

FRICKIN 40

Funny Stories About Middle Age

Benjamin J. Gohs



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Frickin 40: Funny Stories About Middle Age
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For Taco Bell

FRICKIN 40 EXPLAINED

I wrote this book because I am a ridiculous coward.

You deserve to know that since you did me the honor of buying this book in the airport gift shop or a women's shelter rummage sale instead of purchasing yet another Jim Gaffigan tome. (What's he up to now, like 18 kids?)

What would prompt a middle-aged coward to write a book about middle age? The truth is I never thought I was going to live to see 25, let alone 40. And, the older I got, the more uneasy I became about the whole aging process.

So, in an attempt to deal with the impending horror of going "over the hill," I set out in 2014—the year I turned 39—to write my concerns, observations and fears surrounding the run-up to this dreaded fortieth birthday.

The result is a bizarre manifesto of cowardice and regret ... and hippos and farts and yoga and oatmeal-hatred and a hero named "Kumquat Ferrari."

In light of the hellish 12-month ordeal, we begin our minor misadventures with the piece I wrote two days after I barely survived turning 40.

Benjamin J. Gohs
May 27, 2015

BULLETS, WHISKEY & FLESH-EATING VIRUS *The Week I Turned 40*

I don't usually celebrate birthdays but a man only reaches the four-decade mark once; twice, if he lives to 80, but Taco Bell and cherry whiskey know that ain't happening.

A glutton always, I decided when February 2015 rolled around that I would go with what the young people call a "birthday week." It's generally reserved for royalty but, if some snot-nosed, 20-something shift manager at Abercrombie gets to eat cake for seven days, then so did I goddammit.

Saturday – midlife crisis began with the purchase of a new rifle.

Sunday – Looking online at keen accessories for new purchase. Pretty uneventful except for a strange feeling in my left ear.

Monday – Ear feeling worse. Reconsidered the purchase but justified it by reasoning that it wasn't nearly as bad as a mistress or a sports car or a sports mistress. And it was certainly cheaper than those chin implants I'd been eying.

Monday evening – Decided to dip into birthday whiskey a few days early. Half a bottle later and I was listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young and feeling sentimental. Messaged the old man about the purchase. We don't talk much, but the conversation went well ... until it abruptly ended when cherry whiskey told my father (picture Big Jake McCandles) I loved him. We don't do that in my family. (We sure as hell don't do it when one of us is sober.)

Determined to have a good time, me and cherry whiskey pressed

on. Round about midnight or so we realized that, if the Taliban were to suddenly break down the front door, we would be severely outgunned.

Birthday mistake number four: placing an order for a thousand rounds of ammunition.

I'll recap my mistakes up to that point for all you pot smokers out there:

1. Too much gun for too much money.
2. Too much whiskey for too much Benny.
3. Too much "Daddy I love you."
4. Too much ammo!

Tuesday – Awakened with cherry flavored hangover and noticeable lump on left side of neck just under sore ear. Reviewed and deleted online chat with father.

Wednesday & Thursday – Blur of ear pain and what my brother refers to as "hulk neck" as the mystery illness worsened.

Friday – First of three birthday wishes came true when the wife came home with Taco Bell for dinner. Despite ear pain and hulk neck, Friday went pretty smooth ... until approximately 12:36 a.m. I was half-watching a classic movie and half-wondering about my ear when I decided to take a picture of it. It was roughly 12:37 a.m. when I identified the large scab on the squiggly part of my outer ear (the squiggis?) as flesh-eating bacteria. Mere moments of breathlessly viewing the internet carnival of medical horror slide shows confirmed the diagnosis.

The wife, of course, was deep in sleep after having spent the day traveling 320.8 miles round-trip for work conferences. I considered this carefully before shoving my phone in her hand and demanding she compare Friday's photo with the one I had forced her to take Tuesday morning.

The following transcript has had incoherent grunts and coherent swears removed:

The Wife: Are you kidding?

Gohs: This time it's really really real.

The Wife: Flesh-eating bacteria? Again?

Gohs: Yes, on my squiggis.

The Wife: Squig-what?!?

Gohs: Look at the pictures. It's definitely necrotizing fasciitis.

The Wife: Necro—what? Were you reading medical journals again?!?

Unwelcome among the sleeping, I paced nervously around the dining room until too tired to stand. I then knelt by the bed and stared at the photos of my ear until I passed out.

Saturday – I awakened around 8:35 a.m., still in praying child pose. I must have slept on my hands because they were both numb from the wrists down. This caused me to jump up and run around the house shouting, “I’m having a stroke! I’m having a stroke!” until the feeling returned.

Then, I made a pot of coffee.

The birthday week ended with a big slice of chocolate frosted yellow cake but not before I spent an hour studying it for poison.

You see, the daughter had dropped it—topside down—on the grocery store parking lot, and I was concerned about the toxic slurry of gas, brake fluid, anti-freeze, motor oil, and god-only-knows-what-else.

Eventually, we cut the pastry but forwent song and candles, and retired to separate rooms to eat in silence.

I am happy to report my case of hulk neck has disappeared (second birthday wish granted) and the ear is better.

I have also decided I will not be celebrating any more birthdays unless I reach age 80, at which time I’ll know whether my third birthday wish came true.

If you haven’t turned 40 yet, I suggest you run—run for your life!

SELF-HELPLESS

Don't Look At Me

You know that feeling like you were supposed to do something really important but forgot? Then, by the time you remembered, there just wasn't enough time to finish? But, you rushed at a frantic pace to get it done anyway, knowing the whole time you were never going to make it?

That's what turning 40 feels like—plus muscle aches, a mortgage, and way more farting.

If you were looking for a self-help book, this ain't it. There are a lot of self-help books out there that promise to reduce stress, help you lose weight, find a large-breasted mute with a trust fund ... but this isn't one of them.

If anything, this book will make you a worse person for having read it. Frankly, there are really only a few good reasons why you should even be looking at these pages:

1. You're hovering around middle age and did “eenie meenie miney mo” between this and the book with the serious-looking-but-full-of-shit Ph.D. on the cover. Let's face it, this is probably going to collect dust until the internet in your cubicle goes down, or your wife leaves you, or both.

2. Someone who loves you has been trying to tell you your behavior is driving them nuts. Giving you this book is as close as they feel comfortable to telling you outright. I'm sorry to be the

harbinger of cold greasy mortality. But, if someone in your family gave you this, they're probably not willing to pay for the necessary therapy during this difficult time. Might I suggest cheap whiskey, Dr. Phil, and plenty of Taco Bell?

3. There is a party going on right now at a friend's parents' house, and you are besmirching their throne. This means you are probably nowhere near my demographic. So, my only advice to you is to stop dumping in other people's bathrooms—it's just not polite. And, please buy a copy of *Frickin 40* for your parents (dad has enough ties) or that creepy uncle who still hangs out with confused high-schoolers and college students. (He's probably at the party right now.)

For the rest of you nearing, enduring or having survived middle age, let me caveat that, though this is not intended to be a self-help book, I think there is a fair amount of hard-fought wisdom within these pages that you will not find in texts on Buddhism, scientific guides to midlife crisis, relationship advice (*Men Are From Mars, Women Are From What Now?*) or any of the other anecdotal claptrap clogging the shelves at rummage sales and psychotherapist waiting rooms nationwide.

Besides, where else will you learn the difference between butt worms and hemorrhoids, what a plushophile is, the Nazi-oatmeal connection, who I want to play the halftime show at my funeral, or the best middle age sex positions? (Hint: there are none)

Oh, I've looked into all the popular methods of dealing with crises big and small. I've done therapy, I've tried meditation, workbooks and Oprah. The only bit of solace I've found has come from watching Dr. Phil. I just can't seem to get enough of his old-timey, walrusy wisdom. It doesn't hurt that he bears a striking resemblance to Gerald McRaney.

Let me save you a little trouble and a lot of time.

After reading dozens of self-guided improvement books intended

to make me more confident, wiser, thrifty and loving, I have come away from each and every volume with the same conclusion: if I were able to help myself, I wouldn't need the goddamn book in the first place. I also got the distinct feeling that the authors were, in general, either con artists or assholes ... or both.

Judging by the sheer number of works available, I suspect I am not the only one who, out of desperation, plunks down their \$19.95 time and time again only to be told the key to happiness exists in some clichéd paragraph full of tortured platitudes. (Note: "Tortured Platitudes" is the best name ever for a dramatic memoir. Try to sell name to Dr. Phil.)

Self-help text example: "The secret to becoming the you-iest you possible lies in harnessing the emotional god or goddess within your energy spectrum."

OK, I made that up but it's actually less bull-shitty than what you'll find in most of these books.

To be fair, I only really have two things I want to change about myself; they just happen to be major issues which affect many other parts of my life.

For starters, I want to be nicer to people. I tend to be a bit gruff with everyone in my life, and I could do some more smiling and pull back on the criticism. Nobody's come out and said it but I suspect I may be a bit of an asshole at times. I've just been too afraid of the answer to ask.

The other issue I need to address is my weight. I'm no longer a spring hippo. And I really need to lose a few ... hundred ... pounds before it's too late, if it isn't already, which it probably is.

I've tried every way I can think of to better myself. At this point, I'm so desperate I may have to give diet, exercise and being nice a try.

The real problem is that I always end up sabotaging myself in the end. Well, in my defense, the actual sabotaging gets done by my alter ego, which is kind of like you see in the movies. But, instead of a little angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, I just have a midget

with a switchblade.

Oh, I begin with good enough intentions. I eat my plain oatmeal and drink my plain water and smile at my plain wife and ask my plain children how their plain day went. And then that little knife-wielding cocksucker goes running through my brain like a coked-up toddler headed for the highway—cackling at the top of his lungs the whole way.

Before you know it, all those healthy synapses have been sliced and diced, and with the wrong ends tied back together. What once was good is now mangled and ugly. When I get up in the morning, I actually have to remind myself not to be a mean prick.

Why are so many of us unable to celebrate what's right with our lives? How do we become so hung up on life's challenges? Why am I asking you?

I'd discuss the matter with God but he and I haven't spoken since I was circumcised. Sorry, but anyone who was involved with chopping off a piece of little Ben is no longer on my Christmas card list. I know. I know. They say He helps those who help themselves, but you already know how I feel about helping myself.

They also say that you cannot help anyone who doesn't want to be helped. By "they" I mean people who don't want to go to the trouble to actually help you. As Jesus said, "It is better to give than to receive." (Not Jesus Christ. He didn't say that. It was this Spanish guy I know that I am in no way making up.) Besides, the same people always trying to get out of helping you move a piano or paint your house or dump a body in the river are also the same people who say it is better to give than to receive, and to do unto others.

Of course, now that I think of it, they only seem to say those things when they want something. Where are they when you flipped off that guy in traffic and then he followed you home and you called your buddies to rescue you and all they could say was to stop flipping people off in traffic?

The moral of the story is that I'm on my own. Back to self-helping myself. Which, as I said, hasn't worked out so swell in the past due to that knife-wielding short person in my head.

To be fair, I guess my self-help strategies haven't been what you would call "industry standard." I tend to eschew contemporary medicine for alternatives like cherry-flavored whiskey and Taco Bell when I need to ease the stress. But, as promised, this book is here to help you a little. (Wait, did I promise that?)

Below are some self-help ideas I have picked up over the years. Just remember that I'm not certified to give you advice or anything so don't try suing me later when your wife leaves you for a lesbian cat surgeon and your son gets his weenis surgically removed and changes his name to Esmeralda.

10 STEPS TO SELF-HELP

1. Remain positive – Some of the most successful people in the world got that way by deluding themselves into thinking they were great. After all, what's it going to hurt to pretend you don't totally suck?

2. Start small – Keep it realistic: Let's face it, you're not going to be elected president of the USA or even the New Zealand Soft Cheese Society, but you know how to make a good PB&J sandwich, so make that sandwich and feel like a winner.

3. Surround yourself with winners – Because if it's one thing winners want, it's to hang out with a loser like you!

4. Learn something new – Just think how fast the girls will come running when you can sing The Star Spangled Banner in Klingon.

5. Get off your ass – Stop defeating yourself before you ever begin. Apparently, I am notorious for doing this. The wife recently pointed out to me that my two favorite sayings are "Boo to everything" and "Everything is bad." (Real perky fucker, ain't I?) I knew I said those two things but, until I recently began paying attention, I didn't know just how often. Besides, how can you fail miserably at something unless you start something? So, you know, give it a shot. Get out

there and fail!

6. Help other people – A sure way to motivate yourself is by helping others. Just try not to think about the fact that, where the hell were they when you needed them? Selfish pricks!

7. Forget the past – Sure there's a Polaroid of you face down next to an outhouse, with your pants around your ankles and a lit cigarette sticking out of your butt crack. But, as long as you pretend it doesn't exist, it doesn't matter how many times it gets shared on Facebook. (Was that too specific?)

8. Stop living for tomorrow – Nothing in this life is certain. You could go to law school and become a lawyer or you could quit your law firm and become a ninja. You could live to be a hundred or you could be hit by a bus in five minutes. Or, you could jump on a bus with 100 ninja lawyers. Would that be a party or would that be a party?

9. Have fun – be sure to take time to do something for yourself every day, even if it's something small. For example, I like to take a break from work, occasionally, pour a fresh cup of coffee and write sexually explicit lyrics to traditional Christmas songs. "Have a holly jolly gangbang!"

10. Be careful where you get your advice – Have you ever noticed how many self-help gurus there are? A lot! Have you ever considered just how many of these guys were failures until they wrote their self-help books, and that's how they became rich and famous? A lot! Have you noticed how often I use the phrase "a lot" ... a lot!

Then again, maybe I'm putting too much thought into this whole self-help business. I mean, the wife hasn't left me after more than 20 years together, and my kids aren't mass murderers, so how much of an asshole could I be? (Don't answer that.)

Either way, I'm admitting up front that I don't have any of the answers you seek ... unless those answers are how to commit the perfect murder or lie to your wife or keep people locked up in your basement or who should emcee your rock-n-roll funeral.

DEAR FATSO
Letter To A Young Coward

Dear Fatso,

It's me, you. I'm writing from the year 2014. And, before you ask—no, there aren't any flying cars or robot servants or talking monkeys. (Apparently, Charlton Heston was a pathological liar.)

There is, however, this cool thing called the "internet" that lets you have all kinds of products shipped to your front door while you watch dirty movies, have dirty movies shipped to your front door, fight with complete strangers about vaccines and religion, and which dirty movie is best.

I'm contacting you in the past in hope of sharing some of the wisdom I've obtained in these nearly twenty-six years. Ah to be 14 again. If I'm remembering correctly, I've caught you about two months before you meet Ludwig at your family's summer-long rummage sale, where you two make fast and lifelong friends. It's also about four months before he gives you a duffel bag full of hardcore porno magazines that jump-start your lagging body into super-puberty.

A word to the uninitiated: dad is going to kick your pillow down the stairs by accident one day and all those filthy books, with their smudged page numbers and stiff pages are going to come spilling out in all their full-color, glossy shame. And let me tell you, no amount of therapy is going to un-awkward that father-son moment, so you might want to move your stash. Doing so could prevent what will otherwise forge a triangle of deceit between you, your brother and

your dad as you steal each other's titty mags on and off over the next few years.

On a more serious note, I know you've gone through some pretty rough stuff with your family and bullies and I just want to tell you that you're going to get through it. There will be some steep therapy bills involved, a couple of female stalkers that you wouldn't want to screw with Ludwig's weenis (though I'm sure he would if he hasn't already) and a few years of borderline alcoholism.

Of course, back then, there was no such thing as "anti-bullying" or an emphasis on self-esteem for all. Back then, the nonstop mental and physical abuse caused by parents and classmates was just called "parenting" and "kids being kids." Nowadays there is even a campaign featuring famous actors, singers, and sports heroes who go on to tell kids that things—no matter how tough they seem—will only get better as you get older.

I want you to promise me that, no matter how bad things get, no matter how much you think you can't go on, no matter how badly people treat you ... don't listen to these assholes! It does not get better in adulthood. Sure, things will suck less for a while in your late-teens but, buddy, you're gonna peak at 17, and after 21 it is all downhill ... and I don't mean in a "whee, look at us we're in a wagon coasting down a hill" sort of a way. I mean a "holy hell my body is starting to fall apart and I can't get boners on a regular basis" sort of way. Being young is the freest, best and most alive you will ever feel so enjoy it while you can.

And if anybody—anybody—tells you that life begins at 40, I want you to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction, but only after you kick them in the gonads so hard they see stars. All the teasing and poverty and listening to your parents fight and the bullying ... none of it compares to the horrors of aging. Tired, fat, old, ugly, endless bills, ungrateful relatives, pissed off wife, incompetent government, car trouble, leaky roof, \$10,000 you don't have to renovate the bathroom ... that's what you have to look forward to.

If I were you I'd put a gun in your mouth on your twenty-second

birthday and save yourself the agony of turning 39-and-a-half.

You know those long periods dad spends in the bathroom where he grunts and moans and is possibly weeping? That's going to be you. Remember how we used to joke about how it sounded like he was getting scromped by a gorilla? We weren't too far off. You know those endless disagreements over nothing that the parents are always having? Yup, you buddy.

Remember those hemorrhoid commercials with the guy who looks like he's in agony? That's going to be your ass, my man. Remember how hard you laughed when the old man flipped his lawn tractor over while trying to pull that tree out of the ground? Your kids are going to do that stuff to you. You're going to become the running joke of the household. All your stupid sayings and angry lectures will be mocked and ridiculed and satirized for the guffawing pleasure of your children and wife ... all the while they'll be robbing you blind with requests for soda money and snack money and cash for school books and room and board at college and cocaine and abortions. (OK, so no cocaine or abortions. I got a little carried away. But you get the point.)

And, apparently, preventing the dogs from contracting parvovirus or kennel cough is more important than you getting a new recliner. They get worm pills, heart pills, flea treatments, ear medicine—we even trimmed off their pesky testicles to make them more aerodynamic. Hell, they get better medical care than I do. Thanks a lot, Obama! (Did I mention we have a black president? Don't tell you-know-who.)

One thing to consider before you get to middle age: one doesn't go through a midlife crisis alone. One endures with family, friends, work acquaintances. But it's easy to get to thinking that you are all alone in this. Make no mistake, not only are you not alone, but this midlife crisis of yours isn't just yours. It was brought on, in part, by years and years of dealing with brain-damaged children, a demanding spouse, a stressful career and the government. (Thanks again, Obama!) So, take some solace in knowing you aren't alone, unless you are literally alone.

In that case, I guess you really are alone, and studies have shown that single people are less happy and die younger than married people, so good luck with all that.

If I should give any advice to your 14-year-old self, it is this: marriage is worth the trouble, but must be managed like chronic disease. Frankly, I can't imagine trying to make it through this scary turd of a world (yes, tough guy: the older you get, the scarier the world becomes) alone. However, a bit of advice to you before you do say "I do," and this is an important one—so pay attention!

Even now you may be wondering why it is that no matter how long two people have been together, no matter how much they think they know about one another there are still thoughts, urges, dreams and deeds we keep secret. Well, stop it. While a question like "what are you thinking about right now?" seems perfectly acceptable and adorable to a young moron like yourself, it can be quite asinine and unnecessary when one is 39-and-a-half. This one question is the cause of more arguments, resentments and divorces than any other single issue in a marriage.

Unless you live with a psychotic or someone who can control physical objects with mind power, the question becomes more and more moot as time goes on. It's just not worth asking. Surely, I was guilty of asking this question in my younger years and even sometimes today, but that's because I'm a freak. I have a tendency to be hyper-vigilant and therefore pay too much attention to other people's moods and body language. (A bad habit I picked up as a child. While it comes in handy sometimes, it is more of a pain in the ass than anything else because I end up trying to mind-read people and it only annoys them with the constant questioning.)

Stereotypically, women seem to be the ones asking this question most. The wife only asks once in a while but even then I find myself struggling for an explanation.

"What am I thinking?"

I saw a female stand-up comedian the other night who was going on and on about how men really aren't thinking about anything. Of

course, that's not the case. The truth is we are thinking all kinds of things. We just don't want to share most of them.

At any given time, I may be engaged in thinking of a dozen or so things, dozens even, maybe hundreds. The problem is I dare not share most of them for fear of embarrassment, scorn, ridicule or disgust. Obviously I can't think of a hundred things all at once but as a chronic worrier and avid daydreamer, small business owner, father, husband, writer, brother, bill-payer, household cook and fixer of broken objects, I have a never-ending swirling stuff-nado of thoughts and ideas that whirls in my mind, stopping at brief intervals for me to think or worry about the next thing I need to take care of or that I can't take care of or that I wish I could do.

In addition to all the story notes, book ideas, bill reminders and other serious "dad" stuff going on in there, I have the usual slew of thoughts about urges, bodily functions, stupid jokes, nasty comments and the resignation letter I keep updating. Oh, it's not an employment letter of resignation, it's a resignation letter for life. No, not a suicide note, but a "screw-you I'm outta here" letter I continually edit and have at the ready should I win the billion-dollar sweepstakes or discover a rich uncle who's recently bit the big one.

I detest lying but I can't very well respond with complete honesty to such a question. "What are you thinking about right now?" She's not ready for that kind of honesty. "What are you thinking about right now?" I can't very well respond to my dear sweet wife of over twenty years by saying that, at that particular moment in time, I'd like to eat some ice-cream (strawberry) out of the weather lady's cleavage. Then again, maybe that's exactly what I should do. Maybe being completely, cringingly, horrifyingly, terribly honest would be just the thing to stop all the questions.

I can just see it now.

The wife: "So, whatcha thinkin'?"

Gohs: "My butt itches because I didn't wipe enough."

The wife: "W-what?"

Gohs: "I wonder if anyone's ever peed while skydiving. I don't

mean soiled their pants. I wonder if anyone's ever whipped it out and drizzled at 20,000 feet."

The wife: "W-what?"

Gohs: "You asked what I was thinking right now and that's what I was thinking about: cleavage, strawberry ice-cream, my butt itches and peeing skydivers. And that's just a taste of the dark carnival menagerie, Vincent Price double-feature going on up there."

The wife: "I just wanted to know—"

Gohs: "What I was thinking? Yeah, and I told you. I'm also thinking about how Parmesan cheese and spaghetti sauce mixed together smells just like throw-up. I'm wondering if it might rain today and that cats hate the rain and how much I hate cats and that we owe \$64.23 to the gas company and that I cannot locate the booger I fished out of my nose a few minutes ago and that your breath smells like garlic and that I want a pet pigmy goat and a hippopotamus. I'm thinking that my armpits smell like taco meat most of the time, even though I haven't had ground beef in three years. I'm thinking that I need to call the planning commission for a quote on a story I'm doing for the paper and I'm thinking that it's too hot in here, right now. I wonder what John Waters is doing at this exact moment, and I'm wondering, if you had enough of them, could you make an omelet out of human eggs? And what's the deal with Greek yogurt? Is it really that delicious? Like \$4.29-for-a-little-container, delicious? But most of all I'm wondering if Sarah Palin is a good kisser and whether her boobs are as perky as I imagine they are. I'm thinking that thinking about how much my armpits smell like taco meat made me hungry and now I want Taco Bell. I'm also trying to figure out how much it would cost to hire a taxi in Petoskey to order me Taco Bell and drive it all the way out here. Let's see, 90-mile round-trip plus \$12 for the food. And now I'm thinking that none of this matters because Taco Bell isn't part of my diet plan, and that makes me sad. So, thank-you. You asking me what I'm thinking has made me sad."

Just do this early in the relationship and she will never ever again ask what you're thinking about.

TWO-THIRD-LIFE CRISIS

A Look At My Not-So-Longevity

I read a Psychology Today article recently that claimed there is no such thing as a midlife crisis. Apparently the term was sensationalized by a woman—go figure—back in the 1970s for a book she was writing. However, it seems that people who are crisis-prone in their 20s are likely to be crisis-prone in their 30s, 40s and 50s. The article said people can experience stress, anxiety, depression and dissatisfaction during times of transition in their lives but the idea of a midlife crisis as we know it is purely an invention that has taken root in popular culture like so many old wives tales.

Regardless of the phenomenon's origin, many people do really go through, or at least they think they are going through, a midlife crisis. As one of those "crisis-prone" individuals, I have to say that my impending midlife crisis doesn't seem any less horrifying now that I know there is no such thing. After all, you can tell a kid there's no monster under his bed all you want but that's not going to stem the butt-clenching, sweaty-palmed nights I—ahem, "they"—lie awake waiting for the boogiemán to bite off their toes. (I do believe in spooks. I do. I do. I do!")

The main issue I have, other than the whole life-coming-apart-at-the-seams feeling that has me staring down the double-barrel twelve-gauge that is age 40, is that they call it a "midlife" crisis. (OK, it may not be the main issue.) Maybe some of you plan on living to 80 or 90 but there's just no way that's an option for me. If I'm lucky,

this is a two-third-life crisis.

Frankly, if I were to live to 60, I would consider it a genuine Old Testament miracle on the order of fishes and loaves and Jimmy Fallon taking over *The Tonight Show*. Nonetheless, that particular age of angst for so many is fast approaching me, and I find myself considering events and actions which would not have occupied my mind 20 years ago.

It's now October (my time) and this calendar year has seen more than a few conversations I never thought I would have. The wife and I discussed getting a new roof, having the bathroom remodeled, short-term disability coverage and the granddaddy of "you are no longer young" conversations, a chat about life insurance.

On top of all that, parts of my body aren't working as well as they used to, and some parts aren't working at all. I smell smoke all the time, even though nobody here smokes. (Recently discovered my daughter does smoke, so that may explain part of the mystery.) I can't sleep at night. I'm either going to the bathroom all the time or I can't go at all. My armpits smell like taco meat and my testicles keep getting closer and closer to the floor. The hair in my ears grows faster than the hair on my head, and I can't keep up with plucking nose hairs. I hate new music and I don't trust anyone under 35. I'm convinced my kids may be plotting a coup but the joke's on them: the house doesn't have squat for equity, the car is years from being paid for, and I cashed in my retirement to cover the down payment on Chateau Gohs, which is depreciating at a fairly consistent rate, many years ago.

When you're young, you only think in terms of fun and right now. What fun thing can I do today? I'm bored, let's do something fun. Hey, that looks like fun. The only enemy of youth is boredom. When you're nearing 40, you think in terms of "now what?" Is that twitching in my back spinal cancer? Was that gas or a fatal heart-attack? What do you mean you flunked out of college?

I thought it was tough dealing with kids in school. Always getting teased, bullies around every corner. It got to the point that I dreaded

school. But that was nothing like middle age. Between the kids who always need money and the wife—who seems to exist in an alternate universe where we own child slave-operated diamond mines—and the 50-year-old house that is slowly and not-so-slowly reminding me why I rented for the first 15 years of my adulthood, I’ve become shell-shocked.

“Grow up!” you might be thinking. After all, I’m an adult man. I need to just suck it up and do my duty. Well, “Screw you!” I might be thinking. That’s all hunky and/or dunky but you’ve gotta understand something: I’m a Generation X kid. I was raised by half-assed hippies and leftover baby boomers who weren’t quite old enough to enjoy the revolution of the 1960s. Our parents pushed back against all that good old American flag-waving conservatism that made men internalize stress until their hearts exploded or their livers gave out from whiskey consumption. (Which should’ve been a plus.)

The problem is, our parents pushed back too hard. They brought us up with touchy-feely sock puppets and time-outs and all these goddamn feelings. That, of course, was mixed with a heavy dose of divorces, drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence that resulted in just as much, if not more, child abuse and neglect as was realized by our grandparents. Armed with the mixed messages of our parents, we set out to do one better. We were going to fix all the wrongs our parents and their parents had instilled in us.

Spoiler alert: we screwed the pooch on that one big time. By the time Generation X reached adulthood (I’d say 30 or so) it was obvious that we hadn’t a clue what to do. By shunning the ways of their parents, our parents neglected to teach us a lot of things you need to know to get through this life without looking like a complete asshole. (To be fair, most of the following may not apply to my entire generation. Then again, maybe it does.)

IMPORTANT FAQ FOR LIFE

A few of the things I didn’t know but that would have been nice to know:

- Send thank-you notes after people give you gifts or help you
- The flat sheet that comes with the fitted sheet is not an “extra” sheet.
- Brush your teeth everyday (with a toothbrush).
- Jim Beam is not a licensed therapist.
- Every disagreement does not have to become World War III.
- Children are something you should plan for.
- Your neighbors are not necessarily your enemies.
- Mustard is not a food group or a food.
- Your children are not your enemies.
- Welfare is not a career choice.
- One weekend a month and every other Christmas is not “Joint Custody.”
- Pop culture is not a substitute for culture.
- Nostalgia is as dangerous as hope, and far less necessary.
- The Peter Pan Syndrome is fine for the rich and famous but the rest of us 39-and-a-half-year-old humps walking around in cartoon T-shirts, sporting giant earrings, and blue hair just look like douches who refuse to accept the fact that we’re not teenagers any more.
- Don’t try to be friends with your kids (First of all, until they turn about 19 or 20, they are assholes; secondly, they need parents, not another set of hip uncles and aunts—leave that to the hip uncles and aunts.)
- There’s a happy medium between psychopathic nationalism and hating the country.

SIGNS OF “MIDLIFE”

Realizing I was getting “older” didn’t all happen at once. It was a gradual unfolding of occurrences over and over and over again until I slowly and with great hesitation began to accept them as reality. (By which I mean drank heavily and began closing my eyes when I walked by mirrors. Oh, how I wish that weren’t true.) I will never forget back in the early 2000s when I was still rocking bleach blonde hair and a sweet Guy Fieri spike and spatula.

One of the waitresses was waiting for her food in the window

between the cook's station and the front of the restaurant while I put the order together and she said "Looks like your hair is starting to thin." I laughed and said that, no, I just have really fine hair. And that the gel made it look that way.

I really-honestly-seriously-and-for-true had no idea I was losing hair. It wasn't until I took to shaving my head for a few years and then let it grow back that I was treated to a balding patch on the front right side of my forehead. I was dumbfounded, flabbergasted, even flabberfounded! You get the idea.

I'm pretty sensitive about my hair, so it took some years before I allowed myself the realization that the thin patch was not going to thicken back up. My hair had a one-way ticket to the shower drain and there was no getting it back—regardless of what Joey Fatone promises.

Slowly, I began to notice other symptoms of this syndrome we call middle age. As I am wont to do, I compiled a list of things that tipped me off to my life change.

SIGNS OF MAN-O-PAUSE

- I began jokingly using the phrase "The young people." (Now it's just part of my working vocabulary.)
- I get more excited about new snow tires than I do about sex.
- I make noise every time I get out of a chair or bed or fart.
- At the end of the day, a body part, like an arm or leg, just stops working so well. And, when I'm tired, I walk like a cartoon old person.
- I have begun thinking about how I'll fall in different scenarios. I try to plan how I'll land if I slip in the tub or on the icy driveway or the steep basement stairs. I never worried about falling when I was a kid, but a broken hip or twisted knee could really cause me trouble. And, the older you get, the better chances there are that a fall could kill you. (Those "I've fallen and I can't get up" commercials ain't so funny now, are they smart-ass?)
- Naps. Also known as "you're too old to get through the day"

without sleeping.” Turning into a giant newborn, a very real part of manopause.

- Butterscotch starts to taste really good. Admit it (if you are over 40), you’re getting horny just thinking about it.
- I realized snoring can kill you. Sleep apnea is no joke. Now when I see the Three Stooges doing their loud obstructive snoring routine I yell at the screen: “Wake up! You’re suffocating!”
- I’ve begun planning my day around bathroom trips. I know I can’t do any interviews before 9 a.m. because there is a chance I’ll be on the pot when they call back.
- Everyone under 30 seems to be an idiot. (I suspect this one is more than just a feeling.)
- 18-year-olds look like babies. How was I supporting a woman and child when I was 19? It just doesn’t seem possible. (Oh yeah, I was doing it badly.)
- Old people don’t look as old as they used to, and they don’t look at me suspiciously any more. It’s almost like I’m becoming one of them. (One of us. One of us. Gooble gobble!)
- Toenails become like heat-treated glass. And, if left unattended, can also kill you.
- New found obsession with the weather. Never used to care about the forecast. Just figured it was going to do whatever it was going to do. But, now? I mean, have you seen what they’ve done with the Weather Channel? It’s amazing.
- Dessert has become a mandatory part of supper.
- I’ve begun to call dinner “supper.”
- I head into the shower with the care and preparation of a mountain climber, knowing each trip could be my last. (See also: falls kill)
- I pay more attention to the obituaries than I used to. (Wracking up silent victories over everyone I’ve outlasted. Up yours, corpse)
- I finally “get” jazz ... and love it.
- I still complain about my taxes but I secretly realize their necessity.
- Music that came out when I was a kid is now being played on the oldies station. (This one irks the crap out of me!)

- I keep catching myself telling the same few stories over and over again. But, with a little luck and a few years, I won't be able to remember that I've told the stories before, and people will be too polite to tell me they've heard them before. The only problem is, I keep catching myself telling the same few stories over and over again.
- Birthdays look less like Christmas and more like graveyard tollbooths.

MY LITTLE DOUCHE COUPE

Does every man of waning erection, faltering hairline, wandering desire, frustration of situation and yearning for antithesis of his immediate reality seek the masculine auspices of the penile enhancing, belly slimming, young-i-fying V-8 engines of high-priced European sports cars? You bet your sweet ass he does.

The perks of buying a shiny new European sports car include:

- You will have somewhere to sleep when your wife finds out you bought a shiny new European sports car.
- People no longer have to wonder how small your penis is.
- The babysitter will be impressed.
- You can feel pride in knowing you are helping support good-paying Mexican jobs. (What? You thought we were the only ones who outsourced their labor?)
- If you weave through traffic quickly enough, people may think you are important or famous or a middle-aged jerk.
- When you crash your new car you can write off all those costly medical bills.
- Driving with the top down will give your bald spot a free tan.
- It's easier than losing weight and more fun than reading a book, but not this book.
- All that extra gasoline you burn will help some Persian prince gold plate the helipad on his third largest yacht.
- With all the service calls on your temperamental new toy, your

mechanic will finally be able to afford one of those shiny new European sports cars he's always wanted to drive.

THE FIVE STAGES OF 40

The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The five stages of midlife are quite similar. Know them and be ready when they appear.

Stage one: Denial or "I'm still 38, aren't I?"

Forgetting how old you are seems to be the first substantive sign you are no longer "young." My wife keeps asking me how old I am with this desperate tone in her voice because I am ten months her senior, and she knows that, shortly after I turn 40, she will follow. Just the other day she asked me what year I was born and then proceeded to convince herself that she still has another two years before she hits the big 4-0 ... which she certainly does not.

This phenomenon (you know, because lying is such a rare and amazing occurrence) of people not knowing their age is expected among the elderly. Hell, it's cute when little kids do it. But, when a 38- or 39-year-old turns simple addition and subtraction into a Euclidean riddle, it is downright pathetic. Try it sometime. Ask someone in their mid-40s how old they are and they'll utter without hesitation. Ask a 37-year-old the same question and watch them squirm like a Jeopardy contestant who staggered over from the Wheel of Fortune set.

It goes a little something like this:

"I thought I was still 38."

"No, you were 38 last year."

"Yeah, but grandpa was born in '42, and moss grows on the north side of a tree, so I can't be 39."

"You are 39."

"What year were you born?"

"Stop changing the subject."

"How old are you?"

"What?"

“I said, ‘How old are you?’”

“Oh, I thought you asked, ‘How mold are you?’ I think I’m 37.”

This kind of denial is stupefying, and it belongs in the same ashcan as “I’m not fat, I’m full-figured” or “Jim’s not an asshole, he’s just sassy.”

Lie all you like, but your sassy, full-figured ass is eventually turning 40 ... and no amount of pretending it ain’t so is going to stop it. Unless you find a time machine. If so, give me a call. I have some dates to revise. (I’ll bring the guns and sandwiches.)

Even better than the “I’m a grown person who can’t remember my age” folks are the ones who lie about their age, as if those crows feet and under-eye bags aren’t the reason we don’t believe you’re not 32. (Did I fit enough double negatives in there?)

Stage Two: Anger or “Whatta you mean this happens to a lot of men?”

Now, I’ve always been the angry type but something about midlife has got me more pissed off than usual. Maybe it’s because the last time I saw my penis its picture was printed on the side of a milk carton. (Have you seen this prick?) Perhaps it’s because middle age is a time of transition from youthful exuberance and hopeful optimism to grim realizations about failure and mortality. One day you’re a cocky kid with a titanium boner and a Camaro with T-tops, and the next thing you know you are gorging yourself on heart-killing junk food to deaden the suffocating feeling of failure and regret that has permeated your every thought and action.

Maybe it’s because even the little things that used to bring you joy, like enjoying a little “alone time” while the family is at church, have been ruined. Older age and poor lifestyle choices have taken all the fun out of cuffing the carrot. What used to be a sword fight to the death now more closely resembles the shaking of an unconscious choking victim. Yeah, there’s technically some life in there but it ain’t going to jump up and start dancing around the kitchen anytime

soon.

Does angrily finishing off on the thought that you need to take out the trash and fix the bathroom door handle and pay the electric bill make you a weirdo? Of course not. I mean yes, yes it does. You should be ashamed of yourself for even thinking of such things. Sinner!

Stage three: Bargaining or “Dear Satan, I know we haven’t talked in a while but here goes...”

Like so many things in life, you don’t realize a bad situation until you are in the middle of it. By then it’s all you can do to start bargaining with yourself or any of dozens of magical beings for more time or different circumstances or fat-free, low-sodium fruit pies—none of which are going to happen. But no amount of promising to “get yourself together this time” is going to change reality.

There’s so much you wanted to do while you were still young. There’s the Camaro under the tarp in the backyard collecting mouse turds that you’ve been meaning to restore. (Restore the car not the mouse scat.) You were going to go back to school and finish your associate’s degree in liberal arts. There was the ServePro franchise you and your cousins were going to get started. And what about the motorcycle trip to Vegas?

Your friends are all talking about their bucket lists and you still haven’t completed anything on your “Life-is-everlasting-Bon-Jovi-and-nunchucks-rocking-in-the-USA” list. By the time you finally notice all that hair in the drain isn’t just coming from the wife’s legs, you are taking afternoon naps to rest up from doing nothing all day.

Common types of promises we make when faced with the terror of old age:

- I will no longer watch porn while the family is gone to church.
- If you stop my hair from falling out, I will send a monthly check to the United Children’s Fund ... instead of simply telling people I do.
- If you make this suspicious lump go away, I will stop touching myself in an unclean manner ... as often ... for awhile.

Stage Four: Depression or “I’ll have cheesecake and whiskey for breakfast if I want to.”

Your youth was squandered on shallow indulgences, laziness and stupidity. Now you’re old, fat and the music is too loud. These damned kids don’t know what respect is, and your parents will soon be on the verge of utter dependency. Everything, from holiday music and birthdays to work projects and sex have been yellowed by the cloying drizzle of sweet sweet depression. You’re stuck on the fly strip of life, watching with the rest of the intransigent morons as sexy moths and high-powered bees fly right by you, leaving you to die alone, in a crowd of like-minded bugs. (Oh goodness, where is the whiskey?)

Signs you are suffering from middle age depression include the following:

Hygiene – You used to shower, shave and put on fresh clothes just to run to the corner store for milk and cigarettes. Nowadays you have no problem grocery shopping in flip-flops and sweats with a half a butt cheek hanging out. When people ask more than once if you’re ready to go, it’s because they are shocked at what you plan to wear out of the house.

Hair – There was a time when your hairstyle said a lot about you, and it still does. Except, instead of it telling people you care about your appearance, it now hints at the underlying despair every waking moment serves you. The typical men’s “I gave up” hairdo consists of a buzz cut with anywhere from a quarter of an inch to a full inch of hair left on the head. This cut, popularized by Appalachian middle-schoolers screams “Pass the Skoal” and “Shut yer mouth, devil woman, these food stamps is mine!”

The ladies, on the other hand, tend to go for the look made famous by Pat Benetar in the ‘80s. It’s short, black and straight and lets everyone know you are down with the husky lesbians.

Diet – You haven’t been on one in years and it shows. Nowadays you do most of your eating out of containers. Oh, sure, there was a

time when candlelight dinners filled your day planner but lately the elegance of plates and flatware has been replaced by the convenience of Styrofoam and sporks. Your friends and family may have concerns over the stacks of cardboard and plastic boxes threatening to bury you and your nine cats but they just don't understand the benefits of takeout dining.

If you cannot finish the portion, all you need do is close the lid. It'll still be there on the coffee table when you reach for it next Thursday. Besides, lots of people don't cook for themselves or wash their own dishes. Does Bill Clinton cook his own meals? Do you think Julius Caesar ever washed a dish? Who would dare tell Mussolini to set the table for supper?

Leaving culinary matters to others also gives you all kinds of time to pursue other interests, like gently sobbing in the dark or obsessing over all the horrible diseases you're silently developing from your diet of takeout food.

Isolation – Withdrawing from family and friends is a sure sign something isn't right. (Was there ever a time when you actually wanted to go to a family get-together?) Either way, if you're doing the hermit thing, then you are bound to be making excuses in order to avoid contact with others. The worst excuse I ever gave for not going somewhere was that my grandmother had died. Granted, she'd been in the ground for going on three years but, in my defense, she had died. The best excuse I ever gave was that I thought I was having a heart-attack. In both cases the recipient of my lies was unimpressed and unconcerned. (I need to get better friends ... and stop lying!)

Stage Five: Acceptance or "40 is the new 20, right?"

Anyone over 40 within earshot will either laugh hysterically, slap you in the face or both. Repeat after me: "40 is not the new 20. 40 is 40." The truth is, if you're lucky, 40 is 40. If you're like most Americans, 40 is more like 50 or 60.

Not shockingly, this is the stage where you embrace your older self and begin a bit of a born-again zeal about how great it is to

finally be broke down and wrinkling. This is also the stage where people stop talking to you. The decision to roll over and let life stick it in nice and deep isn't an easy one but with surrender comes a certain warm fuzzy feeling.

Besides, after a few years, you'll have developed such a case of Stockholm Syndrome that you will actually believe you are too old and tired and powerless to change your situation.

I guess there's nothing funny about that, so on to the next chapter!

YOGA! YOGA! YOGA!

See Also 'Death By'

Let me suggest that you consider any points I make on the following topic with a certain degree of skepticism. On one hand, I have found the practice of yoga to be a low-impact, cheap and accessible way to improve flexibility, strengthen numerous muscle groups, lower blood pressure ... the list of benefits goes on and on. However, the joy I will take in knowing that some of you may undertake the awkward, embarrassing and, initially, uncomfortable steps to yoga-ing is all the reason I need to recommend you give it a try.

Make no mistake, yoga soothes sore backs, loosens stiff joints and expands range of motion. The wife ruined her back lifting old folks at nursing homes while she studied to become a teacher many years ago. So, now, every morning around 5 a.m. she gets up and pops in a yoga DVD and does her twenty-minute-or-so routine without which she'd be hunched in agony by lunchtime.

She'd been doing this for years as a way of easing what I suspect is a debilitating bulging disk but that her 80-plus-year-old male doctor (who looks an awful lot like a silent movie era vampire) brushed off as "Whiny Woman Syndrome." Unfortunately, after her male chauvinist doctor told her she was complaining about nothing, she's refused to get a second opinion out of sheer shame and embarrassment. It's a crime, because the woman is one tough SOB and she doesn't complain about anything. In fact, she's going to be rather unhappy with me when she finds out I told you. While

I delight in sharing my every embarrassment with the known universe, she tends to keep private matters private. (To see her silently suffering makes me want to punch *Grandpa Munster MD* in the prostate.) So she's continued to treat the unbelievable pain she is in most days by doing yoga every morning. And it's really seemed to help mitigate the suffering.

The real problem (for me, anyway) is that she suddenly decided the husband needed to begin doing daily yoga with her. She didn't give me a reason, but I suspect Lifetime Television and Dr. Phil have something to do with it.

Other than the physical activity, the weird positions and the bizarre hours involved, I wouldn't mind the yoga so much. It doesn't help that my rotundness prevents me from doing most of the positions correctly. The instructor on our TV set says it's OK to "approximate" and to place your body as close to the correct position as possible. This means that I spend half the time panting on all fours like some old fat dog nobody cared enough about to shoot and bury.

The yoga instructor is this trim, 40-something brunette situated on a dock in some tropical paradise. But before you can pitch a tent in your karate pants, she's got you twisted on the floor in a self-inflicted half-nelson, quarter-chicken-wing, string of painful hyphenated phrases. Her voice is sweet and disarming—a little too disarming considering the things she expects me to do.

"We begin this yoga flow in the child pose," she says. "Yoga flow?" I'm already weirded out and we haven't even begun yet. "Yoga flow" sounds like something the doctor has to give you penicillin for.

Gohs: "So, whatta ya think, doc?"

Doctor: "Have you had unprotected sex in any third world countries in the last six months?"

Gohs: "Well, there was that wife-swapping tour I took in Ebola country recently."

Doctor: "It seems you have a pretty steady and severe case of yoga flow."

Gohs: “Well, that explains the itching and the oily discharge ... but what about the premonitions?”

Then the instructor tells us to sit on our feet. Yeah, maybe 50 pounds ago. About all I can manage nowadays is to sit on my cankles and try to act natural. I look like an asthmatic meerkat straining to see across Kapiti Plain. Then we’re supposed to outstretch our hands and rest our forehead on the ground. Huh? I couldn’t do that with a cop kneeling on my neck.

“Feel the gentle massage this pose gives your belly organs,” she coos seductively. Between the screaming neck pain and the pressure on my brain pan I am unable to enjoy the massage my large and small intestines are said to be experiencing, but because all the blood has drained from my enormous ass and flooded my frontal lobe, I can now, for the first time in my life, understand algebra and hear every apprehensive thud of my bewildered heart in my highly pressurized ears.

So, there we are, looking like a couple of meth addicts on the show “COPS” right before I scream “I’m Jesus Christ” and they sick the dogs on us, when the instructor tells us to stand with our butts in the air while our hands are still touching the floor. This pose is known as “prison rape” and judging by the burning sensation in half of all my muscles, it’s only slightly less painful.

The only pose I can actually do correctly is the “cobra flow,” which is basically lying on your stomach and pushing your upper body up off the floor while your lower half remains flat and motionless. (Some of you may remember this pose from your wedding night.)

I can’t do the superman pose (not sure what it’s really called) because I think I’m developing a hernia in my lower abdomen and I don’t want my guts to come spilling out like a visceral Play-Doh Fun Factory from the pressure. So, I lie on my side in what I’ve dubbed the “drunken superman.” I’ve customized this yoga flow by adding a flailing leg feature. I can really feel the burn, and it makes the wife laugh, which in turn makes it more difficult for her to do

yoga properly. That makes me happy. I'm hoping I can make the experience so uncomfortable that she just gives up the whole idea of me doing yoga. But, if it's anything like the last 20 years of our marriage, she'll stick to it no matter how painful and embarrassing it becomes.

SWEET YOGA MOVES

Some other yoga moves I have invented in the few months I've been subjected to the practice include:

- Throbbing Pelvis (I don't bend this way)
- Fatty Fall Down (Painful. Hilarious. Often.)
- Dizzy Spins (The cause of "Fatty Fall Down")
- Beached Whale (When you lie there, waiting for Green Peace)
- Bruised Chin (Combination of Dizzy Spins & weak arms)
- Sprained Rectum (This actually had little to do with the yoga)
- Crybaby's Elbow (Hardwood floor)
- Bent Toe (Again, I don't bend this way)
- Oak Splinter (Also due to hardwood floor)
- Shit Pants (When you grunt this hard, something has to give)
- Festering Finger (Caused by oak splinter from hardwood floor)
- Flailing Child (Drunken Superman while on your back)
- Unconscious Monkey (Flailing child without the flailing)
- Storming Out Of Room (Caused by Shit Pants)

Regardless of where you do yoga, the instructor will seem like the calmest, nicest person in the world. Don't be fooled. While they may seem like they care, their enhanced interrogation techniques are second to none. The more I think about it the more that tropical paradise in the background resembles Cuba. Hell, she may have filmed the yoga DVD from the beach at Guantanamo Bay.

Getting down on your knees should be the first clue. There are only a couple of things adults do on all fours ... and most of them are unpleasant: looking for car keys, searching for a lost contact,

plugging the printer back in (because apparently you're the only one in the house who is capable of doing so!), ducking bullets, hiding from Jehovah's Witnesses, getting back up after falling, escaping a house fire, trying to clip a spastic Labrador's toenails, giving a relentless two-year-old a hundredth horsey ride, fishing the remote out from under the razor sharp farm machinery below your recliner ... well, you get the idea.

I've tried to get out of it but there are only so many times you can fake diarrhea before the wife realizes you're pooping your pants on purpose. (The number of times this works is exactly two. Don't bother stretching it to a third because it's only going to get you dirty looks, dirty pants and extra laundry duty.)

I tried bargaining with the wife but I have very little to offer and veritably no leverage. I said I'd cook her favorite dinner for her but she said I was already going to be doing that. I tried paying her off but then she reminded me that she makes most of the money. I put my hands on my hips and thrust my middle third into the air a few times all sexy like but she just laughed and I think also threw up in her mouth a bit.

Desperate, I did a few of my patented ninja kicks (They're not really registered with the patent office, so feel free to do some yourself.) and threatened to pop her one "Billy Jack" style if she didn't back off. Judging by how fast she came across the room, I don't think she quite heard me right. And, while her pride wouldn't allow her to show it, I think she was pretty scared. But, I let her down easy by cowering and pretending to apologize. After all, I'm secure enough in my manhood to let her think she won the argument. And, if I have to get up at 5 a.m. from now on to prove my point, I guess that's just what a man has to do.

"We start this yoga flow by doing exactly what the wife says, that is, if we have a sensible goddamn bone in our body."

FINANCIAL PLANNING *Hoax, Myth Or Urban Legend?*

Another thing middle age has made eye-wateringly apparent is how far off from my retirement goal I truly am. At this stage in my life, I should have like three-quarters-of-a-million dollars socked away in order to remain fiscally solvent into my elder years. The last time I checked, I had about three-quarters-of-a-thousand dollars in the bank, and most of that was earmarked for a house payment.

At this point in my life, I have pretty much two options: hope one of my kids is successful enough to let me move into their basement when I can no longer care for myself; or, rob a bank. I'm not the *Dog Day Afternoon* type but I have to be realistic, here: I helped raise my kids. This severely handicaps their chances to be good at anything, like hanging onto a library card or maintaining a free checking account. (Nothing but adequate for my legacy.)

And let's say they do end up employed and not living on the street. Are they going to use my misfortune as an opportunity to exact revenge on me for all the bad parenting they endured? Are they going to yell at me to turn down my music and complain when I leave clothes all over the floor? And diapers! At least they weren't conscious when I was wiping their asses. How awkward is that conversation going to be?

"So, dad, it smells like you've pooped your pants."

"I'll be damned. I sure did."

"So, I'm going to fondle your scrotum with a dirty wash cloth

and not make eye contact with you while I wipe your butt.”

“Sounds good, son. I will be committing suicide shortly after.”

“Oh, pop, what a relief.”

Conversely, I am not bank robber material. Firstly, my handwriting is so poor they likely wouldn’t understand my demands. Secondly, I’m nonviolent. Who am I going to threaten?

Teller: “Sir, I can’t ‘bug top monkey panther bong’ because I don’t know what in hell that means.”

Me: “Nobody move or the ficus gets it!”

Teller: “Sir, that’s not a gun in your pocket. I can see the yellow stem.”

Me: “Is too!”

Teller: “Is not.”

Me: “Click-click!”

Teller: “Sir, did you just cock your banana?”

Me: “Can I order some checks? The ones with the ducks on them?”

I guess I could give get-rich-quick schemes a try again. They never seemed to work for me in the past but I’m older now—wiser, too! But what kind of scam would I pull? I could call random telephone numbers out of the phone book and pretend to be a long lost relative in need of a loan.

Random schmuck: “Hello?”

Me: “It’s me, Uncle (purposely unintelligible).”

Random schmuck: “I’m sorry, you must have the wrong number.”

Me: “What’s your uncle’s name?”

Random schmuck: “I have several uncles.” (This is a very patient random schmuck.)

Me: “Well, can you name some of them for me?”

Random schmuck: “John and George, Paul and Ringo.”

Me: “Your uncles were named after the Beatles?”

Random schmuck: “No. Only Uncle Ringo. The rest were named

after garbage men.”

Me: “Oh, well, this is Uncle Paul.”

Random schmuck: “This doesn’t sound like Uncle Paul.”

Me: “I got that, um, ambrosia. Yeah, that’s it, ambrosia.”

Random schmuck: “You mean ‘amnesia?’”

Me: “Uh, yeah, that too.”

Random schmuck: “But that doesn’t explain why your voice sounds so different.”

Me: “Well, uh, I forgot how to talk like myself. That’s why I couldn’t remember which one of your uncles I was.”

Random schmuck: “Oh. Makes sense.”

Me: “So, can I borrow fifty bucks?”

Random schmuck: “Wait, is this my brother Ben?”

Me: “Who is this?”

Random schmuck: “You still owe me fifty bucks, you sonofabitch.”

Me: click!

I dropped out of college well before I accrued any real student loan debt. Fortunately for me, the wife has enough for both of us. The problem is we live in a state where there are damned few available jobs in education and with a legislature that is constantly slashing school funding. It’s gotten to where the wife and I are professionals at the top of our fields and still not able to crack Middle Class. Don’t get me wrong, I’m pretty content with our Upper Middle Trash existence but it would be nice to get the leaky roof and the dilapidated bathroom fixed.

Unfortunately, once you are earning your peak salary, your options for making more money in that field tend to be slim at best. I’ve also come to the realization that I’m probably not going to hit the lottery or save a leprechaun’s life and get three wishes any time soon. This means I’m going to have to actually begin working to improve myself, because I’m just too out-of-shape and unsuccessful to die right now.

To that end, I’ve drawn up a 30-day plan to get started on the

path of where I want to go. It's going to take more than a month to undo all that I have done over my first 39-and-a-half years but this will be a good jump-start.

Day one: Watch Chuck Norris *Total Gym* infomercial. Notes: You're gonna feel pumped after watching it but you don't want to overdo it on your first day. Better just take it easy. (Remember not to think unclean thoughts about Chuck's hot wife. You promised yourself!)

Day two: You need to heal from the previous day's workout, so rest and drink plenty of water.

Day three: Start morning with egg white omelet and brisk walk to kitchen for ketchup.

Day four: You're warmed up now. Put 350 pounds on bench press bar. Facebook picture of 350 pounds on bench press bar.

Day five: Work up good sweat digging remote out of couch cushions. Cardio is vital.

Day six: Skip-rope routine. Excuse me, I meant "skip rope routine." That stuff is insane.

Day seven: Do you think Johnny Depp is crazy in real life?

Day nine: No workout. (There must be some foreign-sounding holiday that began yesterday.)

Day ten: Spend thirty minutes flexing in front of mirror while talking in Macho Man Randy Savage voice: "No agony, no brag-a-dy. Oh yeah!"

Day eleven: Do sit-up. (This is not a typo.)

Day twelve: Order Richard Simmons workout video tapes. (Hope to one day sweat to oldies, and find a working VCR.)

Day thirteen: Binge on Taco Bell. Spend next three days in bed, crying.

Day seventeen: Desperate to make progress, attempt to lift 350 pounds on bench press bar.

Day eighteen: Wake up under bench press bar. Wash dried blood off face. Change underpants.

Day thirty: Doc says hernia should heal nicely.

OK, the thirty-day plan looks like it may not work. So maybe I just need to focus on being more thankful for what I have. After all, who needs fame, fortune, strippers, midget butlers, indoor swimming pools, dozens of muscle cars, a helicopter, solid gold toilet, solid gold toilet brush (the scrubby part would still be plastic or zebra hair. I don't know.), in-house Taco Bell, guy to fly helicopter and tell me how cool it is since I'm afraid of flying, and heights, and helicopters. Also want a refrigerator with ice-maker and a hair and makeup stylist for my dogs. I'll stop here because the list goes on for some time.

It first occurred to me that I might not be thankful enough for all that I have when I lost the remote control to the air-conditioner. (Yes, I am ashamed.) It was this very afternoon (my time) while complaining to the wife that I could not find the remote control to the air-conditioner in our bedroom, which resides five feet from where I was sitting, that I used the TV remote to change the channel on the TV ... which is close enough to my seat that I could lean forward and reach all the necessary power, volume, etc. buttons, that I was thinking about how hard my life was. I'm not being cute. I was seriously pissed off about nothing and feeling really put upon. The wife then reminded me that half the world lives in squalor, and an even greater percentage would find our modest lower-middle class home and possessions to be fit for a king; the king of some crummy Somalian province, but a king no less.

I got thinking about what she said, and realized that she should shut up, but also that she was right, and that is why the world hates us. Moreover, I am why the world hates us.

While most of the peoples of Earth are subsisting off of grasshoppers and chicken guts and living in rock huts with sand floors, waking every day to a hot four-hour commute just to fetch diseased piss water from a well most likely controlled by some trigger-happy warlord, there is some guy (me) sitting on his fat ass and complaining about how the device that keeps him from dying

of heatstroke is a few steps away. (If I didn't hate myself already, I certainly would now.)

While I have a better than average chance of having exactly what I want for dinner tonight, my impoverished counterparts have a better than average chance of developing cholera or dysentery, or both, before breakfast. After a long day of clicking away on the keyboard, I have endless forms of entertainment available at my fingertips. If my third world peeps manage to survive the vipers, scorpions, religious extremists, CIA attack drones, and Ebola ... they might be lucky enough to dine on wild asparagus and goat gonads around a fire made of burning sheep dung.

But, that's the problem with folks like me. We're greedy and ungrateful and we always want more. And even though I'm well aware of my gluttony and self-indulgence, it won't stop me from stuffing my fat face with Taco Bell, guzzling a bottle of cherry whiskey and watching internet porn until I pass out in a puddle of my own sick.

That reminds me, I need to check on the status of that queen-size, gel-infused memory foam mattress topper I ordered last week. My current bed just isn't soft enough.

CAREER SUICIDE

Because Life Isn't Hard Enough?

I should probably begin by admitting that I am self-employed. Nonetheless, my boss is an asshole and I hate my job. Don't get me wrong, there are certain aspects of it I enjoy. I like writing news stories about issues that matter to the citizens I serve. I like putting together a nice advertisement or photo section. Hell, I even get excited when there's genuinely important breaking news upon which to report. However, the reality is that my business partner and I are doing the jobs of like five people and that's pretty much all we do seven days a week, 359 days a year.

Maybe, just maybe, some of the angst I feel, some of the zeal I lack, has to do with my day job being my day job. I mean, it's so commonplace it's cliché that people in midlife decide they are unfulfilled job-wise. The lady banker realizes she has always wanted to go to law school. The senior law firm partner realizes he's always wanted to be a pastry chef. And, the anxious agoraphobic newspaper editor realizes there is a hole in his life the size of a strip club with all-midget bouncers because—hey—who is going to pick a fight with a little person? I might as well have yellow Labrador puppies working the door.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy parts of this news business but it's a high-stress, low-pay field. By which I mean you spend a lot of your time standing in fields photographing plane crashes and stepping around body parts and shivering up to your gnads in mud because

somebody got the bright idea to have the high school cross country team hold a meet in a swamp. You spend a lot of time in this business outside, interviewing coppers who say things like “Back away from the yellow tape” and “Stop calling us ‘coppers.’”

Granted, these days, I don’t get out much but there is still plenty of stress to deal with. Like grammar Nazis, who will point out that the last sentence shouldn’t have ended with a preposition, which is fine if you don’t mind sounding like Yoda. Excuse me, if sounding like Yoda, you do not mind.

Speaking of Grammar Nazis, I wrote this open letter to those folks who volunteer their time to correct the rest of us when we screw up the spelling of a word or forget which form of “There” we were supposed to use. I was hoping the simple act of putting my frustrations about these jerks to paper would be cathartic but it wasn’t.

AN OPEN LETTER TO GRAMMAR NAZIS

Dear Grammar Nazi, if that is your real name.

Sup?

May I call you “Nazi” for short?

Well, Nazi, I’d like to begin this correspondence by thanking you for always being there for mankind. Whether it’s a blogger who uses the wrong form of “too” or an e-mailer who misplaced a comma, someone in your ranks of self-appointed language guardians always seems to arrive just in time to bring the error to our attention—after it’s too late to do anything.

If it were not for your incessant early morning phone calls and late-night e-mails, I may never have known the word “the” appeared as “teh” on page seven of last week’s paper. The future embarrassment you have saved me from enduring—now that I know how to spell “the”—is immeasurable. No longer will I be cut off at dinner parties when I ask for a glass of “Teh Glenlivet.” (OK, they’ll still cut me off but now it will be for peeing in, and then ninja kicking, the host’s ficus.)

I am even more thankful that you brought attention to my use of the wrong version of “there” on Facebook recently. While no one else even noticed, you realized my error was not merely the product of a hastily written post but, instead, the sign of one who clearly has not mastered his homophones. And, though it may bring great shame to my family, I must admit that I was absent the day they taught “there, their, they’re” in second-grade English class. Subsequently, I have gone my entire adult life deciding which word I should use in a given situation by the “eenie, meenie, miney, mo” method. However, as thankful as I am for your unyielding advice, I do have a few bones—and other clichés—to pick with you.

First, I think you need to reconsider your title. I understand the job of “Grammar Nazi” is a volunteer position, and that may give you little say in your sobriquet, but perhaps you could pitch a name to your fellow grammatical overlords that’s a little less ... holocaust-y. Something a little less offensive on a grand historical scale like, maybe, “Genocidal Wordsmith” or how about “English Language Storm Trooper” or “Teh Torquemada of Syntax.” (Sorry. Old habits. I meant “The” Torquemada of Syntax.)

Next, why did Sarah Palin get to invent a word? I mean, I’m sure she’s nice and all, but it just doesn’t seem fair. And, before you go getting your pekoe all in a twist, my protestation is a-political.

The tradition is that, every year, a small selection of words is added to the official English language catalog. As far back as Nunda and Grog started labeling items in their cave, people have been making up words. I’m fine with that. In fact, historians—whose names escape me but which are definitely not made up—say things started to go south when Nunda tried passing off “refudiate” in 50,000 B.C., to which Grog called “shniblitiz,” which was the caveman equivalent of “B.S.”

So, you might imagine my angst when I heard the former Queen of Mooseville got into the history books with “refudiate.” I appeal to your kind-hearted Nazi sensibilities when I ask that the rest of us be given the same opportunity.

Following are a few suggestions for your consideration:

1. Shurbet – My daughter’s word when she was younger. It’s an amalgamation of the statement, “Sure. You bet.”

2. Udza b’ga – My brothers and I came up with this when we were younger. It’s an exclamation similar to “Holy shniblitz!”

3. Skudzabgee – Another (brothers’) exclamatory, on par with “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

4. Eedzer bugeedzer – My own gibberish. It means “Oh no!”

5. Doobaleet – It’s the sound a grocery scanner makes when you pass products with bar codes over it. (Also the sound my youngest brother used to make when he’d run up behind you and quickly run his hand up your butt crack (while you were clothed, thank God) like he was sliding a credit card through the little card reader machine. What can I say, he was three, and then, later, twenty-two.)

While I’m pushing the bounds of your Nazi generosity, might I also request that we update this culture’s catalog of clichés and idioms. I’m just so sick of hearing the same old lines. They’re so ... cliché.

Instead of saying someone “screwed the pooch” perhaps they could have “spun the octopus.”

Instead of saying you have “a bone to pick” with someone, maybe you could have “a cucumber to punch.”

“Backseat drivers” could become “Sixth Day Adventists” (need to double-check the availability of that one) or “Tuesday afternoon mathematicians.”

Instead of someone being a “sick puppy” perhaps they could be a “terminally ill walrus.”

“Much ado about nothing” could become “so many cartwheels at dawn.”

A conversation between me and Sarah Palin might look a little something like this:

Me: “You’ve gotta watch out for that Robert, he’s one terminally ill walrus.”

Sarah: “I know, eh. But I’ve got a cucumber to punch with him,

don'cha know.”

Me: “Yeah, he can be a real Sixth Day Adventist.”

Sarah: “Where is he right now?”

Me: “Oh, probably out spinning the octopus.”

Sarah: “I don't know, fella. Maybe I'm just cartwheeling at dawn.”

(We both nod silently in agreement, pantomiming early-morning cartwheels. Then I ask if she can really see Russia from her backyard.)

The point is, you can't refudiate the fact that this shniblitz has got to change—I don't care who squeezes the kumquats.

(Anyone offended by this letter should contact my parents. It's all their fault I behave this way.)

When people aren't reminding me that the word “The” isn't spelled “Teh,” they like to wax moronic about how I am a member of the evil liberal media who should be ashamed of myself, but please be sure to include their information about the upcoming fundraiser picnic at their church this Sunday in the newspaper. (I should definitely be ashamed of myself, but not for the reasons they cite.)

When people aren't flashing me dirty looks or mailing me dirty socks with nasty messages scrawled on them, they are calling to scream obscenities about what kind of sexual activities my mother and I should engage in. Oh, sorry, about which sexual activities in which my mother and I should engage.

And then there are the diva local columnists who, though some of them can barely string cogent sentences together, have decided their written words are the only thing sustaining the drooling masses. I put up with it because, what else can I do? I'm too old for restaurant work and my gigolo days are but a sweet, vanilla-scented memory.

Here's a list of potential new careers I'm considering:

Porn star – For women who enjoy that flaccid-walrus-having-a-seizure look.

Lawyer – I have always wanted to practice law. I love how they call it “practice.” Like I could get away with practicing cooking. Anyway, if I do go to law school, it'll be so I can end up like Matlock, eating

hotdogs and solving crimes with my underpaid black assistants who keep inexplicably changing from week to week. “Hey, wife, wasn’t Conrad taller last week?”

Celebrity chef – I can scream and swear in a bad British accent and cook animal parts normal people won’t even feed to their dog, or pet hippo, so why not?

Wilderness guide – Other than my intense fear of bees and bears and bisexual hillbillies, I love being out in the country. (Note to self: “The Bisexual Hillbillies” would make a great reality TV program or jazz fusion band name.)

Shoemaker – I’ve always wanted to make my own shoes. Everyone would know the Gohs brand because they would all come with hot pink laces and swear words in the tread.

Battle rapper – I already have my name picked out. You can call me “The Landlord” (cuz I own this motha!)

MIDDLE AGE BATTLE RAP

Here is my latest jam entitled “Middle Age Battle Rap.” (Catchy title, huh?)

*I’m murderous, like family histories
of cancer and crohn’s and congenital heart disease
I’m makin’ small stacks, from bad investments
I’m payin’ big tax, cuz I got no dependents
My kids are in college, well at least one is
The youngest dropped out, came home, works for the family biz
By work I mean sleep, and biz I mean Facebook
I gotta be patient while she finds herself ... apparently on Facebook
I got a good wife, been married for decades
And she gives good advice on how I should lose weight
Yo, my hood is mad whack
We got white folks ... and white folks
Last week I seen a John Deere with bling in the spokes
I’m 39-and-a-half, do you know what that means?
I seen childbirth, the terrible twos and the terribler tweens!*

*I've seen hair loss, The Menopause and read "Women are from Venus"
Now nothing can phase me, I'm a suffering genius
Word to your mother!
(Unless she is deceased, in which case: my condolences)*

OTHER POTENTIAL NEW CAREER PATHS

Plastic surgeon – Is there a more noble way to make a living than by working to build better boobies?

Taco Bell cook – Make that sweet stuff all day? Hell yeah! I could bring happiness to the masses while enjoying my 10 percent employee discount on my most favorite foodstuffs. (This one is definitely going in the top five)

Garbage man – Since I have an obsession with garbage collection, I think it only fitting to make a career of it. Few things (other than Taco Bell and The Walking Dead TV show) get me as excited as garbage day. I love that we can pile up old stuff we don't need or want anymore and put it out by the sidewalk and then a giant robotic truck comes along early Thursday morning and makes it all disappear. Have you seen a garbage truck? It has giant moving parts like a Transformer. One minute there is garbage and the next minute it's gone! And then there is the person—nay, hero—who has to handle all of the sticky, stinky, potentially hazardous waste that comes in those plastic bags. If it wasn't for this army of fast-moving, silent sentries, we would be swimming in seas of our own filth. Now that's heroic. Garbage man also goes to the top of my list.

Professional nice guy – OK, this one isn't technically an existing job, and I would need some financial support from somebody like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, but I could just go around handing out balloons and full-size candy bars and giving people compliments and jump-starting dead batteries and holding umbrellas over their heads while they load groceries in their car. And when I was done, I'd hand them a business card which reads: "B. Jon Gohs, Nice Guy." And then I'd walk away.

THE ANGRY VEGAN

I Pity Tofu

When I was a teenager, comedian Dennis Leary had a bit about how when salt and sugar start kicking your ass, it's time to die. I laughed along with the audience and agreed that such weaklings had no place on the planet. Of course, now that salt and sugar are kicking my ass, I feel a little differently. I'm certainly not ready to lie down and die because of it. So, you do what middle-aged people do, you change your diet.

The problem is, we haven't just been giving up foods that are bad for us. We've also been slowly but surely eliminating foods from our diet that are immoral in the way they are grown or harvested. For instance, the wife gave up all meats, poultry and fishes because killing animals causes suffering.

Now I've been told we can't have cocoa or chocolates of any kind anymore because of the fair trade issue. Apparently, child slave laborers are picking the beans ... and the only way to ensure justice is by keeping me from having a Snickers bar. We're about to give up three brands of coffee we usually buy each week for the same reason. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find fair trade coffee in Northern Michigan? I do. There is a store 75 minutes from my house that sells a few varieties of fair trade, and one that's nearly 50 minutes away that supposedly carries the slave-free java but I haven't had any luck locating it. That leaves me to buy online, which I try not to do if at all possible—shop local and all, you know.

I finally gave up deli turkey after breaking my vow of vegetarianism for the last year by lunching on turkey sandwiches nearly every day. To be fair, until I began eating tuna a few weeks ago, it was the only meat I was consuming. (I know, the vegetarians hear that and think I'm a brutal beast for harming innocent life. The meat-eaters hear that and can't believe what a big gay puss I am.)

The next thing on the list to go is diet soda, and I've been struggling to give up dairy altogether but it's just so hard because cheese and sour cream are so delicious. The funny thing is I've already given so much up. I no longer eat hamburger or steak or pork products of any kind. I haven't had butter in so long I can't remember what it tastes like. I stopped cooking delicious salmon steaks and grilled chicken breasts, and Kentucky Fried chicken drumsticks are but a salty, greasy, sexually-charged memory. To be fair, I never was much of a steak or pork man. So that was no great loss. But man I do love me some meatloaf, sausage, pepperoni, braunschweiger—pretty much any of the heart-friendly family of salted cured garbage meats. I don't eat pie or cake often, or fruit pies or Zingers or Twinkies (anymore) but still there seems to be a list of things I have to give up.

Is this old age? Just a series of deprivations until you no longer enjoy food ... or life in general? I miss food. I mean, I still eat but it's mostly egg whites and dry wheat toast and oatmeal and an assortment of grasses, stalks, barks and seeds. I don't eat anything that I like any more (if you don't count the occasional Taco Bell I talk the wife into splurging on).

Ironically, I'm still so fat. That's the worst part. The sad part is that I do all the cooking, so you'd think I could control what kind of cuisine I enjoy. The problem is that the wife does all the grocery shopping and she decided (I did, too, at the time) that we would stop eating meat, fish, poultry and most animal products a few years ago. I went most of a couple of years with only sneaking the occasional can of salmon or tuna fish. But, as I mentioned, this last year I have enjoyed a steady diet of deli turkey seven days a week.

Look, I know that the production required to supply food

animals to humans is bad for the environment and causes the creatures to suffer ... but they're just so damned delicious. I guess this is how I justify my love of Taco Bell. (I cannot possibly overstate the word "love.") Luckily, just about everything they make can be greatly improved by swapping the taco meat for extra refried beans. Of course, the closest Taco Bell to our little hell hamlet is nearly an hour drive one-way. So, much like Pa heading to Mankato to pick up rheumatism medicine for little Grace and bringing home sugar sticks for Mary and Laura, we once-in-a-blue-baby get the good stuff. The rest of the time I subsist on a diet of oatmeal with brown sugar and fat free milk, oatmeal with dry wheat toast and a spot of ketchup and an assortment of meatless meals, like sad spaghetti, nearly nachos, homosexual chili and plain potatoes with bread and mushroom stuffing.

Mostly, though, I eat oatmeal. I eat a lot of oatmeal. Anywhere from four to six times a day I eat a half a cup of rolled oats at 90-minute intervals to maintain my blood sugar. (Did I mention I am hypoglycemic?) That means I eat more oatmeal in a year than most people do in a lifetime. Like, so much that I've personally kept Wilford Brimley in di-beet-us medication.

For the record, let me state that I hate oatmeal. I didn't start out hating it. It just sort of happened along the way. But, regardless how of much I hate it, it is free of salt, bad fats, is slow-burning and high in fiber. It's supposed to lower your cholesterol and it's really cheap ... and if I swallow another spoonful, so help me Brimley, I just may jump off the roof onto a pile of disabled orphan puppies with cancer.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT OATMEAL

- It was Hitler's favorite foodstuff
- Homosexuals use it for their weird gay stuff (Unconfirmed)
- It's un-American (Confirmed)
- Oatmeal gave George Lucas the energy to make Episodes I, II & III
- "Oatmeal" backwards is "Laemtao" which is Latin for "Satan's"

Hand-job.” Look it up if you don’t believe me (It’s not as pleasant as it sounds.)

- More murders are committed by people who eat oatmeal than by those who eat cream of wheat (Unconfirmed)
- Oatmeal is a by-product of the animal husbandry industry (Confirmed, but you don’t want to know how.)
- “Rolled Oats” is slang for smoking oatmeal to get high—fact: oatmeal is six times as addictive as crack cocaine
- Oatmeal causes autism
- Oatmeal is a U.N. Plot
- Oatmeal carries Ebola
- Oatmeal destroys the ozone
- Oatmeal has terrible credit
- Oatmeal is picked by child laborers who are further punished by being forced to eat oatmeal
- Oatmeal killed the dinosaurs (Just kidding. I killed the dinosaurs—oops, wrong book!)
- 100 percent of people who eat oatmeal will eventually die (Fact)
- Oatmeal is the active ingredient in nuclear weapons ... and diarrhea
- 50 percent of all oatmeal ends in divorce
- “Oatmeal” rhymes with “goat squeal” and that can’t be good
- Oatmeal hid in Canada during the Vietnam War
- Oatmeal owes the IRS six years of back taxes
- Oatmeal only goes to church on Easter and Christmas (shameful)
- Oatmeal is in everything these days: facial scrubs, soaps, cookies, cereal—soon it will be everywhere. If we don’t act fast it will be too late. (Chances are it’s been inside your wife.)

You know who the biggest seller of oatmeal is? The Quaker man.

You know about the Quakers? They used to go to church naked. Think about that the next time you slide a bowl in front of your kids, pervert!

Because I eat so much oatmeal I am extremely regular. OK, “regular” is not the word. From the eye-bulging “glunk” in my lower intestine each morning around 7 a.m., I know I have approximately 12 seconds before one of my several-daily high-pressure episodes occurs and my colon rides the lightning all the way to Diarrhea Village. (Note: Diarrhea Village, worst family vacation destination ever.) I’ve had to stop reading in the bathroom simply because it takes longer now to pull down my pants and get comfy than it does to forcibly evacuate my grain chute.

What am I not allowed to eat? Cheeseburgers. I miss cheeseburgers. I am allowed to have vegetarian hamburgers with fat-free imitation cheese rectangles. Sort of like I am allowed to smack my left hand with a hammer as often as I like. You know what’s in those vegetarian meat discs? Textured vegetable protein (wheat gluten, soy protein concentrate, water for hydration), egg whites, corn oil, calcium caseinate, contains two percent or less of modified tapioca starch, onion powder, canola oil, triglycerides from coconut oil, hydrolyzed vegetable protein (corn gluten, wheat gluten, soy protein), dextrose, salt, soy protein isolate, autolyzed yeast extract, sugar, natural and artificial flavors from non-meat sources, caramel color, cultured whey, maltodextrin, garlic powder, spice, cellulose gum, disodium guanylate, disodium inosinate, soy sauce (water, soybeans, salt, wheat), vitamins and minerals (niacinamide, iron [ferrous sulfate], thiamin mononitrate [vitamin b1], pyridoxine hydrochloride [vitamin b6], riboflavin [vitamin b2], vitamin b12), sesame seed oil, celery extract, soy lecithin.

You know what’s in a real cheeseburger? Hamburger ... and cheese! (Help, I can’t stop lovin’ it!)

This past Sunday morning was pretty tough because I nearly fell off the wagon over a cheeseburger craving. Luckily the love of my life was there to mentally groin punch me into making a good decision.

I was innocently working away when a commercial came on

playing that friendly, seductive music.

Sexy models flaunted their luscious meat and beautiful brown buns. They were playing a tune called “Legalized Crack for Fat Guys” and I was picking up every note they were laying down.

My arm began to itch.

My eyes began to twitch.

I got those old cravings again. My eyes began darting back and forth from the kitchen to the clock.

“It’s after eleven,” I thought. “Some people indulge this early.”

The theme song played like porno music in the background.

“Da dot dot da daaaaa!”

“I am loving it,” I thought as my feet flicked with the beat.

Once the commercial ended I went back to clacking away on the keyboard, trying to get the paper finished for Monday morning’s print deadline. But there was only one thing on my mind—sweet, sweet murder! After a few minutes of listening to David Gregory blather away about some news item, the same commercial returned.

“Wouldn’t that be tasty?” I asked my sponsor (who also happens to be my wife, and asked that I not refer to her as “my sponsor” in this piece.)

“Not really,” she responded.

“C’mon, let’s go get one,” I pleaded. “It’s brand new and for a limited time only.”

“If you get one you’re going to feel like crap afterward and you’re going to hate yourself for it,” the sponsor reasoned.

She was right but I didn’t care.

I had to have one of the new Quarter Pounders from McDonald’s, I didn’t care how many innocent cows and pigs had gone to the gallows in the name of deliciousness.

“They have three new sandwiches, you know,” I told the sponsor in a matter-of-fact tone. “There’s the Deluxe, which I hear comes with all sorts of vegetables like lettuce, tomatoes and ketchup (which is a federally recognized vegetable); oh, and then there is the Bacon Cheeseburger. It’s loaded with good protein and calcium; and, quite

possibly the sexiest of all, the Habanero, Bacon & Ranch is supposed to be a spicy, smoky, ranchy mouth-gasm.”

Her face curled up as she cringed.

“OK, ‘mouth-gasm’ was my term, but they’re supposed to be really good,” I said with a big open-mouthed smile and shaking my head affirmatively in hopes of working the subconscious suggestion angle. “You are getting very sleepy. You will head for the drive-thru and will not forget the extra napkins this time.”

I waved my hands as if doing a magical spell.

“What are you doing?” she snapped.

“Practicing my sign language,” I said defensively. “What are YOU doing?”

The kids—like hostages in a bank heist—just happened to be with the wrong parents at the wrong time. Both are recovering murder-a-tarians and thought my plan sounded just splendid.

“Right on, Dad!” cheered the son.

“You tell her!” reassured the daughter.

Sensing a mutiny was afoot, the sponsor tried to play it cool: “Not interested,” she said without even looking up from her iPad this time.

Stomachs grumbled.

Chops moistened.

Brains began plotting against the sponsor, trying to come up with some justification.

“Whose idea was it to become vegetarians anyway?!” I thought.

Indignation swelled.

“Who are you to tell me, a grown man, what I can eat?!” my brain screamed. “I’m a MAN! You hear me, a MAN!”

Good one, Gohs!

“What, you think you’re going to live forever because we stopped eating food with a face?!”

It all sounded very convincing inside my head.

“But it has bacon and habanero peppers and cheese,” I whined.

Annoyed to action she stopped reading the latest issue of Bran

& Sadness or whatever other communist manifesto it was and proposed a solution.

“How about rice and vegetables,” she said.

She may as well have told me to go out back and shoot Old Yeller.

How about you take a ...” the “Idiot” sensor on the part of my brain responsible for making me look both ways before I cross the street and not sticking my hand in the garbage disposal while it’s running knew what I was about to say and hit the emergency “STOP” lever before it was half-way out my mouth.

“What’s that?” she said. Her head tilted forward, eyes squinting at me from above her glasses frame.

“Limited time only,” I whispered as my eyes began to well up. “Limited ... time ... only.”

MIDDLE AGE INTIMACY

Nothing Remotely Resembling Sex

As much as I'd like to regale you with erotic stories of my time as a naughty park ranger in need of a good thrashing, the wife forbade me to write this chapter. And, as bad of a listener as I usually am, I'm not a complete moron. She's not real keen on "the little stories" I write in general, and that goes quintuple for something as taboo as issues amorous.

Whenever I get to waxing moronic about some ridiculous event in my life, she ends up fielding a bunch of questions from coworkers and the little old ladies at church about some ridiculous thing Ben did or said. I even had to change the title of this section because, even though we've been together for over 20 years, and even though we have children, and even though we sleep in the same room, as far as the world is concerned, we have never had anything remotely resembling the act of reproduction.

I suppose it's better for the mental health of my children and the public at large to maintain the facade of celibacy. The problem is, you really can't talk about aging or midlife crises or relationships with any ubiquity without at least touching on the issue of intimacy. So, since I can't talk about doing the hunka-chunka in a marital way, I'm going to use this space to explore my own curiosities and observations about this most demonized of the most common natural occurrences in American society.

When you're young and fresh, doing it ("it" being that thing

of which I may not speak) is all about solving some great cosmic mystery. What is it? How do I do it? How do I know if I did it right? OK, for men, the most important questions are “Who am I going to do it with?” and “When can we do it again?” But, as you get older, the act becomes less about the act and more about the nuances. When you’re starving, you’re happy just to have a bowl of gruel. But, once the fridge is full, you’re faced with the opportunity to experiment. You could eat a plain slice of cheese or maybe you could stick it between two different kinds of meat and stuff in into a pita pocket. (Hey, I’m not going to judge. Whatever four consenting foodstuffs do in the privacy of their own dining room is their business.)

Regardless of the reasons, I’ve gotten to an age where I’ve become more curious about some adult activities that I once dismissed as too weird or too labor intensive to bother with. We might as well start things off with one of the big taboos—homosexuality.

Now, before my mother-in-law and wife and grandmother and everyone else I know faint, I don’t have a gay bone in my body. (Though that does sound like something someone would say right before they come out of the closet. “I don’t have a gay bone in my body, unless you count that penis in my rectum!”)

The truth is I’ve always just been fascinated by gay people; gay men, to be specific. Granted, most of my exposure has been through movies and television. I guess what I’m trying to say is there is a small part of me that’s always wanted to be gay—and, no, I don’t mean my butt hole.

Don’t get me wrong, it’s not the sex I’m after. I’m just enamored of the seemingly fabulous lifestyle. I want a tastefully decorated home. I want to have chats about drama queens over brunch. I want to say something catty and refer to myself as a “bitch.” I want to drink orange juice and champagne out of a fancy glass and say things like “Don’t go there, honey.” (I swear, all my horny-ness is aimed at women.) And, I want to be able to cry in front of my male friends when I’m having a rather stressful day without them running away in terror.

Recently, I've been getting some real-world insight into homosexuality from a guy I know through my time spent on the radio. My acquaintance lives in Chicago and is fabulous. He has a great sense of humor and plenty of patience with my stupid hetero questions.

Just how fabulous is he? He recently took a panini press with him on vacation to a Wisconsin Gay Pride Day or some such event. I don't take vacations. But, if I did, I'd like to be able to take a sandwich press along, too. Do I have to be gay to get away with such a thing? I don't know, but it probably wouldn't hurt.

The truth is, I'd never make it as a gay. For starters, I cannot imagine kissing another man. Second, I'm way too obsessed with breasts. But, more than that, I don't think I have the equipment for the job. I'm not what you'd call large and in charge. Thanks to the genetic lottery, I have been cursed with mediocre hardware. (Thanks, Dad!) It's not tiny but it's not big, either. Certainly not something you'd go showing off at dinner parties. (People do that, right?)

If the wife and I ever truly engaged in maintenance of the marital variety—which she has explicitly instructed me to deny in all circumstances—I'm sure she would politely smooth my stubby “ego” with some lie about how only whores care about such things.

I don't know for a fact that the gays are hung up on size more than their straight female counterparts but I know plenty of straight men ... and everything is a competition with them. So, I just figured, you know. But even more so, these guys are not only vying for a mate who finds them attractive and sexually competent, but they all have the same mechanisms, so they know bad from good. I just couldn't take that kind of pressure.

By now, some of you (much like my shrink) have likely decided this little literary exercise is just a steam valve for some latent homosexual erotic curiosity of mine. To which I say “pish tosh you silly billies.” But, if I was going to be a gay person, I would do it up right. And, by “right” I mean stereotypical, over-the-top show-tunes-and-pastels, screaming sailor. (I used to use the phrase

“flaming” for gay but I learned its history stemmed from when they used to use bundles of wood called “fags” to get fires going for witch burnings. They would burn the gays with the rest of the “fags” hence the practice of calling homosexuals “fags.” See, I told you you’d learn something. Don’t get me wrong, I still use the word “faggot” when referring to an idiot, but that’s because I can be an insensitive prick at times.)

The next most pressing curiosity for me is this S&M stuff. I just don’t get the whole leather outfits, whips and chains thing. It’s not so much that I want to try it as much as I want to understand how someone can be sexually aroused by being spanked or having their groin stomped on by a woman in high heels or what’s so fun about being called horrible names.

Luckily for you, I found a very long list of kinky sexual desires I’d never heard of. Maybe you perverts know them all but most of them came as a surprise to me. I was even more surprised to see some of my darkest desires on the list. (Which ones? I’ll never tell!)

Electrophilia, also known as Ben Franklin Syndrome, involves people getting randy over electricity. Why would someone rather stick their winky in a light socket than in a VJ? Only the coroner knows.

Acrophilia is when people are aroused by high places. Look, in the sky, it’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s your mom and dad doing the hunka-chunka on the roof.

Harmatophilia is when you or your partner becomes sexually aroused by being with a bad lover. I’m guessing these folks get snapped up in the first round draft. How many jobs, other than an elected office or professional sports refereeing, can you excel at by being lousy?

Among some of the more bizarre desires were folks who like to have sex with amputees and mannequins, clowns and spiders, though not generally all at the same time. Some folks get horny over the smell of flowers or the sight of high heels and some can get off through dancing. I find this last one difficult to believe because my

dance moves have only ever led to falling and vomiting.

Coprolalia is being turned on by swearing. (Let's do it, butt-face)

Is James Lipton of *Inside the Actor's Studio* a Vicarphile? Maybe. After all, this kink is for folks who love to hear people's life stories. The only thing I ever get from listening to people's histories is sleepy. Some people get excited over vaccinations, some over obscene phone calls. Even weirder are the folks who go "boing!" over trains, reptiles and getting their teeth pulled.

Those of you obsessed with big weenies are down with the Haemophilia. (You tramp!)

If you have a hankering for plush animals and other stuffed objects, you are a plushophile ... and a goddamn pervert!

Metrophilia is the lust of poetry. I've been inspired and saddened by poetry but it's never gotten me horny.

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
Cover your eyes
Now make me a sammich!*

When noses turn you on, it's called Neophilia. "Oh, yeah, look at those nostrils. I am going to pick you all night long. Blow it baby! Blow that nose!"

Even worse is the desire to lick someone's eyeball. I'm not going to bother telling you what it's called but, rest queasy, it has a name.

When you like to bite or get bitten, it's called Odaxelagnia. It's also called felony assault, so be careful.

Some people are excited by the sight of insects and small animals being crushed. If seeing a small creature get squished turns your partner on, you need to get out of the house immediately and call the police because that is some serious "it-puts-the-lotion-on-the-skin" trouble.

When you rub your weenis parts up against a stranger, say in the subway or walking down the street, it's called Frotteurism. Apparently this is really big in Japan. Where I come from it could get you shot. And, quite possibly, your victim would then rub their

stuff on you after they shot you, and you'd totally deserve it.

We're all familiar with exhibitionism, but it's one that I actually found interesting; not because it sounds sexy or anything. It just seems like it might be fun to try, depending on where you are. (Like, maybe walking around with your pants down at the old folks home just to see if anybody notices. Or even better, streaking naked through the department of motor vehicles to see how fast you can clear the place out.)

Fetishism is the desire for inanimate objects. Not sure I get this totally but there have been a few big screen TVs that made me a little horny, and my new snowblower is definitely a lusty trollop.

Formicophilia means doing sexy things with ants. I'm not sure what it means to do sexy things with ants, and I don't want to know.

I might be able to give the whole robotism thing a try. There are some mechanized sex dolls from Japan now that are dang lifelike. And, for \$7,000, you could have a lifelong sex partner who won't look at you funny for your weird sex habits, be they involving fire or burglary or enemas or even ants.

THE TOP SIX MIDDLE AGE SEX POSITIONS

6. Mutual aggravation – Similar to mutual masturbation but there are seldom orgasms and often bruising.

5. 99 – It's going to bed with the intention of sex but napping instead.

4. Walrus Style – A lot of heavy breathing and grinding but the genitals never actually touch.

3. Kitchen Sex – Where you tell each other to “Frig-off” over dinner.

2. Frantic Whisper – You try to have some “alone time” without waking up your spouse.

1. The “Adam & Eve” – This is where you both resort to using sex toys, by yourselves. (Preferably in a garden.)

20 YEARS A HUSBAND *Yet Another Wedding Anniversary*

The wife and I recently observed our twenty-year anniversary of living and raising a family together.

I wrote and published in the local newspaper the following letter in honor of our twentieth Valentine's Day together.

An open letter to the wife on the occasion of our 20th Valentine's Day as a domestic cooperative licensed in the State of Michigan.

Dearest The Wife,

I had contemplated giving you diamonds for this, our 20th Valentine's Day existing in one another's vicinity, but then I remembered the plight of the Botswanian diamond miners ... and how we agreed never again to participate in the economic subjugation of Third World peoples.

Then I considered buying you fine chocolates. After all, what is more romantic than a sweet for one's sweet? But then I remembered the plight of Ivory Coast's child slaves who harvest cocoa beans. And, besides, you told me that milk comes from grieving mothers who have had their calves taken from them.

I wanted to buy you some other gift—perhaps a new book or a colorful scarf—but then I remembered you telling the children that our family would be making our gifts for one another in the future. I can still see the look in their eyes. I imagine it was something similar

to the look of an indentured chocolate farmer.

But I say romance is not dead ... even though a 2010 Psychology Today article said it is. I say there must be something I can do for such a patient, intelligent, and accomplished person with your humanitarian tendencies. After all, you tolerate my rather bizarre eccentricities with grace and cheerful restraint.

I know the last time we officially celebrated Valentine's Day was back in 2008, and I spent the entire time thinking that a deranged gunman was going to burst into the theater and let us all have it.

And, I understand that watching me run by screaming "Syrup! Syrup! Syrup!" and slapping myself in the face as I head to the kitchen because I think I'm passing out from low blood sugar for the thousandth time—even though I never have, and even though that thousand figure is probably low—might be enough to drive some women to divorce.

But, from our first camping trip together, when I abandoned you in the tent because I thought I heard a bear—and you came and slept in the car with me to keep me company, even though it was just raccoons—I knew you possessed a special kind of empathy.

So, in honor of your patience and support through my battles with bees, contentious relationships with people in the food service industry, and my 7,300 nervous breakdowns, I offer you this list of behaviors I plan to correct (or at least really put effort into decreasing the instances of) over our next 20 Valentine's Days:

I pledge to either stop eating deli turkey sandwiches for lunch everyday or quit referring to myself as a vegetarian.

I promise to stop bursting into tears every time Maisy (the Shih Tzu who gets more attention than most children) gets so much as a hair ball.

I won't answer telemarketers' phone calls in foreign accents while pretending not to know English ... as often.

I will try to remember not to practice my ninja kicks when you are trying to talk to me about something important. (As long as you stop hiding my karate pants.)

I have already made preparations to throw away the three-sizes-too-big, ragged T-shirt with the glow-in-the-dark Frankenstein head on it.

I promise to stop referring to your church bell choir club as a “cult” and I will no longer spread stories about how you all skulk around town in black robes looking to brainwash others to become bell-ringers too.

I will trim my goatee more than twice a year.

I will try to work through my sudden self-diagnosed allergies to strawberries, peanuts, soy products, deodorant, passion fruit, wool, latex and butylated hydroxytoluene.

I’ll give the whole recycling thing a shot but I cannot promise anything. You have to remember, when you met me, I was buying a new package of socks every week, wearing them once and throwing them away.

In closing, let me just say that I’m really glad you haven’t left me—even though you probably should have—and let me stress my deep feelings of comfort and familiarity at knowing you still exist in my vicinity.

Happy Valentine’s Day!

(You know how much I hate exclamation points, so, you know, take from that what you will.)

Sincerely,
The Husband

MY ROCK-N-ROLL MIDLIFE CRISIS

Ultimate Fantasy Edition

There is zero chance I'll be getting a new sports car or a hot little mistress or any of the neat toys the other fathers will get for their midlife crises but, like Martin Luther King said "It's OK for a man to dream about muscle cars and boobies."

Maybe that was Luther Campbell, either way, the closest I'm going to get to a second childhood replete with selfish binging on shiny doodads, ditz cocktail waitresses and a sudden effort to improve myself is my imagination.

However, if I was to have me a good old-fashioned stereotypical midlife crisis, it would look a little like this:

BEN'S MIDLIFE CRISIS WISH LIST

Sweet pet – Some people get snakes, some get tigers or exotic birds. If I was gonna go all out I'd get me a pet hippopotamus. They kill more humans than any other animal, so they'd make a wicked awesome guard dog. Plus, if I got three more, we could totally play a live action game of Hungry Hungry Hippos . . . followed by a rousing game of "What are we going to do with all of this hippo shit?" And then, "Oh my god, the hungry hippos are trying to eat us" because, apparently, that's what they do.

Cool car – The Munster's "Munster Koach" car is, hands down, the coolest car ever made. I would totally drive to the house of the guy who played Eddie Munster and sit out front honking the horn.

Then, when he came out to ask me just what in hell I was doing, I'd say, "I wasn't honking for you."

Mistress – This is a tough one. I know the stereotype is for middle-aged men to go for younger women but, since I have what the shrink refers to as "mommy issues" I tend to prefer women in their late-30s and older. There are so many unattainable women with whom I would like to cheat on my wife, I just don't know how I could choose, so here are my tentative choices:

TOP 10 CELEBRITY MISTRESSES

10. Sarah Palin
9. Virginia Woolf (deceased)
8. Aeon Flux (cartoon character)
7. Tootsie (Actually Dustin Hoffman)
6. Pamela Anderson (not sure what her last name is at this point)
5. Donna Reed (circa "It's a Wonderful Life" also deceased)
4. Patty Duke and her Cousin (circa "The Patty Duke Show")
3. Pam Grier (circa Jackie Brown)
2. Elvira Mistress of the Dark
1. Tom Selleck (as Quigley Down Under; not technically a girl)

MIDLIFE CRISIS BUCKET LIST

- Punch a shrimple
- Kiss Tom Selleck (but would settle for a hug)
- Beg a little person for forgiveness (stop calling them "shrimples")
- Read all Marvel's "Secret Wars" I and II
- Send death threat to Jimmy Fallon (watching you, laughing boy!)
- Get restraining order filed against me by Jimmy Fallon
- Moon a cop
- Get maced by a cop
- Have beer with cop who maced me
- Laugh while he maces someone else
- Become pen pals with an Amish
- Win a trophy in something, anything

- Build something out of LEGOs
- Paint a picture of the fabled bat-bunny
- Eat a blueberry cheesecake
- Get drunk and light off fireworks inside LEGO creation (kaboom!)
- Throw-up most of a blueberry cheesecake
- Fly a helicopter around a parking lot (no higher than 10 or 12 feet)
- Baba Booeey CNN
- Meet John Waters for coffee and cigarettes (try not to swoon)
- Dip a sleeping person's hand in warm water to see if they pee the bed (I don't care if you know it works. I wanna see it for myself.)
- Get ass kicked by drowsy person in wet pants
- Let a monkey loose in a courthouse
- See how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop (without cheating) – Wiggle eyebrows at people while licking, then try to explain to cops I'm not a pervert
- Learn Chinese
- Swear in Chinese at a person who does not speak Chinese
- Call Buckingham Palace and ask if they have Prince Albert in a can
- Drink entire bottle of prune juice ... and wait
- Give a Jehovah's Witness who comes to my door a *Spider Man* comic and ask if they've heard the good news about Stan Lee ... then sick attack hippo on them (Be sure to get attack hippo)
- Forward mail to White House; see how long before anyone notices
- Replace church organist's sheet music with death metal
- Give homeless person a bag of money
- Dress in drag and perform "I touch myself" in a burlesque theater
- Watch *Blade Runner*, *Vertigo* & *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*
- Mix and drink a Shirley Temple
- Officiate a gay wedding
- Send batch of Ex-Lax chip cookies to DMV (sit in lobby & wait)
- See both kids living on their own
- Shave my head bald again
- Sit in bathtub on hill at sunset while sipping wine
- Eat a piece of apple pie with cheddar cheese on top

- Pick up a hitchhiker
- Survive hitchhiker attack
- Convince cops hitchhiker was not a hooker
- Build a doll house for wrestling action figures (replica of Pee Wee's Playhouse should do)
- Eat a six-pack of Taco Bell hard shell tacos ... with beef!
- Run down street naked, screaming "Save me Jesus!"
- Get a star named after me
- Go drunk driving on a lawnmower
- Spend the night in the drunk tank
- Get lawnmower out of impound
- Return neighbor's lawnmower
- Make hot sauce popsicles for my nephews
- Do something hilarious just before I die like maybe say "Pudding pop!" in Bill Cosby voice or do the robot. (By "do" the robot, I mean the dance, not make sweet love to a robot)

MIDDLE AGE MA & PA

Parenting Never Ends ... Ever!

Children ruin everything. Those words should be stamped on our genitals.

Joy in its every form is a booby-trap. Eat a chocolate-chip cookie, get fat. Smoke a cigarette, get cancer. Date a model, get herpes. Have sex ... get children!

As a parent, you are Wile E. Coyote, and children are the explosion that leaves your head blackened and hairless.

I know what some of you are saying. “But, Ben, children are a miracle. The only reason we exist is to have children and propagate the species. Children should be loved and nurtured and revered as a national treasure.”

Hey, I love my children. Everybody loves their children. It’s what keeps us from selling them to the Gypsies. That doesn’t change the fact that child-rearing takes arguably the best 20-or-so years of your adult life and leaves you a fat, wrinkled, nervous, and penniless mess.

With all the babbling, puking, pooping, snotty-noses, incoherent screaming, lying, manipulating, stealing, destruction of property and combativeness, raising kids is most akin to working as an orderly in a psych ward—or maybe a German porno. Except, I’m going to guess the turnover rate for psychiatric hospital orderlies is much higher than the turnover rate of parents.

Yet, unlike the psych ward, you can’t just up and quit. OK, I guess you can abandon your kids but most of us stick it out because we love

them so dearly. That, and for fear of being blamed once the little lunatic grows up to be a big lunatic and starts blabbing to some smart prick with a Ph.D.

Your kid: "I think the reason I drink is because my mother refused to buy the name brand cereal."

Smart prick with Ph.D: "Tell me, how did that make you feel?"

Your kid: "Inadequate. Buying generic choco-poofers was mother's way of telling me I wasn't good enough for her . . . or Cocoa Puffs."

Look, I'm not saying parenthood doesn't have its fair share of good times. I'm just saying the price tag is awfully steep for a few poorly crafted Christmas ornaments and the occasional macaroni artwork.

You're not fooling anyone, Tommie, we know you traced your hand to make that turkey.

WE HAD OUR KIDS YOUNG

Of all the valid reasons you should not have children when you yourself are quite young—lack of maturity, lack of patience, lack of money, lack of housing, lack of life experience—there is one excellent reason to do just that, and it involves simple mathematics.

See, when I was just 19 and had a woman and newborn son to support, I watched with a generous portion of envy as my friends all continued to play the role of high-schooler-plus. They were all still living at home. Few had jobs. None were planning to attend college right away, and that left ample time for drink and drugs and women and mischief, and as much free time as they could possibly hope for. Remember what it's like to be bored? I don't.

Your average post-graduation interaction went something like this:

"Hey, Ben, wanna go to this concert?"

"Can't, I spent all my money on diapers and a car seat."

"Hey, Ben, you going to Florida with us for spring break?"

"Can't. If I miss any work I won't make my bills."

"Hey, Ben, we're going to the Foosball tournament in Vegas, you in, brother?"

"I'd love to. But, this weekend I'm planning on stuffing myself into a

wood chipper.”

Year after year, I watched my pals splurge their youth and vitality on adventure after adventure. Hell, some of them didn't have their first kid until just a few years ago. What this all means, for those of you who are as bad at math as I am, is that, while my kids are both college-age, my friends are dealing with everything from diapers and the Terrible Twos (and threes and fours and fives and sixes) to the early teen years . . . and at twice the age and half the energy at which the wife and I endured child-rearing.

Nowadays, the conversations (at least until my daughter moved back home with us) went a little something like this:

“Hey, Ben, you coming to my daughter's second birthday?”

“Sorry, the wife and I are converting the family room into a wet bar.”

“Hey, Ben, my son's Little League game is this Saturday.”

“I'd love to, but I'm going to stay home naked all weekend drinking whiskey.”

I am chagrined to report the instances of wine-related shenanigans and spirited house-wide nudity dried up approximately ten minutes before our empty nest returned to three's a crowd. It was a fun year but college isn't for everyone. And, how hard could I come down on my kid? After all, I made it exactly one-half of a semester before giving up. Of course, I'd been out of my parents' house for damn near a decade when I decided to fail miserably at going back to school. So the only wrath I had to face was that of the wife. Oh, the wrath!

Of course, when your kids are in college, you haven't really gotten rid of them. They still spend nearly half the year creating dirty laundry for you to wash and dishes for you to wash and dirty floors for you to wash and medical bills for you to pay and grocery bills for you to pay. (I guess I'm trying to say there's a lot of washing and paying still happening. Don't go. It gets better, I promise.)

Something they don't explain to you in bad parenting 101 is the strange dichotomy you eventually face when your child-children

become adult-children. Legally, they are free to do as they please. Yet, they still need to be parented to a certain degree. They demand to be respected as adults but sometimes expect the same amount of praise, attention, and material support they enjoyed back when they were still the unemployed midgets under your legal guardianship.

As the wife told me the entire time the kids were growing up: you have to parent your kids as individuals. What works for one may not be right for the other. She was right, the wife, but now I'm using that same logic in parenting our adult children and it's not flying so well.

The wife decided we should have been done parenting once the kids reached college-age. And, to be fair, that's when she and I were out on our own with no help. Though, we did end up moving back in with parents a couple times until we finally got things figured out. So, I guess we're stuck until the kids hit their early 20s.

Regardless, the wife was really looking forward to the empty nest. I didn't know it until it happened, but I was, too. We had our kids way too early in life and that caused us to both miss out on a whole lot of living. Nonetheless, good parents never stop parenting their kids. Apparently, neither do mediocre ones. That being said, I am under no delusion that I have all the answers now any more than I did when my kids were two and three.

So, out of boredom as much as curiosity, I recently stumbled across a *Focus on the Family* article about parenting adult children. The author—a divorcee who apparently knows a lot more about how to maintain a healthy family than the rest of us—wrote that she was distraught over her relationship with her son, who was apparently making poor life choices.

She said she began sobbing during a prayer meeting and asked what she could do. She was assured by an older lady that she needed only pray for her relationship to improve and God would snap his celestial fingers and make it all better.

Further, the article says I'm supposed to recognize and respect the differences between us—the kids and the wife and I. I think that will go a little something like this:

You: “Son, I recognize your desire to smoke weed and drink beer instead of studying, and I respect the fact that you are OK with a C-minus in Algebra.”

Your kid: “Dad, I recognize that you worked really hard to have very little money in the bank, and I respect your decision to keep handing it over to me.”

Next, I’m supposed to share my wisdom and insight without being critical. For example—a completely made up and not at all real example—you should address your adult child’s decision to use an entire roll of toilet paper to clean up a puddle of dog puke instead of getting the mop and bucket by saying something like, “Dear child, it is my experience that warm soapy water will do a better job of un-funking that barf stain than all the bathroom tissue in the world.”

In reality, what I want to say is, “What in thee actual frick are you doing with my toilet paper? Are you telling me that you’re so goddamn lazy you’d rather waste a whole roll of butt-wipe than go fill up the mop bucket and clean this the right way? No matter how dry you get that spot with TP, the living room is still going to smell like doggie upchuck, dumb-ass!”

But I don’t say that, because I love my children. And I don’t want the wife to slap me.

Lastly, I’m supposed to relinquish my kids to God. Let’s be realistic: He didn’t stop the Jews from being gassed; He didn’t prevent Princess Diana from dying in a car wreck; and, He allowed Jimmy Fallon to take over *The Tonight Show*. If He can’t deal with real atrocity then He sure as hell isn’t going to remind my kids to stop leaving leftovers out on the stove at night.

However, I am running out of excuses and ideas. So, maybe I’ll work some prayers into my regularly scheduled bouts of sobbing.

THE KID-DOG CONTINUUM

Another thing they don’t tell you about your kids turning into adults is that you start itching for something new to parent. I imagine it’s like what the vets say about war. When you are fighting, you just want to be

home. When you come back, all you can think about is going back to the battlefield.

There was a short time when our kids were both close to going away to college, but hadn't quite left yet, that the wife and I started to get a little sentimental about the whole empty nest proposition.

Your kids being close to leaving is one of several human danger zones nobody ever warns you about. But, luckily, we managed to avoid making yet another life-altering mistake. (Am I calling my children mistakes? No. I would never say that in public ... or in a book.) We hadn't even gotten rid of the two we had and we were talking about adoption and "what if" we had another baby.

Yeah? "What if" I go insane and shoot up the town?

You know how you see a really old couple who has grown children with children of their own, but the old couple also has a teenager living with them? Well, what happened was that old couple used to be a middle-aged couple whose kids were getting close to leaving the house, or had recently left the house, and the middle-aged couple had become so institutionalized from 18 or 20 years of child rearing that they didn't think they could go on living without being under the constant whip crack of an unemployed midget.

You've seen Paul Newman's movie *Cool Hand Luke*. But, instead of the inmate answering to the man with no eyes, it's the parent prostrating before the child.

"Taking it to soccer practice boss?"

"Take it to soccer practice!"

"Buying another pair of overpriced tennis shoes, boss?"

"Buy the shoes, Luke!"

"Shoulda stopped at two kids, here, boss?"

"Shoulda pulled out, there, dummy!"

I have several friends my age with siblings who are grandparents themselves. It's just damned creepy. I guess I shouldn't talk too much. After all, I'm 39-and-a-half and my youngest brother is like 22. But, to be fair, it's not that my parents had me and then 17 years later decided they needed a baby. They just never stopped having kids. Hey, seven

kids over 17 years; you do the math.

There is a way to survive this danger area that lies somewhere in between losing your kids and parenting your parents—what they call the “sandwich” generation. (It sounds much more delicious than it really is.)

Becoming grandparent-parents nearly happened to us. And that is how we ended up owning dogs.

We never really owned any dogs before, other than the couple weeks we held onto a psychotic beagle one of my sisters-in-law unloaded on us. Then, just a couple years before the kids graduated from high school, we got two. In fact, we picked up our two lab-pit bull mixes just a couple months before we bought our first—and what I hope shall be our last—house.

It was about that time in the winter of 2009, kids in high school and not really kids any more, and us in the middle of the 18-month panic attack that is finding and buying a home, that the wife began a series of cryptic discussions that inevitably revolved around babies, or pregnancy, or adoption. Looking back, I don’t think she was trying to be sly. I think something inside her (perhaps down in her ovaries) yearned for another child.

She was just as confused as I, me, I, whatever.

The wife had been teaching for a few years by then, and I was just getting settled as the editor of the community newspaper I had been working for for several years as a reporter. If horny men think with their penis, then middle-aged women think with their uterus.

The conversations went thusly:

The wife – “You know the so-and-sos are pregnant?” She pined like Ralphie after *Red Ryder*.

Gohs – “They’re both pregnant?”

The wife – “You know what I mean.”

Gohs – “Aren’t they like 42 or 44?”

The wife – “The so-and-sos were that age when they had their first.”

Gohs – “Isn’t that the kid who wore nothing but underwear and a cape into his 20s?”

The wife – “Benjamin Jon!”

Gohs – “Besides, don’t older people have a statistically greater chance of producing defective babies—I mean blessings?”

The wife (gasping now) – “Ben ... ja ... min!”

Gohs – “What I meant to say was ‘let’s get a puppy?’”

Sensing with increasing panic, I imagine not too unlike that in the mind of a gazelle hanging from a lion’s jaws (the only time anyone could ever compare me to a gazelle) I quickly turned my terror into action, and suggested we rescue a dog from the local pound.

It was settled, the wife and I decided to get each other a dog for Christmas that November. And, on nearly the worst wintry day of the season, she and the kids drove 40 miles in white-out conditions to the animal shelter.

Once home, it only took 20 minutes for me to remember why we went most of our 20 years without keeping pets. The wife named the brown one “Tolstoy.” I named the black one “Samuel Shatner Hogan,” after a childhood dog named “Sam” and also after William Shatner and Hulk Hogan. Had we known at the time my new dog was mentally deficient, I would have given him a different name altogether.

The wife’s dog spent his time snuggling, snoring and lounging about. My dog spent his nights screaming and his days chewing every electrical cord within reach. He also excelled at evading my grasp, pooping everywhere but outside, and also screaming during the daytime. Years later, the family told me with great sobbing gales of laughter that, when they found Sam at the pound, he had been running frantically around the facility and screaming from the time they walked in until they walked out the door with him.

Apparently, us middle-aged people can also end up with developmentally disabled dogs. I mean “blessings.”

Now fully grown, Sam went from the screaming runt of the litter to a whining behemoth. The dog is now the size of a horse ... a small, cross-eyed horse. He stopped chewing but conveniently poops on any indoor

surface should one turn their back for more than 30 seconds. Of course, the corner of my easy chair makes a fine ceremonial peeing post and it's the only chair in the house he'll pee on. There is something wrong in a universe when the creature you saved from certain death thanks you thusly.

By the time we realized we were both too busy to raise puppies, the wife got the message and came to her own understanding that neither of us, regardless of how bad we might want one, were in the position to start a new human life from scratch. Hell, I barely have enough patience to keep from sending the dogs back to the pound. Can you imagine how long I'd last if I had a cross-eyed, screaming toddler pissing on the furniture?

CURSE OF THE SANDWICHES

Something that never entered my mind as a young dumb-ass was what you're supposed to do with your parents when they get too old to take care of themselves. The wife and I have only recently begun asking each other what we're going to do if, and when, either of our set of parents begin pooping in the hamper and sticking the cat in the microwave.

One of the biggest issues with this is that some of our parents are so nutty to begin with. How will we know when they start to slip? And let's say they do come to live with us—where are we going to put them?

I guess I could stick them in the basement like that John Carpenter movie *The People Under The Stairs*. How creepy is that going to be when the voices start wafting up from under the floorboards?

“Please feed us, Benjamin, we're so hungry.”

“The wife said not to.”

“I'm sorry I called you an ‘uneducated bum.’”

“No, you're not.”

“We haven't seen sunlight for months.”

“Sorry. You should have thought about that when you bought me women's swim trunks for ninth-grade pool class.”

I guess we could use it as an excuse to get revenge on our parents. But

I'm not that kind of person. (I mean I'm not the kind of person who is stupid enough to admit to a crime in writing before I commit it.)

On the upside, I'd get to be the one to say, "Don't make me come down there." Of course, I am never going down there. They'll be OK if I toss some canned tuna and peanut butter down the steps, right?

There is this old cinder block one-car garage out behind the house that kind of looks like a 1950s bomb shelter. I could always stuff them in there and hope for the best. Of course, the neighbors might get suspicious when they see me trotting back and forth with cans of ensure and bags of cat food. Not to mention the stench—there's no bathroom in there. Nothing but minimally adequate for our elders.

And what happens if both sets of parents have to move in at the same time? They don't really care for one another, by which I mean the Bloods and the Cryps don't really care for one another. My living room will look like the Gaza Strip. Oh, they'll promise Jimmy Carter peace at the breakfast table but by the time Dr. Phil is on, they'll be hurling insults and rocks, and by then, probably poo, too. I guess I can keep some canisters of tear gas on hand. Does Amazon carry tear gas?

We could stick them all in a nursing home but frankly it would be too cruel of treatment for my in-laws and way too nice for my parents. Besides, my wife put herself through school—all twenty-eight-and-a-half years of it—by working as a nurse aide. It's how she ruined her back and managed to be in constant pain for the rest of her life. I've heard enough horror stories over the years to know that I'd rather be sold to a Slovakian circus or end up a carnival sideshow attraction than be sent to a nursing home.

"Step right up! Shiver in terror at the ungodly ear hair! Gasp at the amazing man-boobs! Dare to bear witness of Middle-Aged Dad!"

Anyways, those nursing homes are nuts! And I don't mean "nuts" in a "Mr. and Mrs. Gohs, the side-effects of the mercury Benjamin drank are worse than we had originally feared. He will never play the cello." I mean those nursing homes are just a balls-to-the-wall free-for-all of pant-pooing, boner-popping, old-person-sex-having prison where they are dropping like flies—insane, wrinkled, pee-soaked flies. One

day you're getting punched, dry-humped and cried to—all by the same resident, by the way—and the next day you're putting someone else's stuff in their room. (Not so feisty now, are ya, granz?)

People don't realize it when they tour these places but it's death's waiting room. (Cue voice-over in creepy Boris Karloff tone.) "Welcome to Expedient Meadows Retirement Community, we just had a room open up! Does grandpa bruise easily when punched?" Of course they have a vacancy. There is only one reason those rooms are empty ... and it ain't cuz grandma got better and went home.

Oh, sure, they try to dress the place up with a meeting room where they serve ice-cream on Tuesdays and hold a happy hour on Fridays. Because if it's one thing grandpa needs on top of all his medical conditions and medications is sugar and alcohol.

"I'm sorry, we're at full capacity. But if you could call back on Saturday I think we might have an opening." (Even sooner if the lady in room 12 doesn't lose the attitude.)

And don't think you're getting off cheap. Even the really crappy ones are charging like \$1,000 a day—a day! You could set grandpa up with hookers, blow and an all-u-can-eat buffet in Vegas for that kind of cabbage. (Note: remember to schedule trip to Vegas when book is finished. Also, stop calling money "cabbage.")

I guess we could make things interesting and force our parents to "Thunderdome" it but I don't think any of them have the vigor necessary to swing swords or chainsaws. There's no getting around it. If we end up with all four of them at the same time, my house is going to look even more like a Wes Anderson movie than it already does.

Mom'll be in the corner painting portraits of naked U.S. Presidents. My father-in-law will spend his time lecturing everyone on the weather patterns he tracked throughout the 1980s. And dad will continually interrupt my mother-in-law's obsessive pulp fiction reading to horrify her with his vast repertoire of "dick" jokes, but only until he drinks himself to sleep each noon.

Now I get why my biological father disappeared when I was seven.

INFERIOR GOODS

The Shape I'm In

Whoever lamented that, if he'd known how long he was going to live, he would have taken better care of himself wasn't just whistling dirges. I've packed on way too many pounds and both my far and near vision are starting to go. I have a chronically broken foot. They call it a "stress fracture" but it's really a fat fracture from being too heavy and standing too long on one foot. The doctor says it is never going to heal properly. From my grandfather, I inherited sleep apnea, and I also have extreme hypoglycemia.

And then there are all the imaginary ailments I'm convinced I have at any given time. For starters, I am in differing stages of at least three different kinds of cancer: throat, lung and testicular. I'm pretty sure I also have early onset Lou Gehrig's Disease, hammer toe, stinky pinky, mononucleosis, monkey pox, chicken wing, shaky leg, nervous ear, hopping shoulder and quivering sphincter. (I also just found out that excess gas can be a symptom of colon cancer. I'm so screwed—quite literally *in the ass*.) All these physical maladies don't even begin to deal with the anxiety, panic disorder and hypochondria which have made me so popular with the ladies.

"Hey, baby, wanna open a bottle of wine and watch me sob on the bathroom floor?"

Speaking of charming, I remember discovering my first hemorrhoid a couple years ago. I'd nearly pulled the damned thing off before I realized it was attached. One day my plumbing was fine

and the next day I had things falling out of me like a Buick dragging a broken muffler down I-75.

I now understand why the old man used to come limping out of the bathroom after his weekly 45-minute jam session. That shit's no joke. (Pun may or may not have been intended. I'll get back to you on that one.)

NEO-CLASSICAL GAS

Some of the parts of my body that do work work too well. I don't know how else to put this ... I fart a lot. I fart long and loud and often. And, before you dismiss my claim as some crass braggadocio, please understand that I am anything but proud of this odious condition.

I don't exactly recall when the gas production in my lower guts increased so dramatically but it seems to have begun sometime in my mid-teen years. One might be tempted to blame the abnormal output from my middle third on my weight but the displacement has remained fairly constant through numerous waistline expansions and contractions.

The problem has seemed to worsen over the last few years but, as I am a laymen when it comes to the field of flatulence, I cannot objectively measure my exhaust. Nonetheless, it is apparent by the looks, comments and exits of friends, relatives and strangers alike that my sphincter is a bit of a blabbermouth among whispering willows.

"Ripping ass" as my brothers like to say, is the first thing I do in the morning. It's how the wife knows I'm really awake and not simply turning over for another 20 minutes of shuteye. And I don't mean she's lying next to me. She can hear me clearly from two rooms away. Along with my condition comes a certain compulsion to expel said gas at first realization of its existence. I simply cannot stand the feeling of bloat inside, so I must push at even the slightest hint of pressure in the basement. This has, unfortunately, caused more than a handful of pant-pooing episodes. (I know, too much, right?)

To be fair, we all have that grand fartier in our life. And, I'm sure some of you are thinking right now of someone who just has to be way worse than me. (What you're more likely thinking is, "Why did I pay \$14.95 to read about this guy's bowels?") Take that person and multiply him ... or, more likely, her ... by 10, nay, a hundred. I flatulate before meals, during meals, after meals; I fart when I wake up, when I'm sleeping and when you're sleeping; I'm gaseous when I'm happy or sad, in a box and by a fox; in a car, near or far, in a house, above a mouse. (I have no idea what the Dr. Seuss thing is about but I figured I'd just go with it.)

And, though I would trade this curse for just about any other moderately annoying, non-life-threatening ailment, there is something to stick my thumbs under my suspenders about, having such a unique and diverse repertoire.

I've made just about every sound imaginable, from your run-of-the-mill "pwoot" and "quack" to the two-toned "pee-yune" and "skeer-wummit!" I've "feeped" and "ferted," "hissed" and "growled" but, due to my aggressive expulsions, I most commonly scare the dogs, rattle the windows and disgust the wife with the same "braaap!" you might hear when a *Harley Davidson* motorcycle driver revs the throttle as he passes by. (I'm disgusted with me, too.)

Because of my condition, I have passed loud gas in just about every place one should not pass loud gas: grocery store, courtrooms, doctor's offices, staff meetings, wedding dances, the delivery room, just now while writing this—I could go on.

The one thing that has sustained me over this long and storied embarrassment I call a life is that everyone, from the pope to your scoutmaster, has laughed at a fart of their own or someone else's.

The funny thing is, as much as I fart and as much of a part of my life as it is, I have never mentioned the issue to a doctor. And I think that's because, frankly, until recently, I never really paid attention to just how much and how often I do it.

The volume, the frequency, the duration—it's a helluva lot. Like so much that I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I'm not possessed by

a low-level demonic spirit with a sulfur fetish. Or maybe, just maybe, I'm an X-men. Maybe there was a terrible refried bean accident when I was a baby and now I have a mutated colon. Maybe all these years my butt has been trying to tell me something. Though, for the life of me, I cannot figure out how it would help me fight crime. It would be different if I could blow down a wall or summon a mighty mythological creature but mostly I just make rooms full of stinky air and chuckles.

The other unique aspect of this peculiar situation is how often my emissions don't really smell like anything. Sure, there are times when I can clear a banquet hall but a lot of the time my farts produce no real odor. I'm not trying to say my stuff don't stink but glean from that what you will.

WARDROBE!

The shape I'm in has significantly affected how I dress. If you're anything like me, and I pray to Larry David that you're not, you notice certain changes in how you dress as you get older. I've noticed a lot of my clothes nowadays are described with words like "comfort fit" which is code for "here ya go, fatso."

I recently made the frightening realization that I own more elastic clothing than I had ever planned to. OK, to be fair, I never actually planned to own any elastic clothing. What kind of a weirdo plans that sort of thing?

"Man, when I turn 39, I am gonna have soooo many pairs of stretch pants."

Anyone who knows me knows I never gave much thought to fashion in general. I've been wearing bluejeans and black T-shirts since I was old enough to demand black T-shirts to go with my bluejeans.

For the last 15-or-so years, I've been forced to don khakis and polyester dress shirts between the hours of nine and five but I've always remained pretty hobo-ish in my appearance when off the clock. Back when I was at my fighting weight I got away with regular

jeans and an extra-wide belt. As time and my waist went by, I began purchasing what the manufacturers refer to as “comfort waist” pants. I remember getting these kind of pants from my grandfather when I was in my early teens. (That right there should tell you I’ve never been what you’d call “trim.” (Except for that year we lived in a cabin in the woods and ate nothing but cornmeal and lettuce sandwiches. A teenage boy wearing his husky grandfather’s hand-me-down pants—I never had a chance when it came to fashion.)

What I’ve noticed is that, the larger your pants get, the more elastic they try to jam in there. You svelte types may not know this but it’s a full-time job trying to keep up your pants when you aren’t the proper shape, which is more or less uniform from thigh to waist.

What began as a couple inches of elastic on one side of the pants soon took up three belt loops of space. The next thing you know, the entire back of your pants are scrunched up. If I don’t make some changes in my life soon, I’m going to be wearing those sweatpants that are supposed to look like bluejeans—but don’t. They’re about one step from the moo-moo Gilbert Grape’s mother wears. The only real option after that is a tarp.

Oh, you can try belts but they either have to be so tight they cut off circulation to your legs or they’re too loose to be of any help. The only other method that has any real success is suspenders but they are pretty much a last resort. Like a “My wife left me, my kids won’t talk to me, the all-u-can-eat buffet place down the street said I can’t come back if I don’t keep my pants pulled up so screw it” last resort. A slim guy with suspenders is bad enough but a fat guy wearing those things?

“Did you hear about Jim?”

“Oh, no, is it cancer?”

“Worse—suspenders.”

“I was really hoping it was cancer.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I’ll pray for his family.”

“No need. Wife left him. Kids won’t talk to him. Golden Corral

banned him.”

I used to cringe at my mother (behind her back, of course) for wearing shiny yoga pants all the time when she was heavy, but now I can see that, after a few kids, a couple decades of marriage, and enough weight gain, life just doesn't matter enough to wear uncomfortable pants.

LOSING MY HAIR

As if bodily deterioration and certain doom on the horizon weren't bad enough, I'm also fighting the losing battle against hair loss. OK, I used to fight against it. Now I just lie there with my eyes closed and pretend I'm at my grandma's house. Even worse, I have to fight against the wife, who gets in the way of shaving my head, what I thought was a pretty simple fix for yet another failing body part. I don't know why but the older I get the more difficult it becomes to care about my hair.

There was a time (my 20s and early to mid-30s) when I freaked out over my thinning locks. But, if it were up to me now, I would let it grow until it annoyed me sufficiently and then I would shave my head completely bald and just repeat the process until dead or naturally completely bald or I'm rich enough to pay a little person to do it for me. Seems simple enough, right? However, there is an evil force at work that has determined to prevent me from wearing the hairstyle of my choice. Actually, it's two evil forces: male pattern baldness and the wife. (Love you, dear!)

Somewhere along the line, probably right after I decided spending my life alone was not an attractive prospect, the wife decided that my hair was her hair, and she's been making major decisions with it ever since. To make matters worse, she is very particular about how what's left of my hair looks. According to her, the only proper style for a man of my age and rotundness is the short, combed-over-to-the-side seven-year-old boy look. She hates it when it gets shaggy. She hates it when it's too short. She hates me when I'm bald. Near, far, in a car, you get the idea. So, my only real option requires constant

maintenance. Further exacerbating the issue is the aforementioned lack of shits I have to give.

Making matters still worse is my prominent widow's peak is accentuated with a small but noticeable thinning spot. It is one of the few parts of my body over which I am sensitive. Good thing, huh?

The wife, not understanding of the special relationship between a boy and his quaff, is flippant regarding her comments about my hair. I generally do not respond in a productive manner and things tend to spiral quickly out of control. (Has anything ever spiraled into control?) A few months ago, we drew up and signed a hair treaty that basically states I may not cut my hair unless I first get it cut by a professional barber or stylist or the wife and even then I have to wait two weeks after that. Then, if I still am unhappy with my hair, I am allowed to cut it.

About a month after signing the *Gohs Hair Accord*, I went rogue one day and shaved my head bald. This transgression made things fairly tense around the occupied zone and, once the wife threatened to impose sanctions, I pledged to follow the treaty. (See, I keep saying I need to get some tear gas.)

My hair is at a decent looking and manageable length right now but it won't be too long before it starts getting shaggy and long enough to where I have to use a comb. I'm seriously thinking of protesting the accord. The wife is pretty strong-willed but I think I've devised a plan that involves finding an old drama troupe that's going out of business and raiding their costuming.

If I just had a trunk full of old stage wigs, I could wear a different one each day and refuse to take it off, even at bedtime. Who knows? The right mullet or Afro might be just what I need to end this tyranny that has so long shackled my follicles, and my soul.

Then again, the wife coming home after a long day at work and finding me in someone else's hair might have the opposite effect. She might mistake me for some handsome burglar in a Mohawk, or a delivery man who likes to break into people's houses and wait for

them. With my luck, she wouldn't recognize me and then I'd learn just where I stand in the grand scheme of things.

The wife: "Where's my husband?"

Mohawked delivery guy (me playing along): "I threw his sorry ass out. I told him, 'Come back when you've got a sweet Mohawk like mine.'"

The wife: (swooning): "Finally, a real man."

Mohawked delivery guy (me): "So, I've got this package that needs delivering."

The wife: "Gosh I hope he stays away. I've been trying to think of a way to tell him it's over but it's just so hard because he's such a fat wuss."

Mohawked delivery guy (me): "Heeeeeeeeeee (that's the sound I make when I cry, just a high-pitched squeal.)" Sobbing uncontrollably while fighting to remove Mohawk. "It was—heeeeeeeeeee—the—heeeeeeeeeee—whole time!"

The wife (looking very serious and pitiless now): "I know."

So, on second thought, I should probably just let her do what she wants with my hair and save myself the horror of knowing how she really feels about me. Of course, I still might find me a sweet Mohawk wig.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Letter To An Unborn Nephew

A good way to know you're reaching midlife is when your baby sister gets married and starts a family. My little sister got married last year and wouldn't you know it she's pregnant. I'm not pointing any fingers but her new husband looks like the type to woo a girl, marry her and then—bam!—a year later, knocked up.

Anyways, in order to honor the miracle of conception of like the ten billionth human baby ever about to be born, I have decided to address a letter to my unborn nephew, sharing with him my 39-and-a-half years of life experience ... the good, the bad and the black-out drunk.

With the way I'm living, I probably won't be around for his first beer, let alone his fifth birthday. And there is no way in hell I'll see my own grand-kids. So, here is my advice from beyond the grave. (Did I mention I tend to be a little dramatic?)

Dear Frederick,

I know your name isn't Frederick but you haven't been born yet and I just don't feel comfortable referring to you as "Baby" all the way through this letter. "Baby" is what you call a single mother who insists she goes to night school when you're not stuffing dollar bills into her waistband, or maybe a slow dog or a dolphin with a lazy eye who doesn't swim so good but inexplicably is the favored attraction at the county fair. If a grown man ever calls you "Baby,"

run for you life; unless you're gay, in which case it's pretty much up to you. My advice: find a nice podiatrist or a bankruptcy lawyer to settle down with.

Your parents are shopping the name "Gabriel" around. But, until you slip your surly uterine bonds and emerge, bewildered, into this great shared curiosity, "Frederick" you shall remain. Anyways (that's what people around here say when they want to change the subject. It usually goes something like this "And they had to cut the squid's stomach open to get my pinky toe back ... but anyways, can you give me a ride to the airport?")

By "around here" I mean Northern Michigan. It's a lot like where you live: same amount of white trash, but we have fewer fast food restaurants and you can actually swim in our lakes. I grew up where you live and until I was like 15 I thought all lakes were slimy and smelled like a cabbage with gastritis. (Oh, congratulations, our family gets gastritis.)

It's OK to laugh at that last part. Some people say I'm crass but they can gnaw road apples if they don't appreciate my authentic frontier sense of hee-hees and ha-has. Some people just aren't down with the whole white trash stand-up philosopher scene.

By now you may be wondering why I'm so hung up on that title of "white trash" and you're probably wondering who the heck I am to be doling advice. Well, Frederick, I am your oldest uncle. (Actually, what you're probably thinking right now is "How'd I end up inside the giant worm thing that the Millennium Falcon flew into on Empire Strikes Back?") All I can say is, if you think your studio apartment is cramped and off-putting, just wait until you get to the escape hatch.)

Anyways, where was I? Oh yeah. While I'm sure your father's side is replete with upstanding all-American types, your mother's side of the family are what we call Appalachian-Americans. While some folks are good at math and hygiene, we tend to excel at the lesser-known industrial arts like smoking, alcoholism and divorce. As much as it pains me to say it, you are 50% lowland hillbilly by

blood.

Nonetheless, kin is kin, and it is my job as your eldest uncle to bestow my wisdom so that you might avoid engaging in life's plethora precarious entanglements and ward potential encroachments.

Some people will probably tell you not to listen to me, and those people are called the rest of our family. They might use words like "exaggeration" and "joker" or "paranoid delusions" and "restraining order." Either way, I've taken time out of my busy day of flying space rockets and hitting home runs (oh, like you know what I do for a living?) to share some of the lessons I've learned.

UNCLE BEN'S LIFE LESSONS

1. Always share your food with the dog.
2. When a homeless person says "give me a dollar or else" assume sincerity.
3. Be nice to your mom and dad.
4. Star Wars episodes I, II and III were made by the devil in an attempt to ruin George Lucas.
5. Never just assume it's gas, especially in public.
6. Always have a back-up plan.
7. Do what you want when you grow up. Life is too short to live someone else's dream.
8. You can skimp on lots of things but always buy name brand ketchup, TP and batteries. You won't be sorry.
9. If my sister and her husband make more babies (gross) be friends with the new kids. People who don't like their siblings ain't right.
10. Always remember: family is the most important thing in this life; it just is.
11. Never take the extended warranty.
12. When a telemarketer calls, try to remember that they are just some poor schlep who needs to put food on his family's table, and that they are desperate for a sale ... which means they'll take a

lot of abuse before hanging up.

13. If someone walks in on you during “alone time,” just say you were itching your leg, then call them a pervert and tell everyone that you actually caught them.

14. Use snow tires in the winter. They make all the difference.

15. A little gratitude goes a long way.

16. Most people just act tough but some bullies are actually really strong and brave, so be careful.

17. Leave the gun. Take the cannoli.

18. You can like both Elvis and The Beatles, Star Trek and Star Wars, rock and country. Only jerks say you can't.

19. Don't use those stupid electronic cigarettes. If you're going to smoke, smoke. You're not a gay French robot. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.)

20. Don't walk backwards with a lawnmower. It's a good way to lose a foot.

21. “Guess what? Chicken butt!” will always be funny.

22. Yes, there is a Santa Claus.

23. Vinyl just sounds better.

24. Gary Busey wasn't always crazy. (I have since been informed that he has indeed always been nuts. Although, probably sane enough to sue me for defamation of character. Love you, Gary!)

25. You can go to jail for riding a lawnmower while drunk.

26. Oregano for Italian, cumin for Mexican.

27. If you think someone's lying, they probably are. If you think someone's telling the truth, they're probably lying.

28. Heinz 57 is just A1 and ketchup.

29. It's OK to wish Scooby-Doo were real, it's just not OK to talk about it.

30. Chicken butt! (see?)

31. The moon landing was real but George W. Bush was actually a CPR dummy voiced by Frank Oz.

32. Chimps are evil. Stay away.

33. The word “epic” used to mean something.

34. If your parents decide to take a nap in the middle of the day, turn the TV way up. (They aren't napping.)

35. Sometimes you have to go too far to know when you've gone far enough.

36. The original "Cape Fear" movie is superior in every way. (Yes, I know DeNiro is in the remake. I said "in every way!")

37. You can feed your kids something other than fast food and desert; if they get hungry enough, they'll eat vegetables and grains.

38. Implants look nice from a distance but they're no moon landing.

COUNTING HIPPOS & PLOTTING MURDER

A Middle-Aged Insomniac

The older I get the less I seem to sleep. I know they say older people need less sleep as they age but I'm only 39-and-a-half and my sleeplessness has more to do with a poor diet and nocturnal brain frights than anything else.

So, what do I do with all that free time in the dark? I think of weird things, and sometimes I write those things down at three o'clock in the morning and then share them with my friends and family the next day. The following is the result of one such recent bout of insomnia entitled "It's most definitely (probably) not the butler."

IT'S MOST DEFINITELY (PROBABLY) NOT THE BUTLER

I think if a door-to-door insurance salesman comes into your house to try to sell you a term life policy, and he's wearing thick leather gloves the entire time, it's OK to ask him if he'd like a glass of lemonade.

And then, while his back is turned, you should conk him over the head with the biggest flower vase within arm's reach because chances are he was going to try to strangle you anyway. But maybe you shouldn't, because he just might be embarrassed about a wart on one of his fingers and, what's he going to do, wear only one glove? And why does he have to explain himself? What're you, the glove

police?

If I was going to murder someone again I think I would use poison, because at least you could share a nice meal with the victim before he died ... and something tells me it will be much less messy than stuffing the mailbox with rabid weasels again.

When you both are done eating, your victim will likely start sweating and complaining about stomach cramps and double-vision instead of complimenting you on the linen napkins and the radish roses. Typical victim mentality.

You'll probably get really angry and think, "Man, I wish this guy was dead." And then, while you're pouring coffee and slicing pie, you'd be like, "Oh yeah, the poison!" (Note: keep a short list of names of people you could frame for murder.)

The old cliché in murder mysteries is that the butler did it. By "it" they usually mean "murder." Of course, if you're watching a show about butlers who are really great at, say, ice-sculpting or making authentic Texas chili, then "it" could be referring to an entirely different subject. When I was a kid, "it" always referred to sex but there's nothing sexy about murder, unless it was a story about a lady murderer who dressed up in tight leather pants and a see-through negligee and did a lot of belly dancing before she killed her victims, who would also be sexy women, by hugging and kissing them to death.

Anyways, the butlers are always taking the heat for the death of some Bulgarian countess who mysteriously threw herself off the roof after fatally shooting herself in the back six times. It usually goes a little something like this: "Whoever could have beaten Lady Farington to death with this frozen turkey leg?" Then some detective always goes guest by guest, naming off all the reasons they had to kill Lady Farington before he finally gets to the real culprit.

"Admiral Scheizenstein's motive was that he once had an affair with Lady Farington and Lady Farington told all her friends he was hung like a gopher." Then Admiral Scheizenstein would shout "Nonsense!" while lighting his ridiculously huge pipe. I mean, so

big that it's obvious he's trying to make a statement but not so big that you'd automatically think he has a small penis. But then his eyes would dart back and forth all suspicious-like, and everyone would start wondering just how big a gopher is down there.

Then, after spending like an hour convincing you that these twenty people each had a great reason to kill Lady Farington, the detective would point at the butler, who is probably busy emptying the ash tray that Admiral Scheizenstein keeps filling up every ten minutes or so.

There's never really a good explanation as to why the butler did it. Perhaps it was out of boredom, or maybe he saw some other butlers doing it and he just really wanted to fit in with the cool servants. But, if you think about it, the butler really is the last person who would commit a murder. For one, he's so busy cooking and cleaning and answering the door for all these rich and important dinner guests (who apparently don't have anything in the fridge at home) and lighting giant pipes and refilling brandy glasses and measuring gopher weenies for the curious, that he simply doesn't have the time to pencil in a homicide.

And then there is the job security. If he kills his own employer, he's out of a job. If he kills one of his master's dinner guests, he's going to be fired—at the very least. And, how long do you think it'll be before word gets out that Jeeves has a psychotic streak? You might not know it from staring at the sun for hours on end, but rich people talk to one another. Granted, when they talk it's generally through clenched teeth and using words like “indubitably” and “pish-tosh” and “Don't look now but here comes gopher dick!”

Most importantly, even if your manservant does develop a sudden blood-lust, he's so busy shining your shoes and fluffing your hemorrhoid pillows that he's not going to make more work for himself. If he does decide to drop a thousand-pound crystal chandelier on Colonel Fatso, guess who's going to be the one sweeping up the shards and dragging 300 pounds of khaki and sideburns (Colonel Fatso just returned from an African safari)

down to the incinerator? That's right, the butler!

These murder mysteries are often the subject of some crazed brainiac seeking to commit the perfect murder. I sometimes think about committing the perfect murder, usually during the weekly business meeting, but also sometimes when I'm stabbing a homeless person in a dark alley, or when the delivery guy forgets the French dressing for my garden salad—again!

And, though it would cost around \$8.5 billion and take nearly a year of planning, I think I've come up with the ultimate plan for getting away with murder.

21 STEPS TO THE PERFECT MURDER

Step 1: Find a really trusting rich guy and ask to borrow \$8.5 billion.

Step 2: Swim in money like rich cartoon duck. (How often is this opportunity going to present itself?)

Step 3: Hire mad scientist to either clone you or build super lifelike robot. (See if Stallone's plastic surgeon is available.)

Step 4: Purchase ticket on Russian space shuttle for robot/clone. Has to be done like a year in advance. (Establishes alibi. Cop: "Where were you at the time of the murder?" You: "I was in space with the Russians." Cop: "OK. Seems legit.")

Step 5: Treat yourself and robot/clone to a day at the spa. (You've been working hard and could use some relaxation. Go on, you've earned it!)

Step 6: Choose victim who deserves to die. (Possible list could include high school bullies, traveling salesmen, pizza delivery guy who keeps "forgetting" your French dressing.)

Step 7: Learn victim's daily routine. (Be sure to wear dark sunglasses, top hat and trench coat so as not to arouse suspicion.)

Step 8: Send away for mail-order hippopotamus and trainer. (Don't skimp on the quality of hippo or trainer. Cannot stress this point enough.)

Step 9: Train hippo to attack on command. (While the trainer is

at it, might as well teach the hippo to get you beers from the fridge and roll over and play dead when you hold your hand like a gun and say “bang!”)

Step 10: Sick trained hippo on trainer. (Can’t have any witnesses. Probably should avoid becoming friends with trainer or things could get awkward. Probably should have mentioned this earlier.)

Step 11: Take hippo out for day at spa. (Might as well get hippo’s nails painted and Instagram it. “Spa hippo” has got to get a gazillion shares.)

Step 12: Stop screwing around. (Better get the robot/clone to start shoveling hippo dumplings or it’s going to be to the ceiling in no time.)

Step 13: Create fliers that say “Free Hippo Rides.” (Paper victim’s neighborhood with fliers.)

Step 14: Go to pizza shop and order lunch. While waiting at the counter, talk loudly about how much fun hippo rides are. (Say things like, “Man that hippo ride sure was fun and it was free, too.”)

Step 15: Check bag before leaving to make sure they remembered the napkins and the goddamn French dressing.

Step 16: Eat lunch at home while waiting for delivery driver to show up for his free hippo ride. Try not to stare menacingly out the window too much. (Try to smile casually at neighbors who pass by. Don’t smile like a guy who has a killer hippopotamus—you know the type.)

Step 17: If delivery guy doesn’t show up, you’ll have to call for more food. (Make sure this is same day as your robot/clone is going up in the Russian rocket. Remember, a good murder is all about the alibi. Also, be sure to give robot/clone enough cash to bring back some sweet souvenirs, like a set of those nesting dolls and maybe some Siberian tiger jerky. Also, Vladimir Putin’s autograph.)

Step 18: When delivery driver shows up, tell Steve to attack. (Probably should have mentioned the hippo’s name is Steve. Hey, when you have a hippo, you can name it anything you want.)

Step 19: While Steve is mauling the delivery driver, now would

be a good time to wrap up your extra salad and bread sticks. You can always take them in to work tomorrow for lunch.

Step 20: When robot/clone gets back, put him to work giving hippo rides for like \$5 or something. After all, you've got to figure out how to pay back the \$8.5 billion. (Hey, you're a murderer, not a liar. Oh, be sure to check out the going rate on hippo rides so you don't undercut yourself.)

Step 21: Just sit back and smile as the hippo cash rolls in. (Try not to smile like a guy who just committed the perfect murder. You know the type.)

FARTS & LEISURE

The Quest For Boredom

I no longer have any friends. Oh, I still have people I consider friends in the technical sense but my social life has been nonexistent for going on five years now. Of course, with as much gas as I pass, that may be a good thing.

I mean, up until yesterday, I had nearly 550 “friends” but I decided to delete everyone off my Facebook account who I don’t personally know or interact with for work purposes. I trimmed the list down to 97 people—that includes a few dozen family members, a dozen or so work colleagues, assorted acquaintances and the 13 people who bought a copy of my last book. (Take that, Stephen King!)

Truth is, I haven’t hung out with, or even talked to, any of my real friends in years. Most of them live hundreds of miles away. They’re busy. I’m busy. And, what with me being a reclusive workaholic and all, who can find the time? I wish I had time to be bored.

Nonetheless, I am addicted to Facebook and I’m trying to figure out a way to break the habit. I must check it every ten minutes from the time I awaken at 6 a.m. until I pass out from exhaustion at 1:30 the next morning. I can’t believe it’s taken me this many years to figure it out but those social networks just seem to be catering to people’s most narcissistic, self-indulgent and overall worst behaviors. And that’s not good for a self-indulgent narcissist like me.

Before I cleaned house on the friends list, I knew a woman who divided her time equally between swearing about how rotten her

kids were and praising them for being the most wonderful offspring in the Midwest. I had one “friend” who chastised me for mentioning one too many times (I think I might have brought it up twice) that I had gone vegetarian, but he can’t seem to go five minutes without reminding everyone on the internet that he had toe cancer once and that he is indeed a hero for having contracted the awful disease.

Then there are the people posting pictures of their dinner, breakfast, snacks—injuries. My goodness, I’ve seen people’s bleeding, pus-filled, bruised and contused bodies. Why are people sharing this stuff? It’s like soft-core porn for idiots. I mean, I’ve always tended to over-share information about myself throughout my life but that’s because I’m a jackass, and I’m usually doing it to try and make people laugh. (Why is it better to be a narcissistic attention whore in a book than on social media? I don’t know. It just is.)

How did it get like this? This kind of thing didn’t exist when I was a kid, and thank Gene Roddenberry that it didn’t. I can’t imagine what kind of self-serving, socially retarded, mean-spirited, arrogant little pricks it would have made of my generation—oh, wait, I don’t have to imagine.

There is something inherently messed up about a species that feels the need to share its every thought, word, and entrée with the rest of the planet. Of course, even most of those pathetic losers still lead much more exciting lives than I do. After all, you’d think that having nobody to hang out with would have increased my chances of finding hobbies. It hasn’t.

I can’t remember where I was when my fun clutched its chest and fell down the basement stairs. I think it was sometime in my late 20s. Regardless, it’s been a good long while since I’ve done anything enjoyable outside of eating Taco Bell. I didn’t used to be like this. There was a time when I played poker with the fellas, went camping*, cycled and did all sorts of other activities. (*Camping has to go in the same category as mushrooms. I used to eat them. I thought I liked them. Then, after like 35 years of swallowing the slug-like fungus I realized I had been tolerating them when in reality I loathed the

nasty little suckers.) The moral of the story: screw mushrooms and camping!

My lack of hobbies is only exacerbated (I love that word, and not just because it sounds like “masturbated.”) by the fact that I don’t leave my house—ever. Mercifully, my job allows me to work from home. This gives me the freedom to explore the hermit lifestyle in all its shut-in, pasty-skinned glory but it also makes relaxation a challenge. Try to picture working 100 hours-a-week in your office, then punching the clock and continuing to sit in your office. OK, so my office has a bed and cable and a store a mile away that delivers pizza and beer. (Hey, that’s big doins out here in the country.)

Once upon a time I enjoyed shooting—targets and clay pigeons, not crowded shopping malls—and collecting and working on classic cars, until that became too expensive. Lately I’ve been thinking about taking up painting. I took a bunch of art classes in high school. Not just for the easy credits—for the easy credits and the fact that the art teacher let us listen to heavy metal in class and go out into the parking lot to have a cigarette. I was never much good but neither were Pollack or Picasso and look where it got them. (Wait, didn’t they die miserable and broke?)

One time I worked really hard and came up with an oil painting of a big yellow moon behind a creature that appeared to be half bat and half rabbit. My friends donned it “Bat Bunny.” It was creepy but kind of cool in a *Donnie Darko* kind of way. I miss Bat Bunny.

I’m willing to try just about anything that doesn’t involve leaving the house. That being said, there are a great number of activities I would never attempt, even if I were wont to venture from my cave. Lucky for you I have listed some of them below. (I do plan to give drunken Jenga a try.)

SKYDIVING

I have been on a plane exactly four times in my life. They were the jets that took me from Auburn, Michigan, to Seattle, Washington, and back again during winter break of 1992. This trip taught me a few

valuable lessons: airplane food is only bad if you've never been really poor. I can't remember what I ate but I do remember thinking that people must have been greatly exaggerating their in-flight mealtime woes; I also remember that trying to charge me \$7 for earphones to listen to the crappy in-flight movie, after they charged \$400-and-some for the ticket, was a pure dick move.

Of course, back in 1992, we didn't use the term "dick move" so I probably thought it was "bogus" or "not righteous" or that maybe it "reeked." I also remember thinking, as I dangled my feet from my seat for four-and-a-half hours because I was convinced I would fall through the floor if I put them down, that man should really only fly for one of the following good reasons:

- A considerably large person tosses a considerably smaller person clad in Velcro against a wall also covered in Velcro
- A fat man is shot out of a cannon toward a pyramid of pies
- Children wearing garbage bags as capes jump off a roof
- Superman doing Superman things
- You are riding an atom bomb that has been dropped over a major Russian city

Reasons I could not sky dive:

- Fear of a fatal terror-induced mid-air heart attack
- Too fat for parachute
- Too fat for plane
- If I did manage to go up and jump and survive the ordeal, I wouldn't be able to stop screaming—ever! Hell, I'm screaming right now just thinking about it. Will someone please slap me!?!

GOLF

I've only gone a few times but it was evident from the first rotator cuff injury that it's just not the game for me. For starters, the walking—oh the endless endless walking—gives a new meaning to the word tedious. (OK, I guess it still has the same meaning but man that's a lot of walking.)

And then there are the slowpokes. Folks who seem to be more interested in chatting about how they golfed last weekend—you know, when nobody else was around and they shot a hundred under par—than actually whacking some balls. (Hey, if that sounds dirty it's only because you're a degenerate. It's OK, some of my best friends are degenerates, ya pervert.) Worst of all is that damnable windmill.

HUNTING

Now that I'm a half-assed vegetarian, hunting is out. I guess the agoraphobia pretty much fixed that one but I had to give a half-assed shout out to my vegetarian peeps. ("Peeps?" Did I use that word correctly? All I know is I saw someone on *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* say it and it sounded cool.)

Anyway, my dad taught me how to hunt beginning the winter when I was nine years old. Hunting when you're nine means munching on a frozen bologna sandwich your mom stuffed in your pocket while sitting in the snow against a tree after your father tells you to sit still and shut up. I'm not sure of all the mechanics but it seems that you then return four hours later, breath smelling like rotten apple cider and mysteriously light the deer.

The first and only time I ever went deer hunting as an adult was in 1997, when a friend and I decided we would become big time he-men that were going to fill our freezers with meat. We spent the summer building a portable deer blind which we hauled some 200-plus miles to my grandparents' wooded property in a remote location in Northern Michigan. We set the blind up a few dozen yards from the kill zone. We even visited several times throughout the late summer and early fall to replenish the bait pile. "Bait pile?" you say. Perhaps I should explain Michigan deer hunting to those of you who don't live next door to the Waltons.

Step 1 – dump a bunch of fruit, vegetables and salt in a pile roughly the size of a '78 Buick Le Sabre in the middle of the woods. This used to be legal (I think the salt lick part was a no-no) but then they outlawed bait but then they changed the law saying you could

only use so much, like a pail full. I'm not sure if they define the word "pail" but judging by the size of the bags of carrots and beets for sale at the up north gas stations, the pails are also the size of a '78 Buick Le Sabre.

Step 2 – Put on camouflage pants, camouflage shirt, camouflage boots, camouflage paint on your face ... and a bright orange hat on your head to let the other hunters know not to shoot you. This step is very important because every good hunter knows that just about everything—from water heaters to the duck-billed platypus—starts to look like a whitetail around deer season. (Sorry, "whitetail" is a kind of deer, not slang for Caucasian trim.)

Step 3 – Douse yourself with copious amounts of deer pee. The mere sight of you with that bottle of pungent sauce will have them jumping for joy and approaching you with lust in their eyes. And if it works that good on the deer pee salesmen, just think what the deer will do.

Step 4 – Smoke cigars, eat pickled meats and drink beer while compulsively checking your weapon to be sure it's as loaded as you are.

Step 5 – Resist the urge to shoot other animals not in season.

Step 6 – Resist the urge to shoot hunting partner when he starts stinking up the camper with pickled meat and beer farts. (Don't worry, chances are he will eventually try too hard to fart once while you're playing cards in the camper and he will soil his pants right in front of you. You know who you are!)

Step 7 – Yell "Hunting!" Then pack up and go home.

GOHSARCHY IN THE USA! *Middle Age Politics*

Though often wrongfully attributed to Winston Churchill (and, really, what isn't wrongfully attributed to the chubby little drunk?) the axiom that one who is not a liberal when young has no heart, and one who is not a conservative in his later years has no brain, is still an interesting one.

I think it was Winston Churchill who also once said, "Politics shmopolitics!" (Or was that Benjamin Disraeli?) Anyway, there was a time when I really gave a rat's ass about elections and political parties. By the by, what is up with that saying? "I don't give a rat's ass." It means you don't really care. So, does that mean if you do care you'd be willing to give a rat's ass? And, if you did, who would want one? How much can a rat's ass be worth?

The Wife: "I really love you and I care deeply about your feelings."

Gohs: "Oh, I am so glad to hear that."

The Wife: "Here, I got you something."

Gohs: "Oh, what is it?"

The Wife: "It's that rat's ass you've been asking for."

Gohs (unties bow around package): "I hope it's the brown one!"

Anyways, my political awakening occurred after a long unhappy childhood as a strict Republican. I began life as an impoverished neo-con. If the gays are Log Cabin Republicans then we were the Cardboard Box Republicans, those pitiable poor types who favor all the same things their wealthy counterparts pretend to espouse—

self-sufficiency, hawkish foreign policy, an end to the welfare state and so on—and all to our own detriment.

Nonetheless, I deplored those whiny liberals with their public handouts and touchy-feely social programs just as much. But, then, something happened over the period of several years that began to soften my crusty exterior and open my mind up to the idea that all of us are alone in this great universe and so we should damn well take care of each other.

Nowadays, I am more middle of the road, looking fondly on America's mix of perks for the ambitious and safety net for the less fortunate. Oh, sure, I still believe everyone should do his part to make society safe and healthy, and I am all for rewarding those who go above and beyond what is expected of them. But, I no longer fall for the line that the handful of rich people in this world all got there because they are simply more talented and hardworking than the rest of us. Unless you think Bill Gates worked four billion times harder than you do at your job.

So, what could it have been that changed me so? Well, as it so often happens, you hear about some guy who was anti-gay his whole life until his son came out of the closet, and then the father had a change of heart. Or, the rich guy, who thought all poor people were just lazy, until circumstance found Mr. Big-Bucks down in the gutter, giving hobo hand-jobs for apple cores, through no fault of his own. My political awakening was like none of those. I began changing my mind because of talk radio.

I listened to right-wing talk radio five days a week for at least four years before coming to the realization that these guys were just mean and stupid, and that their self-contradictory, childish views of the world were not for me. To be fair, I never had much love for the Democrats, either. They always just seemed to be Republican-lite, like the diet Mountain Dew of ideological bullshime. And, so, I decided to just withdraw from politics altogether. I stopped voting, I stopped lecturing coworkers on the evils of "the other guy" and I quit writing politically motivated columns for the newspaper at

which I worked.

Presently, I don't do too much opining on politics nor economics. I'm simply too busy running my businesses to protest. But, In my younger days I did sit on the fence and fling my fair share of poo, at my leisure, at the foot soldiers from all the parties. And, having gone through quite an extreme spectrum, from conservative Republican to Libertarian to Democrat to Marxist to a 50/50 mix of socialist and capitalist with just the right mix of Green Party, and finally to bleeding-heart Libertarian, I feel like I've had enough vantage points from extremist ideologies to offer a comprehensive look at this diverse fustercluck we call "Democracy." (I know, someone with more broken TVs than teeth and waving a Confederate flag just screamed, "It's not a Democracy, it's a Republic!")

The American political system has its perks but it also has plenty of flaws. But, whenever I begin to point them out, there are always those voices saying "Oh, you've got a better idea?" or "What are you, some kind a communist?" or "Stop hitting on my wife!" The fact is that I do have better ideas than those policies currently used to run our local, state and federal governments. And, no, I will not stop hitting on your wife.

Therefore, being the reliable source of information and insight you've come to know and trust for the last few dozen pages or so, I give you Gohsarchy.

The rules under Gohsarchy are so painfully easy that most people ironically find them confusing. Some might even say the structure is downright ridiculous. To them, I say, "Watch your ass!"

Rule #1 – You must be 37 years old to vote. Let's face it, when you were 18 you were still incapable of doing a great many things right in your life. Those incapable of balancing a checkbook, returning items they borrow or listening to decent music should be kept as far away from the voting booth as possible. You want to have a say in how the country is run? Come back and see us when Lady GaGa no longer sounds good and your credit score is above 650.

Rule #2 – Campaign finance. Do they expect us to believe that it's just a coincidence that he who raises the most money is more often than not the one who ends up in office? About as much of a coincidence as ... as ... as something coincidental, that's what!

Under Gohsarchy, all campaigns would be publicly funded. Each person who ran for office, regardless of whether it was for local dogcatcher or U.S. Senate, would get a stipend of \$5,000 and no more. You don't get to raise funds. Nobody can donate to your campaign, and there would be three televised debates for every race that would get played on every major network and streamed to the web. The public campaign funds would be kept topped off by a new "Annoyance Tax." This tax would be retroactive to 1999, and would fine anyone misusing certain words, like, "Epic, sketchy, sick" or any utterance of "YOLO" or "Cray cray" for \$100 per violation. Also, any "family values" politician who is later caught having an affair with a member of their own sex, or any politician who so blatantly and severely contradicts himself would also be fined. For example, voting against providing medical care for the poorest among us while simultaneously voting to increase the amount of money America spends on its war machine under the guise that the health and safety of the American people cannot be measured in vaccines and physicals but that it can be in the number of bullets and rocket launchers we give to third world thugs ... that's a no-no.

Rule #3 – You must have the skills to pay the bills. It's fine for an asthmatic 15-year-old to pretend to be Jamrod, the 12th Century warrior mage from beyond the Ghastly Zone. However, we must stop running this country like it's a game of Dungeons and Dragons. If your biggest claim to fame is porking chubby secretaries in your Little Rock law firm, or shooting slow-moving wildlife from an attack helicopter, your application is going straight to the basket with the Thorazine admirers and the guys who think the X-Files is real.

Rule #4 – Foreigners can run for all offices. If it's one thing I'm sick of hearing, it's my fellow Caucasians screaming about how they want their country back. Excuse me, you want your country back? I have a feeling there are a handful of people who might disagree with the pecking order on that one.

What my pasty brothers and sisters fail to realize is that this is a nation of immigrants. OK, so they were mostly angry white immigrants who couldn't understand why God would lead them to a new nation only to leave a bunch of half-naked heathens all over the place. But, frankly, I think this nation could benefit from some outside perspective.

Maybe if we were forced to learn that we're not the only people on the planet who matter, we might stop being such world-class assholes about everything. Don't worry, Hubert, having to hear someone speak a language other than English isn't going to make your wife's tits fall off or anything.

And, who knows, you might actually learn something about geography other than that the Tim Horton's is up two blocks from the Walmart. (Doesn't Tim Horton's have the best coffee?)

Rule #5 – Pay and perks. I don't expect it to solve a lot of social issues but these monkeys we're sending to have feces fights in congress and the senate would be overpaid if we compensated them in bus tokens and lard sandwiches. The fact that they make anywhere from \$200,000 on up to \$400,000, not including benefits and perks, is downright disgraceful for folks who work part-time in air-conditioned offices while folks are busting real ass to barely make ends meet. Therefore, under the super keen rules of Gohsarchy, all state and federal politicians—including the president—will earn the current American median income of \$50,017. It's a very respectable amount for where I come from, and paying these self-serving tools closer to what real people are making should help assuage some of the angst we feel when we vote for their dysfunctional asses. (By the way, before you politicians start complaining, most working folks

aren't making near \$50,000 a year.)

Rule #6 – No more job jumping. Beginning immediately, there will be a 10-year-long embargo preventing politicians from working as lobbyists or paid political consultants—other than for political campaigns. There will be no more of this congress-to-corporation mutual masturbation that's gone on too long.

Rule #7 – No more partisan elections. Under Gohsarchy, we will vote for the person, not the political party because there won't be any. You want team sports, go watch women's synchronized scissoring or something like that.

Rule #8 – Greater access to the polls. Under Gohsarchy, people will be able to vote from any digital device, from smart-phone to laptop, in addition to being able to go to the traditional locations. In this day of never-before-dreamed-of technology, there simply is no valid excuse for making people line up for hours like wombats in the kill line at the hotdog factory. (It's an Australian hotdog factory.)

After all, if people know they can have a little tender "alone time" right after they vote, I'll be much more likely to participate. (I mean "they," they'll be more likely to participate.) I expect as near a 100 percent voter turnout as is statistically possible.

Rule #9 – No more negativity. Your mother always said if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. That rule will apply under Gohsarchy. No negative campaign ads will be allowed. You either have to talk about yourself or say something nice about your opponent. Also, whoever loses the election will have the opportunity to work on the cabinet of the person who won. This will help ensure everyone is represented.

Rule #10 – Liberty for all. Personal choices that do not directly affect or harm others will no longer be fodder for ballot measures.

You and your gay lover wanna snort cocaine and shoot off machine guns to celebrate your black atheist wedding, then you work it, girl! As long as you don't take out any street lights or ejaculate on public property, you're untouchable! (And not in that creepy Hindu way, either.) Note to self: add "shoot out street lights" and "ejaculate on public property" to bucket list.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

The Most Annoying Virtue

Just when I think I've gotten much more patient in my old age I see a restaurant menu that offers pomme frites (which, according to my pompous-asshole-to-English dictionary, means "french fries.") but not one other goddamn French item. It makes no sense. I could see it if they had a section with some escargots (as my father would pronounce "es-car-gots") or some vichyssoise (which he pronounced "Why all the fag talk?")

It would be like McDonald's offering one of its menu items in Latin—who are they trying to impress? The only thing they impressed upon me is how absolutely douche-bagedy they are for trying to church up deep fried potatoes. How am I not supposed to throw my steak knife at the waiter's neck? (As if I ever ate in places fancy enough to have waiters or steak knives.)

I'll tell you what happened. Some smart prick in management—who's never worked a single heatstroke-inducing shift on the line—figured he could jack up the price by \$1.99 by slapping a foreign name over a delicious but nonetheless mundane foodstuff. (I love that word "foodstuff" it sounds so transcendental. "Francois went to the kitchen for foodstuffs and returned with a plate of pomme frites!") I joked to the wife that I should ask for a nice tomato reduction but judging by her scowl I was already in danger of getting throat punched in my sleep later that evening.

So, I stick with the pomme frites. Just how frickin fancy of a name

is “pomme frites” anyway? It sounds like something mental patients contract after masturbating one another.

“What is it doc?”

“It’s called ‘pomme frites’ and it’s very rare—was much more common in the ‘70s,” says the doctor. “You’ll need to apply this ointment six times a day ... and stop handling dirty penises!”

“Does that include my penis, doc?”

Am I simply a rage-a-holic? I can’t be sure because I’ve spent enough time in front of smart pricks who ask “And what do YOU think it means?” while scribbling furiously in their smart prick notebooks while I go on about how I once saw my father’s hairy ass when I was five and how inadequate I feel because my ass is nowhere near as hairy.

I don’t know that seven years of therapy helped me much. I do know that I no longer shot-put appliances or furniture across the house when I am angry. But I still regularly beg the wife to chain me up until the full moon passes, or at least until the O’Reilly Factor is over.

Just this week, after the dog peed on my chair for the twenty-thousand-and-something-eth time, I gently took his face in my hands and explained through clenched teeth (mine, not his) that the next time I would likely take a pair of scissors to his furry little weenis. Like I said, in some ways, I am much more patient now than when I was younger. Twenty years ago I would have simply kicked him where his balls used to be and screamed something white trashy that even I am not comfortable writing here.

And more to the term “rage-a-holic.” I am not addicted to rage. Conversely, I am surrounded by morons in both my personal and professional life. When someone breaks my things out of sheer apathy, when people cost me thousands of dollars because “I don’t know,” when they lose your stuff because, well, it’s not *their* stuff ... punting an end table or jabbing a butcher knife into a loaf of bread or ripping the lid off the coffee pot or drop-kicking the lamp into the kitchen just seems like the best course of action.

I may have mentioned this in other pieces I've written but there was a time when both my mother and wife thought I might have Tourette syndrome or a touch of autism. The truth is I just have a low threshold for assholes.

Things that enrage me? Misuse of certain words when one is trying to sound intelligent, though I don't fancy myself a Grammar Nazi. I don't go around correcting people's misspellings on FaceBook or correcting their speech during conversations (unless it's someone I care about and they're making a mistake that could embarrass them in future discussions with other people) but there are a couple of lexicographical (my big word budget is now broke) abuses, among other trespasses, that drive me utterly Glenn Beck-y.

Top offenders are misuse of the words "awesome" and "epic." Think about it: God's hand coming down from the sky is awesome; saving 50 cents on a frozen burrito is not. The tale of Gilgamesh is epic; watching a stripper fall off the stage is—though hilariously sexy—not epic.

People who don't put things back where they found them. If my kids were still five and six I could understand why I find a hairbrush on the piano, a bottle of ketchup in the living room and a roll of toilet paper in the refrigerator on a nearly daily basis ... but they're 19 and 20 now.

OTHER THINGS THAT TRY MY PATIENCE

Dogs who challenge my authority — Sam didn't relieve himself on the corner of my recliner because we neglected to take him out. There wasn't a bladder's worth of pee on the floor. Those urine stains are little "F-you" squirts he leaves to remind me that he thinks I am a cheap loser. And the joke's on me cuz who's picking up his doo-doo's and buying his food? (OK, the wife and kids take care of it, but still.)

Messin' with the Berber — I don't know how it happened, but a few years ago, when we adopted this baby Shih Tzu, she immediately stole my heart, and I've been protective of her since. Just a few weeks ago I sent a picture of her with a blanket over her head like Obi Wan Kenobi to some family members. "Isn't she awesome?" I remarked to one of my brothers, who expressed his doubt over her awesomeness.

There will be one less chair at Thanksgiving this year.

Television news — Could be my local station out of Traverse City or CNN—don't matter. It seems as though just about every other story is aimed at retaining the idiot demographic. They usually begin alright. "We start tonight with the latest on the conflict in Unga Bunga." But before they even make it to the first break they've jumped the well established tracks of journalistic integrity and headed straight for Entertainment Tonight. "We'll be right back with a woman from Iowa whose dog "King" not only looks like Elvis but barks a mean version of 'Love Me Tender.'" And then one of the co-anchors or the dipstick weather man—who gets his forecasts from the same Midwestern Stormtrack center every other "meteorologist" gets his information from—decides to work out his stand-up routine on air. "He may be nothing but a hound dog, Chet, but he is definitely a friend of mine." (That's it, where's my steak knife!?)

Even my beloved Wolf Blitzer has weakened his credibility as a newsman by engaging in questionable interview tactics. About a year or so ago a tornado blew through some town full of southern accents and flip-flops and David Allen Coe T-shirts. Standing amid mounds of aluminum siding and trailer hitches, Wolf asked some shaken woman if she would like to thank God for sparing her from the tornado. I seethed from my pee-soaked chair. "Thank God?!" I screamed. "He may as well have asked her if she thought Lord Voldemort had caused the destruction!" She declined the offer to praise and instead said that she was an atheist.

I sat there, slack-jawed. Ninety-nine thousand times out of a hundred she would have said something along the lines of, "I'd like to thank the Lord almighty Jesus Christ for sparing me and my kin. I want to thank him for wiping out that laboratory full of devil-worshiping scientists. I'm gonna use this second chance to continue cutting the pant legs off of perfectly good blue jeans and exposing my children to cigarette smoke and questionable choices in boyfriends. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna celebrate by investing the rest of my welfare check in lotto tickets and strawberry wine. With any luck, by this time

tomorrow, I'll have made lucky number 13. The doc says eventually one of 'em's gotta be born with the right amount of chromosomes!" Then it'll go back to Wolf who will mention that Turleen told him in passing that she plans to donate a percentage of all her Tupperware and Mary Kay sales to the local Baptist Abstinence-Only Education Program to thank God for his grace. (Which reminds me: I don't like it when people don't live up to their stereotypes.)

Bird songs – but especially robotic bird songs. The wife is obsessed with birds, so much so that for a while she was seriously entertaining the Indian medicine man who would translate her bird sightings into messages from God. (I really wish it weren't true.)

The osprey's babies leaving the nest occurred around the same time our kids were finishing up high school. A no-brainer there. The bald eagle that flew across the highway in front of her car on the afternoon following a big job interview the wife had downstate was supposed to mean that she should move to the big city. Wait, no, it meant that she didn't want to move to the big city. Or maybe it meant that the eagle just needed to cross the road. (Why does that sound so damned familiar?)

Regardless, the wife has a different digital bird sound for each of the 532 functions on her iPhone. Not to mention (then why am I mentioning?) that she stays up late watching an owl webcam—screech owls.

Never heard a screech owl cry out before? First of all, they're movie ugly. I mean you'd expect to see them peeling the faces off lost hitchhikers in the desert or something. And when those little bastards start crying for food they sound like the ring wraiths from that Tolkien book. (Not the one about the zombie hookers, the other one.) Oh, and when they get done screaming because both parents have left the nest looking for food, they eat each other. That's right, I watched a baby owl eat another baby owl. I will never sleep again. And that pisses me off.

But, to be fair, no matter how angry I've ever gotten over other people's stupidity, I've never eaten a baby owl.

FINDING A SCAPEGOHS

It's All Somebody's Fault

What good is a midlife crisis without someone to blame? And who better than the president to be the scapegoat for all my fat ragey angst? “President of what?” you may be asking yourself. “Are you upset with the President of NBC Television?” No, I bear no ill will against the vivacious—though palomino-schnozed—Jennifer Salke.

Although, I was a little perturbed that *Blossom* was canceled after only five amazing seasons. That’s right, I had the hots for Mayim Bialik before it was cool to have the hots for Mayim Bialik. (That was a thing, right?)

Am I talking about Ritchie Casteel, president of the Sav-A-Lot grocery chain? No! No one can be mad at quality foodstuffs at discount prices—except for the only other grocery store in my town, which sells everything at an obscene markup. They probably aren’t too thrilled with President Casteel.

Am I upset with John Waters? Well, for starters, Mr. Waters’ official title is the “Pope of Trash” not the president of trash, so I’m not sure why you even brought him into this.

Maybe I’m talking about President Saddam Hussein. I’m not. He’s dead. Or, he’s hanging out with Elvis, who was a king and not a president either.

If you haven’t guessed by now, my scapegoat is President Barack Hussein Obama! Just kidding. The last thing America needs is another angry white man blaming all his problems on a black man

with an Islamic-sounding name. Besides, Obama strikes me as the type of Kenyan Socialist who would take insults personally and then revoke my health care or send Joe Biden to my house to knock my trash cans over and get my cats pregnant. I mean, not him personally, but like he would bring his own horny cats. I just remembered, I don't own any cats.

I'm not saying I don't deserve all of the blame for the position I find myself at this midlife juncture but I am saying I plan to blame everyone else for my problems. Don't get me wrong, I've tried really hard over the years to take responsibility for my mistakes, be they minor faux pas or king-size quagmires. (That's a lie. I really haven't.)

The truth is I'm tired. I just don't have the energy for introspective. Nor do I have the stomach for reflection followed by positive action. After all, if people who smoked all their life can sue the tobacco companies and win big fat paydays, then I should be able to squeeze the tits of Nabisco and McDonald's for a few million each. Granted, most of the blame for my weight belongs to me being undisciplined when it comes to Taco Bell. I want to quit this abusive relationship but our passion keeps me crawling back, no matter how destructive our love is to one another.

Cops: "We received a complaint from the neighbors about the noise over here."

Taco Bell: "I was just leaving."

Cops: "Mr. Gohs, is everything alright?"

Me: "Yes. Just fine. We were having a discussion about politics ... (I pause for nervous laughter) and I guess it got a little heated."

Taco Bell: "It got heated because you're a stupid broad what don't know when to shut her mouth!"

Me: "Don't mind him, officer, TB just has a wicked sense of humor." (more nervous laughter from me)

Cops: "Easy, Mr. Bell. You folks mind if we come in and take a look around?"

Me: "Sure. I'll put on some coffee."

Taco Bell: "You assfaces got a warrant?"

Cops: "Please, Mr. Bell, just have a seat and try to remain calm."

Taco Bell: "Nobody but nobody tells me what to do in my own home!"

Me: "TB, please! You're just going to make things worse!"

Cops: "It looks like somebody did a number on this place."

Taco Bell: "What number is that? A number two? You sayin' my house looks like garbage?"

Me: "I've been spring cleaning, officer. Please excuse the mess."

Taco Bell: "Only thing you ever clean is crumbs from the bottom of the cookie jar, you fat pig."

Me (sobbing now): "You didn't seem to mind when I was eating your burrito last night." (more sobbing)

Taco Bell: "I've had better."

Cops: "Mr. Gohs, what happened to your face?"

Taco Bell: "Ugly parents. Ha!"

Me: "I-I-I fell down the stairs ... and hit my face on his fist."

(Cops grab Taco Bell, trying to restrain him from hitting me.)

Taco Bell: "You bitch! How could you do this to me?"

Cops: "Alright, Mr. Bell, you're coming with us."

Me: "Don't! Please! I love him! It wouldn't have happened if I wouldn't have brought the wrong beer home."

Taco Bell (hogtied and dragged from the domicile): "You did that on purpose, you witch! You know I only drink Rolling Rock!"

Does Weight Watchers have a plan for that?

I'm going to go ahead and say I put way too much thought into that last bit. The truth of the matter is my unhealthy eating habits have wreaked havoc on my vital organs and I really need to do something. If I don't want to leave my wife a 40-year-old widow. (Wow, did that take an unexpected and dark turn or what?)

Next on my list is my parents. They deserve at least as much of the blame as Taco Bell, who I still love and am waiting for. I don't care how long before they grant parole.

Sure, it's become cliché to blame parents for all your problems but it's pretty dang convenient. Could I go on about how my parents

are to blame for my fear of birthdays, small weenis, mistrust of immigrants and bad teeth? Sure, but what would it solve?

Besides, the older I get, the more I realize I am not the only one who rode the rickety rollercoaster of childhood through a Satanic carnival of dysfunction. (Worst Disney ride ever!)

I keep meeting more and more folks, usually after they've read one of my "satirical" newspaper columns about my growing up times, who share similarly off-putting memories.

The more these people confide their darkest and creepiest secrets to me, the more I realize that most people on the planet are not mentally equipped to raise children, and should not be allowed to parent a hamster let alone a human child.

All the people's adult kids I know are some form of druggie, alcoholic, sexual pervert, anxious mess, suicidally depressed, moronic, delusional, dangerous and mean—and those are just the ones I like enough to get to know. (Maybe I just need to get better friends.)

On one hand, it's nobody's fault that most of us suck at parenting. I mean, it's not like there is some instruction booklet that slides out of the womb with your precious bundle of greed. (How gross would that be?) And we've so far removed ourselves from nature that following our instincts is probably the very worst thing we should do at this point. When people think it's a good idea to give five-year-olds phones and digital tablets which can access every manner of horror on the internet, it's a pretty safe bet that parental instinct has run away with the dish and the spoon.

On the other hand, someone has to be responsible for the mess we're in, and parents have to take a good bit of blame for their actions. Hell, it's my fault my kids sometimes act like morons, and it will be their fault when my great-grand-kids turn out like idiots. (They say dumb-ass skips a generation, right?)

As bad as most people are at parenting, I think the hippies and some of the other Baby Boomers may have been the worst. The last few generations of gremlins no longer go outside to play and

they seem not to have any real concept of life without constant engagement with digital devices and round-the-clock feedings on junk food and sugar water. (Ranting like a cranky old man is a sure sign of middle age.)

Of course, this downturn in society has its upside. Everyone keeps crying about the future of Social Security but in twenty years or so I see that problem pretty much resolving itself. By then the entire population should have type 2 di-beet-us and they'll be dropping off at 50 and 55. There won't be any need for long-term retirement plans or public safety nets when most of the population dies in middle age.

Plus, the unfathomable uptick in demand for things like insulin, rascal scooters, stretch pants, and the fact that every arena, plane, ferry, train and car will have to be fitted with new seats and toilets to accommodate the United States of Cow Ass, there'll be more jobs than anyone will know what to do with. Granted, they'll have to be worked by skinny illegal aliens, but we can pay them for pennies on the dollar. It's a win-win. Even better, it's a win-win-who-gives-a-shit.

After some thought, I've decided to change my mind. I do blame all my problems on the president. Thanks a lot, Obama!

STORM'S A-COMIN

Preparing For The Menopause

I just got done studying up on The Menopause at one of those medical websites, and I can't stop crying. Moodiness, vaginal dryness, thinning hair, weight gain ... those are just the symptoms I got from reading about it.

First off, they call it "The" Menopause. "The?" It's so bad they had to give it a "The." The worst things in history have been preceded by a "The."

The Black Plague

The Hundred Years War

The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon

Even better, according to the site, these symptoms and more could begin as early as three to five years before The Menopause sets up shop in the dark heart of despair.

Well, I can't say I haven't been warned, so I better get prepared. But how? This isn't your zombie apocalypse or World War IV or Sharknado or hurricane's-a-comin' type of fantasy scenario. This is boots-on-the-ground, shits-in-the-pants, Hell's-RSVPd, the-in-laws-are-extending-their-stay-indefinitely, kind of weather.

Improvised explosives and dehydrated Salisbury steak are not going to save my ass now. There's already one whiny, weepy, depressed, balding person with sagging tits in this house and I don't need any competition. There simply isn't room for two of us.

I can try being nicer but we all know that's just not viable long-

term. Too many decades of irascibility have left me with the warmth of Don Rickles with a bowel obstruction—and not one of those “Bring the kids on down, fun for the whole family” types of bowel obstructions you keep reading about at Disney World or Land or Unincorporated Amalgamated Principality for the Purposes of tax evasion.

Maybe I can help ease her symptoms with some good old down home remedies. Some people say homeopathy is just a bunch of hooey, and those people are called “scientists.” And, while I don’t usually go in for such malarkey, desperation has a motivational aspect that cannot be denied. Now, if I can just find grandpa’s old recipe for Prozac.

After careful study of various older women who shall remain nameless, and feral dogs, I have amassed a veritable page-and-a-half of information I feel should be sufficient. Following is a list of dos and don’ts and, only-in-the-event-of-catastrophe, to get you through. I’m sure they will work just fine for me.

Women experiencing the struggles of The Menopause should be pampered and respected, like circus elephants. Be sure to brush and hose them off weekly.

If you hear sudden yelling from another room, be sure to jump out the nearest window. She’s probably angry about some mess the kids made, like leaving your tools all over the kitchen or the kids wearing your boots out in the mud then tracking said mud all over the freshly cleaned linoleum. Next, run around the house and come in through the front door all out of breath (this is the easy part) and be sure to have a story ready about how you were being chased by a puma or an Al Qaeda.

When she asks questions like “Who made this mess?” or “Who spent \$98 at Buffalo Wild Wings?” always have a list of stock answers ready to help diffuse the situation. Saying things like “Hey, what’s that behind you?” and then running like hell are surefire ways to temporarily avoid arguments. Resist the urge to say things like

“Listen here, woman. I’m a man and I do as I please.” It probably won’t (never does) end well.

Mood swings – Don’t use this fluctuation in temperament as an opportunity to place bets with the children on how mom’s going to behave today. When she finds out—and she will find out—you will have an *Incredible Hulk* situation on your hands. My best advice, don’t make her angry. You wouldn’t like her when she’s angry. (Of course, you never ever ever say this because you love her even when she is overturning army tanks and swatting at helicopters.)

If all else fails, make a deal with the devil; be sure to get a receipt.

Weight gain – Unless you are mentally retarded or the world’s biggest asshole (both of those things together could be quite entertaining) you know better than to comment on your spouse’s weight. After all, she puts up with your fatter ass.

Hot flashes – When your wife goes through The Menopause, she will likely experience sudden feelings of being too warm and she may sweat. Be sure to say something comforting like “How’s about you get me a sammich” or “Is it hot in here or are you just a bitch?” (Warning: do not say any of those things.)

Depression and anxiety – As if there weren’t enough reasons to get excited about The Menopause, you can add major mental illness to the list. Yes, you’ll be treated to 364 days and 365 nights of “I’m sad. Now I’m angry. Nope, I’m sad again. Hey, did I mention I was both angry and sad?” The best way to handle this is by pretending you don’t understand English. Or, you could also do what I do whenever the wife terrifies me, and that is to close my eyes—sitting, standing, washing the dishes, don’t matter—and begin snoring. Most of the time she will lose interest and just walk away. Resist the urge to yell when she slaps you.

The Menopause is a very difficult time in a woman’s life. Therefore, there will be times when she is feeling poorly. Even if you think you are ready to display extra patience with your wife, there will be times when communication breaks down and the two of you argue. Voices

will raise, coffee cups will be thrown, motels just five minutes from the house will be checked into.

As if the stress of middle age and adult children and increased career responsibilities weren't enough, The Menopause will only add to the tension. It will continue to build and arguments are certain to occur. But, the reasons we fight at 39-and-a-half are somewhat different than the reasons we fought when we were 19. The young us had spats over wandering eyes, money, extended family, money, child rearing technique, money—did I mention money? The older us tends to argue over who didn't do their yoga, and who isn't supposed to be eating fudge grahams, and money. And, from what I've seen of those couples I know who have endured The Menopause, the fights can also be about absolutely nothing. Literally: "I'm angry. You're near me. Prepare for hate!"

Fighting when you're young has a youthful, vibrant, energetic, sexy quality that often promises makeup sex. Fighting when you're older is just loud, sad, exhausting, and even the best possible scenario concludes with the two of you grumbling off in opposite directions to return to your regularly scheduled drear of an existence. (Makeup sex only seems to exist for young people and in movies so don't get your hopes up.)

The most difficult part of dealing with marital fights, for me anyways, has been the fact that I am too good at it. You see, I was raised by two experts in the field of verbal vivisection. My folks were the Spy vs. Spy of domestic discordance (OK, enough alliteration, I promise).

Mom and dad's arguments could range anywhere from a few hours to an exhausting few weeks without a ceasefire agreement. And there were never any minor disagreements. Regardless of how miniscule the triggering event, their tiffs always ultimately elevated to full-blown "You give me the divorce papers and I'll sign 'em right now!" status. As such, I learned very well how to be succinct in my viciousness and that the nuclear option should be employed in every battle, regardless how insignificant the skirmish.

It took me nearly twenty years to get there, but I'm finally at the point where most of my rage fizzles as grumbling to myself when disagreement ensues. It's much easier now than it was back then but it's still a challenge to ignore my killer instincts.

My parents were the super space ninja robots of semantics. They could talk the other one into apologizing over something that wasn't their fault and they'd be thankful for the opportunity.

Sometimes, when the wife and I are going at it, I feel like the circus lion who's had his teeth and claws removed, and not just because I live in a boxcar and eat stray cats. The fire is still in the belly but the idea of attacking just isn't as attractive as it once was.

Still, it's not easy when you've been trained by the very best. I swear, my mother could have been a CIA interrogator. Forget water boarding. A few days with her, and the twentieth hijacker would've spilled everything down to the color of his mama's panties. (I'm guessing whatever Muslims call purple.)

The old man, on the other fist, could have run for public office with his gift of angry oratory. And god help any politicians stupid enough to debate him. The argument would go a little something like this:

Politician: "I have always supported lowering the business tax, unlike my opponent."

Old man: "What Senator Ass-face won't tell you is he also supports horse sodomy."

Politician: "I have no idea what my opponent is talking about."

Old man: "You fuck horses ... in the ass."

Politician: "OK, I think that's enough of that."

Old man: "That's what you're mother said last night ... when I was fucking her in the ass."

Politician: "My mother has been dead for five years, sir. I demand you show some respect."

Old man: "The thought of you as her son was too much to bear?"

Politician: "This debate is over."

Old man: "You folks really going to vote for this pussy?"

I've found it is useful to have some go-to phrases for days when you're just too tired to argue but you feel an obligation to keep up your end of the marital spat. Some of these may make things better, some of them may confuse your spouse into silence, but most of them will probably get you conked on the head with a rolling pin or a cartoonishly large flower vase.

THINGS TO SAY WHILE FIGHTING

(Use at own risk)

- My mother was right about you
- You're sexy when you're wrong
- Well, at least I didn't kill the dinosaurs!
- Why do our children look like the chiropractor?
- Ungrateful life partner says what?
- Can't we just agree to shut up?
- Is it hot in here or are you just a bitch?
- I married you for your money.
- I'm sorry my chest isn't hairier.
- Show me your tits!
- Can we do this when I don't have diarrhea?
- I told you, she's just a friend ... who fondles me.
- When we have sex I fantasize about divorce court.
- I challenge you to a duel!
- Did you fart?
- I just farted.
- I'm hungry. Can we do this in the kitchen?
- Wait a minute, you're just doing this for the makeup sex!
- You're giving me diarrhea.

PHRASES TO AVOID

(Should probably avoid all of the aforementioned as well)

- Happy Anniversary, Sasquatch!
- Are you sure you want a second malt?
- Of course I find Scarlett Johansson sexy.

- How do you feel about polygamy?
- I'll be home in 15 minutes?

LIES YOU MIGHT FIND USEFUL

- It wasn't my fault. There were so many people at the bachelor party, she had nowhere else to sit.
- I was fanning my thighs.
- They didn't have the low-fat.
- It was only available in turbo.
- I'm not thinking about anything.
- Of course not, she's your sister.
- I specifically told them *not* to go into the kitchen and make themselves dinner.
- I slipped.
- It's just until his divorce is final.
- Of course I like them, they made you.
- It was nervous laughter.
- I fell down the stairs.
- It was the dog.
- It was the kid.
- It was the homeless man.
- It was the you.

PONDERING DIVORCE

And My Second Marriage

Some men get to middle age and decide the thing that's most ruining their chances for a better life isn't their fat stomach or their lack of ambition or even their limp cigar butt of a penis. No, these men decide that getting a new wife will fix all their woes.

So, much like hauling the old station wagon down to the auto lot in search of a shiny red sports car in their price range, they start hanging around yuppie bars and political rallies and junior colleges in search of just the right mix of supple and stupid. (Are there still yuppie bars? Or yuppies?)

It surely is tempting to go find a new ride with smoother fenders, shinier hubcaps and a nice set of double D ... tires with perky pink valve stems. But, frankly, at my age and state of disrepair, there is no way in hell that I could do any better than I am right now by a long-shot. (Not that I have any desire to change rides.) If I was being honest with myself—and I'm not saying I'm going to stoop to such a thing, but if I was to—I would have to admit that the wife has far more reasons to divorce me than I her.

Really, it's a wonder she's still with me. When I'm not obsessing over some unlikely illness or seething over some perceived injustice perpetrated by the pizza delivery man—like the fact that I distinctly ordered extra hot sauce with my terrible nachos but only received the standard one hot sauce with my terrible nachos—I'm trying to fart my way to the moon, and threatening to chop off dog wieners

every time they pee on my chair. I swear too much. I bathe too infrequently. I make inappropriate comments about the elderly, and the religious and the dumb and especially old religious dumb people. If I had a shred of conscience I would divorce her just to put her out of her misery.

And with all this knowledge of how I should be living in a trash can behind a Chinese restaurant, I still have found myself weighing the pros and lesser pros of divorce. Hey, it's middle age. So, before I make such a big decision, I have compiled a list of reasons why people should and should not divorce one another. (Some of the items may or may not directly pertain to my marriage.)

REASONS TO GET DIVORCED

- See less of ungrateful kids.
- New sex partners (Assuming anyone wants your tired old carcass.)
- Getting rid of pesky money clogging up bank account
- End disputes over remote (short-term fix, as new girlfriend/spouse/boyfriend? will eventually commandeer said remote.)
- Spouse won't support your dream of opening strip club that serves Taco Bell and is staffed by little people
- Won't let you get pet Hippopotamus, let alone train it to attack the pizza delivery guy
- Spouse constantly waits until you have to go to the bathroom then races you to toilet, and usually wins
- Spouse knows all your deepest darkest secrets (I don't know about you but I've got a list.)

REASONS NOT TO GET DIVORCED

- Moving sucks
- Spouse is used to your sub-par body; doesn't point and laugh during "sex"
- Money saved from not divorcing can go to ungrateful children
- No one around to blame for losing things, especially remote and inability to get hippo

- Races to bathroom can be fun, especially when you win then pretend to go poop for a long time while she dances in agony on other side of door yelling at you to hurry and you laugh hysterically and lie by saying “Just a second!” over and over again. (Too specific?)
- Spouse is more likely to file for restraining order when you show up drunk and pee on her patio
- Spouse knows all your deepest darkest secrets (Did I mention how big and dark my list is?)

If we did split, she would end up way ahead. Firstly, she could use all that money she’s been spending to keep me in Taco Bell and cherry whiskey and ninja pants on that trip to Russia she’s always wanted. While she’s there she would meet a wealthy orthodontist from California who paints amazing landscapes of far off places in his spare time and sells them for tens of thousands of dollars, the proceeds of which he donates to worldwide children’s charities, the smart prick.

They’d fall in love and move off to the Hollywood hills where she’d start playing tennis and entertaining guests and become the superintendent of some artsy Montessori academy for the kids of celebrities. She’d start saying things like “Isn’t it dahling” and “I must check my shejwool.”

Conversely, I would take one last trip to the kitchen to gather all the dry and canned goods before running away to my bedroom, from which I would not emerge until the neighbors call the cops complaining of an “odd odor” emanating from my house.

With the kids having moved on to start their own lives by then, my only company would be the tenants who would rent the upstairs bedrooms. Though I’d never see them, I know the tenants are there because they make lots of noise at strange hours, occasionally pay their rent and generally stink up the place with what smells like boiled garbage. I’d get better renters but my house is quite the fixer-upper, and fixer-uppers only attract the onion people. (People who smell so bad that when they walk by they make your eyes water.)

OK, so it's obvious I am not cut out for divorce. If I'm not going to be single, then I have to consider the only alternative: the promise to stay married. Midlife is home to so many unpleasant changes: health, career, illnesses and deaths of friends and family. You get to a point where you feel you should remind your spouse and yourself just why in the hell it is you've been together longer than you were apart. Some people call this "renewing" their wedding vows. Some people call this completely unnecessary or foolish or unnecessarily foolish. Think about it ... (you didn't really think about it, did you?) ... you wouldn't call the bank and demand to hold another house closing after 20 years of paying on the mortgage. You wouldn't (well, maybe some of you would) call up the doctor on the anniversary of your first rectal exam and ask for a renewal of your probing. Nobody in his right mind wants to consider why he paid all that money for the car after it's burning oil and has dented fenders and a distinctive ring knock.

And, before you get all huffy and think I'm comparing the wife to a 1979 Ford Maverick, the Maverick had pinstripes—the wife does not. Anyway, anyone who knows me knows I know that she knows that I know how much of a downgrade marrying me was for her. She could have married a doctor or an architect or the guy who invented the Ford Maverick but she didn't.

What I'm getting at, in the most convoluted manner possible, is that marriage was supposed to be a one-shot deal. Yeah, sure, once a year you'd stuff down an overpriced meal of bad steak and stale grocery store deli cake before having hurry-up-before-the-kids-get-home-from-the-movies-I-have-to-be-up-at-five-a.m.-why-did-we-plan-this-on-a-Tuesday? sex in the living room.

You're supposed to overhaul a roof or a truck engine after a couple of decades, but not a marriage.

That being said, I've seen enough episodes of *George Lopez* and *Sex and The City* to know that there is no way—short of an early coronary or one of us going gay—that I was going to get out of this subject arising at some point. I was right. So far, it has simply been

brief musings about where the wife would go if she were to have a second wedding ceremony and honeymoon. I realized, while shivering in horror at the idea of stuffing my too old, too fat ass into the black and white rented casing with the faux bow tie bedazzled in years of neck sweat and keg beer vomit, that the wife never really had a real wedding ceremony, reception or honeymoon.

Whether I end up looking like a penguin summer sausage, I am seriously considering poking away the dough so that some day I can surprise her (I guess announcing it in a book isn't too bright. Hey, honey, surprise!) with the wedding she truly deserves. Don't get me wrong, our family and friends really sacrificed their time and money to help us turn our sinful three-year living arrangement into a lawful sinful living arrangement when we got married back in 1997. She deserved better then and she deserves better now.

Let's say I can scrape up the scrilla necessary to hoof our kinfolk to a central location, feed 'em and then break the hell out and go somewhere neat ... what in the hell am I going to say during the vow renewal? Because, fatboy, if there is going to be a remarriage, there is going to be a vow renewal. I can't just say, "Well, you got what you wanted. Thanks for marrying me, again."

I know what I want out of the next twenty years but I'm not sure that, even with an amazing second wedding, I've a chance in hell of getting it. I want to be able to walk around the house naked whenever I feel like it. I want Cheez Whiz for dinner once a week. No crackers, no bread, just a can of Cheez Whiz and maybe a couple of beers. I want whiskey in a bowl for breakfast on the last day of each month. I want a housekeeper. No, a midget housekeeper. I want him to talk in a Brooklyn accent and call me "Mr. G." And when I'd say "Oh, Mr. Worthington, I think I'll take my Cheez Whiz in the study this evening." (That's what I'd call him, "Mr. Worthington") Then he'd say, "Sure thing, Mr. G!"

I recently saw a video of the Prince of Thailand with his topless wife as she serves birthday cake to his dog. I want that! I also want a helicopter to take me to a fueled-up jet that's set to leave for South

America, and I want ten million dollars in unmarked bills or I start shooting one person every hour—OK, they're telling me this is not a hostage negotiation. Sorry. I'm a bit stressed.

OK, twenty years together. Got to make this good. That Amish barn-building of a wedding we had the first time came straight out of the pages of the *Little House on the Prairie* Guidebook. Despite all the help from family and friends—renting my tux for me, mom making our wedding cake, her mom letting her use her wedding dress—we still got married in a courthouse and held the reception in a dog kennel. (It was fun. It was nice. She still deserved better.)

Now that we are no longer scraping for cigarettes, diapers and bologna (three items which have been replaced by low-fat frozen yogurt, textbooks and soysage) it only seems fitting that the wife gets paid back for decades of putting up with me. But, before I begin saving and searching—and, yes, I know Chuck E. Cheese won't cut it no matter how perfect it would be—I need to figure out what I'm going to say to this woman once I get up there in front of all those mooches. (Hey, they were helpful the first time around. But, you can bet your sweet serenity they will only be arriving this time for the free drinks and food.)

There are so many things I don't want to say but I know I must pledge something. I know, what if I give the wife a list of vows, though more likely promises I will try to keep, and let her pick, say, a half-dozen-or-so. It'll be fun. Like a game show. (I'll let her pick ten things if she promises to make that Prince of Thailand party happen.)

PROLOGUE (From the Latin for “skip to the next chapter.”)

The following vows are merely suggestions and do not constitute a binding contract.

Dearest the wife,

You've put up with a lot of my crap over the last twenty years. Thanks! I've been thinking about some of those things I do that generally cause you to question your will to live or why a just and loving god would stick you with me all this time. The following is

a list of things I could start or stop doing ... if the price is right! (I understand that communicating in television and movie quotes and sayings is high on the list of things I should stop doing because it annoys you.)

But, now, to the list:

1. I'll stop calling pop "soda." I know how it vexes you so.
2. I will limit my F-bombs to one per angry outburst.
3. I'll scream at the news less often, keeping it to, say, only when it's on? It will be up to you to monitor my television viewing and turn the channel whenever I sneak a peek at CNN or FOX.
4. In light of your hatred for traditional jazz music, I will try harder not to detest your "smooth" jazz but must point out that smooth jazz sucks.
5. I will try to go an hour each day without farting in your presence. You know how difficult this is for me so, you're welcome! (P.S. screw Michael Bolton!)
6. I pledge to always make veggie omelets and hotcakes for you on Sunday mornings, even if I am on deadline for the paper, which I always am. (And not just because you ordered me to do so.)
7. I vow to stop threatening to cut off what's left of the dogs' genitals every time they pee on my chair.
8. I promise to stop responding to your every complaint of ache or illness by telling you you are dehydrated (even though you are).
9. I'll stop texting you beat poetry while you're at work. (Work, labor, the laboring man in dirty pants and baked on tan—hot damn, the workin' man!)
10. I'll stop hand-washing my clothes in the kitchen sink. I understand that we have a washer and dryer for a reason and I will some day have to get over the traumas of my childhood. (Sorry about what I said about Michael Bolton. I'm actually a fan. The whole jazz thing had me a little flustered.)
11. I can't promise to stop compulsively sniffing all my food and beverages but I will try to stop smelling everything you eat and drink. (What can I say, I'm a sniffer from way back.)

12. I will try really hard to stop peeing into two-liter bottles when somebody is in the bathroom too long. (Another habit I picked up as a child. Hey, when you grow up in a family of nine people with one bathroom, you learn to improvise. And, in my defense, I only do it when I'm really sick.)

13. I'll try to get out of the house more often, by which I mean more than my current twice per year but no more than seven times in any calendar year. It's scary out there and I really don't like people. (Except you, reader, I love you, and not just for your money.)

14. I promise to stop threatening to karate chop you in the neck when you talk about spending money. (OK, I'll try to stop. I cannot make any guarantees.)

15. I will try to stop making up new nicknames for the dogs, and the kids, and the wife. I understand that having seven names each may get confusing.

16. I will stop telling telemarketers my grandmother died recently and after they give me their condolences saying it's OK because she was rotten. (My grandma isn't really rotten nor is she dead. I just do it for their stunned silence and [my] roaring laughter.)

17. I won't make you watch "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo" with me any more ... but I'd like it if you did. (I wrote this before the show was canceled because apparently the mother was dating child molesters—allegedly.)

18. I'll stop pretending to accidentally run the hot water while you're showering.

19. I'll stop barking at strangers who come to the door but I may continue to growl.

20. I understand our bed is not a dinner table or a plate or a napkin and will stop using it as such.

21. I'll remove almost all references to masturbation from this book.

ACTING MY AGE

Until I Find The Fountain Of Youth

When I was younger and used to hear older people say they wouldn't go back to being young for anything, I always thought they were lying or mistaken in how they truly felt. After all, what problems of being broke, dealing with minor drama, etc. don't pale in comparison to the health issues, fatigue, boredom and cold unfeeling death just around the corner for those of us in middle age?

Now that I am older and have been able to consider the benefits and downsides to them both, I understand exactly what the old-timers were saying, and they were completely full of it.

Wrinkle creams, mud facials, cosmetic surgery, pills, powders, oils, various exotic animal genitalia, all these products and more go into creating a several-billion-dollar-a-year industry intended to serve the millions and billions of us who don't want to look old, who don't want to be tired, who don't want to give up sex or to stop wearing sexy clothing.

Most people are not OK with growing old. They just don't say anything about it publicly because it would be too damned depressing.

"Hey, guys, remember when we had energy and smooth skin and sex was awesome, and we could hold our pees and poos and the future wasn't so scary? Boy, that really sucked, didn't it?"

Following is a list of old-age remedies that may offer some

limited efficacy:

1. Sex with a person younger than yourself – Doesn't reverse the aging process and can actually make you feel older when they're ready to keep going but you have to take a break from doing the hunka-chunka to test your blood sugar and hit your inhaler. Also, seriously increases chances of contracting herpes and pissing off the spouse.

2. Spinning around and around in circles (even counterclockwise ones) – Scientists have discovered this won't actually send you back in time. It's really only good at inducing vomiting. Does offer some cardio benefits.

3. Making wishes after blowing out birthday cake candles – Apparently, this only works in the movies. Other similar activities to avoid: making a wish after blowing away eyelash; making wish after blowing hobo pretending to be a genie.

4. Jumping into secluded woodland pond – While the regenerative effects are in dispute, what you can count on is upping your chances of contracting spinal meningitis, bloodsucking leeches and the ability to shoot diarrhea down both pant legs.

5. Capturing leprechaun – Contrary to science books, this doesn't work. Mainly because they do not exist. However, if you are holding a leprechaun captive, you should probably let him or her go because this is just a small person who likes to wear green. (Be sure to ask for wishes anyway because, hey, it can't hurt, right?)

6. Kissing bearded women – No magical powers to speak of; watch out for whisker burn and residual "thank-you" cakes delivered to your home or office for years to come.

7. Listening to *Strawberry Fields Forever* by the Beatles, backward – What many stoned teenyboppers in the '60s and '70s thought was an eerie statement about John killing Paul or Ringo falling down or Paul loaning John ten dollars was actually a recipe for brownies—pot brownies. Eating the brownies may make you feel younger for a short time.

8. Standing next to someone older – While this may give the

illusion of appearing younger by comparison, no actual young-ifying will occur. Also, the old people will begin to wonder why you are stalking them. Beware of pepper spray, restraining orders and being run down by electric mobility scooters.

9. Getting bit by a vampire – True, in mythology, one who is bitten by a vampire and survives will be cursed—make that blessed—with eternal life. However, just because the fanged fat girl dressed in all black drew blood on you in the bathroom at the office Halloween party, it doesn't mean you're going to turn into the undead.

Those odd looking discolorations on her were not “Vampire birthmarks” as she had indicated. In fact, your best bet would be to get down to the free clinic and get tested ... or soon you may well be sleeping in a coffin.

10. Hollywood beauty creams – Those movie stars with the perfect skin and the size-zero bellies look 30 years younger alright but it has nothing to do with the overpriced yak semen they're hawking on late-night TV. If you want to look like them you need to find a good plastic surgeon and adopt anorexia as a new hobby. Remember, nothing tastes as good as it feels to be dizzy and anemic. Plus, just think of how much money you'll save on groceries. You could buy soooo many amphetamines!

11. Water cleanses – Lately there have been all sorts of miracle “cleansers” you can make by adding cucumber slices and lime wedges to ordinary tap water. You know what you get when you add odd combinations of fruits and vegetables to your drinking water? You get expensive flavored water, and possibly the runs.

12. Avoiding all sunlight – This is actually one of the few things you can do to slow the aging process, of your skin at least. Sure, you'll have to forgo pretty much all social activity other than night clubs and hanging out with the janitorial crews at the local high school, but who'll be laughing when you show up to visit your friends in the skin cancer ward looking all Elizabethan aristocracy and such? (Ditto if you're into the whole vampire scene. Note to self: get moving on script about wise-beyond-their-years teenage vampires who are

all afflicted with cancer.)

13. Get a new body – You could just upload your thoughts into a new husk. There are three main ways to do this: hire an alien to use his super advanced mind-switching ray on you. Be sure to read the fine print to make sure this service does not include anal probes and short-term memory loss; or, you can buy an African spiritual artifact from a pawn shop.

For the haunted artifact switch to work, you will need a helper. Be sure your victim—I mean “new body”—is holding onto the lion’s gallbladder or rhinoceros penis or whatever it is before you begin the magic chant. Remember, you only get one shot at this.

Third, find a Dr. Frankenstein type. This really should be your last resort. These mad scientists aren’t practicing regular medicine for a reason. Be sure to inspect the new body your brain will be going into for freshness and go online to authenticate the status of your doc’s malpractice insurance. Also, be sure to inspect his ride. How a mad scientist maintains the inside of his car is usually a good indication of how clean his laboratory will be. If it smells like cologne, leave it alone. If it smells like soap, give it a grope.

Hey, I told you in the very beginning not to take any advice from me.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT? *The Meaning(lessness) Of Life*

A man gets to a certain age and he starts to wonder what it's all about. What am I doing here? Why are things the way they are? When will Samuel L. Jackson say "no" to a script? How am I the only one capable of putting toilet paper back on the spindle? Why won't the wife let me get a trained hippopotamus?

Now, me, I gave up on pondering any "greater meaning" possibilities a long time ago. As far as I can see, we are a lonely clod of dirt floating through a hale of rocks ranging in size from "make a wish" to "kiss your sweet ass goodbye." That doesn't mean life has no meaning, mind you. It just means I'm skeptical of the idea that a magical being with a magical purpose magically poofed us all into existence as part of some hidden magical agenda.

That may sound counter-intuitive but folks like me find all sorts of meaning in this life: smell a flower, feed a homeless person, feed a homeless person's cat, mow a homeless person's lawn—wait a minute!

One of the best ways to spend our time in a purposeful manner is by serving others. I, myself, as a great human who deserves to be patted on the back while throngs of fans genuflect before me, once spent part of a winter volunteering at a soup kitchen. Of course, we offered sandwiches, too, so maybe we were a soup and sandwich kitchen.

It was a good experience that taught me some valuable lessons

about humility and gratitude. None of the clients we served behaved like they were owed something. If anything, they were embarrassed to be asking for help. But enough about that depressing subject, let's focus back on me and how great and humble of a humanitarian I am.

Just last night, the wife asked what I thought the meaning of life was. (She knows better than to ask me what I'm thinking.) I said I thought it was to enjoy life, to take care of each other as much as possible and to learn as much as we can so we may pass on good, useful information to younger generations so that they may do even better than we did.

She nodded while I spoke. I was so eloquent, you should have seen me. And then I farted, long and loud. It wasn't planned, but my butt's vaudevillian display, in light of such a deep soliloquy, punctuated my ridiculousness perfectly. Which reminds me of another meaningful activity in this life—laughing. Make sure you take time to laugh with the ones you love. And fart. The family that farts together stays together, in separate rooms, but more or less together.

And, don't forget, no matter how down you get about life, no matter how bad things seem to be, just remember that once, while he was visiting the White House, Good Morning America weatherman Al Roker shit his pants. See, ya feel better already.

I was contemplating Al Roker's cool name when I realized that maybe, just maybe, all I need to give my life more meaning and to perk up these middle age doldrums is something as simple as a change in moniker. I've actually been playing around with the idea lately. Who knows what I could accomplish if, instead of boring old Ben Gohs, I was Hector Villinovo or Bruce Balzac? (Ha! "Balzac.")

I can picture it now: Hello, my name is Kumquat Ferrari and I have come in the name of planet Earth. I claim this land for the United States of America and her President, Bill Maher. (Hey, it's my fantasy.)

Maybe a rose would be just as sweet if it had a different name but

who wants a dozen glunks for Valentine's Day?

I think the names we humans get can have a serious impact on where we end up in this life. Oh, sure, the wild creatures like the bears and bees and monkeys don't care about things like names, but that's because they are dumb. Have you ever seen a monkey drive a car? No. I saw a bear ride a bicycle at the circus once but all he did was go in circles. If I was that bear I would have been like "Adios, suckers!" and I would have broke the hell out. Can you imagine a bike-riding bear in the Tour De France? I bet he'd maul the competition. Seriously, he wouldn't be the fastest but he could just bite all the other bikers and then take a nap and cross the finish line whenever he pleased. Who's going to argue with a 10-foot grizzly? (Did I mention he was a 10-foot grizzly? I miss *Grizzly Adams*.)

Just look at all the successful people with cool and strange names: Charlton Heston, Fuzzy Zoeller, Wolverine. What if Arnold Schwarzenegger had been named Wayne Smith? What if pizza was called "skirk"

"What would you fellas like on your skirk? Does that skirk come with garlic crust? How many slices on a large skirk?"

I haven't done much as Benjamin Jon Gohs but just think what I could accomplish as Kumquat Ferrari! I would have the confidence to conquer worlds, to reach for previously unknown heights—like breaking the land speed record on foot—not to mention telling the wife that I'm not the only one capable of hauling the trash out to the road every Thursday. (The fact that I love trash day should not matter. She could at least offer. I think the whole bad back thing is just a ruse anyhow.)

Kumquat Ferrari could take on Martians, Russians, Al Qaedas and MetaboLife salesmens. Kumquat Ferrari would make love with his boots on, instead of pawing confusedly under the covers in flip-flops until he is told to stop.

Kumquat Ferrari drives a jet-powered motorcycle with intercontinental ballistic missiles and a giant death laser, not a rusty green mini-van that fat chicks at Walmart all seem to mistake for

their own.

Kumquat Ferrari likes to live dangerously, like prune juice and long walks through the mall, dangerously.

Unfortunately, my name is not “Kumquat Ferrari.” I am just boring old Benjamin Gohs, a desperate schmuck.

Some desperate schmucks going through middle age seek to find meaning in their life through religion. And, despite the fact that I have not seen the inside of a church in 10 years, maybe I need to give it a try. After all, they say there are no atheists in foxholes. Maybe there are no foxholes in midlife crises or atheists in middle age. OK, that doesn't make sense.

The point is, it seems like a lot of folks confront the prospect of aging by retreating to religion. For many, the fellowship with other people gives them courage and feeds their need for human contact. After all, the thought of leaving the pain and suffering of this mean old world behind for the comfort, security and magically delicious after-world promised in so many of today's most popular faiths is tempting.

At my age and weight class it only seems natural that I should dump my lifelong skepticism and join up with one of those houses of holiness. But, which religion would be right for me? The obvious choice would be to join the wife's church and adopt her beliefs. But, frankly, I don't think they'd take me. For one thing, I ask too many questions.

I remember back in junior high English class, the instructor of which was a kindly old homunculus of a lady, bigger than a dwarf but too small just to be considered a short person, who told us emphatically to ask questions if we had any because she wasn't going to try to guess if we couldn't understand what was going on.

I'll give you one guess who didn't know what was going on, and it wasn't Kumquat Ferrari. She explained it for a second time. I let her response roll around in my head for a bit and with some hesitation I asked again. By now she had moved on to the next topic. All eyes were on me. The teacher stopped what she was doing, walked to my

desk and ran her finger along a passage in my book that explained the coefficient of adverbs when desalinating nouns by way of Russian adjectives.

“So what would the answer be, Mr. Gohs?”

She always said my name as though it had a “Z” on the end.

I stared desperately at the text bowing under her pudgy yellowed smoker’s finger. “Uh, I, uh.”

“Well?” she said, tapping her finger impatiently. Whispers gathered on the outer edge of the rows of desks and rushed toward me like wind through tall corn.

“Mr. Gohzzzzzz?” she cooed sarcastically.

“A pronoun?”

Laughter erupted at my gaff. Her patience at an end, the teacher clucked her throat in disgust and waddled her midgety body back up to the chalkboard. She moved on and passed me along to the next poor teacher by way of a generous C-minus.

I just know if I let myself get back into a situation where I’m surrounded by peers in desks or pews, with a person talking at the front of the room, I’ll have trouble. Someone will undoubtedly light a candle or sing something in Latin and out of reflex I’d raise my hand and start shouting questions at the pastor.

“Why are we kneeling?”

“Who backwashed in the grape juice?”

“How do I conjugate an intransitive adverb?”

“You keep talking about ‘the host’ but I haven’t seen him once.”

“Do you validate parking?”

“Does this lump on my neck look cancerous?”

And if I can’t make it with the accepting folks of the United Church of Christ, how am I going to fare with the Muslims or the Hindus? For one thing, the wife is too much of a feminist to tolerate head-to-toe robes, curfews, or the inability to leave the house without a male escort.

Although, there could be some perks. I could wear a robe all day and nobody would balk. I’d finally have an excuse for spending

so much time on the floor and it would be a great excuse for my suspicion of the Jews. It's not that I have any philosophical or racial issues with these folks but there's something about those tiny hats that just doesn't sit right.

Did the first Jew order a regular-sized hat but the haberdasher screwed up? Maybe he thought it looked cool, since all the other guys were wearing full-sized hats and he just decided to be a trendsetter.

I can't convert to Judaism because of that last paragraph, but maybe Scientology could be interesting. I could go to church with Tom Cruise, Kirstie Alley and Doug E. Fresh. I've already tried Buddhism—the secular variety—and I'm simply too angry.

It's hard to be one with the universe when you're screaming obscenity-filled directions on how to kill some poor bee who just happened to wander into the house, or chucking a shoe at the dog after you catch him peeing on your recliner. I'd be out the first time I threw something at a monk or screamed at a dove for pooping on my sandals.

The Rastafari might be worth a try but my allergies couldn't handle all the pot smoking and the chicken dander. And about the first time I told the wife to, "Pass dem bloodclot potatoes, mon!" she would slap me out of my dreadlocks.

Iree! Iree!

Satanism is out based on wardrobe alone. Have you seen their priests? They look like they stepped right off the set of *Conan the Destroyer*. And then there are the human sacrifices. The last people we should be ritually sacrificing are the virgins. For Lucifer's sake, take the 40-year-old diabetics, use up the senior citizens, have as many Republicans and Democrats as you like but please spare us the buxom 19-year-olds. (My assumption being that there are still such a thing. According to the TV news reports, kids are having sex with each other shortly after leaving the womb these days.)

Regardless of what type of occultism I were to shoehorn myself into, I wouldn't be able to truly believe its tenets or legends, and I refuse to have faith in claims of magic. So, as much as it would pain

Bill O'Reilly, that pretty much leaves me with secular Humanism, which bids to focus on making life better for our fellow man. It tells us to always do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. It calls for people of all nationalities, creeds and colors to come together as one race—the human race. (Bunch a pussies.)

Now, if you'll excuse me, all this touchy-feely crap is exacerbating my funk. Besides, I can always find plenty of meaning in a fifth of cherry whiskey and a couple seven-layer burritos. (Note: look into forming teenage punk rock band called "Exacerbating Funk" or possibly even "Masturbating Skunk.")

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT *19,000 Nervous Breakdowns*

Middle age is a popular time to have a nervous breakdown. However, I think I'm gonna pass on having one now because I already had mine a long time ago.

The idea of this thing pop culture calls a “nervous breakdown” is fairly outdated and tends to be a catchall for a wide range of mental illness, stress and other concerns and behaviors.

I had what one might call a “nervous breakdown” on Halloween night, 1998. Actually, it happened so late in the evening I believe it spilled over into November first. Seventeen years. The number 17 doesn't seem like much but that night seems like a hundred years ago. It would be the first of many thousands of panic attacks but it still remains the worst by far.

I was 23 the first time I thought I was truly going to die. The wife and I were in the middle of adoption proceedings with our son, she had been in and out of the hospital with terrible mystery headaches the doctors couldn't explain, and I was working six days a week with double-shifts every Friday and Saturday. It was during one of those double-shifts, following many pots of coffee in an attempt to remain on my feet, that a life-changing event occurred.

The best I can figure, the tremendous amount of caffeine—coupled with months of sleep deprivation and 12 hours in a hot and busy kitchen—had caused me to feel jittery and quickened my breath a little. For the life of me I still do not know why I did it, but

I decided then would be a good time to check my pulse. I'd never done it in my life before that night but I figured right then, hot and sweaty and tired and buzzed up on coffee, would be a good time to use the rate of my pulse to assess my overall health condition. Well, of course it seemed too fast, and my sausage fingers were only able to find it some of the time so the beat felt like it was off as well.

Armed with zero medical knowledge, I decided something serious was wrong and began obsessing about it. For the next few hours I could think of nothing but my pulse, which only made me breathe faster. Pretty soon I was hyperventilating. Not knowing what hyperventilation was at the time only made matters worse. The more I felt like I couldn't breathe, the faster I sucked in wind. The more air I took in, the worse the hyperventilation symptoms became. Pretty soon I had tingling in my hands. A sure sign of a heart-attack! Well, yes, but also a sure sign of hyperventilation.

As I have since learned, there is no surer way to crank up the old midnight horror double-feature in my head than by frequently checking my pulse and trying to infer anything from what I feel. In hindsight, I was just fine. But, at the time, the Scooby-Doo portion of my brain screamed "Zombies!" and my nerves did their best to vibrate out of my skin.

Pretty soon I was locked in an ever-maddening cycle of checking pulse, breathing faster, tingling more, checking pulse, breathing faster, tingling more.

I quickly lost control of my hands as my blood became too rich with oxygen. I dropped a large soup vein filled with runny refried beans on the floor. The jolt sent beans spraying up and out, covering the lower half of my body in a thick brown sauce. My arms curled up to my chest and the muscles became very stiff. My face went numb and my jaw locked so I was forced to talk through my teeth.

I made my way to the break room while a manager came to check on me. I struggled with my lobster claws to get a cigarette out of the shoulder pocket on my chef coat and dropped them on the floor. The manager, a nice middle-aged man came in with a glass of water

and a wet towel. He began dabbing my forehead and asked if he should call 9-1-1. He offered me some water to which I responded, “I’m not thirsty. I’m fucking dying.”

By the time the paramedics arrived, I was mostly in the fetal position looking—thanks to the beans—like I had shit myself from belt to boot.

“What’s your name?” the medic asked.

“Binjermin,” I growled through clenched teeth.

“How did you soil the outside of your pants, Binjermin?”

“Itch refright beench!” I grunted.

“Refright beench?” the medic asked.

The paramedics asked me over and over what I had ingested as they checked my vitals.

“Cocaine?”

“Goofballs?”

“Dexies?”

“Heroin?”

“Poppers?”

“Elephant?”

“Speed?”

“Crystal?”

“Jive?”

“Acid?”

“Ludes?”

“Blue Devils?”

“Shrooms?”

“My God, man, is it the cheese? Are you on the cheese?”

The answer was “no, no, no.” Once in the ER it was the same questions. Again, I said “no, no, no.” Still, the doctors insisted I had taken cocaine or heroin or something. Still, I insisted that I had not because I have never taken any of those drugs. I certainly wouldn’t have a problem admitting to it if I did but they just would not take “no” for an answer. They ran low on patience and so did I. You could

have cut the tension with a fart.

Unwilling to believe that someone as messed up looking as me could have taken no drugs, the ER docs made me drink a Styrofoam cup full of liquid charcoal. It was the worst thing I've ever tasted, aside from tuna noodle casserole and liquid dish soap.

Finally, they gave me a shot full of something wonderful. I've never felt so contented or calm in my entire life. I can totally see why people become addicted to opiates, because they are keen, cha-cha, real keen.

Once I calmed down completely, they discharged me with no explanation of what had happened.

Then, over the next few weeks and months, I would develop the chronic, full-blown and constant high level of anxiety and panic that I have enjoyed these 14 years. Eventually, I went to a doctor who pulled me aside and closed the door to an exam room. He handed me a business card. His whispers and nervous, darting eyes harkened to an old spy film.

"It's all eggs in the coffee, see," he said, tipping back his fedora. "You're just a bit goofy in the noodle."

"Cut the guff, croaker," I responded. "I'm having like twelve heart-attacks a day, doc."

"Don't be a nance," said the doctor as he polished his Tommie gun. "Drop the dime and this headshrinker'll fix your noodle up all razzmatazz."

The card read "Community Mental Health."

"You calling me 'bugsy?' sawbones?" I said. "Is that your angle?"

"Not 'bugsy,' just a little deep in the soft-spot," he said.

The mysterious episodes continued and so did my doctor visits. Eventually, I got sick of going to the ER to be told nothing was wrong with me. Finally, concern and frustration overtook the wife and she called the number on the card. I saw my first therapist and began years of once-weekly visits that, to be fair, did help some ...

for awhile.

Make no mistake, I was an anxious person before that night, but thanks to seven years of therapy, extensive reading on the issue, and deep-breathing techniques taught to me by my first therapist (a lovely well-meaning woman who tried to have my wife commit me so I could take time to “relax”), my ailment is far worse than it ever was prior to Halloween 1998.

It's been probably six or so years since I saw a therapist, and I don't plan on going back. For one, I don't have the energy to begin again from scratch. Secondly, as my last therapist told me, I will always be an anxious person. There's no getting around it. If I do end up going through a full-scale midlife crisis, it won't be because of my anxiety.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE GOING BONKERS

Lots of folks don't go to therapy for the first time until around middle age. So, what should people expect who've never been to a therapist? Well, they ask a lot of questions, and also more questions.

Get used to hearing things like “What do you think this means?” and “Tell me about your childhood?” I don't understand exactly how my childhood experiences could cause me to still be anxious but the smart pricks with the fancy degrees sounded pretty certain.

I don't pretend to be an expert and I don't dare second-guess the professionals. But, there are a few things I just could not bring myself to do—taking antidepressant medication was at the top of the list. I tried them once for two weeks. I understand that I probably didn't take them long enough to get the full effect but when I didn't feel any better after a couple of weeks I just stopped taking them. It wasn't long after that that I became med-phobic and now am only able to take aspirin, and even then I worry that it's going to give me an allergic reaction even though I've been taking it nearly 40 years.

The thing I found most interesting about therapy and therapists was just how messed up most of them are. And they'll tell you that, too. All but two of my therapists told me the story of their big

breakdown, the events leading up to it, the crazy childhood that preceded it all.

Don't get me wrong, they were nice enough folks and I'm sure they were well educated and capable. But, for what seems to me like a huge portion of the mental health professionals to be recovering from mental illness themselves just seems a little counter-intuitive.

On one hand, they have experienced many of the things that you have, so that's good. They know what to expect and they can empathize with you. On the other hand, its kinda like having cops who are former felons, or school teachers who took special ed classes growing up.

Nonetheless, there is a wide enough variety of psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists out there to fit your particular brand of crazy. Having seen more than my fair share of shrinks, I can only tell you about the ones I have visited but I can assure you that no two were much alike ... or much effective.

1. Dr. Thompson, Pill Pusher – These cats (RIP, Sammy) always seem to be more interested in masking your pain with schedule II narcotics than actually trying to figure out what's wrong. To be fair, I get the whole “let's decrease your suffering before we delve into the slop sink you call a psyche” tack.

And, to their credit, it is difficult to be anxious when your brain is a boiled potato. However, this type of doctor was the first one I saw, and I saw him only once because, as stated earlier, I threw the pills away after two weeks. If I wanted to self-medicate I could have gotten a fifth of whiskey and had way more fun in the process.

2. Moonsparkle Rainbowsmile, Ph. D – The first actual talk therapist I saw was Dr. A, a mousy nervous gal in her 50s who was an absolute lamb. She had empathy to spare, and the patience one would expect of a New Age healer. The main problem, other than teaching me the deep breathing exercises which would cause me to hyperventilate for the next 12 years, is that she tried to convince my wife to check me into a psychiatric hospital for a while so I could “relax and work on myself.”

It wasn't that she was trying to do anything underhanded. She really cared about me and wanted to see my suffering end. The problem was that, in addition to having stubborn panic and anxiety, I came from a place where neck-down medicine was avoided, and mental health was shunned like grim death.

3. Reverend Pray-away – I got so desperate after my longest serving shrink moved away that I saw the only person I could see on such short notice: a genuine faith healer.

Granted, he called himself a “Christian Counselor” but it became apparent in a hurry that I would get little help when he told me his two main forms of therapy included prayer and Bible verses.

He was nice enough, and I knew going in that he specialized in the spiritually afflicted but we gave it a go anyway. I felt a little better after a talk session but decided that I'd be better off with a traditional doctor of mental health. That was the last shrink I saw.

4. Doc Doppelganger – The therapist I saw the longest was an older, wiser version of myself. He had a similar childhood, similar ailments and he laughed at all my jokes. And, really, the two most important things in a good therapist is someone who sounds convincing when they say “there, there” and who shares your sense of humor.

5. Stereotypical Government Doctor – I saw this guy after I'd been suffering with the debilitating effects of panic/anxiety/depression/PTSD for a few years after my initial diagnosis as having such. I had become agoraphobic on top of it all, and was simply unable to work outside of the house. And, back then, I didn't have any skills that would allow me to work from home. Hell, part of the reason I turned to writing was in hopes of helping to support my family in a way that I could.

Despite having shunned help of any type (other than from my wife) I finally sucked up my pride and tried to apply for financial help while I endured my condition. Part of the process when applying for such help is to run the gauntlet intended to weed out the fakers and anyone deemed not ill enough to warrant help. I get

that. So, you can imagine my surprise when, after being told by two longtime therapists who had seen me weekly for months and years respectively that I was the worst anxiety/panic case they had ever seen, that government doc wrote a report that made it sound like I simply didn't feel like going to work.

Looking back, getting turned down by that prick was the best thing that ever happened to me. If I would have begun getting a government check every month, I wouldn't have endured the torture I did to get a cooking job for nearly a year, and then another for nearly two years, and then work as a freelance writer, and then as a staff writer and eventually as an editor.

Forget being touched by an angel, I was helped by an asshole.

THE UMPTEENTH STEP

Making Amends

One thing about getting older, for me anyways, is that it's much easier for me to feel guilty about things I've done recently and even things I did a long time ago. Guilt is a funny thing. And, it can make you do funny things. Even as I type this, there is a 1963 Mattel brand Bozo The Clown doll making its way from South Carolina to Northern Michigan via UPS ground shipping.

So, why did I pay \$36.95 for a 50-year-old doll with a malfunctioning pull-string, a torn left hand and a dirty blue jumpsuit? (Why do I do any of the stupid things I do? Who's asking the questions around here, anyways?)

It all started after writing the somewhat insensitive letter to my sister's unborn baby and publishing it in the newspaper recently. (See "Letter to an Unborn Frederick") As usual, what I found amusing, some found off-putting. And, it was brought to my attention that the history of offenses against my siblings is a long and sordid one.

As the oldest of seven children, it seemed my duty to help care for them, entertain them and teach them what I had learned along the way. Unfortunately, this big brotherliness also included occasionally tormenting them for my own amusement.

Everything was fine for the first four years. I had my own room, my own toys, and my mother all to myself. Up until then, my biggest worry was pooping my corduroys or missing an episode of Scooby-Doo. Then Adam was born, and suddenly I went from being the

main attraction to the guy who carries the long-handled dustpan behind the dancing ponies.

My first act of insurrection was while Adam was just days old. While my mother was changing his diaper, I thought it would be a good idea to chomp down on his foot. The way my mother recounts it, he screamed, she screamed, I screamed—I guess the point is we all screamed—and then one of us got slapped. I'll give you a hint, it wasn't the swaddled interloper.

What followed was nearly 10 years of abuse, from the classic, "Stop hitting yourself" to "Drink this and I'll give you a quarter." And, my all-time favorite, "Listen to me you little jerk: if you tell, I will kill you." Which was usually followed by a, "And I'll never play with you again." The latter always seeming to be the scarier prospect to a juvenile underling so desperately desiring attention.

In my parents' apparent quest to rival The Waltons, the number of children in our household increased, as did the frequency and bizarreness of my torture methods.

I once tied brother Will to a chair in front of his open closet, told him there was a monster inside and then flipped off the lights and left the room for awhile. Hiding in the hallway, I cackled with delight as he screamed for his life, certain the boogiemán was coming for him.

My stint as mini Mengele didn't stop there. I once caused my brother to involuntarily do the splits, by knocking his feet apart. The scream he gave off from the subsequent double groin muscle pulls sent my mother galloping outside to see what was the matter. To add injury to injury, she slapped me for being a jackass and then slapped my injured brother for what she called having a "cow mouth." Of course, me being a notorious nervous laughter, I began cackling, which caused my brother to scream at me angrily, which caused my mother to slap us both again. Had we not been in the front yard near a busy road, I suspect we might still be stuck in that infinite Three Stooges loop: scream, laugh, slap, slap; scream, laugh, slap, slap; and so on.

Had someone had the initiative to draw the scene it would have resembled a less intricate Rube Goldberg Machine, wherein the final operation is a psychotherapist counting a rather large stack of cash.

Once, while heading home after an evening sledding excursion, I decided to point at the woods and scream, “My god, it’s a werewolf!” just before running like hell back up to the house ... laughing the whole way like a maniacal chicken. The kids, weighed down by turn-of-the-century snowsuits, and hauling sleds could only bray like orphaned calves as they scrambled as fast as their stubby shanks could carry them. (In the Alfred Hitchcock version of that story I would have run across the path of an actual werewolf and been eaten for my treachery—and I would have deserved it. But, alas, I lived to persecute another day.)

By the time I hit my early teens, I had found better things to do than balancing margarine tubs full of water atop bedroom doors or offering people “special pickles” that were actually hot peppers. But, my decade-long reign of terror is legendary among my siblings, who gather at holidays to retell with grim expressions and monotone voices of their suffering. I imagine that, in my absence, they sit in a circle of chairs, introducing themselves anonymously and referring to me in whispers and curses.

The one mean thing I remember most, probably because it still bothers me, is when I was around 7. My parents had just split, sending Adam, ma and me to a crummy house apartment in the city while dad stayed home. We took very little with us, leaving all but the essentials to sparsely fill the new living quarters. The only toy I ever remember Adam playing with at that time was a plush Bozo The Clown doll with a broken pull-string and a blue jumpsuit.

One day I decided it would be cool to take a pair of Snoopy safety scissors and give Bozo’s orange yarn hair a trim. I clipped and clipped until the head was bald but for the pumpkin stubble.

Adam was crushed. The already creepy clown now looked like a mental patient on chemo. And, still, he carried that thing around with him wherever he went.

So, that's why I found myself ordering an extremely used Bozo The Clown doll at 10 p.m. last Saturday. I'm sure Adam forgave me a long time ago, but I'm selfishly hoping this gesture assuages some of the guilt I feel about my past behavior in general. Of course, this could totally backfire: "Hey, remember that time you were emotionally devastated by our parents' divorce and I mutilated your only toy ... and 32 years later wrote about it in the newspaper?" What could possibly go wrong?

Now I just need to find someone with a werewolf costume who's willing to make me do the splits while someone dressed like my mother slaps me.

KUMQUAT FERRARI 2029

A Glimpse At My Future

“Fifty-four,” she said. “That’s how old you’ll be when you die. I’ve always known it.”

I smiled and tried to play it off like it was nothing. After all, it had been me who pushed her to tell me. It had been me who remembered her slip of the tongue during happy hour the week before. It had been me who overheard her tell our college-age daughter that she—my wife—knew the years that both her children and her husband would croak. As soon as she said it, I looked up from the table to see her shocked at herself for spilling this little secret she’d been holding onto for a good many years.

Let me explain that the wife does not fancy herself a psychic. And she knows I don’t believe in any of that magical hooey, from religion to mystics to ghosts, goblins, souls or spirits. But, she said she was worrying about one of our kids while they were sick and she said the realization just washed over her and she suddenly knew the respective dates of our deaths. Well, the years, anyway. Not the exact dates.

It all started on a Saturday evening at home. As we sometimes do to unwind from the week, we turned on the classic rock hits station and poured a couple glasses of adult beverage. We were doing fine until Rod Stewart’s “The Young Turks” song came on. “Laaaaame!” shouted the daughter from the other room as her uncool parents turned up the volume on this uncool song that just happens to be

“our” uncool song.

“This is a great song,” I protested. “You have to listen to the words.” The wife and I then proceeded to sing along, stopping to repeat—with the enthusiasm of the inebriated—parts of the melody that directly applied to our life. “The song’s about us,” I said. “Or, it was about us when we were young.”

The daughter chided further, moving into the dining room to make some point about old person music and how Lady GaGa was really where it’s at. Somehow the conversation turned to death and dying and that was when the wife—who scoffs just as heartily at television mediums as do I—let slip that she was the owner of a genuine Old Testament-style premonition.

Sure, I pooh-poohed it as hogwash, but even a diehard skeptic like me couldn’t shake what she’d said. A few days later I asked her to tell me my death age. She refused, so I turned on that old Gohs charm, by which I mean I told her I would pester her nonstop until I died if she did not tell me. Hesitantly, knowing how easily a hypochondriac like me gets worked up, she said the words: “54.”

“Fifty-four?” I said in absolute indignation. “Fifty-frickin-four?” I mean, at my weight, diet and routine of alcohol consumption and very little sleep, 54 was likely being really generous. John Candy was like 43 when he keeled over and I’m not too far behind him in the physical health category, so I’m thinking that seems more realistic. But it was hearing the number that was so shocking.

I know it’s crap. I know there is no way she could know the year of my demise. But, still, there was that little part of me that couldn’t help but wonder. If nothing else, what if she did just happened to be right? What would I do with my remaining fifteen years? I mean, to be fair, lots of people don’t live to see eighteen or twenty-five or thirty-five, so fifty-four is really not so bad.

Fifteen years is a very long time for someone in prison, or an unavoidable conversation with the guy everyone in the office tries to stay away from. Fifteen years is a long time to stand on your head or to watch reruns of *WKRP in Cincinnati*. But it’s also short. It’s less

time than I've been with my wife. It's less time than I've known how to drive. For someone who has just watched nearly 40 years fly by, 15 years suddenly seems all too brief.

As uneasy as I am about knowing my date of demise, the year 2029 seems kind of cool. It's the kind of number you could see in the title of a science fiction movie about a future Earth where robotic bears battle giant radioactive bees for a race of enslaved humans they plan to use for food, servants and fertilizer. The humans' only hope is a ruggedly handsome forest dweller named Kumquat Ferrari, who leads his people to freedom on the back of his trusty trained battle hippopotamus named "Steve."

That must be it. The wife said I would die in 2029 but she didn't say how. I must die in battle while freeing my tribe from the bearbots and the bee mutants. It probably all began in 2025, when Sarah Palin was elected president. (She didn't actually take office until January of 2026.)

As is usual at a presidential inauguration, many dignitaries and celebrities were in attendance. The list included Vladimir Putin—still the leader of Russia because he named himself "Premier for life" in 2018. He also named himself sexiest man in Moscow eleven years running.

Legend has it that Madam President, in all her moosey wisdom, made a bit of a faux pas which set in motion a chain of events that would drastically change the course of world occurrences.

Instead of referring to the Russian leader as "Mr. Putin" or "Vladimir," she mistook him for another Vlad and called him "Mr. Impaler." At the time, he politely laughed it off. Unfortunately, this continued through the swearing-in ceremony and throughout dinner—her staff being too frightened to correct her. (The last assistant to give her lip was mysteriously shot, by a gunman in a helicopter, while out jogging for his life in the Alaskan wilderness.) By dessert she was so drunk she was calling the premier "Vladypoo" and hitting on his wife who is quite manish.

Putin was so insulted he left the dinner and flew straight home

without stopping off at the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame in Ohio as he had planned. As soon as he got home, Putin executed a plan the Soviets had been holding onto for many decades: Operation Buzz-Buzz Growl. Admittedly a terrible name, but it ended up being a highly successful plan.

Shortly after Palin took office, two days to be exact, she received the gift of a giant set of Russian nesting dolls. It actually arrived the day before but no one came to the door to sign for it so the White House got one of those little yellow cards telling them they had to come down to the post office to pick up the package.

Of course, they never bothered checking off the little box that's supposed to tell you what's waiting to be delivered, so the Secret Service had no idea it was a giant package. When I say "giant" I mean the biggest one was like 20 feet tall and at least as big around as a two-car garage. (You know, if a garage was round and 20 feet tall.)

So, anyways, inside the first nesting doll was another nesting doll. Inside that doll was another nesting doll. But, inside like the third or fourth nesting doll was a small group (six to twelve depending on which newspapers you read at the time) of enormous Robotic Russian Attack Bears known as RRABs. Again, not a great name but a deadly weapon, nonetheless.

The Secret Service tried to stop the bears from mauling everyone at the gift-opening ceremony (Did I mention the nesting dolls were opened at a gift-opening ceremony?) but if they couldn't stop an a-hole with a butter knife from running across the lawn and into the White House recently, you know, how were they going to stop robot attack bears? Right? Right.

Luckily, President Palin was out snowmobiling down Pennsylvania Avenue that day so she wasn't hurt by the bears or the stray Secret Service bullets that actually killed more civilians than the bears did.

The RRABs ran off into the woods and up into the mountains where they mated with real bears and had little bear-droid babies

that grew up to be even more deadly because they were shunned by both full-blooded bears and the full-blooded bear-bots.

Then, a couple years later, when the bear-droids were fully grown and really out-of-control emotionally (Teenagers!), Putin sent them orders, also by USPS, to begin attacking all of America's cities and destroy the USA.

When the American military failed against the million-strong bear-bot army (what can I say, they were having a lot of unprotected bear sex) acting President Todd Palin (this gets explained later) ordered all of the country's bees to be taken to nuclear power plants so they could be "radiationed on up" as he said, so they could become giant angry mutant bees like what happened to the *Incredible Hulk*, sort of.

But, when the giant angry bees and the giant angry bears met on the battlefield, they quickly became friends and, as the president said, "went all mavericky on us" and they decided to enslave the human race instead.

For the next couple years, the human race toiled making giant doorways and enormous windowsills that could hold all those giant beehives. All the car manufacturers were retrofitted to make robot bear replacement parts. They mostly made giant bear hips and giant mechanical bear weenies because those seemed to wear out the quickest.

Then, in the year 2029, after years of slaving away at a pro robot bear propaganda newspaper (The Daily Maul), I changed my name and led my people to freedom.

I died in the battle of D.C., while heroically kicking a bear-bot in his big robotic bear balls. Simultaneously, I also got stung in both eyes by a giant angry mutant bee, and you really just can't bounce back from something like that, not at the age of 54.

My last words were just a lot of confused swearing and crying while I rubbed my eyes a lot. I'm sure the history books will change it to something heroic and noble like, "Somebody kill that cocksucker that stung me!"

However, I have to imagine that, before I went off into that great Taco Bell in the sky, I gave a triumphant speech that inspired my people to fight for their freedom. You remember that kick-ass speech Mel Gibson gave in the movie *Braveheart*? Well, my speech was like seven-and-a-half times more kick-ass than that. But, don't take my word for it. [No, really, don't take my word for it. The legal department says I cannot actually say for sure that the following is an accurate depiction of the future. So, please keep in mind that this is just one of several possible future realities. *Also please keep in mind that the legal department is stupid and ugly and I hate them.*]

INSPIRATIONAL WORDS FROM KUMQUAT FERRARI

Battle of D.C. Speech, by Kumquat Ferrari (that's me) 2029 A.D. (No relation to Guy Fieri.)

I know you're all feeling scared right now at the prospect of facing robotic bears and giant radioactive bees. It's OK. I've soiled myself at least three times already this morning, and not just because all we have to eat is that rotten moss stew.

Some of us will not survive this day—I'm talking about you, Bob! I know some have said this battle is un-winnable. Some have questioned how they could follow a man named "Kumquat Ferrari." Others still have wondered why I keep sleeping with their wives. To them, I say, you will be the first to go into battle. So watch your ass!

I know it hasn't been easy these last few years, toiling in the honey mines and changing the fuses on the bear-bots. (Whose idea was it to locate the fuse box in that orifice? Am I right?) Bob knows what I'm talking about. C'mon, Bob, don't be like that. I was just kidding about you not living to see tomorrow.

I understand the urge to surrender to the bees and the bears and leave the rest of us holding the proverbial bag. (And I don't mean Bob's wife.) Hell, up until about 15 minutes ago, I was planning to do the same. But then I looked at all of your innocent, trusting faces and I realized that I'm just not cut out for manual labor any more. We gotta win this one because my back is killing me.

My only regret is that President Sarah Palin couldn't be here to witness this battle. While I did not vote for her, I did think of her fondly when I pleased myself angrily and often. I'm sure some of you will remember she was taken from us far too soon when she mistook a toaster for a mechanical hand warmer.

The Secret Service tried to stop her but she insisted, yelling something about a maverick not needing any gosh darn directions on how to use no liberal hand-warmy-majig.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this for you: the lasers coming out of those bears' mouths are about 12,000 degrees. Old Bob over there just looked at one for about a second and it scorched off his eyebrows.

And you don't even want to know what their claw missiles can do. Let's just say Bob's newest hobby rhymes with "colostomy."

And don't even get me started on the bees. Although there is some good news for those of you sensitive to bee stings because the stingers are so goddamn big you'll die whether you're allergic or not.

I, uh, had written up this big kick-ass plan on how to defeat the bears and the bees by dressing up like lady bees and girl bears, waiting until they asked us out on dates and then stabbing them in their hearts during dessert, but Bob over there left the plans at his mom's house. Way to go, Bob!

Anyways, we really didn't have the money or materials to do more than three or four costumes, so it prolly wouldn't have worked.

So, here's what we're going to do: Me and my trusty steed Steve the hippopotamus, here, are gonna ride out to meet them on the battlefield. When I get close enough I'm going to start kicking them in their bear and bee junk, and when they double over in pain I'm gonna conk 'em over their big stupid heads with this big hard hammer. You pussies do whatever you think is best and I'll meet you on the other side.

Alright everybody, "Hippopotamus!" on three and then we charge.

One ... Two ... Three!

PLANNING FOR THE WORST

In The Event Of My Unlikely Deaths

Even if the wife is spot on with her prognostication of my doom day, the exact “how” will continue to haunt me. After all, it’s a big question: How will any of us die? Who cares. I’m only interested in how I will die. Not so much interested as obsessed. For those of you not locked in the nightmarish self-imposed prison of hypochondria, it might seem a bit strange to compile a list of potential causes of death. But, since I can’t bank on my demise occurring while riding a hippopotamus into battle, I have to be prepared.

According to a good friend on the internet, who also happens to be a Nigerian Prince, about a hundred people choke to death on ballpoint pens each year. I’m already afraid of rolling out of bed and breaking my neck, which is a real thing for about 450 people each year, and now I have to worry that my ink pen is trying to kill me?

I fall asleep while reading all the time. I can only imagine how easy it would be to pop my pen in my mouth, doze off and dream I’m playing foosball with Tom Selleck, only to wake up just in time to find myself gagging on a Bic Atlantis 0.5 mm #2 HB mechanical pencil (Yes, I want a free life-time supply, though I’m not sure the best way to get them is by fantasizing about the world’s greatest TV and movie actor.) before the screen goes black and the director rolls credits on my ass.

Instead of becoming a famous author I would end up a statistic in an *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader* with an entry along the lines of “Did you know that 101 morons died by swallowing pencils last year alone?”

And, how do you eulogize somebody who dies in a ridiculous way without the first couple rows of mourners cracking up?

“Here lies Gohs, he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the drawer. We always kinda figured he’d choke to death, but on a hamburger or, more likely, a large pizza—an entire, unsliced pizza. He is survived by his wife, children and that kid down the street who eats paint chips but somehow managed to master the clicky pen. We’re taking up a collection for his children because the money he was supposed to have spent on life insurance he blew on cherry whiskey, Taco Bell and David Sedaris books. His wife is looking for a new husband, preferably one who did not ride the short bus to school.”

If nothing else, middle age, more than anything else, seems to get you thinking about your ultimate demise. I may have lived like a coward but I don’t want to die like an idiot.

Most of us walk around fearing traditional, respectable deaths caused by common ailments: cancer, heart disease, American spy drones. How many of us spend any time thinking about getting hit by a car or slipping in the tub? But the truth is those things, though considerably fewer, are real dangers that need to be handled with care.

Somehow, with my busy schedule, I still seem to find the time to obsess over even the remotest danger. I once thought I was having a major allergic reaction on my arms one night until I realized the spots were dried beet juice from when I’d prepared dinner earlier in the evening.

Then there was the time I sweated for days over a lump on my spine until it burst, revealing itself as a giant pimple. (Same thing happened down south. Thought for sure the doctor was going to have to amputate my beanbag. Apparently, the world’s fastest growing scrotal tumor also turned out to be a giant pimple.)

OTHER STRANGE WAYS TO DIE

- 2,900 people killed annually by Hippos
- 600 by auto-erotic asphyxiation
- 15 by falling icicles

- A dozen are crushed by tipping soda machines
- 40 by jellyfish
- 150 from falling coconuts
- 30 by ants—ants!
- 34 by dogs

DIRECTIONS FOR DISPOSING OF MY BODY

Sooner or later, dear the wife, one of us is going to be the one to die first, unless we get hit by a train while arguing over who should get out and push the stalled car.

So, if you're reading this, then I have gone to that great fat farm in the sky ... or I'm forcing you to proofread this because no publisher could pull their head out of their butt long enough to sign me—again!

However, there is good news and bad news. Statistically speaking, I am more likely to keel over long before you do. Now for the bad news: my entire life I have settled for second best when it came to the quality of products I have owned. Strike that. I would have been happy to have second best. I was usually stuck making due with third best, fourth best, fifth best. Hell, after second best, I don't even think you can refer to them as "best" any more. I spent my years with low-grade items that made second-hand seem like new.

So, for once in my miserable life, I would like to have the very best of something. And, no, the irony does not escape me now that I am dead.

First, I changed my mind about being cremated. Frankly, it was your idea anyway. I want you to take me to one of those extreme taxidermy guys. You know, the ones who'll create jackalopes and hairy trout and skunks reenacting the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

I want you to spare no expense. (I'm sure your new rich doctor husband can afford it.) Have this guy take about 200 pounds off me so I can be buff for once in my life. Make sure he uses plenty of silicone to make me look like I have lots of muscles. I'm thinking Schwarzenegger circa 1980.

Next, I want to be dressed in footie pajamas, the kind with the

button-down butt flap. I want one button left adorably undone. I want the big pink bunny slippers like Ralphie wore on *A Christmas Story* and I want to be holding our dog Berber (Maisy), who will also be stuffed and made to look overly muscular. (She should also be wearing little bunny slippers.)

Now that I'm kicking the idea of eternal still life around, I'm thinking of all these other cool poses and costumes. Make sure the taxidermist makes me fully poseable like a G.I. Joe action figure, not a goddamn He-Man doll. (Except I don't want a rubber band holding my abdomen to my crotch.)

POSSIBLE OTHER OUTFITS/POSES

- Mexican wrestler – must have luciadore mask, intercontinental championship belt and cape
- Batman costume – self-explanatory
- Tuxedo – swim fins instead of shoes and wearing a snorkel
- Black face – Dressed like Al Jolson
- Creepy clown – Ronald McDonald will do since he's killed more people than Hitler
- Waiter at a fancy restaurant but has an eye patch on – must include John Waters-style pencil mustache
- The bad guy from "Scream" plus cowboy boots – not the costume, just make me look like David Arquette
- Crappy homemade ghost costume that looks a little too much like a KKK outfit
- Bigfoot costume – no mask. Just my head on a Bigfoot's body
- Nude, riding a dolphin and playing a guitar
- Nude, cradling and bottle-feeding (or breastfeeding) a raccoon
- Roman soldier, also plus cowboy boots

IT'S CURTAINS, SEE, CURTAINS!

The wife and I had our first discussion about life insurance the other day. It was less of a discussion and more of brief uncomfortable staring contest as we eyed the bank envelope containing a flier that

promised low introductory rates which guaranteed to ease our financial burden should one of us kick off. “Should” ... as if there was a chance we weren’t both headed for the great sausage grinder in the sky.

Frankly, with both of us getting a start on our respective careers over a decade late, and not buying our first home until five years ago, the last thing we were planning to spend money on right now was life insurance.

And, while those melodramatic commercials intended to guilt you into buying are pretty convincing, I’m not sure I want my wife to have that easy of a time once I’m gone—especially after I recently found out some guy at church was sniffing around her a few years ago. I just found out this spring but was as furious as if it had just happened.

Of course, I’m not worried about the wife. First, she’s as trustworthy and committed a spouse as one could hope for. (At least, that what she tells me.) Second, if she did run away with another man, no one—myself included—could blame her. What can I say, I am a handful. Frankly, I haven’t made it easy on her. (Hell, if you’ve read this far, you know.)

It really was all my fault. As a bad husband, I have only attended her church on two occasions and they were both for some kind of religious graduation of our children. I think they went from white belt to brown belt or got their wings or moved from Hufflepuff to Gryffindor or something. So, needless to say, my absence has been noticed.

Also, I stopped wearing a wedding ring a long time ago because my fingers got too fat and I was too cheap to buy another ring. The wife took this as her opportunity to engage her feminist side and decided that she was not livestock to be marked and tagged—even if by jewelry—and so she, too, stopped wearing a ring.

Despite having gone ring-less, I don’t really worry about her leaving me. If anything, I should probably worry about anyone who would have me as a husband. (What’s wrong with her, anyway?)

But, apparently, all it takes is an absentee husband and a naked left hand to convince a would-be sweet Pete that a woman is open for business.

Anyways, enough about my insane jealousy and pathological insecurity, you've got to hand it to the life insurance companies because they've even begun to sway me, king of the cheapskates.

The life insurance commercials generally go a little something like this:

“Hi, Joan. How have you been coping since Jim passed away?”

“It's been tough but at least I have this policy from Colonial Life to help with the final expenses.”

And then the comforting voice of an older gentleman starts in as the two women sip their tea in what appears to be the break room of a modular housing manufacturing facility:

“For just 30 cents a day, you can have peace of mind knowing Colonial Life has you covered for those unexpected costs.”

What I actually hear is quite different.

Concerned lady friend: “How are things since Ben passed on?”

The Wife: “It was really tough there at the end. I didn't think he was ever going to die.”

Concerned lady friend: “What are you going to do about the funeral costs?”

The Wife: “I took out a life insurance policy on the fat pig like fifteen years ago. And, thanks to Colonial Life and a little vegetable oil on the basement steps, I now have enough to pay for cremation at the veterinary hospital with some leftover to move to Vegas and find a man who doesn't have a penis like a midget's thumb.”

Concerned friend: ... (uncomfortable silence)

The Wife: “Maybe I'll call that guy from church.”

On second thought, screw the insurance. Frankly, I don't want to contribute any more to my going away party—or her happy second marriage—than I have to.

THE FUNERAL I DESERVE

A Few Finishing Touches

Let me begin by saying that being of sound mind and body are two highly subjective criteria. Is anyone in this world ever of sound mind and body? And by whose standards are we measuring soundness? Folks who believe in magical beings are thought of, by their peers, to be perfectly sane.

You can get away with talking to invisible Jesus but if I argue with an invisible rutabaga I'm a nutcase. You see where I'm going with this. (Please tell me you see where I'm going with this.)

Nonetheless, I'm sure the probate courts can figure out anything that I may not have done right in this, my last will and testament.

For starters, what money I didn't spend on planning my funeral went to hiring the undocumented immigrants who have been instructed to murder you in your sleep should you deviate in the slightest from my final wishes.

That said, funerals are just too damned depressing. I've never actually been to one but I've seen plenty of them on the TV. And, frankly, if you can't put a little fun in funeral, then I don't want anything to do with it. So, here are my plans for the Benjamin J. Gohs Memorial Death-a-bration.

If I'm going to be stuck doing the traditional service thing, then I want it done my way. If it were up to me, I'd just have my ashes sprinkled out in the woods somewhere. But, the wife says I have to

have some kind of public service that allows friends and family to have an excuse to miss work and school.

Fine. You want me to have a funeral, then I'll have a muck-a-ruckin funeral! But I want it to be *my* funeral.

I want the folks in the back row to scream "yee-ha!"

I want people doing shots of hard liquor during the eulogy.

I want the cops to show up because the neighbors complained about the noise.

I want at least one of my friends to get a hasty BJ in the balcony from a married woman while her husband is in the john.

I want TMZ to be showing pictures of my funeral on TV.

I want one of my brothers to punch a photographer in the face.

I want a priest to punch one of my brothers in the face.

I want someone to show up who is actually named "Hasty BJ."

I guess it doesn't matter what kind of a church my funeral is held in ... as long as it's Catholic. Most of my family was raised Catholic (I think) and, even though I am a heathen, I figure it might offer some of them a little comfort to show up at a venue they find familiar.

Now that the location is settled, we need to find hosts. Obviously I want my brother Hammy to run the show but I have a short list of celebrities I'd like to have make an appearance and dote over my corpse a little. They may or may not deliver the eulogy, as I'd also like to have someone emcee the long list of events which I have planned throughout the day. My go-to hosts include Patton Oswalt, Roger Clinton and Betty White (together) and, only as a last resort, Ted Nugent.

As far as the entertainment goes, I am thinking we should have two or three bands. You can't swing a dead cat in my family without hitting a guitarist (or a dead cat), so that shouldn't be too difficult to manage.

Now, as far as activities—so many activities—there should be a minimum of the following: dwarf tossing area, outdoor turkey shoot, bobbing for dildos (for the ladies), wet T-shirt contest, female bum fights, tattoo booth, make-your-own-sundae bar, petting zoo

(for the kids), an Elvis impersonator, a Mexican man dressed as Santa Claus who will be referred to as “Santana Claus,” and Penn and Teller should do 15 minutes or so right before the half-time show.

The half-time show will consist of two teams of naked Chinese men shooting each other with paintball guns. Last man standing drinks free the rest of the night and gets his choice of lady bums.

The doors on the venue will be locked precisely at noon, and no one will be allowed to leave until their blood alcohol content is at least three times the legal limit for operating motor vehicles.

Rickshaws and tricycles will be provided for guest transportation home.

Now on to the eulogy. I’ve decided I want Bobcat Goldthwait to deliver my tribute. If he’s not available, then get Gilbert Gottfried. If not him, then I guess get Ludwig to do it.

EPILOGUE SHMEPILOGUE

Ben's Eulogy

Dearest beloved, we are gathered here today to carry on as though this guy was far less of an asshole than he really was. Benjamin died suddenly after falling off his roof.

The paramedics tried to save him but he fought off their attempts, and they were forced to Taser him until he collapsed in a melange of his own bodily fluids.

Some say Ben left this world drunk and confused. Others say he was just drunk. Either way, he was completely naked, if you don't count the boots, scarf, and aviator goggles.

Benjamin was a poetic man.

He used to sip his beloved cherry whiskey while reciting prose.

"The fault dear Cassius, is not in the stars but in ourselves," he would say between drinks.

A deep man, he liked to toast each new glass of spirits with one of his myriad musings.

"Let's kick sobriety in the dick," he'd say, and then he would.

When he wasn't dick-kicking, Benjamin enjoyed a wide variety of leisure time activities that included eating Taco Bell and writing filthy homoerotic letters to his brothers.

He also enjoyed stuffing sweaty wads of cash into the G-strings of strippers. Though, not as much as he enjoyed stuffing his face between their sweaty breasts.

A simple man, Benjamin enjoyed the simple things in life: sitting

in his rocking chair while cleaning his shotgun and saying things like “Storms a-comin” and “Bout time to harvest the rutabaga” in his 1840s miner voice.

Benjamin was a gentle, patient man, unless you pissed him off. Then he would yell quite loudly and throw things at you. His favorite things to throw were shoes and boots, though he was also fond of throwing books and dishes—really anything which could be hurled with malicious intent.

The consummate family man, Benjamin loved his wife dearly, and he never fantasized about running away to Mexico with two strippers and a midget butler.

A great father (the world’s greatest, according to some coffee cups) Benjamin adored his children and didn’t at all think they were lazy or dumb.

Ben was an animal lover (but not like that one tabloid claimed) and took wonderful care of his Shih Tzu Maisy.

In hopes of decreasing the suffering of all animals, Benjamin also abstained from the eating of meat, except for thin sliced smoked deli turkey, because turkeys are stupid and ugly, and also delicious.

A charitable man, Ben never hesitated to give money to needy single mothers, for he knew that every dollar bill he gave those young dancers would bring them one step closer to his lap.

Benjamin Gohs wasn’t an educated man. But, despite having dropped out of college after only a half of a semester, he had opinions on a great many things.

Ben could always tell when he was smarter than someone else, especially if they disagreed with him.

And, though his answers to the Jeopardy TV show questions were often wrong, he always yelled them the loudest.

What can we say about Benny that hasn’t already been written on the FBI’s 10 Most Wanted list?

An avid film buff, Ben loved old movies of all genres. *It’s A Wonderful Life* was his favorite movie to watch ... with his pants on.

An admirer of pornography, Ben’s favorite subjects to watch

were older women in their 40s and 50s. Some have said this was due to the complicated relationship he had with his mother. Others have said this is because he was a pervert.

Far from a religious man, Ben preferred to put his faith in science. His final wishes were to be stored in cryogenic suspension so that, if scientists ever figured out a way to cure death by electrocution after falling off a roof drunk, he would be thawed. He also noted that, while you're at it, give him liposuction and a much bigger penis.

Luckily, his wife had him cremated. Now stay tuned for a performance by special guests Penn & Teller.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin J. Gohs is the author of humor books *I'm So Great & Other Delusions*, *Frickin 40*, and the e-book *And Eventually ... Death*. He also has a soon-to-be-published funny science fiction anthology entitled *Martian Women Have No Nipples*, and his third collection of humor essays *Who Drugged The Baby?* is in production.

His recurring newspaper columns *The Crying Towel* and *Don't Get Me Wrong* have been published for more than 10 years combined.

Benjamin has also been a humor and news correspondent on Northern Michigan radio for eight years and counting.

Benjamin lives in Northern Michigan with his very patient wife, three insane dogs, and two mostly sane children.

