out of this are you?"

"No."

I was doomed. We were packed and I hadn't thought of a decent excuse not to go. Feebly, I waved good-bye. As I blinked, a tear rolled down my cheek; Diane laughed and closed the door.

Half way over to Joan and Mikey's I started to turn back. I thought I had left my son, Kenny behind. But no, he was sacked out on the back seat with his walkman on. Kenny is at that stage in life where the less communications with his parents, the better. He is fourteen going on twenty-five. Few things are right in his life. His parents are unreasonable, school's a drag, his sister is a pest and girls are attractive but scary. Fishing trips are the one place where he and I communicate well, but not until we get to the state park.

When we arrived at Joan and Mikey's, Joan greeted us at the door. She pointed at the two boys who were seated on the couch. Each had on one of those compact radio headphone sets, a portable CD draped over a

shoulder, playing a hand held computer game and watching TV. Electronics is their life. Joan walked in front of the TV, turned it off and pointed toward the door. Dutifully, the boys marched out the door and into the van without once interrupting their games. Kenny and I each grabbed one of their sleeping bags and duffel bags. I got the duffel bag knee high before I realized it was a two-man job. It made a can of beans feel like a feather.

"What's in here, lead?" I gasped.

"Sort of," Joan said. "The boys put in a lot of extra batteries."

Just then Mikey walked in from work. "Hi, Bry. How bout I fire up the gas grill and give you guys a hearty send off meal?"

"No thanks, Mikey. We have to get to the campground before dark and set up the tent," I said as I flung the suddenly light duffel bag over my shoulder.

"If I turn on the turbo charger, we can be eating pork steaks in fifteen minutes," Mikey pleaded.

"Here, Kenny. Let me carry both duffels, you carry the sleeping bags. Sorry, Mikey. We gotta go," I said as I headed out the door at a trot.

Joan followed and gave the boys each a kiss good bye. Neither blinked or looked up from his game. I began to wonder if there was some hypnotic force holding them. Maybe the Japanese were getting back at us for the H-bomb by stealing the minds of our children. Joan broke in on my thoughts as I was closing the tailgate.

"I don't blame you for leaving," she said,. "I wouldn't eat his barbecue either if I didn't have to." I looked at her in wonderment as I waved good-bye and got in the van.

Once in the van I felt like the commander of the space shuttle. My nephews in the back seat were still glued to their screens, Kenny had on his

walkman and everyone was strapped in with seat belts. "Mission control, we have lift off," I said aloud to myself as we backed out the driveway and headed into the great unknown.

For the next hour and a half, I was left alone with my thoughts. My mind kept returning to the statement by Joan. For years I had battled with my wife over going to Mikey's barbecues, and now to discover that I had a secret ally in the enemy camp, it was truly a wonderment. Suddenly a huge red spider was dangling in front of my face. I screamed and swerved. The boys in the back giggled.

"You want one, Uncle Bryan?" the smaller one asked and then dropped the spider down his throat.

I pulled off the road and screeched to a halt. "Are you crazy, Wendell? You can't eat bugs!" I yelled.

"I'm Fermin. These are chewy creatures; they're candy."

"I'm Wendell. Watch me eat a worm," said the bigger one as he thrust a green squiggly creature down his throat.

"That's disgusting," I said. "The only thing more disgusting is me calling you two Wendell and Fermin all weekend. How did you get names like that? Do your friends call you Wendy and Fermy?"

"Not unless they want a bloody nose," said the bigger one. "Dad said it would make us tough and learn how to fight."

"Mom said she named us this so we would stand out in a crowd," said the little one.

"I have no doubt they were both right," I replied mercifully, "but I can't be yelling those names all over the woods this weekend. What are your middle names?"

"Mine's Jacob, and his is Ichabod," said the little one.

"Hmm. That's not much better, but it has potential. Suppose I call you Jake and Ike for the weekend?" I proposed. "Those are what I call real fishing buddy names."

The two smiled and I noticed for the first time that Jake was somewhat smaller than Ike, and he was missing two teeth in front. The boys were becoming real people instead of clones with electronic headgear.

"Wait a minute," said Ike. "If we're Ike and Jake, we can't call you Uncle Bryan. That's not a fishing buddy name either."

"True. We'll have to work on it," I said as I drove back on to the freeway.

An hour later as we entered the state park, Jake leaned forward with a lizard tail dangling from his mouth and asked, "Are we there yet Obiwan?"

"Yeah, Jake, this is it." I said. "If you open the windows, you can smell the fresh air of nature."

"All I smell is exhaust fumes. It smells like a semi just went by," said Ike. Then we saw the reason for the malodorous condition. Two church busses came into view on the road ahead of us as we rounded the next curve. Their sides were festooned with signs that read "Annual Church Campout." and "Jesus loves the Great-out-doors." Fortunately as we neared the campgrounds, the busses took the left fork toward the private cabins, while we headed right to the public campgrounds.

"If you listen closely, you should be able to hear a woodpecker or two picking up his dinner, Ike," I said, hoping to orient the boys toward nature.

"All I hear, Obiwan, is some heavy metal," said Ike.

"Nuh unh. It's opera," Jake said.

"Oh, no! It's a sound war! We're doomed!" I cried.

"What's a sound war?" asked Jake.

"That's when two idiots decide they can't stand the other one's music, so they turn up the volume of their own to drown the other one out. We have to camp as far away from them as possible," I explained. But my luck was holding about as well as at the time the phone call came in and started this whole episode. The only campsite left was in the center of the battle.

We pulled into the site and rolled up the windows. By shouting, I could make myself heard above Verdi and Iron Maiden. I explained to the boys that we would first set up our tent, and then I would take them out to eat. Jake offered me an extra walkman he had brought along in case his radiophones broke down. His choice of tapes was severely limited to Sesame Street and U2. I began putting up the tent to the sounds of "Sunny Day."

It has been said that one boy is some help, two boys are no help, and that three boys are a hindrance. I had three boys. Kenny, who had been silent the whole trip suddenly decided to revert to childhood. Whenever I got one of the boys to help, Kenny would pick up the vacant video game and start playing. Jake and Ike decided that holding up tent poles was less dangerous than pounding their fingers while trying to drive tent pegs, but not as much fun as playing video games. Matters would have been difficult enough if we had been able to communicate normally, but each of us had on a set of headphones and music in our ears in an effort to keep out the sound war. We all were marching to a different drum, literally. All in all it took 90 minutes to do a 15 minute job of setting up the tent.

When the tent was finally up, I motioned the boys back into the van and we headed for the local burger barn. We took our time eating and I relished the soft strains of Hank Williams Jr. on the juke box. It may not have been my favorite kind of music, but at least it was only one tune.

It was late when we got back to camp, and quiet too. The sound war had been silenced by a curfew. Thank God for the rangers who enforce those curfews. We arrived just in time to hear the verbal exchanges between the participants of the sound war. "Wait till tomorrow." "Oh, yeah? Well, I got 14 more tapes I ain't even played."

"What do we do now, Obiwan?" Jake asked.

"Now we go to bed," I said.

The boys headed for their bunks, but I did not follow. "Aren't you coming to bed, Uncle Bryan?" asked Ike.

"That's Obiwan. And no, I have a couple of chores to do before I turn in. All I have to do is find my pliers, er I mean my light sabre. Good night boys."

By the time I turned in, the world was a better place for people with delicate ears and little boys who spend too much time in a video and audio world of their own.

Aroused from sleep by the not too gentle shaking of my son, I awoke to his yells of "Dad! Dad! We've been robbed!" It was nice to hear him talking again. "Is the van gone?" I asked groggily.

"No, the van's here, but all our radios and video games are gone," said Kenny who sounded as if he was getting suspicious.

"Not to worry," I said and rolled over.

"You took them didn't you. At least give us our radios so we don't have to listen to those people trying to blast each other out," he pleaded.

"Kenny," I said, "the one nice thing about fishing pliers is that they cut speaker wire as well as monofilament line. Now let me sleep for another hour. I had a long night."

The next thing I knew, Jake was shouting and shaking me. "Obiwan! Obiwan! Kenny set the bacon on fire!"

"Put a lid on it." I said.

"No, Uncle Bryan! It's a big fire!"

"I'm serious. Put a lid on the frying pan, that will smother the fire," I said.

Jake ran out and delivered the dictum. When he came back I had made my bed and was putting on my pants. "Gee, that worked great. I didn't know you could put out a fire with a lid. At home, Daddy always uses a fire extinguisher on his barbecue pit."

"Why doesn't that surprise me," I said, expanding Jake's world with a little sarcasm.

Ike came in then with a plate full of carbon deposits. "You want some bacon, Obiwan? It tastes kind of like Dad's hamburgers."

"That doesn't surprise me either. You boys ready to do a little fishing?"

"What about breakfast, Dad? We were going to have pancakes." It was Kenny. He spoke for the second time. He was really beginning to loosen up.

I salvaged a breakfast from the mess left by the boys, but the frying pan was a goner. While we were eating, the audio combatants tried to crank up their systems, accused each other of sabotage, got into a fight and were forced by the rangers to leave. I thought things were beginning to look up. But, I thought too soon.

After breakfast we drove to the marina to rent a boat. I had promised the boys that I would take them to the best spots on the lake. When we got there, the marina was empty. The grizzled old man known as Pop who ran

the place sat on a rocker, humming a tune in which he sang every now and then, "Fort Knox ain't got nothin' on me."

"Hi, Pop," I said. "Where's all your boats?"

"The church people come early and took 'em all. They didn't leave me nothin' but a big ol' pile of money. Fort Knox ain't got nothin' on me," he sang with a smile.

"What do we do now, Obiwan?" asked Jake.

"Don't you have anything left? A canoe or something?" I implored.

"Nope, not even a raft. 'Cept, wait a minute. I think I got an old dinghy in the shop. You might haf' to bail her now and then, but she floats pretty good."

"That's okay," I said. "How big of an engine does she have?"

"No engine. Oars. You ain't forgot how to row a boat have ya?" Pop smiled.

"No, I ain't forgot how to row a boat. I also haven't forgotten how much work it is," I moaned.

"Well, Fellas, that's all we got. Take her or leave her."

I looked at the boys' expectant faces, "We'll take her."

"Great. That'll be 35 bucks," Pop cackled.

"Thirty-five dollars for a dinghy we have to row ourselves! That's highway robbery!" I shouted.

"Nope that's the law of supply and demand. Course if you want to disappoint these children," Pop said with the look of a shyster.

He had me by the boat. He knew it, and I knew it. There was nothing to do but hand over the money. Pop went off singing about Fort Knox, and we unloaded our tackle from the van.

We walked back down to the dock to find that Pop's description of the floating wood as a boat was generous. It was about 10 feet long, stripped of paint, weathered for a decade and light showed between the gunwales and upper planking. Pop stood on the dock, oars in hand, and was still humming. "I threw in a coffee can for bailing. That's on the house," Pop chuckled.

"That's very generous of you, Pop," I said. "And I wish you well. And I also wish all your teeth would fall out the day before Thanksgiving."

"Too late," he said with a large toothless grin. "Be sure to have the boat back by eight sharp tonight. Otherwise, I have to charge you double." Pop walked down the dock counting his money and humming his tune.

The boys and I gingerly loaded the tackle and ourselves into the boat. We had about six inches of clearance between the waterline and the gaps at the gunwales. I rowed slowly out of the marina and quickly remembered why rowing was hard work. As my puffing got heavier, Ike asked if he could take over.

We traded places and after splashing us all with water on half catches with the oars his first four or five strokes, Ike began to get the hang of it. Then Jake wanted a turn. He caught on too, and even Kenny wanted a try.

Things were looking up again. We were making good headway, and I was getting a free ride. Of course, things got worse in a hurry. Some of the caulking began to give way. At first I thought my feet were sweating. It was when my ankles began to sweat that I knew something was wrong. The water coming in was now up to the seat bottoms. We discovered that if one of us used the can and two of us used our hats to bail, we could keep up. So much for the free ride.

When we got to the first good spot, we changed our strategy. Since we weren't moving, the water didn't come in as fast. We fished for ten minutes and bailed for five and stayed even with the flow.

Kenny noted that if we bailed a little less, when we caught some fish, we would have our own live well. He was becoming downright social.

We worked out a fishing buddy system. Kenny worked with Ike, and I worked with Jake. We used lures from my tackle box. I thought having the boys learn how to handle the equipment would be a good first step. After they had the equipment down, they could learn how to work with live bait.

Jake, being eight, wanted my largest and most gaudy topwater lure. A fish would have to be a monster just to get his mouth on the thing. I showed Jake how to attach the lure and the basics of casting. He caught on quickly. His years of computer games made his hand-eye coordination superior. Kenny was having as much success with Ike.

It was while I was putting a lure on my own line that spectacular success was followed by spectacular disaster. I began to look around for Bonehead. Jake had cast toward the bank and was reeling in his lure so fast, he was creating the wake of a destroyer. I was just explaining to him that he should retrieve his lure at a slower rate when the monster fish struck it. Jake's pole doubled over and his eyes became saucers.

"What should I do, Obiwan?" he yelled.

"Don't do anything. Just hold your rod up like you are now and let the fish tire himself out," I said. Kenny and Ike reeled in their lines and watched as Jake fought the fish. Gradually the fish tired and Jake started reeling him in. I set my rod aside and got the net ready by leaning over the side and putting it in the water. The fish was almost to the boat when it made its final attempt at escape by leaping toward the boat and diving. All

three boys bent toward the spot where the fish went down. Instantly, gravity, physics and the rounded bottom of the boat took over, and the entire universe became liquid.

When I came up, I looked for the three boys. In a few seconds they were bobbing at my side. We all had on life jackets. Kenny looked at me in amusement.

"What's next, Obiwan?"

"Grab whatever's floating nearby and head for shore," I commanded. I dragged the boat behind me to shore.. Ike brought in the oars. Jake grabbed the cooler, and Kenny retrieved my now empty tackle box. Kenny and I made a trip back out and retrieved three fishing rods. The one with the fish attached was no longer in the area.

Once we had the boat emptied out, we headed back to the marina. It took one oarsman and three bailers with hats to keep the dinghy afloat.

Back on the dock, Pop stood with his thumbs hooked in the straps of his overalls and shook his head at us. "Looks like you boys have had a rough mornin'," he quipped. I only glared back. "If you fellas want to rent a real boat this afternoon, I got one. One of them church fellas just brought one back. He said the Lord was so kind to him this mornin', he was gonna take the afternoon off. He caught himself a stringer full of catfish. And if that wasn't enough, he found a rod floatin' out in the middle of the lake with a six pound bass hooked on the line. He was so happy, he give me a ten dollar tip. Can you beat that?"

My glacial stare told Pop I was not in a jovial mood.

"I'll tell you boys what. Since you had kind of a rough time this morning, if you give me ten dollars, I'll hold the boat that fella brung in until

you can get changed in to some dry duds. And I'll only charge you half a day's rent. How's that sound?" Pop looked at me hopefully.

"Let's go back out, Obiwan. I didn't get a bite yet," said Ike. I looked at Jake and Kenny. They nodded agreement. I reached for my wallet and found nothingness.

"Sorry guys, my wallet's on the bottom of the lake," I apologized. Pop looked more disappointed than the boys. He wasn't going to get an extra half day's rent on the boat. Fort Knox had a leg up on him. He walked away without humming his tune, and the boys and I loaded what was left of our gear into the van. Fortunately, my keys were in my front pocket and hadn't fallen out.

Back at camp we changed into dry clothes and ate lunch. Kids being more resilient than rubber, Ike, Jake and Kenny were recharged after lunch and ready for excitement. Middle-aged adults being less resilient than balsa wood, I was ready for a nap.

"What do we do now, Obiwan?" Jake piped up in a hopeful voice.

"Let's take stock of the situation," I advised. "We still have three rods, but we don't have any lures, hooks or bait. That pretty much lets out any more fishing. Why don't you guys take a hike. There's some pretty scenery around here."

"I want to catch a fish like Jake" Ike whined.

"I'm sorry, Son. I don't know what I can do."

"A package of hooks was caught up under one of the trays in the tackle box. Maybe we could dig some worms and fish with those," Kenny offered.

"Maybe so," I said, "but I didn't bring a shovel."

"How about if we catch some grasshoppers?" Kenny asked. I hadn't seen this much enthusiasm from him in months. I was pleased he wanted to try so hard.

"Go ahead and try, Guys. Let me know how it turns out. Don't wade though. Fish from the shore," I admonished.

"Aren't you coming, Obiwan?" asked Jake.

"No, you guys go ahead without me. I could use some rest. Besides, there's still only three rods," I said.

Jake looked disappointed. It was nice that I'd be missed. The boys gathered the rods and hooks and headed off toward the lake. I doubted that they'd have much success but one never knows. And in this case as it turned out, I sure didn't.

I walked into the tent and flopped on my bunk only to be greeted by severe back pain. Forgetting that I had hidden the radios and computer games under my sleeping bag, I jumped up and pulled it back. One by one I removed the games and put them in my duffel bag. as I was putting the last one away, I noticed that it must have been turned on when I fell on the bunk. When I pushed a button to turn it off, the little man on the screen wearing a pith helmet jumped over a log. I tried a different button and he ducked under a vine. Two hours later I was good enough to get over six logs at a time and avoid all vines, even the ones with the grasping gorillas. Taking a break just long enough to relieve the tension in my back, I picked up the spare walkman and loaded a tape. Instantly I noticed that my dexterity improved with U2 at 60 decibels. By the time the boys returned at 6:30, I was the new Jungle Jack record holder.

The boys themselves had had a record afternoon. "Where did you get all those big bass?" I asked.

Ike caught the two biggest, I caught four and Kentucky caught the other six," Jake said.

"But we threw back all the small ones under two pounds," said Ike.

"Who's this Kentucky fella, and why did he give you his fish?" I inquired.

"Kentucky Jones, your son," explained Jake. "He gave us the idea, so we gave him a fishing buddy name."

Ike continued. "His name is Kenny, so we called him KENTucky Jones. Besides, Indiana Jones was already taken. You wouldn't want to use somebody else's name, would you, Obiwan?"

"Uh, no. What idea?" I asked, cleverly changing the subject.

"The idea for using the chewy creatures as bait. We just put them on the hook and the fish gobbled them up," Jake said.

"Kentucky figured fish weren't smart enough to know the difference between a real lure and candy," said Ike.

That big fat one Ike caught on a lizard and Pop took his picture to hang in the marina," Kentucky said.

That night we had the biggest fish fry I can remember. We had to borrow frying pans from a few neighbors, but we had no trouble making deals for bass filets. All the other fishermen in camp bribed the boys for their secret, but they came through with convincing stories about night crawlers and grasshoppers. They had become expert fishermen up to and including lying about their catch.

The next day Ike and Kentucky went off to explore the farthest shores of the lake for even better fishing. Jake and I having to share a pole stuck closer to home. We made a fair trade of talents in the process. Jake showed

me the secret of his rapid fire retrieve, and I gave him some pointers on Jungle Jack.

On the drive home while I listened to "Sunny Day," I found Sesame Street better for driving than U2 which made me cruise at 20 miles over the limit, I compile the credits and debits of the trip overall. Somewhere at the bottom of the lake was an excess of \$200 worth of fishing gear and a wallet full of credit cards. Other than the inconvenience, and as long as a fish didn't start charging things all over town on my cards, the loss was tolerable. On the plus side, I had gotten over videophobia, gained a super new fishing strategy, two new fishing buddies and a son named Kentucky Jones who speaks to me civilly whenever I call him that name. Yes sir, I had come out way ahead on this trip.

It would have been a storybook ending had not Mikey been waiting with a plate full of freshly burnt indeterminate meat and insisted we have a welcome home meal. All through the dinner, the boys regaled their parents with a splash by splash description of their catches. Watching them eat a meal without their radios on truly amazed their parents. We all got a kick out of Kentucky joining in the conversation with enthusiasm. It almost kept Joan and me from choking on Mikey's barbecue.

Advancing the Auto Industry

It's amazing, the feeling of pride I can get from sitting in the porch swing, sipping iced tea, watching my son vacuum and wash the car, and all the time know that I am bolstering the future of America by advancing the auto industry.

Confused? A little explanation may help. Excuse me just a minute. "Kenny, you missed a spot on the front, right fender. You better go over that part again, Son." He tends to get a little careless if I let my supervisory attention wander.

Let's see now, where was I? Oh yes, I was explaining how directing my son's washing of the family car was creating a brighter future for America. First, one has to get rid of the misconception that engineering advances come from engineers with scientific calculators, drafting tables and fancy, holograph projecting computers. Many people believe that these little, eggheaded geniuses spend hours poring over charts and diagrams to make cars better, however that is not the case.

Major engineering advances are made by hapless boys who are at the mercy of their fathers. Consider my grandfather's generation, or specifically, my grandfather. On cold mornings when his father was having trouble getting his car started, my grandfather, a young teenager at the time, would be dragged screaming from his nice, warm bed, forced to don cold overalls and boots and be unmercifully propelled out doors. There, shivering, he would stand for the next half hour cranking the car while his father worked the pedals and choke lever. When his father finally got the engine started and drove off to work, grandfather would hustle back inside to nurse his frostbite and ever enlarging fantasies of patricide.

Fortunately, one of the boys from his era invented the automatic ignition in an effort to keep his friends, my grandfather included, from becoming a father killer and resident of Death Row. Thus my father was able to be born and subjected to a different, yet equally gruelling torture, by my grandfather.

When my father reached driving age, it was his privilege to learn the art of driving from my grandfather. Unfortunately, along with that privilege came a two hour harangue as my father gradually ground away all the gear teeth from the transmission. Each Sunday for six months, as my father navigated the grocery store parking lot and the wonders of the manual transmission, he received gentle phrases of encouragement from his instructor. Phrases such as: "If you aren't going to use your left foot for the clutch, you idiot, I'm going to saw it off." and, "That's a gear shift, not the arm of a slot machine, Dummy. Don't yank it 'cause you ain't going to get no jackpot." Grandfather was known for his persuasive technique as a teacher, if not for his charm.

Eventually, when men of my father's generation became influential, the automatic transmission quickly appeared on new car models.

During my own years as an adolescent, I suffered as well. While not verbally harsh, my father always assigned me a task that was arduous, distasteful and at times, dangerous. My job was to scrape the ice and snow off the windows of the car; front, rear and side. Even when my father started the car and used the defroster, which never made a dent in the rear window ice, the task still had its challenges. For one thing, there was no way to get the snow off the car without getting it on to me. By the end of the job, I was as wet as if I had gone sledding or had a snowball fight with my friends. Somehow it was a dismal kind of wet, as opposed to the kind of wet you get

while having fun. Another problem, and sometimes dangerous, was the scraper. I snapped off more scraper blades in my time as a window clearer, than Bobby Orr did hockey sticks in his NHL career. The danger part came when I would be scraping hard against roughened ice and the blade would snap. Usually, due to the sudden stop when the blade snapped, my hands would travel down the wooden handle picking up splinters and then across the ice leaving bits of skin. My gloves which should have protected me were generally shed from wetness by the time I got down to the rough ice.

No, it is not a pleasurable memory, but then, a price must be paid for advances in technology. Some member of my own generation paid the price as well and gave us the rear window defroster.

My son, Kenny, will never have to break a scraper blade. However, he does have to take time out from playing with his friends to vacuum and wash the car. Hopefully, I, and other fathers like me, can keep Kenny's generation hopping. Then, in the not too distant future, the country will have a self cleaning car.

Excuse me. "Kenny, don't forget to take out the floor mats when you vacuum." It makes me proud to see him seething that way. America's future is in good hands.

Miss Sydney

Late one Friday afternoon, as I was quietly dozing after a hard week's work of cramming little minds full of literature, the phone rang. It was my sister-in-law, Joan calling. I assumed the worst when I recognized her voice. Surely Mikey had forced her to invite us over for another of his charred meals that he created on his turbo charged incinerator that he likes to call a barbecue grill. Mikey had missed his time and calling. He's a computer jock for a large, nationally known telecommunications company. Had he been born in ancient times, there is no doubt he would have achieved the lofty position of High Priest of the Altar in charge of burnt offerings.

Instantly my mind began to compile a number of excuses why my wife, Diane, and I could not possibly make it this weekend. However, Joan had not called for that purpose. I was relieved. She asked me to come over and discuss a writing project of Fermin's.

Fermin, whom I like to call Jake, is Joan and Mikey's eight-year-old son whom I've had the pleasure of turning into an expert fisherman. An expert fisherman cannot go around with a name like Fermin; so for his sake, I call him Jake after his middle name, Jacob. This suits the two of us just fine, if not his mother.

When I arrived, Joan met me at the door with her coat on. "Oh, going shopping?" I asked.

"No, I'm taking you to see Fermin's teacher," Joan replied.

"I see," I said. "A young one just starting out who wants a few tips on how to teach Jake and his classmates to write. I'm glad you called me. It's always nice to share my experiences with the new generation of teachers."

Perhaps my attitude was a little condescending, but Joan's retort surprised me.

"Wrong again," she snapped as we got into her sedan. "You and Fermin are in trouble.. Remember two weeks ago when Fermin was sick, and you came over to read him some fairy tales?"

"Sure. He had just seen "Princess Bride." I was pleased that he asked me to come read to him instead of his grandfather like in the movie. It was great fun," I said.

"Did you just read fairy tales or did you tell your own version?" she asked.

"As I recall, I read him a few but he objected to their phony endings. Jake seemed to think that everybody living happily ever after was a cop out. He's very bright. I was pleased with his perception," I said in a self satisfied tone.

"Did you rewrite any?" Joan prosecuted.

"It seems to me that we did add on to "The Princess and the Pea." I may have taken a few notes, but I don't specifically recall what happened to them, I said defensively.

"What happened to them, is that Fermin copied them and turned them in as an essay. Now his teacher feels that he has a cynical and depressed outlook on life, and she wants to send him to a psychologist. I want you to tell her that the story was your idea and that Fermin is normal!" Joan yelled.

"Calm down, Joan. This is all just a little misunderstanding. I'm sure when Jake's teacher realizes that he and I were just having fun, she'll be pleased with the outcome. What's her name?" I asked as we pulled into the school's parking lot.

"Her name," Joan said as she shut off the engine, "is Miss Sydney. And from the little contact I've had with her, I don't think she finds much humor in too many things."

My hand froze on the door handle. Instantly, I was eight years old and back in the third grade. Miss Sydney, a small woman of indeterminate age with pale blue eyes and light blond hair pulled tightly into a bun, stood over me as I cowered in my desk. Knowing that my fate was already sealed, I couldn't raise my eyes above the faded gray belt of her navy blue dress. "Well, Bryan," she said in a flinty voice, "what's your excuse this time?"

I started to stammer an excuse, but was immediately cut off by the excruciating pain in my ear as Miss Sydney lifted me from my desk. "Stand up when you address me or any other adult," she commanded. Miss Sydney loved ears and pigtails. To her they were nature's handles on children. "Now what's your excuse? Speak up and give a direct answer."

"I don't have an excuse, Miss Sydney. I was just having fun," I answered feebly.

"Your fun, Bryan, has cost this class time. Time this class cannot spare. Therefore, you will all stay after school today to make up for lost time. Then you, Bryan will stay after the rest of the class has left and write an apology to your classmates, to me, to the principal and your parents. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Miss Sydney," I replied grudgingly.

"Class?" she demanded.

"Yes, Miss Sydney," the class dutifully responded.

Feeling the glare from the rest of the class, I looked around furtively. Bill "the Bull Elephant" Unger, the self appointed class disciplinarian by virtue of his extreme size, was pounding his fist into his thigh where he knew

I could see it. That meant he was going to lead the class's attack on me at recess for making them stay after school. I expected that, and I felt I deserved it. The idea that Miss Sydney could ever be wrong never entered our minds.

"Bryan? Are you ready?"

"Yes, Miss Sydney."

"Are you okay? You just called me Miss Sydney," Joan said.

"I'm fine," I replied snapping back to the present. "This Miss Sydney, she's tall and has long dark hair and brown eyes and wears bright colored clothing and is in her twenties or thirties, right?" I asked Joan hopefully as we walked into the school building.

"No, she's short with blue eyes and light blond hair that she keeps in a bun. She seems to wear rather plain clothes, and as for her age, she could be 35 or 65," said Joan.

My stomach did a back flip, and my mind did some quick calculations. I began to think aloud. "If Miss Sydney had been a new teacher when I was in third grade, let's see, that was 20, no, 30, no, uh, a long time ago. That would make her; no, it couldn't be her."

As we rounded a corner, I was still rejecting the possibility when Miss Sydney, my old third grade teacher stepped into the hall from her classroom. My jaw dropped, my heart sank and my hands trembled as I took off my hat. She should have been old and gray and wrinkled, but she didn't look any different from the way I remembered her when she was my teacher. The pale blue eyes, the light blond hair and a navy blue dress were still there. It suddenly struck me that age and time had no effect on Miss Sydney; she wouldn't permit it.

Apparently Miss Sydney had total recall and recognized me immediately. "I might have known it was you," said Miss Sydney. "Come in and sit down."

Joan and I of course obeyed; even as adults, there was no resisting the authority of her voice. Since there were no chairs in the room other than Miss Sydney's desk chair, we had to sit in student desks. Joan, who is petite, had no problem. I, on the other hand, was wedged in like the last sardine.

Miss Sydney, never one to dabble with formalities, took some papers off her desk and handed them to me. "Is this your work?" she asked.

"I don't know, Miss Sydney, I'd have to read..." I was cut off by a familiar, excruciating pain in my ear as Miss Sydney pulled me to my feet. Unfortunately, the desk came with me as I rose causing additional pain in my stomach and the back of my thighs from whence it hung.

"We must stand when we are addressing our elders. I thought I taught you that much courtesy. Now, take off that desk and speak up."

"Yes, Miss Sydney," I replied as I disencumbered myself. "As I was saying, I don't know. I have to read it."

"Then, read it," she replied succinctly.

"Yes, Miss Sydney," I said, and I began to read.

"Aloud," commanded Miss Sydney.

"All of it?" I asked incredulously.

"All of it," she directed. "I want Fermin's mother to have the full effect."

"Yes, Miss Sydney," I cleared my throat and began to read loudly.

"The Princess and the Pea ...Continued

Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived a young prince who wanted to marry a true princess. Now the

prince had met many young women who claimed to be princesses, but the prince was never truly convinced of their genuineness.

One night when it was raining quite hard, a young woman knocked on the door of the prince's castle and asked to spend the night. She too claimed to be a princess. The prince's mother who was very clever devised a plan to test the young woman's claim.

The prince's mother made a special bed for the young woman. On the bed she had placed a pea. Over the pea she placed twenty mattresses and twenty quilts made of the softest eiderdown. "If she is truly a princess," she told her son, "she will feel the pea. Only a princess can be sensitive enough to feel a pea under all those mattresses and quilts."

In the morning when the young woman awoke, the prince asked her how she had slept. "Terribly," she replied. "I feel bruised all over from the lump under my mattress."

The prince jumped for joy and immediately asked the young princess to marry him. She accepted, and they lived happily ever after,...or at least for the next few days until they began to plan the wedding.

Since they were to be married in the prince's homeland, it fell upon his family to arrange the wedding. The prince's mother began by renting the finest hall in the kingdom. When the princess saw the hall however, it was not acceptable. The hall was drafty and had a musty odor. It also needed painting, complained the princess, in colors that would match her bridesmaids' dresses. No sooner had the princess spoken than the prince ordered the hall aired out and painted. The prince also ordered all ventilation reworked to close off any drafts.

Next the princess and her future mother-in-law sat down to discuss the reception menu. The caterer had suggested ham and roast beef sandwiches, baked chicken, green beans and of course mostaccioli. "Oh, no!" cried the princess when she heard. "At my wedding there must be pheasant and caviar for all the guests, with the finest champagne to wash it down. When the prince found out about the disagreement, he ordered the champagne, caviar and pheasant and smiled for indeed he was marrying a true princess.

The guest list was submitted to the princess for approval, and this too met with rejection. The prince's family had included many life long friends who had seen the prince

grow to manhood and helped him in times of need. There was the stable master who had taught the prince how to ride and race his horses. Also, the school master who had taught the prince to read and write and speak eloquently had been invited, and the town ruffian who had taught the prince to wrestle and became the prince's hunting fishing and beer drinking partner. But the princess crossed anyone off the list who was not titled or of royal birth. Then she added the names of kings and queens whom they barely knew and didn't really like. She reasoned that the list would look better for the press release, and the ones who didn't show up at the wedding would send better gifts. The prince was saddened at not inviting his friends, but he wanted to marry this true princess, and he ordered the revised guest list to be published.

As the wedding day neared, the conflicts continued, No matter what the prince or his family suggested, the princess found fault with it and insisted upon improvement. The prince wanted a leisurely honeymoon in a cottage by the sea, but the princess wanted a whirlwind tour of the Riviera and the Mediterranean; so it was planned. The prince wanted a simple tuxedo in robin's egg blue, but the princess wanted him in grey pinstripes with top hat and tails; so they were ordered. The prince suggested they have a small ten room castle built near his parents where they could share the labor cost of the local serfs, but the princess insisted they have a twenty-four room castle with sauna and built-in pool. She also demanded that it be built on a mountain top far, far away where they could have complete authority over their own serfs and the local townspeople would pay homage only to them. To this the prince acquiesced. My goodness, what a true princess she was turning out to be.

At this time, I paused to take a deep breath and looked up at my listeners. It was hard to tell what Joan was thinking, her face was completely impassive. There was no doubt what Miss Sydney was thinking as her clear blue eyes stared a hole right through me. She had a reason for making me do this, although she was keeping it to herself until she was ready to let me in on it. That was her way. When she caught a student misbehaving, she always made that student own up to the act by repeating it, then she would point out

the flaw. This reenforced the dastardly act and its ramifications in the student's mind so he or she would not repeat it. Miss Sydney's method of discipline had been worked on me numerous times while I was in her class and several other times before I escaped grade school. Always, she was right and, I learned not to make the same mistake. Now, Miss Sydney was making me own up to my act by reading the essay, and when I was finished, she would point out the flaw. Of course, as an adult, I knew she couldn't punish me or my class. But, just in case, I took a quick glance at Bill Unger's desk. Fortunately "the Bull Elephant" had not sneaked in while I had been reading.

All these thoughts passed through my mind in the time it took for that deep breath. What Miss Sydney had in mind for me I would not know until I finished reading the story. There was nothing to do but continue.

On the day before the wedding, the prince's mother quietly suggested that the prince take the princess out for the afternoon to keep her from making any more improvements. The princess's constant interference was frustrating the caterer, decorators and seamstress. If the prince would bring her back in time for the rehearsal dinner, things would be all ready for the wedding the next day.

The princess was reluctant to relinquish control of the proceedings, but she agreed that she could use a rest. After all, finding flaws and improving everyone else's ides was hard work. The prince took her for a relaxing canoe ride down the local river. It was a warm spring day with a soft breeze and floating down the gentle stream was soothing. Unfortunately, shortly after leaving the shore, the princess discovered a small leak in the bottom of the canoe. The prince quickly paddled to shore. As they were getting out of the canoe, a young man came running along the river bank shouting, "Watch out! Watch out! The dam has burst and the valley is flooding! Run for your lives!"

The prince and princess scrambled up the bank, across the road and up the hill to the top where they were just out of harm's way. They watched as a wall of water came rumbling down the valley crushing anything in its path and washing it

out to sea. "How lucky we were to have that canoe with a hole in it. If we hadn't paddled to shore we would have been swept away and killed," said the prince. Thinking quickly, he seized the opportunity to make a point with his bride to be. "You see my dear, sometimes imperfect things are just what you need, and you can love them for their flaws." The princess, who hadn't been paying the least bit attention to the prince looked up at him and said, "Look at the grass stains on my shorts! I was planning on wearing these next week in Greece. And I'll have to buy new tennis shoes too, these will never get clean."

In an instant, the prince saw his future pass before him. Nothing that he or anyone else could ever say or do would ever please this woman. Oh what a princess she was. The prince looked around and seeing no one, he quickly grabbed the princess and heaved her into the rushing water. "I can't swim!" she screamed. "Oh, really?" yelled the prince. "I could never have married someone with a flaw such as that." And the prince watched as the princess bobbed down the river and out of his life forever.

The prince waited until the water had receded, and he began to walk home on what was left of the muddy road. After walking a short distance, the prince heard a voice calling to him from the water. It was the young man who had warned him of the flood, and he was paddling upstream in the prince's leaky canoe. The prince joined the young man in the canoe, and they paddled to the young man's house not far up the river. The prince thanked the young man profusely for saving his life and promised him a great reward which the young man turned down. The prince knew he had met a fine person and vowed to make this young man a friend.

Just at that time, the young man's father and sister came home. They had been running to warn the people on the other side of the river. The father stood and talked with the prince for a while, but the sister, tired from her journey, sat in a chair, fell instantly asleep and began to snore loudly. "I'm sorry," her father apologized, "when she's tired, she can sleep anywhere on anything." The prince immediately asked the father for his daughter's hand in marriage, and they lived happily ever after."

I paused and looked hopefully at Miss Sydney, secretly pleased that Jake had done such a fine job of transcribing my notes.. "Is that it?" she snarled.

"Yes, Miss Sydney," I replied while ducking my head and staring at the familiar gray belt.

"After all these years, you're still trying to be a funny man," she accused.

"Yes, Miss Sydney."

"You realize what you've done, don't you?"

"No, Miss Sydney."

"You've tried to cheat young Fermin out of his childhood fantasies. A child needs the hope that people can live happily ever after. Reality is hard enough for all of us to endure as we age and learn about life, but childhood is a time to dream. As children we can dream about the way life should be. Then as adults, remembering those dreams, we can work toward making the world come up to our fantasies and be a better place to live for our children. Don't you see that?" she begged me with her eyes on fire..

"Yes, Miss Sydney. Er, no, Miss Sydney. I hadn't thought," I stammered.

"Of course not," she said measuring me. "We teachers are here to supply the tools, and we let the children supply the dreams. That's how education should work."

In this short time with Miss Sydney, hearing her approach to education,, I learned what I should have learned in my four years of teachers' college and had reenforced during my years teaching since then.

"Now, what are you going to do about this?" she demanded.

Holding up my hand to take an oath, I said, "I promise never to teach young Fermin again"

"Wrong!" she yelled as she crashed her ruler on her desk. "Letting you out of the third grade was the biggest mistake of my career," she bemoaned as she shook her head wearily. "Now, try it again."

Rethinking and phrasing my thoughts slowly, I ventured again. "I promise to help Fermin with his writing technique and skills, but I will never impose my ideas on him or in any way diminish his dreams."

"You're still slow, but you've finally got it," she said in a tired voice.

"Thank you, Miss Sydney. May we leave now?" I asked hopefully.

"No." she said in her steely voice and fixing me with a glare. "You don't get off that easy. You've something else to do." She then pointed to my desk. and I squeezed into the sardine can once more.

An hour and a half later when Joan dropped me off at home, Diane was busy making dinner. She came toward me for our usual greeting kiss, but I held her at bay.

"First I have to read you my letter of apology. Then after dinner I have to call my parents and read them theirs. And tomorrow, I get to go back to Jake's school and apologize to the principal and Jake's class.

"Oh," Diane said, looking at my quizzically. "You didn't happen to have a run-in with our old third grade teacher, Miss Sydney, did you?"

"Yes, I did as a matter of fact. And if she had larger desks, I'd re-enroll in her class. Now get my pipe wrench so I can take this stupid desk off me; It hurt like hell in Joan's car on the way home."