

I'M SO GREAT

& other delusions of a libertarian, socialist, vegetarian, Buddhist, gun-toting, pacifist, capitalist, hypochondriac shut-in

Benjamin J. Gohs



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Stories My Parents Don't Want Me To Tell

If I were you, I wouldn't believe a lot of what's written in this book. That isn't to say that it's not all true, but even I think some of it seems a little farfetched ... and I'm the one who lived it.

Don't get me wrong, there's nothing fantastical in the following pages (way to dazzle them, Gohs.) The following stories aren't as amazing as they are just plain ridiculous. After all, I was never a super spy or a game show host or anything exciting like that. My tales concern the minor misadventures of an irregular manchild trying to survive everyday life in the Great Lakes State.

Before you delve into the low-lights of my existence, I would like to offer a few admissions. I did rip my pants on the way to the murder scene, and after portraying the Easter bunny, and again at my brother's housewarming party. It was all my fault that my wife peed her pants while my brother and I fought that bumblebee. The roadkill we skinned probably would have tasted just fine, but the homemade vodka gave me an awful stomach ache as well as the sulfuric squirts. I don't regret teasing those rottweilers until they bit me. But, pretending to raise money for cancer when I was eight was just crummy of me. Yes, I pooped the bed. But, in my defense, I had such a high fever at the time that I thought I was a riverboat captain.

Like I tell my wife when she gets frustrated with my antics: If you think it's tough being around me, you should try a day living in my head. My old mother calls that a "special kind of crazy." I believe the medical term is "functionally insane." But, like I told the motorcyclists

who ate dinner off my engine block, “I’m not a lunatic or anything.” I just happen to have a seemingly greater amount of trouble dealing with everyday tasks than other people do. And, I have a tendency to want to do things my own ridiculous way, even if that means following the tune of a different drummer right off the edge of a cliff. I’m really very adventurous ... as far as hypochondriacs go.

The trouble is that nothing’s ever really gone the way it’s supposed to have. As a child of the ‘80s, I grew up watching movie after movie where the poor downtrodden kid eventually got to live a storybook life, once he’d endured just enough torment.

Growing up in a less-than-blue collar working family with five younger brothers and a little sister (*unprotected sex was all the rage in those days*) I had the “downtrodden” and “poor” thing down pat. When my parents had jobs they worked really hard; when they didn’t have jobs they kept themselves in shape by vigorously debating just who was the bigger nimrod.

To be fair, my Lower Middle-Trash upbringing taught me a great number of things, like the value of a coyote pelt, eleven ways to cook cornmeal, and which publishing companies make the softest toilet paper—because God knows you can’t flush a sock!

I also learned that truant officers will—regardless of how big your foot warts are—come to your house if you miss enough school and, while that woman’s bikini bottom mom bought me (try finding men’s swim trunks in a small Michigan town in February) may have fooled the pool teacher ... time, gravity and simple physics were not about to go along with the charade—let’s just say “fallout” wasn’t just for atomic war anymore.

Things improved a little as I entered adulthood but it didn’t last long. I turned down an offer from my estranged sperm donor (I only ever refer to my stepfather as my dad.) to live with him in Seattle and get a job at Microsoft right out of high school—dodged a bullet with that one, Gohs!

At the age of 18 I met and horrified my future wife by getting really drunk and knocking out my best friend in the middle of the woods. Apparently long hair, a family history of alcoholism and no prospects were just too sexy to resist. We began dating a year later after her sister bribed me into it with a case of beer; she never did pay up, by the by.

I've never been homeless, unless you count living in a tent for three months, or staying in a relative's basement. I've lived in trailers, shacks, motel rooms, and houses that should have been condemned—I think one of them actually was.

Luckily there were only six of us packed into that mushroom-scented canvas sauna the summer we lived at the campground. Going to bed with marshmallow encrusted skin and a butt-crack full of sand is fine for a couple of days, but try living like that for three months. I understand full well why our pals in the Middle East are going on six shades of ooh-ee-ooh-ah-ah.

Every morning it was powdered eggs burnt to perfection and every night it was hot dogs so low in quality they stopped grading them with letters.

One night we had an extra-special treat at *Rancho Transient* when mom brought home a package of discontinued hamburger on manager's special. Now, mom said it was just a typo; but once she began cooking the "100% ALL-BOOF" patties, it was apparent that there was something wrong. It didn't smell like hamburger. It smelled like liver and something else we couldn't quite identify; and worse, it tasted like liver ... and something else we couldn't quite identify.

Nonetheless, it was a break from hot dogs, and we chowed down. They say you can eat anything if you put enough ketchup on it. OK, nobody ever said that. But, ketchup we did, and down they went.

I'll never forget that night because, as we lie there in the 90-degree heat, clutching our swollen little bellies, I longed for the mellow scent of mushrooms which had been replaced by the long slow growls of liver farts. Between the heat and the humidity the stink cloud just hung there, like a bad attitude.

By autumn, we managed to find lodging with my stepfather's mother, who looked like the Wicked Witch of the West but talked like Lawrence Welk.

"T'mma gonna gitchoo mya pritties anda youra actiona figuresa tooa!"

It wasn't long before we were yearning for the tent. Us kids weren't allowed in her house trailer from sunup to sundown, no matter how bad we had to go to the bathroom. We got around that problem by spending our days playing around a giant drainage ditch in the woods.

The only ones who saw us doing our number ones and twos outside were the possums and muskrats, and they didn't seem phased since they were doing their number ones and twos outside just the same.

When we were allowed inside we were confined to the living room, which also served as bedroom for all six of us. There was an extra bedroom in the trailer but it was filled from floor to ceiling—to ceiling!—with board games ... which we were not allowed to touch.

To make matters worse, she insisted on doing all the dinner cooking. Her menu consisted of two dishes: stuffed cabbage rolls that smelled roughly like Satan's butt and chicken noodle soup with whole chunks of chicken—skin, gristle, bone and all. Granted, I've never actually smelled Satan's butt, but I would be willing to bet my mortal casing that it smells just like her cabbage rolls.

Worse than her sulphur casserole were the slimy rubber chicken skins I remember trying to swallow without tripping the hammer on my hair trigger gag reflexes. I once remember my mother trying to tell the doctor not to use a tongue depressor on me, but it took me yurking Co-Co Wheats up his sleeve to convince him it was a bad idea.

We finally got out of the wicked witch's place following the now infamous "My Dinner!" incident. I won't get into too much detail, but let's just say that a face was slapped, a box of food from Kentucky Fried Chicken was stomped on and the words "My Dinner!" were screamed with the volume and affectation of a Shakespearean monologue. (The incident is legendary on the trailer park circuit.)

And then there were the jobs. I've done just about everything for a dollar that you can imagine short of hooking and armed robbery. Don't get me wrong, the idea of getting paid to do the hunka-chunka sounds mighty fine but I'm built for utility, not looks. Nobody ever takes a station wagon to a car show. I guess working for the casino was a form of stealing. And, selling vacuums door-to-door has to be some sort of prostitution: sweaty gobs of cash change hands, both parties feel dirty about the whole thing and the customer certainly does get fu... well, you get the point.

Speaking of crappy jobs, when I was seventeen I picked up poop at my dad's dog training business for \$10 a week. Every morning I followed the same routine: rake poop—some mummified, some steaming—into a dustpan, gag, vomit, repeat.

The dogs sneered as I dry-heaved.

There is something humbling about being so low on life's roster, but I collected my \$2 a day which kept me in pop and cigarettes.

When I say “at my dad's dog training business” what I really mean is “at home.” At any given time we had a half-dozen or so dogs inside the house with us and another half dozen or so out in the kennel. Morning, noon and night it was jingling collar chains, scratching paws and wave after wave of beefy dog farts. I say “beefy” because, unlike us kids, the dogs were given only premium food stuffs. Only the best for creatures that eat their own vomit and sniff each other's butts.

Like Tolstoy—the author, not my wife's dog—said, our family was unhappy in its own unique way. We were almost always poor. I wouldn't say we were “dirt poor” because that makes it sound like we owned land, which we did not. We did almost crest the hill of Middle Class once for about six months when dad's carpentry business became very successful. This was in the pre-dog training days and, thanks to some thieving employees, it was short-lived. It wasn't our family's first medium-sized catastrophe and it wouldn't be the last.

It is no secret that I got my vaudevillian-style bad luck from dad. I also inherited his charming thousand-yard stare and taste for whiskey: two must-haves for any perennial underdog.

The old man was a veteran of the army, a highly decorated sniper and jack of all trades. By all accounts he is the toughest and most skilled person I have ever met. He taught me how to shoot, skin an animal, fix a car, fish, build a rain shelter out of ferns, start a fire with wet wood and how to defend myself.

But, for such a serious guy, he liked to joke around—a lot. To be fair, his sense of humor ranged from cringe-worthy to snot-bubble-blowing funny. His rendition of the Conagra Foods' Banquet Chicken “I Feel Like Chicken Tonight” jingle is a must-see. If we were having chicken for dinner, he would sing “I feel like chicken ta-night, chicken ta-night” while dancing around and pantomiming his hands as both the chicken's beak and tail-feathers. He also liked to amuse himself by jumping out from seemingly nowhere, flashing his Maglite in your eyes and shouting “Is that bright?!”

While the origins of his “comedy stylings” remain a mystery, mine

do not. For reasons I still do not completely understand, my ridiculous mistakes seem to act as some kind of warped aphrodisiac for people's funny bones—less of a comic genius, and more of a guy who tends to fall down the stairs at just the right time.

And then there was my mother, a fantastic artist who could paint portrait-quality art from a photograph, but who chose to bust her butt waiting tables, working for Hospice and hospitals, and working with dad doing everything from carpentry to training dogs.

Even before my parents began training dogs my mother was the clean type. Her desire for a spotless house only worsened when the dogs moved in. We may have been poor but we weren't going to be filthy too, by god! Day and night she scrubbed our oversized hundred-years-plus-old hovel. She used so much bleach on the floors that it turned the wood gray; our eyes stung and lungs burned.

"Mom, you're using too much bleach," we'd croak in between gasps of really really clean air. "You're going to give us cancer."

"I'll cancer you," she'd always respond.

That was kind of her thing, to insert whatever subject word you just said into the sentence "I'll ___ you!" If we were hungry and wanted a sandwich she'd say "I'll sandwich you!" If you were looking for your hat and made the mistake of asking her of its whereabouts she'd respond, "I'll hat you!" To this day I'm really not sure what that was all about ... and I still do it to my kids.

Always the frugal one, mom kept the heat so low in the winter that you could see your breath, another trait I seem to have adopted. I half expected to walk in one day and find the dogs wearing fingerless gloves and standing around a burn barrel in the living room while singing doo-wop classics.

If there was a superhero for frugality, it would have been my mother.

"Hold on—My cheapskate sense is tingling!"

I had an aunt that used to separate the two-ply toilet paper and limited our usage to four squares per trip when we visited. God help you if you ever had the runs. While it never came to that in our house, I am convinced that, had we been able to afford toilet paper, my mother would have done the same thing. We got by with various grades of trade paper, rags from old T-shirts and towels, and the occasional

sock, all of which, minus the paper, we would wash and reuse.

Trying to do laundry in a house of nine people with no washer or dryer was a challenge. We eventually got a new laundry set but not before doing our fair share of frontier-style scrubbing. We did as much as we could by hand, and my brother Adam and I sometimes hauled the rest down to the laundromat in black garbage bags piled onto a wagon.

Making matters worse was the enthusiastic and abusive boy giant who lived across the road from us. He was mentally slow but the size and strength of a professional wrestler. He used to watch our house, and the second the kids and I would go outside he would appear in his yard. The moose would gallop across the street yelling “Hey! Hey!” in a deep booming voice that sounded like someone slowed a vocal track; just picture any Hollywood Satan voice. Baby Huey would follow us the mile or so down to the laundromat, taunting us by knocking our laundry bags onto the ground and trying to steal our dirty clothes.

“Why do your socks have skid marks?” he’d mock in that satanic voice of his.

Luckily, due to a lack of money, our day to day clothes were washed in the bathroom sink and hung by the living room heater vent on the off chance that the furnace might kick on during the night.

Many a winter's day I walked to school in frozen stiff blue jeans because they simply hadn't dried from the night before. You've heard the old saying “That really chaps my ass?” Well, underwear was yet another unaffordable luxury, which meant there was nothing between my tender vittles and the unforgiving rub of wet denim. Of course, that was when I was lucky enough to have pants. Every fall my mother would buy me one or, if we were living the lifestyles of the rich and famous, two pair of blue jeans.

Now, anyone with kids knows they wear through clothing fast. After all, there's only so much wood gathering, poop hauling and giant-simpleton-fighting a boy can do before his pants give out—and wear out they did. Usually by about the half-way point of the year I would have holes in the knees and the crotch of my trousers. Remember that underwear were foreign to me until I was in my 20s and we've got a serious issue.

Money was always a scarcity, so most of the time there wasn't cash for basic necessities, let alone luxuries like food and pants. Each year I'd go to school until my gilets started poking out of my jeans and then I would stay at home until they could afford to get me a pair of trousers ... or the truant officer showed up.

Slacks I could do without. After all, what kid doesn't want to spend all their time in sweatpants? It was the lack of eats that most concerned my brothers, sister and I. The only food we ever seemed to have around was surplus cornmeal, honey, a brick of government cheese and a gallon-sized container of mustard. I don't know where the mustard came from or why we had such a large amount.

Opening the refrigerator door at our house was like playing scratch-off lotto tickets: you knew the best you were going to do was get a free ticket or, in this case, some free mustard, but it was fun to pretend. Every morning I would go to the door, take a deep breath and look inside: nothing but dog medicine and the yellow menace.

Why did we have so much mustard? It's not like we had a bunch of bread and ham lying around. I mean, the dog medicine made sense because we had ... dogs! But, mustard? There was nothing to put it on. I liked to fantasize that somewhere in the world there was a guy choking down a very dry turkey sandwich.

"That's right, buddy, I've got aaaaaaaaall the mustard."

The worst part was that it has no nutritional value whatsoever. At least if it had been a jar of mayo I could have gotten a few calories out of it. I haven't been to my parents' place in years, but I'll bet you a vegan corned beef on rye that if I drove down there tomorrow and opened up the fridge, I'd see that same damned giant yellow container, three-quarters full and nothing to put it on.

Then there was marriage. As I earlier stated, I met my wife just out of high school and a few months later we decided to move up to the sticks, about 230 miles north of where we grew up. I found a job dealing blackjack and we found a mouse-infested apartment upstairs in the same building as one of my aunts. Fast-forward 10 years and I was a reporter for a small newspaper group, the wife was a school teacher and part-time professor, and we had two kids.

Nowadays I am co-owner of a modest publishing company (Don't get excited, we own a smallish weekly newspaper and a few niche

guides) The wife just finished her 15th or so master's degree and is working her way up to being a school administrator, and she still teaches college classes. Both kids are in college and we've got three dogs ... which means we're just as broke as we used to be, we just have more stuff we don't need.

All in all, life has been pretty good since those days of hand-washing and too much mustard, but all that "interesting" living, and what is increasingly looking like faulty genetics, has turned me into a world-class hypochondriac, a chronic worrier and prone to making bad decisions.

Neuroses aside, I hope you enjoy laughing at some of these minor misadventures and self-inflicted ridiculousness as much as the family enjoyed laughing at me when they happened.

No Good Deed

She wanted a Jacuzzi—bad—like a 10-year-old wants a BB gun. Don't get me wrong. She not only deserves, but needs the Jacuzzi, as 10 years of lifting the elderly as a nurses' aide have left her lower back in a nearly constant state of excruciating throb.

Being a good sport, I agreed to shop around. She fell in love with the six-seater model. It had a green marble pattern, dozens of jets, super heater, lights, music and more.

"A mere \$5,000," the salesman said.

Once I recovered from my mini stroke I reminded the wife that, while we are like the Clampetts in so many ways, we do not possess their fundage.

Hopes dashed, the idea quickly disappeared and we went on with our lives. Then one day, on my way home from work, I spotted a sheet of plywood at the end of a driveway with the words "Hot Tub, \$200" spray painted across it.

The tub was missing a few parts which are no longer in production. Instead of green marble it was gray two-by-four. This wasn't one of your frail fiberglass jobbies, neither. The thing was immense. It stood five feet tall and at least six feet across. The shell was made of two-by-six lumber with heavy iron rods wrapped around it.

But, through a mouthful of chaw, Hot Tub Guy assured me I could find the parts "on the line." I assumed by "on the line" he meant the internet. When I balked at the notion of searching for parts he knocked a hundred bucks off the price tag and disappeared into his tenement

only to return with a motherboard, a computer tower and gobs and gobs of wires and tubes.

The computer was necessary to operate the air puffer system that was used to both heat the tub and control the jets. The fact that the master control mechanism was built in roughly the same year they discovered silicon didn't seem to phase Hot Tub Guy as he assured me all I was missing was a power cord.

Wooed by the smell of spearmint Skoal and excited at the prospect of saving \$4,900 while simultaneously making the wife happy, I said "OK. Let's do it."

Hot Tub Guy spit a gob of black juice near my feet and hit the speed dial on his cell phone. Within two minutes there was a crew of *my people* (that's a nice way of saying "white trash." It's OK, I come from white trash so I can say it. It's *our* words.) hoisting the great wooden monstrosity onto a car hauler hooked to a pickup truck.

Five minutes later we arrived at Gohs Manner—the wife pretended she was thrilled. Upon closer inspection, the hot tub needed a paint job, a power cord and some new PVC pipe, but all in all it had potential.

And then, as it so often does, fate caught a whiff of Gohs' happiness and began to sneeze uncontrollably. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months and the hot tub project was soon forgotten.

Then came a rather raucous summer storm. Apparently, you must park a Buick on a hot tub cover to prevent it from flying away during a thunderstorm—I did not know this. The wife and daughter spent the better part of a Sunday morning bailing gallons of rainwater from the tub.

I, foolishly attempting to work on said Buick in my garage sanctuary, was beckoned to the tub by said wife and daughter—they got into the tub all right, but now their feet were wet and the step slippery and apparently I make a dandy railing.

"And while you're back here, why don't you and your brother Jacob move the 400-pound tub closer to the house," the wife said. Why not, it was only 90 degrees in the shade.

From her swing, Pharaoh graciously guided us, verbally, along the 20-foot move.

"A little more to the left."

“Yes, dear.”

“No, a little more to the right.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

“Ignore that lumbar swelling and drop the tub on your bad foot.”

“Aieeeee!”

“Perfect.”

Hunched, I waddled to the picnic table for sanctuary and to nurse a hot lemonade. What they don't tell you at the hot tub adoption agency is that their hollow bottoms make great habitat for wildlife and insects, especially the big, hairy stabby kind.

I may have been seated nearly a minute before the bee landed on my shoulder. Notice I didn't say “a” bee. No, it was “the” bee. A few of them flew out from a hole in the bottom of the hot tub but, judging by his lapels, this one must have been the leader.

Now, I have a tendency to exaggerate for effect, but I have been known to jump from a slow-moving car to escape a honeybee in the backseat. So, when the kiwi-sized bumblebee, with what looked like an ice pick on his butt, crawled up my neck and began dry-humping my carotid artery, I became a little unhinged.

Still hunched from my strained back, and looking slightly like a frog on steroids, I sprang from the picnic table, flailing my arms and skipping in herky-jerky half-circles. I battered my neck repeatedly but the buzzing death machine held tight. I charged the wife, still on her swing, my high-pitched screams drowned out only by my nonsensical swears—oh the swears.

“Gah! Is it gone? Blaggit! Is there anything on my back?” I screamed at the wife, who just sat there on the swing, eyes closed, head down.

“Look at me! For god's sake, why won't you look at me!?”

She was laughing. Laughing so hard, in fact, that she couldn't breathe or move or look at me.

“It's still there,” Jacob shrieked as he swatted at it just as it stung me.

The bee, possessed by Satan or possibly Ozzy Osbourne, flew around Jacob's hand and into his mouth—for god's sake, his mouth! Unconvinced the bee was gone, I continued jumping and screaming and shaking the wife. For having been so completely paralyzed by terror I was moving around quite bit.

The wife just continued convulsing, trying desperately not to pee her pants. Suddenly Jacob ran by, spitting. He did a lap around the house before performing a respectable front flip, throwing himself down and rolling on the ground.

“I thought bumblebeeth could only thting you wunth,” Jacob said through an engorged tongue.

“Stop it!” the wife yelled through snorts and cackles—apparently our suffering was dangerously hilarious.

But still I kept jumping and screaming, Jacob kept rolling, the wife kept peeing and my neighbor, who I could see over my wife's shoulder, just stood in his yard shaking his head in disgust.

Between snorts and squirts, the wife pointed to the ground behind me. It was the bee, well, it was the bee's upper half. I watched him belly crawl Hamburger Hill-style until Jacob stomped the assassin out of existence.

Finally convinced that the bee was off me, I ran into the house to spend my final moments in anaphylactic shock. The excitement came to an abrupt halt when the wife came in to get a change of pants and reminded me that I was not actually allergic to bees.

The years have come and gone but the hot tub is still sitting in the same spot. It's never been used and, judging by the amount of air traffic around it at any given time, the bumblebee colony's population has exploded.

One of these years I'll get around to putting a “For Sale” sign at the end of the driveway. I think \$200 seems like a good price.

Roadkill, Table Of Two!

As with so many minor, yet annoying adventures and mildly interesting events in my life, I am the cause of my own misery. Don't get me wrong, I volunteered for this, the latest in a long line of self-imposed irritations, but why should that stop me from complaining?

I may be a vegetarian now, but I wasn't when this event first occurred, so you PETA types and those with a weak stomach may wish to skip this story and move on to one with a little less murder. Though, if you can't find humor in chronic illness, viscera or vehicular slayings, you're not trying hard enough.

It all started when a friend—who shall henceforth be referred to as “Handsome Stranger”—rammed his car into the third deer in less than a year. He says accidents, I say rethink the shortcut through the petting zoo.

Whether his frustration over never having bagged a buck during deer season was getting the better of him I do not know. However, when Handsome Stranger told me he had kept the deer and wanted to save the meat, I volunteered to show him how to turn his roadkill into food.

In order to tell that story, I must tell you this story. When I was about 9, my family lived in a shack in the backwoods of Indian River in Northern Michigan. When I say we were poor, I mean my shoes were bound with athletic tape and we subsisted on government cornmeal and surplus honey. It was the one time in my life I don't remember there being any mustard in the fridge. However, I do remember eating lettuce sandwiches once and being told by my mother—as she

handed me a bruised apple—that it was sometimes good for you to go to bed without dinner.

The dark mood at Chateaux Drear drove my father to brave deep snow in hopes of poaching a deer. Dad returned many hours later without food. But, sitting on a stump, wielding a gray Stanley utility knife, I dry-heaved while he showed me how to skin a coyote, the pelt of which fetched enough money for some much-needed provisions.

Later, when dad took up taxidermy as a hobby, it was normal during a trip to town for him to jam on the brakes and send me scurrying across the highway for the lifeless remains of a rabbit, raccoon or possum.

With time, I overcame my queasiness, unlike my little brother Joshua—notorious for a hair-trigger stomach—who walked in on us dressing a critter one time and said, “What dat ‘mell?” before throwing up so hard I swear I saw a boot, a soup can and a fish head hit the floor. What little Joshie didn’t know was dat ‘mell was borax powder and death.

Once I became skilled at skinning, I was introduced to quartering and processing animals right at the kitchen table. I miss the taste of venison, and there is definitely something Zen about killing your own food and turning it from a living creature into burger, steaks, sausage and jerky; after that, store bought is just cheating.

My high hopes of things going better with Stranger’s deer were dashed when he said he had to postpone the task until after his colonoscopy. For those of you unfamiliar with this particular brand of torture, also known as a “Kentucky Handshake,” it involves a colon, a camera and compressed air—didn’t Burt Reynolds kill a few fellas for doing something similar to Ned Beatty during a canoe trip back in the ‘60s?

Mere hours after he was treated like a Macy’s float and injected with enough horse tranquilizer to sedate half of Horton Bay, he called. By 9 p.m. we were in latex gloves and ready to work. The amount of drug present in his system wasn’t truly apparent until I saw the area in which he expected me to work.

A 12-watt space heater kept the plywood box he called a garage at a balmy 15 degrees while the 60-watt bulb cast just enough light on the World War II surplus aluminum card table to know it couldn’t

hold a game of pinochle let alone an 80-pound white tail deer.

Worse yet was the condition of the animal. It was frozen and so stiff we could have laid it across two sawhorses ... and it would have made a better table.

A job like this would require all the Schnapps in the world. Luckily, I had brought several bottles of cheap liquor for just such an emergency. I yelled "Schnapps!" and took a mighty swig from a bottle of apple flavored booze before going to work.

We put the heater nearest the creature as we dared and commenced chiseling and cursing. I was explicit in my directions: pull gently at the skin with your left-hand while using a razor knife in your right hand to cut the connective tissue between the skin and meat. We each took a side and planned to meet at the spine.

Soon, the carcass began jumping and I could hear the low grumble of frustration. The body began shaking so violently that I could not continue skinning without the possibility of cutting myself. I stepped back and peeked around the shoulder only to find Stranger hacking at the beast with a dollar store chef knife.

"Schnapps!"

After all, if a little razor knife was good, then a great big chef knife must be better. Once again I explained my directions. By then the heater had begun to work and the skin was coming off much faster.

"Schnapps!"

With the legs naked, Stranger decided to abandon his mission to see just how much meat he could leave on the skin and began trying to remove a back leg ... with a short-handled sledgehammer. Once again the deer convulsed and once again I nearly took off my thumb.

"Schnapps!"

In between guzzles I told Gallagher to be patient, that I would show him how to remove the quarters. That was when I learned just how the animal had perished. Now, don't get me wrong, I wasn't expecting the thaw to produce a burst of orange blossom, but this was not your average stink of raw meat and wet fur. This was the kind of pungency that made you want to run out and bury your face in a skunk's keister just to get rid of the smell.

The words, "What dat 'mell?" flashed in my mind as I grabbed my gut. Stranger ceased pounding to retell Bambi's traumatic final mo-

ments.

It seems the animal was hit by not one but two speeding cars before being shot by a sheriff deputy. That explained the bullet hole and the incontinence, but shed little light on my pal's unique use of a hammer to remove the hind legs. For my own sanity, I chalked it up to the narcotic stupor.

Following several hours of cutting, trimming and frostbite we had the deer into processable chunks. It must have been midnight when we packed up our gory freak show and headed for the kitchen. Stranger's wife tried to process why two grown men with good newspaper jobs were working so hard to salvage maybe \$40 worth of meat. But we knew it was the principle of the thing.

What I hadn't prepared for was that the stiffness of the hide had caused much more hair than usual to come out in the skinning process. By the time we got the meat into the house it was nearly as furry as when we'd begun.

"Schnapps!"

We spent the next 90 or so minutes tracking blood and hair from one end of the kitchen to the other as we rinsed and sliced, chopped and rinsed the meat before wrapping it in official-looking white butcher paper.

Despite the cold, fatigue and way too much schnapps, we had the beast washed, chopped and wrapped by 1:30 a.m.

To cap the night properly, fate decided to reinforce the adage, "No good deed ..." as, while I stumbled out to meet my cab, I hit a patch of ice and performed a respectable yet painful side splits. My screams drown out the loud popping noise which accompanied my derelict descent. Lucky for me and physical therapists everywhere it was not a groin pull but a denim death knell that made all the noise. It seems the crotch of my Levis was not rated for portly gymnasts bearing 25 pounds of roadkill.

To his credit, the driver didn't harass me about the fall, the hole in my pants or the blood-soaked packages and knives bundled in my arms.

Stranger and I had planned to turn most of the meat into sausage. The summer after our little butchering session we had met for drinks at the local pub. He asked me if I'd tried any of the venison. I confided

that I had been so afraid of contamination that I had thrown it all away months ago. Apparently, so had he.

We laughed, clinked our glasses and gave a cheer to an evening neither of us would ever forget.

Placism's Ugly Face

I have a dream that one day people won't judge each other based upon where they come from.

Oh, they don't wear white hoods or burn torches, and you'll never catch them holding rallies, but there is an ever-growing number of placists in our local population. You know who you are, driving around town in summer, grumbling about the traffic, the noise and the seemingly inept pedestrians.

The urge to floor the gas pedal and play *tourist bowling* with your Buick may be a strong one, but before you sideswipe a family of six for stopping in the crosswalk to take pictures of potholes, remember that placism is an ugly, ugly thing.

Placism in Northern Michigan is most often aimed at fudgies. For those of you unawares, a "Fudgie" is one who heads into Northern Michigan during summer months to purchase large quantities of over-priced fudge, take pictures of seagulls pooping on other tourists and hold contests to see just how slowly they can cross the road without getting creamed.

Granted, they can be annoying. I once remember sitting in stopped traffic because a small group of out-of-towners had decided to use the northbound lane as a directional kiosk. Tired of waiting for them to get directions from a man in a pickup stopped in the southbound lane (this happens far too often around here) I honked my horn. Apparently these fudgies hailed from a locale that frowned upon horn blowing.

“I’m on vacation!” the larger male fudgie screamed at me before turning back to finish getting his directions.

Occasional rudeness aside, the level of anti-fudgism has grown to frightening proportions. It’s gotten to the point where “Fudge” has become a four letter word. I half expect to see ruffians in overcoats selling it in dark alleyways.

“Psst. Hey buddy, wanna buy Double Chocolate or Fantasy? I got the good stuff—100 percent pure Mackinaw.”

“Not me,” you say to yourself.

“I’m no placist. Why, some of my best friends are fudgies.”

When the truth is you might have no problem talking to them at the local coffee shop, but you’ll be damned if you’re going to let your daughter date one.

Oh it usually starts off innocent enough, with a look and muttering something under your breath along the lines of, “Why don’t you go back where you came from.” The next thing you know you’re letting the “F” word fly. And let me tell you my friends, once you start using the word “Fudgie” there is no turning back. So, before you take that step down the awful road to placism, stop and think about the people behind the label.

“Fudgie” is actually a slang term for Traveling Fudge-Loving American, which was originally coined in the early 20th Century by the first anti-fudge movement.

What early anti-fudgites did not understand is that fudgies cannot fight the instinct to travel any more than they can stop buying confections or shirts that read: “I’m with stupid!”

Some tried to blame candy makers for creating a decadent treat so delicious, but for the most part these confectioners were tolerated as long as their sales were kept to the summer months.

Despite the fact that geography, not chemistry, makes you a fudgie, the question remains, what is it that makes fudge so irresistible? The magical powers it possesses draws normally lucid folks hundreds or even thousands of miles from their homes. Its ability to reduce normally snappy dressers to wearing Hawaiian shirts and neon framed sunglasses cannot be overstated.

Understandably some beleaguered townspeople will inevitably be distraught by the sudden swarm of disoriented vacationers clad in khaki shorts and brown sandals driving recreational vehicles the size of double-

wide trailers and taking pictures of anything that won't flee from their snapping, flashing, finger pointing frenzy.

But all this brings us to the real crux ...What's in a name? Would a tourist by any other tag be any less desirable?

To my never-ending shame I grew up in a household full of anti-fudgites. When I was a kid I heard the name "Fudgie" scorned as though it carried satanic connotation. It was whispered by my grandparents with the same tone of fearful contempt they used to utter "Cancer" and "Polio."

As a child I lived in Cheboygan, Indian River and Onaway, so I had always heard the "F" word but I had never actually laid eyes on one until I moved to Charlevoix. Oh, sure, there were the summers spent up on Lake Huron when my uncle and I would set fudgie traps by digging small holes in the beach and filling them with short sharp sticks, but we never actually caught anything.

Once I finally saw a few of these creatures I realized there was nothing to be frightened of. Convinced there was something positive about these so-called Fudgies, I set out on a quest to follow the migrating and spending patterns of these fascinating beasts.

I learned that the common North American Fudgie (*Spendus—Indiscriminantus*) spends an average of three months a year, generally the warm summer months of June, July and August, traveling from town to town patronizing stores, hotels, campgrounds and any place labeled "biggest" or "best." They seem to favor large balls of twine, all-u-can-eat flapjacks and parking lots with septic stations.

Nonetheless, they are completely harmless—unless they crawl into your attic, then it's nothing but chewed up wires and holes in the insulation.

So, the next time you're thinking of allowing your placist attitude to cloud your judgment of these noble nomads, just remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said: "I have a dream that one day the townie and the tourist will join hands. I have a dream that one day the fudge makers and the fudge lovers will live in harmony. I have a dream that placists of all stripes will learn to love one another."

OK, maybe it wasn't MLK. I guess all I'm saying is don't judge the fudge!

The Hoax With The Most

A press release was forwarded to me via e-mail while I was still at the Charlevoix Courier. It stated that Mars would be closer to Earth on Aug. 27, 2006, than ever in recorded history.

The prospect of interviewing an enthusiastic amateur astronomer from Charlevoix sounded, to me, like the makings of a good story. I ran the gist of the information by my editor. She green-lighted the article and I, being a Grade-A procrastinator, put the release in my to-do box—Okay, it's more of an unofficial "I'll get to it eventually" pile ... where memos go to die.

Wednesday, I reread the Mars release. My palms grew a little sweaty at the prospect of a planetary collision. From the information I gleaned, Mars would be within 34,649,589 miles of the Earth. Though 34 million miles isn't even close to what scientists call a "cosmic near miss," my mind raced with thoughts of apocalypse.

"Would there be enough peanut butter to go around when the world ends?"

I fought back the urge to go into the same full-blown panic I experienced in 1997 when the Hale-Bopp Comet came a little too close for sanity. I spent weeks in cold sweats, lying on the floor of my living room and waiting for the impending crash of molten rock on my beautiful blue planet. I'd like to chalk my freak-out up to pure childishness but I was actually 22 at the time.

Thursday, I moved the Mars release to the bottom of the to-do box in hopes it might disappear. The paper was still there when I checked on Friday and I decided I had put the story off long enough. To no

avail I called a few local sources in hopes of finding someone interested in sharing their excitement over this once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

Despite my ten whole minutes of effort I made one unsuccessful call after another. Was there not one interested stargazer in the county?

By Friday afternoon, I had a migraine headache accompanied by more sweat and uncontrollable blinking in my right eye at the thought of cataclysm. Not only was there a chance two worlds were going to collide, but I seemed to be the only one who cared. Just what I needed, my very own Cassandra Complex.

Rod Serling's monologue echoed in my head.

"What you see before you is a man ... sort of. His is a mind twisted by anxious thoughts of death and destruction, and sloppy joe mix served on two doughnuts which nearly never come to fruition ... until now. He is the little boy who cried 'Planet!' one too many times, in the Twilight Zone."

Friday night was a series of unconscious horrors. I dreamt one of my favorite family dogs—Homer the St. Bernard—had turned on me. *Thanks a lot, Stephen King.* Then I dreamt I was being chased by werewolves and zombies, a lifelong recurring nightmare. The one that awakened me early in the morning was of fire falling from the sky. I was jerked awake just as the hot rocks were about to hit me.

Cranky, anxious, and with my eye still twitching, I got up Saturday morning with the intention of finding out all I could about this event. To keep myself busy I decided to do some more research. Surprise, surprise, I found approximately 6,840,000 hits for "planet Mars" on Google.

I learned Mars is the fourth planet from the sun and has an average temperature of about 218 Kelvin. Great, I now knew almost as much about the cosmos as my 10-year-old daughter.

Sweating and twitching aside, things were moving smoothly—I was learning all I ever wanted to know about Mars, and my hyperventilating had slowed to terrified gasps. It was then that I found the informational site www.About.com. On it I saw a warning written by astronomy enthusiast Nick Greene which read, "It is possible you've received an e-mail which says that Mars will be closest to Earth in August in 50,000 years. Sorry, that was 2 years ago, you're reading a

recycled e-mail.”

Recycled what now? I was sick—not so much from my self-induced, horrified, overreaction as from the prospect of nearly sending a hoax out as news. I didn’t know what to do. I knew full well I couldn’t call in dead on Monday morning—last time they recognized my voice. This coward was going to live, but he was also going to be without the top story for his Monday deadline.

Visions of an irate editor put the irrational thoughts of a cosmic collision to rest and I decided to verify this new information. I called a longtime amateur astronomer located in Marquette who wished only to be identified as “Olga’s husband.” (Actually, he preferred to remain anonymous. Calling him “Olga’s husband” was all my idea.)

I know, being located in the Upper Peninsula didn’t make him local. But I was desperate and I figured if anyone could help me at that moment, it was a 60-year-old Yooper with a spyglass and a degree from Colgate University. I asked him about the Mars situation. His guffaws reminded me of when I was eight and I showed my parents the new haircut I had given myself with a pair of Snoopy brand safety scissors.

Once he regained his composure, laughing-boy told me the whole Mars thing was indeed a hoax. What he really said was, “Sounds like youse got hosed, eh. Dat red planit ain’t gonna be too close to da Ert for annuder tree hundrit yers.”

I felt a sudden flood of remorse for all those Dan Rather jokes I’d made—Perhaps this was my National Guard story. And, just my luck, “Gohs-gate” doesn’t roll off the tongue as easily as “Rather-Gate.” In fact, “Gohs-gate” sounds more like a part you need to order for the air-conditioner.

“I see the problem, your Gohs-gate’s fried,” says the fictional repairman. “It’s gonna take about three weeks to get ‘er in.”

On a positive note, Olga’s husband did say Mars would make a pass close to Earth in October of that year, but not nearly as close as the one from a couple years ago.

“Don’t tak ‘er too hard, eh,” Olga’s husband said. “Youse twernt da only one wut fell fer dat.”

The fact that other people may have been as dumb as I was to simply take the word of an anonymous e-mail was little consolation.

Then I remembered, I needed a feature story for Monday's deadline. The sweaty hyperventilation resumed, as did the eye twitching.

I went back to my e-mail's in-box in search of an alternate story. Luckily I found a press release from a wealthy Nigerian prince who needed my help. I could just see the headline: "Local reporter brings ray of light to Dark Continent."

A Labor Of Loathe

The official record says Congress made Labor Day an official holiday in 1894 to celebrate the achievements of American workers. From what I can see it accomplished two things: it boosted s'mores sales and gave some American workers a three-day weekend with which they could do anything they pleased. For some strange reason, the bulk of these lucky devils decided to use the additional day to do more work.

“What should we do for Labor Day weekend, dear?”

“Oh, I was thinking we would play 'Grapes of Wrath' for three days.”

And, in true Steinbeckian fashion, families all across this nation spend the week leading up to their big break by hoarding canned beans, mustard, salted meats and packing ungodly amounts of flannel into vans and pickup trucks.

Having spent an entire summer living out of a tent in my youth, I had had just about all of the Great Outdoors I could handle by the time my wife and kids came along.

“C'mon, Ben, we can go swimming at night, roast marshmallows by the fire and spend all day hiking through the woods.”

Her mouth kept moving but her voice quickly evaporated. All I could hear was the high-pitched buzzing of mosquitoes and the low growl of boof in the night.

“Liver ... gah.”

“Liver?” the wife exclaimed.

“Nothing. Nevermind.”

I began to protest but it was obvious—both by her excitement and the fact that the kids were hauling camping gear from the garage and

piling it in the middle of the yard—that we were going.

Thursdays were always spent packing the car at breakneck speed so we could, “Get a head-start on all the damned tourists.”

Yes, there could be 8,000 other cars on the expressway that weekend, but we were the only ones who weren't tourists.

“Don't forget the suntan lotion. Don't forget the bug spray and for heaven's sake don't forget the 26 pounds of hot-dogs,” the wife called in between cheerful hums.

“I'll hot-dog you!” I muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Friday morning was always a mad dash to keep up with the wife, who seemed to have slept in her clothes and was way too perky. After all, if we couldn't get on the road before 10 a.m., “There isn't much point in going.”

Somewhere between Michigan's largest pink elephant and the U.P.'s tastiest hamburger (Clyde's Drive-in, by the by), a relaxing cruise through the majesty of the open road became a cross-eyed blinking frenzy when I realized that, yes I did pack the 20-foot by 20-foot tent with built-in shower room and breakfast nook. But, somehow, most likely in the interest of staying on schedule, I failed to pack the poles.

86 miles from home and making good time, we weren't about to turn around. The only intelligible sounds emanating from the front seat were the wife's stifled guffaws and my broken, angry gibberish. “Never again! ... Why? ... We'll rough it!” After all, it was camping.

No one ever dared ask, “Are we there yet?”

A few hours of uncomfortable silence passed and we knew we were *there* because the car dead-ended between what smelled like Northern Michigan's most popular outhouse and some two-by-fours that once resembled a picnic table. I wanted to scrub the layers of bird poop off it but I'm pretty sure that was the only thing holding it together.

I stood there for a long time studying the spineless tent. Anguished cries broke the silence when I realized gnarly pine boughs weren't intended to be used as tent poles, and they would never be ... no matter how far I drop-kicked that cooler.

A mostly full ball of butcher twine from the mess kit strung be-

tween two pine trees served as a makeshift support for the center of the tent. And, as long as you stayed toward the middle, it was tall enough to move around—kind of.

The kids stayed the night in the tent and the wife and I slept in the car. Upon awakening Saturday morning it was understood why people don't sleep in cars more often. The wife was hunched so far forward when she walked that she looked like she should be ringing bells and shouting "Sanctuary!" And, despite slapping myself black and blue in the night, I never did manage to kill the loudest mosquito in the Northern Hemisphere.

Later that afternoon I managed to scrounge a few longer, straighter sticks but unsuccessfully attempted to assure the wife that it would not cause the tent to cave in causing mass suffocation during the night.

The elderly couple camping in the Greyhound bus across the way asked why the tent looked like a demented marionette.

"It's one of those European jobbies," I said.

The wife said they were laughing with me but I didn't buy it.

"How did you forget the poles?" they guffawed.

As the wife squeezed my hand to remind me to shut up, that familiar feeling began rumbling up from the cesspit in my brain. Of my numerous character flaws, the penchant for making rude, stupid or mortifying comments when I should just shut my fat mouth is among the worst.

I understand that I am ultimately responsible for what I say but, to be fair, my comments are less accidental overzealous retorts and more runaway horse and carriage loaded with a wagon full of nitroglycerin and horrible statements.

What comes of me speaking my mind? One time, when I was running the register at a restaurant where I cooked, I told an elderly gentleman he had a very interesting accent. As he paid his bill I said, "Is that Australian?" His wife, whose face was now curled into a hatred knot said, "No, he has a speech impediment." The only thing missing from the scene was me with a donkey head, braying like a jack-ass.

By now, Ma and Pa Yuck-Yuck were strolling away, still laughing. "Sticks and twine ... rube!"

The wife had my fingers in a vice-grip.

“Don’t even think about it,” she growled through a big open smile with teeth clenched.

I spun 180 degrees, goose-stepped toward the woods and shouted one word before the wife cut me off.

“Manger!” which looks like “manger” but rhymes with “anger.”

“Benjamin!”

“Manger!”

The tent may have sucked but there was plenty to do and pretty soon we were back to the businesses of living like indigents. I should mention that, earlier, I lied by omission. I made it sound like I slept in the car because there wasn't room in the tent. The truth is that I have, for as long as I can remember, had a deep-seated pathological fear of bears. To be fair, I've never actually seen one up close. However, my hysterical aunt did force me to watch the 1976 horror movie “Grizzly” with her when I was around eight years old. Ever since then I have been convinced that every snapped twig and every creaking tree is really an 18-foot man-eating grizzly bear heading straight for me.

I am a large, slow moving man. But, when my bear terror activates, Look out, Kenyans! I can sprint with the best of them. I have left no fewer than a dozen family members to die in the woods after I swore I heard a bear off in the bushes. Didn't matter what I was holding: firewood, cooler, children—I would drop it and dash for the nearest car or building.

On my honeymoon I awakened in the tent to the sound of rustling along the treeline. I shook my new bride, whisper-screamed “Wake up! There's a bear!” and man I was gone. My wife stuck her head out of the tent just in time to see me locking the car doors. Luckily it was only a family of raccoons after our graham crackers and marshmallows, but the intent was the same. If it truly is the thought that counts, then I'm in big trouble.

While I was milling in the treeline, pretending to search for firewood, I heard shouts and swearing coming from the wife. I returned to discover that we had roused the interest of a nearby beehive. They were flying around the picnic table, landing in our food and drink ... and stinging us.

My young daughter slapped at the air and was so angered by a bee landing on her forehead that she punched herself between the

eyes, driving the stinger into her fist. By then, even the wife had had enough.

“Screw this!” I said as I began shoving camping gear into the family roadster.

This time there was no argument. The wife and kids scurried about, tossing trash into the fire, loading supplies into the trunk and flailing at the curious bees.

It was dark by the time we had everything packed away. Eventually, after falling asleep at the wheel a couple dozen times and having to pull over to rest my eyes every half-hour, we made it back home sometime around 1:30 a.m., dirty, smelly and exhausted.

Just as I was about to get out of the car the wife said, “That was fun. We should do it again next year.”

And we did.

The Lawnmower, Man!

Summer is officially over. Single-cylinder flora munchers all over will soon issue one last puff of blue smoke.

Hyperactive use of hyperbole aside, fall doesn't seem like a popular time to invest in landscaping implements. The last thing I wanted to do with only a few weeks left in the lawn care season was make an investment, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Discovery of the machine's state of disrepair occurred earlier in the summer with a pull of the ratty starter rope. The blade on the ancient weed eater spun, but the engine did not start. It seems the air filter cover went missing the previous season allowing snow and water to infiltrate regions of the engine they should not have.

On the second or third pull I was treated to, as the Beverly Hillbillys theme song said, "A bubblin' crude" when the poor old machine gagged up about a pint of gasoline, oil and green water soup from the spot where the air filter once was located.

In spite of the machine's gurgling death rattle, the real crudities displayed were the barbaric sentence fragments I uttered while watching the mower self-destruct on the sidewalk.

I caught a glimpse of the wife's lips and hands moving in silence, but chose to disregard her pantomimed pleas for me to end my troglodytic display. At the time we were living in a house with the smallest of yards—just wide enough to drive a car through and about three times as long—right next door to the nicest lesbian couple.

With unparalleled rage, I mercilessly rained fist and boot down on the contraption's metal frame and plastic wheels—it never had a

chance.

In hindsight, I may have overreacted. I swore and kicked, kicked and swore. The wife covered her face, the lesbians and their kids gasped and the mower just sat there, mocking me.

Enough was enough. It was time to call a professional. What could be the harm? I reasoned my pain and suffering were worth the few extra bucks spent on lawn care service.

OK, “lawn” was being generous. As a sufferer of male pattern baldness or, as my grandfather called it, *Nature’s barber*, I had much empathy for the random clumps of weeds inhabiting the dirt patch in front of the house. The blades of grass were so sparse I once considered the equivalent of an agricultural comb over.

“Grow the healthy sections of the lawn to ridiculous lengths and rake them over the bare patches,” I thought. OK, maybe it was a cry for help on my part. Regardless of my idiosyncrasies, I figured the lawn service would need only drop by twice a month for a trim. Hey, two weeks may sound like an eternity in the world of grass, but last summer the lifeless two-inch strands of brown tinsel held on for dear purgatory in some sort of brown and crunchy suspended animation. They weren’t getting any taller.

I made the call.

“\$35! Are you fu—I mean, is that correct?”

“That is correct, sir.”

“But the lawn is tiny.”

“\$35 is our minimum charge. Even for ‘tiny’ yards.”

“But it only takes 15 minutes to cut, and I use scissors.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke, sir?”

“I—I’m not sure.”

I surrendered my wallet and tried to relax. Come to find out, the loss of grass was not hereditary and, with time, it did begin to regenerate. Everything was fine until about the end of summer when simultaneously the rain came and the lawn mower man disappeared.

The grass had a sudden and uncharacteristic growth spurt which I assumed resulted from an introduction of large amounts of gamma radiation or the application of authentic voodoo magic ... either way I was in trouble.

Week one without a cut and the lawn was two hands high. Week

two, the kids lost their soccer ball in the deep end. Week three, I caught a couple hippies making crop circles in the backyard at 2 a.m.

As much as I didn't want to give in, suffering a massive stress induced stroke at age 30 was even less appealing. Whipped dogs have been known to possess more moxie than yours truly when I finally conceded. I drove to town and recounted the sordid tale to a seriously disinterested salesman at the nearest lawn and garden store.

Slowly, anxiety gave way to excitement, as this would be the first new mower I ever owned—All preceding machines in my care consisted of archaic hand-me-downs and rummage sale rescues including two gas powered, one electric and a rusty manual with dull blades which didn't cut the grass so much as smack it around a bit while it emitted a deafening screeching noise.

The salesman sold me a gray and red, four-cycle, walk behind model. He didn't laugh when I jokingly inquired as to the machine's level of water resistance. He merely winced and suggested I either park it in a shed or keep it covered when not in use.

My next stop was to find a Hallmark card that read: "Dear Lesbians, sorry for beating up my lawnmower and swearing so much in front of your kids."

Political Prowlers

The birds flew south, bears are in their caves and politicians, panic-stricken at the possibility of impending upheaval, are twitching in their mohair suits. Whether you prefer the lesser of two evils or the evil of two lessers, election day draws nigh.

And, as nervous as I am about confrontational flyers, gaudy yard signs and hanging chads, the candidates are borderline frantic. Handshakes are sweatier, the already plastic hairdos appear much slicker than normal and their lips are chapped from kissing one too many babies.

Whereas national and state politicians may spend millions of dollars to get elected to an office, local politicians tend to stick to campaigns consisting of word of mouth, letters to the editor, and the occasional all-u-can-stomach pancake breakfast.

Now, to be fair, if absolute power corrupts absolutely, then even the worst of local politicians are merely the fat-free ice-cream of politics. That doesn't mean they are harmless, but they seem to be less capable of far-reaching chaos than your average congressman or senator.

But, make no mistake, local candidates' hands are no drier and their hairdos no less caked with overpriced beauty aids. And, this time of year, due to fluctuating poll numbers and dwindling finances, they tend to be more aggressive.

Due to the seriousness of the upcoming season I feel it is my paranoid—er patriotic—duty to forewarn my fellow citizens.

1. Never corner a candidate with invasive inquiries concerning their policies and intentions—if they wanted to play 20 Questions

they'd become a contestant on Jeopardy!

2. Watch where you flash your cash—sharks can smell a drop of blood in a million gallons of water. Likewise, a hard-boiled politico can smell a would-be campaign contribution through denim at 500 paces.

3. Warning signs of an agitated candidate include—the blinding shine of bleached teeth and patent leather shoes, as well as unsettling amounts of enthusiasm.

If confronted by one of these quasi-motivational glad-handers panhandling for votes, don't panic. Accept whatever propaganda pamphlet they offer, take a deep breath and back away. It is imperative to avoid eye contact. Nod, smile and, in a confident and reassuring voice, tell them you are as-of-yet undecided, but will consider them come election day.

The not-so-symbiotic relationship (while they need us, I'm not so sure we couldn't do without many of them) between politicians and citizens is only possible when politicians receive all the public exposure, tax-funded stipends and limited power small town representative democracy has to offer.

Once at a safe distance, and only then, make certain you still possess your wallet, shoes and integrity. You'll know you're safe when you can no longer detect the overpowering odor of hair spray and desperation.

Don't get me wrong, all in all I believe most Americans enter politics to do good. If I didn't still feel that way I would have moved to Canada, changed my name to Rufus and taken up salmon smoking and moose herding. But that doesn't mean some of my representatives don't frighten me at times.

When you see a current or hopeful officeholder, take a little comfort in knowing that, at the very least, their anxiety is genuine. If that won't help you sleep any better tonight, here are a few tips on surviving the political season:

- Avoid the temptation to show your support via bumper stickers. Ask anyone who remembers trying to scrape off, "Vote Ferraro in '84."
- Don't feed politicians campaign funds—this only encourages them.
- When annoying campaign workers call, answer the phone in Pig

Latin.

“Ello-hay?”

- Political signs make great sanitary liners for bird cages and kitty litter boxes.

- Hang wreathes of garlic on your front porch, this will deter door-to-door campaigners and other assorted ghouls.

- As the late Chicago politician William Hale Thompson is thought to have said, “Vote early and vote often.”

Thanks A Lot

Every few years I hear a new story on who actually invented Thanksgiving, so please bear with me.

Although the first official Thanksgiving is supposed to have taken place Nov. 26, 1789, after New Jersey congressman Elias Boudinot proposed it, I also heard Abraham Lincoln started Thanksgiving during the Civil War.

Perhaps it is the desire of historians to forget this holiday followed a winter that included Pilgrims starving to death, resorting to cannibalism and turning on one another not too long before they turned on the indigenous peoples of North America—I can't say as I blame them. All I really know about the holiday involves some rock band from Plymouth called "The Pilgrims" who left the new world in search of spices. Upon landing in Poughkeepsie in 1492, the pilgrims were able to survive their first winter when the Cleveland Indians taught them how to make popcorn and turquoise jewelry.

My knowledge of this poultry-centric holiday may be warped, at best, but it seems ironic we celebrate a holiday rooted in a time when an enormous celebratory meal really was a once-a-year occurrence. I doubt this is the case in our contemporary and increasingly pathologically portly society.

Don't get me wrong, in the spirit of Will Rogers, I never met a meal I didn't like, and that goes triple for turkey—this year it's a 21 pound monster. (This was written when I was still a murder-a-tarian. The wife hates it when I use that term. And, frankly, I don't care what other people shove in their chew-holes, I just like the way it sounds.)

Selfish as it sounds, I didn't grow up in one of those homes where everyone announced what they were thankful for before eating.

"I'd just like to thank Muffy dahling for thoshe diamond cuff-linksh. They go shwimmingly with my new Bentley." (Yes, all the rich people in my imagination sound like Sean Connery.)

Raised in a house of nine people, for us, Thanksgiving was one of the few times a year no one left the table hungry. For us, Thanksgiving was a tradition, but the focus was the food.

What I really get a kick out of are the big families who converge during the holidays. Sure, there were nine of us, but that's nothing compared to my maternal grandmother's get-togethers. Even with nearly 35 mouths to feed she knew how to put on a spread.

Turkey day at Grandma's meant spending Thursday in a house filled 10 times to the capacity allowed by fire code. It also meant eating dry turkey and soggy stuffing until we couldn't breathe.

I'm not sure anyone ever contracted worms from under cooked turkey. But, to stave off the possibility of larval infestation, Mom, Granny and a half-dozen aunts would awaken at 4:29 a.m., Eastern Standard Time, to get the turkey in the oven by 6 a.m.

Around mid-morning there would come a series of whoops and hollers from the living-room-turned moose lodge as the patriarchs, preoccupied with cold beer and the upcoming football game, would do a less than mediocre job of keeping the kids out of grandma's hair.

"Watching" us generally meant shoving the dozen or so grandkids into a spare bedroom that had a stuffed purple bear, an old Co2 pistol and a metal toy tow truck from the 1950s.

It was awful.

Looking back now it couldn't have been legal. It was like a mental asylum for short people. A third of the kids were crying, a third were arguing over the bear and the truck, one of my cousins would invariably sit in the corner, gnawing on crayons, and my cousin Danny and I would be fighting over that damned pistol.

Pushes turned to slaps, slaps to punches and pretty soon he and I were plotting each other's deaths from respective corners of the living room.

I don't know if it was boredom or malnutrition, but we were always hungry. Strung out on a combination of black coffee and adults-on-

ly holiday 'nog, the matriarchs aggressively defended their territory from us kids as we stampeded the kitchen, herd-style, every 10 minutes to decry the inhumane treatment doled by the older kids and to inform Grandma of impending starvation if the turkey wasn't done soon.

By the time dinner rolled around we were so hungry and exhausted we didn't notice how dry the turkey was. You could have dipped an old boot in gravy and we would have been happy. And to be fair, at this point, they wouldn't know what to do with a succulent slice of bird anyhow.

The muggy, turkey scented air teased the nostrils as granny pulled the prize from the oven. The hungry horde hyperventilated with anticipation. Grandpa fired up his electric knife—which I'm pretty sure he borrowed directly from Thomas Edison—while the uncles bickered over proper carving technique.

“Slice with the grain!”

“No, against the grain!”

“You're doing it wrong!”

The truth is that it really didn't matter what way he sliced it. Years of Grandma's signature stone turkeys had dulled the blade beyond repair and pretty soon he was hacking and pulling ratty chunks off and tossing them on the platter. In reality, the only thing Grandpa could cut was the can-shaped, imitation jellied cranberry product wobbling to the rhythm of the reciprocating blade.

At last, it was time to dig in. Everyone, that is, except aunt what's-her-name who passed out on the couch from a combination of heat exhaustion and one too many cocktails.

The scene probably won't ever don a Hallmark card but it was good enough for us.

Of Spruce & Frostbite

I'm not the most observant person around, so, I was shocked to hear the official start of winter is Dec. 21—a bit tardy if you ask me.

Obviously the Hawaiian shirt-wearing, Pina Colada-sipping goon in charge of determining this particular date has never been north of the Tennessee-Kentucky border. And, he certainly knows little of anyone who doesn't don a sweater whenever the mercury drops below 72 degrees.

Though the beach bums may be at a loss, you can ask any “Inuit-by-proxy” (I was going to say “Eskimo-by-proxy” but apparently that has been determined to be offensive.) and they'll tell you the real start of winter in the upper-lower seems to be when people begin to mistake the white stuff on the ground for traction enhancer—generally the day after Halloween.

We endure blizzard after blizzard and white-out after white-out, yet the first couple days of wintry conditions always resemble improv night at the Ice Capades.

Don't get me wrong, I'm as guilty as the next. Slippery roads are the furthest things from my brain come midsummer. But it usually only takes a terrifying slide through a busy intersection to remind me of two things: First, I should slow down. And, second, that third helping of prune Danish is never a prudent idea, for breakfast time or otherwise.

Another unofficial start to winter is finding yourself stuck behind some joker who manages to turn a 15-mile trip into a three-hour ordeal. Who can blame him, right? After all, nobody bothered to tell

him he'd need to install a periscope on his car before strapping that 18-foot Blue Spruce to the roof. (I might have mentioned that Northern Michigan folks put up their Christmas trees around Thanksgiving and don't take them down until Good Friday.)

Obstructed vision be damned, Admiral Swerves-A-Lot is convinced if he just slows down and cranes his neck enough, he'll be able to see around the 600 pounds of nettles, trunk and sap.

Of course, the real saps are the poor schmucks in line behind him who consist of holiday shoppers, travelers and the snowplow driver on his fifth pot of coffee. Their only recourse is to express holiday cheer with an assortment of improvised sign language and pained screams.

The final unwritten signal of winter's arrival are the brave men and women who, despite possessing an average amount of good sense, choose to pass slower vehicles under conditions which reduce even the most stalwart drivers to nail-biting grannies.

Huddled over my steering wheel, I creep along a two-lane highway of ice polished to a high shine by six weeks of 45 mph winds. All the while these Northern Michigan daredevils fly by me sideways on two wheels at 76 mph—Stopping just long enough to flash me a frown and the bird of bad cheer.

"He must be a local," I shriek through clenched teeth as I attempt to keep my already queasy stomach from bailing. All the commotion causes my small intestine to think it's in one of those World War II "Flying Ace" flicks and begins screaming "Jump! Jump! Jump!" at my lower intestine, which it has mistaken for nervous paratroopers.

Ironically, the same ones to flash me dirty looks tend to be notorious for rolling through stops, refusing to employ their turn signals and slamming on their brakes to avoid turning Thumper or Bambi into highway soufflé.

When the hyperventilation and horror subsides, I turn to the hope that I will later pass these venturesome sojourners safely, but inconveniently, stuck on the side of the road.

That's how I know winter has begun.

Self-Helpless

I was going to lecture on the importance of hanging in there when it comes to self-improvement. Something my old mother calls “stick-to-itiveness.” Then I realized a pudgy, former two-pack-a-day smoker with a checkbook in the red is the last person who should be preaching the virtues of being a better you.

Making positive life changes aren’t easy. If they were, we would all resemble those toothpaste models with the frighteningly white smiles and \$600 haircuts.

I’ll never forget the year I vowed to lose weight on the cabbage soup diet. It was only slightly less disgusting than the headcheese diet. For those of you unfamiliar with this sulfurous sauce, cabbage soup is a metabolic food. From the Greek “metabolic” meaning: “tastes so bad we know you won’t eat it.”

After a few weeks of the putrid pottage I began to feel like Oliver Twist. I heard somewhere that more people are afraid of public speaking than death—obviously they never tried cabbage soup. Ditto goes for the cruel and unusual grapefruit diet, which I hear was recently outlawed by the Geneva Convention.

Exercise more? To my chagrin, the FDA doesn’t recognize lying on the couch as a physical fitness routine. Though the cardiovascular benefits of screaming at the TV are arguable, workout gurus advise you to get your heart rate up for 30 minutes, three times a week—you’ll know you reached your target somewhere between, “I can’t breathe” and “Oh my god I’m going to die!”

I knew I was out of shape when I pulled a hamstring stepping out

of the shower. For those of you who thought I pulled it diving for the game-winning touchdown at the family reunion last year, I was lying.

Giving up cigarettes is another big resolution people like to make. It took a month-long bout with double pneumonia back in spring '99 to convince me to give up the smoky little darlings. I wish I could say it was done for something noble such as saving money or preventing cancer, but I simply couldn't breathe. \$1,200 worth of X-rays and assorted pokey-proddie tests later, the doctor said I had the lung capacity of an asthmatic chipmunk. You may remember the cartoon musical trio Alvin, Simon and COPD.

Some people resolve to spend more time with family. Time with immediate family (Extended family is a completely different beast, yes, "beast.") is a grand idea. Ten sweaty-palmed, pulse pounding minutes in the presence of my truck driving, gun toting, ordained minister cousin or the great-aunt who married a convicted murderer or some such strangeness, who may or may not still be in prison, and I remember why I seldom leave town for the family farm. Don't get me wrong, I love them dearly, but they are best taken in small doses ... from great distances.

Learning something new is another popular goal for many. I'm not saying humans have a finite capacity for attaining knowledge, but this particular resolution makes me nervous. I was 9 when I found my father in the garage hyperventilating over a tear-soaked, half assembled bicycle. He called it holiday stress, but I know the truth. Upon reading the instruction manual, he forgot how to get back to the house.

Now, I don't fancy myself a moron (another arguable notion), but I can't chance forgetting something integral like how to operate the microwave or program the VCR—yes, I still have a VCR.

Getting organized is a great idea for the New Year. I envy folks with a special spot for everything, whose towels hang on racks and whose refrigerators don't resemble fight night at the International House of Condiments. Yes, the moldy applesauce on the third shelf is a biohazard. But, if I pull it out, then where would I be? I might as well grab that hummus leftover from the Carter administration and how about that margarine container of, well, I can't remember what it was, but should I really risk stinking up the house with some kind of a demented archeological dig?

Besides, I don't think my frail ego could take seeing just how empty the icebox is after a thorough cleaning. Perhaps it is simply better to let sleeping dogs lie or, in this case, to let the fuzzy casserole grow.

Resolutions are the cornerstones of self-improvement. But, no amount of cleaning, exercise, diet or thriftiness will ensure fame, fortune or immortality—only self-imposed neuroses.

Just find yourself a happy medium and stick with it. Hopefully you'll have better luck than I did.

Trespassing With Benefits

Last week a couple men peddling theology visited my home. This makes it the third time the dense duo were turned away from my door. And, seeing as they asked when would be a good time to come back, I expect this won't be the last I see of them.

The idea that people go house to house selling products, services or religion boggles my mind. But, as angry as these invasions of space make me, I must confess to a brief foray into the world of door to door sales, once upon a time.

Though I never dared visit the same house twice, I managed to annoy many an unwilling tenant during my several-month stint. I would have quit after the first humiliating day if it weren't for the empty promises of big money and nonexistent prestige.

My first taste of the biz was in vacuums—and I thought cleaning kennels after Table Scrap Tuesdays was bad. If you are unaware, selling vacuum cleaners is one of the most miserable jobs on the planet, right below barnacle scraper and the guy who washes the arm length gloves at the animal husbandry clinic.

My second and final sales job was with some obscure phone company. There's nothing quite like the indignant look on someone's face when you knock on their door and ask them if they are happy with their long distance service. Why I wasn't punched in the stomach more often, I'll never know. I later heard the company was accused of switching people's long distance service without their knowledge. It's called "slamming" and it's illegal.

I'd like to think I'm absolved from the stink of those paltry posi-

tions for two reasons. One, I never made a penny. In fact, with the cost of business attire, gasoline and lost time at a real job, I actually ended up a few thousand dollars in the hole. Two, I felt terrible about myself every time I darkened someone's doorstep with my pitch.

If I recall, the only comparable humiliation I felt previous to working in outside sales was when I was a kid and my father decided he'd try taxidermy as a hobby. Few things lower a young man's self-esteem like the shame of dodging traffic on 90 degree blacktop with a handful of week-old possum remains while attempting to avoid being spotted by someone you know—and let me tell you, those babies ain't pine scented neither.

While I can't change my awful past, I may be able to offer a little insight into the mind of these doorstep derelicts. First of all, don't invite them into your home. Once they are in, the blood sport begins and you are on your own.

If you find yourself in the position of defending your pocketbook against the lure of 80 pounds of authentic Himalayan Yak Butter, remember, the words that come out of your mouth are seldom what the salesman hears.

When you say, "I'm not sure I need a lifetime supply of lemon flavored wart remover," the salesman hears, "I might change my mind if you throw in a couple cases of Grandma Smithy's Old Time Fish Lips." When you say, "I'm not interested," the seller hears, "Remind me how the floor buffing unicycle attachment will enhance my modern lifestyle." When you say, "Get the hell out!" the peddler hears, "Assure me that, if I buy today, you'll throw in a sack of dehydrated platypus wax—now with 16 percent more venomous dew claw." And, as a final effort to rid your home of these putrid purveyors you say you cannot afford the product, the seller hears, "Please offer me the 30-year installment plan at 26.5 percent APR double secret financing."

While I may not be able to live without a vacuum-powered spine massager, battery operated steak knives or a self-propelled potato peeler with built-in nose hair trimmer, I don't want to buy them from a guy in a trench coat at my kitchen table.

Yes, my steak knives are dull. Yes, my carpet is stained. And, yes, I've heard the good news.

I'd rather not adopt a Jack Russell terrier with a borderline per-

sonality disorder to deter these troublesome traffickers but I have the number to the local humane society on speed dial, and I just might use it.

The Dead Of Winter

No one seems to know exactly when the dead of winter is, but you can get a fair estimate by multiplying the number of icicles hanging from your nose by the number of sharp, deep breaths you take when your spouse tries to warm their icy feet on your back—a maneuver also known as the Wisconsin Alarm Clock.

Another sure sign of the dead of winter is when middle-aged fathers venture out to teach their teenagers how to drive in the snow. You will often see them in an empty grocery store parking doing backward donuts. Be sure to listen for the high-pitched screams of, “The brake is on the left! The left!”

Some would differ on when the dead of winter actually occurs since, according to the groundhog, we have only four more weeks of the white stuff to look forward to. Of course, anyone familiar with the frozen tundra of Northern Michigan knows the hog lies—every damned time! Which is why I’m thinking we need our own cold weather mascot. Perhaps it could be Carl, a manic-depressive chipmunk who suffers bouts of both unbelievable glee when he sees you trying to dig your car out of a snow bank, and downright disgust if he happens to catch you and the family making a snowman. Instead of coming out of his ground lair and looking for his shadow, Carl would jump out of an alley and open his raincoat.

Since shivering doesn’t count as conversation, Carl knows the only thing you can really determine on Feb. 2 is how long your marriage will last if one of you doesn’t get out of the house for longer than it takes to check the mail. Tensions only increase when you open the

mailbox to find a picture postcard from the Caribbean with the greeting: “If you shovel my roof, I’ll bring you back a coconut. Love, Uncle Bob.”

Shoveling one’s roof, another sure sign of the dead of winter. Sure, I say that up here and nobody flinches. Try laying that one on them down south and you might as well say you wax your lawn.

I knew it was the dead of winter last week when we endured the blizzard that never was—only tender types from southern Ohio refer to last Thursday’s flurries as a “blizzard”—not because of the cold, gray sky or the relatively few inches of snow, but because I was back in the trenches fighting with the snow blower that never was.

The novelty of owning my very first snow throwing machine vanished when I realized it was only a snow blower in the theoretical sense.

Back in autumn, when the salesman told me I was getting, “all the snow-moving capacity one would expect for \$149.99,” he meant it. What I hadn’t realized at the time was that I would become the punch line to some engineer’s elaborate joke.

When I purchased the unit back in October I also bought 100 feet of extension cord. And, at the time, the difficulty of lugging 45 pounds of bright orange cord through knee-deep snow didn’t enter my penny-pinching brain.

Not until the first heavy snow did I realize the ejector on my four slice toaster packs more of a punch than the motor on this thing. And, I’m not sure who decided to put the old-time baby carriage wheels on it, but he or she needs to be slapped, hard and repeatedly.

The box boasts this unit to be self-propelled. It was apparent from the get-go that by “Self,” they mean “You” and by “Propelled,” they mean, “Not so much.” This unit moves with the ease and grace of a steel shopping cart on two bad wheels.

And then there is the “Durable” construction—their word, not mine. The housing is plastic. The blade is plastic. The handle is plastic. The wheels are plastic. In fact, the only metal on the entire contraption is the oblong sticker warning me not to get it wet. Obviously no one bothered to explain to the engineers at the Snow Way in Hell Corporation what snow is made of.

I’m sure those of you with the fossil-fuel-guzzling, 800 horse pow-

er, gear-driven, snow-eating monsters with built-in hand warmers and cappuccino dispenser are laughing yourselves into asphyxia at this point, and I don't blame you. I'm reaping the ills of being cheap and much like Aesop's grasshopper, learned to prepare for the dead of winter.

It's been seven years since I wrote that piece and I still have that little electric snowblower ... and I use it every winter.

We've Got A Day For That

Like any good bull-shime observance, the official start date of Daylight Saving Time (DST) changes from year to year. Some debate the necessity and usefulness of DST. And, why not, since Benjamin Franklin first proposed it in a column he wrote in a French newspaper—as a joke.

Now, millions of Americans are affected, annually, by what began as a jest. And it got me wondering how many other observances and pseudo-holidays there are floating around the calendar. That was when things began to go south. Not only were there already more observances lined up for April than I could write about in one sitting, some of them were downright strange, even by my standards.

Here is a sampling of the many observances for the upcoming month. For those of you longing to learn how to perform CPR on Fido, April is Pet First Aid Awareness month and Alcohol Awareness month. I mean, really, if you're going to be practicing mouth to mouth on your Basset Hound, you want to be three sheets to the wind. What goes better with doggy breath, anyhow, red or white wine?

April is Workplace Conflict Awareness month. My boss told me not to include this one—I told her to go suck an egg.

Sorry Charlie Day and Anti-Circumcision Day both fall on the first of April. Not the two most uplifting observances I've seen. And you only have one day to get over it because Reconciliation Day is April 2—Sorry, Charlie.

In case you feel the need to let everyone know how much they get on your nerves, Hate Week is seven days long (April 4-10).

Bar goers may be dismayed during the Alcohol-Free Weekend (April 7-9) when they find out that, she isn't that attractive and he isn't that funny.

Explore Your Career Options Week is April 10-14. And, after the *egg sucking* comment, this'll be a must for me, I'm sure.

Is it a coincidence that Tax Day, Take a Wild Guess Day, That Sucks Day and Husband Appreciation Day all fall on April 15? Probably not.

Get revenge on whoever has been stealing your pudding packs at work from April 17-23—That's no skunk in your lunch box, it's Egg Salad Week.

April 18 combines Tax Freedom, Stress Awareness and Wear Your Pajamas to Work days, so you have the convenience of being hassled by the IRS, losing your mind and arriving at work in your bathrobe and slippers—don't say I didn't warn you.

Pet Owners' Independence Day is April 18. Apparently you get to stay home and sleep while your pet goes to work. I'm thinking this day is celebrated by the same people you see on pet psychic programs asking some self-appointed doctor of tomfoolery whether Fluffy has post traumatic stress disorder after being separated from the rest of the litter.

Those of you who need to trim the extra weight you gained enjoying National Jelly Bean Day (April 22) will have a chance at a good cardiovascular workout while reminding the kids who's boss on Spank Out Day (April 30). (Actually, I think this might be an anti-spanking holiday but I say use your discretion.)

Both Playground Safety Week and Scoop the Poop Week, kickoff on April 24. The answer as to why seemed obvious at first, but now I'm not quite so sure how they tie in.

Call me a traditionalist, but I think observances should be kept to the big holidays and memorials. You know, the things that really matter, like April 28: Hairball Awareness Day.

It'll Grow Back

Mom knew two hairstyles when I was a kid: page boy and inmate. When you've got seven kids you try to keep it simple. I got so used to homemade hair care that, when I grew up, I could never justify spending \$15 on a stylist.

Year after year the wife would cringe as I massacred one haircut on myself after another. First I tried the little boy comb-over look. Then there was the scalp-lock, which was basically an overgrown Mohawk. Then I grew my hair long. Then I shaved it bald. And, until it began thinning in the front, I was giving myself a homemade spike hairdo. That all ended when a waitress where I worked said "Are you going bald?" I was completely unprepared for her comment. I truly hadn't noticed that my widow's peak had begun to look more like a widow's butt crack.

I spiraled into denial mode and began growing my hair as long as I could. By the time it reached shoulder length the boss and the wife had both had enough.

"Ben, we need to talk about your hair."

It was surreal. I always knew there would eventually be an intervention but I figured it would be over my addiction to Little Debbies, Taco Bell and hundred proof Southern Comfort. After all, it's not like I was desperately trying to reclaim a bit of my wild and crazy teenage years, back when I had a full lustrous blonde mane.

Apparently the wife could put up with the guitars, the Firebird and the tattoos—but the ponytail was just too much.

I weighed my options. I realized that, with as much dirt as the

wife has on me, I was certainly not going to fare well in divorce court.

I acquiesced. The wife asked if I wanted her to give me a haircut. She actually gives decent haircuts.

“No. This is something I have to do on my own.”

I took off my shirt and wrapped my neck in a ceremonial towel from Dollar General. There I was, gazing into the bathroom mirror, clippers in hand and too stubborn to get a haircut from my capable wife.

20 minutes of contemplation passed. My fatigued arm shook. I couldn't do it. The longer I held the menacing electric shears, the heavier they became.

“One wrong move and the scalp gets it,” the brain threatened, but cowardice got the better of me and I dropped the tool in the sink. The hesitation stemmed from fear of exposing the talc hued bald spots likely lying in wait under my auburn mop. Oh the lies I told myself: ordering those unbreakable combs, buying extra large containers of shampoo and gel, yelling at the wife for all those hairs I found in my food.

My comb-over of shame quickly suffocated under the weight of its deceit. I barricaded the door with the laundry hamper and brushed back my bangs. The widow's peaks on Mt. Gohs were longer, wider and whiter than before. This boat was sinking fast and hairs were jumping ship at an alarming rate.

“How's it going in there?” she asked.

“Ocupado!” I said in my worst Speedy Gonzales accent.

Finally, I snapped. I grabbed the trimmers. Hair fell to the floor. An earlobe was nicked in the fracas. In two minutes it was all over—success. Who was I kidding? I looked like an escaped mental patient. OK, I looked more like an escaped mental patient than usual. I couldn't have done a worse job if I had used a butter knife and tweezers.

“Butter knife and tweezers, that's what I need!”

The wife pounded on the door, but my barricade held.

“You'll never take me alive!”

“Just let me do it,” she said.

I emerged. Her offer of “I'll do it” turned into an order: “Let me

fix it.” I pleaded with her: “I can buy a blinking neon tie. That’ll take the attention away from my head. Right?”

She didn't respond.

“At least it’s not as bad as the time I gave myself a Mohawk. Right?”

She didn't respond.

My dismay worsened when I realized that at least a Mohawk is an actual hairstyle; what I had done was nothing less than an asymmetrical abomination of Don King proportions.

The wife surveyed the damage and attempted to straighten what remained.

“How did you ... why is it?”

The wife mumbled from behind. I made out the words “jack-o-lantern,” “lawyer” and “wine.”

She may as well have performed open heart surgery with a coffee straw and masking tape. I tried not to sob.

In the days following what would become known as “the incident,” I was overtaken by desperation. It didn't take long before I found an internet advertisement for some pills.

“\$440 for a years supply?” That sounded good. “Two of three men grow hair ... but two percent end up with erectile dysfunction?”

I tried to convince myself it was a fair trade. I read on: The drug was so deadly, pregnant women could not handle the packaging. It was nature’s way of saying, “Do not eat this, moron!”

Then I found a \$690 hairpiece—excuse me, hair “system.” It was “unbelievably natural,” and, “almost adheres to your skin.” Then the fine print: I’d have to shave my head and glue the “system” to my scalp.

It would stay on for four weeks, but I only had one minute to position it. They told me I would look like Wayne Newton. I wanted to look like Wayne Newton, but the wife wouldn't let me have the \$690. Besides, I would have ended up looking more like Fig Newton.

How about surgery? The flap method sounded exciting. For \$4,300, they'd cut out patches of bald scalp, stretch hairy scalp over the open wound and sew my head back together. Stretching the existent over the nonexistent? That's how I darned my socks, and they

never looked or fit right after that.

With my luck they would pull too hard on one side, causing my eyebrow to raise unnaturally high. The upside is that people would always think I was really interested in their conversation.

They told me my left ear could end up near my temple, but the hair would look fantastic. I told the wife they had a payment plan. She gave me \$15 and told me to go to the barber.

Happy Anniversary

Another Memorial weekend has come and gone; and, with it, another year with the wife. I suppose some would observe the big 12 with a trip to Hawaii or a romantic dinner for two, but after the luck we've had with anniversary celebrations in the past, we decided to play it safe, and separated for the weekend.

Our fear of matrimonial merriment goes back to that ominous honeymoon, if you call drinking cheap wine while hunkering in a leaky canvas coffin as the National Weather Service warns all within earshot to run for their lives, a honeymoon. Although, once you've had enough of that cheap wine, those lightning bolts and twisters don't seem so tough.

"Auntie Em, Auntie Em, I can't feel my lips!"

When the sun finally graced us with its presence, blushing bride decided we'd rent a canoe. She must have mistaken my hyperventilation and whimpering for joy, because the next thing I knew, we were touring Clem's Boat & Bike Rentals. (To be fair, the shop wasn't really called "Clem's." But it was something homespun like that.)

Being a novice, I impressed upon the shopkeeper my desire not to drown. Clem suggested his largest and most unwieldy canoe, a 12x4-foot monster. And, why not traverse a small inland lake in one of the lifeboats from the Titanic?

"No sir, you won't tip this one," he said in a tone of voice that almost sounded like a challenge.

The wife, being a veteran of lake and river canoe trips, took command of the vessel. Once Capt. Bligh seated herself in the front of the

boat, she ordered me in and assured me everything would be “just sit down and shut up.” So, you might imagine my surprise when I attempted to come aboard and proceeded to execute the most perfect squealing front flip. Just before we went under, I saw—through my upside-down legs—the Captain flapping her arms. It was like watching a mime imitate a bird who was imitating a mime who was having a stroke.

When I surfaced, Clem was wiping away the snot and tears and trying not to choke as he coughed between his intermittent high-pitched “haws” of delight.

“I never seena ... you wenta-da-bottom-a-da ... hooey-hahee.”

This time Clem held the side of the canoe as I toddler-wobbled my way into the craft. We began paddling—in circles. “Other side!” the wife screamed. So, I began paddling on the other side. More circles. “Alternate!” she screamed. Apparently I was supposed to have brushed up on my canoe etiquette prior to the honeymoon.

After a minute or so of going in circles, I realized that I needed to paddle opposite to the wife's strokes. Soon we were cruising along and I actually began to relax a little. The sun was out in all its glory, the sky was bright blue and clear of clouds and the water was calm. Pretty soon we were in the middle of some small unnamed lake deep in the badlands of Northern Michigan.

It was probably about the deepest part of the lake that I decided to have a full-blown panic attack. I don't remember why but I know I needed to get out of that canoe right that minute. I began screaming incoherently about drowning on my honeymoon. The wife was mortified. She had maxed out on the amount of Gohs charm she could take for one day and, as soon as we were in chest-deep water, she jumped out and swam back to shore.

There I was, sitting in a boat I barely knew how to use and terrified out of my mind. So, I did the only reasonable thing a person would do in such a situation: I began paddling in a circle while hollering epithets about the wife.

Clem didn't laugh when I returned the canoe a day early—by myself—and he offered an open kayak he guaranteed would not flip. As an act of contrition, I cooked a full Mexican buffet for dinner that evening and the wife forgave me for the S.S. Deathtrap incident.

Remembering how much fun we'd had all those years ago, the wife and I decided to revisit the honeymoon spot for the annual commemoration—it would prove to be a textbook case of clinical idiocy. We foolishly assumed we could get a campsite at our old spot without reservations; luckily, a friendly local directed us to a “rustic campground on a lake.”

The first thing I noticed when we arrived at Stereotypical Horror Movie Campground (yes that was its official name) was a guy camped out in a bus with no wheels—come to think of it, I'm not so sure he was camping. My desire for a refreshing swim in the waters of Lake Itch and Scratch were cut short when I saw school bus guy emptying a portable septic tank into it.

All I can say about the outhouse is, you know it's bad when even the bugs won't go near it.

But, determined to make the best of things, we plugged our noses and unloaded the car. That was when we noticed the absence of tent poles. This wouldn't be the first or last time I had to put up a canvas lean-to. Even with school bus guy's donated clothesline (he was very nice for a backwoods serial killer), the tent wouldn't stay up. Beaten once again, we packed up and headed home.

Of course, previous years were nothing compared to 2005, when my father-in-law decided it would be a scream to have an emergency triple bypass. After all, nothing stokes the fires of romance like major surgery on a loved one.

This year was kind of a bore. On Saturday, the wife called from her sister's house (200 miles away) after locking her keys in the trunk. My son had to crawl through the back seat with a pair of hot-dog tongs to retrieve them.

Meanwhile, at home, I was barricaded in the bedroom to avoid half a dozen golf ball sized bumblebees with anger management issues who had infiltrated the living room.

Someday we'll have the worry-free trip we've always wanted. For now we're content we made it this long and thankful next year is so far away.



Return Of The Fudgie

Despite the miniature heat waves in recent weeks, today is the official beginning of summer. And with this sunny money season comes a wave of tourists also known as those lovable “Fudgies.” For those unfamiliar (or if you skipped ahead a few chapters), the fudgie is a tourist who visits the area to snap pictures of seagulls and buy pounds and pounds of overpriced fudge.

Now, before I go any further, I’d like to clarify that this isn’t an attack on fudgies—I can’t take another truckload of hate mail. Those of you familiar with last year’s column, “Fudgie not a four letter word,” should know this is merely a follow-up, not an attack, on those noble creatures.

When the editor said I should revisit the premise, I flinched. It’s the middle of June and I don’t have the energy for angry letters and threatening calls. After a few scowls and angry snorts from her side of the office I was convinced it was a great idea—because I didn’t have a choice in the matter.

As I schemed on ways to get back at my editor, I struggled over what to say about the geographically-challenged. They like fudge, that’s a given. They’re fond of khaki, straw hats and T-shirts which read, “I’m with stupid,” or “My parents were abducted by aliens and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.” And, their differences don’t stop there.

While Northern Michiganders may have bumper stickers which read, “Git er done,” and “Summer’s just three months of bad sledding,” the billboards on the fudgies’ gargantuan, moveable living quarters read, “I break for festivals,” or “My Greyhound bus is in the shop.”

Just look for vanity plates like “SLEEPS50,” “CAMPZILA,” and “SMORES#1” attached to vehicles speeding down the northbound lane of I-75.

But these leisure-seeking migrants, flush with cash on arrival, don't stay long. By August's end you'll see them on street corners, pockets inside out, panhandling for Petoskey stones and autographed photos of the city manager. And then, like the swallows of Capistrano, they're gone until next year.

Ever in search of answers to the great mysteries in life, I compiled a list of why people flock to northern Michigan, Charlevoix in particular, each summer.

10. Fudge. (I'd put it higher on the list, but c'mon, nobody travels hundreds of miles just for fudge, even the fudgies know that.)

9. Clean beaches. (Heck, it beats spending the dog days cheek-deep in a kiddie pool near downtown Saginaw.)

8. The world's second largest cherry pie pan. (Though some people become irate when they discover the pastry was gone years ago.)

7. To get on my uncle's nerves. (Just ask him, he'll tell you.)

6. Charlevoix is a haunt for famous people like actor Brian Dennehy and writer Ernest Hemingway. (Okay, my Editor swears she once spotted Dennehy at Village Inn Pizza and Hemingway got the license for his first marriage here.)

5. We're the only city (quite possibly in the world) with a mayor named “Boogie.”

4. The City of Charlevoix is located on an isthmus between Lake Michigan and Round Lake, and who doesn't like saying “isthmus?” Isthmus, ladies and gentleman, isthmus. (But don't say it with a mouthful of fudge, it's messy and just plain rude.)

3. Petunias. (Even in midsummer, when our population swells to 30,000 or so, the petunia to people ratio is like 4:1, which makes this one of the best smelling cities in Michigan—Ironically unlike Rose City, which is overpopulated by dairy farms and smells nothing like roses.)

2. Venetian. (What other time of the year can you walk around town holding deep-fried bread and spun sugar without drawing dirty looks?)

1. And the number one reason people flock here each summer, as

told to me by an old Irish train engineer, (no, this isn't the beginning of a joke) we have the largest natural air conditioner known to man—Lake Michigan—and the town is clean, quiet and beautiful. I couldn't have said it better myself. Here's to you Charlevoix. May this be your best summer yet.

P.S. Last one in the water is a rotten egg.

Alone At Last

I was skeptical institutionalization could render one impotent for a life on the outside—that was until the kids went down to visit our folks for a few weeks.

Back in March, dreams of a quiet house, fruity umbrella drinks and being fanned with a giant feather didn't foreshadow the lackluster events to come. The wife and I kicked off the celebration of new-found freedom with spaghetti and Seinfeld reruns.

Day two, the kids called. The wife was happy to hear from them, but I'm not much of a telephone talker and they'd just left.

"So, watcha been doin for the last 18 hours?"

At their age they don't always catch the sarcasm.

By day three I sensed something was amiss. We weren't Conga-ing through the kitchen, and the wife's gloom was palpable. After some prodding she admitted, "I miss the kids." For my own safety, I had to lie, "Me too."

The wife was thrilled when the kids phoned on day four. Then she hands me the phone, "You're having fun? That's good. Grandpa lets you eat anything for breakfast? That's nice. A sandwich made of jelly between two slices of cheese? I'm giving the phone back to your mother now."

Who were these permissive and patient people, and what had they done with my parents?

The call helped her mood for awhile. But, by day eight, she had full-blown Summer Camp Syndrome. Symptoms include long diatribes about how great the kids are, unexplained shortness with hus-

band and spontaneous sobbing.

Anticipation seldom equals reality, I get that, but the most excitement I had was clipping my toenails in the living room—a taboo to be sure.

So much for, “The Devil’s workshop.” Idle hands led me straight to boredom’s waiting room, where the only thing to read are pamphlets on mono: “Mono may cause swelling of the spleen? A burst spleen is an emergency?”

On day 12 we had lunch with half a western movie: “Dances with Melodrama,” If I recall. Evidently we’d rather do housework than watch Kevin Costner get frisky in a teepee. (I’ve since had to watch Alien Autopsy three times to get the image of him in buckskin out of my head.)

I heard an occasional groan from the childrens’ rooms as the wife unearthed mysteries from the Mesozoic era. Once, she called me in to show me Mt. St. Biohazard, which consisted of dust bunnies, fuzzy spoons, old socks and the fossilized remains of a bagged lunch—no, make that seven bagged lunches. Apparently the boy had been using his backpack as a mobile dumpster.

Between bleach fumes and dust thrown by our vintage vacuum, allergies left me dazed. So, I was in my own little world organizing shaving accessories and polishing the necessary, when the wife burst in with blood gushing from her hand. The daughter had thought it wise to stash glass from a shattered picture frame in her toy box.

I squealed, jumped, and hit my head on a shelf. Luckily, I didn’t suffer any brain damage. Luckily, I didn’t suffer any brain damage. When my eyes uncrossed, I tried tending to her wounds, but found it difficult due to all the hysterical blubbering.

After a good smack in the face and a few stern words, I dried my eyes and promised to relax. She endured my backwoods doctoring without a peep, while I would’ve called for a priest and made her promise never to remarry. By that evening we were wheezing, bleeding and praying the children would soon be home.

Day 14, small talk was exhausted. Like inmates out on parole after a 40-year sentence, we found this disruption to our routine unsettling. Even worse, she blamed me for the kids’ absence.

“I thought we could use some time alone,” I pleaded. All she heard

was, "I am evil. I took your children away. Ha, ha, ha!"

I had inadvertently insinuated myself between mother bear and the cubs, and no one was around to hear my screams. Playing dead was still an option.

"How about a chocolate malt?" I asked, as I readied myself to either fall to the carpet in my best possum pose or beg for mercy. "OK," she said, her eyes full of disdain.

I don't know how long I can use ice-cream as a tranquilizer, but the kids are due to arrive this Sunday. If you see us in line at Dairy Queen, run for your life.

The Crying Towel

I'm not big on the celebration of anniversaries, especially ones which are job-related, so please don't think I'm doing some kind of, "Where am I a year later?" piece of hooey—it's not me.

When I started writing this twice-or-so monthly column about 15 months ago, my editor suggested I invent a smart saying to fill the space under the little picture of me which accompanies said column. Spring 2005 was eventful, and I was new, so the whole search for the tagline was postponed. My editor stuck the words, "Staff Writer" in the box for the time being.

Mid-summer 2006, and things are no less hectic, but procrastination was no longer an option. I was afraid to change things up after over a year with the existing tagline, but my bosses were less than sympathetic to my pleas of laziness—If it ain't broke ... right?

For ideas on suitable column names, I consulted a half-dozen or so local publications. Five minutes later, I realized you can't swing a dead cat in Northern Michigan without hitting a column writer.

I wasn't sure what "The Gestalt Shift," meant, so I looked it up. I still don't understand. Other column names included, "Rising and Converging" a reference to highway on-ramps, I believe. I'm no sports fan, but, "From the Mound," I assume is about baseball. "Last Call," is clever, seeing as the writer's last name is Booze. "Just a thought," seemed a little generic, but what do I know? "Ear to the Ground," is clever if figurative and uncomfortable if literal.

To compete with mottoes like those, I needed to figure out what it was I did. Well, I fight with lawnmowers and snowblowers. I duke it

out with giant bumble bees and tipsy canoes. I lock myself in the car at night when I go camping for fear of those yet-to-be discovered, but nonetheless real, Michigan man-eating black bears.

All that self-discovery was of little good after the boss said, while apropos, “The Klutz” and “The Pansy” were too defeatist. I protested. I told her, “No officer, I didn’t realize I needed a permit for that,” and “It jumped under my wheels,” don’t fit in the little box next to my head.

With face puckered and teeth bared, her eyebrows tried to make themselves vertical to the forehead. (My father made a face like that when I was about 9. He caught me eating raw Kool-Aid straight from the packet in an attempt to hide the smell of stolen cigarettes on my breath.)

Realizing I had pushed the editor about as far as was safe to do, I got to work on the following list of taglines:

10. “Below the Belt,” was inspired by a recent letter to the editor, but I don’t fancy myself a cheater.

9. “The Gray Gohst,” after a confederate war hero. I know, I know, my column has nothing to do with the Civil War—I didn’t say this was a good list.

8. “Hammer and Tongs,” meaning I write the columns with gusto. But let’s face it, the last thing I did vigorously was a ham sandwich on rye.

7. “Heavens to Betsy.” I chose this one just for the shock value.

6. “Not Quite Humble,” in honor of former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir’s statement, “Don’t be so humble, you’re not that great.”

5. “...” We couldn’t print number five. This is a family publication after all.

4. “Court Jester,” could have worked if the local judges would allow me to throw pies at defendants and squirt the prosecutor with a seltzer bottle.

3. “Four Flusher,” referred to never making the grade. The boss thought it sounded too much like bathroom humor and wiped it from the list immediately.

2. “Read Me or Else,” in homage of the old National Lampoon magazine cover wherein a revolver was pointed at a dog’s head with the caption: “If you don’t buy this magazine, we’ll kill this dog.”

We decided on “The Crying Towel.” I say “We” because, if it had

not been for my editor's decisiveness, this column would still fly under the flag, "Staff Writer."

According to a book on phrase origins, "Get out the crying towel" is a retort to a chronic complainer. With all the taxes, politicians and general ne'er-do-wells around, there's a lot to complain about in this world.

I hope anyone reading this sticks around for a few more of my gripes; and, Dad, I still owe you three Newports and a packet of Kool-Aid.

Just Passing The Time

I always vowed I would never stoop to writing the, “I couldn’t think of anything to write about in my column,” column, but here we are.

Before you blame me, know our office is a veritable third world operation. My hands cramp due to the Arctic air-conditioning. I get drowsy due to my overstuffed reclining chair, and with the view of Round Lake, concentration is out of the question.

“For just .60 cents a day you can make sure little Benjamin has that new espresso machine he’s always wanted. Won’t you please give generously?”

I spent this week in the white-collar sweatshop planning to write about Pluto being stripped of its status as a planet. In case you’ve been hiding in a spider hole in Tikrit, Pluto was quietly designated as a dwarf planet by a group of astronomers in Prague. Then there were eight. It seems people aren’t too interested in the fate of the former planet. And, even if they were, what would I write?

Yeah, I could always regurgitate some information from a text book, stretch a few hundred words over how I thought they were talking about that dog from that company that’s taken over southern California.

I could tell you Pluto is blah blah feet across, X light years from the sun on the right-hand side and that it was discovered in 19-who-gives-a-rat’s-fanny, but I think I will leave the stars to the astrologers, thank-you very much.

The real problem was I had already submitted the idea to my editor. I was stuck with it. After a few days of nail biting (by which I mean

eating doughnuts and crying), I realized I had zilch. I was in too deep. The Great Pluto Farce, as it would come to be known in my head, would join the list of failures like my, “Misunderstood Dictator,” series.

While I was saddened, “Reflections on Saddam: Gentler than Genocide” and “Osama: Joker of Jalalabad,” would never see the light of day, they certainly weren’t the worst two ideas I’d considered pitching to my editor. Then again, If I couldn’t make a go of a story on an ex-planet, how would I ever get that, “Mating Rituals of the Jumbo Shrimp,” piece off the ground?

What hope was there for my exposé on corduroy if I couldn’t sell, “Sins of the Rutabaga,” and “26 Ways to Prepare Tenderloin of Skunk?”

Then there was the tips and tricks set I wanted to roll out. The list included old favorites such as, “10 Things You Should Never Do With Mustard,” “25 Smells You’ll Never Admit to Liking,” and a piece entitled, “It’s Not Your Fault: 20 compliments for Parents of Ugly Children.”

Although I didn’t think, “The Dead Art of the Courtesy Flush,” would go over much better than, “The Thinking Man’s Guide to Parcheesi,” I was hoping my thoughts on cheating at solitaire would be found useful.

Some columnists write about nature, but I didn’t think too many people would relish reading, “The Lemming: Nature’s Little Moron,” much more than, “Hog Calling for Fun and Profit.” “Matriculation and Other Words That Don’t Mean What You Think They Mean,” may sound dirty, but it had to be more interesting than the four-part investigation into the mechanics of chalk I was mulling over.

I gave up on “Speling Four Dumbmies,” because it was far too maudlin, even for me. I killed, “A Left-wing Guide to Values: The Best Nine Words on Paper,” after my membership in the Liberal Media was threatened, and “Mythological Creatures?: Bigfoot and the Compassionate Conservative,” would have been an insult to anyone who has ever spotted the hairy, sweaty dullard. (Was he referring to Bigfoot or the Compassionate Conservative?)

Maybe someday, after I’ve won that Pulitzer Prize for enraging the general public, I can go to work on some racier topics; but, for now,

columns like, “The Protestant’s Guide to Judaism,” and “In Case Of Emergency, Freak Out!: Disaster Protocols for Cowards,” will remain shelved.

Then again, maybe I’m being too wimpy. If someone had the courage to create a bumper sticker which reads: “Even Jesus Thinks You’re a Jerk,” then I could probably get away with my piece, “How To Swear In 14 Different Languages.”

After all, I’d rather be labeled offensive than boring.

Day Tripping ... And Falling

Labor Day weekend is typically known for road trips, hot dogs, camping and bonding with the family, but for some of us, there is a darker side.

The wife, kids and I should have been spending every holiday zooming up and down the interstate to grandma's house. However, driving hadn't been the same since mechanical failure caused me to crash a Ford cargo van into the wall of a cemetery at 40-mph in 1995.

At the time of the accident I wasn't a full-blown hypochondriac, and it never occurred to me until later just how much the crash would affect me later on in life. I went from being able to drive all day and night to any destination I wished, to sweating and hyperventilating every time I drove faster than 35 mph. Just pulling up into the on-ramp was enough to make my arms and legs start tingling while visions of gory death pranced in my brain.

Every time I drove after that incident I was certain the steering was going to go out again, leaving me imperiled on the highway. As you might imagine, we didn't travel much.

Over the years I managed to keep it together on city streets and highways but still had quite an issue with expressways or traveling any distances greater than 30 or so miles.

Fast-forward to 2005. When I laid my head on my pillow that Friday night, I had fully intended to spend the weekend at home doing minor repairs and maintenance. I awakened the next morning to angry cries from the wife.

“Bathtub ... overflowing ... &@#%!”

Roused from slumber, I rolled up my pant legs and grabbed my plumber's tools—a jug of Drano and a rusty coat hanger. The better part of Saturday was spent fighting a blockage the size of an Idaho potato with what I believe was the first plunger ever made. If I would have gone to plumber school I would have known the first lesson they teach you is not to pour drain cleaner into anything you plan on vigorously plunging.

Lesson one: acid burns. Lesson two: some chicks may dig the eye patch but your wife does not. Lesson three: kicking the tub won't make the water go down any faster.

In the fracas with clogzilla, I managed to exacerbate an old fracture on my right foot. Ironically enough, famous whiskey maker Jack Daniels supposedly died in a similar fashion. Legend has it that he was a stubborn old coot who got so angry when his safe wouldn't open that he kicked it, bloodying his toe and dying from the subsequent infection.

Maybe it wasn't irony after all, but fighting with the tub did make me want to drink whiskey. Eventually the tub emitted a great satanic belch and Swiss Family Body Odor was able to shower without flooding the basement. By Sunday morning, even I was ready to get out of town.

10 a.m.—the family departed from Charlevoix—wife and children gleeful; Dad #1.

10:55 a.m.—Dad drove right past his turn off at the I-75 South interchange after visions of fatality involving a gasoline truck and gallons of blood; Dad no longer #1.

11:10 a.m.—feeling guilty about ruining the surprise trip down state, Dad headed north on I-75. After 12 years together, mom didn't ask why. Surprise!

11:11 a.m.—hyperventilation was accompanied by tingling, nausea, numbness, drowsiness, dizziness and thoughts of impending doom.

11:20 a.m.—between frantic snorts, Dad suggested lunch at a park. Mom and kids said, “That's great.” Dad said, “I'm going to throw up on my feet.”

Noon—after a picnic near Burt Lake, a calmer Dad hobbled up the observation tower long enough to get vertigo and see a breathtaking display of RVs and their makeshift clotheslines.

“Aren't the skid-marked underwear lovely this time of year, kids?”

The kids used the opportunity to give mom a mild stroke by leaning

too far over the top of the tower.

1 p.m.—the family stopped at the “Deliverance” yard sale.

While Dad tried to understand why a fish tank brimming with motionless gerbils was 12 feet from the nearest shade, he did his best to assure the kids they were only sleeping. He then tried not to make eye contact with the chain-smoking matriarch or the grubby kid with the Mohawk as he paid his quarter for a hardcover edition of, “Jim Beckwourth, Negro Mountain Man.” (I’ll let you know how Jim makes out later.)

1:30 p.m.—headed into Conway, Dad decided to get photos of the kids posing on the red and green cars of the Crooked Lake Express.

1:35 p.m.—while unsuccessfully trying to start the car, Dad remembered why he never leaves town.

1:38 p.m.—Dad popped the hood and stared intently. Radiator, battery, various hoses.

“Maybe if I wiggle this wire—nope, still won’t start.”

2:50 p.m.—the wife and son walked to town to call Dad’s editor for help.

The first words out of editor’s mouth: “How did you get him to Conway?”

2:51-2:53 p.m.—the wife and editor had a good laugh at Dad’s expense, but help was on the way.

3:10 p.m.—overcome by boredom, Dad broke out his guitar to serenade the Swiss Family Tough-Luck. It wasn’t long before an elderly gentleman in a windowless van stopped to ask if Dad would play and sing gospel songs at a nearby church. Dad screamed “pumpernickel,” which is his safe word, and the wife shooed the strange older man away.

3:55 p.m.—figuring help would soon be there, the wife turned the ignition key forward to roll the windows up and the car mysteriously started.

3:57 p.m.—wife tells dad he hadn’t been turning the key all the way forward.

3:58 p.m.—Editor arrives to follow family home. Dad keeps an eye out for a nice cemetery to run into.

The Salmon's On The Manifold

“I’m not a lunatic or anything,” I said to the small crowd as I popped the hood on the old blue car. “I’m a local writer working on a travelogue of sorts.”

A few of them smiled politely and went back to fueling their motorcycles and stretching their legs. Smells of fish, herbs and almonds wafted across the gas station parking lot. I flashed my press card in a futile attempt to confirm my sanity.

“Watcha doin’?” one of them queried.

“Makin’ dinner,” I responded.

What drives a man to cook dinner on the engine of his ‘88 Cadillac? Maybe it was hunger, perhaps it was boredom, but either way, it doesn’t take a criminal mastermind to know auto engines get hot enough to cook food. And, this was something I had always wanted to try.

While I wasn’t new to cooking, I was unfamiliar with this method. And, since I couldn’t afford the \$68 how-to cookbook “Manifold Destiny” I had to wing it.

A pound-and-a-half of Atlantic salmon sprinkled with lemon, basil, rosemary, black pepper and salt was triple wrapped in foil. I was sure to spray the inner foil of the meat and veggie packs with a generous amount of cooking spray. Two large handfuls of fresh green beans covered in two tablespoons of virgin olive oil, salt, pepper and sliced almonds was also triple wrapped in foil. The brownies, which came from a mix, I poured into a nine-inch cake pan and also covered with foil.

I used 100-pound strength all-purpose wire found at auto part stores to secure the victuals. It’s perfect for cinching sagging exhaust pipes or

keeping lunch off the highway.

I wedged the salmon between the exhaust manifold and a parallel exhaust pipe. The green beans, which were shaped in a flat rectangle (ensure meat and vegetables are one layer deep, preferably an inch or less thick) I laid on the valve cover. One piece of wire secured both fish and veggies. I strapped in the brownies with a piece of wire so they rested atop both the radiator and valve cover before setting out on our 60-mile journey.

By Mancelona—30 miles from home—the scent of salmon wafted through the heater vents. We stopped at our property there and I did a progress check. The green beans were hot, but the brownies were room temperature goo. I moved the beans to the alternator and put the brownies on the valve cover before heading home.

Back in Charlevoix, I parked at the Mobil station, untwisted wires, laid out forks and napkins. John Garfield, Vincent Wilson and Amy Schindler, the three bikers up from Jackson on a color tour, said the salmon was delicious but the green beans were still crunchy.

We snacked from the engine bay and made small talk while the wife sunk in her chair, covered her face and prayed to God no one saw us.

So what did I learn? Contrary to popular belief, an alternator does not get hot enough to cook green beans. (Is that a popular belief?) I learned my children have yet to reach the age where everything I do is an earth-shattering embarrassment. In fact, I think combining my son's fantasies involving high speeds, fine food and combustion may have jump-started him into puberty.

I also learned some vehicles simply have too many gadgets under the hood. There just wasn't enough bare engine block upon which I could cook to bake those brownies.

The next time I do some over-the-road cooking, I'll take my '67 Buick Riviera with the 430 cubic inch big block. It has enough open space to roast a tenderloin, a five-pound bag of potatoes, buttermilk biscuits and a devils food cake.



The 28 Days Of Christmas

Today makes 28 days I've been celebrating Christmas ... against my will.

On Thanksgiving Day, the wife decided we should get the holidays rolling—two weeks before our normal decorating date. The upside to her decision was that I was too busy making 11 pizzas to help with the Yuletide frenzy. (On a side note, my brothers and sister demand homemade pizza whenever they come up. So, we just eat pizza on Thanksgiving and do the turkey thing on Black Friday. *Nowadays we do the Tofurkey thing.*)

For the first year I can remember, she had to solve the Sphinx's second riddle, you know the one: how did eight, 30-foot strands of lights become a 12-pound sheepshank?

It was sweet, sweet justice to watch her fight with the malfunctioning staple gun as she hung strand after strand of half-working lights. Of course, this holiday season has been pretty tame compared to my childhood Christmases.

The only excitement so far is when my son spilled a gallon of paint on himself while searching the shed for the legs which hold our aluminum Christmas shrub erect. He won't admit to pouring it on the floor and proceeding to make satin finish angels on the concrete, but the scene of the crime tells a different story.

Now that I'm confident the statutes of limitations on trespassing, theft, obstructing justice, domestic violence and child endangerment have lapsed, I can say the wife's grumbling over missing ornament hooks and decorations submersed in liquefied candy canes from

yesteryear was slightly reminiscent of my father, wreaking of Apple Barrel Schnapps and Newport Kings, on one of his more memorable holiday rants.

Now, he and my mother argued about 312 days out of the year, so we were accustomed to the commotion, but the sight of him cross-eyed and cursing at a 30-year-old pretzel of lights, long-since outlawed as a fire hazard, was nothing less than disturbing—on a *please lie on the couch and tell me all about it for \$120 an hour* level.

Meanwhile, mom and us kids trimmed the nine-foot pine we pilfered from the back forty of a mid-Michigan-based, multinational corporation which will remain nameless.

Anyone who knows me can tell you I'm a terrible liar, but packed with Christmas spirit, this 12-year-old didn't even flinch when I told that sheriff deputy my father was helping my little brother go pee in the bushes that wintry evening.

It was blizzard conditions when Dad emerged with that evergreen beauty. I'll never forget the frantic, yet elegant, way he belly flopped into that snowdrift—trunk under one arm, buck saw under the other—when another set of headlights appeared on that secluded gravel road.

My father abhorred thievery, but he did his best during some bad financial times to give us at least a little Christmas. Sometimes there was no food and sometimes you got a bag of green plastic army men under the tree when you were 15; but there was always a big beautiful Christmas tree in the living room.

Luckily, those years are countered by good years, like when I was 9 and I got my first Daisy air rifle. Though the blood of 1,000 chickadees is on my hands, it was a truly great Christmas. And, I'll never forget when I was 5 and my aunt hauled all us grand-kids into the back bedroom at Grandma's to look out the window and see Rudolph's nose in the distance. Minutes later we heard jingling and stomping coming from the roof. We ran into the living room to find a gift-filled green burlap bag the size of a Guernsey.

That was also the year Grandpa gave me a beautiful handmade steerable sled. A runner is cracked and the shiny brown finish turned stone gray long ago, but that sled will be 33 years old this Christmas.

I firmly believe we are the sum of all our experiences, both good

and bad, and I wouldn't give up any of my Christmas memories for all the little green army men in the world.

So, even if your holy trinity merely consists of George Bailey, Yukon Cornelius and Clark Griswold, have a merry Christmas. Oh, and take it easy on the apple schnapps.

Same Old New Year

In light of how far off I was on last year's New Year's predictions—I didn't lose weight, the county clerk didn't stop smoking, not only did the city councilwoman and former city manager not make up, but she decided not to run and he was canned—I've sworn off prognostication for awhile.

Still hoping for a glimpse into the future, I called my psychic adviser Magick Tami. She told me the next few years will be of significant growth for me at work. Whether that means my pile of hate mail will get higher or the number of mind-numbing governmental meetings I will attend is expected to increase, I am not sure.

She did say one thing which made me do a double-take. As my father used to say "I kid you not." (Well, he didn't actually say "kid." He used another word, but you get the point.) She said: "There is something to do with a vehicle. Is it the brakes you've been concerned about?" Although, because Tami was Jamaican, it sounded more like: "Oh, mon, you gotta brake-brake prolim whicha now doncha? If'n you doan take keer a dat you gonna have mayja prolims wit erry blood clot ting."

Now, truth be told, I am not much of a believer in things supernatural, but knowing that the day before I called Tami I had set an appointment with my mechanic to inspect my brakes—my mechanic can corroborate this—gave me a bit of a dizzy spell and made me stutter. How she expected me to reconcile what she told me with the certainty that I already know everything there is to know about time and space ... not to mention that all psychics are frauds, was beyond

me.

That being said, let's get down to the nitty-gritty: The year at hand and how bad of a start it had.

They say March comes in like a lamb, goes out like a lion. The lesser well-known saying is that December goes out with confetti and spirits while January comes in like the winner of a prune stew eating contest infected with a strain of steroid-fortified stomach flu. (Yeah, a poop joke. Pretty classy, huh.)

No doubt many of you are still nursing yourselves back to health after trying to see how far you could push your collective endocrine systems. Granted, the last thing going through your mind at 3 a.m. on New Year's Eve was how you would feel in the morning or the one after that, but when those handfuls of Chex mix, two cheeseburgers, a quart of imitation Champagne and that last martini turned your stomach into host of the hobo Olympics by digging their metaphoric heels into your pancreas and tugging on fistfuls of esophagus in an attempt to do a Triple Lindy off the diving board of your tongue, you knew you had gone too far.

No doubt by the time you read this I will be back at work, under my desk and checking my pulse for irregularities. Oh, when we were young we could down great gallons of beer and pints of vodka, but these days a six-pack and a few glasses of buttershots and it takes three days to recover.

And to make things worse, while Satan is playing the drum solo to "Wipeout" off both hemispheres of your brain, you get to think about all those things you did under the influence of Jell-O shots, Jager Bombs and some concoction your buddy swears he invented which tasted suspiciously like sweat socks and gin.

If you're anything like me, and kudos if you're not, you probably told someone you don't like how much you love them and you told at least one person you do like how much you hate them. Someone wearing a kilt may or may not have burned his underwear while screaming indiscriminate epithets to, what is my best guess, someone who only he could see.

You probably scored poorly in a fight against what you hope was an inanimate object: It could have been a trash can, it could have been a popcorn machine, and hopefully it wasn't a homeless person or

someone's dog.

Someone may even have told the mayor that you are a "borderline Adonis," but it's not important who said what and when and to whom because that person will never admit to having said it even if there were, say, three to eighteen witnesses.

You enlightened individuals are all welcome to get going on bettering yourselves through exercise, diets and smoking cessation programs this year, but the rest of us are doing all we can to hold on for dear life.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to try downing some chicken broth and saltines and hope for the best.

Job Insecurity

“I love my job, I love my job, I love my job.” It was my mantra through more than a dozen crummy careers.

Now, I should preface the following by pointing out that I am not a cheery fellow to begin with. Oh sure, there was a time when I was, dare I say (“Dare, dare,” Cleavon Little whispers.) a happy-go-lucky individual, but then I turned 7, and have been in one sort of funk or another ever since. The shrink blames my fatalistic father, while I prefer to think it's because life is all a big accidental nothing playing out on a dying rock hurling through space, but that's a paranoid delusion for another time.

Mix my maligned mental state with a smear of craptastic careers and I'm surprised I haven't climbed a clock tower by now—(SEE ALSO Joke material to avoid: Mental illness, assassinations and hating one's job et al.) And for those of you thinking it's this line of work, this news business, which has made me such a miserable SOB, who asked you?

Don't get me wrong, I don't fantasize about pulling the heads off kittens or pushing the wheelchair-bound down steep hills (the IRS does not appreciate competition.) but I have had my fair share of angst and increased stresses recently.

Last week began as usual: Five calls and a half-dozen e-mails reminding me that I am a poor writer, I'm not as clever as I thought I was and at any given time I am one or more of the following: Racist, bigot, anti-Semitic, conservative, liberal, gay, homophobic, capitalist swine, socialist pig, and I even got an e-mail from one Dr. Jasper Bruner who, peddling herbal supplements, wrote, “Your chick does not admire to do it with you for reason of your male device size. Don't

miss this good possibility to solve the problem.”

I had had enough. Not only was Dr. Bruner accusing me of having a less than admirable device, it was going to be up to eight weeks before the pills arrived.

I stared at my 1912 Royal typewriter, pre-loaded with the piece of paper upon which I may someday write my resignation letter from this business in general. It stared back, daring me to make the first move. I began to brainstorm, by which I mean the six-and-a-half cells not affected by Krylon paint fumes or Anheuser-Busch (SEE ALSO: dumb teenager) began doing gray matter squat thrusts which caused intense pain and a mild nosebleed.

I had to whip up a scenario the wife would believe.

“You see honey, I had to quit because the office is full of communists.”

She'd never buy it. She knows I have a soft spot for Gorbachev.

“But dear, I'm being sexually harassed by my boss.”

Who was I kidding, the last time anyone but my wife gave me so much as an amorous glance was 1992 when Homer, the family St. Bernard, was in heat.

It was no use. She would see right through my schemes. And, let's face it, I had grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle afforded me by the liberal media. I wasn't about to go back to living like a peasant in fly-over country.

Then I got this e-mail with “DO YOU HATE YOUR JOB?” in the subject line. It read: “Purchase a rectal thermometer made by Johnson & Johnson. When you get home, lock your doors, draw the curtains and disconnect the phone so you will not be disturbed. Take out the literature from the box and read it carefully. 'Every rectal thermometer made by Johnson & Johnson is personally tested and then sanitized.'”

The glee I felt in knowing that somewhere, some poor schmuck was getting the cold glass shaft 40 hours a week dissolved when, after curiosity overcame, I sneaked down the health and beauty aisle at the local supermarket. It seems the device (Johnson & Johnson's, not mine) is not personally tested, but the point was taken. There are jobs out there that are a true pain in the ... well, you get the idea.

I'm sure I could be doing much worse things like cleaning kennels

again, working the gut table at a slaughterhouse or working as a fluffer in the animal husbandry industry. If you don't know what a "fluffer" is, and you're over 18, I suggest you Google it. If you're under 18, I suggest you Google it when your parents aren't around.

Either way, all I can say is: "I love my job. I love my job. I love my job."

Going To Sing Sing

My name is Gohs, and I make bad decisions. This is where you say, “Hello, Gohs.”

I know the shock you must be feeling: “You mean the rotund guy with too many tattoos and the arteries of a 90-year-old pastry chef makes poor choices?”

This latest bumble involves performing a song at the local library’s open mic night. I know my way around a guitar but sing only well enough to get myself in trouble. Though, that has never kept me from obliging when the mood commands.

I convince myself the experience is not for my own edification but because my 13-year-old son and budding guitar hero deserves some recognition for all those hours of practice. He says, “Let’s play Crazy Train.” I say, “Let’s not.”

We settle on Tommy Tutone’s classic 867-5309 (Jenny).

“Hey, what a great idea!” shouts the part of my brain—known by scientists as the Belushi Zone—in charge of craving doughnuts and beer, making homemade fireworks and using a cooler lid as a sled pulled by an inebriated gent on a riding lawnmower.

“But sire, you cannot sing,” pleads the part of my brain that looks like Professor Julius Kelp and generally prevents me from, say, investing in South American Alpaca farms.

We tune the guitars and run through it for practice.

“So, how does my voice sound?” I ask the wife.

Kelp senses her hesitation but, before he can warn me, Belushi brains him with a croquet mallet.

“You sound like a freakin’ canary,” Belushi says as he polishes crimson sauce off the hammer with a shirtsleeve and elbow. “Now get out there, superstar.”

The first act, consisting of a pretty girl and her slacker boyfriend, plays perfectly for the crowd of 20. My dinner tries its level best to abandon ship. A short little poet about the size of two garden gnomes gets up. He’s Jack Kerouac meets Danny DeVito.

“Railroad cars shifting buttermilk; birds gurgling acid; white feet ... kicking; always kicking.”

Then it’s the boy and I. The crowd’s anticipation is palpable. My feet feel heavy and my tongue thickens. Suddenly I’m Roy Schieder on Amity Island. Off in the distance some guy is yelling for his dog Pip-pen. The camera does a dolly zoom (look it up) nice and close on my face. Kelp awakens and delivers a roundhouse kick knocking Belushi unconscious.

“What in holy hell am I doing!?”

I joke with the crowd, “We won’t be using a microphone. You’ll be thankful.”

Ain’t I clever?

The crowd laughs a little, probably assuming I’m some humble artist who is better than he lets on. Little do they know.

My son plays the intro while hot and cold running terror shoot through my torso. Kelp is yelling and pulling at levers.

“Run, damn you, run!” he shouts.

I sit, motionless. I’m sensing something—kind of like when you’ve got a greeber on the end of your nose, or yesterday’s underpants inexplicably hanging out a pant leg and nobody wants to tell you.

“Jenny, Jenny,” My voice squeaks and groans. Every third note is in a key heard only by snails, mice and dogs with Down Syndrome. Off in the distance a mildly retarded basset hound answers my call. (“Jesus, god, did he just use the ‘R’ word?”)

Kelp faints. The crowd’s reaction is one of horror, then disbelief and finally sadness when they realize it isn’t going to stop.

Regaining consciousness, Kelp raises a megaphone: “Warning: The tortured wails of a dying beast emanating from performer are intentional! Go quickly to the nearest exit! Folks, this is not a drill!”

“Jenny, Jenny, who can ...” I forget the next line and play the chord

progression backwards.

In one of the all-time great mercy killings, Kelp pulls the plug; I stop singing. I stop playing. Pride and dignity puddle at my feet, or is that something else? Kelp is jumping and waiving his arms as though being chased by a giant bumblebee.

“What have you done? What have you done?”

Nick finishes the song and the crowd claps heartily.

“Lies, all lies!”

A tearful woman, seated in the front row and holding a rosary, collapses in relief. Even the weird little poet shakes his head in disgust. I consider jumping out a window, skipping town and living out my days as a low-level government stooge in Uruguay under the name Pablo McDermott. (Too specific?)

On the ride home the wife tells me, in the nicest way possible, that I’ll never get past the first round of American Idol.

Just then Belushi comes to: “You just weren’t singin’ loud enough, doll.”

He’s right. Next time I’ll dazzle ‘em with my heavy metal rendition of Ave Maria.

How Romantic

If you're knee-deep in Whitman's Samplers, Kmart lingerie and dead flowers, you are not alone—the nation weeps over gutted wallets and lost greenbacks.

I caved to the emotional extortion after holding out for 14 years. The last time I took the wife on a date was 1994, to see Jack Nicholson's "Wolf."

Before I further expound on the scarcity of celebrating our love, I should probably mention the events which led to this matrimonial mire. It all started 15 years ago when I tried to date my (now) sister-in-law Rachel. She resisted Gohs' charm, but thought me a match for her younger sister. She pleaded for me to take her sibling on a date. I refused. She begged. I conceded, with one stipulation: It would cost her a case of Busch Light beer. A bargain was struck, one thing led to another and I eventually married the younger sister.

Fast forward to last week. The wife didn't push the issue leading up to Valentine's Day, but it was obvious she wanted acknowledgment our marriage was more than a business losing more money than it makes—I blame my kids, who've yet to land a Nickelodeon TV series or endorsement deal with Oscar Meyer.

Once again I conceded and narrowed her gift ideas to a fishing pole, a stuffed gorilla and a trip to the movies. I chose the latter—Hey, it got me through the first 14.

A box of goobers, a medium Diet Coke, 90 minutes of Hayden Christensen teleporting to and from Egypt and the wife was elated. I was sweaty and nervous.

Despite being the only two in the theater, I have an aversion to cavernous spaces and, with the rash of shooting sprees in past years, I am convinced I will someday be the target for a disgruntled mailman or distraught teen whose daddy didn't hug him enough—or hugged him too much.

I spent the entire movie creating a jail yard shank out of an ink pen and my empty Dots box while considering every hostage scenario imaginable. Steven Segal I'm not, but after six months of Tae Kwon Do, these stubby legs can execute enough awkward side kicks to leave any would-be assailant winded with laughter, thusly eliciting our hasty departure.

With the movie finished and my blood pressure out of the danger zone, the wife thanked me and said, "Who are you and what have you done with my husband?" I politely laughed (*She's on to you Gohs, better alert the Supreme Ruler about this*) and then asked what she got me for Valentine's Day.

"Seriously, where the hell's my gift?"

Despite being 0-2 for both B-day and V-Day, the wife said she would make it up by planning a trip for her and the kids to Disneyland in August. Don't get me wrong, she wanted me to go, but knows I'll sooner gnaw off my big toe than board a flight (see also: Sweaty and nervous).

I got a little misty just thinking about a week without the three of them, but protested such extravagance. She reasoned the children would grow into maladjusted adults if such depravation occurred.

It wasn't the money or that my kids would be indoctrinated by an evil corporation's propaganda that made me nauseated, and it wasn't that they would be exposed to a soul-less rat with a falsetto, a duck with a speech impediment who refuses to wear pants, a pair of criminally insane chipmunks and a baby elephant so whacked out on crystal meth he thinks he can fly.

OK, it was the money. But, in my defense, I could not justify spending thousands of dollars on something in which I had no interest. In the wife's defense, she never once mentioned how I spend that much annually on an ever-growing car collection.

After days of deliberation, and not wanting to invite yet another karmic paddling for my misdeeds, I agreed to the trip. The wife ex-

plained that she wasn't asking my permission, but thanked me for the blessing.

Later, with a migraine, palpitations and pondering how this once mighty king got dethroned, I remembered I never even got the beer I was promised.

So Rachel, if you're reading this, I'm considering suing for breach of contract and getting out while I still have my boyish good looks.

I only hope your Valentine's Day was as swell as mine.

Getting My Balls (and strikes) Back

So I'm flipping through the latest copy of "O" (that's The Oprah Magazine to all you godless heathens) and I come across a piece by Dr. Phil. You know, that bald chick with the mustache who dispenses painfully obvious advice to the fat and the married.

In this month's article he tells a woman the reason hubby says nasty things to her is because he hasn't reconciled her doing the hunka-chunka with a coworker. As if she needed both hands and a flashlight to find that one.

Then, reading Phil's response to the 58-year-old obese woman who couldn't understand why overeating made her fat, I had to ask myself just what in the Funk & Wagnalls I was doing. How did it come that this once relatively manly man was reduced to spending his day off browsing a magazine for bored housewives? I wasn't raised in a tutu or forced to draw my feelings as a youngster. I did have a Raggedy Ann doll until I was 8 years old but I skinned my first coyote when I was 9. I grew up shooting frogs, burning bugs and playing tackle football. I built forts in the woods and once shot a man for snoring. OK, so, maybe the snoring part is a bit of a stretch.

What could have possibly happened to decrease my testosterone levels so?

Baseball!

I blame the baseball strike of 1994. Getting paid to do what you love seemed blessing enough, but not for these guys. As so many unbelievable things do, it happened. I was 19 the year we had no World Series, and so angry I sold my card collection and vowed never to

watch the game again.

So began my descent into the bowels of metro-sexuality. Long gone were boyhood summer days spent in the outfield shielding my face from the sun with my Phil Rizzuto shortstop mitt that was far too big for my hand.

Gone was the sweet smell of old leather and scrounging quarters to buy packs of Topps from the lonely display case so out of place at the neighborhood hardware store.

Gone were the nights spent flipping through price guides and trying to calculate how much a boy of 14 was worth. I sold a Darryl Strawberry for \$1.50. For Jose Cansenco I got \$3. Trading, selling and bartering for baseball cards was like the kid equivalent to the New York Stock Exchange.

Gone were the afternoons with Alan Trammell and Kirk Gibson, both badly dog-eared from one too many Saturdays spent sorting them in front of the black and white TV with the tinfoil antenna, while the boys of summer did their thing.

I did a fine job of abiding my oath all these years. It wasn't until 2006, when my "Bless You Boys" made it all the way to the World Series. Sitting alone, (the wife has never known me as a "sports guy" and I know how she looks at men who are hooked on NASCAR and golf, so it was best kept secret.) I watched every winning game with glee, and the last games of the series in agony as they tallied loss after loss.

Even though they didn't make it in the end, watching the Tigers back in action awakened something inside me, and the following season I found myself sneaking part of a game here and there.

Then came the steroid scandals, talk of adding disclaimers and asterisks to the records of athletes found guilty of nothing and now the government inquests into what private citizens do with their respective bodies.

America's pastime may not have had any dignity left to lose, but I was not going to let another one of its self-inflicted black eyes stop me from watching the game I love. I justified the alleged actions of some in MLB with the theory that, while steroids can make a person stronger, pills and serums are no substitute for dedication, training, sacrifice or talent.

Players who take drugs do so often at great risk and at the very

least they should receive the accolades they've earned without fear of municipal witch hunts. (Is he advocating drug use?) Besides, we all take steroids, it's just a matter of to what degree.

The U.S. Olympic team must take its own food to China this year because Chinese meat is so loaded with growth hormones, our athletes would test positive for steroids if they ingested it. Though perhaps to a lesser degree, American livestock and produce are also on the juice: One-pound chicken breasts and bulletproof tomatoes are not natural.

Whether it's the World's Strongest Man competitors, pro wrestlers or even baseball players, I just don't care what they put in their bodies. I made the mistake of giving up a lifelong love (and a portion of my manhood) over dubious behavior once but I'm not going to let it happen again.

Now, if you'll excuse me, the Tigers are already in spring training and I have to get started rebuilding my card collection from scratch.

Stranger's Brew

They say spring is right around the proverbial corner, but it's snowing as I write this and, like many of you, I am in week three of clinging to life in the fight against this bionic bubonic plague of.

Not feeling well enough to hit my usual Saturday hot spot, Handsome Stranger came over to my place for a guitar lesson.

Since no illness in existence is a good enough reason to excuse myself from our weekly ritual of scholarly discussions over suds, Stranger insisted on bringing alcohol with him. He arrived around nine on Saturday evening and, like a skid row denizen, pulled a tall glass bottle from a wrinkled paper sack and set it on the coffee table.

"Get a couple glasses," he ordered.

The clear glass showed a color of liquid which belied the bottle's label.

"It's not scotch," Stranger said, as his harry mug curled into a Grinchy smile. "It's mead ... homemade."

For those of you who don't spend much time with Vikings or inmates, mead is an easy to make alcoholic beverage which consists of honey, oranges, spices and 10 percent evil. (15 percent in Canada.)

The jaundice bathtub brew bubbled and churned violently in its glass hell. And, as if commanding us to drink, the cork popped out on its own. It really did.

My eyes darted to and from Stranger and then to his creation. I couldn't help feeling like the monster to his Dr. Frankenstein.

"Drink good. Fire bad!"

Apprehensive to ingest the libation, I gave it a sniff. It was a full-

bodied stench with overtones of oranges and armpits distilled and strained through a ripe gym sock. Like most wines, this one had legs. They just happened to be hairy.

Shaking my head in defiance, I gasped for air and flashed back to my teen years when a good friend and I decided to make our own batch of vodka. Being adventurous sorts, we forewent the recipe (and safety precautions) and filled a large plastic ice-cream pail with sliced potatoes, sugar, baker's yeast (not brewer's yeast) and water before shoving it lovingly in a drawer under my pal's heated water bed.

For six weeks, we watched the sauce grow from bad idea to affront to nature. When moron's intuition convinced us that it was ready, my friend pulled the batch of bio-hazard out, strained it through his mother's spaghetti colander and poured it into an unsanitary, but empty, liquor bottle.

It looked like watered-down milk and smelled like watered-down hell. The aroma offered shades of forgotten pasta and curdled milk with just a hint of nursing home.

"Is that you, Aunt Gert?"

Forget gagging a maggot, I pictured them leaping off buildings and kicking chairs away as their homemade nooses tightened.

My friend took the first sip.

"Gaaaaaaaah!" he exclaimed as he shivered uncontrollably.

He winced as his lazy eye straightened. (That generally only happened when he was really drunk.) We searched his mother's cupboard for something to mask the flavor.

"Chili powder?"

"No."

"Celery seed?"

"No."

"Liquid smoke?"

"Maybe ... but no."

"Mint extract?"

"Jackpot!"

We emptied the little glass bottle into the "vodka"—a move only slightly less effective than dunking horse fritters in ketchup. I was getting that feeling you get right before something bad happens. I could hear my mother's voice echoing in my head: "Benjamin Jon

Gohs, have you lost your #@\$!\$&! mind!?”

We poured the murky sauce over two ice-filled tumblers and stared at each other for a long time before raising the glasses and chugging.

Now, I'm not a picky eater by any standard. I am the creator of pork chop soup, blackened Ramen noodles and oatmeal with ketchup. However, even my perverted taste buds have their limit.

What can only be described as a minty rancidity was enough to kick-start my sympathetic nervous system. My gag reflexes stood on their tippy toes and flipped my stomach the bird—no, both birds.

My friend held on to the counter top with both hands and groaned loud through clenched teeth. He sounded like a demented bucking bronco rider.

“Heeeeeeeeyaaaaaaah!”

It's been awhile, but I definitely remember exclaiming something loud and wet like “Yurk!” or “Fligg!” before clapping both hands over my mouth and running from the kitchen. Hot prickly sweats broke out all over as I besmirched his mother's carefully decorated bathroom. I yurked on her decorative rugs. I fliggled on the flowered wallpaper. In between convulsions I prayed to Ozzy Osbourne, Timothy Leary and Keith Richards—and anyone listening--that I would not die or go blind.

Why hadn't I listened to my mother?

Quite sure I'd coughed up the majority of my organs, I wiped my bulging watery eyes and headed for the living room where I spotted my pal on the couch, clutching his stomach and moaning what sounded like an old time gospel hymn.

I fell to my knees.

“Damn his devil tongue!”

Grabbing at my burning guts I begged for him to stop. He convulsed violently between prayers, pausing in a futile attempt to hit the mop bucket he'd placed on the floor next to him.

“Dios te salve, Maria.”

Splash!

“Llena eres de gracia.”

Sploosh!

“El Señor es contigo.”

Drip.

Nausea soon turned to intestinal distress as the demon brew sauntered through our lower intestines clad in what felt like golf cleats dipped in merthiolate for the following two days.

Stranger's second request for drink glasses awakened me from my day terror and I reluctantly obliged. Despite his pleas, I returned from the kitchen with one cup. He took a nip for himself, shuddered and then pushed the issue no further.

"You can keep this one," he said. "I have more at home."

I had originally ended this column when it ran in the Charlevoix Courier newspaper by saying anyone interested in the full fifth of homemade mead could contact me at the office. In less than a week I was visited by an elderly gentleman who offered to trade a bottle of his homemade wine for Stranger's mead. I gladly unloaded the elixir but was dismayed upon realizing that this new bottle of juice was just as dubious and urine-hued.

It's been a few years but I still have that bottle of wine in my basement, daring someone to take a sip.

Perhaps I should unload it on some desperate teenagers.

It's The Law

I'd planned to write about the impending switch to Digital TV, but then it hit me: I'm not running an information hotline. This is The Crying Towel, not the Kind-hearted Helpful Towel.

Then, I was all set to expound on the mating rituals of the Himalayan yak when I get this e-mail from those devil worshipers over at the American Humanist Association saying they want to follow England's cue and repeal blasphemy laws. It seems England had a hard time wagging the finger of shame at Sudan for arresting a teacher who broke blasphemy laws by allowing her students to name their mascot "Mohammed," the equivalent of your kid's teacher naming the class guinea pig "Jesus Christ," while the limeys simultaneously had similar laws.

American talking heads, including my favorite charlatan Bill O'Reilly, got in on the act, decrying those evil Muslim extremists for their inhumane ways. The irony of which being that there are still states, including Massachusetts, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Wyoming, which have said laws on their books.

According to Michigan penal code, "Any person who shall willfully blaspheme the holy name of God, by cursing or contumeliously [sic] reproaching God, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor," and "Any person who has arrived at the age of discretion, who shall profanely curse or damn or swear by the name of God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor."

As far as I could tell, a fellow media professional could get away with naming his microphones after the Muslim prophet and I was still

OK to curse Shiva, Zeus and Scrappy Doo, but “Holy \$#!*!*% God,” I screamed for no good reason, “As often as I curse deities, they’ll never let me out of jail.”

Wondering what other strange laws there might be for the breaking, I began intense research, by which I mean listening to Supertramp albums and dropping pizza crumbs in the keyboard.

Though more unconventional than strange, it was with glee I read of the Australian teacher found not-guilty of abuse after jet slapping an unruly 8-year-old student. It seems “correction, discipline, management or control” is OK down-under, which may explain why they have far fewer school shootings than do we.

Then I found a website which specializes in weird rules, but our legal department says watching episodes of Matlock does not make me a lawyer, no matter how many times I use the words “juris” or “habeas,” so you might want to double-check accuracy of the following.

According to www.dumblaws.com, Michiganders may not: be drunk on a train, seduce an unmarried girl or sell a car on Sunday, which pretty much kills my plans for this weekend. You may not cut your hair without your husband’s permission and, since those evil gays are prohibited from the practice of obtaining ownership over each other via governmental certificate ceremony, this one is for the dames only. Michiganian farmers may not sleep with their pigs, sheep, goats, cows or chickens; though it is perfectly legal to get freaky with animals in Washington State, so long as you do not harm them in the process—puts a whole new spin on the term “puppy love.”

Look for the Evergreen State’s new slogans: “A chicken in every pot, a dress on every goat” and “Single farmers, worried livestock.”

Speaking of animal cruelty, Act 339 of 1919 states, “An animal control officer or other person killing a dog or other animal ... shall not use a high altitude decompression chamber ... for that killing.”

Just what the hell was going on in 1918?

And, since what happens in the barn stays in the barn, we’ll never know if 339 was passed to prevent bachelor farmers from hiding the evidence of their forbidden love.

While it’s probably too late to save my job after lampooning beastiality and child abuse, you can learn everything you never wanted to know about digital TV by visiting: www.dtv.gov.



Seder, Savior & A Sig Sauer

I was reading “The Higher Law” by Edward S. Corwin last week in preparation to expound on yet another Second Amendment battle raging in Washington, D.C.

Friends and foes of firearm ownership are desperate to learn if the nation’s capital will repeal or retain a 1976 law which outlaws handguns. D.C. remains the murder capital of America, though gun prohibitionists say the murder rate would be higher without the ban.

Corwin quoted ancient Athenian orator Demosthenes but, just as I was about to read it, the Wife told me she wanted a traditional Seder dinner on Easter Sunday. Forget I personally don’t celebrate Easter and we’re not Jewish and forget Passover was a month away, I was working here!

Demosthenes said, “Every law is a discovery, a gift of god—a precept of wise men.”

I took issue with his words, not only because of the myriad dumb laws in existence that would easily prove no all-powerful, all-knowing deity created them, but because he used a big word like “precept” and I was forced to get out of my chair and reach for a dictionary.

“Precept: rules, writs, warrants, laws intended to guide behavior,” I mumbled to myself as I read. “A regular barrel of authoritarian laughs.”

All laws are arbitrary in nature. I mean, men create them for all sorts of reasons: safety, health, greed, stupidity. Then I remembered the 10 big laws the Jesus fans are supposed to follow, and wondered if Moses hadn’t cooked the whole thing up. I only say that because of

the little known 11th Commandment: “Zipporah shalt stop reminding me, I mean Moses, that she could have married a wealthy sheep herder instead of waiting by that pit for seven years.”

But, who am I to argue with King James?

Besides, the wife was hounding me about ratatouille, unleavened bread, Haroset and lamb chops with mint jelly. Not only would the meal cost a small fortune in silver pieces, I really didn't want to spend all day in the kitchen when I should have been working on this column.

“We don't have to,” she said—in her ever cheery manner—knowing full well I haven't said “no” to a request, no matter how strange, in over 14 years.

I bartered for a few more minutes of research before shopping, and reread the article of concern: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”

It seemed pretty plain to me that we were supposed to get the guns—well, muskets—in order to form a militia when necessary to fight off invaders. But, alas, this was written before machine guns, carbines and cartridges. So the war of semantics was likely to rage on. But it would have to wait until I returned from the grocery store.

Lucky for us they had all the ingredients needed to complete our Middle-eastern experiment.

“Watcha makin'?” asked the perky young cashier.

“A case for my divorce attorney,” I grumbled.

“Huh?”

“Shalom!” I said and marched away with my bags.

Home, and with wallet \$94 lighter, I searched online for a recipe for unleavened bread, which conveniently doubled as chimney patch.

Instructions:

1. Mix unspecified amounts of flower and water
2. Roll thin and prick with fork
3. Bake until crisp
4. Pretend to enjoy

5. Save broken teeth as Passover souvenirs, use them to make an Easter necklace, or throw them at family members when they complain about how awful it tastes.

With the Haroset fermenting and the house reeking of eggplant and garlic, I returned to Corwin, who quoted Calvin Coolidge as saying men don't make, but discover, laws. So big G wanted us to have guns, but we weren't supposed to be killing one another—I was confused and I wasn't alone.

Apparently, 2,300 years after M-dog descended the mountain with his tablet of "shalt nots," the Chinese invented gunpowder. It took about 15 minutes for some Asiatic McGuyver to fashion the world's first gun out of bamboo before shooting his best friend in the face over a game of mahjong gone bad.

We've been shooting one another ever since, which is why the Supreme Court may soon decide whether guns are a right of individuals or militias. No doubt the law will be interpreted as all superfluous edicts are: from the prejudices and experiences of the justices reviewing the case.

Good old-timey common sense dictates that, since murder is already a crime, there's nary a need for extra gun laws, but the courts have not traditionally sided with common sense. But then, what do you expect from someone who wears pajamas to work and bangs a hammer whenever he's unhappy?

Criminals will always exist because laws are only good for two things: keeping honest people honest, and punishing those caught breaking them. A man willing to take another's life isn't going to let a little thing like a seven-day waiting period stop him, but I should digress before I am accused of being one of those wacky NRA types who thinks the answer to every ill is "more guns."

Speaking of punishment, the Ratatouille tasted as bad as I expect anything with "rat" in the title should taste, though, with a little mustard, the Haroset and lamb were edible.

Let's face it, danger will always be a reality, and taking away the ability of law-abiding citizens to protect themselves will not diminish that danger.

By the way, history says Demosthenes used a pen full of poison, not a gun, to kill himself, but he could've just as easily slit his wrists with a Seder biscuit.

The Brutal Ballet

If boxing is the *sweet science*, then professional wrestling is the *brutal ballet*—Oh I'm a Hulkamaniac, there's no denying.

True, the king of my boyhood dreams remains firmly lodged in the drug induced nightmare that is reality TV (SEE ALSO Hogan Knows Best), and most of my favorite wrestlers are either dead or retired, but I couldn't resist watching WrestleMania 24 last Sunday.

Those of you unfamiliar with, or unimpressed by, sports-entertainment may wonder why a grown man would pay \$54.95 to watch sweaty behemoths paw each other in a contest with a (Spoiler alert!) preordained outcome.

My fascination with large men in tights goes back to the early 1980s. Me on the living room floor and grandpa in his rocking chair, we watched stars of the National Wrestling Alliance like Larry Zbyszko and Ric Flair battle for supremacy along with guys like Lex Luger and Dusty Rhodes.

With six boys in my family, we didn't just appreciate the pageantry of the squared circle, our entire lives revolved around it. One of my best Christmas memories was the year I got Rowdy Roddy Piper and Nikolai Volkoff action figures and an official WWF wrestling ring. My brother Hammy got Big John Studd and Hillbilly Jim figures.

Saturday mornings were spent watching WWF (now the WWE) matches from the makeshift ring on our living room floor—blankets became canvas, couch cushions became turnbuckles. Then, in the mid '80s, we discovered Saturday Night's Main Event. It was the ultimate fix for our wrestling jones.

The mere fact that it began at 11:30 at night and preempted Saturday Night Live reruns every couple months or so made it special. Being 11 and 7 respectively, brother Hammy and I were the only kids allowed to stay up that late. And, poor as we were, mom always managed to scrape together enough change or pop bottles so the two of us could get some chips and soda for the special event.

I remember the feeling of glee when good guy Junkyard Dog chased bad guy Jimmy “Mouth of the South” Hart under the ring and tore his pants off revealing boxer shorts covered with a heart pattern.

“They can’t do that on TV!” we shouted. (This was decades before Jersey Shore.) Oh how we squealed with delight!

I also remember watching with sweaty palms and racing pulse the night Hulk Hogan was savagely beaten by the evil King Kong Bundy, who interfered with Hogan’s match against Don Muraco. In tears, and pounding on the floor, I screamed at the TV as Bundy repeatedly performed his signature move *The Avalanche* on Hogan. I’m not sure how many ribs the Hulkster broke, but he got his revenge at Wrestlemania II in a steel cage for what could be one of my all time favorite matches.

For me, those were the golden days of wrestling. Nowadays one is forced to sift through female porn stars clad in lingerie passing themselves off as wrestlers. And I dare you to figure out who is good and who is bad. Modern wrestling is full to bursting with antiheroes—the good guys are all bad guys and the bad guys aren’t really that bad.

Whereas Bobby “The Brain” Heenan and his family of ne’er-dowells, which included scoundrels like Ravishing Rick Rude and Paul Orndorff, always managed to get my blood boiling, there aren’t really any heels of substance these days. The closest thing to a villain I’ve seen is the guy who, a couple weeks ago, beat down the illegitimate Irish midget son of his former friend.

On a sad note, the more than 30-year career of “Nature Boy” Ric Flair likely ended for real last Sunday. I’ve seen a lot of “Career Threatening” matches in my time, but I’ve never seen one where the loser was in tears and took the time to hug and kiss his family at ringside before heading backstage.

They may pull punches and rehearse matches, but the impact wrestling has had on my life is very real. Maybe it’s childhood nos-

talgia that keeps me tuned in, but when the Hulkster told me that, by drinking my milk and eating my vitamins, I would never go wrong, I believed him—brother!

Unnatural Casings

They say there are two things you never want to witness as they are made: laws and sausage. Well, one needn't watch a law being made to know whether it is necessary.

For your consideration: Dozens of men and women clad in business suits with the sole mission to make rules so excessive in number and oppressive in scope that their authors justify their unnatural existence while simultaneously betraying those they've sworn to serve; to find this conundrum smothered in Limburger and served on a skunk tail, one need only look at the menu under "T" for tyranny. The price? Your freedom.

OK, so Rod Serling I'm not. But, it didn't take much time surfing www.legislature.mi.gov and eying just a few of the dozens of laws proposed for this year alone before I felt like I was in the you-know-what zone.

Aside from various amendments to existing corporate welfare schemes and various dubious taxes, I found a proposal directing police, doctors and teachers to report suspected child abuse; the fact that someone felt a law was needed for something this obvious both scares and puzzles me.

Though I was certain trespassing was already a crime, there is a bill proposed that would penalize scofflaws with a \$100 fine and up to 30 days in jail for remaining on someone else's land after they've been directed otherwise. Where I come from, fines are the least of your worries if you refuse to get off a man's spread.

Not certain that they had wasted enough ink, paper, time and money, our good Michigan legislators authored H.R. 324 which rec-

ognizes the Michigan inductees into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

Some laws, like voter rights initiatives, are passed to prevent prejudice, and some laws, like those which tell you what you can't do with your body, are passed to protect prejudice, but my favorite laws are the ones which spring up after some yutz hurts himself doing something stupid, which brings us to my favorite of the laws proposed this first quarter: H.R. 5753 which aims to, "Prevent death and injury from stove tipping."

Had I simply been lucky? Was it possible there was a marauding band of G.E. and Kenmore ovens thirsting for human blood? My mind flashed back to the cult classic movie "Death Bed: The Bed that Eats People."

Perhaps this was perfect fodder for the sequel: "Evil Ovens: The Stoves that Fall on People." The movie would open on a sexy blonde co-ed cheerfully painting her toenails in the living room of the family for which she is baby sitting. Suddenly, a noise from the kitchen.

"H-h-hello?" the college student calls toward the noise. A strange "thud" jolts the scantily clad college student from her pedicure. A lone wolf howls in the distance.

"Who's there?" she cries as she heads toward the kitchen. Upon entering, our victim finds a casserole dish on the floor; the oven door is ajar.

"Now who could have ..." she whispers as she stoops to retrieve the pan. Cue violin staccato as the oven tips over, crushing blondie. I'm telling you: throw in some 3-D shower scenes, a few gallons of blood and a wisecracking 12-year-old and we've got the next summer blockbuster.

But, back to the law. I read further: "Since 1980, at least 33 people were killed and 84 were injured when free-standing stoves tipped over on them."

My God! 33 people over the course of 28 years have lost their lives to this menace? Why, that's even higher than the eggbeater mortality rate. Frankly, if this is such a problem, you should probably follow these tips: Stop using your oven door as a diving board; and, if you're going to chug bourbon 'til you black out, then at least throw junior in his crib beforehand.

Predictably, next were more laws about guns. Oh, how we love our guns—almost as much as we like arguing about our guns.

Due to a drive-by shooting in Detroit in recent weeks, two Michigan state representatives are pushing for a law which would increase penalties for firing a weapon from a vehicle. You know, because the only reason people commit drive-by shootings is because the penalty isn't stiff enough.

They say “weapon” because, while the predominant choice of murderous hoodlums is the firearm, you never know when some rogue gang is going to whip out their crossbows or wind up the arm on a trebuchet.

“Yo! 16th Century Mafia up in this piece, bee-yotch!”

Just in case you're interested in a little rolling mayhem, the penalties have increased from four to 10 years in prison with fines increased from \$2,000 to \$10,000 for cases where no one gets hurt. If you actually hit your target, then you could be looking at 15 years behind bars and fines of up to \$15,000.

For anyone thinking of releasing an anaconda, tiger or a rare African vampire frog loose in the streets, you should hurry up and do it now before the Exotic Animal Law is passed. You could be looking at a \$300 fine and up to 90 days in jail for a first offense.

A law dictating how many wild birds of prey you could capture and keep as pets seemed strange to me, until I discovered that kidnapping various hawks and training them as pets is a pastime in Michigan. According to the Michigan Hawking Club, there are nearly 90 hawkers in Michigan who use their raptors to hunt rabbit, squirrel and even other birds.

When blasting bloody holes in Mother Nature's creatures just isn't exciting enough, there's always the enslavement and murder games of hawking to fall back on. When you put two dogs in a pit it's called animal cruelty. When you force a large bird to kill a rabbit it's called a “hobby.” I get it.

To become a falconer, you must be at least 14, pass a DNR test and get sponsored by a veteran falconer.

Finally, in the “Try not to fall out of your chair laughing” segment, we have H.R. 323, which urges the United States Congress to balance its budget. I tried coming up with something more ridiculous than

State of Michigan officials demanding another governmental body to be responsible with tax funds, but I just don't have the stomach for it.

I'm sure your state has plenty of strange laws on the books and more waiting to be made every year. If you want to have a little fun, start forwarding those conspiracy theory chain e-mails, the ones you're used to deleting, to your state senator or U.S. Congressman and see how many of them end up as laws.

For A Little While

I found some pictures the other day of when my group of childhood friends used to gather once a year for a reunion of sorts. I couldn't help but study a picture of us from 1994. It was taken at my first apartment in a little slum a few dozen miles south of the Mackinaw Bridge.

Having never spent more than a day away from one another, back in the old days, it wasn't long before most of the guys made the couple hundred mile trek from our hometown to the Great White North to see how their "Benny" was doing.

And, that's how it always was: no matter where we were or how long apart, our close-knit group could always take up right where we left off.

Gone now are the days of partying in the old barn, camping along the river and engaging in general mayhem like impersonating the police or climbing a highway billboard in a gorilla suit just to mess with passing cars. After a short police chase, that resulted in some serious off-roading and a lost muffler, Johnny Law caught up and called it "distracting to the flow of traffic" but let us off with a warning. We called it "hilarious." And, looking back, I suspect the officer got a chuckle as well because he never did ticket us for trespassing or running from him, either.

I guess life can't be all Mad Dog 20/20 and fishing the Rifle River, which is exactly why we got together once a year ... for awhile anyway. I laughed when I thought about how long it took for those guys to revert from fathers, husbands and professionals back into 15-year-old hoodlums when we would gather. I'm sure there are better ways men in their 30s can spend their time. After all, throwing lit firecrackers at each other, peeing in one another's beverages and using pickles and hotdogs as pornographic props

in photos of whoever passed out first was hardly befitting men of our age. (Those pictures would eventually appear on the following year's commemorative T-shirts.)

Mostly we spent our brief stays of reality reminiscing about the old times, like the day we got caught in an Air Force training exercise on a bombing range while we searched for unexploded ordinance to take as souvenirs. Well, the gang was on the range. My cowardly backside was sitting in the car up on the scenic overlook. I was about to eat an apple when I saw two F-16s come screaming hellfire over the field my buddies had disappeared into. I remember dropping the apple to exclaim "Ho-lee-fuuuuuuuuuuuuuu"—BOOM! The thunder of jets drowned out my voice.

People use the phrase "running for their lives" all the time. But, unless you've actually witnessed it, it is impossible to know how funny people look when they are trying to outrun their own skin.

The first three of them emerged from the bushes, high-stepping, heads back and blowing snots. Their expressions were a mixture of dubious determination ... and terror. What must have been going through their heads?

"Can I outrun a fireball?"

"Did I leave the coffee pot on?"

"Are my underwear stain-proof?"

Shortly after, the last two of our gang waddled into sight. They were galloping sideways, and holding something.

"They're carrying a bomb!?" I shrieked.

Our ordnance enthusiast friend assured us that it was merely an unexploded practice round he'd lugged up the hill. We relaxed a bit but I couldn't help but nervously ponder that word: "Unexploded?"

We gingerly placed it in a cardboard box—the preferred method of explosives experts worldwide—in the trunk and enjoyed a colon clenching two-hour ride home.

It's been a few years since our last get-together and I don't expect there will be another. Bills, families, work have won the tug-of-war. Every once-in-a-while I still dig up that stack of pictures and have a little private reunion of my own. The newest addition is a mug shot of our ordnance enthusiast. He shot three fellas a few years ago and was later accused of some things I'd rather not get into. It was ruled self-defense. But we know better.

The Unhappiest Place On Earth

Before I begin, let me say that—as much as I dislike people in general—I don't like being alone. Being alone allows me time to think and I have a tendency to over-think the slightest issue.

“Will today be the day I am allergic to peanut butter?”

“Is that hangnail going to give me blood poisoning?”

“Is Wilford Brimley right? Do I really need more term life insurance?”

I thought I could use a break from the family, but that quickly changed.

As always, those hyper gimps in the legal department are working to stifle my creative freedom, as if libel were a bad thing. So, here's the disclaimer: *As far as you know, the following events are true. Only the expiration dates and name of a major corporation which rhymes with “humble tea” have been changed to protect my dignity and the publisher's rear.*

That being written, I had not been single for over 14 years when this was originally written. (Control your sorrow, ladies.) So, eight months ago, when the wife decided that she would be taking the kids to Florida for a week, I was psyched.

Fast-forward to last week and they were on their way to the 40-square-miles of evil-theme-park-turned-autonomous-aggressive-gift-shop-and-propaganda-emporium known to communists and terrorists nation-wide as Disney World.

For several thousand dollars you, too, can send your family to a 100-degree sandbox to be reprogrammed by the maniacal masterminds behind such atrocities as Herbie Fully Loaded starring Lindsay Lohan, who played the drug-addled driver of a Volkswagen beetle suffering from gender confusion.

These are the same folks who brought you the 88-minute romp of an Italian woodcarver with a penchant for all things arboretum and an unhealthy desire to live with a young boy. Plant a tree indeed.

To keep the food budget under a cool grand during their stay, we devised a plan to pack PB&J, chips, cookies and other foodstuffs—the idea being that a cheap breakfast, lunch and snacks would allow them to have fine dinners each night without breaking the proverbial bank and making my wallet squeal. This seemed fine and/or dandy—or at least OK and mediocre, since the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) website didn't prohibit food in luggage.

Fourth Amendment be damned, the wife was pulled out of line for having too many cans of tuna in her carry-on luggage. Perhaps I missed the Department of Homeland Security memo: “Kindergarten teachers armed with canned fish determined to attack U.S. theme parks.”

Concerned my wife may in reality be a terrorist, I contacted Brand X Tuna corporate headquarters via e-mail demanding information on any ties they may have to Al Qaeda. (I have yet to receive a response.)

Maybe airport security was right. Maybe they'd unwittingly apprehended Osama Bin Albacore. I sat home, alone, wondering how I would tell mother the wife was an enemy combatant. How many years in prison does an American get for joining the other side, anyway? My mind raced with daymares.

“I'll wait for you!” I cried out as I fell to my knees.

Would I have to convert to Islam? I was not about to give up my beers no matter how good I looked in a robe and sandals.

I called Handsome Stranger's house for some cheering up, but he'd apparently skipped town. Probably looking to avoid the impending scandal. Gone were my dreams of poker with the fellas and beer 'til dawn. My veritable whirlwind of bachelor debauchery had fallen short of even the lowest expectations while simultaneously exceeding my average crest of self-inflicted discomfort. (You think it's tough dealing with me, you should try living in my head for a day.)

I could hear the tour guide on my at-home vacation: “Thank-you for flying Torquemada Airways. Loneliness and depression are located to the left and right of the aisle. As you can see, paranoia is clearly marked at each end of the plane. And, in case of emergency, please feel free to freak out.”

That first night was spent dining on generic tomato soup and saltines

in front of “George Lopez” reruns. I get it, your daughter is a tramp and your mother is an awful human being. Can we move on?

Insomnia took hold and did not let go, which is lucky for me because I got to watch “Revenge of the Nerds III” while wondering if that banging noise outside was the Spanish speaking gent from whom I’d been receiving cryptic phone calls daily through winter ‘06.

He would call and talk to me in Spanish for as long as I would stay on the phone—45 minutes one night. I just kept saying “I’m sorry, sir, no habla Espanol.” He would just laugh and laugh and laugh.

I pulled the covers over my head and prayed for daylight.

Day three: the pizza boxes, cracker wrappers, issues of Mad magazine and dirty dishes which decorated the coffee table in the living room were a desperate cry for help, but no one could hear.

“Scream all you want, there’s no one around for miles!”

By day five I had become more raccoon than man, sprawled on the living room floor, eating instant mashed potatoes and bacon bits from a saucepan while guffawing like a buffoon at “Futurama” cartoons. I was going to die soon, I could feel it. I just hoped I would come back as a wise-cracking, beer-guzzling, pipe-bending robot.

By the evening of day six, I was helping Handsome Stranger erect some strange 40-foot monstrosity consisting of eight ropes and various sections of steel pipe held in place by off-brand duct tape.

“It’s for the Scottish keg toss,” he said in his best Scot voice ... which also happened to be his worst Scot voice. Escaping Stranger’s compound without being impaled, I headed home to find the family tan, relaxed and unpacking.

I told the wife of my horrifying week, and she offered a deal. She said she’d never again leave me alone for more than 24 hours, as long as I promised not to publish this story.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Gohs. No habla Espanol,” I exclaimed. “I don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

And then I laughed and laughed and laughed.

Frivolous Thoughts

A recent off-the-record conversation with a local politician about the frightening rate at which our county is sued got me to thinking about all the things I could do with a few hundred thousand bucks after I frivolously sue my employers.

Granted, we don't have any air quality issues, and the water is just fine, but the lack of cappuccino maker and pinball machine in the office is contributing to my severe mental distress.

And then there are the little old ladies who come in to tell me how much they hate me. I'm not kidding. They seem to be the only ones with the stones to tell me, to my, face how they feel. The grown men always do it via phone, e-mail and once a guy sent a letter to my home. A veiled threat? Perhaps. (I later discovered the letter writer was a disgruntled animal husbandry agent. It seems spending 40 hours a week shoving bull batter elbow deep into a cow's wazoo left him without much of a sense of humor.)

Knowing my workplace was cruel and unusual, the next step was to find an ambulance chaser with low enough self-esteem to handle my case. I asked a couple pals at a law firm if my complaint had any merit. There must have been something wrong with the phones that day because we kept getting disconnected before they had a chance to give me their answer. Apparently, lawyers aren't quite as sleazy as I had been led to believe, and hoped, they would be.

Aw, who was I kidding? No judge would find in my favor.

"Your honor, Mr. Gohs is clearly trying to swindle my client. When you asked him if he swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but the

truth he responded by saying ‘Ka-ching!’”

Besides, have you been to jury duty lately? I’d sooner face Saddam’s kangaroo court than the carnival of humanity not clever enough to get out of this wheel of misfortune. Civic obligation or no, the last time I went down there it looked like a casting call for Deliverance II. And that’s not a crack at normal rednecks because I am from hillbilly stock and possess no fewer than five hick traits: tattoos, pickup, David Alan Coe album, scars from a farming incident and an innate distrust for people with all their teeth.

What was I to do? I needed a fat settlement, and quick. I considered writing my congressman, but he’s running for reelection, and if I had the money to bribe, er, contribute to his campaign, I wouldn’t be in this situation.

Then, while watching the episode of the A-Team when Murdock decides he needs to be more like Face, it hit me: perhaps I should run for office. I know what you’re thinking, “Gohs should work ‘perhaps’ into his vocabulary more often; it makes him sound scholarly.”

Perhaps I will.

Perhaps, indeed.

That’s it, I’ll run for office, and not just as a goof to spite my old boss. (For some reason she used to get real peeved when I would tell people I was thinking of running for governor.) I did a little research and was shocked. For the good of the nation you’d think there must be a dozen requirements which would preclude someone like me from running, but no. So long as there were no felonies or animal husbandry incidents on record, I could run for offices from township supervisor to state representative.

Frightening, huh?

We wouldn’t dare put the position of taxi driver, surgeon, teacher, lawyer or soldier up for a vote, but we seem OK to do it with positions which wield infinitely more power. The man who can take this country to war on a whim—not saying that would *ever* happen—need not pass the basic skills test one would require of a scientist’s cigarette smoking monkey. (As with so many things in life “butt first” is the preferred method.)

That is not to say all politicians would stick the triangular block into the round hole, but I can certainly see a fist fight breaking out in

the testing room when the man in the white coat insists that “Funky-town” is not a geographical location and “misunderestimate” is not a real word.

How could this be? How could my grade school teachers have lied to me so? How could I look at my kids and honestly tell them 51 percent of the voters can tell the rest of the population what to do? And for no other reason than there were more of them.

Six of 10 people in a room could decide they should drink gasoline with dinner; that doesn’t make it right. More importantly, how could I focus on faking a slip-and-fall accident or stuffing dead rats into the heating ducts at work with the knowledge that our democracy is little more than a popularity contest for some of the most important job titles in existence?

By the time you read this, my bosses will likely have discovered my scheme and put the kibosh to operation “Settle out of Court.” Maybe it’s all for the best.

After all, I cannot have the dead skunk of frivolous litigation hanging ‘round my neck when I run for governor next cycle. Perhaps you’ll consider giving me your vote. Perhaps.

Apocalypse On Aisle 12!

Perhaps I should have heeded the hints: the stack of Watchtower booklets left on my porch every Saturday; the plague of pill bugs hiding under the couch; the phonetically spelled warnings in my alphabet soup.

They say there are no atheists in foxholes, and I can assume that also applies to the apocalypse. But, for a heathen like me, calling out for a magical being during times of fear is not an option.

What brings about all this talk of the end of days? I don't want to unnecessarily worry anyone, but I have begun to notice some strange happenings.

Granted, I've been known to exaggerate situations out of proportion in the past: I've self-diagnosed no fewer than 839 heart attacks, six different kinds of bone cancer, emphysema, asthma, perforated intestine, paralysis, stroke, full-blown diabetes, SARS, typhoid, dysentery, rickets, Epstein-Bar, lupus, toe cancer, itchy eye, and sickle-cell leukemia.

But this time it's different. The end of days is near. And it all started at the grocery store. Not the stereotypical venue for cataclysm but according to my Old Testament readings, that devil character appears where you least expect him.

I noticed something was wrong when, while looking for a shaving razor, I found a moisturizing hand cream for men. At first I thought it was placed there by a lazy shopper making a last-minute cut from their shopping roster, but upon closer inspection the label read "For Men." First it was pastel clothing, then they said we could cry, but a skin hydration system was certainly the devil's work.

I ran screaming, warning my brothers to stay out of aisle five. By which

I mean I continued shopping, but threw away the wife's list and bought only gender affirming stuff like red meat, beer and an Auto Trader.

"A generator for a 1967 Buick Riviera? Sweet doggie!"

Passing by the cereal aisle, I glimpsed a toddler speaking in tongues after his mother refused to buy Lucky Charms. I swear he looked right through me. Frantic to escape Satan's Boutique, I cruised to the checkout. Gridlock!

The shopper-to-cashier ratio was roughly 37:1, and at least one grocery getter was planning to save all the dimes in Northern Michigan by unloading deck after deck of coupons. My god, it was like a house closing!

"Act casual, Gohs," I told myself as the cashier squinted to read the fine print on the sweaty circulars.

"Six cents off hemorrhoid cream." Beep!

"12 cents off creamed calf spleens." Beep!

"Buy one get one free chicken lips." Beep!

"Save a dollar on gallon-sized jugs of mustard." Damn it!

With every item pulled from the cart, coupon woman would shuffle and reshuffle her stacks like a nervous blackjack player. I couldn't see her eyes but her posture was cocky. She was daring the cashier to tell her one of her precious coupons had expired. And then it would be a six-week hike back to aisle 87 to find a suitable replacement product.

From six carts back, I squinted to read September's National Enquirer. "Hmm, Kevin Spacey is gay? A Huskie named Pachee swallowed a fork and lived to bark about it? Brad and Angelina are having trouble—no, not Brangelina!" I spoke aloud, trying to convince any demons within earshot that I was merely a mild-mannered shopper.

"Can't let them know you're on to them, Gohs."

The line slowly edged forward until I was second. The person in front of me stood there, motionless, with his hands in the air as if to say: "Pay attention to me! I have hands!"

There was no cashier.

Where was the cashier?

Everyone in line began doing that thing you do when you're forced to communicate with fellow hogs to slaughter.

"There's no cashier," I said.

"I know, isn't that just crazy," said the elderly woman behind me.

"This is why I usually go to Wal-Mart," said the man in front of me.

It was unanimous: a cashier would be needed. I looked up and down the rows of cash registers to see if any other lanes were open. All the way down at the far end there was one empty spot. Above it was a large square light that read “Self-Serve.”

“Self-serve checkout?” I thought. “What’s next, self-serve dry cleaning; self-serve taxidermy?”

I wanted the hell out of this three-dimensional Escher painting, but I couldn’t make a run for it without tipping off the shopping cart posse that had assembled.

“Steady as she goes,” I slyly thought as I excused myself from line. “I, uh, forgot something.”

“You clever devil, you!”

I took a quick right turn down the nearest aisle and raced straight for the open checkout. By the time I got there, someone had moved into place. But, what the heck, it was only one shopper.

The woman ahead of me had a cart full of vegetables and fruit, the most wile of the self-serve items. You see, you can’t just scan an apple. You have to punch in the code for “apple” and then weigh the apple and then push more buttons and do the hokie-pokie and turn yourself around.

She just stood there like a monument to 19th Century ignorance. “It’s seeeelf-serrrrrrrve,” I condescendingly muttered in a sing-song voice. Apparently she was waiting for a cashier to materialize. Just then a stern looking woman in a grocery store uniform with an overpopulated key ring stepped forward.

“It’s self-serve. There is no cashier,” the warden grunted.

“I toooold yooooou,” I chided in sing-song fashion.

Veggie lady eyed the machine. It was like watching a chimp’ trying to work an adding machine that was built by another chimp. (They still have adding machines?) I expected her to start beating the register with a turkey bone and picking lice out of my hair in frustration. (I don’t really have lice.)

She turned to me, her eyes pleaded for help. Ashamed, I averted my gaze. Hell, up until that day, I’d never even seen one of these machines. Like a fellow cow to slaughter, there was nothing I could do.

“Moo,” I said.

Then the machine spoke. It told her to scan her items and place them on the conveyor belt. She put an eggplant on the scanner.

Nothing happened. The machine spoke again. It said help was on the way, but this time it sounded angry. I was giddy.

“Help is on the way!” I cackled to the people in the new line forming behind me. I must have sounded like a mental patient off his meds.

“Help is on the way! Hee-hee, her-her, hoo-hoo, huh-ha!”

“By god why doesn't this store hire some cashiers?” someone shouted.

The warden reappeared, shook her head in disapproval and then pushed a series of the beast's buttons. I could sense the rest of the herd behind me, shifting anxiously. Another nervous “moo” escaped my lips.

I looked back and in an instant veggie lady had disappeared. I imagined that, like a modern-day Edmond Dantes, she had been whisked away to a prison island for angering the machine.

“This is where we put the ones we're really ashamed of,” the evil voice echoed in my head.

Then it was my turn. I humbly prostrated myself before the mechanical messiah, determined to get free if only to tell veggie lady's story. I scanned my items. Steak. Beep! Beer. Beep! Auto trader. Beep!

“I'll eat your soul.” Beep!

Some of you may be thinking automation is not the end of the world, but for my sake; for veggie lady's sake, I'm seriously considering getting my butt to church.

Ungrateful After All These Years

I recently sat down to write a list of all the things for which I'm thankful. But, as I often do, I got sidetracked by bills and news and life. All that reality made it difficult to produce the clichéd "Why I'm Thankful" piece I've done in years past. In fact, I'm starting to think gratitude is a bit overrated.

So, without further preamble, I give you my un-thankfulness (wouldn't "Thankless" have been easier? Shut up, you!) list just in time for Thanksgiving.

I'm not thankful that the wife is nearly finished with her master's degree. She was in college when I met her, and she's gone to school for 18 of the 19-and-a-half years we've been together. Between her work and school schedule, I rarely see her, and I'm just not sure our marriage can survive a sudden increase in so-called quality time.

I'm not thankful that my son is taking driver education. From my experience, 14-year-old boys are not known for their impulse control or sound decision making skills. I spent the summer of my fourteenth year reading the girly magazines left in the outhouse behind the town granary and trying to build a bigger coffee can bomb out of roman candle innards with my best pal Kent. Besides, the last time I gave my son a driving lesson, he mistook the accelerator for the brake—right and left have always been his kryptonite—and he floored my old Cadillac into a snow bank: an event which led to a broken headlight and another six months off my life.

I'm not thankful that the wife and I decided to look into buying a house. The maze of horrors, false positives and arbitrary rules have

given me new respect for the devil and his associates in the real-estate industry. Don't get me wrong, we're partially to blame. We made the mistake of working over the last couple years to fix our credit. We now score just well enough to qualify for the Mad Max Beyond Thunder Dome loan program.

"Who run Barter Town?"

"MasterBlaster run Barter Town."

"Say louder!"

The 50-year-old heating oil tank in the basement that looks like it's going to blow is fine, but the tear in the screen disqualifies you. The asbestos in the attic is OK, but the doorway is one inch too narrow. And, while I'm sure the radon test will come back negative, the spirits from the Indian burial ground under the basement are definitely going to raise my homeowners' insurance rates.

I'm not thankful the government is taking so long deciding whether to give Detroit auto makers loans or handouts or whatever you want to call it. While I'm the last one to call for corporate welfare, I'm also not stupid enough to decry free money in my pocket. And, since I'm looking for a house, I'd like to know now if Michigan's economy is going to turn around at any time in the next hundred years, or if the wife and I should pack up the Georgie-Boy van camper and hit the open road a la the Wild Thornberries.

Who am I kidding? Campsites are known hunting grounds for bears and bees, so I hardly think I could deal with being chased by murderous wildlife while the wife films it. I can almost hear the narration over my screams now: "My assistant Ben has interrupted the courting ritual of the Kodiak bear. That rookie mistake will surely cost him six fingers and a quart of blood."

I know they say to stay calm and play dead, but my first reaction to peril is to emit high-pitched shrieks and flap my arms in panic.

"By my assistant's screams, I can tell the bear's teeth have found bone—yup, that's going to need amputation."

On the upside, I wouldn't have to worry about finding matching socks any more. Finally, I'm not thankful that the radio stations decided to start playing Christmas music seemingly earlier than usual. It makes it very difficult to convince the wife that there'll be no gift giving this year (see also: buying a house) when every store and down-

town are already full-swing with the Yuletide plague.

If there ever was a war on Christmas, it has failed miserably. Judging by the TV commercials urging people to get out there and shop, the anti-Xmas army in Bill O'Reilly's imagination is in full retreat. I imagine Santa is operating POW camps in Candy Cane Bay where captured Humanists, atheists and liberal media types are force-fed eggnog and made to watch propaganda films like "It's A Wonderful Life" and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

Interrogator elves make short work of these enemy combatants who seek court orders to get nativity scenes off public property.

"Vair ah zee injunction paipuz."

What can I say, my interrogator elves are German.

Meanwhile, some sweaty ACLU lawyer chained to the wall has snapped and just keeps repeating "Every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings. Every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings."

Well, that's the list of what I'm not thankful for. I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for a list of what I am thankful for.

Happy Thanksgiving, and try not to let the in-laws get you down.

First Degree Mortgage

Some women take up jogging or yoga for their New Year's resolution, and others vow to quit smoking. My wife has decided to kill me.

The mission to murder all started when she said, "Let's buy a house." Now, as any condemned soul in the sixth or seventh level of hell will tell you, buying a home can be a trying experience. Now more than a year into house hunting, and a day or so past the date we were supposed to close on the house we originally chose, I am about two nerves away from appearing in my own E! True Hollywood Story.

Oh, how I yearn for a predatory lender; one who would take my word for it on my income and credit history and simply hand me the cash, no questions asked. But, thanks to the so-called housing crisis, we've gone through a vetting gauntlet rivaled only by those experienced by terrorist detainees.

Don't get me wrong, the first 50 pages of the loan application seemed normal.

Name: No problem

Spouse: I know this one

Occupation: Professional rabble-rouser

Did you spend any part of 1969 in Cambodia?: What? I mean, of course not.

Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party? Well, there was that one mixer ... hold on just a minute!

And then came the fees—oh, sweet humanity, the fees. To make the whole trick work, the bank goes over the fees with you line by line, and it really does make the charges seem reasonable.

\$8.10 for flood certification fee? OK.

\$600 for snakebite insurance? Um.

\$1,250 for asteroid collision? Alright already.

\$320 for ogre indemnity?

And, I'm pretty sure they charged me \$50 because I didn't know what an escrow mitigation insurance appraisal was. I still say it sounds made up.

I thought we were supposed to close on Dec. 30, but my calculations were in Earth months. As I write this, my trusty Realtor is working on an extension. An extension, as if we had dragged this process out unnecessarily and needed more time. If it wasn't for our real-estate folks I would have lost my mind completely.

The best part of this whole Clockwork Orange escapade is that the wife, usually an emotional rock, has been driven three shades of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane." (Those of you under 40 will have to Google it.)

"But, honey, I'm not the one responsible for not getting the 'OK' on the house," I pleaded.

"But ya are, Blanche, ya are!"

Every minor setback has got me hiding the wire hangers (I know, different movie) and cowering under the coffee table.

"But, sweetums, don't fret. We'll get that house. Just you wait and see," I urge.

But all I hear from her side of the bed is: "I buy you nice dresses and you treat them like dishrags!?"

"Run! Run for your life," the voice in my head screams as I incorrectly perform the sign of the cross. Let me assure you that her Gollum-esque descent into home ownership has left her quite insane. I swear I can hear her in the wee hours, perched up on the roof and cursing my name.

"We wants it. We needs it. Stupid husbandses keeping us from our precious."

It doesn't help matters that I'm happy where we are. The rent is cheap, the landlord is cool and only one of my neighbors seems deranged. Well, to be fair, he called the police and told them I was a maniac after he claims I tried to run him over with my van. My memory is a bit foggy on this one, but if I had wanted to run the little lush over,

he wouldn't have been able to dial 9-1-1. (OK, I may have tried to run him over.)

“Hee-hee, hoo-hoo, her-her, huh-ha!”

It is this mental tilt-a-whirl which I blame for the wife's decision, in the midst of all this holiday/home buying chaos, to get pets. After all, she reasoned, a new home needs new puppies. And, wouldn't you know it, one of them was mine.

Just when I thought fate had kicked me squarely in the FICO for the last time, I got a Christmas present that cries, bites and poops. It was junior prom all over again.

So now the ever-shrinking mobile home we currently occupy has the addition of two furry toddlers ... who chew on everything from table legs and shoes to guitars, remote controls, electrical cords and fingers. One is manic and the other can't stay awake because he suffers from sleep apnea and possibly a mild form of narcolepsy. I'm not kidding. He snores really loud and his eyes only close half way, so when he's sleeping he looks and sounds like an angry zombie dog.

In all fairness, I don't blame the wife for her episodes. She figured we would be moving by now and have room for Sam and Tolstoy—I wanted to name them William Shatner and Hulk Hogan, but the wife wouldn't allow it. So here I sit with a buyer ready to move into the trailer, munching Tums by the bushel basket and wondering when in the hell, if ever, we're going to move.

My only consolation is that, if the wife is trying to kill me, the joke is on her because I canceled my life insurance.

I Got The Plumber On Speed-Dial

I've got the plumber on speed-dial.

It sort of sounds like the hook line in a bad rap song: "I Got the plumber on speed-dial! I Got the plumber on speed-dial! I Got the plumber on speed-dial!"

Except, instead of the usual chorus consisting of some bling-encrusted hoodlum chattering on about a "G" a "Ho" and a "Nine," it would just be the sound of me sobbing over digital drums and leaking pipes.

Five days into home ownership and I'm already a mess. Even the dogs are less ashamed—and I've seen where they put their noses. Before I go on with this cheap and, might I add, ineffective form of print therapy, let me say that the wife and I love the new house. Even the unemployed midgets living upstairs are happy with their new rooms. But, in my fragile state, I'm just not sure I can handle playing Mr. Fix-it.

I knew things were going bad when the closing process flowed so smoothly. My father always used to say, "Every time something good happens, something bad happens." As I sat there scribbling my mark, broker and banker on one side, wife and daughter on the other—the boy volunteered to stay back and pack a few miscellaneous items while directing the movers so we could spend the first night in the new house—I thought it was all too good to be true. After nearly 15 years of slugging it out, making mistakes with our credit and then working to fix it, we were finally getting our own place.

My eyes darted back and forth, stomach bubbling, brow sweating

while I waited for the bad thing to come via last-minute phone call.

"I'm sorry Mr. Gohs, it appears that you failed your fourth-grade mathematics exam. We're going to have to rescind your loan ... and remove one of your wife's ovaries."

My knee began to bounce uncontrollably, the way it does when I'm feeling anxious. The wife put her hand down on my kneecap hard. She knows the leg bounce is about three steps before hyperventilation and about five steps before I jump through a closed window a la the Cowardly Lion.

Perhaps a comet would land on us. Maybe a stray bullet from a nearby post office? Earthquake, plague, volcano? I stared at the realtor's phone, awaiting that awful ring, and fantasizing about every likely, and unlikely, scenario.

"It's the governor, Mr. Gohs, he said the execution is back on!" I just wanted to drop to my knees and scream "Khaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!" (Actually, Khan was Captain Kirk's foil. I should probably be screaming "Mustaaaaard!")

We signed paper after paper, form after form, but didn't read any of the fine print. Who knows what I actually signed.

"By signing this document, Mr. Gohs, you pledge to vote in the Congolese senatorial race of 2038. If you fail to meet this obligation, we will be forced to take your first-born child's lower incisors."

My hand began to cramp. The wife and I flashed each other a smile. But, with all the sweating and grimacing, our pained grins made us look like we were fighting back the runs.

"This form allows the bank to inspect the property—and the contents of your colon—with 24 hours notice."

Forget water boarding, there must be a back room in Guantanamo Bay where they hold mock home closings until the terrorists give up their secrets.

"OK, OK, I tell you where bomb is located but, please, no more paperwork and small talk!"

Then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, it was over. With papers filed, hands shook and pleasantries exchanged, we left the closers and headed to meet the movers. The arrival time came and went, but no movers. Minutes after grumbling about how I wasn't paying them to stop off for dinner, I got the call.

“Uh, hello, Mr. Gohs?”

When someone calls you “Mr.” it generally means you are about to be told you have some horrible disease, or they’ve broken something they don’t plan on replacing.

“I’m sorry we’re running late, but there was an accident.”

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuustaaaaaaaaaaaaard!”

So, let me get this straight, you’re telling me your large semi-truck that can be seen from say, the moon, hit another large semi-type-truck which can also be seen by, say, the blind?

“Nothing seems to be broken, but the other truck took off and we’re waiting for the police to arrive.”

OK, Gohs, stay calm. No need to pop a blood vessel. After all, you’ve got a nice new house to live in. No more drunken homunculus next door to call the cops on you.

About an hour or so later the movers showed up, promptly unloaded the truck and handed me a slip of paper that made my stomach hurt and my wallet cry. Suffering from mental, physical and marital exhaustion, the family passed out wherever they finished their dinner of fries and chicken nuggets.

We awakened last Friday in our new home, but the smile on my face soon disappeared when the wife, yelling from the bathroom, alerted me that we were the luckiest family in town because our shower had not one, but two cold water faucets.

“I Got the plumber on speed-dial.”

Not quite ready to spend the day with my own stink, I grabbed a bar of soap on the way out the door. Following a birdie bath in the newspaper’s water closet, I called our plumber—who just happens to be a close neighbor—and asked him to check out the water heater.

“Gonna needja ta meet me at da house,” he said.

“That’ll work out just fine because I just drove all the way to work which is 20 miles from my house,” I responded.

Apparently, I also had sarcasm on speed-dial.

Once back home, and smelling of Irish Spring and B.O., I maintained my distance while the plumber started the World War II-era boiler. The wet popping and percolating I was hearing, the plumber explained, was normal for an appliance of its age. I did my best not to black out when I heard the words “death rattle—soon—money pit.”

I tried to pay attention while he pointed at various valves and switches and pipes, but all I could think about was how living right around the corner from this guy was going to make it pretty awkward after I started writing him a series of bad checks.

No sooner had we rejoiced over having hot water than—and good goo I wish I was kidding—there was an apparent simultaneous breakdown of the kitchen faucet, bathroom sink, upstairs sink, dishwasher and washing machine. It seems the home inspection did not cover checking to see if the house was built on an ancient Indian burial ground.

“I Got the plumber on speed-dial.”

Evil spirits notwithstanding, I called the plumber. He said the old metal water pipes had been off so long that a substance resembling kitty litter mixed with creamy peanut butter had clogged many of the fixtures. After a couple hours and a few parts runs, the plumber was finished and we had a fully operational house.

It's been three whole days since anything has malfunctioned, and the family is just loving the new house, but I'm withholding my chirps of glee. My one consolation is that help is merely a phone call, and a half a block, away. Lucky for me my plumber works weekends; lucky for him I just bought a brick of checks.

Too Busy To Die & Other Non Sequiturs

It's been about a goat's age since I wrote about any of my minor misadventures but, in my defense, I've been swamped with the shiny delights of the American Dream.

Between fighting with the hot rod, fighting with the kids, fighting with the dogs, dealing with my son's confirmation and planning for both a major family get-together and my wife's upcoming trip to Glacier National Park, I've had just enough time each night to down some butterscotch schnapps, cheap beer and raspberry Zingers before crying myself to sleep.

Oh, and did I mention I've just started a new diet? OK, so I'm actually re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-starting the old diet. I tend to go in spurts: stewed spinach and yogurt for three days, Busch Light and chili dogs the rest of the week.

Then there's the Gohs-mobile. I'm goin' out of order here, so bear with me. First, the damn driver's side door freezes up on me. Then, I finally get the old mufflers off so I can install the really loud Cherry Bombs, and karma strikes in the form of the transmission and gas tank simultaneously springing leaks. Seriously, did I kick puppies in a former life?

By the way, my 17-year-old brother is now living with us so he can finish high school, which basically means I now have two angst-ridden, hormonally charged, unemployed testosterone machines eating my food and squatting in the rooms upstairs. Could somebody please tell me how five people use 12 bath towels a day?

Let's not forget that I endured my first-ever church service recent-

ly. It went something like this: Rise; be seated; rise; be seated; rise and sing; be seated; rise; sing; rise; hut, hut, hike! It was like doing squat-thrusts in football practice but without the coach screaming “You still want seconds on mashed potatoes Mrs. Gohs?!” at me between whistle blasts.

But back to the church service. What is all the scurrying about? The kids are sitting in the pew next to us, and then they’re gone. Then they’re there.

Then gone again.

Rise.

Be seated.

Sing: “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

Sit down.

No, stand up!

Be seated.

Rise.

Then my daughter skulks by with a seven-foot brass torch straight out of Fahrenheit 451. For god’s sake would someone hide the books!?

Actually, the people at the wife’s church were very nice and, frankly, the only thing out of ordinary was me—there, divorce averted. For lack of a better segue I’ll say I survived the ordeal just so I could face yet another speed bump on Gohs’ Uneasy Street: Prom night.

Luckily for me my daughter is still too young for school dances. She’s 13 now, which means I’ve only got about 27 more years before she starts dating.

The boys are another story altogether. I got Wingus and Dingus all suited up for their big night. Shower, deodorant and even a good combing. I didn’t mind playing chauffeur while the wife was down state seeing family, but since the hot rod was up on a jack, I had to take the work truck.

I did the cool thing and dropped them off down the street from the event—no use traumatizing them in front of their friends when dad rolls up in a 20-year-old banana yellow Ford.

Eleven o’clock rolled around and the wife—back from visiting—went with me to pick up the boys and a late dinner from Taco Bell. It was the usual good cop/bad cop routine:

The wife: “How was your night?”

Gohs: "Was anybody smoking the reefer? Look at me!"

The wife: "Who did you dance with?"

Gohs: "Did anyone spike the punch? Let me smell your breath!"

The wife: "You both look so handsome."

Gohs: "I know you were doing something you weren't supposed to be doing. And, if you tell me right now, I won't beat you as much!"

And then, in a move which will forever go down as the grand-daddy of all shut-you-ups, the boy yells, "We didn't have sex!"

Ah, the stink of discomfort and awkward silence wafted in from the backseat and settled into the van with all the grace of a fat man falling off stilts. I dropped my burrito to the floor, cranked the oldies station to the highest setting and whispered to myself: "What a friend we have in Jesus."

My \$10 Stove

They say a man's home is his castle. Well, I'm not sure who says it but somebody says it. When you think of "castle" you might imagine a knight in shimmering armor, a beautiful princess and assorted gallantry. Here in the real world, the castle is under siege by unemployed midgets, unruly beasts and a cook who is always trying to poison the king.

It's not bad enough that I sleep on the floor and the dogs sleep in bed with the wife, or that they've learned to aim between their kennel bars, like fertilizing sharpshooters, while we're at work. Brother devil hounds Sam and Tolstoy turned a year old last week and the wife and daughter thought a birthday party with cake and hats was in order. (I want you to take a moment and digest that statement: a birthday party for dogs.)

The dogs promptly ate the hats, but there would be no cake because the wife destroyed the stove. It seems a burner was not plugged in all the way causing electricity to shoot to the ceiling and apparently fry the appliance. From my office I heard a loud pop followed shortly by the wife's even louder screams: "Lightning! It shot lightning! Beeeeeeen!"

Oh yeah, did I mention the wife has taken up cooking? And, before you sensitive types recoil at my assessment of the wife's efforts, know this: I willingly and skillfully cooked every meal during the first 15 years of our marriage. Common sense, lack of free time—and state fire code—have prevented my wife from cooking since we got together in 1994.

It all happened when I was out for eggs and juice some autumn morning while she made toast and fed our infant son. I returned to find them blissfully unaware of the coal-black column of smoke rising up the kitchen wall and pooling against the ceiling behind them. The toaster was aflame and the wall and ceiling were stained a nice charcoal color.

When you can't cook toast, or at least notice that the toaster is Chernobyling, you've pretty much forfeited control over the kitchen. But, fast-forward a decade or so and, with no more college classes sucking up her nights, she is excited to finally have time to cook for her family every night.

She's excited.

Aren't you excited?

I'm so excited I can't stop crying.

So, for the last couple months it's been one culinary enigma after another. Pot roast a la Birkenstock—after six minutes of chewing, I stopped looking for the buckles and laces. Tuna noodle surprise—Surprise! Guess who hates tuna noodle casserole? And, quite possibly my favorite BBBTSLRTs—that stands for black bacon, burnt toast, slimy lettuce and rotten tomato sandwiches.

The twins, on the other hand, find the wife's cooking simply divine. Of course, in their first year on the planet, they have eaten one-half of a severely overpriced leather recliner; four pairs of shoes, a cell phone, a tub of crayons, two television remotes, three nylon dog collars—yes, they remove their collars and eat them—several blankets and pillows, two dead mice, two tubs of margarine, the wife's back massager, three feet of oak living room baseboard, nine stuffed animals, half a Barbie doll, one beer, approximately 13 pounds of acorns and six bushel baskets of pine cones, sundry flowers, insects, my lemon cookies and my favorite Stephen King book.

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuustaaaaaaard!”

Anyway, I checked the home's electrical system as well as anyone who knows nothing about electricity can do. I opened the breaker boxes and fuse boxes—why we have five of them is a different story—and the breakers and fuses looked fine. I knew none of the fuses were blown because, the last time I had a blown fuse, I ended up calling the electrician who showed me how to check it out. He also assured me

that, while he was quite happy to come over and change a fuse for \$50 a shot, I as a homeowner should be doing so.

If the fuses were good then it must have been the stove. I scanned the countryside for a reasonably priced range. Now, when I say “scanned the countryside” I mean I drove up and down the back roads looking for an oven on the side of the road in my price range. By “price range” I mean \$25 or less. I don't know about you folks in the big city, but out here in the country we sell things—anything from cars, clothes, food, livestock and tractors, to stoves, toys, electronics and hot tubs—by putting a cardboard sign on them and setting them by the side of the road.

It wasn't long before I spotted my prize, a cream colored '70s model. The wife nearly died of shame when I handed the stranger a \$10 bill for the old stove in the front yard.

“Oh my gaaawd,” she said, covering her face. “It's not going to work.”

It took about 10 minutes to drain the rainwater from the stove before hoisting it into the back of the van.

“It's not going to work,” the wife jeered again.

My son and little brother—who was still living with us at the time—wrestled the stove inside and plugged it in.

Nothing.

“I told you it wasn't going to work.”

Well, with no microwave, and too cheap to call an electrician, we splurged on a table-top skillet to get us through. Have you ever eaten slow cooked spaghetti? I have. It ain't pretty. Think paste and tomato sauce and lots of frowny faces. I don't demand gourmet. I just want something this side of edible.

After seven days of bachelor fare and fast food, I broke down and made the call. It cost us another \$50 for a real man to come in and change the bad fuse I missed.

“I thought we covered this last time,” the electrician scolded.

“I was afraid of getting zapped,” I admitted.

And then, with \$50 worth of labor and \$1.19 worth of fuse, we were in business. Viola! The old stove worked. The wife was so happy to have the magical cooking box back online she decided to celebrate by cooking Thanksgiving dinner. Early, yes. But, she's never done it

before and wanted a practice run before the real deal later this month.

Anyone with an empty seat at their dinner table please get a-hold of me.

P.S. It's been four years and we still have that \$10 stove. I guess it worked.

Have Yourself A Morose Little Christmas

Today marks 25 days of Christmas at the Gohs household, and the extended bout with Yule fever has given me time to do some serious thinking.

I cannot figure out why getting into the holiday spirit is like trying to stuff myself into those medium Christmas sweaters my extended family is so fond of sending. Either they take me for a much thinner man or they find it a hoot to see me stuffed like 10 pounds of sausage into a five-pound wool casing.

The lack of circulation to my brain makes me just woozy enough to hand the wallet over to the wife, who is pathologically convinced the children will grow up to be ax murderers if they don't get to open six dozen packages on baby Jesus' birthday.

Then I waddle through hip-deep snow to dens of conspicuous consumption where I am bombarded by marketing ploys thinly veiled as holiday spirit.

"What better way to celebrate peace on Earth than with a new flat screen TV?"

I didn't need this tool set in October, but now that it comes in a red and green cardboard box with the words "Great gift for dad" on it, I just gotta have it. After all, I have a regular tool set, but I don't have a holiday tool set.

And then there's the candy. I haven't the foggiest what I'll do with a one-pound peppermint candy stick, but I'll be damned if I'm leaving this store without three of them.

The holiday magic of shopping for the kids as youngsters has

turned to a chore. Christmas wish lists have been replaced by Xmas purchase orders: teenager A wants this, this and this; teenager B wants that, that and that—you have until Dec. 25 to fulfill your contractual obligation or face litigation.

“Dear Santa, this is an attempt to collect a debt. Any information obtained will be used for that purpose.”

Now I’m elbowing some old lady who just kidney-punched me to get the last copy of Super Death Brothers Smash-0-Rama for her grandson’s Play Box. Sure, she hates the little brat, but this’ll keep him too busy to complain about his cousins at the family gathering.

Oh, the gatherings! The loudmouthed, though ironically hypersensitive, sibling will unknowingly insult each guest a dozen times before leaving the room in tears when someone makes one off-hand comment. Grandpa’s narcolepsy keeps him pretty well out of the chaos, but he awakens long enough to sample three kinds of pie and down a quart of Cool Whip while Grandma screams “Check your sugar!”

Dad’s dirty jokes clear a room faster than the 13-year-old Labrador with the intestinal problems. What’s worse is the whiny 6-year-old who’s parents think him gifted because he’s capable of throwing your cell phone in the toilet.

“Did we mention that Portnoy has an IQ of 178?”

“Did I mention that flyswatters don’t leave bruises?”

The head teacher at his daycare said he’s acting out because he’s so bright that he gets bored with normal activities? You don’t say. I had no idea malicious destruction of property was a sign of genius.

What I’m really thinking about is taking baby Einstein out behind grandpa’s woodshed with a genuine cowhide belt. Aw, but how can you stay mad at junior when he’s singing you a chorus of insults to the tune of “Jingle Bells” and pretending to fart on your leg?

That’s generally the cue that it’s time to go share a six-pack with the homophobic family friend who also happens to be terrified of Jews, Asians and any music made after 1966.

No one invited him.

No one wants him there.

But, no one will tell him to leave.

Sure, he’ll break the ice by passing gas and telling a couple “dirty

immigrant jokes” but those PBRs are nice and cold ... and he hates baby Einstein as much as you do. He’ll spend the next 45 minutes explaining how them damned illegal aliens are the reason he’s been on the welfare for the last 16 years. If you’re lucky, you’ll finish your third beer before he tries recruiting you into his latest multi-million-dollar business idea.

The wife—a consummate learned professional—doesn’t have a natural domestic bone in her body, but she smiles and nods as the housewives and girlfriends cluck about their kids’ soccer games and recipes and gossip about whoever didn’t make it to the get-together.

Finally, I find a quiet nook and pick up an acoustic guitar. I’m too busy to play much these days, and there doesn’t seem a much better time. Pretty soon the brothers have gathered and beer turns to shots. Shots ultimately turn to singing Alice in Chains and Nirvana tunes and more strumming and more shots.

Then, after everyone else has gone to bed, I pop in “It’s a Wonderful Life” and get a little teary-eyed watching George Bailey give up his life’s dream only to find joy right there at home in Bedford Falls with his wacky family and friends ... without any presents, without any giant candy sticks, without the greed and gluttony that so often clutter the true value of the season.

A Bad Buddhist

As one who strives to be calm and peaceful like the Buddhists, I should be shunning hate. But, the truth is, I am not a very good Buddhist. Actually, I'm a quite bad Buddhist. Oh, sure, I no longer eat meat. And, I tend to forgive people more quickly than I used to. But, the truth is, I'm still a very angry person.

And, frankly, working in the news business doesn't help. I'd like to see the Dalai Lama sift through conspiracy theory laden e-mails, listen to the phone calls of perturbed readers and have people stop you in the grocery store to tell you they hate everything that you stand for. I'm guessing after a few weeks of this, even the most tranquil omnipresent super-galactic one-with-himself monk would have an ulcer and a collection of empty scotch bottles.

I thought I'd gotten all of the griping out of my system after some heavy-duty meditation but, hosanna, I endured another seven days of ridiculousness and observances of the irksome. Don't get me wrong, I have considered doing some sanguine writing in the past, but let's be honest: you don't go to the garbage man to buy flowers.

What follows is a taste of last week's peeves.

Anger management—I'm now about three weeks into my attempt at bettering myself. I haven't given up swearing completely but I am finding myself saying only the first letter of each swear word, which goes a little something like this: "Who ate the last of the F cottage cheese and then put the empty D container in the C fridge?! I'm tired of this S and it better F stop right F now!"

The result? I sound like a Mormon with Tourette's Syndrome.

Gun Appreciation Day—It gives me no mirth to report that at least five people were injured by gunfire in three separate “accidental” firearms incidents on the Saturday Jan. 19 Gun Appreciation Day events across the country. The events were intended to push back against those determined to squelch a wide range of gun rights in the wake of the Sandy Hook school shooting.

Perhaps nobody told these folks that only Bugs Bunny characters can get away with looking down the bangy end of the gun and pulling the trigger to see if it's loaded. Forget the background checks. If you've ever used a gun as a back scratcher, a hammer, a Frisbee or to try and dig an English muffin out of the toaster, you shouldn't get to own one.

Corrections—An astute reader wrote to inform me that the term “clip” and “magazine” are not interchangeable. A clip is used to load ammunition into a magazine; the magazine loads ammunition into the chamber of a gun. *Thanks for the tip, smarty-pants!*

A bunch of garbage—Last Friday, I read that Sweden has had to begin importing garbage from Norway. You read that right. While we're getting fatter and worse at geography, these wile Asians have become hyper efficient at recycling and even figured out a way to turn the rest of their garbage into electricity—so much so that they ran out and had to start buying it from other countries.

Tour de False—Lance, Lance, Lance, Lance, Lance ... you broke my heart. Actually, I never liked this smug little pedaler. It doesn't bother me that his lies and cheating have disgraced a sport beloved by tens and twelves of people all across Frenchland. What bugs me is the idea that all he has to do is admit to a decade of deceit-and-cheat and he'll probably get a free pass.

Forget guns, pot and gay marriage, you want to know what's killing this country? A lack of accountability; people who behave immorally and are not punished for it. You're really sorry? Go spend a decade doing volunteer work without any endorsement deals and then come ask for forgiveness.

Instant potatoes—For 20 years now I've endured instant potatoes, telling myself they don't taste like cardboard and sadness. I'm done. I decree 2013 “The Year of the Fresh Potato.”

The fifth Stooge—Sly Stallone needs to stop it. He's over 60 now and he's in better shape than I was at 18. Oh, who am I kidding? I was

voted most likely to turn out like Curly Joe DeRita.

Scapegoat—When I was 10 years old they started censoring Bugs Bunny to supposedly protect the children. This was back when cartoons were only aired on Saturday mornings. Now they're trying to blame video games and movies for the tens of thousands of shooting deaths that occur in America each year.

Look, banning Bugs Bunny didn't stop us from dressing in drag and handing out exploding cigars—and stopping kids from playing Halo or Mario isn't going to prevent little Billy Psychopath from doing what genetics, bad parenting and over-medication have predisposed him to do.

Take my strife, please—I'm finishing this piece on a Monday morning and I couldn't be happier. The house is quiet after a long four-day weekend of influenza-induced moans, groans and hate speech.

Little did I know, when I awoke early last Thursday morning, that the flu had turned my wife into Hitler's third niece. (Yes, I used the “H” word.)

What did I learn over this 96-hour hell-ride of soup, juice and tears?

1. Sprite is not juice!
2. Apparently the boiling point of soup is still not hot enough.
3. I am personally responsible for the cold spots in the house.
4. Chocolate ice-cream is more effective than Prozac.

Words matter—I heard the phrase “vitally important” three times this week, but that's nothing new. What really irked me was once again someone misusing Occam's Razor, which basically means: “When faced with competing theories with similar predictions, the simpler is more attractive.”

Go here to learn more about the proper and improper uses: <http://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/physics/General/occam.html>

I'll end this screed with a quote from the great Dale Gribble: “This is the feces produced when shame eats too much stupidity.”

Captains Contagious

This may be the last column I pen for, as I write, my white blood cells are rumbling with whatever viral mutation my family left on every square inch of my home.

Granted, as the crown prince of the hypochondriacs, I've been known to see doom lurking around every sneeze, sliver and unidentified rash. But, one can never be too careful.

I was healthy enough last Friday when, as planned, my brother and his two young sons arrived on my doorstep. What I hadn't prepared myself for was the fact that three times that number of family members would eventually wind up at my house that evening—half of them apparently fresh out of the plague ward.

Four brothers, one sister, two nephews and a son later and the wife daughter and I were playing host to a gorilla cage at ground zero.

Now, let me explain a little about my brood: in a family of nine, none of us got as much attention as we thought we deserved. The result is seven adult children—myself included—each competing for the attention of whatever room they are in by trying to make everyone laugh.

By midnight, Friday, the living room looked and sounded like monkeys-gone-Vaudeville. It was a veritable open mic night of celebrity impressions, sound-effects, awkward dance moves, filthy jokes and ear-splitting guffaws. The quiet and reserved wife just sat in her rocking chair, as she always does when my traveling circus of siblings shows up, and endured the cacophony.

It took me until about 2:30 a.m. to get things calm enough to where

we could go to bed. Four hours later I was awakened to the sounds of stomping feet and cawing from upstairs—the nephews were up. Knowing that was as quiet as it was going to get, I forced myself out of bed and began making a dozen breakfasts. By the time everyone had finished eating and clean-up was complete, it was time to make lunch. This continued through dinner time.

Don't get me wrong, I love my family, and nobody makes me laugh harder. However, with a wife and daughter who are both very busy with work and school, I've grown used to being alone. I was ill-prepared to take on the Swiss Family Stampede on such short notice. Unfortunately, there is no 4F exemption when it comes to relatives.

My only glimpse of hope came at around 8 p.m. on Saturday, when I found the Spencer Tracy classic "Captains Courageous" on TV. I figured it would be fun to watch a movie with an actual story line for once since we usually just watch comedies when the family gets together. (Last time it was a movie about bigfoot that starred Danny Bonaduce.)

The opening credits were met with groans of vulgarity and disapproval, and we no more made it to the part where little Harvey Cheyne gets in trouble for bribery when the heckling began. Things only worsened when Tracy's character "Manuel" was introduced.

Now, I love Spencer Tracy. I think "Adam's Rib" and "Inherit the Wind" are just tops, but even I couldn't resist joining the catcalls when he wound up that godawful accent. I'm still not sure if he was supposed to be Irish, Spanish or mentally compromised.

The character Manuel referred to Harvey as "fish" but with his ridiculous accent it sounded like "feesh." And, that was all it took. Pretty soon—and for the rest of the weekend—it was "Hey, feesh, go grab my cigarettes." And, "Hey, feesh, there's a line forming out here!"

Judging by the 10-or-so percent of dialogue I actually heard, it seemed like a decent movie. Eventually, Manuel was cut in half by the rigging after a mast broke during a storm. With no legs, and losing blood at an alarming rate, he somehow managed to give a seven minute speech, kissed his crucifix and then sank into the briny deep—it was real classy.

My demise would not be so poetic. By midnight on Saturday I could feel the cold forming in my lungs. Visions of siblings dressed as

grim reapers danced in my fevered brain.

By Sunday morning they were all feeling better. And, as they packed up the wagon train, I coughed and sniffled.

“Hey, feesh, how’s that communicable disease treating you?”

The house is empty now, the wife is at church. I’m taking fluids and debating on what would be the best and most dramatic last words. So far I’m thinking of going with either “I am slain.” Or, “Finally.”

With my luck there will be no one around but the dogs to hear them anyway. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go find some NyQuil, feesh.

New Year's Hesitations

I suppose this list is technically a couple weeks late, but anybody who knows me knows my procrastination knows no bounds. I'll take a page out of Gandalf the Gray's book and say that my work is never early or late but turned in exactly when I intended.

I've never been a fan of making resolutions in the new year. However, upon some deep reflecting—the kind one does while writhing in agony after downing one too many slices of strawberry cheesecake—I've decided to make some changes in my life.

The following list consists of intentions rather than resolutions.

Swear less—while I shun the notion that there exists a corollary between the use of epithets and a person's intelligence, I have found that swearing often tends to only escalate any negative feelings I may have at the time. Not to mention that it really upsets my Shih Tzu to the point that she jumps on my shoulder and pats my face with her paw in order to calm me.

Do more angry dancing—why should Kevin Bacon be the only one to blow off steam by dancing angrily in an empty warehouse? After all, this business of dead trees is a stressful one. I think the next time someone calls the newspaper and really rags me out for writing a story about how their dear sweet do-nothing-wrong son was operating a crack dispensary 30 feet from a pre-school, I'm going to head down to the local manufacturing district, march into the first unlocked warehouse I find and cut me one hopping mad rug.

Take up smoking—I gave up my smoky darlings back in 1998 and never looked back ... until now. Don't get me wrong, I don't crave the

nicotine, and my fragile lungs couldn't handle the smoke. But it really does look cool. And, there are times that it would be nice to puff away dramatically on deadline while pacing in the news room.

Be truly charitable—Do something nice for three people without telling them I did it. I have no idea what or when or where ... so look out!

Procrastinate less—Yoda says: “Do or do not ... there is no try.” So, I suppose, I don't have much of a choice in the matter.

Work less, play more—I hate the term work-a-holic, mainly because the suffix is “ic” not “holic.” If anything, I should call myself a workic. The point is I need to spend more time with family and friends ... and many of you probably do, too. While it may not be easy for us workics, shopics, sexics and ragics, improving ourselves is something we must do ... there is no try.

Wear pants—Before you get too queasy, let me explain: I spend most of my time working from the home office. This affords a rather casual dress code. It may be more difficult to dance angrily in khaki's and a dress shirt, but I think the wife will appreciate not seeing me in sweatpants five days a week.

Stop screaming at the TV—Someone once told me it's not my job to tell the world's jerks they are jerks. Judging by my blood pressure, I have not heeded this sagely advice. However, from now on when Anderson and Shep', Morning Joe and Bill-O raise my ire I'm going to do what my father-in-law does: clasp my hands together and utter, “Hakuna matata” right before I chuck the remote at the TV.

And, if the cops find that phrase scrawled in blood on my study wall, it will only up the postmortem sales of my memoirs.

Learn to dance—They say you have to walk before you can run. So, before I can get angry dancin' I'm going to have to get to dancin'. Luckily, my business partner just happens to be a dance instructor. I wonder if he knows The Robot.

Be nice to telemarketers—I admit it's a scream to answer in broken English while some poor schmuck tries to sell me aluminum siding or solicit funds for the National Hot Dog Vendors Widows Society, but these folks are just trying to earn a buck like the rest of us. The last thing they need is Captain Clever busting their chops.

No more pre-ambling—I have a bad habit of telling people a story

before I ever tell them the story I said I was going to tell them. The wife calls this “pre-ambling.” A decade ago she would just nudge me a little to let me know I was rambling. Now she shouts “pre-ambling” at me like I’m a trained dolphin. Maybe if she threw a trout at me and petted my nose once in a while I’d be better behaved.

Call the men who date the women in my life by their real names—I have this tendency to call my sister’s boyfriend every name but his own. Instead of “Mike” I’d call him “Milton” at Thanksgiving. Then, at July 4 I’d call him “Merlin.” What began as a joke quickly became habit. I’ve found myself doing the same thing with the male child who befriended my daughter.

Apparently “Lizard Boy” isn’t his real name.

Learn a new language—As a great starter-but-not-finisher of projects I have learned how to say “hello” in Mandarin, “The farmer’s daughter is good” in Vulgar Latin, and I can ask “Where the airplane potatoes are?” in German. This year, I would like to learn a complete language. I’m thinking Klingon or Elvish.

Make peace with the bees—I have long had a paralyzing but completely rational fear of bees. I’m not allergic or anything, I just can’t stand the little buggers. I’ve been stung numerous times without provocation but have decided to be the bigger species. Look for coverage of the “Honey Summit” in a future edition of the newspaper. (Yes, I will most likely double-cross the bees when they show up.)

Oh, Tannenbaum!

By the time you read this I will likely be safely behind bullet-resistant glass, gluing cotton balls to popsicle sticks in some clandestine nuthatch.

The reason for my yuletide madness isn't birthed from your stereotypical booze-drenched dysfunctional family gathering—though I expect a fair amount of Mr. Beam's miracle mood enhancer will find its way into the bottom of my rocks glass over the next week or so.

And, while there have been several arguments between the wife and I, they weren't over what gifts to get the kids, or who has the worse in-laws. Luckily, both of us have been smited with a set of perfect parents whom we not only love dearly, but who subscribe to this newspaper. (Is “smite” the right word? I'm sure I'll hear about it five minutes into Christmas dinner.)

No, this year's “passion of the tinsel” I owe to my desire (the wife calls it a sickness) to get a good deal. Sure, it sometimes ends up costing more to go with the bargain, but in the end it's worth it. If the wife drank more Jim Beam she might understand that.

The perceived transgression is the result of an attempt to nurse along an artificial Christmas tree I paid \$20 for 11 years ago. The wife said we should spring for a real tree this year, but I assured her we could easily squeeze another nine years of life out of the one we have. After all, it's not like they go bad.

So, we dusted the overgrown pipe-cleaner off, bent its wire branches back into place and took to decorating. The wife said it looks pathetic. I think it gives the house that festive Slovakian orphanage,

minus the joy, kind of feel.

About three days later—mind you, the tree was erected several days before Thanksgiving—the tree was found on its side, ornaments strewn across the living room floor. The consensus among the wife and kids is that it offed itself, but I suspect foul play. You make a lot of enemies in the newspaper business, and none of them are beneath assaulting a man's Christmas tree.

Not only did the “fall” tweak some of the branches, but one of its built-in stabilizers snapped off. My son volunteered to fix the tree stand, by which he meant indiscriminately attach eight-or-so board feet of two-by-four via three-and-a-half-inch drywall screws.

It was a valiant effort. Did I say “valiant?” What I meant to say was “Holy Hell, son!” He brought the tree in from the workshop in the garage, stood it precariously in the corner of the living room and re-decorated it.

Later that afternoon, my daughter walked by the tree a little too quickly. I'm no engineer, but this must have caused a breeze of some magnitude because it set off a chain of events that even still have me unnerved.

In slow-motion, I watched as a holiday hell-scape unfolded. As the tree began to tip I looked over at the wife who was rolling her eyes.

“T-o-l-d y-a s-o,” she said in a deep, slow satanic voice.

With the reflexes of a three-toed sloth I sprang slowly out of my broken easy chair in a vain attempt to catch the falling symbol of glut. As I pinwheeled and limboed my way up, the tree crashed to the ground, simultaneously launching the ornaments that hadn't shattered during the first fall.

“Iiiiiincoooooomiiiiiii!” I screamed.

The wife threw her hands up defensively. I chanted something in Latin. The dogs stampeded in circles like they were trying to hold off the Apache nation. Twinkling lights were half-off, the tinsel was lopsided and there were candy canes and broken glass everywhere. Somewhere in the distance I could swear I heard John Denver singing “Please, daddy, don't get drunk this Christmas.” It looked like the holidays had gotten sick and barfed all over living room.

Like good little carpenter gnomes, my brother and son marched the tree back into the garage while I sipped my special medicine. For

an hour I could hear sawing, hammering, drilling and swearing ... and that was just from the wife's side of the living room.

Back the tree came, this time with even more wood attached to the bottom. The tree skirt was no longer large enough to cover the improvised base of pine and steel.

"We can rebuild this tree. We can make it better, stronger—we have the technology."

The wife protested, but our arrogance knew no bounds. It was a holly-jolly madhouse! We threw our heads back in maniacal laughter as we used a red tablecloth to cover our shame.

"Hee-hee, her-her, hoo-hoo, huh-ha!"

The madness was complete. Clearly there was no turning back now. I had intended to explain how my wife got two pianos for Christmas, but the nice men in white coats say it's time to take my medication.

A Likely Excuse

Father's Day—Harrumph!

Well, not “harrumph” to that day in particular but to all observances. Regardless of the reason, national holidays, personal anniversaries, they all just seem like so much superfluous self-aggrandizement.

Yeah, yeah, I get it: we're supposed to honor those who blah, blah, blah. I'm still not buying in. But, then, I've always had difficulty celebrating accomplishments and milestones.

Don't get me wrong: I don't begrudge anyone their little celebrations in life. I guess the realist in me just knows the cake is only going to make me fatter; someone is going to have to sweep up all that confetti; and, what am I really celebrating, anyhow?

I'm another year older?

Goodie gumdrops!

The Grim Reaper just edged a little farther forward in his chair.

I've been with my wife for 19 years?

Congratulations for not filing for divorce!

I graduated from school?

Well, yippity doo-daw, I didn't flunk out!

I'm a father?

Which basically means I didn't accidentally lose, kill or sell the offspring that I crudely helped to produce. Is there anything else I didn't screw up that I'd like accolades for?

The wife, on the other hand, is a celebration junkie. Even when it's just the four of us at home for a kid's birthday she drags out her steamer trunk full of streamers, kazoos, posters, games and a godaw-

ful dance mix CD.

I sometimes wondered how it would have looked for someone to walk in on four people standing around a giant cake in a fully decorated house, techno music blaring.

“Where is everybody?” the stranger would ask. In creepy deadpan unison we would all turn our heads and say: “We are everybody.”

When our lab puppies turned two, the wife put party hats on them and gave them special treats. Have you ever explained to a dog that this isn't your idea, while you try to strap a rubber band under its chin and situate a cardboard cone on top of its head? In the days following, they refused to make eye contact with me. It was like accidentally seeing a relative naked, and we could never look at each other the same again.

So, the celebrations continue and I try to stay out of the way. Despite my pathological aversion to observances, the wife still makes the effort whenever a birthday or Christmas rolls around. For the last six months the wife has been using these holidays as excuses to try to get me to buy myself a new chair. I've been resisting spending the \$300 it's going to take to replace my old blue recliner.

“Old blue!” I shout, with a tear in my eye.

But, she does have a point. The seat is nearly a foot lower than it was 12 years ago. So, when I'm seated, I look like a giant toddler. The foot rest, which caved in years ago, no longer extends. I filled the hole with two old pillows that also prevent the four-inch furniture nails—which now protrude on the right side at knee level—from goring me. The sides are so weakened that when I try to get out of the chair they spread about an arm's length on each side. This leaves me half-standing and pinwheeling while I fight gravity and contort my body backwards in a manner that makes it look like I am doing one hell of a limbo.

Sometimes I get up.

Sometimes I fall back into the chair.

That's the chance you take with Old Blue.

I've tried oiling the rocker assembly but cannot seem to find the grunts, groans and high-pitched demon squeaks it produces.

This past Saturday, my daughter thought she would be helpful and suggested we bring up the not-quite-as-old blue recliner from the bar

in the basement.

“New blue?”

This piece of furniture is one of the many roadside acquisitions which populate my man cave. I've never actually sat in it but it certainly appears to be in better shape than Old Blue.

The kids brought it up and placed it in the living room for dear old dad. Other than being a little dusty, the fabric was in decent shape and it appeared to be mechanically sound. My daughter jumped into it and pulled the lever—the foot rest worked!

Then it was my turn. I sat down in the chair. “Not bad,” I beamed. I pushed up with my tippy toes. “It rocks,” I lauded. Then it happened. I made the mistake of scooching back in the chair and giving the floor a good shove with my feet to send me rocking back and forth. I went back, alright.

What I didn't know at the time was that this roadside find had been someone else's Old Blue. Apparently the bottom assembly had fallen into disrepair and they fixed it by building a new base out of two-by-fours—a base significantly smaller than the original.

Now, basic physics tells us that a tall object with too great of a top weight and too small of a base is destined for hilarity. I fell backward in slow-motion. My arms clutched at the open air, feet kicking ferociously. (My old swim coach would have been proud.)

I was falling so slowly I had time to scream to my wife: “Where's Maisy! Where's Maisy?” The last thing I saw was the uncontrollable shaking of my wife as she laughed at my plight. I had visions of landing on our 11-pound Shi Tzu.

“Where's Maisy! Where's Maisy?” I screamed over and over. I even had time to scream “Help me!” a few times ... but nobody helped. I hit the floor with a muffled “thud.” And, as I lie there in all my ridiculousness—the wife standing over me and convulsing with laughter—I thought about how I had gotten to this particular point in my life.

New Blue now sits next to Old Blue, which is next to the broken piano I paid \$100 for, but which is so heavy it will never leave this house. I am now officially in the market for a new recliner.

Perhaps I should buy one to commemorate the Fourth of July.



I Gotta Get This Right

It's National Newspaper Week again and I know what you're all thinking: "Who cares?"

Wait, that's what I was thinking. I mean, I love doughnuts, but I don't get all emotional every time the local bakery celebrates National Doughnut Day—it falls on the first Friday of June, by the way. That said, the observance did get me to thinking about the business in general and what it has meant to me over the last decade or so.

I freelanced for a half-dozen or so publications throughout Northern Michigan, and one in California, for a few years leading up to my first staff writer position up in Charlevoix. Putting out sports stories, holiday features and the occasional enterprise piece prepared me for the technical aspects of news writing, but nothing could have readied me for the emotional whack-a-mole of covering my first murder.

It was my second day on the job. I'll never forget the call from my boss, who was busy getting that week's paper off to print.

Editor: "Gohs, there's a 10-77 on the north side of town."

Me: "What's a 10-77?"

Editor: "It means the cops found a dead body."

Me: "Holy &*!@."

Editor: "You're damned right, 'holy &*!@.'"

It was a shooting, and the suspect was unaccounted for. Sweating, trembling and hyperventilating, I grabbed a steno pad, pens and the good camera and headed for my truck. I was in a hurry. But, as much as time was the enemy, physics proved to be the real heel.

Hurriedly, I jumped up into the cab, lost my balance and did the

splits—one leg on the pavement, one leg in the truck. Now, if you've never seen a fat man with short legs do the splits, let me explain. You see, gymnasts wear spandex for a reason: it flexes. Cotton dress slacks, on the other hand, have a tendency to split from, oh, let's say your belt loop to your inseam. So as not to disturb the reader, I'm going to pretend I was wearing underwear when this happened.

Needless to say my heart attacks were having heart attacks as I tried to recover from the trauma of having my pants blowout in plain view of city hall. (Did I mention that my office was across the street from city hall?) I glanced all around in horror, certain someone had seen. My mind conjured worst case scenarios.

“Dispatch, we've got an eleventy-seventy: fat guy with his butt hanging out! Over!”

The street was dead. My secret was safe. As luck—or a universe with a wicked sense of humor—would have it, the murder occurred across the street from my house. I tried to regain my composure as what was left of my dignity flapped in the air-conditioning while I sped toward home and the crime scene.

There were police cars and officers strewn about on either side of the highway. I took deep gulps of breath as I putted my way through hell's half-mile, praying to the god of chubby journalists that my nervous and, hence, *suspicious* behavior would not tempt a deputy—thinking he'd nabbed the ne'erdowell—to haul me out of my vehicle for questioning.

“Well, if it ain't the Bare Butt Bandit!”

Somehow I managed to slip past the guards and dash into the house undetected. I made a quick wardrobe change at the homestead and hoofed my way across the highway to the crime scene. Slowly, I worked my way through police tape and roadblocks, officers and detectives, police dogs and gawkers until I reached the head honcho.

Former Sheriff George T. Lasater (picture Wilford Brimley with a gun) kindly and patiently fielded my queries as I fumbled my notebook and sputtered through my greenhorn questions. Police lights, brown uniforms, visions of a deranged gunman popping out from behind the bushes—my head swam and I fought back the urge to vomit.

Upon gathering all necessary information, I photographed the scene and headed back to the office to write my first big story. The

boss looked it over. He told me to call the sheriff to confirm a couple facts.

“We'd rather be right than first,” he said.

He was right. And, nearly 2,000 stories later I'm still striving to make sure I get this business right.

Happy National Newspaper Week. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I need a doughnut. And, yes, this column was written while wearing boxer shorts ... if that makes you feel better.

Getting On My Nerves

Funny how a week turns into a month. I'd like to say I was on hiatus in order to focus on my international diplomacy studies but even I don't believe that, and I'm the one who made it up.

The boss said it was this or I go back on bathroom duty. Apparently, eating mashed potatoes and watching 6-year-old reruns of Project Runway don't pay like it used to. Don't get me wrong, the break since my last column has not been for lack of rage over life's foibles. (People can have foibles, but life? OK, I'm stalling.)

Anyway, without further preamble, I give you the week in rage.

Young love—I used to watch Tevye struggle with his maturing daughters in my favorite musical “Fiddler on the Roof” and feel sympathetic to Motel and Tzeitel as they told the aging patriarch they had given each other a pledge to marry. Any nostalgia I had over the idiocy of young love has grown exponentially smaller as my own daughter nears 18 ... and gets further from the convent. Nowadays I relate more to Spencer Tracy in “Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.” Except, my Katharine Hepburn doesn't look on, teary-eyed, as I change my mind just before supper. Try as I might, I feel more like Emperor Palpatine—the evil old man who could shoot lightning from his hands in Return of the Jedi: “Oh, I'm afraid the deflector shields will be quite operational when your boyfriend arrives.”

Gun control—I've devised the perfect solution for this debate. We hold a televised pay-per-view crazy-old-man-off between Wayne LaPierre and Joe Biden. If Biden wins we all get a double-barrel shotgun. If LaPierre wins we each get our own Apache Helicopter. For

what it's worth, I'm rooting for LaPierre. I've got a field mouse problem, and 625-rounds-per-minute with that 30 mm chain gun should be sufficient to tear those meeses to pieces. We'll give the proceeds to ... I don't know ... midgets with herpes or something.

By the by, what the hell kind of a name for the king of all guns is "LaPierre," anyway? John Wayne's real first name was "Marion" but he had the good sense to change it. I think ol' Wayne would hold more sway if he went by "Dirk Smashingner" or "Lex Gunpowder."

Sequestration conflagration—Like the firemen of "Fahrenheit 451," our federal representatives are not putting out blazes but starting them. Instead of incinerating books, these silk-suited thugs are raring to set proverbial fire to the economy. I'd tell you to contact your political representative but your time would probably be better spent converting what's left of your 401k to pesos or investing in mustard stocks.

One small step—A big asteroid missed us last week, but only by a few thousand miles. All the hub-bub over interstellar traffic got me thinking about the fact that we shaved apes spend the bulk of our time and fortune warring on one another, arguing over religion, sexuality, skin color ... all the while there's a rock the size of Yankee Stadium out there waiting to retire us permanent-like a la the dinosaurs. That reminds me of an old joke: what's the last thing that goes through a homo sapien's mind when he's hit by 100,000 tons of cosmic matter?

Worship me—I watched the apocalyptic action classic "Armageddon" for the too-many-eth time recently and realized I'll never have the chance—or will or energy or skills or bravery—to save the planet. Nonetheless, I want a bronze statue of myself erected outside a governmental building. Assuming middle-aged shut-in does not qualify as a superhero status, I've opted to take up a collection. I figure by the time I raise the \$30,000 necessary to commission a sculpture of me in a space suit doing my best Charles Atlas pose, I will have located a municipality willing to host this work of art.

Tune in next time to see if I use my powers for good.

Get Rich Quick

I guess you could say I've involved myself in a fair number of barely legal enterprises in hopes of getting rich. My humanitarian history began in 1983 when I was 8. The parents had just split for good, sending mom, my 4-year-old brother and I from our pedestrian, middle-class-ish existence to a ramshackle apartment in the "Escape from New York" section of town.

Mom lost her title of "Stay-at-home" and for the first time I was alone. Soon, I went from a shy, weepy momma's boy to a shy, weepy hoodlum. My first heist was modeled after a charity where people went door-to-door with coffee cups collecting for monkey Alzheimer's or feline lupus or something like that.

With one of mom's mugs in hand, and a short spiel in the name of a cancer cure rehearsed, the Gohs Candy Fund was in business. Panhandling for non-existent causes turned to shoplifting at the local party store, because the former was simply too much work. OK, to be fair, I got a handful of change at one house and I swiped two candy bars at one store. It was wrong, but a career criminal I was not. Decades later, I still feel the shame, but at the time it seemed like fairly victimless crimes.

And then, Sampson, the strict military man who would become my father, appeared on the scene and the tomfoolery ended—for awhile. Soon after moving out of my parents' house I found a different sort of trouble. Granted, selling overpriced gourmet treats and silver-plated jewelry isn't the same as lying for donations, but it's pretty damned close.

In the years following "Cancer Scam," I hawked everything from vacuums to night crawlers, but my laziness and greed prevented me from seeing one pyramid and multi-level-marketing venture after

another for the frauds they were. I even kept the faith when an unemployed alcoholic and a former Texan drug runner arrived at my mother-in-law's house in a beat up station wagon with homemade business cards and dog-eared pie charts to convince me I could make millions selling phone service door-to-door. (Please hold your applause until the end of the humiliation.)

I soon found myself back at home. In between cooking jobs, and desperate to move out of mother's basement, I wrote a \$250 check. Months passed and loved ones were alienated by desperate sales pitches. My partners in slime then turned me on to soliciting donations for Vietnam veterans and disabled Americans via telemarketing.

Taking advantage of peoples' generosity gave me the same sick feeling as eating a gas station burrito, but I pressed on through four hours of people screaming graphic instructions on what I should do with the phone, myself and my mother. I broke for lunch and never returned.

The scams had such allure that it wasn't long before I paid \$100 for a list of homeowners who supposedly qualified for a refund of their closing costs. Offering someone their money in return for a fee went over pretty much as you might expect. I may as well have walked into a stranger's house, picked up their toaster and offered to sell it to them. (Hold on, I've got an idea!)

By 25, my miserable machinations hadn't produced a penny and I quit, for nearly seven years. Then I began noticing the occasional odd classified like: "Free manure (horse). Easy to pick up," and "Breast pump ... barely used. \$70."

I wondered what I could sell, but resisted the urge to liquidate household furniture and knickknacks until I spotted an ad from a Christian man seeking a car or money to buy a car—it was all the push I needed to fall off the wagon.

So far, I have zero responses to: "White 32-year-old nonsmoking professional male seeking wealthy surrogate parent. Interests include comic books, video games, cash, muscle cars, Taco Bell and beer. High bidder addressed as 'mommy' or 'daddy' and will receive finger paintings, hugs and phone calls on major holidays. Platonic interests only need apply."

I'd like to think this will be my last swindle, but I know me too

well.

Oh, and “Christian man seeking car,” if you’re reading this, let me know how it all turned out—the suspense is killing us.

Roughing It

If my wife and kids could spend the entire summer 'round a campfire or biking through the wilderness, they'd do it. Not to say I loathe flies in the food, sand in every crevice and giving blood to nature's littlest vampire, but a couple days in god's country and I'm an itchy, chafed, nervous wreck.

So when the wife spotted an RV for sale on the roadside, I had to investigate. After all, it's not as if I have a choice not to take the family camping, and the wife is certainly sick of pulling up stakes at 2 a.m. because my sobbing is keeping her awake.

The 18-foot, 1983 Transmaster by Georgie-Boy had it all: Bathroom (closet with bucket); kitchen (propane-powered burner); and beds for four (four Ethiopians), not to mention a bargain price by anyone's standard.

You outdoor purists may scold my lack of frontier spirit, but if you knew of my days spent 'roughing it,' you might not be so quick to condemn the purchase.

Believe it or not, there was a time when I wasn't a full-blown pansy. And, while I'd like to regale you with tales of father and son hikes through Yellowstone or family excursions to Tahquamenon Falls, the only camping we ever did as a family was the summer of 1986 after we were booted from our trailer home.

The six of us took up residence at a state park in a World War II era tenement the size of a walk-in closet which smelled vaguely of old mushrooms and wet dog. The highlight of eating boof patties and powdered eggs by firelight was tempered by being forced to stay in

the sweltering canvas coffin while the parents worked—a move done in hopes of staving suspicion from park rangers that young children were unattended 40-plus hours a week. Camping because you have nowhere else to go is the ultimate in roughing it.

I wouldn't camp again until I was 16 years old, when my friends found 'Beer Fest,' a small chunk of state land a stone's throw from the Rifle River. Several times a year, for the next decade or so, we would scrape together enough money for booze and cigarettes and pilfer whatever food we could from our homes. I remember once taking only the clothes on my back, a five-pound bag of potatoes and a bread bag full of well-past-the-expiration-date sausage.

There were no sleeping bags, no pillows, no toilet paper, and after a night of hard drinking, fighting and consuming too much undercooked and possibly rancid pork, my compatriots and I would pass out in the dirt next to the fire at sunrise. When you can wake up covered in blood, mud and vomit only to do it all over again, you're roughing it.

Then Otis, a man twice our tender age, drove up to our campsite, parked and proceeded to fall out of his car. Let me clarify. He did not stand up and fall down. He opened his car door and fell out. I have been that drunk in my life but never while behind the wheel.

He bought us whiskey and shared his contraband in return for some company. Poor Otis was roughing it when he fell in the fire. I can still hear the howling and smell the burning hair, but that didn't stop him from partying on.

He was really roughing it when, later, he dove nose-first onto our chopping block. Until then, I had never seen that much blood come from anything that wasn't going to die. We wrapped Otis' face in my best friend's new sweatshirt and rushed the dazed drunkard to his residence in his in-laws' basement.

Otis' wife just shook her head and helped her man to bed. Being married to Otis, now that's roughing it.

Roughing it nowadays is running low on s'mores fixings or trying to use Georgie-Boy's bathroom, an operation akin to performing deep-knee bends in a pantry. Between avoiding the sting-happy bees and man-eating Michigan grizzlies, I feel I've paid my dues.

So the next time you see a guy in a modern-day prairie schooner

hauling a canoe, an SUV and a half-dozen mountain bikes, do not judge him a tenderfoot too quickly, for he too may know the perils of roughing it.

A ‘Cross’ Walk

A relatively silent war between pedestrians and motorists rages all across America. What began the battle of rolling murder machines and ice-cream cone-wielding foot soldiers is known only to criminal psychologists, but one thing is certain: Drivers forget they’ve ever walked and pedestrians cannot remember ever having driven a car.

Tensions peaked this summer when a local policeman directing traffic was hit by a car. But it really got personal when, a few weeks later, a rather large walker unleashed his angst on me. I’m not sure whether he was angry because his mustache went out of style with the Bee Gees or if his Human Growth Hormone supply was dwindling, but he sprinted across several lanes of lunch hour traffic while indiscriminately screaming, “This is a crosswalk! This is a crosswalk!”

I’ll interrupt this story long enough to say I’ve always had a problem with keeping my mouth shut. Whether cracking wise at my irate mother or squeaking out a girlish “ooh” when being frisked by the meanest cop in mid-Michigan, vocal control has always been an issue for me.

No sooner had I mouthed the words, “Yeah buddy, this is a crosswalk,” than the Incredible Bulk spotted me out of the corner of his red bulging eye, strutted back across the street and stood in front of my, up-until-then, moving car to remind me in a demonic shriek that this was indeed a crosswalk.

Not about to argue the finer points of easement etiquette with the incredible apoplectic man, I feigned ignorance.

“Who said that?” I queried innocently.

As I was about to be bench pressed, Buick and all, I took evasive maneuvers. Once safely out of punching distance, I shouted detailed directions on where he could put the nearest park bench.

“... and your grandmother’s big toe, also!”

Determined to take my revenge in this column, I began intense research, by which I mean watching YouTube, eating turkey sandwiches and sassing my editor. While waiting for an episode of SpongeBob Squarepants to load, I ran across the Michigan Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Action Plan and their Action Team who intend to, “Provide recognition to jurisdictions and/or officials who have brought about a significant decrease in pedestrian and/or bicycle crashes; Clarification of state pedestrian and bicycle laws (and) review local, state and federal laws and evaluate if/where disparities exist.”

Review? Clarify? Recognize? Sounds serious. I imagined this rag-tag bunch sport nickel-plated pedometers and orange Kevlar vests emblazoned with reflective skull and cross bones. Look for their six-week course, “Pedestrians in a Persistent Vegetative State,” how to negotiate that 16-foot swath of white paint on pavement.

The Action Team will offer “safety training,” while dumping tax funds on “high-crash jurisdictions,” and, “Develop a reference manual ... ‘What Every Pedestrian Must Know,’” in addition to working on safety features including, “sidewalk construction, pedestrian count-down signals, median and crosswalk refuge islands.”

What every pedestrian must know? They can’t be serious! Didn’t most of us master the whole foot-to-ground and look-both-ways-before-crossing skills when we were like seven or eight? And “Refuge Islands?” Only bureaucrats could make crossing the road sound as perilous as floating in from Cuba on a Styrofoam bait box.

For those of you concerned the state is working to end the hilarity of slow-speed collisions between, say, a 1989 Ford Festiva and a fat kid on a banana bike—actually I was on a BMX—don’t fret, because the Action Team only plans to reduce the overall fatality rate 10.4 percent by 2008.

There is a toll-free number, but if you need more info than “look both ways” and “don’t roll under speeding bread trucks” you shouldn’t leave your Lucite rectangle.

But enough cynicism and sarcasm, it’s time to broker peace be-

tween walkers and drivers with the following pledges.

The motorist pledge: Though I'm encased in two tons of lease payment, I am not superior; I will keep all offensive hand signals to myself; I will not treat the crosswalk like a bait pile or assign point values to pregnant women, punks or little old ladies and, though my expression resembles the scowl of one trying to pass what began as an extra large bowl of shredded wheat, it has nothing to do with your sluggish procession.

The pedestrian oath: Though I walk four blocks instead of using 10 drops of gas, I am not superior; I promise not to wave cars, already stopped to let me cross, to go first; And, since my home's A/C units cause more pollution via coal-generated electricity than do some cars, I promise to stop saying "carbon footprint" and the word "green" unless describing a color!

Searching For My Swine

My psychic told me not to bother with the matter, but I'm making one last appeal: Could whoever has my pig return it? No questions will be asked.

The legal department says I cannot claim my brown piggy bank was stolen, after all, there was a mighty electrical storm the night it, \$40 in change and two very old collector coins went missing, so it is feasible "Hog," as the Gohs family affectionately referred to it, came to life a la Night of the Living Dead, leapt from my car and now roams the streets squealing in agony as only a freshly animated plastic Dollar Store farm beast can.

In my rage, I wrote a short note detailing my disgust over the incident and taped it to the window of the crime scene—my '67 Buick Riviera. I spoke to a local policeman, but chose not to file a report because I figured they have more important things to do than sleuth after a plastic piggy bank.

My thirst for vengeance yet slaked, I placed a newspaper ad calling for Hog's whereabouts with no questions asked. I'll admit I intended to bop the noggin of whoever returned it, but no one has come forward with my roaming Hog.

After a couple weeks without so much as a ransom note, I decided to call Magic Tami, my advisor on all things clairvoyant. Tami told me the pig was abducted by a mentally handicapped elderly man—a mental image I found almost worth the loss of property. Though I will likely never see the bank again, she said I might offer a small reward, say \$5, and ask the man fitting the description if he could help me.

I am a mouthy but ineffectual vigilante and I just can't see myself doing Popeye Doyle-style shakedowns on the elderly in Hoopskirt Alley until someone finally breaks.

"Man, word on the street is the Hog is on a one-way trip to Mexico. You dig?"

"Don't toy with me, Johnny Switchblade! I know you got the skin on my plastic porcine."

"Man, the D.A.'s been sweatin' feet all day long. I'm tellin' ya, I got nuthin'."

The 12-year-old in me yearns for Face, B. A., Hannibal and Murdoch to roll into town and, after a series of explosions, overturned cars and hokey disguises, I am reunited with my sienna swine. The reality is this is the third time I've had something stolen from an automobile.

In 1994, my infant son's car seat was heisted from our toast brown Chevette. We were so poor we resorted to buckling the lad in with pillows and a blanket to keep him propped up until we could find a replacement. All you could see were his eyes. He looked like a little Arab astronaut strapped in for blast-off.

The second object to mysteriously disappear was a CD player in 2002. The joke was on them because, when you started the car, the stereo's volume automatically ran up to its loudest level for some reason. I would have loved to have been there the first time they hopped in and fired up the engine to the ear-splitting scream of sweet sweet revenge.

As galled and appalled as I have been at these trivial trespasses, Karma may be dishing exactly what I deserve. You see, when I was about 16 years old, some close friends of mine came into possession of the lights off a police car. The intentions were to pull people over and bust up parties at a friend's house for our own amusement. That soon escalated.

We strapped the lights, haphazardly, to the top of my best friend's 1979 Grand Prix and installed an old siren given to us by an uncle and former motorcycle cop. It didn't sound like your modern police cruiser, but when a teenager sees those lights a-flashing and hears that siren a-wailing, they are too busy pooping their pants over what mom and dad are going to say to realize it's all a scam.

Perfectionists all, we decided the prank wasn't complete without a police uniform, borrowed and returned, from a source I shall not detail here. We laughed 'til our spleens ached as teen after teen, stopped after leaving a party, tried to sob their way out of going to jail. We chuckled to near asphyxiation as juvenile delinquents bolted for cornfields and tree lines, their beer cans and wine bottles hurled with haste as we busted up party after party that summer.

Fun's finale came when—after a few too many toddies—patrolling the back roads one night, we neared a crossroads where sat a real police car. We slowed to a crawl, hoping he would just look left and right then pull through the intersection.

After what seemed an eternity at the stop sign, the phantom fuzz drove off. The driver of our “police cruiser” whipped a hairy ape-rapin' U-turn and sped away in the opposite direction, sending our endless joy crashing to the ground.

And, just as quickly as we had received our special gift, it was gone—smashed into hundreds of blue and red plastic pieces on the highway.

All these years later I try to convince myself we performed a service. If just one teenager was scared straight by our amateur antics, it was all worth it. But now I am out \$10 for the call to my psychic, \$40 in change, who knows how much the old coins were worth, and all I have are 550 Psychic Source bonus points and potential self-incrimination for a stupid stunt I was involved in over 20 years ago.

On second thought, maybe you just keep Hog and we'll forget any of this ever happened, lights, siren and all.

A Little Bathroom Humor

My new editor probably should have thrown this work of filth at my feet and asked why I was trying to get her fired, but she didn't. However, the nail-biting legal department, with their thinning hair and palpitations, urged me—and by “urged” I mean jabbed at me with sharp sticks while grunting menacingly in what I'm pretty sure was Latin—that I must, at the very least, forewarn my readers that treacherous content lie ahead.

So, if you pronounce schedule “shejwool,” faint at the site of luncheon meat, subscribe to the New Yorker, lift your pinkie while drinking or get your wine out of a bottle instead of a box, you might want to pick up a copy of Dog Fancy or watch a rerun of The McLaughlin Group 'cause we're going to the loo.

My news junkie pal, who sends me so many column ideas, gave me a double whammy this week. Not only did Mr. “Please-don't-squeeze-the-Charmin” Whipple pass away, but a Pennsylvania woman recently won a lawsuit against a major department store chain after they illegally taxed her on bath tissue—what we poor folk call “butt wipe.”

I know what you're thinking, and you're right: Lazy writers (like me) and overworked editors *do* wait for this kind of story to come along so we can print headlines like, “Woman Flushed Over Swirling Controversy.” A quick check online revealed the punsters going to town on these stories.

All this bathroom oriented discourse got me thinking about my own sordid childhood. My father's sense of humor ranged somewhere

between Red Foxx and Lenny Bruce. Bodily functions were his obsession and nothing was taboo. Dad spent so many years telling us to pull his finger I'm convinced he inadvertently conditioned himself to the point where tugging his digit is now a physical necessity. He was the Leonardo da Vinci of farts. And, though he specialized in the "Barking Spider" and the "Greased Elephant" he was well-versed in an array of windbreakers including, but not limited to, the following:

Doppler—this fart sounds like it is coming up and then going away at a high rate of speed; also known as the "Road Runner."

Trumpet—This one is pretty self-explanatory: it sounds like a trumpet.

Wet Tuba—Also pretty obvious.

Fear Wit—Makes a "Feeeerwhit!" sound.

Harley-Davidson—Harley-Davidson is famous for its loud engines that make a "Potato-potato-potato-potato" sound. This particular fart also goes "Potato-potato-potato-potato."

The Duck—Sounds like a long, angry "Quack!"

Bombs Away—Emits a high-pitched whistling sound like a bomb being dropped.

Cracker Barrel Kid—Sounds like someone blowing out a mouthful of cracker crumbs.

Deliverance—Quiet like a gentle breeze.

Backfire—Quick popping noise.

Gilbert & Sullivan—To qualify it must cycle through at least three musical notes.

To those of you who feel this subject is going downhill fast, I say: What, Dog Fancy wasn't doin' it for ya?

Our white trash circus was worsened by the fact that nine of us shared (unless you count that Folger's coffee can by the sump pump in the basement) one restroom complete with half-dollar-sized mushrooms growing between the bathtub and floor.

We routinely went without official toilet paper. There's nothing funny about making the mad dash while scrounging for a sock or book with pages no one would miss—sorry, David Copperfield.

In my defense of the aforementioned unconventional implements, I should point out that people have historically used everything from corncobs (which I can only assume is akin to shaving with a cheese

grater) to rag on stick, silk and—allow me to pause for hecklers—yes, even newsprint.

Looking back, there are only really two humorous things associated with a bathroom that I can remember from my younger days. One involved a short-tempered one-armed Vietnam veteran screaming at a drunken 15-year-old who proceeded to befoul every porcelain receptacle in the man's cabin during my friend's 1992 high school graduation party.

The fine young gent began the evening by regaling us with tales of other evenings when he had drunken all the booze on the planet. So, we did not think twice when he ordered a fifth bottle of 80 proof whiskey for his lonesome.

The result came about 12:30 in the morning when, after consuming only about half of the bottle, our boastful pal had a sudden simultaneous case of projectile vomiting and explosive diarrhea. My friend's dad only had two rules while we spent the weekend partying and sleeping in his garage: keep the noise down and don't come in the house.

Well, the Rot-Gut Geyser ignored protocol, and our warnings, and headed in to use the bathroom. We cringed and waited for the sound of gunfire or punches or some other such violence. What we heard was a lot of high-pitched screaming ... but it wasn't coming from the kid.

We ran to the cabin's bathroom window and looked in on the scene. The kid had his pants down around his ankles and was doing what looked like an angrier, less coordinated version of Chubby Checker's "Twist" as he threw up in the toilet and then spun 'round to hang his hind end over it.

Our friend's dad just stood there, holding towels in his good arm and screaming at the kid to sit still while frantically waiving his nub. The kid was so freaked out by the whole thing he didn't know which end was firing and what it was hitting.

We laughed pretty hard at the ordeal and even harder as we retold it to the kid time and time again over breakfast the next morning.

The other special bathroom humor memory I have came when I was 13 and my mother summoned me and my brother Hammy to the outer door of her sanitary sanctum sanctorum. Some of the most

meaningful conversations between mom and me were had through that old pine door.

By the time I knocked to see what was the matter she was sobbing. She cracked the bathroom door slightly, regained her composure and from her throne told us to listen as she read aloud the blueberry pie eating contest from Stephen King's "The Body." If you haven't already, I implore you to read it.

The story is of an obese and ostracized young man named David Hogan who exacts revenge on the cruel townsfolk by initiating a pastry puke-fest of old Roman proportions. Mom kept herself together up until Davie, with queasy gullet, opened his mouth with a great blue smile before belching an inhuman amount of castor oil and pie on the previous year's champion, hence setting off a chain reaction.

I remember blowing snot bubbles, crying great hot tears and shaking while fighting for air and trying not to fall down as she told of poor Miss Norman who, exhibiting good manners to the bitter end, upchucked in her own purse.

To news junkie I say: Thanks for dredging up a great childhood memory, and keep sending these strange news bits. To anyone I may have offended I say: Pull my finger.

Coda

Dedications are generally found in the front of the book but, since I do everything else the wrong way, I figured I may as well end with a few “thank-yous.”

Mostly I'd like to thank the wife for putting up with my daily bouts with personal apocalypse. She must have told me “You're fine, dear!” and “You're not dying!” about a thousand times, and maybe a thousand times more. Her patience with my rather unique personality flaws has been appreciated more than she will ever know. Although, to be fair, the sheer ridiculousness of my daily life keeps her flush with laughter, so I think we might be even.

I'd also like to thank my business partner Chris Faulknor for his—sometimes Pollyanna-ish—good cheer and enthusiasm. Don't ever tell that kid he can't do anything. He'll just smile, nod and go do it anyway.

I'd like to thank my grumpy old Scottish editor and mentor Jeremy McBain. If not for he I would never have written story one for a newspaper ... let alone some of the columns which appear in this volume. Gone are the days of campfire smoke, great glasses of Glenlivet and bagpipe music, but the memories live on.

Thanks, no less, to my other favorite editor Julie Witthoeft, whose support in all my ventures—no matter how outrageous—has never been forgotten.

Finally, I have to thank you, the reader. If you made it this far then you must have found something worth reading. Thank-you for giving me the chance to do what brings me the most joy ... making people laugh.

For those of you who didn't laugh, all I can say is: “NO REFUNDS!”

Born on the back of a donkey headed to Cheboygan, MI, in 1975, Benjamin J. Gohs has lived in over a dozen Michigan towns and worked in over a dozen fields, starting with his first job as lead tormenter to his five brothers and sister.

When he was quite young, Gohs developed a taste for strangeness and a penchant for minor misadventures.

Before becoming a member of the lame-stream, drive-by, liberal-conservative evil media in 2003, Gohs worked as a

dog training attack dummy, dog poop picker-upper, landscaper, babysitter, house painter, cook, blackjack dealer, roulette mucker, truck driver, welder, mechanic, tow truck driver, waiter, vacuum cleaner salesman, telemarketer, car salesman and stay-at-home dad (that last one is code for “unemployed.”)

Despite being devastated that his first poem did not win a school-wide competition in 1985, Gohs continued to jot stories, ideas and rhymes while being an avid reader of Science Fiction, comics, mysteries, horror stories and shirt-rippers ... and drawing waaaaay too many pictures of naked women with snakes.

A lifelong scribbler of poems, short stories and essays, Gohs quit his job as the head cook and manager of a family restaurant in Northern Michigan in August 2003 with the goal of becoming a professional writer within a year. When he finally realized his chances of earning a living as a poet were somewhere between “Ha!” and “Go kill yourself!” he decided to look into news writing.

By December of that year he had landed a freelance gig with the local newspaper—operated at the time by a kilt-wearing, scotch-swilling Mexi-



can gentleman with serious flatulence.

Soon, Gohs was writing for three newspapers spanning from Petoskey to Charlevoix to Traverse City—including publication of a civil liberties column in the L.A. Journal—and writing advertising copy on the side for several local businesses.

In May of 2005, Gohs was hired as a full-time reporter for the Charlevoix Courier Newspaper, a subsidiary of the Petoskey News-Review. Gohs' articles continued to be published in the Courier, News-Review and occasionally in the Gaylord Herald Times (also owned by the News-Review).

It was in 2005 that Gohs wrote his first humor column. When the townspeople did not break down his door with torches, his editor suggested he continue writing columns.

Some readers compared him to Dave Barry—which was pretty cool—and asked for more. (Some readers compared him to Mussolini, and begged him to stop.)

Pretty soon, Gohs was writing columns centered on humor, politics and civil liberties on a nearly weekly basis.

In April 2008, Gohs was named Editor of the Charlevoix Courier Newspaper ... and that's when the torches came out.

Over the years, Gohs tallied several awards, presumably for crudest use of the English language and most hate mail received in a single month.

Gohs left the Courier in spring of 2010 to publish a men's humor magazine and operate the Boyne City Gazette newspaper as co-founder and news editor full-time.

During his tenure as editor of the Boyne City Gazette, Gohs has earned nearly a dozen awards for his news writing, page design, humor and opinion. (Apparently there are some sick individuals out there and they enjoy judging newspaper contests.)

In February of 2007, Gohs began weekly appearances on Northern Michigan's most popular AM Radio Talk Show "The Vic McCarty Show." Each Thursday, between 10 a.m. and Noon, Gohs has brought his signature brand of humor and his biting commentary on social issues to the show.

Gohs and his very, very, very patient wife, a school teacher and college professor, live in rural Charlevoix County with their three spoiled dogs: Sam, Tolstoy (you can blame the wife for the snooty name) and Maisy.

Gohs and his wife, who have been married 19 years, also have two children in college—finally!