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Life On Santa Claus Lane
by Darrell Bain
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Humor

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Chapter One

JINGLE BELLS AND SHOTGUN SHELLS

It took a lot of real hard thought before I decided to make a book out of these stories that I have been writing for our family and for our friends, both live and on the internet. The narratives describe a lot of odd, funny and occasionally downright hilarious things, which have happened to Betty and I since we started a Christmas tree farm. One of the funniest was when the Postal Service notified us that the private road we and some of our kids live on was now officially named Santa Claus Lane. Our daughter-in-law Linda failed to see the humor of it, and figuratively demolished their mailbox with a shotgun. She obtained a Post Office Box number. "I'll be derved if I'm going to be laughed at every time someone asks for our address," she declared, as if every one of the 1,812 inhabitants of our little village didn't already know where she lived.

Linda isn't the person I'm concerned about, though. My wife Betty has never seen a lot of these stories, and I'm sort of careless about going off and leaving the computer screen lit with whatever I happen to be working on at the time. She's bound to catch one here and there. And what if this book gets published like the other one I wrote, Tales From A Texas Christmas Tree Farm? I really don't think she would object to most of these little moralistic tales, but you never really know, do you?

"No you don't," My wife said from behind my back.

Ulp. "What are you doing here?" I asked. Betty was standing behind my chair, reading over my shoulder. I don't know how she got there so suddenly, but women can be sneakier than cats when you don't want them to be.

"I live here, remember?"

"Of course I remember," I said. "In fact, I can remember the first night when we moved into this place. We christened the sofa because the bed wasn't put together yet."

That was the wrong thing to say. "You're not going to write about our sex life are you?"

I grinned to myself, remembering a funny episode. "There's nothing wrong with our sex life," I said.

"There will be if you start writing about it," Betty responded. "Besides, it wasn't a sofa; it was a lounge chair out in the garage. Our furniture hadn't even gotten here yet. And the mosquitoes were terrible."

"I don't remember any mosquitoes."

"That's because you were drunk, and they wouldn't bite you." That's a canard. I hadn't had more than a dozen or two beers the entire day, and all of them were well deserved. After all, we were taking a momentous step then, moving from a townhouse in the city to a farmhouse in the country.

"Can I write about that?" I asked.

"You can write about anything, so long as it's truthful and it's not about sex," my wonderful wife informed me. So right then I made a vow: I will not write about our sex life. And I will at all times be truthful. I wrote both vows down right then, and looked over my shoulder at my spouse. She raised a cynical eyebrow, tousled my thinning hair and walked over and sat down at the sewing machine, crossing her shapely legs. I shifted my gaze before I got carried away and started writing about sex.

The sewing machine, computer, my desk and a million or so books all live in peace and harmony in the garage we converted into an office. In fact, I bet Betty doesn't remember, but her sewing machine is sitting in the exact same spot where the sofa -- or lounge chair, maybe -- sat, lo these many years ago on a certain memorable night. But I promised not to write about that.

We have lived, Betty and I, on this East Texas farm for over twenty years now, along with a succession of various sized dogs, and an interminable and ever-changing number of cats, kittens and chickens. We had cows at first, but I found out pretty quick that I wasn't a real cowboy. We sold the cows and began growing Christmas trees. There isn't much money in them, but at least they don't break through fences and get out in the road. Besides, for most of those twenty years, Betty worked full time away from the farm, and resented having to herd unruly cows back through the gate in her business suit and high heels every few days as she arrived home from Houston, while I hollered instructions from the safety of the pickup truck. I'm scared of cows.

Chapter Two

GEORGE OF THE CHICKENS

After I cleverly talked Betty into letting me quit work and just grow Christmas trees, she worked for ten more years before finally retiring. Now she grows tomatoes and chickens. And I tend to Betty's chickens. Reluctantly. It's not a job for the faint-hearted. Even Tarzan might have second thoughts before tackling them every day. And after sundown...

It was a dark and stormy night. All right, it wasn't stormy, but it was cloudy and pitch dark. Remember that dark. It sets the stage for what went on when I went to let the chickens out of the henhouse before daylight, wanting to get in some mowing before it got so hot. As usual, when I go out early like that, I carry a flashlight, partly to light my way but mostly to keep me from getting lost. My sense of direction is so erratic that I have trouble navigating back to my easy chair after dinner, let alone finding my way around a fifty acre Christmas tree farm. Or a chicken yard on a moonless night.

This excursion into the darkness of our yard just happened to occur the morning after Betty and I had watched "George Of The Jungle" together the previous night. She laughed like crazy every time that klutzy Ape-man went swinging along on his vine, colliding with the trunk of a tree, or landing in the jaws of a lion. That should have warned me, because first, Betty rarely watches movies; secondly, when she does, she tends to think they should apply to real life (I hope she never watches Titanic) and thirdly, she knows for a fact that I have absolutely no sense of direction.

The stage isn't quite set yet. I have to tell you about fences. When we first moved out to the farm, I built so many fences (including large, chicken-yard fences) that I can hardly bear to look at a fence post any more,

and once my son-in-law borrowed my post hole diggers, I purposely never asked for them back, fearing Betty might find a way to put me on the other end of them again. However, in order to keep chickens from getting out and playing with possums, coons, cats, and other assorted varmints, they require a fence. A fence requires fence posts. Fence posts occasionally get wobbly, rotten or have things fall on them. There was this fence post in the chicken yard, which had rotted at the bottom, and the fence was about to fall over. As a temporary expedient I nailed a two by four from the top of the fence post over to a handy tree inside the chicken yard about five feet away, and it worked fine to hold up the post. I think that temporary expedient occurred about five years ago, but never mind. In fact, I believe there are several other temporary expedients on the fence around the yard, but never mind that, either. Just keep George of the Jungle, the darkness and that two by four in mind.

Now there I went, flashlight in hand, off to let the chickens out into the chicken yard. I had opened and closed the gate, and was headed towards the chicken house when I heard a noise near where they were penned up in their house. I immediately thought it was a varmint, exploring ways to get inside and have a chicken for breakfast. Quick as a bunny rabbit, and with just about as much sense, I dashed forward, flashlight grasped like a club. This technique might have worked to beat the varmint to death, but did nothing to light my way.

The next thing I knew, there came this terrific blow to my head, centering on the tip of my nose and upper lip. I guess I needn't explain what happens when a head meets a fixed object while the legs keep on pumping. That two by four didn't move an inch. I landed flat on my back, and the flashlight went up into the air, end over end, and managed to come back down and land directly on my injured nose and lip. It's probably a good thing the flashlight landed on something soft, like my head, because it didn't break, and I was able to find it. Otherwise, I would probably have spent the next 45 minutes until daylight crawling around in chickenstuff, wishing I had brought my gun so I could shoot what I now thought was a chicken thief who had whopped me in the face while I wasn't looking.

Using the flashlight to locate the entrance to the yard, I crawled that way, and used the gate to pull myself to my feet, and thence stagger back to the house (our house, not the chicken-house). I was still sort of dazed when I wobbled through the back door and into the house. I think I must have looked somewhat like I did the last time I got drunk and fell off the porch into the azalea bushes, because Betty immediately asked what on earth I had been doing.

"George," I mumbled.

"George?" Betty asked.

"Jungle," I said. "Vine. Tree."

"You're not making sense," Betty said, coming toward me and sniffing suspiciously, as if I might have started hitting the booze early in the day.

I shook some cobwebs loose, avoided stepping on a kitten by tripping over the coffee table, and crawled over to my easy chair. Once what senses were still functional returned, I told Betty what had happened. She was very sympathetic.

"You didn't break that \$3,000.00 upper bridge, did you?" She asked.

"No, but by node hurds."

"You smell like chickenstuff," Betty said. "Go take a shower."

"By nip hurds, too," I whined, pleading for sympathy.

"It's got chickenstuff on it, too. As soon as you finish your shower, go fix that fence post. And don't ask me to watch a movie with you again.

George of the Jungle, my foot. Your medical insurance is high enough as is."

Suddenly I was tired of being ordered around. "Me Tarzan. You Jane," I proclaimed.

"Me Jane. You George," Betty said. "Go."

I went to take a shower.

Chapter Three

DADDY DOG AND BABY DOG

Biscuit, the Dachshund, replaced Tiger, the Chihuahua when Tiger quietly expired one night. We were bereaved, but eventually decided we needed another little doggie to chase the boogers away from the farm. Now, Tiger had never given us the slightest bit of trouble when housebreaking him. A few timely swats, and he quickly learned that he had almost a hundred acres of grass, weeds and trees to do his business in. Biscuit, on the other hand, was fascinated with carpets. He was so fascinated, in fact, that he very nearly became an outside dog instead of an inside/outside/inside/outside/inside ... dog.

Housebreaking a puppy is hard work. It might be easier if there was just one proven theory of how to go about the business, but there isn't. To make the matter worse, there is no such thing as doggy diapers that you can buy at Wal-Mart. They do sell paper towels, however, so go ahead and buy a bunch if you have a puppy like Biscuit. You'll need them -- unless you discover the Daddy Dog theory of housebreaking, like I did.

Our puppy is named Biscuit, for reasons you might guess. You would be wrong, but never mind. He should have been named either Dopey or Sleepy or Hoover. He vacuums up everything on the floor - shoes, towels and carpet included -- right along with his regular food, kitty food and any stray bits of people food he finds on the floor or is able to mooch from us. When Biscuit isn't eating, he's sleeping. During the day, of course. He has about got us trained to sleep during the day, because he sure isn't prepared to let us sleep at night. He either has to go outside, or if he doesn't, he pretends he does, so he can get us out of bed. It used to be that if we didn't get up, he would pee or poop on the carpet. In fact, it used to be that he would pee or poop on the carpet whether we got up or not. We eventually came to believe that peeing or pooping on the carpet was his way of saying thanks for all the good food and water we give him. Or maybe that's why we should have named him Dopey. He's not all that bright, and seemed to be unable to distinguish carpets from grass. This eventually led Betty and I, from utter frustration, to read up on housebreaking puppies.

The first theory of housebreaking is to rub the puppy's nose in his mess, swat him with a rolled up newspaper and put him outside. That's what we had been practicing. Swatting him relieved our tension, and taught Biscuit all the places on the carpet where he would get swatted if he messed there. Our house has lots of carpet, though. I calculated it would be sometime around the turn of the 22nd century before he discovered all the places on the carpet where he stood to get swatted and put outside if he messed there. Neither of us figured to live that long, so we turned to the second theory: gentleness.

Gentleness. Swatting does no good. Instead, you are supposed to take the little doggie outside umpty-leven times a day and umpty-umpty leven times a night, and stay with him until he pees or poops, preferably both. A good theory, but like kids, puppies should be given only to young people; they're the only ones with the stamina to keep up with them. Within a couple of days we were bleary eyed, exasperated and had forgotten every word in the English language except "Good Doggie" and "Bad Doggie". In fact, that's what we said to each other when we went to bed for an hour or so before having to get up with Biscuit.

"Good Doggie," I would say, hoping for a little hanky-panky to relieve the tension.

"Bad Doggie," Betty would answer, meaning she was too tired from going in and out with Biscuit for anything resembling hanky-panky.

All this gentleness went for naught. Biscuit still peed and pooped on the carpet every time we weren't looking. I guess he wasn't that dumb -- he did learn not to do it on the carpet when we might catch him in the act. I decided there was obviously a need for more research.

Our vet, along with his zillion dollar fee for services, kindly presented us with a copy of the section of a doggie book, which explained

about housebreaking puppies. Now I don't know who wrote that book, but I suspect he has some werewolf in his ancestry. The reason for this is his theory. He says that at five or six weeks, puppies start to want to do their business away from their cave. If they are slow to learn, the daddy dog growls at them when they dirty the cave floor. Therefore, this expert explained, the best way to housebreak your puppy is to GROWL at him when he makes messes in the house, which the puppy thinks is his cave. He also thinks mommy and daddy are just big dogs without hair. Well, heck, it sounded reasonable to me, even if a little unorthodox. It could have sounded like Einstein's theory of the universe so far as I was concerned. I was ready to try anything by this time.

Remember though, we live on a farm, way out in the East Texas countryside. And we have well-armed neighbors with itchy trigger fingers who just love to shoot wolves and other varmints who make noises at night. I decided to put off the Daddy Dog growling bit until the next morning, just to be on the safe side.

The big moment came shortly before Betty was due to leave for a baby shower. Biscuit pooped on the carpet when he thought I wasn't looking. Immediately, I ran towards Biscuit, letting out a loud, terrible-sounding, ferocious GROWL. Unfortunately I had my eye on Biscuit rather than watching where my feet were going. I tripped over the coffee table, landing on all fours, right at the same time that Biscuit jumped three feet straight up into the air in fearsome surprise. _Where in hell did that Daddy Dog come from?_ He must have wondered. Betty jumped four feet. She wasn't expecting it, either. I growled again almost immediately, in pain from my barked shin this time, and watched events unfold from my hands and knees on the floor where I had fallen. Biscuit yelped like a swarm of wasps was after him, obviously wondering whether he could make it outside before Daddy Dog quit growling and started biting. Betty began laughing hysterically as she opened the door for Biscuit to run, with all the puppy speed his short little legs could manage, out toward the great carpetless outdoors. I growled at Betty for laughing at me. Biscuit, thinking Daddy Dog was just behind him, ran faster, off the porch and into the grass where he immediately began peeing and pooping, and didn't stop for ten minutes.

Betty didn't stop laughing until she left for the baby shower. Exhausted from all that Daddy Dog business, I retired to the couch, leaving Biscuit outside for the time being. In fact, he was so scared that he didn't come back to the door until Betty returned.

That afternoon, Betty woke me -- I mean, shook me -- on the couch where I was watching a football game through closed eyelids (this is something only men can do). She couldn't wait to tell me what a hit I was at the baby shower when she told the story about her husband who growled at puppies while down on his hands and knees, then growled at her, too. I didn't see what was so funny. I could just picture that story spreading and growing, until half of Houston would not only believe that I walk on all fours, but also howl at the moon and eat dog food from a bowl on the floor. If I ever hear that I pee on the carpet, my wife is really going to be in trouble.

The upshot is, I think the Daddy Dog theory works. Biscuit almost immediately stopped making messes on the carpet. Now all I have to worry about is curious crowds coming out during the Christmas season while I'm trying to sell trees. They will want to get a look at the man who turned into a dog. Well, shucks, if it increases business, I'll go along with it. The customers better not complain about our prices, though. I'll growl at them.

Chapter Four

A SIMPLE ERRAND

I've heard that one of the accompaniments of advancing age is failing memory. That may be true, but I can still keep two or three items on my mind when I'm out shopping, without having to write them down. That tablet and pen which is kept on the kitchen counter by our car keys is for Betty to use when she needs to remember something. I don't need it myself. I have a good memory.

Unless I get distracted or confused, of course, which does happen.

One day Betty sent me to the store for bread. Just before I left she said, "Wait, there's one more thing. I need some single fold white bias tape. You can find it in the notions department."

"Okay," I replied.

"Let me write it down for you," Betty said, picking up the pen and notepad.

"I can remember", I said.

"Okay, tell me what I want."

"Sure. Bread and uh, single wrapped bright buck tape."

"No! Single fold white bias tape!"

"Single fold bright bias tape," I repeated.

"White."

"Right."

"And bread."

"Oh, yeah. Bread."

"What else?"

"Single fold, uh, white bias tape," I said proudly.

"Bias."

"Got it," I said, and hurried out the door before my memory was further impugned. However, I decided to keep repeating to myself what I was going for, just to be on the safe side. _Bread and single fold white bias tape in the notions department. Bread and single hole white bias tape in the notions department. Bread and winged whole bright bias grapes in the produce department. Bread and single sole light taped grapes in the produce department. Bread and double bright taped dates in the fruit department._

I got inside the store. I looked and looked, but I couldn't find that kind of dates. I decided to ask one of the nice ladies at the cash register, "Where can I find some double breaded right wing tight shaped dates. They aren't in with the fruits."

The nice lady looked at me like I was a fruit, and didn't answer. Just see if I ever go through her register again.

I asked one of the stock boys. "My wife wants some twice threaded lite sided taped baits. Do you know where I can find them?"

"We've got some double breaded frozen fish, but I guess that's not what you're looking for, is it?" He said.

"No, I need troubled right handed late drapes," I repeated.

The stock boy also looked at me like I was a fruit that had escaped from the produce department. The store obviously didn't have skates or drapes, either one.

Back home, as soon as I walked in the door Betty asked, "Where's my tape?"

I swear it sounded just like she said tape instead of grape, but I knew what I remembered. "They were out," I said.

Betty sighed. "Did you get the bread?"

Oh, shucks. I had got so involved in trying to find those duct taped skates that I had forgotten the bread! I spread my empty hands apologetically, even though it wasn't my fault.

Betty sighed again. "Never send a man to do a woman's job," she complained.

I still haven't the slightest idea what she meant by that.

Like I said, I still have my memory; I don't care what Betty says -- it's just that it gets confused on rare occasions. For instance, yesterday I took Biscuit our little dachshund with me in the truck to go mail some letters. I pulled up by the mailbox, rolled down the window, opened the lid, and came to my senses only after stuffing the dog halfway into the mailbox. I looked for my boots yesterday after my nap. When I found them sitting by the dogwood bowl, I immediately went to the closet and let Biscuit out. Sometimes I forget the name of things, and have to describe them indirectly for Betty to know what I'm referring to. Like, those sheets of white stuff you type letters

on, or that thing that rings and you have to answer it. Of course, it could be worse. I still know my name. It's Darrell something or other.

Chapter Five

CHEERS

It's a good thing we don't have close neighbors. I already know I'm a little eccentric, but there's no sense having the world think I've gone completely around the bend, which is what would happen if anyone lived within screaming distance.

Here's why: Take one person (me) who has a puppy still being trained in the intricacies of inside living. That means lots of yelling at him with shouts of "no!" as he tugs the tablecloth and dishes onto the floor, or decides that the dust ruffles on our bed belong in the bathroom. When I shout, he cringes, knowing he's been bad. Or, on the other hand, when he refrains from slobbering my face while he's in my lap, I compliment him by saying, "Good Doggie", or when he's particularly well behaved I raise my voice and say "Good Doggie Biscuit!".

Now, fast forward to the football season. I like to watch football games from my big easy chair or perhaps from the couch if I've had a hard morning telling Betty how to mow the lawn. In either case, Biscuit has decided that he likes to see the games, too, ensconced in my lap or perched on my chest, depending on whether we're using the couch or the chair. Now, I have to confess, sometimes I get really vocal when there's a little excitement on the gridiron. The first time I saw a great play this last season, I was sitting in the easy chair with Biscuit in my lap, alertly following the action. Immediately, I yelled and hollered and screamed as if Roger Staubach was still playing and had tossed one of those famous Hail Marys -- and then I saw poor Biscuit clawing at the door trying to get outside. He thought he must have done something really terrible the way I was yelling. Poor doggie. I rescued him from the hole he was gnawing in the door, and settled back down. After that I tried to keep my voice down. No way. I mean it's a football game, right? Not tennis or badminton or Kasparov pondering his next chess move. If it's football, I've got to yell. And every time I did, Biscuit cowered and trembled, wondering what in heck he had done that was bad enough to make me holler like a fundamentalist preacher at a country revival.

Now what was I supposed to do? It was too cold to put him out for more than a few minutes. He would scratch the paneling if I tried locking up him up in another room. He didn't believe my reassurances that he was being good, not after shouting and screaming and pounding the arm of the chair only an inch or so from his cringing little body, especially not when I would holler again every few minutes. Biscuit was getting paranoid, and I was getting frustrated. Finally I hit on a solution, deciding that it really didn't matter what I said, shouted, yelled or screamed in order to vent my feelings.

And that's why I don't want nearby neighbors around during football games. They would think I was crazy, hearing me yell "Good Doggie! Good Doggie!" As my team's star receiver hauls in a pass, or "Good Doggie! Good Doggie Biscuit!" when the running back plunges into the end zone for a touchdown. And since we don't have any close neighbors, the solution worked great.

Well, almost. After three hours of hearing me yell about how good he is, Biscuit doesn't think he can do anything wrong for two or three days afterward. I really have to guard my socks, telephone cords and anything else remotely chewable.

Chapter Six

COUCH TESTING

Living on a farm keeps a man really busy. I must work at least two or three hours every morning, unless I need to take a few days off to rest up from my household chores of taking out the trash and keeping my desk tidy. Sometimes Betty claims I don't do enough around the house, but I figure

braving that chicken yard every day counts for a lot. She doesn't quite see it that way, and is constantly trying to prove that I'm lazy. Whenever she says something to that effect, I remind her that for all of the ten years after I quit my job and began growing Christmas trees, I have unfailingly sacrificed my time and effort, and made a special trip to the bank twice a month to deposit her paycheck. And for the last two years, I have gone once a month to put her retirement checks in the bank. I'm not the least bit lazy, no matter what anyone says.

Betty can be a sneaky devil when she's trying to prove a point. One day she took a picture of me with my eyes closed, stretched out on the couch with the puppy lying on top of my chest, with his eyes closed, too. Later that day she showed her daughter Pat that picture, using it as proof to back up her assertion that men are generally useless around the house.

When she showed it to me, I said that the picture plainly showed I was working my tail off tending to the dog, and not only guarding the couch to make sure no crooks came in and stole it, but testing all three cushions at once to make certain they were okay to use in case we had some sudden guests who wanted to sit on them. And when she said the dog looked more alert than I did, I said that there are lots of things men can do with their eyes closed -- like watch football games, and guard couches, and protect the home from burglars -- and that she just didn't understand what real work is. Fortunately Rob, our son-in-law, was present, and he supported my viewpoint whole-heartedly. In fact, he said that if it weren't for men, couches would never have been invented, and then where would women be when they wanted to rearrange living room furniture?

Chapter Seven

THE FABULOUS DESK

It is supposed to be a truism that women love furniture. They spend inordinate amounts of time dusting it, vacuuming it, moving it around, shooing dogs, cats and husbands off of it, and dreaming up excuses for going out and buying it. We own a two thousand square foot house, which would probably sell for a penny or two. We also own enough furniture to furnish a four thousand square foot house, all of which would probably sell for a hundred dollars or so, according to Betty. She thinks any piece of furniture more than two weeks old needs to be either re-furbished or replaced. We have this set of plain old ordinary chairs, which she likes so much that she refuses to part with them. I think they cost maybe fifty dollars apiece back in the days when milk was still delivered to your doorstep, and movies cost a quarter for a double feature. Since Betty and I have been married, those two chairs have been re-upholstered more times than I've quit smoking -- at three hundred bucks a pop. I once calculated that we could have retired in comfort back in 1984, was it not for the money spent on those two chairs.

I bought a piece of furniture once. Several years ago, while Betty was still working full time, she was always bringing home paperwork. Time sheets. Mileage reports. Phone logs. Notes. Reports to be done. Procedure manuals to be revised. Pencil counts. Employee picnic budgets. Wastepaper recycling studies. Cryptic notes which she wrote, and later on, couldn't decipher. Budget studies no one but her ever looked at, and so forth. Most evenings we couldn't eat at the kitchen table because of piled up paperwork. Shucks, one day she spread it out on the bed, and we had to sleep on the couches. Christmas came along, and I had a brilliant idea. Why not get Betty a desk? And a chair? And a lamp? And all the other stuff that goes with a desk? I began shopping in August, and spent many hours looking for just the right desk, being careful to measure to be certain it would fit into a special niche I surreptitiously reserved for her in the office. Finally, I settled on a real prize: a beautiful solid oak job, polished to a high gloss, with drawers and niches and a big, wide, long top spacious enough to play table tennis on. It cost almost a thousand dollars plus delivery charges. I bought a matching lamp with a built in clock so she would always know what time it was while

working, and a plush leather easy chair to make her comfortable while she sorted through all that endless paper which executives have to shuffle in order to be called executives. Next, I let the kids in on the Christmas secret, and induced them to buy all the accessories in gross lots, which any well endowed desk must have to hold its head up in deskdom, such as enameled staplers, calculators accurate to a zillion decimal places and able to sort through powers and sines and quadratic equations in microseconds, never mind that Betty couldn't balance a checkbook even with coaching from Pythagoras, Archimedes and Einstein put together. She got gold and silver plated pen and pencil sets, and embossed index cards, and rag typing paper so soft you could have used it for Kleenex, never mind that she can't type a lick. There were rubber-coated paper clips and personalized note pads and other odds and ends and gadgets that scientists had just invented the last week.

The desk and its truckload of accessories were delivered Christmas morning. Betty was properly appreciative. Man, did I get hugs and kisses! Boy, did she have fun unwrapping all the other stuff (I balked at trying to wrap a desk and chair)! And, lo and behold, I was regaled for hours and hours on how much she appreciated it, and how she was going to get it organized and use the heck out of it as soon as Christmas was over with. I gave myself a pat on the back, and our banker a check for about fifteen hundred dollars, and waited out the next week anxiously, dreaming of eating off the table again, and never seeing our bed piled up with paper until death did us part.

Today, five years later, I can look over my shoulder and see the desk sitting in lonely, unused splendor. Well, not quite unused. Laid out on that expansive work area, I can see a half-empty ream of computer paper, a box of jelly, a hat, a pair of garden nippers, a pocket book and a puddle of kittens. I believe there are some flashlight batteries in one drawer, and a hammer in another. The rest of the drawers are empty. The two hundred dollar lamp has disappeared into the guestroom, and I have no idea where the chair is, unless it's off being refurbished. No feet reside in the niche under the desk, but I can see a puppy curled up in there, pretending it's a cave, content in the knowledge that if he stays there, he will never be disturbed.

Betty still uses the kitchen table for paper work. Anyone want to buy a desk, cheap?

Chapter Eight

CHIMNEYBLEEPS

Some pieces of furniture that I really do like are the Franklin stoves and the fireplace -- if you consider them furniture. I do, because - like any other furniture -- you can stub your toe on them, trip over them, break them and perhaps even refurbish them -- but let's not get carried away. We've already covered that subject.

Back when we built this house, the IRS was giving energy credits for not using up oil and other traditional sources of power. If you burned wood to heat your house, instead of oil or coal, the government practically shoveled money into your bank account. Needless to say, that really appealed to us. We built our house with a great big fireplace in the den, a Franklin stove in the office, a Franklin stove in the bedroom, and a little pot-bellied cook stove in the kitchen. For the first few years we actually used all of these except the cook stove -- Betty drew the line there. Lighting the first fire in the fall became sort of a ritual. No matter the date, the first fire marked the first day of "winter". And sometimes the first fire marked other events I would just as soon forget, if Betty would ever let me.

Fireplaces have to be cleaned of soot and creosote buildup in order to prevent chimney fires. There is a special breed of persons who perform this chore, called appropriately enough, Chimneysweeps. We've been using the same one for years. The first time he was here and did the fireplace, he asked, "do you want the flue left open or closed?"

I already had some small experience with crawling into the fireplace during several failed experiments with glass doors our first year on the farm,

and I didn't care to repeat the experience. "Open!" I said emphatically. And that's the way the flue has been set, lo these many years (Betty insists that it is a damper we're talking about, rather than a flue, but I think that if women know so dern much about fires then they ought to be the ones to get up first in the morning and start them, instead of men).

Just a day or so before the chimneysweep came, I had encountered a possum (you may ask about this possum if you haven't heard about it yet -- I may or may not answer truthfully). That contretemps left me too lame to bring in firewood for a while, so that chore fell to Betty. Soon enough, our first real cold snap began. Betty got the wood ready, and I resolved to get a fire going the next morning, lame or not.

The first thing I noticed after getting up and putting the coffee on and going to the kindling bin was that Betty, not used to building fires (or knowing the difference between a flue and a damper), hadn't broken the kindling into small pieces. I rested a piece of kindling on a large piece of firewood, raised my foot and stomped vigorously at the small piece of wood. The kindling snapped with a loud crack! And I let out a loud scream! as pain shot through my side where the possum had caused me to be wounded. My scream scared our two new kittens and the puppy almost out of their wits. The kittens yowled and the puppy howled, then the kittens hissed and the dog yelped, as I stomped and screamed again. That possum had really done a job on me. Even before starting the fire, my side was making me walk crooked. I mean, it really did hurt.

Bringing my kindling inside, I found that with only minimal yelps of pain I could tear up newspaper, and that placing the kindling drew only moderate grunts and groans. The dog thought I was talking to him, and growled and tugged at my trousers. I kicked at him. Wrong foot. Wrong side. I really let out a yell that time, scaring him all the way back to his cave under Betty's desk.

Eventually, everything was in place. I took a pain pill, and struck a match. The paper lit. The kindling lit. The firewood began to smolder. I left, poured some coffee and went to the office. A little while later I smelled smoke. Just a little damp wood, I thought. After all, it was coming a cold rain outside. I went on typing. Pretty soon I really smelled smoke. I looked up and to the side, toward the fireplace at the other end of the house. I couldn't even see it through the haze of smoke. Good Grief, the fire must have got loose! That was all I could think of at the time. I rushed into the smoke, stopping at the kitchen to grab a bowl of water, then continued on to where I knew the fireplace lived. It was still there. A fire was burning merrily. The smoke was pouring into the room, not up the chimney. I threw the bowl of water onto the fire. More smoke boiled out. I rushed for more water. The smoke alarm went off. I ran faster, hugging my side. I screamed. The dog began barking louder and louder, running in circles. I opened the front door to let the smoke out. The kittens and cats rushed toward the opening. The dog chased the cats. My feet got tangled up in swarms of kitten and puppy feet. I tripped, landed on my side, and let out a howl of agony. The pan of water separated itself from my hand, and soared into the air. Water rained down on the dog and me and the cats and Betty, who came rushing out of the bedroom in her nightie just in time to catch the brunt of the water.

Betty began yelling, "The roof is leaking! The house is on fire! The kittens are loose!" I don't know which disaster she thought was the most important.

"It's just the chimney!" I tried to reassure her over a cacophony of the beeping fire alarm, barking dog, hissing cats, groans of pain, and her own incoherent orders for me to do something about the leaky roof, the burning house and/or the escaped kittens. It wasn't a very successful reassurance, considering that I had started several chimney fires over the course of years, being a real enthusiast with fires.

Betty rescued the pets just in time for them to get in my way. I dodged a dog, threw another pan of water on the fire, pulled a cat out of my hair,

and embraced my wife. "Relax," I said, just then realizing what had happened. "The Chimneysweep forgot and left the flue closed."

"What?" Betty said, her voice almost as loud as the fire engine I could hear approaching in the distance. Our nearest neighbor lives a half mile away, but they must have heard all the racket, and called 911.

"The flue!" I yelled.

"You?" She shouted, misunderstanding and not quite believing I had caused all this commotion. Her loud voice added considerably to the commotion.

"Me!" I hollered back at her, taking all the blame, and simultaneously detaching another kitten from its death-grip on my robe.

Later, after thanking the volunteer firemen for their speedy response, and taking the batteries out of the fire alarm to shut the pesky thing up, we began discussing the situation. "At least we know the fire alarm works," I said, trying to salvage something from the disaster.

Betty looked around at the smoke-colored walls, tipped-over tables, and curtains hanging awry, cunningly decorated in a new pattern of fluffed up kittens who still didn't know whether it was safe to come down or not. She picked up her purse.

"Where are you going?" I asked, hoping she planned on changing out of her wet nightie before leaving.

"To Wal-Mart," she announced in no uncertain terms.

"What for?" I asked, sort of steering her toward the bedroom closet where I hoped she could find something decent to wear.

She shivered. "I'm going to buy some blankets to keep us warm. And until you learn the difference between a flue and a damper, don't go near that fireplace again."

Chapter Nine

I HAD A HAMMER

I guess I may as well go ahead and write about that possum, since I've already mentioned it several times. It's not an easy thing to tell about, because, after all these years, a possum finally got the best of me. Well, maybe that wasn't the first one that outwitted me but it was certainly the first one that managed to lay me out. One of these days, after I'm completely healed up, I hope for a return match. Possums are said to be the dumbest animals this side of Wylie Coyote, and I wish my dear wife wouldn't keep comparing me to them. I'm a match for any possum. Usually.

We open for business each year on Thanksgiving Day, giving us four really, really busy days - Thursday through Sunday -- to sell trees, wreaths, gifts -- and food. Four days with an active snack bar leaves a lot of trash. The following Monday morning, I was dragging my tired old body around the shop, cleaning up some of the mess. I started to empty a large, upright garbage can, and leaped back in surprise. There, in the bottom of the can, as content as Sylvester with Tweety Bird feathers hanging from his mouth, lay the biggest, fattest possum I have ever seen. It must have been hanging around every night, gorging on used hot dogs, hamburgers and barbecue, until it forgot where it was and passed out. Or maybe it had just had sex with a fat lady possum, and was spending its time recuperating. Whatever, I didn't want him hanging around, leaving puddles and droppings where customers might step. Business was bad enough already without having customers stepping in possumstuff.

So long, possum. You are going to die, I thought to myself, those being the days when I still went armed for just such emergencies as this. I made a fast draw, intending to do him in with my trusty nine shot revolver. Alas, all my hand came up with was my trusty Swiss army knife that I had substituted for my revolver that weekend to use for cutting twine to tie trees on top of cars.

Now, I will do battle with crooks, wolves, coyotes, kidnappers and possibly even chimneybleeps with my Swiss army knife, but not with a possum the size of a small bear. He woke up when he heard my hand slap my thigh as I

went for what I thought was my gun. He yawned, opening his mouth, and easily baring something on the order of a million long, white sharp-pointed teeth. I think I must have annoyed him by waking him up. He added a deep-throated snarl to the show of teeth. I backed away to think things over. Suddenly, I remembered that I had a big framing hammer in my truck, kept there to drive stakes, hammer reluctant nails and fix reluctant machines by hammering on them until they either started working or devolved into their component parts. I figured if a framing hammer could render the tree-shaking machine into interesting pieces of junk, it must be able to dispatch a possum the same way, even if this one did come in the large, economy size, with teeth bigger than those sported by the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park.

"Wait here," I told the possum. "I'll be right back."

The possum snarled at me. Another look at those teeth made me glad this was a framing hammer I was going to the truck for, rather than a regular old ordinary size hammer. A regular one probably would just bounce off him, I thought.

I picked up the framing hammer, and went back to the trashcan. I peeked cautiously inside. Yep, the monster was still there -- and suddenly I wondered how that big brute had managed to get inside a three and a half-foot tall can without tipping it over. Whatever, I vowed he wasn't going to do it again. Standing well back and gripping the framing hammer with both hands in a good imitation of Mark McGuire coming up to bat, I reached out with one foot and tipped the can over.

That dern possum was heavier than I thought. I really had to put some English on the can to get it to tip over. That, in turn, left me off balance as the possum crawled out to do battle. Nevertheless, brave old former soldier that I am, off balance or not, I reared back and swung, two-handed, with enough power to put one out of the park. The possum moved slightly as my hammer came around in a mighty arc. I tried to compensate, throwing me even more off balance. The hammer missed. I felt a horrible searing pain as all the muscles attached to the right side of my rib cage tore loose. The hammer also came loose and tore a hole through the side of the shop. If muscles could talk, they would have told me, on the spot, that not only was I no Mark McGuire, but the muscles used for swinging an ersatz baseball bat shaped like a framing hammer had gone unused, for these many years, and by golly, they weren't about to start up again.

The pain was so severe that I fell to the ground, writhing like a six-legged pig being attacked by a python. I screamed loud enough to wake the dead from the old Indian burial grounds on a nearby knoll. I clutched my wounded side like a running back protecting the ball as a dozen linebackers were piling him on. I hollered and cried and cussed and beat the ground with my good hand, trying to make the hurt go away. When I was finally able to crawl painfully over to a supporting post of the shop and use it to pull myself upright, I looked around apprehensively. The possum was gone, no doubt home with his family by now, laughing like hell.

Three days later I gradually became able to walk again without asking Betty to hold me up, although I still couldn't bend over or lift anything heavier than a spoon or fork. The worst part was having to be helped to the bathroom -- and resisting the urge to call a divorce lawyer when Betty asked if it hurt when I laughed.

Eventually I recovered, and I'm prepared now to do battle again. With my gun. Upright. At a safe distance. I've learned my lesson. Possums can be dangerous to your health.

Chapter Ten

ARMED AND ALMOST DANGEROUS

There's another possum story I guess I have to tell, too. If I don't, Betty will. There's nothing a wife likes better than to describe her husband's follies, preferably to large audiences of her friends and relatives, those he thinks he has convinced that he is stronger than Superman, smarter than

Einstein, and a better shot than Wild Bill Hickock. And besides, Betty accompanies me to most book signings, and she wouldn't let anyone buy this book without telling on me if I don't include it. So here you are.

Back when we first built our house out here in the country, we located it in a veritable jungle, almost a half-mile from the blacktop road -- and then spent the next hundred years clearing that jungle from around it. As we beat back the wilderness, we ran into so many snakes, mean old boar coons, skunks, bunny rabbits akin to the one which once attacked President Carter and.....possums. Big possums. Little possums. Daddy possums. Mama possums. We must have built our house on the very spot where God placed a possum-creating machine, and then got busy with all those begats, and forgot to turn it off. The possums wandered into our garage, under our cars, into the chicken yard -- where we found they liked chickens and eggs just as much as we do. Given a half second with an open door, they were inside the house like a shot, and if not spotted within the other half of the second would find hiding spaces any kitten would envy.

Eventually, encouraged (mandated) by my wife who thinks possums were dreamed up by aliens and placed on earth for the sole purpose of feasting on her chickens and making her husband look stupid, I declared war on them. War implies firearms, and an old ex-soldier like me surely knew how to handle guns. Thusly, I forthwith armed myself with a nine shot .22 caliber revolver and began carrying it in a handy quick-draw holster. Naturally, the possums immediately disappeared, and nary a one was seen again until the first visit to our new house by my parents.

We were showing mom and dad around the yard (such as it was at the time) one morning with me still packing that nine shot revolver on my hip. Enter a possum. Not just any possum, but a gigantic possum, crawling out of a hole big enough to bury dead horses in. That possum was so big that I suspected it must have been left over from the Pleistocene era, and was just now coming out of hiding. We all saw it at once.

"Get him!" Dad shouted, heading for his car.

"Get him!" Mom screamed, backing up against a big pine tree that was blocking her access to the car.

"Get him!" Betty yelled, running to close the door to the house before that monster got inside.

I drew my trusty nine-shooter, not scared at all now that I was armed. I stepped forward until I was within three feet of the possum, which glanced disinterestedly at me and proceeded to amble away. Well, I wasn't having any of that. I leveled my pistol, took dead aim from four feet away, and fired, bang! bang!

The possum didn't even blink. It continued on its errand, which seemed to consist of walking around in a wide circle that would eventually lead it back to its hole. I stared at my gun in disbelief. I ran up to the possum again, practically touching its body with the barrel of the gun, and fired more shots, bang! bang! bang! I stepped back, expecting that monster possum to fall over dead with three bullets through its heart.

The untouched possum continued strolling along, angling back toward its hole now. I shot at it again, bang! It kept walking.

"What are you firing, blanks?" Dad commented from the safety of the car.

"Don't let it get away!" Mom instructed from the other side of the pine tree where she was hiding.

"If that beast gets in the house I'm seeing a lawyer!" Betty shouted from where she was guarding the door.

I wasn't about to let it get in the house, much less get back into its hole. I ran up to it again, and emptied my gun at it, bang! bang! bang! click. The possum continued on its merry way, untouched. I might as well have been shooting at Casper the Ghost for all the harm I did.

"_WHY DON'T YOU JUST THROW IT AT HIM!_" My ever-loving, ever-supportive wife advised in a voice loud enough to be heard in downtown Houston.

I looked at my empty weapon, and watched in frustration as the possum disappeared back down its hole. Throwing my gun at him didn't seem like such a bad idea at the time. If he hadn't gone back in his hole, I probably would have.

Chapter Eleven

STUMBLING INTO HEAVEN

I knew Betty would never call a lawyer, no matter if I couldn't shoot a possum. We have had too many good times for either of us to ever think of anything like that. Like our first date, for instance, where I bought a six-pack of beer, drove us way out into the country, and instructed her to lay on the hood of the car with me. We then watched a meteor shower and provided a fine meal for the local mosquitoes. Heh, heh. I bet you thought we were going to do something different on the hood of that car, didn't you? Remember, though, I promised not to write about our sex life. I can sort of write around it, though, so long as a dog is involved -- and no, neither of us were having sex with him. In fact, sex was the last thing on our minds when this little episode began.

It was a dark and stormy night. Well, it was dark, anyway. I mean, really dark. Four o'clock in the morning. A moonless night. Completely clouded over. And we live almost a mile from the nearest light source. Way out in the country. Really, really dark after the electricity goes out.

Now, I can't say this for a fact, but I have the feeling that someone from the Electric Co-Op has it in for me, and was watching our bedroom through a telescope just waiting for the proper moment one morning to switch off the electricity -- and our lights. The proper moment came right after I finished up in the bathroom and walked back into the bedroom to begin pulling on my long winter underwear. Ordinarily, I sit down on the edge of the bed to do this, because if I don't, just sure as shootin' I will catch my big toe in the narrow part of one leg of the underwear, and either fall down or stagger around the bedroom like I used to do after having a couple too many before-bed brandies. I was innocent this time, though. The reason I didn't sit on the edge of the bed was that our dog Biscuit was trying to help me get dressed, and I had to stand up to get my drawers away from him. I was holding one leg of the underwear up in the air with one hand, and trying to pull the other leg of it over my own leg, while simultaneously turning in circles to prevent Biscuit from getting a grip on the part I was trying to stick my leg in. At that moment, the lights went out.

Darkness. Utter and complete, so dark that the bottom of a well would have looked like spotlights were shining into it by comparison. For those of you who think they can balance themselves on one leg in the dark while turning in circles, and simultaneously trying to locate where the dog is so you won't trip over him -- well, you just haven't ever tried that trick. I fell flat on my face -- and onto the dog.

Biscuit yelped like he thought I was trying to feed him to the cats. I yelped because I thought I had killed myself. Betty woke up and yelped because she thought a half dozen burglars had broken into the house, and me and Biscuit were fighting for our lives.

"Get 'im, Biscuit!" Betty hollered, certain that our little dog was a match for any number of miscreants.

"No, no, Biscuit! It's me! Your master!" I countered when he began snarling and barking at me for falling on top of him.

Biscuit can see in complete darkness. I know this for a fact, because just as I got back up as far as my hands and knees, Biscuit decided he was ready to play some more, and grabbed the trailing leg of my long-legged drawers. He tugged. I fell. My nose smashed into the carpet. I yelled again.

"Darrell, what are you doing? Are you having a seizure?" Betty shouted into the darkness, forgetting about possible burglars. She sounded as upset as she had that time a skunk got into the kitchen cabinet beneath the sink.

"No, I'm not having a seizure. The lights are out," I said, swiping my

hand around where I couldn't see a thing but where I thought Biscuit might be. He wasn't. The bedpost was. I hit my knuckles and yelped again.

"Would you quit playing with that dog, and either come back to bed, or get out of here and let me sleep?" My helpful wife said, now that she knew what was going on. Or thought she did.

"I told you, the lights are out," I said, rolling over onto my back, then sitting up. Biscuit still thought it was a game, and he could still see in the dark. I couldn't. Biscuit charged, landing square on my chest, and knocking me backwards. He isn't a dumb dog. He knows he isn't supposed to lick me on the face, but he had me sprawled on my back on the carpet, and slurped me a dozen times in three seconds, knowing I couldn't see to fend him off.

"Yahhh! Quit it, you dumb dog," I said, wiping slurp off my face. Biscuit immediately licked me again, right in the mouth. He was having a grand time.

" 'Quit playing with your dog, I said' ", Betty said. It's always my dog when he's doing something she doesn't like.

"If I can find my flashlight, I will," I said.

"Why don't you just turn on the lamp?" Betty asked.

"Because the blankety blank lights are out," I said.

"Oh, is that why you can't turn on the lamp?" Betty asked, with impeccable logic.

Biscuit darted in and slurped my face again before I could answer. I struggled to push him away from my dripping face. He barked joyfully, getting his licks in while the licking was good.

"Honey? Why don't you answer? Is that you or a burglar?"

"It's me, I promise, and if you don't tell your dog to put his tongue back in his mouth, I'm going to amputate it." It's her dog when he's doing something I don't like.

"Don't talk about my doggie like that," my dear wife said from somewhere in the room. It's hard to pinpoint the direction of a voice in total darkness -- or anything else for that matter.

By this time I was on my feet. I took a step in what I thought was the direction of my bedside table where I usually keep a small flashlight. Biscuit was in front of the step. I wasn't going in the right direction anyway because I crashed into the wall when I tripped over the dog again, who still thought I was playing but was now under a death sentence from me and being protected from harm by her.

"@%\$^@" I said.

"Don't talk like that in front of the doggie," Betty said, as if he could understand what I was calling him.

"I'll be glad not to if he'll get the ^@!*(^(% out of the way, and let me find my flashlight," I said.

"It's on your bedside table," Betty told me.

"I know it's on the bedside table," I said. "Where in @%^@^** is the +@\$%\$*@ bedside table?"

"By the bed."

I didn't think I ought to answer that one right at the moment. I began crawling toward Betty's voice.

"What's that noise?" She asked.

"The wall," I said.

"Walls don't make noise."

"They do when I bump them with my head," I complained.

"What are you doing bumping your head into walls?" I heard my wife say. I thought I could detect a snicker in her voice.

"Because I can't catch the dog," I said.

"Here, Biscuit!" Betty called. "Come to mama!"

Sixteen feet thumpety-thumped over my back as Biscuit ran for Betty. He flattened me onto the floor again for the third or fourth time. Then I heard noises sort of like bedsprings. Was Betty getting up? I held still, then slowly rose to my feet.

"I hear you," Betty said.

"Good," I answered. "Pretty soon you'll be able to see me." I felt the comforting edge of the bedside table. Somewhere on it rested my little emergency flashlight. I felt around, ignoring the crash as the lamp tumbled to the floor, followed by the clock, my book, my glasses, the phone and the empty bowl which had held cherry vanilla ice cream only hours before.

Biscuit loves ice cream, even dried up remnants of ice cream. He smelled it. Just as I located the flashlight -- by a process of elimination; nothing else was left on the bedside table -- Biscuit leaped for the bowl, which had miraculously landed right side up, unbroken. His leap occurred between my legs just as I turned the flashlight on for one small microsecond. Its flash illuminated the walking tongue just as I began falling sideways. The flashlight crashed to the floor and went out. Utter darkness enveloped me again, as I lost my footing for what seemed like the tenth or twelfth time.

"Watch out!" I heard a cry as bodies met.

My body met something soft, covered by something silky. It dern sure wasn't the dog. It wasn't a burglar. It must be my wife. She laughed and collapsed backwards. I fell forward on top of her. Fortunately, this time I landed on the edge of the bed. Before the bed decided to try escaping into the darkness, I crawled toward what I thought was its center, moving my hands and legs and neck and head to make sure of where I was, which was where I decided I wanted to be, amidst silky skin, silky stuff momentarily covering the skin, and other nice things revealed when the silky stuff disappeared.

The heck with playing outside.

Who needs lights anyway? The sun will come up eventually.

It did, three hours later.

One night, I'd like to try that again.

Without the dog.

Chapter Twelve

FUN WITH FLOSSING

There are other ways we play inside, without even an insinuation of sex. Well, maybe this particular incident can't be considered real play, but before it was over with we thought it was. To set the stage, I first have to tell you that Betty gets strange illnesses and/or has odd things happen to her. Like, you normally expect a rattlesnake to be on the ground, but the one that bit her was in a bush up as high as her head. And there was the time that her shoulder refused to work, and we claimed 3500 actual miles driving her to Houston and back while she saw a series of doctors, each of which were more baffled than the last. That caused an IRS audit, and when they added the receipts they gave us additional credit -- I had added wrong, and the mileage was actually over 4,000 miles. Or when she got this odd disease which causes big round red spots on the body, and is so rare that she had doctors from all over southeast Texas coming to see her just to say they had observed that disease. Or -- well, you get the idea. Only Betty could come up with dental floss as a culprit.

What happened is that Betty got a piece of floss stuck between a couple of her teeth, which doesn't sound like much of a problem, and really isn't, except that eventually some little thing like that can get to feeling like a hunk of rope is hanging loose in your mouth, and just a shade too short to grasp with your fingers and pull loose. Betty suffered for two days, then finally one night after I was already in bed, with one hand dipping into a bowl of ice cream and the other one swatting away what I believe to be a half dozen kittens trying to help me, Betty came out of the bathroom, already in her nightie and asked where the tweezers were.

Having been married to her for many years, I didn't bother asking what she wanted tweezers for. I figured I would be informed very shortly. "Wait 'til I finish my ice cream, and I'll help you find them," I said, unwilling to leave a bowl of ice cream unguarded with a swarm of kittens loose on the bed.

"You're going to have to do more than just help find them," Betty

informed me. "Here, I'll help with the ice cream so we can get started quicker," she added, and proceeded to do Black Spot and Black Dot, the two kittens, out of the bit of ice cream I had intended to save for them.

"What's the problem?" I asked, as she licked the spoon and set the bowl down for the kittens, which looked up at her indignantly at the lack of ice cream in the bowl.

"I have a piece of floss stuck between two teeth, and I can't get it loose. It's driving me crazy."

I checked my watch. It was nine o'clock. "I don't suppose there's any chance of our dentist coming over tonight and performing this operation, is there?"

"After we sold him a Christmas tree with aphids in it? Ha!"

I located the tweezers in the candy bowl, right where they belonged, then retired to the bathroom, Betty in her nightie, and me in my shorts, standing in front of the big mirror, close to the row of overhead lights but not close enough. I could see her tonsils, but not the piece of floss. I went back and got my glasses and my newly purchased flashlight, being careful to close the door behind me so that Biscuit couldn't come in and assist.

No sooner had I told Betty to open wide, and shined the light down into her mouth with one hand while the other gripped the tweezers in a good imitation of the beak of a starving robin going after the first worm of Spring, than we both glanced into the bathroom mirror, and both of us apparently thought of the same thing at the same time: what on earth would someone think we were doing if they could see us just then?

That thought set us to laughing. We looked even more idiotic with our bellies and other body parts jiggling from our guffaws, and that set us off even worse as we imagined an audience looking on and thinking that they had come upon an observation window of a coed funny farm. That made us laugh all the harder, like positive feedback in a psychology experiment. Between episodes of hilarious chortling, giggles loud enough to bring Biscuit barking at the door, and screams to each other to stop making the other one laugh, it took a half hour for me to finally get a hold on that damn little piece of floss with the tweezers, and relieve Betty of that little piece of string that was hard to see without a magnifying glass, but which she had sworn felt like a hawser in her mouth.

I felt so much like a successful surgeon after it was over that I went and had another bowl of ice cream, conveniently forgetting the way I had seen my belly jiggling while fishing for dental floss.

Some operations just deserve a reward.

Chapter Thirteen

ATTACK OF THE KILLER KITTENS

Besides Biscuit, I have mentioned some other recent additions to our happy home: two tiny kittens, little more than small heaps of buzzes and black fur. After momentous and lengthy deliberation we decided to name them Black Spot and Black Dot.

Now, anyone who has been owned by kittens knows that they are natural born carnivores. They like to stalk and kill their supper, chase and bring down their breakfast, leap on their dinner and torture it fiendishly before eating it. Never mind that when they are kittens all these meals come out of cans and bags. If you don't believe kittens hunt, just leave a bag of Meow Mix in the open. Quicker than a lion after a gazelle, they will have it torn open and the contents slain. We were very careful about leaving food out where the kittens could kill it -- but were a bit careless, otherwise. Their first hunt was a momentous one.

One Christmas a number of years ago, I bought Betty a brown sheepskin for Christmas. Don't ask me why. Like many of my ideas, which ended in grievous error, it seemed like a great thought at the time. What set me off was this picture in a catalog describing a "unique" gift, a natural brown tanned sheepskin. I'm pretty sure I must have been drunk when it arrived, and

again when I wrapped it, because I was still patting myself on the back at how well I had done when I placed the gaily wrapped package in Betty's hands on Christmas morning. It's a good thing it was gaily wrapped, because the unusual contours of a tanned sheepskin caused me to use up a whole roll of scotch tape trying to get the soft springy sheepskin stuffed inside a whole roll of wrapping paper without an odd leg or tail popping out or poking a hole through the paper. Well, maybe it wasn't so gaily wrapped. At least it was concealed, which, when you come to think about it, is the idea behind wrapping presents in the first place.

A big smile gradually lit up Betty's face as she felt the softness of the big package. Well, it was soft in those areas where scotch tape wasn't an inch thick. "I think I know what this is," she said, as she began tearing at the paper. A vision popped into my head of all the times Betty had sort of dragged her feet when we passed a store selling anything resembling a fur coat while we were out Christmas shopping. It began to dawn on me that perhaps a sheepskin wasn't quite what she had in mind. As her smile grew, mine faded.

A few minutes later, Betty finally got the package unwrapped. Her smile disappeared like snow in July. She held up the sheepskin, bits of scotch tape and wrapping paper still stuck to it here and there. "What the hell is this?" She asked.

I blanched. In the glare of day, sober, it looked like she was holding up a giant, oversized, mottled rat skin, streaked with brown dirt and mustard stains. "It's a sheepskin," I muttered.

(Following conversation censored as unsuitable for family-orientated literature).

Whatever else, a Christmas present from your spouse, if it doesn't cause a divorce, cannot be thrown away. For several years that sheepskin was displayed on couches and chairs no one but a guest ever set on, as a sort of decoration, like a bearskin rug, you know? Would that it was that attractive. Every time Betty passed it, I got that LOOK, like, see what my stupid husband did?

I really think I had the garage converted into an office just so I could get that sheepskin out of the regular part of the house. When the conversion was complete, I moved the sheepskin to the back of a couch, sort of half-hidden in a corner of the office. Eventually, Biscuit found it and made friends with the poor thing. He pulled it down to the seat of the couch, and used it to snuggle up on during the winter. Other than a flea or two, it didn't hurt it a bit. And come summer, it was returned to the back of the couch.

Now, enter Black Spot and Black Dot, the new kittens. Soon after entering the office for the first time, they found the couch. First one, then the other jumped upon it. Almost immediately, they spied a giant brown-streaked furry animal resting on the back of the couch. Black Spot, the bravest, approached first, with Black Dot following.

"Hello," Sheepskin said. It might not look like much, but it had always been a friendly thing.

"Grrrr," Black Spot growled. He knew prey when he saw it.

"Phhtt," Black Dot hissed, ready to pounce. Neither one of them was having any of this friendliness from anything that big and furry -- and which might be good to eat.

Black Spot crouched, tail twitching, then leaped, catching Sheepskin squarely in its mid-section with his claws. He hung entangled with Sheepskin for a second on the back of the couch, then tumbled backward, bringing Sheepskin down on top of him in full battle. Black Spot was on his back, threshing with all four feet to keep Sheepskin from smothering him. Sheepskin thought he was winning the battle, but then Black Dot, as sneaky as a divorce lawyer, attacked from the top, going after the moving bumps in Sheepskin that Black Spot was making from his struggle beneath the no longer friendly animal.

Attacked from top and bottom, Sheepskin tried to get away. It leaped to the floor dragging both kittens with it, but this time both of them landed on

top. Sheepskin was in dire trouble as both kittens attacked ferociously, snarling and clawing. Sheepskin tried to make a getaway, but only managed to slither a couple of feet before it was smothered in kittens. It fought valiantly, but Black Spot and Black Dot were too much for it. Its struggles grew less and less vigorous, until eventually it stopped moving, having expired from its many wounds. The kittens had already had breakfast and were not very hungry, so having won a momentous battle with a worthy foe, they simply settled down on the carcass of their trophy and rumbled themselves to sleep.

Betty came into the office, and saw that the sheepskin was well and truly dead. The kittens had killed the heck out of it.

"At least someone is getting some use out of it," she remarked.

"Not to worry," I answered without thinking, an attribute that contributed to my frequent courts-martials in the army. "I'll get you a white sheepskin to replace it."

I sure didn't have to worry about making conversation for the next two or three days.

I saw some nice rabbit skins at a shop last week. It's getting close to Betty's birthday. I wonder....

Chapter Fourteen

FOLLOWING ORDERS

There is a reason Black Spot and Black Dot came to live with us this late in life. I think there is something which happens to little old ladies as soon as they begin putting on weight and getting gray hair, which is unexplainable by scientists. When that happens they begin to buy cat books, haunt animal shelters, and read all the classified pet ads in every newspaper published within a hundred miles. In short, their bodies begin demanding a kitten or two to brighten up their home, assist them with the housework, and help send the veterinarian's kids to college. When Betty entered that stage, I knew there was no use fighting it. I didn't even mention the four cats that had already been cycled through the house and were now living outside on the porch, nor the two belonging to Robyn, our granddaughter, which tend to hang around our place in the morning because they have discovered that we feed early. So, after several trips to the animal shelter to make certain she had exactly the type of kittens she wanted, and several other trips to Wal-Mart to purchase kitty litter boxes, collars, dry food, canned food, play toys, scratching posts, hair brushes and a ten year supply of kitty litter, we headed home, several thousand dollars poorer, but the proud possessors of two coal black kittens, just old enough to be learning how to meow instead of mew.

When cats or kittens go to a new home, they immediately establish their dominance. They are the new bosses, and don't waste a bit of time letting the humans know who their new bosses are. As soon as Black Spot and Black Dot were taken out of the box when we arrived home, they began to act like cats.

Black Spot was the real offender. I had no sooner sat down than he crawled up my pants leg, and said, "hey, mister. No loafing on the job. Fix me some chow."

I decided to patronize him this one time. I got back up and filled the food bowl. Black Spot and Black Dot both walked over to it, sniffed and turned up their noses at the cat food on which we had spent \$7.98 a can.

To heck with them, I thought. I lay back down on the couch to take a nap. My eyes were no sooner closed than I felt something walking on my chest. It stopped and began going rrrah-rrrah. I opened my eyes. Black Spot slapped my chin with a paw, claws extended. "Wake up," he said.

"I'm awake," I told him. "What do you want?"

"This is a hold-up. Gimme the dough, or else."

I was amused. "Or else what?"

"Rrrah-rrrah. You hear that?"

"Yeah. You're purring."

"Right. Gimme the dough, or I'll turn up the volume and turn on the

subsonics."

"So?"

"It will paralyze you. Then I will torture you."

I kept silent, but soon began to feel uneasy. The purring intensified in volume. I could feel the subsonics beginning to vibrate in my bones. Maybe he could paralyze me!

"What kind of torture are you planning?" I asked.

"Whisker tickle to your upper lip while you can't move," Black Spot told me, with a fiendish look in his eyes. He stuck out his tongue, and I felt the warm raspish imitation of a soft file tickle my chin. "That's a warning," he said. "The whiskers are worse."

I know when I'm licked. "All right, here's the dough," I declared, pulling some twenties out of my billfold.

Black Spot slapped them to the floor. "What's with that funny green paper? I want the dough, mister. You got 30 seconds."

"But -- " I had sudden visions of being paralyzed while four or five thin whiskers slowly tickled my upper lip until I was driven insane.

"I'm talking about that savory crusty brown stuff that fits around those sausages I smell."

"Oh. You must mean the kalachis Betty is cooking for my breakfast."

"You mean my breakfast. I'll eat the dough first, then the meat."

I told Betty to give the kittens a few kalachis, while I turned on the TV to watch the morning news. She promptly fed them every kalachi she had cooked. Later on, she would offer me a bowl of cereal as a way of telling me how I rated in comparison to new little kittens in the house.

In the meantime, I was just getting to the part of the news where the anchor was telling about some little old ladies who were learning karate as a means of protecting themselves from abusive husbands. I turned it off quickly before Betty got any ideas, because if she gave those kittens my breakfast again, she was going to qualify. I gave the anchor just enough time to finish talking about karate and turned the TV back on. Just then I felt little pinpricks advancing up my leg. It was Black Spot and Black Dot both this time. They used their little claws to hook their way up to my lap where they could command all of my attention.

"Turn off the TV. I want to take a nap," Black Spot ordered.

"Yeah," Black Dot echoed.

"No," I said.

"Rrrah-rrrah."

"No."

"RRRAH-RRRAH," Black Spot insisted.

"Oh, all right. Maybe I'll take one, too."

"No, you won't. We want our ears rubbed while we're napping."

"How long will you nap?"

"A few hours. Now pipe down."

Four hours and a paralyzed hand later, Black Spot and Black Dot left me to use the potty box.

I got up and stretched and was immediately bombarded by bits of kitty litter being sprayed from the box with all the power and distance of McGuire swinging for the fence.

I turned around, being careful to keep my forearm across my eyes. "Hey, take it easy," I yelled.

"I was finished, anyway," Black Spot said. "What's for supper?"

"Is that all you do, sleep and eat?"

"Of course."

"What did we get you for?"

"To help us sleep and eat. Don't get comfortable. Black Dot and I want to be fed by hand."

"I wouldn't think of getting comfortable with you two around," I said. Neither of them answered. Sarcasm is wasted on a cat.

Betty fed Black Dot, and I fed Black Spot their supper, which consisted

of each of our halves of the porterhouse steak we had intended to share with each other. Betty didn't seem to mind a bit that the kittens were getting her steak -- or that at the present rate I would starve to death in a matter of days.

"All right, we're finished now; let's go to bed," Black Spot said, wiping his face with a dainty little paw.

"Great," I agreed. "Now I can get some rest, too." I picked up both kittens and deposited them in the basket we had made up for them. Black Spot quickly used the basket as a stepping-stone to hop up into bed with me, while Black Dot suddenly became interested in the dust bunnies under the bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked Black Spot.

"We're sleeping here," he announced. "You stay awake and make sure we don't get tangled up in the bedclothes."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Is there any chance the bedclothes would strangle you?"

Black Spot didn't answer. Sarcasm is wasted on a cat.

In the meantime, Black Dot had killed all the dust bunnies and reappeared a few feet away from where I was ensconced on my back, with Black Spot kneading his paws in my chest, trying to dig down far enough to get some arterial blood flowing.

"You may as well come to bed, too, Black Dot," I said, trying to entice him closer so maybe Black Spot would play with him instead of my aorta.

"I'm not that kind of cat." Black Dot huffed. "It will take more than words to get me to sleep with you."

"Fine. Go get in your basket, then."

"On the other hand, Betty looks like a good bed partner. But you keep your hands off, hear?"

"Hey, she's my wife. I can put my hands on her if I want to!"

"I said hands off, mister."

"Or what?"

"You see that potty box across the room?"

"Yeah."

"I don't."

"Oh. Have a nice night, please."

"I will. Set your alarm so you can run to the store and get me some liver for breakfast. I don't like that canned food."

"Yes sir," I said. Black Dot didn't answer. Sarcasm is ... oh, never mind.

The next morning I debated about placing an ad in the paper.

Wanted. Good home for two black kittens.

Guaranteed to act like cats.

My imagination began working.

Rrrah-rrrah. Sound of kittens purring.

RRRRRRRRRR. Sound of kittens going down garbage disposal if no home found.

"WHAP!" Sound of little old lady practicing karate on husband.

I turned off my imagination, and accepted the inevitable. We had new owners.

Chapter Fifteen

MEXICO MADNESS

Living on Santa Claus Lane isn't all peaches and roses. Occasionally, we have to go on trips. The last few years, one of our prime journeys has been the long drive to Mexico and back in order to save a little money on the truckloads of medicine we need to keep our aging bodies functional and our pharmacists happy. The last time we went, we drove the 420 miles to the Rio Grande Valley, did our shopping, and drove the 420 miles back -- all in a total of 18 hours. And if we could have done it quicker, we would have, considering what went on there.

We usually stay overnight when we go on these trips, so why were we in

such a hurry to get back? Well, it all started out with us becoming felons at our first gas stop. Actually, we had been felons for four months without realizing it. The safety inspection sticker on the car had expired four months ago, as the man who cleaned our windshield kindly pointed out (yes, Virginia, there still are service stations where they clean windows, check oil, etc. There are seven in fact, in the whole state of Texas and we just lucked onto this one.). Lucked out? I would just as soon not have known. From then on, Betty and I drove with one eye on the road and the other on that expired sticker, which had suddenly grown to a size that covered half the windshield, and was glowing and blinking and calling out to every cop within a thousand miles, "Hey, wait! Wait! I'm expired! Come arrest these miscreants, right now! Hurry! They're getting away!" That expired safety sticker kept up its exhortations to cops the rest of the trip, but it was just the beginning of trouble for us. We started out as law-abiding citizens, and gradually progressed into hardened criminals.

Let's back up a moment. Remember, we were going to Mexico for the sole purpose of buying a bunch of medicine for ourselves, and saving a bunch of money. Well, we never have learned the virtue of keeping our stupid mouths shut, and soon the word got out: Hey, the folks are going to Mexico to buy medicine! We want some, too!

And thus, before we knew it (or before I knew it, anyway), Betty had promised her sisters, kids, in-laws, outlaws, grandkids and relatives I've never even heard of that sure, we'd be glad to bring back a few pills for them. A Few? Their shopping lists looked like the monthly order for a chain of drugstores. They wanted everything from a dozen bottles of aspirin, to a ten-year supply of Premarin, to five kilos of Viagra pills, and it only got worse from there.

Got the picture? Okay, here we go! Damn the safety stickers! On to Mexico! All the way down, Betty didn't have much to say about our medical warehouse of a shopping list, but she must really have been turning it over in her mind, because once we got there, she announced: "There's too much to bring back across the bridge in one load. We'll have to make two trips."

No big problem, I thought, other than sore feet and lower back strain from carrying four huge shopping bags full of thousands of pills - weighing enough to give a donkey back strain -- through town and across the bridge. Twice. No problem at all.

Unknown to us, three hundred million "Winter Texans" had exactly the same idea as us, i.e., get that medicine cheap; tons and tons of it. Before we arrived that year, they had already run a good thing into the ground, and (also unknown to us) the customs inspectors had declared war on anyone bringing back more than a month's supply of anything stronger than cherry flavored cough drops or extra strength Tylenol. In the meantime, we could see people buying up tons of booze and trainloads of cigarettes, causing us to wonder why. Why was simple: Customs wasn't worrying about booze or tobacco this month, they were after the medicine shoppers. We just didn't know it yet.

So there we went, blithely unaware of the trap we were running into. But Betty was already ahead of the customs inspectors. I suspect that beneath that gray hair lurks a latent criminal mind. "Here's what we'll do," she said. "The first trip across and back, we'll wear hats to disguise ourselves while we get our own medicine. The next trip, when we get everyone else's stuff, we'll take the hats off, and they won't know we're the same people."

Well -- I thought that maybe Betty could get away with it since she was wearing that Monica Lewinski-like brown suede bush hat I had gotten her for Christmas as a gag gift, little knowing she was going to wind up using it as a disguise to enter into a life of crime.

But check out my hat: a bright red, BRIGHT red gimme cap with a green Christmas tree on its front. Disguise, indeed! I was already having dark thoughts about dark cells in dark Mexican jails where, if I managed to smuggle my trusty Swiss army knife inside, I might manage to tunnel out and escape in only twenty or thirty years. Just imagine, beginning the life of a career

criminal at my age! I found myself wishing right then for a magic carpet to fly back home on. Too late, though. We were already inside the drug store where Betty was immediately recognized, hat or no hat, as the crazy lady with the meek husband who showed up every year about this time, and spent enough money to balance the federal deficit on medicine, vanilla and leather.

Besides a year's supply of our regular medicine consisting of Betty's Premarin, Bentyl, Lomotil, Zantac, Ampicillin, Phenacetin, Ibuprofen and Gelusil, plus a few quarts of vanilla thrown in for good measure, there was my supply of Naprosyn for my back, and Zantac for my tummy, and Anusol for hemorrhoids, and Lineament for arthritis. There were a few other pounds of this and that, and then there was one more item, a mild narcotic-like analgesic called Tramadol, that somehow the government has failed to classify as a narcotic, and since I have an inordinate number of aches and pains resulting from farming and tripping over kittens, I added a few hundred of those to our list.

Even under normal circumstances, and before the crackdown, of which we were still innocently unaware, we routinely undid the boxes of drugs, and combined as much as we could into fewer boxes to make it look like we weren't carrying so much. Even so, this time we filled four of our huge bags. The helpful pharmacist bagged up all the medicine in several dozen black plastic bags like the blue Wal-Mart bags you see. I asked him why black bags, and he said, "El Customos Diablos Hombres no see."

I looked at Betty, who speaks Spanish. She rattled off some words back and forth with her, then turned to me. "Customs is looking for medicine now. From anyone, and the black bags are so they can't see through them to tell what we have. I sure am glad I told us to wear hats."

I didn't know at this point what the heck black bags of medicine had to do with hats, but my legs were already beginning to shake, and my throat tightened up so that I couldn't say what I really wanted to, like, "Let's ditch this stuff, and make a run for it!"

I probably wouldn't have said it, anyway. The total for our supply of medicine, including my narcotic-like pills (which suddenly began emitting an odor plainly evident to any drug sniffing dog within 20 miles) came to over a thousand bucks, and we had already paid for it.

Betty then put her sneaky criminal mind into gear again, and dragged me across the street to a doohicky place where they sold curios and doohickeys for only five or six times what they're worth, and began buying toy wooden trucks, candlesticks, blankets and other cheap junk; about thirty dollars worth. The reason for that, she told me, is to cleverly put the medicine in the bottom of our great shopping bags and the junk on top, the theory being that El Diablos Customos Inspecteros wouldn't look underneath, which had always worked before. This time it didn't.

The line leading to the bridge across the river snaked into the customs building, and past a big burly fellow with a Pancho Villa mustache, a hogleg of a pistol strapped to his leg, and a gimlet eye that I was already sure had spotted me from ten spots back in the line. I could hear mumbles and what sounded like complaints coming from the vicinity of the Customs desk as we inched forward. Soon I knew what the complaints were: "Declare all medicines!" I heard El Diablo say forcefully.

"Aw, Shucks," I said to myself (or perhaps said something a little stronger. Well, maybe much stronger, but kids might read this one day). "I thought that last time I got thrown in the Slammer for DUI was going to be my last time in jail. Now here I am sixty years old, and about to become a convict." I could feel sweat gathering on my forehead and in my hair, and trickling from beneath the bill of my bright red cap, almost certainly marking me as one of the unfortunates who would be forced to unload their bags for a thorough search. I could feel "Criminal Profile" settling over my body and fitting there like the proverbial glove, the same glove I was beginning to imagine prying into our every orifice while searching for cocaine and heroin and morphine after they found all our other stuff, which certainly wouldn't

require a rocket scientist, considering how many black bags we had filled with medicine. It also suddenly occurred to me that those black bags wrapped securely around square cardboard medicine containers resembled C-4 explosives, too, and I saw a dog up ahead with fangs at least two inches long, and standing chest high to his handler while resting on all fours. My paranoia increased. What if one of those packages did have C-4 in them?

The line moved slowly forward. I looked around, trying to spot the source of the machine gun-like sounds I was hearing, then suddenly realized the noise was being caused by my knees knocking together, supplemented by chattering teeth, a nervous tremor, and a tic in one eye. The perfect fit for a profile of a drug runner.

Betty was in front of me in the line, and I wasn't hiding behind her, no matter how she tells the story. Her turn came, and I held my breath. "Any medicine to declare?" Asked El Diablo Inspectoro.

"Just a little," My wife said

A little? She must have been shouldering 40 or 50 pounds of assorted pills and capsules. I wondered why she didn't sound worried. I wondered how much a Mexican lawyer would cost after we spent a few months in a dungeon, and they finally let us see one. I wondered how she was managing to carry all that weight around, without sweating and puffing and grunting like I was.

El Inspectoro Diablo was probably wondering the same thing. He reached into Betty's bag beneath the wooden trucks and drew out a black package. He tore it open and saw a dozen or two flat containers of Lomotil, a powerful diarrhea medicine available only by prescription in the U.S., as was everything else we were carrying - except Zantac, and even that was in prescription strength.

"Ah!" El Diablo grinned. "Montezuma's revenge!" He said it as if he hoped we had to use up all 400 pills within the next three days. Betty smiled serenely. I grimaced unserenely, my bowels suddenly feeling the need for a dozen or two of those particular pills.

"Is that all the medicine?" El Diablo asked.

"I think so," Betty said in a voice resembling that of a thirteen year old nun, prettily adjusting that crazy hat as if she were Monica Lewinski getting ready to reach for the knee pads. She said this, knowing that she had at least five dozen more packages of medicine wrapped in black bags and concealed beneath the toy wooden trucks. My stomach roiled, making a sound like the growling dog nosing around my legs. How could she do this? Was she crazy? Was I crazy for letting her do it?

"Pass," the inspector smiled, no longer looking like the devil -- for two seconds. Then it was my turn.

The friendly inspector vanished without a trace. El Diablo Inspectoro appeared again. As I watched in astonishment, he grew two feet taller. Hair sprouted from his nose and ears in tangled knots. His teeth became snaggly and sharp pointed. In addition to the hog leg strapped to his waist, a criss-cross of filled ammunition belts materialized on his chest, the same caliber as the submachine gun that was slung and ready for use.

"Any medicine to declare?" His voice rumbled and snarled at me, sounding like an erupting volcano.

"Duh," I said.

"What?" His voice grew deeper. His hand strayed toward the submachine gun.

"Duh," I repeated, hoping I sounded intelligent, but fearing I didn't.

El Diablo grabbed my shopping bags. He fished in the first one, and brought out a black plastic wrapped package of medicine. He grinned like Godzilla eating an office building as he ripped open the wrapping. I felt blood beginning to drain from my body, making me feel faint and woozy. A dozen packs of Betty's Premarin spilled out on the counter. More packs shined brightly from inside the ripped bag. El Diablo Inspectoro stared at me, then burst out in horrible cackling laughter.

Well, heck, I knew I was going to jail but did he have to laugh about

it? I saw Betty waiting impatiently beyond the portal, tapping her foot as if to say, "Quit joking with that nice man, and come on!"

El Diablo cackled again. "Es el hombre! En tiempo es la senora!" He made cupping motions with his hands at chest level, and then I got it. He thought I was buying Premarin to start a sex-change operation! And was laughing about it! I felt blood rush back into my extremities, and knew my face must be as red as a pickled beet.

"Whad' he say?" I heard some tourist two or three spaces back in line asking someone else.

"He said that dude is buying hormones to change him into a woman," the someone else answered, in a voice loud enough to be heard on the other side of the bridge. A gale of laughter swept along the line, interspersed with mutters of "fag", "going to hell" and other politically incorrect epithets, some hardly ever mentioned in polite company.

The customs inspector, now miraculously back to normal size rather than resembling an incipient werewolf, waved me on. I slunk off, cap pulled low and shoulders hunched so no one would think I was puffing out my chest.

Betty joined me. "See?" She said brightly. "I told you it would be easy. Now all we have to do is take off our hats and do it one more time." I have no idea where her unshakable faith in hats came from. I figured as soon as we came back again that that lycanthropic customs inspector would recognize us from a hundred yards away, and have a platoon of soldiers waiting to tie us to a post in the court yard and use us for target practice. I knew better than to argue with a woman who has shopping on her mind, though. Back we went.

We had spent almost a thousand dollars for our own medicine. The list for uncle Joe and sister Sue and cousin Nell and so on ran to about two thousand more dollars, and filled a half-dozen big bags full to the top with only a sprinkling of wooden trucks and Mexican blankets to disguise the goodies. By that time I was shouldering the bags like an army pack, which is what they felt like. My neck was hurting, my feet were hurting, and my brain was hurting, trying to think of a reasonable explanation for carrying enough medicine back across the border to equip a thousand bed VA hospital.

There was an upside, though. By golly, I happened to think, if we somehow manage to make it through this time, then we can call ourselves successful drug-runners, and tell stories of our daring-do to the other inhabitants of the nursing home after we're too old to prosecute. In the meantime, I was beginning to think the idea of discarding our hats for the second smuggling operation was a pretty good idea. The wind was blowing hard, our hair had gotten sweaty under the hats the first run, and now a blustery norther just coming through had blown our old gray locks of hair into tangled masses resembling heaps of spider webs. It had changed our appearance a bit. Also, when we stowed the goodies from our first run, I had popped a migraine pill with codeine and a barbiturate in it, and that was making me feel more optimistic about our criminal careers now.

Nevertheless, I still didn't have a great amount of confidence in our lack of hats to disguise appearance from El Diablo Inspectoro, especially after him pointing me out as a sex-changer just getting started. I patted my side where my trusty Swiss army knife hung, wondering whether to use it to try to fight our way through customs when they tried to arrest us, or stick it down into my boot and use it to tunnel out of the Mexican jail I figured we were going to be thrown into before the day was over.

I hung back and let Betty go first again, not hiding behind her, you understand; it just happened to work out that way. And then we lucked out. It was a different inspector, but still resembled Satan in every characteristic but the pointed tail, and he probably had one of those, but just didn't show it to keep from scaring kids.

"Any medicine?" El Diablo Inspectoro II asked Betty.

"Just a little Premarin," she said, mentioning the 800 tablets she had purchased for her sisters, and not mentioning the 7,000 other odd pills she was carrying.

"Is that all?"

"I think so," Betty said, this time sounding like a seventh grade cheerleader. She brushed at her wind blown hair and smiled prettily.

"Pass," El Diablo said.

"Any medicine to declare?" El Diablo asked me. He grew a foot, and his fingernails turned into claws.

"Duh," I said. Well, it had worked before. Don't kick a winning horse, and all that baloney.

El Diablo Inspectoro squinted his blood shot eyeballs at me, then leaned backwards in furious laughter. As soon as he caught his breath, he shouted to someone inside, my previous accuser, I'm sure. "Hola! El Senor Y Senora es esta aqui orthaves!"

My Tex-Mex interpreted that to mean, "Hey fellows! Our half man-half woman is back again!" I blushed strawberry red this time, and muttered epithets under my breath.

"Pass," the inspector said. He bent a limp wrist at me and laughed again. I slunk off, thinking dark thoughts.

"See?" Betty told me, as we were walking back across the bridge, each of us carrying roughly the poundage of a combat infantryman. "I told you it would be all right if we took off our hats before we made the second run." I failed to see what the hats had done. It seemed to me that making a fool of myself had contributed more to our successful drug-running operation than the hats or lack thereof, but maybe not. Female logic escapes me sometimes. Well, all the time.

We dumped all the medicine in the trunk of the car, then I got up on it and jumped up and down to get it closed, and off we went, heading north, intending to drive a ways, then stop for the night. As soon as I got back into the car, I took one of those dope pills I had bought, just to test it, and make sure they had given me the right thing. On top of the headache pill I had taken before, I began feeling almost like the way I used to after several double rum and cokes -- which, as best as I remember, always got me into more trouble than a dog loose in a butcher shop.

"Ha! They didn't catch us, did they?" I bragged.

Betty laughed. "Heck no. Those hats worked great!"

"I wish I had saved my bush hat from Vietnam," I said. "We could go into business bringing medicine back for folks."

"We're already in that business, in case you haven't noticed," Betty reminded me.

"Right. And those dumb inspectors didn't scare me one bit."

"Me either," Betty agreed.

"What would you have said after telling him 'I think that's all' if he had looked into the other dozen bags?" I asked.

"I would have told him I forgot," she said. "And if that didn't work, I would have batted my eyes at him."

"Me too," I said with a dopey leer.

"Have you been into my Premarin?" Betty asked.

"Ha ha," I laughed. "Dumb inspectors."

"Dumb as a post," Betty agreed.

In the distance we saw a line of orange barrels turning two lanes into one. As we got closer, I could make out the distinctive appearance of a border patrol car. Our joking ceased with the abruptness of a fouled-up laugh tape. We had timed things just right to get caught in a spontaneous search trap. We gulped and promised God not to ever laugh at Customs Inspectors again, while simultaneously watching out for a side road. There were none to be had. A car pulled in behind us, and we couldn't even turn around and run for it. Three cars ahead, we saw the inspectors with their cloven hoofs, some of them using their horns and pitchforks to pry open trunks, while others patted down suspects, and sent about one in three over to a mobile pokey to be confined until a judge could get to them.

I popped another pill, and told God he shouldn't ought to play jokes on

us like that. God answered and said he didn't have anything to do with it because he was out right now in another galaxy, and just observing here, not doing. I asked him if he could come back right quick and make a border patrol car and its occupants disappear for a few minutes. He said, not until you go to church again. I said, I went to church, once. He said, yes, I remember. You were fifteen years old, and you haven't been back since. I quit talking to God, and began talking to Betty.

"Where are the hats?" I asked. Any port in a storm. Heck, maybe they were magic or something.

"They're in the trunk," Betty told me, killing that idea.

I felt for my trusty Swiss army knife again. Maybe if the trooper saw I was armed to the teeth, he wouldn't start anything. I popped another pill; not for courage you understand, but because those El Diablos Inspecteros, cleverly disguised as state troopers, were giving me another headache.

The car in front of us stopped, and the driver held out something in his hand. A bribe? I got a twenty ready, then Betty told me to stop acting like an idiot and get my driver's licensee out. I did. It was ready. And ready. And ready, while sweat, blood and tears poured from my poor, abused body. Betty didn't seem to be worried, even when the new El Diablo pried open the trunk of the car in front of us with his pitchfork, fished inside and held up what looked like a bag of medicine. That poor unfortunate was motioned over to a parking area, where another Diablo in blue pants with a stripe down the legs held a dog on a leash and a short-barreled shotgun in his other hand. I decided that even a Swiss army knife has limits.

Besides, they were busting that guy for one package of medicine, when we had enough in our trunk to open our own drugstore. Those troopers didn't realize they had two real desperadoes just waiting to make a break to Canada, if they would get that cruiser out of the way.

I pulled into the empty slot, window rolled down and driver's license ready.

"Are you U.S. citizens?" He asked.

"Duh," I said intelligently.

"Yes," Betty said.

"What's in your trunk?" He asked, picking his teeth with a Bowie knife that makes my Swiss army gadget look like a lady's fingernail clipper.

"Trunks. I mean trucks," I said.

"Trucks? Did I hear you right?" He shoved his sword back into his boot, and rested a massive, hair-covered hand on his sidearm. It appeared to be a ten-gauge shotgun with the barrel shortened to five inches.

"Yes, sir. Trucks. Toy wooden trucks," I admitted.

He raised a brow. "What do you do with them?"

Betty brushed at her hair and batted her eyes. "He plays with them," she said.

"Huh. This business is going to drive me nuts, yet. Go on, get out of here."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

We drove away, very carefully at the speed limit until we were out of sight. Three times in South Texas that day I had almost ruined my pants, and I didn't think I could stand another encounter. We drove on into the night until we were certain we were safe from El Diablo Inspecteros in all their manifestations, and by that time we were half way home, and decided to just drive on through.

I popped another pill, and got real dreamy like. "You know what?" I said to Betty.

"What, dear? You sound dopey."

"Thanks," I said. "I feel dopey, too."

"What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say I haven't had so much fun since we smuggled that copy of Playboy into Saudi Arabia in our dirty underwear."

"And we didn't even wear hats then, did we?"

"No, but I will from now on. If I ever get my nerve back," I said.

When we got home, Biscuit was so excited to see us coming back early that he promptly peed on our freshly washed carpet.

Things were back to normal.

Chapter Sixteen

ALL THAT STUFF

For all you faithful readers who think I spend most of my time lying around watching my wife work, the following story, which is absolutely true, should prove otherwise.

One day Betty asked me to go to Wal-Mart with her, then after I agreed, cleverly told me that on the way, we needed to drop the car by the garage to be serviced, and would have to take my truck. Well, that didn't seem like a problem. I can drive a truck, and I know the way to Wal-Mart. It wasn't until we got there and had been there for hours and hours that it dawned on me why Betty was so insistent that the car should go to the garage. She had been shopping in the garden section while I was looking at Swiss army knives and adventure books. I could have skipped the books -- I was already in for an adventure.

We came back from Wal-Mart with my little truck straining at the wheels with a top-heavy load of potting soil, pine bark mulch and sheep manure. The last item is what I thought about the whole business, once Betty told me what she was up to. She had decided that she wanted to grow Leyland Cypress, a beautifully different type of Christmas tree just becoming popular, and she wanted to grow them in pots like one of our competitors did, so we wouldn't have to buy them from him for resale. She was also thinking of undercutting the competition by wholesaling them. Her grand musings were only stopped by our arrival back at the farm; otherwise I believe she would have begun thinking in terms of a national market, and selling thousands and thousands of the Leylands. I, on the other hand, am an old fuddy duddy and didn't want to get into the Leyland business at all, thinking we would most likely do a lot of work and spend a lot of money for nothing -- or maybe break even, which is usually how most of our best business enterprises come out.

Here's how the work went. First, I had to shovel mulch and potting soil into a wheelbarrow, then fold in the sheep manure. I thought I had done with shoveling stuff like that when I left the army all those years ago. Betty ignored my complaints and told me to mix the ingredients together, fill the ten thousand seven-gallon containers she had bought, then bury the containers to a third of their depth into the ground in unused portions of our yard.

"What do we do with them after that?" I was foolish enough to ask.

"First we plant baby Leyland Cypress in them, and then you water them every day for five years, and then we can sell them to all our customers at Christmas."

"And what if we don't sell them? What do we do then?"

Betty had an answer ready, of course, just as I had one year when I had the bright idea of growing blueberries for our customers, which is another story, and there are very good reasons I don't like to talk about it. She said, "If we don't sell them, then we have to either let them grow and bring customers to your yard to cut Leyland Cypress trees, or dig them up, and take them to the shop to sell."

I didn't ask when it had gotten to be my yard instead of her yard. I just knew that if, by chance, we did sell them, she would spend the next ten years telling me she told me so, and asking where my initiative went. And I would say I have plenty, it just don't run to growing trees in our front yard, it's more like I'm thinking of how I'm going to make us a million dollars writing this book. And she will look at me the way she used to do every time she passed the old Sheepskin before the kittens killed it.

A century or so after bringing home that pickup-load of sheepstuff and the mulch and potting soil, I finally finished filling those ten thousand seven gallon containers with the mixture Betty had ordained as suitable for

growing Leyland Cypress Christmas trees. In the meantime, she had been reading some more about the proper potted ingredients for growing any kind of trees in pots.

I came inside after finishing shoveling that sheepstuff for the Christmas trees.

"We need some more stuff," Betty announced, looking up from the pages of her magazine.

"Why don't you use some of that chickenstuff I keep stepping in?" I asked hopefully.

"Chickenstuff is for flowers, not trees."

"Well, how about some doggiestuff? We have plenty of that."

"Doggiestuff won't work," Betty said, as if any fool ought to know that much about stuff.

"Well, how about kittystuff? We have plenty of that, too."

"Kitty stuff won't work, either."

"You mean sheepstuff is better than our own doggiestuff and kittystuff?"

"That's right, except this magazine says that steerstuff is even better than sheepstuff."

"Now you want steerstuff?"

"That's what I said."

"This all sounds like bullstuff to me," I said.

"It's plain you don't know anything about stuff," she said.

"Well, it's a good thing I love you, or I wouldn't put up with this stuff," I proclaimed.

"I wouldn't ask anyone else to shovel stuff for me," Betty said, with a lovable look on her face.

No one else would do it, I thought, but didn't say it out loud.

We went to get the steerstuff. The animals we get the stuff from seemed to be getting bigger. Next thing you know, we'll be going to the zoo and asking for elephantstuff. I wonder what kind of trees it would grow?

I think the moral of this story is to never take your wife to Wal-Mart in a truck.

Chapter Seventeen

KILLER TILLER

One day several weeks later, I was laying on the couch still recuperating from shoveling all that stuff into the pots. I was being lulled by the pleasant background noise of our big tiller muttering along as Betty was out tilling the garden, getting it ready for her Spring planting, and I was thinking of how I helped her every year by taking time off to go to the feed store to buy a bunch of seeds for her to plant as soon as she had the ground broken. Eventually the tiller noise stopped, and I assumed she was finished and was cleaning up the machine so I wouldn't complain about her leaving it dirty for the neighbors to see. I was debating about whether to go check on the job or snooze for a while longer. I finally decided that perhaps I had better see what was going on, since she seemed to be taking an awfully long time getting back from the garden, which is only 150 feet or so away from the house.

I met Betty right outside the door. The first thing I noticed was how cute she looks after working up a sweat. The second thing I noticed was how white she was. And silent, as if there was something she didn't want to talk about.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked, peering closely at her.

"I ran into a tree," she said.

"Oh, you ran the tiller into a bee, and it stung you, huh?" I said, glad things were so simple. My hearing isn't what it used to be.

"No, I ran the tiller into a tree," Betty repeated.

There aren't any trees within 200 feet of the garden, though there are some fairly good-sized ones starting about that distance away from it.

"Did it hurt the tree?" I grinned. Surely she was kidding, and I was willing to go along with the gag.

"You think I'm kidding, don't you?" She said indignantly. "Where do you think the tiller is?"

"In the carport?"

"No, it isn't in the carport. I said I ran into a tree."

I sort of threw a sideways glance toward the carport where the tiller normally lives. The tiller wasn't home. I felt a little chill run up and down my spine.

"Uh, do you mind if I take a look at where the tiller ran into a tree?" I admit; I didn't have a clue. Tillers dig; they don't dart across roads, travel great distances and smash into trees. "This way," my wife said, leading the way sort of catty-cornered to the usual trail to the garden. I soon saw why. The trail crosses the dirt road leading on back to Pat & Rob's place. I spotted the signs of a struggle there, as if a large animal had come loping across the road, digging its claws into the dirt every two or three feet like it was trying for better traction. The spoor led toward a group of big pine trees. And there, where it had obviously come to an abrupt halt against a huge tree at least four feet in diameter, was the tiller.

I approached slowly, following the trail I now concluded had obviously been made by the tiller rather than a grizzly bear. As near as I could tell, by the time it got to the pine tree it must have been going at least 60 mph, and hitting the ground only about every two or three feet. That tiller was SMASHED, almost beyond recognition. The front end was all crumpled, one tire was flat, and the whole carburetor complex had been snapped off as if it were paper mache instead of solid metal.

I heard a sniff. I turned and gathered Betty into my arms.

"Are you hurt, sweetie?" I asked. Golly, how could she help not be?

"I'm fine. I let loose of it before it hit the tree," she said.

"Good," I breathed a sigh of relief. And then burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. There I stood looking at what had to be the complete ruin of a \$700.00 machine, and all I could do was laugh. I mean, really. A tiller? Crashing into a tree?

"What happened?" I asked, as soon as I could get my breath back.

"Well, I finished tilling the plot for the first round, and I was tired and wanted to get back to the house and cool off before making you lunch and -- "

"And you put it in rabbit," I finished for her.

"Well, you put it in rabbit, don't you? That is, you did when you used to till before showing me how."

"Uh, sweetie..."

"I've seen you do it!"

"Uh, did you think to disengage the tines first?"

"What's a tine?"

"That's those curvy blades underneath that do the digging," I informed her. "You're supposed to disengage them before putting it in rabbit."

"Oh, those things. Well, I was going to."

"Going to?"

"After I got ready. Then it ran off with me." I could just picture her bending to disengage the tines, bumping the long gear arm, and away she goes, galloping along after the tiller, and where it comes to rest, no one knows. I laughed some more, and between guffaws thought perhaps I should have told her to always put it in turtle when coming back from the garden, not just while tilling.

"I tried to hold it back," Betty said virtuously.

"I bet you did!" I could just imagine it. Pulling back on the arms had obviously gotten the tines in just the right position, leaving the machine going at its fastest speed on its powered wheels, and helped along even more by all that leverage the tines gave it as they rotated. I could picture her yelling, "Whoa! Whoa!" and running - or more accurately, being dragged -- by

the runaway tiller. I doubled up with more laughter.

"I couldn't stop it," Betty said.

"Hoo, boy! I bet you couldn't!" I howled.

"So I aimed it at the tree to keep it from hurting anyone."

I looked around. The nearest house belonged to Pat & Rob, and was fifty feet or so from where the tiller had crashed. I looked at the smashed machine again. There was a hole two feet deep against the base of the tree where the machine had obviously run for a minute or two after the collision. Hmm. Maybe she had the right idea.

"Well, let's go to the house," I said.

"Yes, you have to make a telephone call."

"I do?"

"Yes, to the repairman."

"There's no hurry," I said.

"Oh, yes, there is," she insisted.

"Why?"

"Because I still have to finish tilling," she said, eyeing the garden plot like a sink full of unwashed dishes.

"Never mind," I said grandly. "I'll finish it up for you."

Tillers can be replaced. Betty can't.

Chapter Eighteen

THE GREAT COCKROACH WAR

We moved into our new house twenty years ago. Ever since that day, I have periodically put out a few little boric acid tablets, which cockroaches mistake for chocolate candy, banana splits or strawberry shortcake, and immediately gobble up. Whatever they think they are eating, it isn't any of those, and within a few seconds they curl up and die. The tablet apparently causes their bodies to dissolve into thin air, for the sight of a dead cockroach in our house has been an extraordinarily rare occurrence, almost always attributable to a doggie or kitty bringing one in to play with. Cockroaches have just never been a concern, and we never felt the need of those pest control people who come in and point to bits of dust and call them cockroach droppings, kill what they call the hidden bugs with fulminating hydrochloric acid, and insist on a contract letting them come back every two days for the next twenty years to do the same thing, charging roughly half your annual income adjusted for inflation. No, we never needed them until ... last week.

Betty spotted what she thought were two cockroaches within a few days of each other, and the war was on. She immediately called the pest control people, certain that we had been invaded, and were on the verge of being vanquished by a ravaging, take-no-prisoners army of cockroaches. Personally, I didn't think so, but over the course of a long lifetime I have learned that bugs are one of the few things it doesn't pay to argue with a woman about. Bugs and women are inherently antagonistic, and there's not a thing a man can do about it except get out his wallet or flyswatter, and usually both.

The pest control office told Betty that we had to remove every single item from every drawer and cabinet in the house before the exterminator came. This is akin to a major moving job minus the packing, since everything will have to be put back after the exterminator finishes his work and has gone back to the toxic dump where he lives.

Now mostly, emptying all your cabinets and drawers isn't a great amount of work -- or wouldn't be if it weren't for the floor level cabinets, and the ones built up there at cathedral ceiling height where no one in his right mind would put a cabinet except a professional basketball player. And then there are the lower kitchen corner cabinets, those deep dark holes where wives hide weird kitchen appliances they never use except when husbands are present to play fetch.

I can wander into the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee, and Betty will say, "Honey, will you hand me the combination roast dicer slicer icer while

you're standing there?"

"Sure," I'll say. "What does it look like?"

"It has three handles on a cooling coil, and a knife blade attached to a rolling pin with little cubes cut out of it. It's right there in the bottom corner cabinet." "The bottom corner cabinet!" I exclaim, beginning to shiver. Reluctantly I go to make preparations, having flashbacks in the process to my days as a Vietnam Tunnel Rat. I strap on my .45, adjust my trusty Swiss army knife, clench my flashlight in my teeth, get down on my hands and knees, and enter the cabinet's dark depths, wondering if there really are cockroaches back there, mutated from feeding on boric acid, grown to monstrous size, and armed with the stray slicer dicer icers they have found.

Eventually I will find something that looks as if it might have come off my tractor, and I back out, keeping a cautious watch all the time for stray Viet Cong or mutant cockroaches. I stand up, brushing off my knees, and uncocking my pistol. I hand the implement to Betty.

"That's not the slicer dicer icer," she says. "That's just the slicer dicer. Couldn't you see it only has two handles?"

At which point I have a sudden backache, and assure my wife I can manage to eat her roast without it being sliced, diced or iced, and could I get back to the football game now?

Or take those top alpine cabinets, so high a California Condor would get short of breath trying to fly up to them. I will be sitting in my easy chair watching something educational on the Playboy Channel, and Betty will say, "Honey, I need the short-handled pewter lemon holder. Would you mind getting it for me?"

"Can't you hold a lemon in your hand?" I ask.

"Of course I can't. Not when I'm making pewter lemon holder pie."

Put that way, I can see the logic. I get up and get out my rock climbing pitons and rope and safety belt and climbing shoes, and attack the Matterhorn, returning a day or two later, waving the pewter lemon holder triumphantly overhead like a trophy before handing it to my wife.

"That's not the one I wanted," Betty says.

"You mean this isn't the lemon holder?"

"This is the long handled one. I can't make a short handled pewter lemon holder pie with a long handled pewter lemon holder, don't you know that?"

"Always glad to add to my information store," I reply. I look sadly at the TV, and start putting my rock climbing gear back on.

* * * *

Where were we? Oh, yes, emptying cabinets and drawers, including the dreaded lower kitchen corner cabinets. Now personally, I think corner cabinets ought to be outlawed, or at the very least be subject to a zoning regulation that requires that they be blocked off completely and permanently. Lacking that, a bad back will serve the same purpose, which is what I immediately developed when I heard we had to empty all the cabinets.

"I'm sorry, honey," I said. "I just can't manage those low cabinets down on my hand and knees because of my back."

"Never mind, I'll do them," Betty said. Thereupon she really did get down on her hands and knees. Eventually she came to the lower corner cabinet. Her front half disappeared inside. At this point, Biscuit the dog decided she couldn't possibly venture into the depths of the lower corner kitchen cabinet without his help. He ran up behind her, and gave her bare legs a good slurping in order to hurry her inside.

"Biscuit, stop that!" I heard my wife's voice echo from the vast cavern that she was beginning to explore. Her whole body entered, thinking she was going to escape Biscuit's help. They don't call dachshunds badger dogs for nothing. He slithered in beside her, just as if she had received tunnel rat training from me, and he was her junior apprentice. From somewhere deep inside the cabinets I kept hearing the sounds they were making.

Slurp.

Boink. Sound of head hitting overhead cabinet.

"Biscuit, stop!"

Slurp. Sound of head hitting cabinet.

"You crazy dog, stop licking my face!"

Slurp. More faintly now, they were getting deeper inside.

Boink. Boink.

"Biscuit, quit that!"

"Woof! Woof!" Biscuit was thoroughly enjoying himself, going tunnel exploring as his genes dictated, while at the same time getting in a plethora of forbidden face licks on his helpless companion.

The voices and sounds got so far away that they become an indistinct mumble. A half-hour passed, then the action began. Things long-hidden and forgotten began tumbling out of the cabinet onto the floor -- but they were coming from the door around the corner and two cabinets down. Betty and Biscuit had taken the scenic route. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Bagel slicers. Hand operated meat grinders. Old ice cream makers. A round dozen of useless electric knives. A cracked crock pot. A flower pot. A huge flower vase obviously constructed to hold a century plant should we live so long. And a huge pile of other unidentifiable gadgets and contraptions, which neither of us proved to have the faintest notion of their purpose. And finally Biscuit's nosy little droopy-eared face appeared, eyes laughing merrily, and a big grin on his face. Betty's head and shoulders followed, draped in spider webs and old cheesecloth. Biscuit turned around and got in five quick slurps to Betty's face before she could get all the way out and stand up out of his reach.

I gave her a hand up. "I'm glad we've got that corner cabinet out of the way," I said.

"What you mean, we, White man?"

"I was listening. I would have come and rescued you, bad back and all, if you hadn't come out soon."

"Hah!"

"I bet you didn't see any cockroaches, did you?"

"Just the big one standing here."

"Where?" I turned around in a circle.

"Never mind. Let's get going. We only have two more hours before the exterminator gets here."

And I helped, I truly did. We emptied drawers and cabinets with abandon, deciding we might as well clean house while we were at it. Long forgotten and useless items went into big cans to be discarded. Long forgotten and useless items (in my opinion but not Betty's) went into smaller cans and boxes to be tucked back in corner cabinets and saved for garage sales. They will probably next be found by the estate managers, if they are brave enough to go looking.

All other items were stacked on tables, shelves, chairs, footstools -- on any space available, and out of the reach of our lovable dog who, with all the undoing of cabinets and drawers, had gotten the idea into his little doggy mind that anything he hadn't seen before belonged to him unless we claimed it first. And the mathematics are inexorable: Space available in cabinets, drawers, and cupboards equals seventeen times the available space to put them on when they are out of drawers, cabinets and cupboards. This meant using the floor, porch, chandelier, etc., but eventually it got done with only minor losses to our happy doggie.

Enter the exterminator. He went around and sprayed fulminating mercuric prusside into all our drawers and cabinets until they begin steaming, then did the same for the baseboards, behind refrigerators, and so forth. Biscuit licked up a few drops before we could stop him. He began slobbering at the mouth like he does when he plays with toad frogs, and we put him outside until he recovered. The exterminator finished up inside, and sprinkled thousands of tiny cluster bombs outside and around the house. Biscuit sampled the granules, and began swelling up at the mouth like he does when he plays with ground

rattlers. We put him back inside with his water dish.

The exterminator then exterminated our bank account, and left.

We begin putting things back up.

"Did we ever see a cockroach?" I asked Betty.

"No, but they were here. The nice man said so."

"I would say so too, if I could collect a check like you just gave him."

"Don't be mean. I feel safe now."

The next morning, after Biscuit came in from his morning run, I found him playing with a cockroach, the only one I ever saw, then or now. I still don't know whether he brought it in, or whether it was one of that ravening horde that Betty saw, but what the heck, those cabinets and drawers needed cleaning, anyway.

And if we hadn't done them, I never would have known what happened to that pair of silk drawers with hearts on them that Betty gave me one Christmas.

Chapter Nineteen

THE BLACK PLASTIC MOWING JOB

Since retiring last year, Betty has gotten really handy around the house and yard, but she does have this bad habit of becoming ill at the most inconvenient times, such as when the garden needs watering, when Biscuit has gotten acquainted with a skunk and needs a bath, when the car and truck need washing (not to mention my clothes, the mowers and the tractors), when a load of firewood needs to be stacked on the porch, and on and on. I have to hand it to her, though; she has to be deathly ill before slowing down, and only being measured for her casket will cause her to skip one of her regular jobs. I like being married to a woman like that, and I assume she likes being married to me. At least she has not failed so far to bring me chips, popcorn and ice cream while I'm involved with man-type jobs, like watching football or surfing the web for things to buy in order to avoid going shopping.

One day, a month or so ago, Betty got really sick just about the time the yard needed mowing (and remember, her stupid husband had made a yard out of three acres of wilderness after running the cows off). I searched the web for a solution to the problem, and found a site which suggested simply letting the grass grow if your wife couldn't mow it just at the moment, then when it grew tall enough, to buy a couple of goats. The goats would eat the grass, and could be turned into tasty barbecue later on. It sounded good to me, so I let the yard go for three weeks while waiting on Betty to heal. I darn near had to buy the goats, but she recovered just in time.

Betty got to feeling well enough to try mowing the yard one morning, which made her happy to be doing something useful, and made me happy to see her doing one of her wifely jobs. I know it would have distressed her if I had to do it instead of her, or if I had to buy those goats. She put her boots on to wade through the grass to the mower. It was that high. I didn't get up from the couch to go look, of course. I trust my wife when she says something, and she said, "The grass is so high that I'm going to have to wear my boots."

"Well, why do you go and get sick when the grass needs mowing?" I asked, helpfully.

"Never mind, just put some gas in the mower, and I'll get started," she said.

I make a concession with the gas. It's my own fault. I should have noticed how hard it would be for a short woman to add gasoline to the mower when I bought it for her, but since I didn't, I feel like it's my responsibility to put gasoline in it. I filled the gas tank, left it with her, and went back to holding down the couch so that Biscuit wouldn't drag it off somewhere. Shortly afterward, I heard the buddin, buddin sounds of the mower from outside as I lay down for a well-earned rest. That gasoline can is heavy.

Soon I heard the mower sputter, stop, start, sputter again, then quit completely. I knew the yard couldn't be finished yet, so I just kept watching

TV and drinking coffee. Eventually Betty came in the front door. Maybe she needs to go to the bathroom, I thought, but she didn't go that way. Instead, she went to the scissors rack, and picked out the biggest pair of scissors she could find, and went back out the door. I waited for a while. There was no sound of the mower. I gave her fifteen more minutes, then decided to see what the holdup was. At this rate, the grass would be grown back up in the first part by the time she finished the last part. And I have to admit I was curious about the scissors.

I found Betty out in the middle of the yard where those ten thousand Leyland Cypress pots live, down on her hands and knees, groping under the mower deck with one hand, and snip snip snapping with the scissors with the other. Beside her was a pile of pieces of black plastic, similar to what she normally used between the potted Leyland Cypresses to keep the grass from growing there.

I watched for a moment, then asked, "Why did you mow up the plastic?"

Betty didn't say anything. Snip snip snap. She added more pieces of plastic to the pile.

"If you were mad at the plastic, why didn't you just set it on fire? It burns good," I said.

"Mumble mumble," it sounded like she said. She raised up, and wiped sweat off her forehead.

"Do you need some help?" I offered. I still couldn't figure out what she thought she was doing.

"No. I got myself into this, and I can get myself out of it." Snip snip snap. Well, I admire a woman who doesn't ask a man to get her out of stupid errors she gets herself into. I especially admire a woman who doesn't ask, when I'm married to her. Still, I was curious about what she had going on under the mower, and more importantly, what she had done. I looked around the yard.

Then I saw. Betty had tried mowing across the edge of some of the plastic, and it had gotten caught in the shaft of the mower blades. It had wound around and around as she tried to keep going, jerking up more and more plastic, and flinging potted Leylands to the winds as she stole their weed barrier. The sheets of black plastic were only twenty feet by ten feet, but sections of it were overlapped and stitched together, which told me why the pile of pieces of plastic she was pulling from beneath the mower was growing like an active landfill project. Snip snap. Yank, pull, tug. Snip snap.

I watched for awhile, and finally took pity on her.

"Would it help if the deck were raised up a little, so you can see what you're doing?" I asked.

"Probably," she said. Snip snap, tug, yank snip snap, ouch! She cut her finger, and that convinced her.

"Yes, definitely," she conceded. "Raise the deck."

I led Betty over to where two car ramps were kept, and pointed them out to her. They are pretty heavy, and I would have offered to carry one of them, except she had already declared that she could get herself out of this mess. She carried them back, and I generously showed her the little lever to pull to make the mower move when it doesn't have its motor going. I sent her to get a two by four to block the back wheels, then had her put the piece of wood in place to keep the mower from going backwards after she heroically pushed it up onto the ramps.

Sure enough, now Betty could see what she was doing. Snip, snip, snap, snap, tug pull, tug, tug snip snap. One more yank, and there it came off the shaft, the last twenty feet of plastic sheeting all at once. It added considerably to the pile. I stood by while she got the mower back down the ramps, and waited while she turned the key.

No, she didn't turn the key. It had been left on all this time. The mower went click click instead of rrr rrr.

"Has the mower been doing this lately?" I asked.

"Only the last two or three times I mowed," Betty said contritely.

"I wish you had said something before the grass got so high," I said.
"The battery is dead."

"Oh, is that what click click means?" She looked as naive as Little Bo Peep.

"Every time," I replied. There went the mowing for this day. Never send a woman to get a battery. They will come back with a dress, some groceries and a new pillow to make sitting on the mower easy, but forget all about the battery. I knew that, so didn't even ask. I just went and got one the next day after resting up from all the help I had given my wife.

The moral of this story is that if you want to keep your wife on the mower, check the battery every time after she finishes with it.

Chapter Twenty

PAJAMA PARTY

When I first started seeing people wearing sweats around town, I wondered why they had been discharged from the hospital still wearing their pajamas. I finally decided that they had probably been in an accident, messed up their real clothes, and their husband/wife/friend/etc. had forgotten to bring them some new ones to go home in. Then one day Betty told me they weren't pajamas; they were clothes.

They'll never get me in a set of those things, I said to myself. Which just goes to prove that you should never say never, or that word will come back to haunt you. After seeing me wear nothing but boots for 19 years, then breaking out in tennis shoes one day, our daughter Pat decided that if I could change from boots to tennis shoes, I could probably change other bits of apparel, as well. She bought me a set of sweats for Christmas. Well, shucks, I said thank-you and all that, but I still said to myself, no one will ever get me into those things. I'm sticking to my jeans and work shirts.

So, there the sweats hung accusingly in my closet, week after week, month after month, an unworn Christmas present from my very own stepdaughter. And, I have to admit, gradually curiosity began to get the best of me, just like it does Biscuit when he tries to find out what a bumblebee tastes like.

There must be something to sweats to make so many people wear them, I thought. What if I picked a day when it was raining, so I wouldn't be tempted to go outside, and a day when I was also pretty sure no one was going to come to the house, and sort of, well, tried them on? Just for a few minutes, you understand.

The day finally came. I was out shoveling sheepstuff for the new pots Betty had bought to replace the ones she had mowed down, and I got all sweaty and smelly, and had to take another shower, and then it started raining. Well, I wasn't going to go anywhere in the rain, and I figured that even if anyone did come by the house, the smell of that sheepstuff being rained on would run them off. So, out of the shower and into the closet I went, and out I came with that pair of sweats.

I have to admit that they were easy to put on, but I also have to admit that I felt like I was starring in a Beverly Hillbilly's skit from wearing britches that were held up with a string instead of a belt. I tried to strap my Swiss army knife on, but the only way it would go was inside the pants, tied to the string, and hanging down the middle of my body. I decided against carrying it that way in case a blade slipped loose and cut something more vital than a string. So I left it on the dresser. And already I felt undressed, or like I was wearing pajamas. I mean, how can a man go anywhere without his Swiss army knife? It was bad enough when I came home from the war and couldn't carry a gun everywhere, but not even a knife? Well, I was determined to try wearing those sweats at least once, so I sacrificed and continued dressing.

On went the shirt. So far as I could tell, it looked like any other sweatshirt. The only difference was in the price tag, which had been accidentally left on. It only cost three times as much as a regular sweatshirt because it was part of a pair of sweats. I guess that makes sense to a

retailer, but I'm glad it wasn't my money Pat had spent.

I had just come from the shower, remember, and also had been out shoveling sheepstuff in the rain. My nose began running. I reached for my handkerchief. No handkerchief. Sweats don't have a place to carry handkerchiefs. I looked around quickly to be sure Betty wasn't peeking in the bedroom, and swept my sweat-shirted forearm across my nose. Then I rolled up the sleeves. I no longer looked exactly like the models you see wearing sweats, but I usually wear rolled up sleeves anyway, and that covered up the stuff that got on the sleeve because the stupid things didn't have a pocket for a handkerchief. Before coming out of the bedroom, I decided I'd better go to the bathroom. That's when I discovered that sweat pants don't have a fly. Well, I'll be damned if I was going to sit down to pee, even if I was wearing sweats. I pulled the pants down, fumbled around with my shorts, and promptly peed all over the front of my sweat pants. I took a few minutes to dry them off, almost, with a towel. Fortunately the sweat pants were a dark color, so I didn't think Betty would notice. I tiptoed out into the den.

"How come you peed on yourself?" Betty asked.

"I'm not used to these new-fangled things," I said.

"How come the sleeves are rolled up?"

"You know I like my sleeves rolled up."

"Well, they don't look good like that." She came over and began tugging at the sleeves.

"I can do it!" I yelled. I didn't want even my wife to see snot on the sleeve of my sweatshirt. Not my fault, you understand. They should have made those things with a handkerchief pocket.

"All right, you do it. Then go to the store. We need some bread."

"In these things?" I recoiled in horror.

"Of course. Everybody does it."

"All right," I agreed, very reluctantly. I picked up my keys and slipped them into my pocket. They fell to the floor. Sweat pants don't have pockets, either. I picked up my keys, and walked out to my truck with them dangling uncomfortably from my hand. I got in the truck and started toward the store.

I guess I wasn't paying attention -- or too much attention, maybe. I was kind of hunched down in the seat, hoping no one would recognize me. I couldn't see the road very good like that, and I believe I tended to swerve a bit each time I raised my head to peek over the dashboard to see where I was going. Shortly, I heard a siren and saw lights in my rear view window. I pulled over.

The cop got out of the patrol car and walked casually over to my truck. He stopped by the window, which I had rolled down.

"May I see your driver's license, sir?" The cop asked.

I felt for my wallet. Whoops. No pocket. No wallet. It was lying on the bedroom dresser, along with my belt and Swiss army knife, my change and a little pillbox I carry for sudden migraine attacks. I started to have an attack right then.

"Um, officer, I don't seem to have my wallet with me."

The cop rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He looked as if he were thinking how good I would look behind bars.

Blood rushed from my head. My lips felt dry. I fished for the chap stick I always carry in my shirt pocket to moisten my lips so I could talk. Sweatshirts don't have pockets. My chap stick was home with all my other stuff. My lips dried up until they felt like old leather strips that had been left out in the desert for a year or two.

"Look, offthier, I can exthplain," I said, with my totally desiccated lips distorting my words. "It's all the fault of theeth thweats. Thee, I got them for Christhmas, and it wath raining, and I wath shoveling theepthtuff and..." My voice trailed off as I saw a twisted expression on the cop's face, like he didn't believe me but did appreciate an original story. "...and no pockets," I finished weakly. I held out my hands for the cuffs.

The cop began writing in his little book. "I'm giving you a warning ticket," he said. "Now you head for home. I'll follow."

"Thank-you, thir," I said.

"And don't try making a pass at me, or I'll lock you up."

"Yeth thir," I said, yearning for my chap stick.

We headed for home. Betty saw me drive up with a cop as an escort, then watched from a window as the cop drove away, and I trudged toward the front door, stopping twice on the way to pick up my keys after trying to deposit them in a non-existent pocket.

"Where's the bread?" Betty asked. She didn't mention the cop. I guess she figured I would explain in due time. The time was due. I held out the ticket. "No wallet," I said. "No driverth listhcense. No money. No bread."

"Why didn't you take your wallet?" She asked.

"No pockets," I said.

"That's no excuse. Other men wear sweats, and they seem to have wallets."

"Well, where do they carry them? In their thorts?"

"You're a man. You should know."

I went back to the bedroom and applied a liberal dose of chap stick. Pretty soon I came back out. I was wearing the fanny pack my wife had given me for a Christmas present some years ago, and which was still brand new and unworn. I felt about fanny packs the same way I felt about sweats. However ... on the belt of the fanny pack was strapped my trusty Swiss army knife, and inside was my wallet and chap stick. I went for the bread. And I just dared anyone to make fun of me.

And after that, I crawled back into bed in my sweats, where a person belongs when they're wearing pajamas. I don't care if they are called sweats.

Chapter Twenty-One

MARSHMALLOW RESEARCH

As the years go by, almost everyone begins worrying about their weight -- and what they eat. One item that doesn't belong in a diet, however, is hot chocolate. I have it classed as a necessary food item, especially on those cold mornings when you have trouble getting the chill out of your aging bones. A good cup of hot chocolate will take care of that problem. Marshmallows make it taste even better than it does to begin with.

I had what I thought was a brilliant idea one morning while working at the computer. I like marshmallows in my hot chocolate, but the big marshmallows don't melt too well. So, I decided to try a handful of small ones. I dropped them into the steaming cup of hot chocolate which I had sitting beside me on the mouse pad. After a minute or two, I picked up the cup without looking away from the computer screen, and took a sip. I sucked one of those little marshmallows right in with the sip of chocolate, and it stuck in my throat. I coughed and spilled chocolate in my lap. It was hot hot chocolate, and that caused me to yelp and set the chocolate down real quick, so quick that some splashed on the keyboard. While I was cleaning that up, without thinking, I picked up the cup again, now only half full, and took another sip. By this time, the little marshmallows had melted pretty good, and one of them had stuck to my upper lip while the cup was tipped, and stayed there when I set the cup back down. Others of the little gobs were stuck to the one that had stuck to my lip. They followed it out of the cup in a daisy chain as I set it down, and a line of them dribbled down over my lips and chin. One dropped on my hand, and I flicked it away quickly when I saw that it was about to continue dribbling down onto the keyboard.

The motion of my hand threw the marshmallow away onto the carpet. "Get away, Biscuit" I yelled, as I saw my faithful dog sniffing the white gob. He obeyed with the same alacrity as he does when I'm telling him to get away from my ice cream, but I didn't have time to watch. I turned away from him just in time to see two more little gobs drop from my lip: one onto my lap, and the other between the fingers of my right hand that had - so far -- escaped

contamination. The fingers of that hand were resting on the j, k, l and the ; keys. The little marshmallows dribbled between them, and onto the keyboard.

Sometimes even I can get the message: get those gooey, dribbling marshmallows off your face, and they will quit falling in your lap and on your hands and onto the keyboard. I wiped my face with my hand. Half of the rest of the marshmallows came off on the back of my hand. The rest I could feel beginning to dry on my lips and nose and the side of my face where I had wiped. At this moment, I saw Biscuit again. His nose had turned from black to white, and one ear was stuck to the side of his head from trying to leave the marshmallows alone like I told him to. I bent to pick the marshmallow off Biscuit's nose, and the gummy stuff already stuck to my hand got into his fur. He ran off a few paces, thinking the whole thing was a game. "Good Doggie!" I screamed, but he thought we were playing football again. He raced off like a sturdy little fullback, and then galloped out of the bathroom a few seconds later, trailing a roll of toilet paper, one end stuck to his cheek and nose, and the rest of the roll bumping and trailing and unwinding along behind him. He turned his head and barked as Betty came into the office.

"What in the name of heaven are you two doing?" She exclaimed.

"Having marshmallows with our hot chocolate," I answered. "Why?"

I leave the rest to your imagination.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE GATE BUILDERS

The following events happened almost 20 years ago, back when I still had delusions that cowboys were born, not made, and when I was still drinking Coors instead of Gatorade.

Randy, my son from a previous marriage, who was eleven or twelve at the time, was visiting me. It also happened to be a time that some of our cows (which would very shortly convince me to go into another line of business) had learned to bypass the cattle guard I had designed and built (and no comments on that, please). We're talking about a gate; the very same gate, in fact, which I was putting up to replace the defective cattle guard. Randy was eager to help, and I was pleased to show him my expertise in gate building. Every Dad likes to show off to his son, and I'm no exception. At least, I didn't used to be.

The first thing Randy and I did was extend the fences along the road, inward past the used culvert now masquerading as a cattle guard, and a little ways on each side of the road. This in itself was a two day project, but it turned out all right, unlike the first fence I built -- but that's another story. Now for the gate. First, we got two huge 10" diameter creosote posts, one to hang the gate on, and one to fasten the other end on. We used posthole diggers to dig the holes, not wanting to wrestle with the mechanized auger for two little holes. In fact, I don't want to wrestle with the auger ever again, regardless, but never mind, that's another story, too.

I huffed and puffed, and let Randy huff and puff, and we finally got two holes dug. Next, we bought cement, hauled water and a wheelbarrow to the prospective gate, and cemented the posts in, deep enough and wide enough that a Mack truck couldn't knock them down. Darned if I was going to have a leaning gate like some I had seen around the countryside. This gate, by the way, was going to be one of those 14-foot aluminum jobs, unwieldy as heck to put up, even with Randy helping.

Posts in, we rested, and I bragged. "See how simple this is?"

"Right, Dad," Randy said. He was nothing if not agreeable, since I was paying him two dollars an hour for a job which a real cowboy would have finished in a couple of hours, but which we had been working on three days. In fact, a real cowboy would have built a cattle guard that worked, and would have had no need for a gate, but I was still delusional at the time.

The next day, cemented posts standing as firm as steel pilings, we made ready to hang the gate. Aluminum gates, by the way, do not come with instructions, though they do have several parts. The first thing I figured out

after having a few beers to reflect with was that I had to attach some thingies to the post that the gate was to swing from. These thingies consisted of long screws with the end bent into a solid cylinder at right angles from the screw parts. The gate hinges had similar gadgets except that they ended in hollow rings, the theory (as I eventually figured out) being that the rings on the hinges slip over the upright cylinders once they are attached to the fence post. Simple. Once you get the thingies in the posts.

It would have been very simple to have measured and marked the posts while they were still on the pickup, and used my brand new electric drill to get holes started for the gizmos, but I wasn't bright enough -- I mean, I wanted Randy to see how a brace and bit worked, without electricity, like in the Olden Days. First I had to go buy one, though.

You would be surprised how hard it was to find a real brace and bits, even twenty years ago, but we finally located one after two days of looking. Randy examined it with a critical eye. "Where's the extension cord?" He asked.

"It doesn't have one," I told him. "You operate it by hand, like this." I proceeded to stuff what looked like the right sized bit into the brace. It fit, but I didn't recognize the doohicky that tightened the bit in the brace. What I was actually doing was imitating -- or trying to imitate -- something I had seen my dad do when I was about three years old. The brace turned. The bit fell out.

"Can I tighten it, Dad?" Randy asked.

I handed it to him. Two seconds later the bit was fitted tightly into the brace, ready to begin drilling.

Smart Alec kid, I thought. "Just checking to see if you were alert," I said out loud.

We proceeded to drill some holes in the posts, about where I thought the thingies should go.

"Why are we drilling these holes when the thingies have screw ends?" Randy asked. "Couldn't we just screw them in?"

Too big for his britches, I thought. "Sure," I said aloud, "but I wanted to show you how a brace and bit works." This kid will go far if someone doesn't kill him first, I reflected.

I decided that some more precise measurements were in order after finding out that the original eyeball judgments I had insisted on weren't going to line up the cylindrical ends with the holes on the hinges. First though, we went to town and bought a tape measure.

"Back again?" The clerk asked.

Smart Alec clerk, I thought. I bet he never hung a gate in his life. From my superior attitude, I paid for the tape measure, and back to gate hanging we went. Measure, measure. Screw, screw. Nothing to it, I thought as I gave the thingy one last turn to really fit it tightly in the post. In fact, I was using a giant pair of vise-grips clamped onto the thingy for leverage to make sure I got it in tight.

"Is that it, Dad?" Randy asked.

I wiped sweat off my brow, and chugged some beer. "That's it, son," I said. "Now we hang the gate."

With Randy helping, and only stumbling and bruising my behind once or twice, we lined up the gate hinge holes with the upright cylindrical ends of the thingies. The gate slid right on, by golly, surprising me so much that I had to sit down and have another beer while admiring our handiwork. A little breeze came up. The gate swung in the breeze -- and stopped halfway to the post it was supposed to attach to. Somehow, while hanging the gate on the other post, I had neglected to check the lay of the land. The road tilted, preventing the gate from closing -- by a good two feet of earth.

"The cows will get out if we leave it like this," Randy said.

Dern kid. I knew that. I chugged some more beer, thinking hard. A light bulb popped into being over my head, figuratively speaking.

"No problem, son," I said. "I've been wanting to test out that little dozer blade for the tractor. We'll just grade that part of the road back to

even, and then the gate will close."

I had already had vast experience with getting heavy implements on and off the tractor, so the dozer blade was not any trouble, even after putting it on upside down the first time. With Randy helping. In fact, Randy managed to live a lot longer by being silent while I removed the pins from the three-point hitch and kicked the arms loose. With both of us in action, it wasn't much of a problem to turn the blade over, and get it back on the tractor. That should have warned me, but it didn't.

You see, it turns out that there is a direct correlation between hardness of earth and size of earth-moving equipment needed to move it. To put it in simpler terms, that road had been packed so hard that it would have taken a ten-ton bulldozer to make a dent in it. The blade sticking out from the rear end of my little tractor bumped and skidded along behind me for a half-hour, accomplishing nothing. Well, I do think I finally managed to move a tuft or two of grass between the ruts, but that's about it. And all the time Randy was watching as I moved back and forth on the tractor between the two prospective gateposts, stirring up dust with that little, bitty, dozer blade. In fact, the longer I tried to use it, the smaller it got. Or so it seemed. I would have given up sooner, but by this time I was busy trying to figure out what to tell Randy when I climbed down. Finally, I had it.

I got off the tractor. "Well, son," I said, "it's obvious that an engineer is playing a joke on us. He designed this dozer blade to move grass and soap bubbles, not dirt."

"Damn right," Randy said. He was just learning to cuss. "The engineers screwed it up."

That's my boy. If something doesn't work, always blame the engineers. However, we still needed a gate, even though my mental processes were already trying to suggest that by leaving things as they were, all my cattle could probably manage to get run over within a week, and I wouldn't have to worry about the pesky dern gate. I might have done it, too, except that every one of the cows had started off as a cute little calf, and we had named every one of them. Rosy. White Stockings. Gertrude. Elsie. Not only could I not turn them out on the road, we never could kill one to eat, like we had planned. Never name cows. It just leads to trouble. Hmm ... I wonder ... No. Kids need names.

"What do we do now, Dad?" Randy asked, tilting a coke in the same motions I used to drink Coors.

"Well, it's a cinch we can't move the road," I said.

"Yeah, the damn engineers screwed up the road, too, didn't they Dad?" He had caught my gleam of approval when we agreed that the engineers had messed up the dozer blade. If you got a good thing going, hammer on it, I always say, and Randy picked up on this real fast.

"Right. So we'll just have to move the posts."

"Can we do that?" Randy asked dubiously.

"Sure. They're not that heavy," I said.

"Yes, sir. But all that cement..."

"Hmm. Well, no sense giving ourselves back-strains pulling them up." I swallowed some more beer, wondering what to do.

"Why don't we move the thingies to the other post, Dad?"

Smart Alec kid. If he doesn't watch it he'll grow up to be an engineer himself. I just thought that, but didn't say it. However...

We took the gate off, then in a little while I gave Randy some new cuss words to practice with. Getting those Thingies screwed in was ducksoup compared to getting them back out again. They didn't want to unscrew. I knew how to take care of that, though. I had already found out in my short ranching career that a hammer will solve a whole heap of ills. Randy and I took turns, and the Thingies came out, but the post and the Thingies were a little the worse for wear after banging the cylinder portion of them around and around, practically standing on our heads at the bottom portion of the circle. And then we had to put them into the other posts. Rats. I had another beer. I don't think I was at all unsteady on my feet by then, but somehow that badly

engineered road caused me to fall down on that aluminum gate and bend one of the crosspieces.

"Aw, heck," Randy said.

"Yoush can do bettersh than thatsh," I said.

"Aw, hell," Randy said.

"Thatsh better. We'll fix the gate later. Right now, you hold, and I'll twist. We gotta get thesh thingsh in before dark." (Later on I found a long iron rod, and used it to keep the crosspiece from bending more. It worked, but then somebody swiped it. By that time it didn't matter, though -- the cows were gone).

Randy extended his life span even further by carefully not mentioning that I had forgotten to measure distances on the new post, and one of the Thingies had to come out and go in again. I chose to move the top one. We screwed it in, with Randy doing most of the work. Then we hung the gate again. Then we took the gate down again. There was too much room under the bottom of the gate. A calf could crawl under. Heck, anything could crawl under it, it was so high. Back to the Thingies. Randy didn't say a word. He may live to be a hundred and ten, as fast as he learns.

Finally, by golly and by heck, we were ready to hang the gate for the final time. I was amazed. The female parts slipped around the cylinder parts of the Thingies with the greatest of ease. I let go. Randy let go. The gate hung there, glittering in the sunset.

I stepped back to admire our work. Randy did, too. But then he sort of squinted into the sun. He walked up close to the gate. He turned around, I think so he could get off to a running start in case I got violent. He said, "Dad, why is the lettering on this gate upside down?"

(Censored)

Randy crawled over the gate, getting it between him and me.

"It's all right, son. It's just the engineers again. They put the lettering on upside down."

"Can we fix it?"

"Well, we could take off the lettering, and glue it back on," I said. I walked up to the gate. The lettering was stamped into the metal. My gosh, a whole factory was messed up. Either that, or we had hung the gate upside down. I'm sure it was the factory, and Randy had the good sense to agree with me when I told him that.

"We'll have to take the gate off, turn it over, and re-hang it right side up -- I mean, hang it so that the factory error won't be obvious." I said.

We took the gate off. We turned it upside down. We hung it back up.

"Are we finished now, Dad?" Randy asked.

"Yes, my son. We are finished," I said.

"What are we going to do tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Oh, yes. Tomorrow we have to build a gate for the chicken yard."

"We have to build it ourselves?" Randy asked, with a touch of apprehension in his voice.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's as simple as hanging a gate."

Randy got extremely homesick during the night, and I had to take him home the next day. All the way back, he kept apologizing for not being available to help me build that chicken yard gate. I guess he thought I couldn't do it without his help. I never did tell him how it came out. Or anyone else for that matter.

Chapter Twenty-Three

BED AND BREAKFAST BLUES

Contrary to popular opinion, Christmas tree farms are not a great source of riches. In fact, they are not a source of very many riches at all. To give you an idea, the last time we got audited, the IRS sent us a sympathy card. So, ever since I quit my job and began trying to make money growing

Christmas trees (foolishly) and by writing (foolishly), we have kept our eyes open for other, more reliable sources of income to supplement Betty's salary, right on up until she retired last year.

A number of years ago, I had one of my brilliant ideas. I'm always having brilliant ideas, but this one was actually put into operation. This happened back in the days of a rapidly expanding Bed and Breakfast Industry, and I had the thought that travelers would practically run each other off the road in order to spend the night at a real, live, genuine Christmas tree farm. Betty admitted that it sounded like one of my better ideas, so without further ado or a whole lot of research on the subject, we got started.

We applied to a Bed and Breakfast agency for a listing, and pretty soon here comes a lady out to the farm to look us over. It's fortunate that she called first. We're both sort of lackadaisical about house and yard work. We spent a weekend getting the place in shape (or at least putting a veneer over the worst spots), and the next weekend had our inspection. We passed, so then I had to write a blurb about our farm for inclusion in their listing, telling why anyone would want to spend the night here. I sat down at the typewriter (remember those gadgets?).

You can see Christmas trees growing, I wrote. But heck, that doesn't take long. What else, besides that? You can go tour an old County Jail about 15 miles away, just in case you want to see how your renegade ancestors spent their time in hock. There are lots of country roads you can drive around on, and get lost on. There's a little creek nearby with some perch in it, when it doesn't dry up in the summer. We also have some oak trees on the place. How about looking at our garden? See those potatoes! Watch the peas grow!

By now you have an idea of the problem. A Christmas tree farm is a fairly dull place most of the year. See one Christmas tree, and you've seen them all. Visions of all that money from travelers getting away from us ran through my head. Think, Darrell! What does everyone like to do? I left the typewriter, and went out on the porch to think. A few beers later, it hit me. Everyone likes to eat! I thought. Just fill 'em up with Betty's cooking! Heck, she won't mind spending a few extra minutes in the kitchen after putting in only a measly 60-hour week on the job. I mean, how much time can breakfast take to fix? I stumbled back to my typewriter, and began typing. By the end of the drunk -- I mean, day -- I had a menu all ready for Betty's perusal.

BEVERAGES:

Coffee, Juice, Milk, Cold Water, Hot Tea

MEATS:

Bacon, Canadian Bacon, Ham, Sausage, Corned Beef, Breakfast Pork Chops.

BREADS:

Toast, Biscuits with gravy, Popovers, Pancakes, Plain and Blueberry Waffles, Homemade Cinnamon Rolls, Blueberry Muffins.

CEREALS:

Dry cereal, Oatmeal, Cream of Wheat

EGGS:

Fried to order, Scrambled, Soft-boiled, Poached, and Cheese or Ham Omelets.

(That reminded me, I could always show our guests the chickens, and maybe even let them fetch the eggs if they got here before dark, giving them something to do, and me one day I didn't have to clean chickenstuff off my shoes)

CONDIMENTS:

Syrup, Homemade Jelly of various exotic flavors, Honey, Sorghum, Sugar and Butter (No one ever ordered sugar. Maybe me and my brother Gary are the only people in the world who put sugar on buttered biscuits).

Okay, that ought to do it. After all, I didn't want to give Betty too much to do after working all week. Besides, she still had housework and laundry to do on weekends, while I disappeared with the tractor and a six-pack for hours at a time.

I sent off the blurb (which I admit rather strained at describing the

joys of staying overnight at a Christmas tree farm), and included our prospective menu to the agency, only then showing a copy to Betty. "Hmm," she said. "Isn't this menu a little elaborate compared to most Bed and Breakfast places?" While I had been typing, she had been researching.

"It's a draw," I retorted. "We need lots of customers to make any money, and I figure food will do it."

The next month, we had our first call. A couple wanted to spend Saturday night with us. When Saturday came, Betty got the extra room all ready, and the house cleaned, and porch swept, and so forth. About three o'clock, while I was enjoying my fifth or sixth beer of the afternoon, I remarked, "Isn't this exciting? Our first customers!"

Betty wiped her brow. "Real exciting. Are you ready for me to start supper? We have to eat early." I sacrificed by having only one more beer while Betty fixed supper, then we settled in to wait for our guests.

* * * *

"Aren't they cute?" Betty asked, as we watched the young couple get out of their car.

"Cute as bugs," I agreed. Personally, I thought they looked young enough to be runaways instead of a married couple. They were both skinny, but the guy was positively cadaverous. I thought immediately: Well, Betty won't have to work very hard fixing breakfast in the morning. Two people that skinny won't eat much.

We introduced ourselves, helped them with their luggage, and showed them their room (first having to shoo the cat off the bed -- we had somehow closed him up in the room), then waited anxiously until they came out again. They turned out to be a young couple belonging to some sort of religious mission, one against beer drinkers, I think, because of the way they both looked at me with a Coors in my hand. Or maybe they didn't care for cigarette smoke, but I had stated plainly in the blurb that it would be a smoking household, and that we were nevertheless nice people who helped old ladies across the street, were nice to stray cats, and so forth. Whatever, neither of them mentioned my vices, and by golly, they both turned out to be interesting people. Besides religion, the young man was into politics as an assistant vote getter of some sort, though I still swear he must have lied about his age to get the job. I doubt that he was old enough to vote. His wife was a student teacher. At any rate, politics and education always makes for interesting conversation, and I learned a few of the things that go on inside the circle that the public rarely hears about. Their company was almost worth what took place the next morning.

I had prepared a copy of our menu, with places to check beside each item desired for breakfast. I told the young couple to leave the menu with the items checked that they wanted for breakfast on the kitchen table, along with a time. The lady asked if 8:00 was too early, and we both laughed and told them that farm people got up early. So off we went to bed, thinking we would feed them in the morning, then have most of the day left for our regular chores.

* * * *

Early the next morning, I shook Betty out of a sound sleep. "Wake up, honey. You have to see this," I said.

"Hunh?" Betty answered at five o'clock Saturday morning. She normally slept until after six. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, except you need to get busy." I handed her the two menus I had found on the kitchen table. She looked at the first one.

"Scrambled eggs and toast? Why should I get busy this early for something like that?"

I pulled the top menu off, and Betty examined the other one. Her eyes got wider and wider the more she read. That young skinny kid had marked every item on the menu except water.

"Omigod, he can't be serious!" Betty exclaimed.

"We have to assume he is. After all, we're in the business," I

answered.

Betty didn't say anything else. She headed for the bathroom, and I went and opened a beer. I always did enjoy a beer in the morning, but this was more in the way of medicine than enjoyment. I was already picturing a dead customer at our breakfast table, and headlines in the newspaper accusing us of complicity by over-feeding him.

Betty ran me out of the kitchen after a few bumbling attempts at helping. Even I could see that this menu was going to tax her culinary ability. At about this time, the young man came out of the bathroom, all dressed and ready for the day. He sniffed the odors coming from the kitchen, and grinned like a kid at a candy counter.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning. I see Mrs. Bain is already cooking. I couldn't believe it when I got all those choices for breakfast."

"We couldn't believe it, either," I said, but he wasn't listening.

"It all sounded so good, I couldn't decide, so I thought I'd just try a little of everything."

With all his choices, that's all he'd be able to try, I thought. His wife joined him, and they went out on the porch to breath some fresh country air, unpolluted except for residual diesel fumes from the tractor, the smell of chickenstuff from the henhouse, and the odor of cat spray hanging in the air, not to mention that a skunk had let loose somewhere in the nearby woods, and you could smell a bit of that, too. They came back inside pretty quick.

I finished off my beer and began helping Betty carry platters from the kitchen to the table, a plate of ham and eggs first. I told the youngsters to sit down and get started while we brought everything else. I got back with hot popovers just in time to see the skinny kid helping himself to his wife's scrambled eggs and toast, washed down by a big glass of milk that I hurried to refill. The platter of ham and eggs had vanished into thin air. As I returned, I saw him downing the last of the popovers, which is what I had intended to eat for breakfast, so I decided to settle for pancakes, and managed to eat part of one while the kid ate a whole stack, dripping with butter and syrup. Betty came in with a pan of biscuits and more bacon and sausage and ham, and almost dropped both pan and plate when she saw how much food had already been consumed.

I followed Betty back to the kitchen, where she put me to stirring oatmeal while she took a big bowl of cream gravy to the table. Her eyes were as round as a saucer when she came back. "Good God," she whispered. "He had already eaten half the biscuits before I got the gravy in there. Doesn't his wife know how to cook?"

"I'm sure she can't cook as good as you," I replied truthfully.

"I don't think she cooks at all," Betty said. "Don't burn the oatmeal."

I stirred some more, then took it out to the black hole masquerading as a skinny kid dabbling in politics. I imagined I could see streaming ions, the remnants of each entree forming the event horizon. I blinked, and he was just a kid, pouring half a pitcher of milk onto his oatmeal and the rest into his glass, which he had emptied several times already.

The little wife spoke up for the first time that morning. "Don't eat too much, Dear. Remember, we have that brunch with the Assistant Attorney General at eleven."

"I'm about finished," he said. "Only these waffles to go." He inhaled them in a couple of seconds, and pushed back his chair just as Betty was bringing our coffee to the table. The skinny kid spoke to her. "Mrs. Bain, you are a really great cook. We'll be sure to stop by here every time we head for Houston. Won't we, dear?" His wife agreed, while Betty and I exchanged worried glances. Did all Bed and Breakfast customers eat like this?

I helped Betty clean up, while the young couple packed their things and took a brief walk in the woods -- very brief. The old bull didn't like strangers. When they returned, the kid got out his checkbook and paid us the

enormous sum of \$45.00 for the night's lodging and gigantic meal. We bravely waved them good-bye, while wondering what the future held.

* * * *

Our next customers showed up a couple of weeks later, another couple, but this time a little older -- and more rounded. Both the man and wife looked as if they had never missed a meal in their lives. They arrived early in the afternoon, forcing me to get off the tractor and come in early. I introduced myself, took a quick shower, then came on back out. The guests were seated on the couch, but I had come in from the porch, and found that the cats and skunks had left us alone the last week or so, and I suggested we all sit out on the porch until evening. I popped a beer, hesitated, shrugged and asked, "How about a cold beer?"

"Sure thing," The man said.

"I shouldn't, but I will," the lady decided.

Three hours later they staggered off to their car to go get a hamburger, while I wobbled to my truck and drove to town to replenish my beer supply. I was just in time. It turned out that they weren't adverse to a nightcap or two -- or three or four. Fortunately, I had bought two cases, so by the time they got to bed there was still enough left for the next day. And, like the youngsters, this couple also was very interesting. He was an engineer, and his wife was into some sort of herbal business. I learned a lot about computers, and Betty got some lowdown on herbs that she would later put to use. Again, the company was almost worth what happened the next morning.

* * * *

I had planned on picking up on the tractor where I had left off early the previous day. It was my really busy time of the year, and I needed to get started early. And I thought I would when I saw the breakfast menu. Just a normal sampling that two slightly overweight people might want for breakfast -- which was still twice what Betty or I ever ate. I was beginning to have second thoughts about that menu, and seeing Betty slaving away in the kitchen, I'm sure she was, too. At any rate, this interesting couple ate only a couple of breakfasts apiece, as the man said they were due at a herbal farm at nine. That suited me.

I was very polite and decided not to go to work until after they left. In the meantime, I popped a beer. I saw the engineer looking longingly at the can. I shrugged and offered him one. Four hours later, we were still on the front porch, drunkenly discussing the whichness of what. I think it was Betty who finally ran them off and put me to bed around noon, but I really don't remember. Heck, I didn't even remember to collect their money, but fortunately Betty did. After I sobered up, Betty remarked, "You know, I'm not sure this is such a good way to get rich."

"Let's try it a little longer," I insisted. "It's really not much work." For some reason, Betty sort of glared at me when I said that. I have no idea why. Maybe because she spent those few minutes in the kitchen cooking and washing dishes, while I entertained our guests.

* * * *

Betty and I both anxiously awaited word of our next guest. This one came with only a day's notice, so we were sort of pushed to get things ready, especially since Betty had put in better than a sixty hour week, not counting an hour each way in traffic, and I had been mowing at least a couple of hours each day, and driving back and forth to town in an effort to keep the refrigerator stocked with Coors. I didn't want to get caught short again.

When the guests pulled up, I thought I recognized the car, but I didn't want to believe it. I didn't until there was no choice: yes, it was that nice little young couple again. I don't see much point in repeating the breakfast bacchanalians; same story, second verse.

I waved goodbye to them the next day to the tune of curses and rattling dishes coming from the direction of the kitchen. "That's it!" Betty declared. "This Bed and Breakfast is out of business!"

"This can't go on," I replied. "Let's try one more, and see what

happens."

I suspected Betty of hitting the medicinal alcohol I kept in a Jack Daniel's bottle in the kitchen, because she agreed. Shucks, she even got a little smile on her face after a while. I didn't suspect a thing.

* * * *

Two weeks later we got a call for another guest. A single this time. No sweat, I thought. I kept thinking that, right up until after our guest arrived, and Betty informed me that she had to work Saturday, and would be leaving at six in the morning.

"Who's going to cook?" I asked.

"I guess you'll have to," Betty said. "Just think of the money you'll be making, and I'm sure you will get through it fine."

I had nightmares that night, dreaming that our guest, an overweight, middle-aged schoolteacher, might order a gigantic breakfast. I could cook, after a fashion, but I figured I would need at least a case of beer to have the courage to tackle something like that. I dreamed of endless stacks of burnt pork chops and runny pancakes, spilt milk and mistaking salt for sugar. I may have even yelled in my sleep, because the schoolteacher looked me over the next morning like a bug under a microscope. She reminded me so much of my sixth grade teacher that I didn't dare let her see me open a beer to help breakfast along. I started on her menu, cold sober.

"These aren't right," she said, fifteen minutes later when I brought her meal. "The eggs are scrambled too hard; the oatmeal is cold and gummy, and the toast is burnt. Go try again."

I apologized and returned to the kitchen. Heck, if she thought that bowl of oatmeal was gummy, she ought to see the stew pan full I didn't bring her. I learned the hard way that a little oatmeal cooks into a lot, and I had to keep switching to a bigger pan as it expanded, until I ran out of pans. The eggs had gotten hard while I switched containers, and the toast burnt while my back was turned. I dumped everything and started over.

A couple of hours later, I finally got her eggs just right, and the oatmeal stirred exactly three and a half minutes, and her toast brown on the edges but tan in the middle, and her bacon cut in half before cooking, and so on. I had to throw away three times as much as I cooked because she wouldn't accept it. I don't know if she had seen that schoolteacher fear in my eyes and was just playing with me, or whether she really was such a perfectionist. I wasn't able to satisfy her at all until I began clandestinely hitting the medicinal alcohol, and got to where I didn't give a shucks. She had to remind me to take the \$35.00 single fee, and I fell off the porch waving good-bye too vigorously. I was never so glad to see anyone leave the house.

* * * *

"How did it go?" Betty asked, as she came in the house lugging shopping bags.

I eyed the bags suspiciously. "I thought you went to work."

"Things were slow so I went shopping" Betty said casually. She smiled as she caught a glimpse of the full can of breakfast garbage I had forgotten to take to the chickens. I say chickens, because the dogs and cats had turned up their noses at it.

"I've decided that you're right," I declared. "Bed and Breakfast is no way to make a living."

"I'm glad," Betty said.

"But just wait until you hear what I've dreamed up next!"

"I can't wait," My wife told me, heading for the liquor cabinet.

Chapter Twenty-Four

AN ADVENTURE WITH BEDS

There's nothing like moving furniture to inspire that old, married togetherness, whether it's moving it from one place to another, or simply rearranging things in a room. But after doing both in one day, those new twin beds we wound up with didn't sound like a bad idea at all.

It sounded simple on the surface. Betty wanted to trade our regular size bed that lived in the guestroom, for the two twin beds from her mother's recently vacated home. Betty's sister wanted our mattress and box springs to replace the ones on her old bed. No problem, right? Just swap them out.

It was a clear night with lots of stars, and a bright sunshiny morning with no rain forecast for the next three months. That induced Betty to insist that I go to the shop and procure a tarpaulin to go with us. She predicted rain just because we were going to move some mattresses. I knew there wasn't a chance, but I didn't argue. We needed something to line the pickup bed with, anyway. It was almost May, and the truck hadn't been washed since Christmas, so that's what I did. We then hauled out the mattress & box spring, separately, with only minor bumps and bruises along the way from the bedroom. We tipped them over into the pickup bed, laying them flat. They just fit, but I tied them, anyway, using my trusty Swiss army knife to cut the cord with. I threw the rest of the rope into the cab of the truck, and off we went. No problem so far.

Since it promised to be a hot day, we wanted to get the loading and unloading done before noon, so after the 90 mile drive, we immediately began to remove the mattress from her sister's bed to make room for the one we had brought. She couldn't decide where she wanted to store the old one, so three of us huffed and puffed and slid the mattress off the bed and against the wall as a temporary expedient. The darn thing seemed too heavy to lift, anyway. It was an old timey mattress, the kind that is so heavy and bulky and floppy that it normally takes twelve husky men and a mule to handle just one of them.

Next, Betty and I brought in the mattress and box spring from the pickup, and put them on her sister's bed. Since her sister also had an old time bed frame, that made the bed too high. Off with the box springs, on with the mattress, and out the door and next door with the box springs to an empty room in Mother's house.

By this time sister and her husband were completely exhausted, and Betty and I did most of the rest of the moving. First, out the door of mother's house and around sister's house to the pickup -- four times. Twin beds, each with mattress and box springs. Betty is the packer of the family, so I let her decide how to stack them. She looked up, spotted a wisp of cloud a hundred miles away, and decided we'd better cover them for the trip home. I flipped half the tarp to the side, and proceeded to stack the things. Halfway through, I over-ruled Betty and decided to put them in edgeways so they would at least be braced against the back of the pickup bed. Off with the two we already had in it, and back on edgeways, plus the other two fetched and slid in edgeways. And then back for the metal frames, which were easy to take apart -- so easy, in fact, that I didn't bother to memorize the sequence. Out to the pickup with the frames. After that I tied everything all tight with the load resting on half the tarp, and the rest wrapped over the mattresses and springs. I tied it tightly through each grommet of the tarp, and began wishing I had brought a heavier cover -- this one looked sort of fragile. I might have convinced Betty to do without, but that would have meant unloading and loading again. The heck with it.

Now, back into sister's house to rest, I thought. Nope. She had decided she wasn't going to leave that old timey mattress leaning against the wall. Frankly I didn't blame her, but I wish she had decided to have it moved after we were well on down the road. Remember how heavy it was, just sliding it off the bed? Its weight quadrupled as soon as we tried picking it up to move it, me in front and Betty and her sister on the other end. I got a good grip, and away we went, with two tons of mattress stretching my arms and bending my fingers. Out of sister's house, around to mother's house and through the door, all the time with that old mattress folding and bending and bumping and gaining weight with each step while my fingers cramped, and my arms turned into piano wire, and my legs into jelly. Faster and faster I ran toward that empty room with my end of the mattress, knowing if I ever let go that there was no chance in hades I could ever pick that monster up again. Me and the

mattress collapsed into the empty room just as my lungs threatened a spontaneous pneumothorax, and my muscles began talking revolt and a new head of state.

I heard clapping behind me. "Wow!" Betty applauded. "You ran the last thirty feet with the mattress all by yourself!"

"Where were y'all?" I gasped.

"We both couldn't get through the door together, so we let go."

"Well, where's the Hulk when you really need him?" I griped petulantly.

"Never mind," Betty said. "We're about done now."

Eventually I gained my feet, and wobbled back to the proceedings.

The rest of the morning at sister's house went a little better, involving only a few light loads of things I hadn't counted on carrying back, added to the cab of the pickup and behind the seats, stowed in such a way that I had to scrunch my seat forward, and bend my already abused body like a pretzel to fit inside. Betty drove back, and other than feeling my cramped feet slowly shrink by two full sizes from being wadded up in my tennis shoes, the trip went okay -- until I heard a flapping noise behind us.

I didn't even have to turn around to know what the noise was. The bright blue tarp had torn loose from its grommets, and was flapping in the wind like a monstrous blue jay. Betty pulled over eventually -- we were on a two-lane road -- and I got out to see what I could do.

Now remember, half the tarpaulin was beneath the mattresses and springs, and half of it was loose, previously tied up over the load by a set of now-defunct grommets. I still had some rope, and remembered that the steel frames which we had stowed along each side of the mattresses were pretty heavy, so I pulled out my Swiss army knife, and cut a couple of lengths of rope, intending to mash down the loose part of the tarp up and tie it around the frames. I laid my knife up on top of one of the mattresses so it would be handy.

That idea of tying didn't work out so well because, of course, I would have had to punch holes in the tarp to tie it around the frames. I scratched my head while figuring out what to do.

"Why don't you just wad it up, and lay the frames on top?" Betty asked.

If there's one thing I don't need, it's a smart alec wife making noises when I'm trying to solve a difficult problem, but since she happened to be right, I didn't say anything. I figured being made to bring the tarp on a clear day to begin with canceled out her being right about the way to keep it from flapping. Sure enough, the frames weighted the loose tarp down enough that we were on our way in a minute. It wasn't until we got home and I felt the empty holster where my knife belonged when I went to cut the rest of the ropes loose, that I remembered I had left my trusty knife on top of one of the mattresses. I looked up there, sort of hoping for a miracle, but, of course, the knife was gone.

Grumble grumble, cuss cuss I muttered to myself after getting a kitchen knife to cut the ropes loose so that we could begin unloading. First the frames, naturally. Or the pieces of the frames that I pretty soon found wouldn't go together right. Darn, they had looked so simple when I had taken them apart. It only took an hour or so of straining and bending and lifting and kicking and hitting with a hammer to figure out that I was trying to put together two different types of frames using intermixed pieces. It went fairly easy after that, especially after discovering the final step went even better with me holding and Betty kicking to get them into the right dimensions for the box springs -- except it turned out that I had to redo one of them because, of course, the box springs weren't the same size, or the frames weren't the same size; one or the other, and I don't remember which. All I do remember is taking the springs off and putting them on several times, then carrying in and adding the mattresses, and collapsing into my easy chair, thinking the day was done.

Having been married a couple of times before, and to this particular sweet thing whom I love dearly, I should have known better than to sit down on

a furniture moving day, because pretty soon I was up, having to reverse the alignment of the beds because something or other stuck out an inch too much. I no sooner got sat down again, than I started to hear a sound like tag team wrestlers coming from the bedroom. I spent five or ten minutes getting my exhausted body up from my chair, and raced faster than a speeding snail to the bedroom to see what the ruckus was about.

There was Betty, rearranging furniture. She had already shifted both twin beds around, and was busily shaking the oak dresser that had lived in that room in the same spot for 21 years. Actually, she was doing the shaking. That dresser wasn't moving at all, except for the mirror that was banging against the wall. That made me remember how I had spent a week trying to figure out how the mirror attached to the dresser, and finally wound up rigging some assembly so that it had perched precariously atop the dresser for lo, these many years. At my age, I don't have weeks to spare trying to figure it out again, so I rushed to help. Between Betty and I, we gradually got that ten ton dresser moving, inch by grudging inch, with her pulling and me pushing and trying to keep the mirror from collapsing on our heads at the same time. Eventually it came to rest against another wall, where I fervently hope it stays for the next 21 years, by which time I doubt if anyone will fetch me from the nursing home to move it again.

I thought about starting to write a book about women and furniture, but I was too tired and sore from the day's experience to even think about it. My back was sore, my legs were sore, even my fingers were sore. I went to bed and slept 14 hours, and, somewhat refreshed, got up the energy to go out to the truck and fold up the remains of the tarpaulin and put it away. During the first fold, my Swiss army knife fell out of the tarp where it had been resting since falling down between the mattresses.

There is some justice in the world after all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

TRACTOR AND THE THREE LEGGED IRON SCORPION

If I were still a drinking man, I would certainly have had a few that day of moving beds and furniture. On the other hand, I sometimes wish I hadn't been a drinking man when we ordered our first tractor, the year after moving to the farm. I might have had an easier time of things. Or maybe not. That tractor was too uppity for its own good, and I probably needed some strong drink to put it in its place.

The truck from the tractor dealer unloaded our new machine and all its attachments, then drove away, leaving me to sort things out. It was my first encounter with a tractor.

"Hello, Tractor," I said. "Show me what you got."

Tractor didn't answer. All right, be that way, I thought. I'll learn to use you, anyway.

Tractors are psychic. This one read my mind. "That's what you think," it said.

"What could be so hard about it?" I answered.

"You'll find out," Tractor said.

I hate smart-alec machines. I hooked up the bush hog, only losing two fingers and a kneecap in the process. I started bush hogging tree stumps, small ones, only about twelve inches in diameter. I heard a godawful noise behind me. I looked back. The bush hog was bouncing in four different dimensions, and screaming at me to stop before it tore itself to pieces. While I was watching behind me, I ran into another stump, except it still had a tree attached to it. The godawful noise stopped. Another godawful noise started as the tractor wheels kept turning, digging deep holes through rocks and roots. I screamed for the tree to get out of the way. Tree didn't listen. I pulled the emergency stop thingy. I got off Tractor, went to the house, and called Tow Truck to get Tractor back to level ground, but first he used a big industrial jack to untangle bush hog from the tree trunks, so Tractor could move around a bit.

Tractor's radiator grinned at me through its new snaggle-toothed grill. "Had enough?" It asked.

"That was just an aberration," I said. "Besides, it was your fault, not mine. You shouldn't have tried to mow down such big stumps."

"Me? I would have to get bought by an idiot," Tractor muttered.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said you hurt me, and if you try to use me again, you'll be sorry," Tractor told me.

"Oh, yeah?" I said.

"Yeah. I bet you can't dig some postholes with that auger attachment," Tractor said.

"What's an auger?" I asked.

"That thing over in the corner of the barn," Tractor said.

I went to the corner of the barn. No wonder that thing was hiding in the corner. It looked like it had come out of an ugly factory. There were two great curved arms with little holes in the ends of them. The arms joined the rest of the contraption about where another big, straight arm was loosely attached. It sported what was clearly a handgrip on the end of it, and depending from where all these things met, was a great big corkscrew.

Well, I'm not dumb. I could tell right off that the corkscrew was the functional piece, the part intended to dig the holes. Now, don't ask me why anyone would call a big corkscrew an auger. I know what an auger looks like. It's the little thing on my Swiss army knife that I use to drill new holes in my belt every year or so as it shrinks. I figured Tractor was just trying to confuse me. I decided to show him right off that I could dig a hole with that auger thing, as he called it. I bent over and lifted it by the two curved arms, propping it up by the other arm, which is what I figured it was for, except I couldn't see why what looked like a hand grip was gouging a hole in the dirt, but you know engineers, always screwing good machines up by adding unnecessary parts.

Anyway, I kicked the big corkscrew into position, and holding on to the big curved arms with both hands while simultaneously avoiding that other useless arm by gripping it with my third hand, I began turning in circles to dig me a hole. Tractor began laughing like all get out, just as I tripped over another unnecessary part, causing the whole thing to collapse, and the corkscrew to drill a hole in my leg instead of the ground.

"What's so funny?" I asked. "Anyone can fall down."

"You're supposed to put the auger on me, you dummy," Tractor said.

"I knew that," I said loftily. "I was just checking it out."

Tractor laughed some more. "All right, you checked it. Now put it on."

I proceeded to do so. Or tried to. Getting that dratted thing upright, and holding it there by the middle, and using a hind foot to lift the curved arms to the bottom arms of the three point hitch while holding onto the PTO attachment with a third hand, and bracing the apparatus with the other hind foot, while trying to keep from getting swatted across the face by the free-swinging third arm, isn't as simple as it sounds. I got one arm hooked on, then it slipped off and took my other kneecap with it. I tried slipping the female part of the auger over the male part of the PTO first, and the big corkscrew, hanging freely, swung between my legs and ended my sex life for the next six months. I grabbed for my crotch, and the whole unwieldy thing crashed to the ground, bringing me with it.

I started to get up. One of the curved arms lay across my chest. The corkscrew was between my legs. The PTO arm pinned one of my arms. The handgrip arm was digging into my ribs. I could wave, but I couldn't get up. I couldn't even slide out, because the blasted contraption was still in the corner. Fortunately, I could reach my cooler with my free arm. I lay there, pinned to the earth, and drank three or four beers while I waited for Betty to find me when I was late for supper. Since I had already drunk three or four before deciding to get into a wrestling match with a tractor attachment, I was feeling no pain when she finally did find me.

"What are you doing lying under all that iron junk?" She asked

"Fixing damn Tractorsh corkshrews," I said.

Betty was used to me working while drinking, by this time. She handed me a screwdriver, and went back in the house. As soon as I ran out of beer, I managed to extricate myself. Tractor was still laughing as I crawled away.

I came back out to the barn the next day.

"Not again," Tractor said.

"I'm going to dig a hole," I told him.

"You better stay away from that auger," Tractor said. "I'm warning you."

"Consider me warned." I tilted another beer to my mouth. I didn't tell Tractor, but I had to drink a whole six-pack before getting up the courage to tackle that corkscrew again.

"What did I do to deserve this?" Tractor muttered. I pretended like I didn't hear him, and proceeded to hook up the auger. Drat. Now Tractor had me calling it by the wrong name. That wasn't the only thing I called it. Four hours and six more beers later, I finally had the thing hooked onto the tractor. Standing back and looking at it reminded me of a giant iron scorpion, with the Tractor representing the body, and the auger, representing the tail, lifted high and dangling ready to sting.

I climbed aboard, slopping beer onto my pants as I swung my leg over the gear case, and plopped into the seat. I killed the engine a couple of times, put it in the wrong gear, and jerked out of the barn in fits and starts. I overran the place I intended to dig a hole, and backed in circles for thirty minutes trying to get centered in the right place. Then I just sat where I was for a few more minutes, because in order to operate the auger, you had to hold onto the hydraulic regulator with one hand, and onto the hand grip of the thin arm with the other (which I had figured out by now was to guide the corkscrew into position and hold it there until the hole got started). I sat there because that didn't leave me a hand free to finish my beer, and I didn't want to waste it.

Finally, I was ready. Can't dig a hole, he says. I'll by gosh show Tractor just how good of a hole I can dig. I put the Tractor in PTO, revved him up, guided that big corkscrew into place, and pushed down on the hydraulic lever. The corkscrew bit into the dirt. It swirled in circles. Dirt flew out of the hole I was digging. "Hot dern!" I yelled. The corkscrew really got into gear. It dug deeper and deeper, until most of its length had disappeared into the hole. That's enough, I thought. I jiggled the hydraulic lever. The corkscrew went deeper. I had forgotten which way to pull or push the lever to make it reverse. The whole length of the corkscrew disappeared into the earth. I finally figured out how to reverse the process, but by that time it was too late. Tractor began to tilt backward, pulled by that still-revolving corkscrew, by now headed for China. I hung on for dear life, unwilling to let go and fall backward. The nose of Tractor rose into the air, and his hind end sank down until it covered the hole the corkscrew had disappeared into. The wheels still churned, gouging great holes in the ground, and that, in turn, left more leeway for the corkscrew to go deeper. If Tractor hadn't finally taken pity on me and killed its motor, I would probably have buried myself without even a tombstone to mark the spot.

When I was certain everything was still, I finally let go. The tractor seat was so close to the ground by that time that it didn't even hurt to fall the couple of feet to the earth. I got to my feet, wobbled around, and peered at the disaster. It looked like The Giant Iron Scorpion had stung the earth to death, and died in the process.

The next day I came back sober to see if I could extricate Tractor and the corkscrew. I could. By digging. I went to get a shovel. And a bunch of beer. A week later I had excavated enough earth to replace Hoover Dam, and finally got to the point of the corkscrew, then had to dig under it because it was hung up on a root. I had trouble identifying the root because I didn't know trees sent them that deep. I got it loose, and Tractor slowly,

reluctantly, settled back to level.

Tractor never said a thing the whole time. I was wearing my shooting iron, and I had warned it to keep its big mouth shut, or I would kill it right on the spot. As a matter of fact, Tractor never talked again. And try as I might, I was never able to get that auger on by myself again. To this day, I still don't know how I did it the first time.

And that, friends and neighbors, much as I hate to admit it, is a true story. As best I remember it, anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Six

WREATH MAKING FOR DUMMIES

In my previous popular book, Tales From A Texas Christmas Tree Farm, there was a little notation or two about wreaths, mainly how well (or unwell) they sold. I do believe that the mention didn't do justice to the art of wreath making. I'm sure everyone believes our wreaths are just whipped together in minutes according to demand, and that there's not much to the process. Everyone couldn't be more wrong.

Have you bought a real wreath? That beautiful green circle of fresh pine boughs, lovingly detached from living trees, carefully arranged upon a ring, and adorned by fallen but still useful pine cones gathered one by one from the forest? The type you hang on your door and wonder why it remains so beautifully green and fresh smelling so long? And is so heavy? Ah, faithful reader, here is the real story behind those wonderful decorous real wreaths.

I guess in a sense you might say the pine boughs are detached from living trees. They were living when we chopped them down. The trees come from our fields, and were originally intended to be Christmas trees -- but they were so ugly no one would buy them. Heck, we couldn't give the dern things away. From those Mothers of all Charlie Browns come the lovely boughs you see on your wreath. Now we ain't dumb. If no one wanted those trees in their homes to begin with, why would they want them after they are chopped to pieces and tied on a bent coat hanger (figuratively speaking)?

Coat hangers. Now I remember. No wonder I hate wreaths. Shortly after I was married to my previous wife, right around Christmas time, my former father-in-law gave me this coat hanger, a pair of pliers, some pine branches and some wire. "Here," he said. "Make us a wreath."

"Me?" I asked.

"Sure. It's easy,"

I looked down at the materials with a jaundiced eye. The only thing I knew how to do with a pair of pliers was to pinch my fingers, as I shortly proved. Withal, though, I wanted to get along with my new father-in-law. I got started.

A couple of hours later he came back into the room. "How are you coming along?" He asked.

"%\$%\$%!!@^**@^" I said courteously.

"I'll come back in a little while," he said.

Days later (it seemed), I was still working. I had twisted the coat hanger so often that it squealed in terror every time I came near it with the pliers (it caught on to the screaming from me -- every time I twisted, a finger jumped between the jaws of the pliers and got smushed). Even with all that bending and twisting, the coat hanger still wasn't exactly circular in shape. Well, it wasn't even very close; let's admit it. It was closed, though, and described something like an oval which resided partially in another dimension, and where I had unwound the hang of the hanger there were bumps and valleys which served no useful purpose, but which I thought looked sort of amusing. At any rate, I thought smugly, no one would ever recognize a coat hanger as the source of my wreath. I decided to go with it.

My father-in-law stepped back into the room. "How are you doing?" He asked politely.

"*@^@*^%\$%\$@!!\$%\$" I said, not so courteously.

"I'll come back in a bit." .

"How about the next century?" I muttered under my breath. He may have heard me. He was never so polite to me again.

Weeks later (it seemed) I had half the boughs wired onto the prospective wreath. The poor things had been handled so many times that they were more mangled and tangled and beat up than the loser of a grudge wrestling match, or seven of my eight fingers and one thumb. The boughs even had blood on them (my own, from pinched and pierced fingers). Some boughs went one way, some the other. Some seemed to have disappeared into that other dimension, leaving only trailing wires to mark their paths. The ones that hadn't escaped yet had turned as brown as dirt. I think they had seen what was happening to their brothers, and decided to die on the spot and hope I would bury them instead of add them to the wreath. I can't really say I blamed them. If I were a bough watching me, I would have committed suicide rather than go on that wreath.

My father-in-law stepped back into the room.

"How are -- -." He gaped. His brow wrinkled, and his eyes crinkled. I think he didn't know whether to laugh or cry -- or run for cover when he saw me tensing my muscles and clenching my teeth.

"Maybe I better finish this," he said. Mercifully, he plucked the poor, unfinished wreath from my hand. Clandestinely, I followed him into his workshop, curious as to whether he would attempt to salvage something from my efforts, or just start over. What he actually did was put on a tuxedo and top hat, and begin practicing magic. He waved his magic wand, and in a twinkling and a flash of his wrist, a perfectly circular, green-boughed wreath miraculously materialized out of thin air. At least, that's what I think happened. Magic is the only explanation I can think of which could have produced a wreath from the mess I had made.

We never did get along very well after that.

* * * *

Now, fast-forward thirty-odd years into the era of modern technology. We've cut an ugly Charlie brownish Christmas tree, right? However, since that tree has gone year after year with no one buying it, it has grown so large that it only takes a crew of six young huskies to cut it and get it up to the house. And we wouldn't want the poor thing to die before we clip its boughs, would we? Of course not. So we stand it in a big bucket of water that has to be replenished each day. And each day, we stand around it, nippers in hand, clipping boughs. The nippers are a sharp instrument originally designed by surgeons to amputate fingers and thumbs, and will still serve that purpose nicely if one isn't careful. The ugly boughs are put in big trashcans, and hauled to the shop where the actual wreath-making operation takes place.

Remember the coat hanger? Ha! Some genius invented a wreath-making machine, not to make us happy, but to make him rich. It costs bunches of money, and comes in several pieces with easy assembly and operating instructions, only requiring a degree in engineering with a minor in calculus and a side course in advanced physics to understand. Failing that, you can hire an idiot savant craftsman who dropped out of high school for the express purpose of making you look and feel stupid to do the job. In 37 seconds he will have the machine assembled and will have shown you exactly how it works. By this time, you already have enough money invested in wreaths to send one daughter to two years of college, with enough left over to pay her auto insurance. Or enough for a three-year binge, if you're so inclined, which you well may be before getting that first wreath made.

Remember those pliers? The wreath-making machine outshines them by far in the area of smushed, crushed, mangled fingers and thumbs. You see -- or maybe you don't. The main item of supply for this machine is a perfectly circular piece of metal about the same thickness as a coat hanger. Upon this template are set a dozen or two of brackets like that, set cross ways and upright on the ring. The ends of the bracket are fitted into the jaws of the machine, the end of a bundle of boughs is held in the bracket, and the operator stomps a pedal that closes the jaws on the bracket, folding it around

the tips of the boughs. The next step is to go find your wife, dragging the dangling wreath ring by the finger caught in the bracket with the boughs, and trying to describe the appearance and operation of bolt-cutters through a miasma of pain so she can cut you loose.

Eventually, if your fingers survive, the bundles of boughs will meet at the point of origin on the circle -- except for that last bracket which is buried in the tightly bundled foliage of the first boughs you placed on the ring. This bundle will promptly pop loose during the process of trying to get the stem end of the last bundle under it and clamped in place, thereby ruining the whole wreath.

After repeating all those steps a number of times, you emerge triumphantly with a genuine pine wreath -- ready for the next steps. Next steps? You mean it isn't finished? It has enough pine greenery in it to forest east Texas, packed so tightly on the ring that it weighs 20 pounds. Sorry, friends and neighbors. This is only the beginning of the end. Next, we have to preserve the wreath by dipping it into a vat of anti-perspirant (respirant? transpirant? Oh, shoot, let it go. I'm no Botanist), a solution somewhat like a weak house paint. This keeps the boughs from turning brown. And, ahem, just to cover our bases and cheat a wee bit, let's add a gallon or so of expensive green color that also resembles house paint to the vat. Just in case it even thinks of turning brown, you understand. Wreaths are sentient entities, and you have to keep one step ahead of them.

Now you have to bend over and dip the wreath in the tub of preservative/color solution, then hold it over the tub to drip (while bending over) so as not to waste the preservative, which costs only a little less per ounce than eau de dollar perfume. Remember that daughter in college? That's a good way to pass the time while bent at a forty-five degree angle with the wreath dangling from your hands. It helps resolve the pain in your back. After ten years of agony in this position, it's time to stand up straight again.

If your vocal cords haven't given out from screaming about your fingers, at this point you yell for your wife again.

"What's wrong?" She will ask.

"I can't rise up," You say. With the added weight of the solution saturating it, the wreath now weighs 30 pounds. And your back muscles are spasming and writhing and knotting up like a basket of eels.

"Wait here while I go call 911," she says.

"What about the wreath?" You ask.

"Drop it," she says. "I'm not getting any of that green goo on me."

You drop the wreath. Green goo splashes up into your face, adding to that which has already covered your arms to the elbows, your front from chest to groin, and your new white tennis shoes from heel to toe.

With a hoist and crane, you finally manage to get the wreath dipped and set on a rack to dry.

Is this all? Nope. After seeing your friendly chiropractor, you have to dip the wreath again. And sometimes again. All the time, you're wondering at what point, while bent over that vat of green glop, that the wreath, now weighing in at 40 pounds or so with the added solution, will tilt you forward, dropping your head into the vat and under the goo where you will drown. At this point, it would almost be welcome.

Okay, let's say we've finally got the wreath by-derned dipped enough that it will stay green until well past the third millennium. Now are we finished? Not likely. Plain wreaths belong on coat hangers. No self-respecting wreath made on this fabulous machine and lovingly colored and preserved at risk of life and limb would go naked into the world. It has to be decorated.

Well, that sounds simple enough. Just bench-press the 40-pound wreath up to your wife, and say, "Here, it's ready to be decorated."

"Go get me some pinecones," she says.

"Okay," I say. That's easy. Our house is surrounded by a grove of hundreds of pine trees. I get in my truck and go to the house. I look at the pine trees. I look up at the pine trees, 50 feet up as a matter of fact.

That's where the pinecones all are. I have a sudden attack of vertigo, which sends me reeling into the house where I sit down and thumb through a Christmas tree farm supply catalog, and cleverly gather 10 boxes of pine cones over the phone. I go back to the shop.

"Where's the pinecones?" My wife asks.

"I can't bend over right now," I say.

"Well, when can you bend over and get me those pinecones?" She says.

"As soon as the UPS truck -- I mean my back will probably be okay in a couple of days," I say. I ordered the pinecones to be delivered by overnight shipment.

Sure enough, the cones show up right on time. I transfer them into plastic garbage bags, burn the UPS box to conceal my perfidy, and proudly display the pinecones to my wife.

"I didn't know there were so many pinecones in our yard," she said.

"You just have to know where to look," I said smugly.

"And since when did our pine trees start growing red and green and white pine cones?"

Whoops! I had obviously ordered painted pinecones rather than plain. Fortunately, Betty liked them, so I got off the hook.

Happy now, Betty gets busy. Soon, you can hardly see the wreath for all the pine cones, ribbons, artificial berries (artificial berries? on a real wreath? I say something and am told to tend to my own knitting) and other gee-gaws. This brings the wreath up to about 50 pounds and completes the process. I have to admit it looks much prettier than those sickly artificial imitations.

I unwrap one of the wreath hangers I bought cheap, in bulk. One end goes over a pipe in the shop. The other end I hook under the wreath. I let go. The wreath-hanger bends, then breaks. The wreath crashes to the ground. The ring bends into coat hanger shape. The decorations fall off. The boughs pop loose.

The next day when Betty asks me to start making wreaths again, I tell her I have to go get an emergency haircut. My barber looks at me kind of funny since I was there only two days ago, but I tell him to shut up and cut my hair. And to take his time at it. While he cuts, I begin thinking of my next excuse.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE GREAT CHRISTMAS ON THE SQUARE EXPEDITION

Our county seat has a population of only 812, not counting dogs, cats, writers or Christmas tree farmers. Each year in Mid-December, the Chamber of Commerce sponsors this big extravaganza which takes place on the four streets surrounding the courthouse. It is called, appropriately enough, "Christmas On The Square", and claims attendance of 10,000 or so shoppers, lookers and merry-makers. The whole thing is climaxed by a parade along about dusk.

Now you would think that already owning A Christmas tree farm which lives on a road the Postal Service named "Santa Claus Lane" would be enough Christmas to suit anyone. Not my wife Betty, though. She saw an ad in the local paper, soliciting vendors for Christmas On The Square, and as soon as the message registered in her Christmassy little brain, I saw a familiar gleam light up her eyes. That gleam always spells extra work or extra strain on her husband's pocketbook, and usually both.

"I want to take my wreaths and handicrafts and stuff to Christmas On The Square," Betty told me, in a voice brimming with confidence. "We can get a spot for only a hundred dollars, and I just know we'll make lots of money."

I had heard that one before, back when she corralled a couple of granddaughters into escorting her to a "Trades Day" to sell jelly baskets at the exact same spot. Net result: a bad case of the flu and the sale of two baskets of jelly, which almost paid the salary of one granddaughter. "Uh, sweetie do you remember -- " I tried to remind her, but that's as far as I got.

"This time will be different," Betty assured me, and I resigned myself to the inevitable. Men should never argue with women about sex or money; they will lose every time. Besides, when Betty gets what she thinks is a great idea, neither rain nor snow nor dark of night nor protesting husband will stay her from her self-appointed rounds. I kept quiet and started figuring costs.

There was that hundred dollars to be paid for occupying a spot of grass and sidewalk almost the size of a closet (my closet, not Betty's -- hers is more in the nature of a warehouse or an airplane hanger). And I didn't intend to let her go alone, not with 10,000 potential short-changers to reckon with. Betty has only a nodding acquaintance with standard mathematical and/or financial theory, and tends to make up her own when writing checks or having to make change. Given that I would go with her, I had to figure on replacing my own valuable self at the farm with an extra couple of hands, which would amount to another hundred or so, even at the slave-labor wages we pay. Then there's the labor tied up in making the wreaths, her main item for sale -- by this time of the selling season even Betty has relinquished part of the wreath-making to whatever grand-daughter or daughter-in-law she can hire. That's another fifty or so dollars. You would think that would about cover it, but that was just the beginning.

Wreaths have to be decorated, of course, which meant another enjoyable trip for Betty to the crafty Craft Store, which craftily sells craft supplies at a moderate mark-up of only five or six hundred per cent. Add another fifty.

Adding all these expenses together, I figured Betty would need to sell at least three hundred dollars in goods just to break even. By my arcane calculations of potential customers versus wreath appeal divided by half the season already gone, I came up with a figure not too far removed from that. It was barely possible, I told myself -- and Betty, just to keep her happy. Actually, I didn't trust either my calculations or our local weather forecasters very much.

I may as well not have bothered, even if my figures stood up, because Betty wasn't finished yet.

"Honey, I think we need a sign for our spot on the square," she announced, the day after deciding on the move up to the county seat with her wreaths.

A sign? I thought. Well, I can make a halfway decent sign on my trusty computer, which I almost know how to use. It wouldn't take more than several hours of cussing to get it done. "What do you want it to say?" I asked, but Betty was already on the phone.

"Acme sign company? This is Mrs. Bain. I want a sign. On a banner. How big? Oh, at least ten feet long and four feet high ought to do. And I want it in color, of course." Of course. Color doubles the cost, but I love my wife, and said not a word of what I was thinking. She continued, "I want it to have pictures of Christmas trees on it in green, and our farm in red. What? Oh, the D Bar B Christmas Tree Farm." She paused, obviously listening to the sounds of a happy calculator, clickity, click click, then smiled brightly. "Only \$189.00? Great! I'll take it." I thought she had already taken it before she heard the price, but my lips were sealed. However, I happened to be holding Biscuit, our little doggie at the time, and he let out a squeal from me gripping him too tight.

"Did you say something, honey?"

"No, I didn't, that was just Biscuit wondering how we're going to afford dog food."

That remark didn't faze Betty at all. She's used to me making strange remarks, and rarely pays attention to them. I went back to my calculations. Now we would need to sell only about \$500.00 in wreaths to break even. I figured the numbers: Average wreath sale price of \$25.00 divided into \$500.00 equals 20 wreaths.

"We'll need to take at least 20 wreaths," I said, groaning. I was about wreathed out already from the ones we had already made for our regular customers.

"Oh, no! I want to take at least thirty," Betty said. "And a bunch of those lighted garlands I make. And lots of centerpieces. Oh, and we better take a few dozen pints of jelly. That ought to sell good, too."

I stopped calculating expenses versus revenue for the moment, and put my mind into the space requirement mode. What would it take to haul all of this stuff twenty miles without damaging it? Our wreaths are big and bushy, and the centerpieces large and fragile. It was hard to figure the space we would need because Betty was already busy adding to her list: Three tarpaulins, three large tables, three chairs, raincoats (need I explain that as soon as Betty decided on this foray into Christmas land, the Houston weather forecasters heard her talking from sixty miles away, and began grinning and plotting?). Books to read. Glasses. Water bottles. That giant banner and a giant landscape timber to attach it to. Flyers for the farm. Business cards. And on and on, as if we were planning an expedition to the other side of the planet, instead of a simple jaunt to the county seat. By this time, I figured our space requirements were up to a small boxcar or three large covered wagons. And then Betty decided she needed a giant display rack to hang the wreaths on once we got where we were going.

From past experience, Betty knew better than to ask me to build anything more complicated than a brick and plank bookcase, although in this case I probably should have volunteered -- I might could have strung out the building until after Christmas. As it was, our son Mike got the job. He went easy on us, only charging us a few hundred dollars for materials and labor, but the finished product added considerably to the prospective load. Just picture two upright poles eight feet tall, with criss-crossed two by fours for feet, loaded with sandbags made from old blue jean legs to hold them steady. These in turn supported back-to-back six foot by ten foot lattices for the wreaths. Now we really did need a lot of room to transport all the paraphernalia -- and our weather people were beginning to grin and mutter about storms in our future. And those few hundred dollars now had Betty needing maybe a thousand dollars to break even.

I called the nearest railroad terminal, but they politely declined to rent us a boxcar, and it seemed as if all the near-by covered wagons were tied up in Christmas parades. Frustrated on both fronts, and unable to make Betty believe it might rain (despite her putting raincoats and tarpaulins on her yards-long list of things to take), I began thinking in terms of a convoy.

Have you ever seen pictures of those archeological expeditions where jeeps and cars and trucks are loaded to the gunwales with camping gear and bedrolls and tent poles and water bags and with all kinds of odd equipment and odd-shaped bundles tied over fenders and luggage racks? That was us when we got ready to go, early on a cloudy Saturday morning.

I drove my little Toyota pickup, with pieces of the gigantic display rack and landscape timbers sticking out the end of the bed and over the tailgate as if they were pieces of a demolished beach house. I had boxes of this and that stacked here and there, and the whole load crisscrossed with enough rope tying it down to have climbed Mt. Everest with. Inside the cab were water jugs, jelly baskets, tarps, centerpieces and so on, leaving me just barely enough room to shift gears. I even carried something in my lap, a cedar wreath I believe, from the way I had to avoid scratching in public for the next couple of days.

Betty followed in our big Mercury, its trunk stuffed with tables, chairs and boxes of I know not what. The back seat and window ledges and most of the front seat were filled with garlands and centerpieces and what I thought was our lunch but turned out to be a bag of egg cartons we were saving for our daughter-in-law.

Our son Mike came last, in a borrowed blazer with the back seat laid down, and layer upon layer of wreaths stacked to the roof, and filling all of the passenger side of the front seat.

By the time we got on our way it was already sprinkling rain, the first time our forecasters had been right in the last hundred years, and by the time

we pulled into town and found our spot, they were predicting storms, hail, wind and possible tornadoes. Remember now, we were still in the selling season at the Christmas tree farm, and I had to get back and open the gates, rain or no rain. Mike and I upended the pickup, so to speak, and I made my escape while he stayed behind to help Betty set up her display rack and fix the banner and unload a million or so wreaths and unfold the big tables and unload jelly and centerpieces and set up little tables and get out the arctic gear I had insisted on bringing just in case, and all that stuff he is so much handier at than I am. At least, that's the excuse I gave for getting in out of the rain, and avoiding the muscle-straining job of setting up the operation. Besides, I haven't cultivated that story of a bad back all these years for nothing.

By the time I got back to the farm and got it opened for business, a cold north wind which hadn't been predicted was blowing an icy drizzle down my neck whenever I stepped out of the office, which wasn't often -- that's what I pay our slave labor for. Besides, careful planning had me there as the only person who could work the cash register until Linda, our daughter-in-law, arrived so I had to stay inside, regardless.

The temperature kept dropping, and I kept hoping Linda would be late so I wouldn't have to get out in the cold, but no such luck. She always was a punctual girl. In the meantime, Mike had arrived back from getting Betty set up, so I no longer had any excuse at all for not joining her out in the open of that wind-swept square. I slipped into my parka; told Mike & Linda to make us lots of money (we aren't the only idiots who fool with Christmas trees in the rain. Lots of our customers don't know enough to come in out of the rain, either), turned on the windshield wipers, and headed back to Christmas On The Square, driving very slowly.

When I arrived, Betty was bundled up in two sweaters, a coat and a Poncho, and sitting with her back to the wind. However, she was smiling, having made her first sale, a ten-dollar centerpiece. Only \$990.00 to go.

I have to admit, all of Betty's planning had paid off so far as appearance went: we had the most attractive spots on the square, I think. All we needed now were customers. How many did we need? Lots. For one thing, we wouldn't have the car when we closed at five to make room for the parade, so we sure had to sell the equivalent of the big Mercury full of stuff in order to pack everything back up. There was one other hitch: Mike had put up the banner facing the courthouse lawn, and the only people who saw it were some teenagers playing tag.

The day wore on. Drizzle, drip, bluster. Blow, rain, cold wind. Repeat same. Fortunately, the direst of the forecasters' predictions failed to materialize, but it was bad enough to keep the crowds down. Instead of a 10,000 body count, we figured maybe 2-3,000 people visited the square that day -- at the most.

The food vendors did well, especially those serving hot food and drinks. Betty and I each had a hot fajita as a mid-morning snack after deciding empty egg cartons weren't very nourishing. After that we had a hot funnel cake that must have weighed in at ten pounds or so, and was so good we about made ourselves sick. And that was the high point of the day.

We did manage to sell a wreath here and a jar of jelly there, a garland or two, and so on, at the rate of about one sale per hour. I wrote it all down. By four o'clock that evening we were wet, cold, tired, and I had been fighting a miserable migraine all day. We had sold a total of \$232.00 in goods, and even Betty was willing to call it a day. Don't ask me how we got everything loaded back into just the pickup and Blazer. Perhaps it was the driving rain and bone-chilling cold that helped and hurried things along. I suspect some of my old army training subconsciously kicked in, too. Wreaths, centerpieces, jelly baskets and all manner of gear in boxes and bags and bales, loose and secured, tied and untied got thrown into and stuffed into every nook and cranny available, with no worries about damaging those fragile centerpieces or bending a wreath or two. We just wanted to get the heck out of

there and into some place dry and warm. We departed the square to the tune of crackling lightning, booming thunder and hammering of raindrops against the windshields and roofs of our vehicles -- and to this day neither of us has ever inquired about whether the parade was held that night. Back at the farm, we unloaded all the previously named articles in that cold driving rain, splashing through puddles higher than our shoe tops, while I listened to Betty muttering to herself over and over, "Never again, never again, never..."

All in all, that expedition was, in Betty's words, "a bird-brained idea". I didn't ask her who she meant was the birdbrain: her for going, or me for not stopping her. We got wet and cold and it cost a bunch of money, but it wasn't a total loss: Betty now has the finest wreath-displaying rack in three counties, and I have to admit, those were the best damn fajitas I ever ate!

Chapter Twenty-Eight

TRADE FAIR FOLLIES

After the disastrous "Christmas On The Square" expedition, I had told Betty not to mention going to one of those things ever again. Betty never said a word, so I have to accept the blame for our latest excursion. What prompted me was that I had just had several books published, and thought a trade fair might be a nice way to introduce them into this area. That plus the fact that Livingston, the closest thing to a town in our area, was only charging twenty bucks for a plot to set up on. Of course, this plot had no cover, but I figured that this early in the year we wouldn't need one.

Betty soon got into the game with her crafty crafts. She made up Easter baskets, Easter egg trees, Easter door decorations and so on. Plus, of course, she labeled and boxed up the old stand-by that almost always sells, jam and jelly.

The trade fair was to run three days, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. We got there bright and early Friday morning, and got set up in a half hour or so. It was eight o'clock. The reason I insisted that we get there so early is that on one of our other trade fair excursions in Wimberly, the place was packed by eight o'clock. This place was not packed by eight o'clock. Nor nine o'clock. Nor ten o'clock. In fact, for the whole day, there were far more vendors than customers. Which led me into what was intended to be a kindly deed.

Across from us I saw a woman struggling with the frame and tarp of a canopy-like tent, trying to get it erected. I watched in fascination for a half-hour or so while she twisted aluminum poles into unlikely positions, and rolled and unrolled the tarp, which was supposed to go over a frame. At last I could stand it no more, and, thinking of my tent putting up experiences in the army, and certainly not being overwhelmed with customers, I decided to offer her a hand.

"Could I give you a hand, there?" I asked the short little dumpy woman.

The woman paused to wipe sweat off her brow, and looked up at me. Evidently she thought I fit the image of a tent putter upper. She said, "Sure mister. This thing is driving me crazy."

"What's giving you the most trouble?" I asked.

"It's these blasted tags," she said, jerking on one of them to show me what she meant. Each corner of the canopy had a long tab extending from it, with the last few inches ending in an elasticized loop. My eagle eye quickly saw that the tags were intended to be looped over a hook at the end of the leg of one of the aluminum support posts, which in turn, or beforehand, actually, were to be inserted into the aluminum framework which was to support the bulk of the canopy as soon as the several parts of it had been put together first. Excuse the technical. Tents are very technical.

"It looks pretty simple," I said. "We'll just get three of the corners of the canopy over the framework and hooked on the legs, then one of us can hold and the other pull while we stretch it tight and hook up the tag to the pole."

"Okay, mister, I'm game, but I warn you, this is a contrary tent."

"I was in the army," I said.

"Okay, sergeant, let's do it."

I picked up one of the legs and inserted it into the canopy framework. The other end of the framework came loose. I pointed to it. "Hold that end," I said.

"My arms won't stretch," the lady said. She was already holding one corner.

My arms wouldn't stretch either, so I carefully jabbed my tent pole into the ground and got to the other end. "Now hold on," I directed. I got the pieces of the framework into position, and got hold of a pole and inserted it, then turned to see how the lady was doing. She was doing fine except she had her tent pole going the wrong way, the opposite of mine.

"Yours isn't in right," I said.

"Mine points to the ground. Yours is pointing into the air," the lady told me, just as if she had been putting tents up all her life, and hadn't asked for help.

"The framework is obviously upside down and your pole is in wrong," I told her.

Dubiously, she changed her pole, and stood by while I heaved and flipped the canopy framework over so my pole was in the ground. I saw that it was firmly set, then noticed that a leg on my corner was wobbling.

"Set your pole and come grab this one!" I yelled, maybe a little loudly. The neighboring vendors all stopped what they were doing and began watching, which made me watch the little dumpy lady so that she didn't make any more mistakes. She made a mistake by not setting her pole solidly, so that when I pulled, it came out of the ground and the framework collapsed again. I know it wasn't set right because mine was still in the ground. The fact that I was holding on to it with two hands had nothing to do with the outcome.

The sun was getting a little hot by this time, and I noticed I was sweating. Also I saw that the crowd of vendors watching what we were doing was growing. They were grinning, too. I looked all around, and for the life of me, I still don't know what they thought was so funny. Anyway, this time I decided that the best way to get this canopy type tent set up was for both of us to start on one corner and work around to the last one. We proceeded.

We got the framework together, then I set a pole into it, and handed the tag end of the canopy to the little dumpy lady. She stooped over in front of me, and hooked the loop to the pole. Stooping over provided an amazing sight, but I decided she couldn't help it, and didn't comment. We set another pole and hooked the loop of the tag to the pole. It was a little harder this time, but it went on fine.

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said.

"I got this far by myself a half-hour ago," she said.

That comment wasn't worth answering, I didn't think. Instead, I made motions for her to set the third pole. She did, muscles rippling that I really hadn't noticed before.

"Now for the last one. Let's go. I'll hold, you pull."

I held; she pulled. The loop grudgingly came within an inch of the hook, but would go no further.

"Pull harder!" I said loudly.

"Why don't you push?" She asked.

"Push what?"

"The pole, dummo! You push up while I pull down."

I didn't like what she called me, but I had to admit that opposing forces made a little sense. I was still in charge, though.

"Pull!" I commanded.

"Push," she huffed, as if I wasn't already giving it all I had.

"Pull harder!"

"Push harder!"

"Pull!"

"Push!"

That wasn't just our voices. The crowd joined in, chanting along with us.

"Pull!"

"Push!"

An opposite tent pole popped loose.

"I'm almost there!" The lady yelled.

"Do it, do it!" I shouted.

"Ogod, ogod, ogod!!" Someone in the audience screamed.

"Harder, harder!" Someone else answered.

Another tent pole popped loose. "It came out!" I groaned.

"Never mind, I got it done," the little dumpy lady panted.

Our audience cheered. I personally thought the yells and hand-clapping were a little much just for getting the canopy over three corners of the framework, considering that two poles had come loose and were dangling from the tags looped over the hooks. Perhaps they assumed something more than tent poles were doing some rocking and rolling.

"Forget about those poles," I suggested. "Let's just set this one and get the last corner of the canopy over the framework."

She blew an errant strand of sweaty hair from her forehead. "All right, I'm ready."

I took the pole in both hands and set it good, while she got a good hold on the tag right above the loop. She pulled. I pushed. She strained. I strained. It wouldn't stretch quite far enough.

"Let me get down lower, and you get up higher," I said.

"Yeaaa!" The audience cried. What on earth did they think we were talking about?

Suddenly I noticed that our opposing forces so close together were causing the loop to come nearer the hook, but at the same time our bodies were twisting somehow so that she was in front of me, and I was behind her so that I couldn't see too well. And my sweaty hands began slipping on that aluminum pole. I let one hand go to try to get a better grip. I grabbed something soft.

"Hey, sergeant, get that hand away from there."

"Excuse me," I said. I inched my hand lower. It felt something hard that I couldn't see. I grabbed it.

"Let loose, you fool!"

"I can't, or the tent will collapse!"

"That under wire on my bra is going to collapse if you don't!"

"It sure felt like a tent pole to me," I said.

"Well, it wasn't. Here, you pull for a while, and I'll push."

I still couldn't see, and I don't think she could, either. I yanked her blouse off while she unbuckled my belt. I heard a tearing sound. The leg popped loose from the framework. The whole apparatus collapsed on top of us amidst cheers and yells from our supporters. I crawled out from under the collapsed canopy, and stood blinking my eyes in the sunlight. Just about the time I noticed I had a torn blouse in my hand, it was snatched away. It's a good thing, because at the same time my beltless jeans began sliding down my hips, and I had to grab for them.

I heard yells and screams. "Do it again! Take it all off! "Her get lower, and him get higher!" "No, get higher and him get lower!" "No, no! Missionary, missionary position!"

What did missionary position have to do with tents? This whole thing was getting ridiculous.

I decided that discretion was the better part of valor. "Lady, I'm sorry but your tent doesn't work," I said.

She buttoned her blouse, gathered up the remnants of the unworkable tent, and stalked to her vehicle, driving away with her nose in the air.

I don't know what the country is coming to these days. No one is polite any more. She didn't even stop to say thank you.

I don't know what the moral of this story is, other than don't go to trade fairs. Betty sold one jar of jelly. I didn't sell a single book. We both

collected good sunburns, and once back home and unpacked, we entered into a solemn pact: we will never go to a fair again unless we're maybe taking some grandkids.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

FREEZER CHICKENS

Shortly after Betty and I moved out to the country, we bought a big freezer. This immediately made Betty want to fill it to the brim with anything she could get her hot little hands on. Soon we had cartons and bales and foil wrapped packages and paper wrapped packages and leftovers and all kinds of stuff. Some of it was even edible, I think. What we didn't have was a whole lot of meat stored up to last us through a nuclear war, or mutant bugs killing all the animals on earth, or ... well, you get the idea. We needed MEAT in that freezer.

Since I had just spent enough money on a chicken house and big fenced-in chicken yard to have bought and stocked four and a half freezers with a thousand porterhouse steaks, Betty decided we should save some money, and grow chickens for the freezer.

"Okay, honey, you want to grow chickens for the freezer, that's what we'll do," I agreed, picturing dozens of nicely wrapped, clean, featherless chicken carcasses like you see in grocery stores. Besides, I figured by the time we got around to buying the chickens and feeding them and protecting them from varmints and so on, Betty would forget all about the idea. And, putting chickens in the freezer was comfortably far enough in the future that I was sure I would forget, what with all the other things I had to do around a new farm -- or what one day might be a farm.

ZOOM!!! That's how fast the time passed. I put the little baby chicks into the chicken yard, went back to the house, and the next day was astounded to see a yard full of full grown chickens. Heck, that's not even fair. Chickens don't have any business growing that fast. Betty went to look with me.

"They're ready," She said.

"They are? How can you tell? They're only a day old."

"I know. It seems as if we only bought them yesterday, but they're ready to kill."

"Well, if it has to be done," I said. "I'll just get out the new .22 rifle and shoot them in the head." I had just remembered a scene from my early youth when I owned my first real gun, a single-shot twenty-two rifle. Naturally, I had been unbearably anxious to test it, and there had been that young pullet wandering around and ... I still remembered how good the fried chicken had tasted that night, even though after mother finished with me, I had to eat mine standing up.

I went in and got the new .22 automatic, loaded it up, and brought along a few extra shells. I hooked a fresh beer, and went out to the chicken yard with my wife trailing along like a faithful female Tonto.

"Be sure and shoot them in the head," Betty said, "so you don't spoil the meat."

"No problem. They didn't call me 'Deadeye Darrell' in the army for nothing." "Oh yes, I remember you telling me what a good shot you were when you were fighting the Viet Cong and all."

"Um, uh, yeah," I answered hesitantly. When had I said that? Sometimes when I've had a beer or two, I say things I have no recollection of afterward. Well, I had been in Vietnam, anyway. That ought to qualify me to shoot a measly .22 rifle. We entered the chicken yard. I raised my rifle. A chicken raised its head. I fired. The chicken bent over, pecked at a bug, scratched some pine straw, and went on about its business.

"Must have been a misfire," I said.

Several misfires later, I had managed to shoot the comb off one chicken, and some neck feathers off another.

"What's wrong?" Asked my dear wife.

"They won't hold their heads still," I complained.

"Just pretend they're Viet Congs," Betty advised. "That ought to do it."

I remembered seeing some pictures of Viet Congs. Those pictures and flashes of light from our nightly snipers shooting randomly into the compound added up to my total knowledge of Viet Congs, unless they had come close enough to see one night when I was drunk, a distinct possibility. Being drunk, not coming close, I mean. God knows what I had told Betty when I was drunk.

I began stalking the chickens, a matter of following my chosen victim around and trying to hold the end of the rifle barrel to its head before I fired. The chickens were getting stirred up now, and the stalking began turning into a foot race around and around the chicken yard, with me holding the gun out in front of me and trying to both look where I was going and/or draw a bead on a chicken head, or touch the barrel of the gun to a head. I preferred the last option, being pretty sure I wouldn't miss at that range. However, the blankety blank chickens wouldn't cooperate. After some more misfires and shooting a few more neck and head feathers, I gave up. Besides, all those misfires had used up all the shells I had brought out with me.

"How come they don't fall down dead," Betty asked. She was genuinely puzzled, not having been around mighty hunters much.

"I think it must be a bad box of shells," I said, ignoring the new holes in the chicken house and barn roof and various trees and fence posts.

"Do you want me to go get a new box?" Betty asked.

Suddenly another scene from my youth popped into my mind, that of back when I was eight or nine years old, and mother was wringing a chicken's neck on Sunday after church so we could have fried chicken for dinner. The way I remembered, it seemed pretty simple.

"How about if we just wring their necks?" I asked.

"Hey, now why didn't I think of that?" Betty said happily. "Why I remember my mother doing that all the time. It's easy. Come on, I'll show you."

I was willing to be shown, though I was sure I already remembered the technique perfectly, but I thought I would be nice, and give Betty a chance to show off her skills. All we had to do was convince the nearest chicken to cooperate, which we did after chasing her around the chicken yard, stepping in chickenstuff every second step, and stepping on a chicken running the other way the other step, and ducking under flying chickens the third step, which I think makes three instead of two, but at the time it was hard to count. Between the two of us, we finally cornered our prey, and Betty fell on top of it to be sure it didn't get away again. She came up holding the chicken by its feet, and grinning like she had just captured an Oscar or Eppie or something on TV. I didn't think I should mention the chicken stuff smeared on her cheek and forehead just yet, so I didn't.

I looked around at the other 24 chickens still scurrying this way and that, flapping and squawking and complaining that they hadn't signed on for stuff like this, so I suggested to Betty that we clear out of the Chicken yard, and give them a chance to calm down instead of wringing her chicken's neck right in front of them, and maybe scaring them into attacking us instead of the other way around.

Betty thought that sounded like good idea, so that's what we did. She carried the first candidate for the freezer around the corner from the chicken yard so the rest of them couldn't see its demise, and also under a shade tree so we could cool off and regroup. Half the morning was already gone, and we hadn't even got one chicken out of its feathers yet, much less in the freezer.

"Okay," Betty announced. "I'm ready. Here we go."

She transferred her grip on the chicken from the feet to the neck, and started wringing. She twirled the chicken in circles from her hand, faster and faster. Sweat popped out on her forehead. She breathed heavily. Finally, she dropped the chicken to the ground.

"There!" She shouted.

The chicken staggered to its feet and wobbled around in circles, falling and getting back up. It was dizzy as all get out, but plainly its neck was still intact.

"What!" My wife shouted at the chicken. "You lay back down! I wrung your neck fair and square. You're supposed to be dead!"

The chicken didn't believe it. While we stared, it regained its equilibrium and made a getaway, heading south. We never saw it again.

I patted Betty on the shoulder.

"That's all right sweetheart. It probably just had a tough neck."

"Well, you can try the next one. My arm is sore."

"Sure thing," I said.

This time it was me who got the chickenstuff on me, making a sliding grab for another chicken, and grabbing it by one leg and a handful of tail feathers. It twisted around and pecked my hand ferociously until I got my grip transferred to its neck. I carried it out of the chicken yard with one hand, while brushing off chickenstuff from the front of my shirt with the other. I discovered that chickenstuff doesn't brush very easily, whereas it smears readily. I cleaned my hand on the chicken's feathers just for that, and promised it an extra wring when we got to the shade tree.

Betty watched closely as I drew up into a stance, braced my legs, and began wringing the chicken's neck. I whirled it in enough circles to factor pi out of an equation. I spun it hard enough to give me a good case of tendonitis the next day. I wrung and wrung and wrung some more until I got tired. I flung the chicken down to the ground.

"There!" I gasped.

"Squawk!" The chicken said. It got to its feet, pecked me in the foot, and staggered away, gaining speed. It disappeared to the east. We never saw it again, either.

Betty looked at me. I looked at her.

"We must be doing something wrong," I said.

"We sure must," Betty agreed.

While we contemplated the toughness of chickens' necks, another vision from my childhood manifested itself. This vision was of my Dad with a little hatchet in one hand and a chicken held by the feet in the other hand, with its neck laid on a chopping block. Now, by golly, that made more sense to me than twirling a chicken in circles by its neck (later on I called my mother, and she said you had to give a little twist to the neck as you twirled in order to break it). If a chicken could get up and walk away with its head separated from its body, I wanted to see it.

"Where are you going?" Betty asked.

"To get my little hatchet," I said.

I won't go into the details of chasing another chicken. Suffice to say that they were wary, the chicken yard was filled to a depth of at least three feet with chickenstuff, and chickens can run faster than you would ever believe something with only two feet could. Finally I caught a laggard and brought it over to the chopping block. I didn't even wait to cool off. I plopped the chicken's neck on the block, and whapped its neck with the hatchet.

"Ha!" I shouted, as the head parted from the body. I flung it triumphantly to the ground. The headless chicken got up and started scampering around.

Betty screamed.

"It can't do that! It's dead!"

I didn't think it could do that either, but it did. However, in a minute or so the chicken quit running around like a chicken with its head cut off (and now I know where that expression comes from), and we were ready to proceed from there.

I sat down, put the chicken in front of me, and pulled at its feathers. They slipped out of my hand with the greatest of ease. I looked at my fingers to be sure no one had greased them while I wasn't looking -- or to be sure

they weren't covered with chickenstuff. They weren't.

Betty plucked at the feathers a bit with no better luck, then suddenly her face brightened. "I remember now! Mother used hot water to loosen the feathers. She had a big pot to dip them in."

We didn't have a big pot, but a big trashcan worked about as well. We didn't even have to build a fire since our water ran pretty hot as it was. I dipped the chicken carcass in the hot water, and we both plucked. An hour later we had a blood-smeared, feather-encrusted chicken body that looked as if a cat would turn its nose up at it.

"I think I'd rather just skin them," Betty said.

I went and caught another chicken, washed off the chickenstuff, and chopped off its head. I pulled and pulled at its skin. Betty pulled and pulled at its skin. I got a knife and tried separating it that way. So did Betty. An hour later we had a blood-smeared, feather-encrusted chicken that looked as if ... well, you know what.

"We have to get a move on," I reflected. It was noon. So far we had let two chickens with sore necks escape, and had plucked one and skinned one. That left 21 to go.

Over the next hour or two, we worked out a system. I chased and caught and chopped. Betty dipped and plucked and skinned. Along about sunset we brought our tired bodies and 23 carcasses into the house. They looked nothing at all like the chicken carcasses you could buy in grocery stores for 79 cents a pound.

"Save out one," I told Betty. "I can't face chicken tonight, but tomorrow I want to have a fried chicken. We need something to reward us for all this work."

"So we do," Betty agreed, putting one carcass aside, and resuming the wrapping of the others in foil to go to the freezer.

The next day I sat down at the table to a heaping pile of fried chicken and all the fixins. I picked up a nicely brown leg and bit into it. My teeth stuck. I took the leg out of my mouth (with some difficulty) and looked at the leg. It looked like a perfectly ordinary fried chicken leg. I bit down again and felt a filling come loose. The meat was so tough it would not come free from the bone. I looked over at Betty. She was doing a perfect imitation of a beaver trying to gnaw an iron wood tree in two, except it was a chicken breast. She did eventually work a piece of the breast off from the rest and get it in her mouth, but she failed miserably in trying to chew it up. That chicken was tougher than any old leather shoe. In fact, it was positively inedible.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Betty had to admit she had no idea, and neither did I. So far as either of us knew, we had raised the chickens much as our forefathers (or mothers) did, and cooked them exactly the same. We just couldn't eat them.

We tried one more as the main ingredient in chicken and dumplings, boiling and cooking it half a day. We had dumplings for supper. They were pretty good, but the chicken meat in them was unchewable.

I still don't know what went wrong. I know for sure chicken was never that tough on the farm where I grew up, and Betty says the same thing. Eventually we put the carcasses out for the dogs and cats. They turned their noses up at them, too, so I took them to the pond and threw them in for the catfish. A few months later I went fishing and caught a big catfish. You know what? It was tough as hell. I think it must have been feeding on that chicken.

Chapter Thirty

THE LAST CHICKEN

Twenty years later, Betty was still on that chicken kick. Each Spring, I was instructed to go buy some more chickens, not for the freezer but to produce eggs. Yes, eggs, those things you can buy in the store for a dollar or so a dozen. I once calculated that the eggs produced by our chickens cost approximately ten dollars each, but never mind. Betty wanted chickens. I

suppose she thought country people weren't really country unless they grew their own eggs, despite feed costs, ravenous chicken hawks, even more ravenous foxes, coons and possums. I lost count of the number of times I have been roused out of a warm, cozy bed to go out with the shotgun or pistol, or in the case of a snake, with a machete to rescue the chickens and/or the eggs.

To give you an idea of how devoted Betty was to her chickens (and eggs), I first have to tell you that, like most women, she is deathly afraid of snakes. She still thinks it must have been a hallucination that time I picked up a chicken snake by its tail, and beat it to death against the chicken house wall when my machete wasn't handy. Albeit scared, Betty is brave. One day she went out to gather the eggs while I was off doing something else, only to find a gigantic snake coiled around both nests. It had one egg in its mouth, and three more bulges in its body, suspiciously of the same size an egg would make. Betty immediately grabbed a hoe and proceeded to beat the snake senseless, until it not only let go of the egg in its mouth, but whomped it until it spit up the other three, two of them still intact.

Devoted or not, I guess all things have to end somewhere and sometime. After Betty quit work, our finances just wouldn't support ten-dollar eggs anymore. Besides, we acquired Biscuit, who was fascinated with chickens, and found innumerable ways to get in, under, and around the chicken fence.

Okay, here's the true story of how it all ended. After Biscuit (our cross between a toy and normal sized Dachshund) had plucked the feathers off our next to the last chicken, then sent it hippity hopping off into the sunset at about forty miles an hour, never to be seen again, our last chicken began drooping around the big chicken yard all by itself. It sang sad songs and acted as if its last friend in the world had died, which is most likely what happened. At any rate, it was plain to see that it was lonely.

After a few days of that, I broached the idea to Betty that perhaps the last chicken would be happier if we just took it up to our daughter in-law Linda, and let her integrate it into her flock. Betty was reluctant at first, but finally agreed. Hooray! I thought. No more stepping in chickenstuff! Free at last, free at last!"

That same afternoon I got a fair sized box, collected Betty, and we headed to the chicken yard to collect the chicken. I very carefully pushed aside the flagging tape that hung from the electrified wire over the gate. It plainly would not be necessary any longer, since I intended to disconnect the electric wire and gizmos and salvage the setup, just in case I ever wanted to electrify something else, like maybe a fence around my desk, or perhaps rigging up something with a timer on it so it would zap the paper carrier anytime the newspaper hit the ground after seven o' clock in the morning.

Anyway, I unlatched the gate and ducked under the electric wire, then Betty and I proceeded to corral the chicken and put it into the box. I left the gate open since it would clearly no longer be necessary to close it. After only a few minutes and a minimal amount of labor, we caught the chicken, deposited it in the box and collected the last egg I hope I ever see in a nest. As far as I'm concerned, eggs belong on a breakfast plate surrounded by thick sliced bacon, not in a nest surrounded by chickenstuff, or more likely smeared with chickenstuff. We headed out of the chicken yard. Betty went first. I followed, walking upright. No more having to contort my back ducking under that damn wire.

Short little Betty went through the gate, and I followed along, watching the box to be sure Henny Penny didn't get loose. My forehead contacted that wire I had disconnected. I'm sure I disconnected it. Something struck me squarely across the forehead. I felt a blinding pain in my head, and brilliant lights blasted me from all directions, while I screamed loud enough to startle the birds out of the trees. The next thing I remember, I was laying on the ground flat on my back, looking up at Betty.

Betty was very concerned. I could tell by the way she was holding her hand over her mouth, and struggling heroically to keep from laughing.

"What happened?" I moaned. I felt worse than the time I had run into

that horizontal two by four in the chicken yard one dark morning, and busted my nose and lip.

"Did you disconnect the electric wiring on the fence?" Betty asked.

"Of course I did," I said.

"Then what are you doing laying down there in all that chicken stuff?"

"I guess a bolt of lightning must have struck me," I said, looking up into a clear blue sky.

"That's one explanation," my wife said to me, while helping me to my feet. I noticed that she very carefully avoided that electric wire that I distinctly remembered I was going to disconnect. I stayed bent double for a few steps, not avoiding the fence, you understand; it was just that I decided I couldn't walk upright for a few minutes.

The next morning I went to salvage that wire, but I do believe I started inside the barn where it plugged in, and worked out from there. I figured the wire might have some residual electricity left in it. In the meantime, I will watch out for those lightning bolts coming out of a clear blue sky. It took a long time to get all that chickenstuff off me.

Chapter Thirty-One

EGGS ARE EGGS

With the demise of the chickens, we began eating store eggs, naturally. I was going to town the other day to run some errands, and Betty asked me if I would mind picking up some eggs on the way.

I said, "Sure, I'll do that for you." And off I went. I even remembered to actually get the eggs, too, which at my age is something of an accomplishment. At least I thought I had gotten the eggs, until I proudly laid (no pun intended) them on the kitchen counter.

Betty immediately opened the carton and peered inside.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Don't you believe they put eggs in egg cartons anymore?"

"There are two broken eggs in here," Betty said, holding the carton out for me to see.

"Well, don't look at me, I didn't break them," I told her.

"You're supposed to look inside the carton before you buy them," Betty informed me.

Well, shucks, I don't mind learning a thing or two in my old age.

"Okay, I'll take them back," I said.

Some time later, I returned, feeling really virtuous for making an extra trip to town to exchange the carton of eggs that had the broken ones in it for a carton of pure white absolutely intact twelve eggs. I not so proudly laid them on the table.

Betty didn't even open the carton this time. "These are small eggs," She said. "We use large eggs."

I looked, then looked again. Right there on the carton, it said Grade AA Medium.

"Isn't medium close enough?" I asked.

"It would be, except medium eggs are small. You have to get large eggs before they are medium sized."

"You want large eggs, though. How can I get large eggs if the large ones are only medium sized?"

"That's easy. You get Jumbo."

"Oh. Okay, jumbo it is."

I returned to town to the grocery store, not quite so enthusiastic this time. Very carefully, I picked out Grade A Jumbo eggs, opened the carton to be sure they were intact, and bought the jumbo eggs that in reality were only large, not jumbo. On the way home I wondered if there was a gigantic class of eggs that in reality would only be jumbo sized, but I quickly stopped this line of thinking before I got into colossal or spaceship sized, and started wondering how the chickens which laid those kind of eggs could be corralled.

Home again, I silently laid the eggs on the counter, hardly proud at

all, but determined to get this egg thing right.

Betty looked at the eggs. She didn't smile. I wondered how much more gas I had in the truck.

"What's wrong now?" I asked.

"These are only grade A. Why didn't you get grade AA like you did the first time?"

"What's the difference? They're eggs, aren't they?"

My wife reluctantly conceded that grade A eggs were, in fact, real eggs, but informed me that grade A eggs were unlike grade AA eggs.

"What's the difference?"

"Grade A Jumbo are the same as Grade AA medium. I wanted large eggs, remember?"

"It has been some hours now, but yes, I remember. I'll go back to the store."

"Maybe I better do it myself."

"No, I insist," I said determinedly. "Never let it be said that you have a husband who can't fetch the right kind of eggs for his wife. However, maybe you better write down exactly what you want this time."

Betty wrote it down. Grade AA Jumbo eggs. Look in the carton to be sure they aren't broken. I headed for town again. Very carefully, I checked Betty's note against a carton of eggs. I opened the carton and inspected each egg. None of them were broken. I had to take the carton's word for it that they were, in fact, Grade AA, since I must confess that the difference between A, double A and triple A escapes me. I paid for them while returning the previous carton, explaining to the clerk that apparently I didn't know nearly as much about eggs as I thought I did that morning.

I got home and plunked the eggs down on the counter.

"Careful!" Betty exclaimed. "Don't break them after all this trouble."

Betty opened the egg carton while I stood in resolute silence, certain I had gotten things right this time.

"Why did you get brown eggs?" My lovely wife asked.

"What's the difference? They're yellow and white on the inside, aren't they?"

Betty looked at me as if I'd never finished third grade. "Brown eggs cost fifteen cents more a dozen. Didn't you look?"

"I looked to be certain I had Jumbo AA."

"Well, I wanted Jumbo AA white, not Jumbo AA brown."

"I'll take them back," I said.

I stopped to fill the truck up with gas, stopped at the grocery store and got a carton of Jumbo AA White Unbroken Less Costly By God Correct Eggs, and told the clerk to quit looking at me that way. I drove back home. I slammed the egg carton on the counter.

Betty winced. She opened the carton. Two eggs were broken from me laying them on the counter perhaps a little more forcefully than I should have.

"How about some Jumbo AA White Inexpensive scrambled eggs?" Betty asked.

"Suits me," I said.

While we were eating our scrambled eggs, Betty asked me if I would pick her up some potato chips the next time I went to town.

Do you know how many types of potato chips there are now?

I told her my truck was out of gas, the transmission was acting up, and I didn't like chips any more, anyway.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE LOST VIAGRA PILL

I know I've mentioned old age a number of times. Now, I don't really feel old despite my 62 years, but some parts of bodies just don't work as well as they did when they were younger. And thence comes the story of the lost Viagra pill.

I had been hearing so much about Viagra that while I was seeing my doctor for a checkup, I asked him if I could have a sample.

"Sure," he said, "but I can only give you one pill. Everyone wants them. And be careful, it's the hundred-milligram dosage."

"I'll take care," I assured the doc.

On the way home I decided that rather than tell Betty I had a Viagra pill, I would just take it and surprise her with the effects I have heard so much about, then tell her where my renewed vigor came from afterwards. I figured by that time she wouldn't mind my little deception.

Now, any of you who have been married for a while know that you really don't have to say anything when you're thinking about hanky panky at bedtime; the signals are just there, and your spouse can read them as easily as she can tell when you're claiming to be watching a ball game, but you're really eyeing the cheerleaders.

Betty finished up in the bathroom first, and then it was my turn. I set the Viagra pill down on the counter, intending to take it in a moment, just as soon as I got a glass of water. There was no glass in the bathroom. I went to get one. When I got back, I momentarily forgot what I had gone to get the glass for (you older folks can sympathize here). I thought maybe I had forgotten to brush my teeth, so I got out the toothbrush and toothpaste from behind the Listerine bottle, but as I was doing that, I noticed that I had forgotten to shave. I put down the toothbrush to plug in the razor, and along about then remembered the Viagra pill.

I had better take that pill now, I thought, before I forget it again. I thought I remembered leaving it on the counter. I looked. No pill. I moved the Listerine bottle and the tube of toothpaste, thinking that maybe it was behind one of them. I didn't find the pill, but I did manage to turn over the glass of water I had never drunk.

About this time, Betty called out, "What are you doing in there, Sweetie?"

"Nothing!" I called back.

"Nothing doesn't make that much noise," Betty said. "Did you turn over your water glass again?"

"No. I mean, yes, but I'll fill it up again."

"I don't care whether it's full or not, just come to bed." Betty was beginning to sound a little impatient.

"In just a moment, hon," I assured her. Where the hell is that pill?

My search for the missing Viagra became more and more frantic. I couldn't find the damn thing anywhere. Finally I decided I must have inadvertently raked it off onto the floor while fumbling with my toothbrush or shaver. I got down on my hands and knees, and began feeling around for it. Viagra pills are blue. Our carpet is blue. Need I say more? I had no success at all. Of course I couldn't be sure the pill was actually on the carpet because I hadn't seen it fall, but I knew for certain it wasn't on the cabinet any more.

You may now ask why I was feeling for it instead of looking for it, even with blue on blue. I was feeling for it because my bifocals were on the bedside table, and I didn't want to go get them because I wanted to take the Viagra first, without Betty knowing about it. I began opening and closing bottom drawers and cabinets, thinking maybe I had put the pill up for safe keeping and forgotten where I put it.

"What in God's name are you doing in there?" Betty called. Maybe I was making a little too much noise, but I was desperate to find that damned pill. It was the only one I had, after all.

"I'm looking for my glasses." I said, without thinking.

Betty opened the bathroom door with my glasses in her hand. She stared at me down there on all fours as if I were a Martian suddenly let loose in the house.

"What on earth are you doing down on your hands and knees? You know you don't keep your glasses on the floor!" Betty asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Uh, I thought I felt a quarter under my bare toe."

"I'm worth more than a quarter," Betty said. I could tell she was becoming exasperated. "Come to bed."

"Just a moment, Sweetie. I have to go to the bathroom first," I told her.

At that moment Biscuit, our dachshund doggie ran into the bathroom. Betty closed the door on both of us. I searched some more, but still couldn't find that stupid pill. After a while I gave up and flushed a couple of times, and ran some water as if I had really been doing something other than looking for a blue pill on a blue carpet or a forgotten pill in a cabinet or drawer.

Finally I gave up. I opened the door and went back into the bedroom, followed by my faithful doggie. Betty was turned on her side with the covers pulled up over her head. Remember what I said about signals? Boy, was I getting a signal. Not only was I not going to get to test the effects of Viagra, but I wasn't going to get anything else, either.

I climbed into bed, thinking maybe if I gave it awhile, the atmosphere might change from cool to at least semi-warm.

The atmosphere did change. A little while later Betty yelped from the dark, "Biscuit, what are you doing? Stop that!"

In the dim light I could see Biscuit ensconced upon Betty's lower leg, making some unfamiliar motions, at least unfamiliar to him and to us, since there isn't another doggie living within five miles, especially any lady doggies. Normally he just cuddles up beside one or the other of us, and goes to sleep. Betty flung him off her leg.

Biscuit crawled up onto my leg and began moving -- and now I began to suspect where that Viagra had gone. It had indeed fallen onto the floor, and Biscuit had long ago let it be known that anything unfamiliar on the carpet or floor belonged to him. He had eaten it, and was now feeling the effects.

Now how was I going to get out of this one? I shoved Biscuit away. He came right back, almost frantic now. I shoved him away again. He went over to Betty. She sat bolt upright in the bed. "Biscuit! Stop that. Stop it I say!"

"Maybe I better put him outside," I said.

"Maybe you better. I've never seen him act like this. I thought it was female dogs that went into heat, not male ones."

"I guess he is confused," I said, the best answer I could come up with at the moment.

"Maybe he's sick," Betty said.

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Then why is he acting like this? Biscuit, stop it, you idiot dog!" By this time Betty had turned the light on. That didn't bother Biscuit a bit. With single-minded determination, he continued on with what he had decided was urgent business. As soon as Betty shoved him away, he came right back to me.

"Maybe we better put him outside," I suggested.

"Go ahead; see if it will calm him down," Betty agreed.

I carried Biscuit out to our big porch where the cats live and where coons and possums come up at night to finish off whatever food Biscuit and his cats have left over (Biscuit thinks the cats belong to him). I turned the porch light on and set him down. Immediately he jumped up onto the swing where our old neutered female cat, Cutie Pie lives. He got quickly to work. Cutie Pie's eyes popped open. She let out a squall and tried to get loose. Biscuit held on for a moment while the swing swung, Cutie Pie meowed, and the two Tomcats, Black Spot and Black Dot looked on with amused tolerance.

Their amusement lasted only until Cutie Pie wiggled loose and climbed a support post out of Biscuit's reach. Biscuit yelped and grabbed the nearest Tom, Black Spot, with his stubby little forepaws, and panted happily, tongue lolling and little haunches moving to beat the band. Black Spot yowled and reached back and slapped Biscuit's nose. Biscuit minded not a bit, and just kept on. Black Dot saw what was happening, and ran for cover. Black Spot managed to get loose and climbed up on the roof. Biscuit woofed in frustration and headed for the chicken yard before he remembered that we didn't have

chickens any more. It didn't matter. A wayward possum got in his path and had to take a turn. We could see clearly what he was doing under the full moon.

Betty was watching all of this in open-mouthed astonishment. "What on earth is wrong with our dog?" She asked for the dozenth time.

"I guess he must have a little sexual tension built up," I said.

"Tension, my hind foot. He's acting like a doggie sex maniac."

"Like Father, like son," I said proudly.

"He's not your son, you idiot. We're taking him to the vet tomorrow."

In the meantime, Biscuit was circling the house, looking for some more close companionship. He found an old tire, a stray cat that wandered up at the wrong time (thinking we were putting out food), then spotted the old boar coon who was accustomed to eating on the porch at night. The coon didn't pay any attention to Biscuit, being twice his size. He came on up on the porch and put his nose down into a food bowl, as usual. Like a shot, Biscuit was on him. Boy, I have never seen such a surprised coon in my whole life.

And that about ended it, except that Betty really did think something was wrong with Biscuit, and took him back inside the house where he kept us awake the rest of the night, attempting to do what so suddenly came naturally.

After an almost completely sleepless night, Biscuit finally settled down, and I talked Betty out of taking him to the vet. "It was just a momentary phase," I told her.

"Well, I hope it never happens to him again," Betty said. "It's like he ate some Viagra or something."

I didn't say anything, but I began wondering, boy, if a Viagra pill did that to a dog, what it would do for me? Of course, I had to figure that the pill was meant for a 160-pound man, and Biscuit only weighs 15 pounds, but nevertheless...

I still haven't gone and gotten another pill, but in the meantime, one of the cats has fallen in love with Biscuit, the other two won't go near him, and I haven't seen a coon or possum on the porch or in the yard ever since. It could have been worse, though. Suppose Biscuit had run across a skunk while he was chasing around the yard looking for a sexual companion?

Epilogue

The millennium has come and gone. Other than a two year drought, an unknown fungus killing trees here and there, a sort of grass-like weed which doesn't pay any attention to herbicides, and a plague of snails munching on our seedlings, we're in pretty good shape. As a matter of fact, it seems as if the more crazy things that happen, the more sense life on Santa Claus Lane makes. The first book about this farm is doing fine (well, we've made a few dollars from it) and we have great hopes for this one. If nothing else, these adventures have taught us how much our family and friends believe in us. Or perhaps laugh at us. Every last person who read as many as two or three of these stories, told us they should be made into a book. So here it is, folks. We made the book, but you are as much responsible for it as we are.

Merry Christmas.

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