

**Short Stories**

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## MOVING EAST

Have you ever wanted to be rich and famous? I did. And, at long last, my boat was about to come in. I had finally finished graduate school. The company I was working for just gave me a promotion to corporate headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut.

Stamford, Connecticut may not seem like much to you. Especially if you are from New York. I was from the Pacific Northwest. Seattle to be specific. To me, Stamford was corporate heaven. I dreamed of being in an important job in the east. Now my dream was coming true. My friends could not understand why I would want to move back east. They knew I would be raped and murdered before I left the airport. "Why do you want to leave Seattle? Are you crazy?" All I could tell them was that they were right, I was crazy. They were not driven to be rich and famous. They didn't see Stamford as the beginning of a new and exciting life. I couldn't see what they were saying. But then why should I. I had it all, a beautiful and well-educated wife, two children and a condo in Seattle. What more could anyone want. I even flew on the corporate jet! I had arrived in yuppy bliss. Well, I thought it was bliss.

This story really begins seven months before the "corporate" move. That was when Jimmy was born. Jimmy can only be understood in the context of his older sister. Carrie was the perfect baby. At two weeks old she slept through the night. I'm not making that up. she really did sleep through after her second week. She rarely cried. She was blond, blue eyed and very cute. Based on our experience with her, we "knew" raising kids would be a breeze. It confirmed the fact that we were exceptional parents. We knew how to do it right. Jimmy brought reality to our lives. At six months he was still screaming every three hours for food. It was obvious to us that he would never sleep through the night. He had already been hospitalized

for double pneumonia and had a visit from the EMT van for jumping out of his mother's arms, landing headfirst on the floor. He knocked himself unconscious.

Our trip to grandmother's house gives a good insight into Jimmy. He loved the ride in the car. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon. Both his grandmother and great-grandmother were there. I am the oldest son, who made Jimmy the standard-bearer. Everyone was waiting for the visit. We took him out of the car seat. Carried him in the house. As we went through the front door, his big smile vanished. Soon he was crying, then screaming. Leila (his mother) rocked him, cuddled him, tried to feed him, changed his diapers, nothing worked. Grandmother said, "that baby needs rocking in the rocking chair". Away she took her grandson. The more she rocked the louder he became. Great-grandmother said, "give me that baby". She was a woman who had raised five. She knew the ropes. First, she bounced him. No good. Next, she talked to him. He stopped crying. I could see it in his eyes. He was thinking "I don't recognize that voice". He focused on her face. "My god a stranger"! That was all it took. He launched into a tirade of screams and tears that would wake up the dead. By this time, I had enough. "Give him to me" I said. All you have to do is be firm with babies, so I thought. By this time, he had soaked his diapers. I grabbed him and held him tightly to my shirt. Instantly I was soaked with tears, snot and pee. My mother said "Jim, he wants to leave". "Nonsense" I said. He isn't old enough to know that. She was right. After another half hour of screaming, we bid them good bye. As we walked out the door his screams mellowed to sobbing. By the time he was in the car, all tears stopped. Three blocks from the house he was sound asleep. After all that screaming you would need a nap too.

"Don't worry, these things happen". These were the words I offering to Norm. Norm and I both had young children. Having a college education, I took it upon myself to offer him parental advice.

Technically, he was senior. His oldest was four days older than Carrie. Norm's wife was holding her baby when a bee stung her. She dropped the baby on its head. We were in the hospital. I was with Norm in the cafeteria ( I volunteered to watch Carrie while Leila went to the pediatric ward). Norm was a wreck. He knew the baby would never be normal. To a man named "Norm" that is catastrophic. I was trying to reassure him. "Things will be all right" I said in my most educated voice. He didn't seem to be reassured. About that time, I noticed my chair getting cold. I looked at Carrie on my lap. She was fine. Smiling as usual. I went on trying to reassure Norm all would be well. As first-time parents, I explained, we tend to make more out of a situation than it really is. He seemed to understand. Now the chair was cold. I looked down. Not only was it cold, the seat was wet. "How could the seat get wet" I asked myself. At that moment my mind flashed back to an earlier time.

We were closing a real estate deal. I was holding Carrie in the same position. That time things were warm, not cold. I looked down to see that she had filled her diapers and it was oozing out the top. It came over the top, ran down the side of her diaper onto my lap.

This time it was only pee. It came out the bottom. That explains why I didn't see anything. "My god, she PEED on me" I shouted. I jumped up. The chair was a puddle. Norm looked up and said, "don't worry, these things happen". I was not about to take advice from him. So I said "it is different with my kid." He only looked at me. He knew it was useless to argue with a graduate student.

So, we were moving to Stamford. Of course, my mother was not too happy about us moving. She knew (like my friends) that people were raped, killed and murdered in New York. She also knew we would never make it out of the airport alive. As the date drew near, I could see there was only one alternative. She had to go with us. It would

only be for a few days. Just long enough to assure her we were not moving into a battle zone. She was delighted. Suddenly New York was the best place in the world.

The day of the big departure finally arrived. It was on a Sunday. Everyone flies on Sundays. Our plane left at 7 am. It took two Cadillacs to get all of us and our stuff to the airport. Aunt Margie brought Leila, the kids and me in hers. Aunt Marie brought mother and the 11 suitcases, garment bags, handbags and one port-a-crib in her Cadillac. Upon arriving Aunt Marie began announcing to the world that her nephew was a very important corporate executive and was moving to the east coast. It took two porters to get it all checked in. Leila had a two-seat stroller in which she placed the kids while I took care of the bags. Next, we went to the terminal. Mother would stop to tell people that her son was a very important corporate executive who was moving to Stamford, Connecticut and that she was going too. "And here are my grandchildren, aren't they darling?" I knew at any moment Jimmy would launch into a tirade. He didn't. It must have been all the excitement. He was waiting for the plane. He knew he could not upstage his aunts or grandmother. He was waiting for his moment. It came at takeoff. Later, doctors told us it was the change in air pressure. Between sea level and 35,000 feet, he had what can best be described as a screaming fit. He wound up just like a baseball pitcher. First, he would squeeze his eyes shut, then lean his head back. Next, he would open his mouth. At this point you saw nothing but a cavernous mouth. No eyes, no nose, no nothing except a giant mouth with a wiggling epiglottis inside. He as yet had not made a sound. It was the quiet before the storm. Then it would come. Like a wave on the shore. First it would build, then crash in an ear-piercing wale. Sometimes the sound of his screams gave him impetus for even louder screams. By this time I was distancing myself from the kid. Have you ever wished you were invisible? That was how I felt.

Invisible is a common feeling when traveling with kids. One time I took Jimmy to Seattle. It was a business trip but since I could leave him with my mother, I decided to take him along. All the relatives were delighted that he was coming. Knowing his flying behavior, I decided to take the red eye special. I figured he would sleep most of the way, which he did. I also had a lifetime supply of sedatives. They worked marvelously. We had to change planes in Chicago. He was fine but wide-awake. He had just learned to walk. He toddled over to the window. No problem. He got there, turned around to look at me. He smiled. Then he turned back, and pee shot out of the top of his diapers all over the window. I was invisible, so no one noticed me cleaning up.

We finally reached cruising altitude and he calmed down. Things settled down. Food came around and we all ate. Carrie was charming the stewardesses. They kept saying what a beautiful child. They held her. They carried her around. It was great. It was especially great because Leila had taken Jimmy to the back of the plane. As long as someone would walk him around, he was quiet. Of course, the stewardesses only wanted yuppie children. You know, the beautiful, well behaved, charming exquisitely dressed child. That was Carrie. Jimmy was in a mood to be walked and I could see him being walked all the way to New York. Fortunately, mother helped walk him.

The details of the rest of the flight blur into a bad memory. All I can remember was watching the clock. "Only five hours left" I recall thinking. What seemed like two hours was only 10 minutes. Being interested in math, I performed a quick calculation, 10 minutes or 6 intervals per hour times 6 hours is 36 intervals at two hours each is 72 HOURS until we reach New York. Right then and there I should have realized I was headed for trouble. Of course, when chasing a dream, one never lets reality get in the way.

On we flew. Eventually we arrived. We came in over Manhattan. The view, excellent. My spirits picked up. Jimmy was screaming. I

didn't care. We had arrived. I was about to begin my new life.

Deplaning was not too bad. People were so happy to see us off that they made a path for us to go first. As soon as we stepped off the plane, Jimmy started smiling. He was happy. Apparently, he liked the east.

Picking up the luggage was another experience. I hired a porter. He collected all the bags except mothers. She had heard about the amount of luggage stolen. She was not about to let hers out of her hand. We lined up in single file behind the porter. His cart was full to the top. I followed. Leila was next. She had the double stroller in which were deposited the kids. Mother brought up the rear. On the count of 3 we marched through the baggage check point. I am remembering walking with the air of importance. When mother got to the check point, she was asked for her luggage claim check. She got confused. I had all the claim checks. I was already passing out of sight. Panic struck! She could see herself lost at JFK. They would take her to jail for stealing her own bag. We would be separated. She would never see us again. It was more than she could take. We were rounding the bend. She had only one option. At the top of her lungs she yelled "JIMMY, HELP HELP HELP"! Have you ever thought of leaving your mother at the airport? I did not, of course. It never even entered my mind. I went back. Leila and the porter didn't. Now I was separated from my family. I handed all 11 claim checks to the baggage clerk, grabbed mother, and ran.

We got outside to wait for the AVIS van. That sounds like a normal thing to do. The problem is the word is "outside". Outside, in New York city at 6 pm in January is cold. Cold is a word people from Seattle do not understand. Thirty-five degrees is cold in Seattle. Ten-degrees is death. Fortunately for us it was twelve degrees. The cold went through us like a knife. This was a bit of reality even I couldn't ignore. Mother began lecturing Leila on the necessity of keeping the



babies warm. In retrospect, I recall the look in Leila's eyes. I didn't know what it meant at the time. It is something only years of experience would readily discern. I now realize that twelve degrees is nothing compared to the mother and daughter-in-law relationship. What amazes me is that this is a natural phenomenon, like cold weather. There is nothing one can do to prevent it. The best approach is to go to Florida, leaving mother and cold weather behind.

The AVIS van took us to the rental car lot. There we picked up the biggest car they had. The people at AVIS were wonderful. They just ignored us. At this point, I really appreciated it. On the way out, I asked for directions to Stamford, CT.

The directions were in Bronxish. Being from Seattle, I didn't speak Bronxish. I asked again. At that point I realized Bronxish wasn't English, unless you are from the Bronx. In which case, English is not English. I tried modifying my request. "Which way is north?" After some arm waving, we settled on a direction. As luck would have it, the street I was about to enter was one way. By now you know that it was not north. Nevertheless, I had my bearings. Off we went. Mother rode in the front. She didn't want to miss any of the sights. Leila was in the back changing diapers. She was not in a good mood. There was not room in the trunk for all the bags. Poor Leila was pinned in among suitcases, port-a-cribs and dirty diapers. Mother kept calling out the sights. As we crossed the Whitestone bridge, she exclaimed "oh honey, look at those tall buildings, it must be New York." She went on at some length interspersing her descriptions with "Leila you should really see this" or "you are really missing something of a life-time". I think it would have been better without the influence of my mother.

We drove up to Stamford without incident, if you can say driving in New York is possible without incident. Being a good law-abiding citizen, I stopped at red lights, let others drive in my lane etc. The usual courteous driver stuff. I thought that would make a good

impression on New Yorkers. It did. I was amazed at how many honked and waved at me. I was beginning to think they knew how famous I really was. Then, at a stop light, I rolled down the window to hear what they were saying. It must have been Bronxish. People certainly would not curse at me. Although it did sound very much like profanity.

Finally, we arrived. I had rented a furnished apartment. It was a house divided into four apartments. Ours had one bedroom; it was a deluxe model. What amazed me was that it rented for twice the mortgage payments on my new three-bedroom house in Seattle. We trudged in and flopped into bed. Tomorrow would begin our first day as New Englanders.

## EGG PLANT

I hate eggplant. I hate it with a passion. You may ask why? I don't know. Why does one race hate another? Why do the rich hate the poor? I ask you, isn't it better to hate an eggplant than another race or socioeconomic class?

I hate eggplant. Yesterday Leila made eggplant parmigiana. I knew it was eggplant parmigiana because I was at the store when she bought the detested thing. I said, "what is that?" Leila said, "you know what this is". I asked, "what are you going to do with it?" She said, "what do you think". I knew. I didn't want to admit my wife would really eat such a thing. I responded to her question "put it in the refrigerator until it rots. Then I will throw it out." She made no comment. She put it in the shopping cart. I was now the proud owner of one egg plant.

Nothing more was said. We went home. I thought it could be placed directly in the garbage can. Why bother with the refrigerator She knew what I was up to. She grabbed it first. Now my refrigerator was adorned with this purple protrusion. The very thought of such a thing sitting there irritated me. I would wait. My time would come.

Next morning, she started cooking. This was to be her best parmigiana ever. She put in spices, herbs, and tomatoes, it smelled wonderful. I had forgotten about the tumor in the refrigerator. "What is that you are cooking?" "Something wonderful" she said. "It sure smells great". "You will like it" she said with a smile. On the way to work it occurred to me what she was making. I wouldn't like it if hell

froze over. I wouldn't like if the Arabs and the Jews became best friends. I wouldn't like it if my life depended on it. No way!

That evening I called home. My oldest daughter answered. "Carrie", I said, "what is for dinner". "Eggplant." Shit. Double shit. "Carrie, do you want anything at the store?"

Hoagies. That was what I was having for dinner. I got all the stuff. I bought plenty of cookies, candy and ice cream. If it got down to a fight, I wanted the kids on my side. When I arrived home, Leila was not there. One of the kids had left their homework at school. Leila went to get it. I ate in peace. I knew the storm was soon to break. She didn't come home. I began to worry. Maybe she had car trouble. I called the school. "This is Jim Black is Leila there?" I got a very strange answer. "Is this the Jim Black who refuses to eat eggplant. I can't believe that a man of your caliber would not eat eggplant. You are a Ph.D., college professor, chairman of the school board, consultant, and father of six." "Is it really true that you don't eat eggplant". "Just a moment, the principal wants to talk to you." "Hello, Jim this is the principal. Is it true that you don't eat eggplant? You aren't THAT ignorant and prejudice, are you?" "We just can't believe that you are THAT provincial. It must be a mistake." "Just a moment, the librarian wants to speak to you."

I had enough. When the librarian got on the phone, I took the initiative. "Sally, this is Jim Black **who eats eggplant**. I don't know where these nasty rumors got started. They are not true. I am even taking the eggplant to work tomorrow for lunch."

And so, I did.

p.s. It tasted very good.

## SUNDAY MORNING

There was a time when Sunday was a day of rest. Leila and I would get up late, enjoy coffee and croissants, then get ready for church. That was before children. Now Sundays are neither a day of rest nor a day of worship.

For us, Sunday morning starts Saturday night. That is when we "layout clothes." The idea is to get everything ready before Sunday morning. Then all we must do is get dressed and leave. At least, in theory, that is how it works. So, we begin just after dinner. The kid's layout their clothes and inform the parents of anything that needs to be washed. This is the dangerous part. In theory, the kids will tell us, and Leila will wash it. Note that I said the kids will tell us and that Leila would wash it. Being a typical husband, my job is twofold: earn the money and keep the wife pregnant. I have done well in both areas. Thus, I have filled my marital obligations. Under the division of labor concept, anything inside the house is the wife's responsibility. This, of course, places an unfair amount of work on the wife. Being a typical male, I remind her of how hard I work earning the money (as a college professor, I teach 12 exhausting hours a week). My second job is also very tiring work. Moreover, I like to remind her of the events in Genesis, chapter 3. It was Eve who talked Adam into eating from the forbidden tree. As Adam told God, "She talked me into it. It was her idea. I'm just here to earn the money and keep the wife pregnant." So, we have it. Proof positive. Man should not do any work inside the house.

In my earlier days, I believed that. Now I know it is not true. Nevertheless, I still subscribe to it. It may not be true, but it is impossible to teach an old dog new tricks - especially if he refuses to learn.

So, the kids find what needs to be washed and Leila washes it.

Believe it or not, once I did the laundry. I don't remember the circumstances. But I do remember doing it. It is one of those deals where you do it once and remind whoever will listen a million times that you did it once.

So, the kids find what needs to be washed and Leila washes it, and I remind everyone that once I did the laundry.

Now that is the theory. They only inform us of what they think needs washing. George, for example, doesn't believe it is necessary to change his socks. Therefore, he never informs us that he needs socks. When Sunday morning comes around, George comes down in the same pair of socks he has been wearing all week. "What is that smell?" Kathleen asks. "It is George!" declares Carrie in a way only an older sister can when expressing her extreme disgust for a younger brother. George, who doesn't respond to criticism well, drops on the floor in a puddle of tears. "Now see what you have done" I scream at Carrie and Kathleen. "Why don't you be nice to your little brother, for a change." I add sarcastically. The division of labor law doesn't keep me from entering the arguments. Kathleen, who also doesn't take criticism well, stomps off without saying a word. She won't talk to me for several hours, possibly all day. Carrie has her response all worked out. She starts crying. "You don't love me." "All you ever do is yell at me." She runs to her mother who is changing diapers. Faced with tears and poop, Leila is overwhelmed. "Jim why don't you be some help for a change and come in here and finish changing the baby while I undo what you have just done." "Not me" I declare. "Division of labor." "Well, if you can get everyone upset, you can help calm them down." "Not me. Division of labor." I go out to start the car.

In the meantime, George has gotten a hold of himself and starts to get dressed. "Where are your clean socks" Leila asks George. He doesn't know. Maybe they are in his toy drawer. He sets off to find them. In the meantime, with me out of the house, all the kids help

each other, and the babies get ready. At this point, Jimmy asks what is for breakfast. This starts a new cycle of eating, getting food all over the clean clothes, putting on a new set of cleaner clothes, and getting ready to get in the car. During this process, I come in to declare "We are leaving in five minutes." Leila calmly explains that church doesn't start for 1 hour. We have plenty of time. I can see her patience is getting thin. I decide to help.

"George, get your socks on" I tell him.

He can't find them.

"Where are they?" I exclaim.

"If he knew that" Leila says, "he would have them on."

"Didn't he lay them out last night?" I ask.

"George, did you layout your socks last night?"

"No, Dad."

"Why not?"

"Because I already had them on."

"Ok" I said, taking command of the situation. "Put your shoes on and get in the car ."

No one is ready to get in the car.

"Leaving in five minutes!" I shout. "Everyone in the car."

By now the situation has deteriorated to the breaking point. The kids are all upset. Leila is upset. It is time to be helpful. I go to the car and read the paper.

Finally everyone comes out. I can see I am in for it on the way to church. The kids are fighting, Leila is not talking to me. Hatred is everywhere.

We pull into the church parking lot. There are the Hemphills (he is an Elder). I smile and wave. He must not know what is really going on in the car. I wonder if his car has the same problems ours does.

We park.

As the door opens, a plastic smile comes across the face of everyone in the family. We get out to the greetings of the Hemphills.

"Isn't it a great day" Don Hemphill says.

"Just marvelous" I say "Sundays are always so meaningful to us."



## THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving! Except for Christmas and the birth of a new baby, this is the best time of the year. We always go to Uncle Carl and Auntie Nan's house. Uncle Carl and Auntie Nan live in Wilton, Connecticut. That means an eight-hour car trip. You may ask why it takes eight hours to drive 250 miles. I'm glad you asked. I'll tell you. We always have a two hour stop to repair the electrical system in the car. It is always the same problem. The battery is dead. It is always for the same reason. The alternator is not charging the battery. For several years, I always fixed it the same way. I would buy a new battery (from a gas station at 10 times the regular price). I would drive to Uncle Carl's and then fix the alternator.

This year I was prepared! Knowing the inevitable was going to happen, I brought along two items: my toolbox and Ralph's phone number. Ralph is one of the most important people in my life. Often, he is the most important. Ralph is our mechanic. He is wonderful. Unlike most mechanics, Ralph can really fix the car. One day a neighbor asked me if I knew anything about cars. "Sure", I said, "802-2257", that is Ralph's phone number. I have it memorized. Not only can Ralph fix the car, but he is also a nice guy. You know how it is when you go to the garage to explain what is wrong with the car. They look at you like you are dummy. Then they explain that what you are saying is impossible. That can't happen. I am fortunate to be male. At least they show me a minimal amount of respect. Leila says they don't even listen to her. As she begins to explain the problem, she can see the wheels turning in the mechanics mind "it is obvious that the problem is in her mind, not the car." When we go to Ralph he listens. Then he says, "Oh yeah, I had that happen to me last year." It makes us feel so good that we don't even care if he fixes the car.

Back to the trip. We started off as usual. Loaded with all the clothing that we could possibly squeeze in the 9-passenger station wagon. We were about 100 miles out when the lights began to dim. I am sure you know the sinking feeling in your stomach when car trouble happens. Leila said, "take the next exit." I said "that is too small a town. We should go on to a bigger city." She reminds me that we are in Vermont and that there aren't any "cities". I was forced to decide. If I did what my wife said I would lose face. If I didn't and if we got stuck, I would never hear the end of it. I decided to follow her direction. After all, if she was wrong, I could yell at her. Of course, she was right. We drove directly to a gas station with all the equipment we needed. I got out and called Ralph. He told me how to fix the problem without buying anything. He also told me what to say to the mechanic. It was simple. All I had to do was tighten the fan belt and have the mechanic check the charging system. I was elated. To make things even better, across the street was a kitchen specialty shop. Leila, an avid cook, went shopping while I fixed the fan belt. The kids stayed in the car and fought. The baby screamed. It was wonderful - wonderful because Leila and I were not there to hear it. By the time we got back on the road the kids were sound asleep. I had planned for a two-hour repair stop. Since it only took one hour, we were ahead of schedule.

The rest of the trip was uneventful except for Jimmy's insistence upon sitting in the front seat. We have a rule: only girls can sit in the front seat. Boys have what I call marsh-wiggles. It is a term I stole from a C. S. Lewis book. In the process, I re-defined it to mean boys have a biological necessity to wiggle. They cannot sit still. Jimmy is especially bad. At age 9, his body is large enough to hit you every time he wiggles. As he moves, somehow his foot manages to bang your leg. Or when he leans over, his elbow (it is sharp as a spear) stabs you in the side. He can't help it. He just cannot sit still. So, we have a rule.

He says it is unfair. Why should I be discriminated against?". I tried to explain that it wasn't him. I had the rule for all boys. He responded with "then why is John on mom's lap right now?" (John is 8 months old and mother is changing his diapers.) That didn't seem to matter. The thought crossed my mind that Jimmy would make an excellent lawyer. Why should those fact be allowed as evidence? Was there a legal precedence for them? He argued "When I was a baby did you refuse to let boys up in the front?" "Well, no" I responded. I said, "there weren't any boys when you were a baby, you are the oldest." That had no bearing on the case. I was being drawn into a legal quagmire. I was being worn down. In the end I would lose. I didn't have the strength to fight back. Depression set in. The trip was going to be ruined. Jimmy would hound me to death. "Ok" I said, "Come up. Just keep you mouth shut and sit still." He smiled. He jumped over the seat, knocking his mother in the head with his foot. "It wasn't my fault" he said. "Laura made me do it by being in the way." Another lengthy legal description was about to occur. It would be a detailed account of how his trajectory was changed because of the location of Laura's right hand. "I said keep your mouth shut and sit still. You have done neither just coming into the front seat. If you so much as blink an eye, I am going to pull the car over and beat the holy living S--- out of you. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!!!"

He understood. I had hurt his feelings. I could see it in his eyes. He was holding back the tears. Leila gave me that look that said, "you have gone too far." "Jimmy," I said "Now you see why we have this rule. It keeps me from yelling at you over something trivial." "I understand, Dad" he said. "I will get in the back seat". I let him. On the way over he scraped his foot across the side of my head. I said nothing. After all, this was a vacation.

We arrived at Uncle Carl's about 11 pm. The kids wanted to watch TV. Uncle Carl has a huge TV. We said not until tomorrow. They

went to bed determined to get up a 5 am so they could watch TV. We all settled down for the night.

## LEAKY TOILET

It always happens on a Friday evening. After a long hard week of work. By Friday, your body and mind are ready for a rest. It is time to have a good dinner, sit in front of the TV and do nothing. This was what I had in mind on my way home from work. Being the father of six kids, however, I knew better. Sitting in front of the TV would invite an army of lap sitters, complainers, combatants and babies that needed something done for them. My hope was that I would remember how to meditate. I could move to some other form of consciousness. Leave this mortal world behind. If only I could remember my mantra. It was something like mommy or money or not now sonny. Maybe it sounded like an E or Pee or Gee or that can't be. Now I remember, it was OM (pronounced AH UMH). OK, now I can face the screaming hordes.

As I walk in the door (secretly chanting my mantra) I am greeted by a rousing round of "Daddy's home." It is so sweet I forget to chant. Kids come from everywhere. All want a hug and a kiss. I don't even mind Johnny (the baby) who gets snot all over my shirt.

As I walk into the kitchen Leila says, "Daddy's home, the toilet won't shut off."

AH UMH.

I don't hear a thing. It is working. I didn't realize how well it works.

"Did you hear what I said? The toilet won't shut off."

AH UMH

It is starting to lose its effect. I heard her the second time. Maybe if I try again.

AH OH, I think I better stop this nonsense and listen to what she has to say. I can see by looking on her face it is not a good time to

ignore her. "What did you say darling? I was thinking about a computer software problem I had today." "The toilet won't shut off. It has been running all day."

In my most serious tone I said, "Did you jiggle the handle?" Yes, she had tried that and a variety of other things. Nothing worked.

"Well," I said, "I'll look at it." Then I sat down and started to read the paper.

"Would you mind looking at it this weekend?"

"Sure, be glad too."

I went to the toilet, lifted off the lid and looked. Sure enough, it was running. I could see the shutoff valve wasn't working. I told Leila that I would go to the hardware first thing in the morning.

As Saturday dawned, I completely forgot about the toilet. Life was good. The kids made coffee. Outside it was cold and crisp. Inside it was warm and cozy. It was a glorious day. I was so glad to be alive. It was one of those Vermont postcard days.

"I just wanted to remind you that you are going to fix the toilet today." Said my darling wife. Well so much for postcards. Reality came back like Vermont winters.

In my town, the hardware store is not just a store. It serves as the local meeting hall. You go there when you have some time to kill or want to find out what is going on. The local newspaper reporter spends a lot of time there. Since my neighbor (Doug) works there, I have a special status. I like the people there. They are all friendly, helpful and nice to visit with. As I walk in, I am greeted with "Mr. B" how can I help you. "My toilet won't stop running." They had just the right part. It is only \$4.95 and comes with easy to install instructions. I am all set. I pride myself on being able to do the repairs around the house. Like a quiet evening however, that pride is more of a fantasy than reality. This will become readily apparent in a moment. I get

home with the part and start to work. Leila says she has to run some errands and will be back in a couple of hours.

I am now left alone with the kids, a leaky toilet and an easy to install repair kit. The directions are simple. After installing the new kit, the moment of truth arrives. Will it work? I flush the toilet. It flushes. It fills the tank and shuts off. No leaks. Excellent. I did it!

"Daddy, how come the toilet doesn't have any water in it?" I look down. The bowl is empty. Back to the directions. I found my problem; I forgot to connect the hose to the overflow tube. Ok. I connect it. Try again. This time it flushes but the tank won't fill up. It just keeps running. Before it ran just a little. Now it runs wide open. It won't shut off. Quickly I shut off the water leading into the toilet. For a moment the thought lingered in my mind that every time someone went to the bathroom they could reach under the toilet, turn on the valve, let it run while we go potty and then turn it off when we are done. That thought didn't linger long, I knew Leila wouldn't like that idea.

Panic sets in. I call to find out how long the hardware store will be open. "Another fifteen minutes." AH OH. Knowing from experience that whatever parts I forget to bring they will need to see, I grab everything I can find. It occurs to me that I should bring in the tank too. I take it off the toilet. Too big to take. I did get the pipes and valves. This required that I shut off the water to the house. Now I am hit with the thought that we might be without water all weekend. God help me!!

Ten minutes left. Placing all the parts in a bag I head out the door. "Dad, Jimmy is being a pest. It is his turn to feed the horses. But he won't do it because he says I didn't do it this morning." Nine minutes. No time for discussion. With one quick movement I lifted Carrie off the ground and told her if she didn't feed the horses, I would beat the holy living S\_ \_ \_ out of her. She got the idea. No further discussion was needed.

Eight minutes. "Jimmy" I said, "get in the car." I could see in his eyes the question "what did I do?" Of course, he didn't dare say a word.

We arrived two minutes late. Apparently, Doug knew (from my tone of voice) that I was in trouble. "What is your problem?" he said. I showed him the parts and explained that the toilet ran wide open. "AH HA" he said, "you have a Mansfield system. I haven't seen one of those in years." We found an old one in the back. \$24.95. He didn't have an input pipe and valve to fit my old set-up. We pieced some stuff together. \$17.52. "You didn't take the tank off did you?" I had to admit I did. "You need a gasket and new bolts." \$8.97. "Did you disconnect the toilet from the floor?" "NO." "Good, you won't need a beeswax gasket." "That will be \$52.64, I gave you credit for the \$4.95 valve you returned." I said "thanks."

By now panic was replaced by the fear that I might need something and couldn't get it. The provider instinct rose in me. Food. We will need food. Never mind that Leila had a stew on the stove. I stopped at McDonalds. Do you know what Chicken McNuggets for 8 costs? Another \$19.50. I stopped at the store and got dog and cat food. \$22.87. You never know when you will run out. Fortunately, I ran out of cash at the store. Otherwise, this would have been a very expensive trip.

We returned home to find all the kids hiding. They know it is not safe to be seen. "It's ok" I said. "I brought Chicken McNuggets." McDonalds' food always works. They came out. George was hiding in the closet. He put on my coat and hat. He was trying to be a coat rack.

We ate. Then I began to fix the toilet. I am happy to report that I had no difficulties. In fact, it was all done by the time Leila came home. "Look" I said, "it works fine." She didn't know what really happened. "I am so proud of you" she said. "You are so good at fixing things. Tomorrow could you look at the stove. The door doesn't shut right."



"AH HUM"

"What did you say?" she asked.

"AH HUM"

"Jim, where are you going?"

"AH HUM"

"Maybe he is tired" she thought.

"AH HUM"

## BROCCOLI

Our children have developed a vocabulary that would make a drunken sailor sit up and take notice. How can this be? we asked. After all, we had been very careful never to say such words in front of the children. I asked Kathleen, who at the time was explaining to me that Jason mooned Sarah. She looked at me with disdain (as if I was really stupid) and said, "on the bus, of course."

How could I not know? The bus. The central depository for all school age children. Where else would such a vast store house of knowledge be available to my children? The bus. Of course. How could I possibly not know that? As I thought back to my own school days, I remembered the talk of Tom Wickey. It was rumored that he only had one testicle. "What was a testicle" I asked. That led to an educational experience that Harvard could not rival. I learned all the proper and slang terms for every anatomical part of the human body. The bus. Of course.

Now I have a problem. I didn't want these terms used at home. The brute force approach was to forbid them ever to be used. I recalled how effective that was in my own childhood. After much thought I came up with a creative alternative. I reasoned as follows: I will make up a word that is the most nasty, vile, and profane word in the world. Then I will forbid the kids from ever say it. That will guarantee its permanent membership into their daily vocabulary.

The next day I met the kids as they came off the bus. "Hi kids. How was your day?" "Fine, but Johnnie is a Butt face. Bobby mooned Sally and Jack is an F'n SOB. "I see you learned much on the bus today" I said. Then I hit them with the punch line. "It is a good thing you didn't hear the **B** word. You didn't hear it did you?"

"Of course, we did, I heard Bitch several times today". I said, "Thank God, you didn't hear it. That is not the B word."

Immediately they wanted to know what it was. "Please dad, tell us. We promise never to say it. We only want to know what it is." I said "I'm sorry, it is the worst word in the world. I just can't tell you. It would ruin your innocence." They said "don't worry, it is already ruined. We never tell you the really bad stuff we hear on the bus." "Well," I said, "OK, but you must promise never to say it. Cross your heart and hope to die." "We promise, now tell us." Just for effect I balked. I really wanted them primed. By now several neighbor kids had gathered around. I said that I could not say it to them. Their parents would sue me. I could only whisper it in my own kid's ear. George was the most likely candidate to blurt it out at the top of his lungs. So, I said to George, "Come over here with me where the other kids can't hear and I will whisper it in your ear." We walked away from the other kids. I bent down and whispered in his ear.

"B R O C C O L I " he shouted. Everyone heard very clearly. They were surprised. "Come on", they said, "that is not a bad word." "How do you know" I said. "Because we say it all the time." "Sure" I said, "adults don't say anything because that would make you say it even more. The only acceptable form that I will allow is the B word."

Ever since, I am barraged with Broccoli every time I come home. It caught on at school. It swept through the ivy halls like wildfire. Every time I went into the building, I was greeted with a cacophony of "Broccoli."

Our youngest son, Johnnie, was born after the Broccoli incident. One of the first words he learned was "**bo key**". When he was about two and a half, we took him to a restaurant. Leila ordered the salad bar. She came back with a plate brimming with "green stuff". John pointed to the broccoli and said "wha dat, Ma Ma?" "Broccoli" she said without thinking. He was dumbfounded. Broccoli was the worst swear word in the world. Its meaning was deeply rooted in profanity. Now, sitting on a plate in front of his mother, there was something green

that people eat with the same name. This would be like ordering a steak named Adolph Hitler. I could see his mind working. After the initial shock passed, he began to process the information he had just gained. "Hmm, I bet it tastes really good. After all, there is always something special about forbidden fruit."

"Me want" he said. Leila put some on his plate. He took a big mouthful. He began to chew. He liked it. He is chewing it. Wow. This is the first time he ever ate anything green that wasn't from the candy counter. After a while, he stood up to get a better look at his mother's salad plate. He bent right over the top of it. It was obvious he wanted a better view. He opened his mouth. Out came broccoli puree. He spit it out right on top of the plate. It took several spits to get it all out. By the time he had finished the entire restaurant was watching. He had broccoli all around his mouth. He looked up and announced, "bo key is yuck." The waitress came over. "Is something wrong?" Johnnie said "Gar." "What did he say" the waitress said. Gar is Johnnie's word for garbage. "Car" I said, "he is not well and wants to go home in the car." We posted a hasty retreat, leaving my Adolph Hitler steak behind.

## LAURA

“HI, MY NAME IS LAURA. I AM 3 YEARS OLD I LIVE WITH MY 3 BROTHERS AND 2 SISTERS. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

DO YOU WANT SOME HELP? I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?”

Laura is a talker. She likes to tell you all about things. She also likes to help. Her version of help is more like you entertain her. She wants to know how everything works. Then she begins to tell you how it works. Never mind the facts. They only get in the way.

This was especially painful during the basement stairs project. The stairs became a necessity because of the front porch project. The front porch project became a necessity because of the coming of winter. I don't know what or who caused the winter. I wish I did. Then I would have someone or something to yell at.

Anyhow, there was a loose board on the front porch. I had to get it fixed before the ground froze. The board was in the ground. Well, as fate would have it, the board was rotten. It had to be replaced. Guess what? The adjacent board was also rotten. Well one thing led to another. Soon I had torn out the entire foundation of the porch. Since I had to completely rebuild the porch, I might as well expand it to become functional and pleasant to look at. The previous owner was a Vermonter. According to his mind set, beauty is a waste of money.

Anyhow, I completely redid the porch. In the process, I covered up the access to the basement. That was OK. We planned on putting in a set of stairs from inside anyway. So, I became committed to the basement stair project.

As is always the case, the project turned out to be much more complicated than I thought. I had been working on it for some time when Laura decided to help.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" she said.

"DO YOU WANT SOME HELP? I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?"

I knew this would not work. I said to my wife "Look, I am trying to finish this \*!@#\$%^ project. Can't you keep her away from me?"

I could see this was a lose lose situation. My wife was clearly on Laura's side. Moreover, I had hurt Laura's feeling with the expletive (\*!@#\$%^).

Anyhow, I agreed to let her help. First, we had to put on her coat and hat. Then gloves and boots. Now she was ready to go to the basement. I had to help her down (only a ladder, no stairs). It was quite an ordeal.

"Daddy, I can climb down by myself. I am 3 years old."

I went over to the work bench.

"Daddy help!"

She was stuck on the ladder. I helped her down.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" she said.

"DO YOU WANT SOME HELP? I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?"

"Sure," I thought. I asked her to hand me the hammer. She did.

"See" she said, I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?"

"Did you know that this nail goes in that board?" she said. "You can use the hammer I just gave. Do you want to? It goes right here. Just nail it in there."

Keeping my cool, I said, "why don't you nail it."

"I AM 3 YEARS OLD. I CAN DO IT. I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?" she said.

"Daddy, how does it work. I can't do it. You do it. You can do it because you are a big strong daddy. Ok?"

"Sure", I said. As I began to nail, she pointeded that I was doing it wrong. I was holding the hammer in the wrong hand. "I am left-handed" I said. Never mind the facts. It was the wrong hand. Then she announced "I AM 3 YEARS OLD. I CAN DO IT. I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?"

I could see she was about to begin an endless monologue. It would oscillate between telling me how to hammer and describing how she was going to do it. Depression sets in. Another wasted day. Much to my surprise (and great joy) she announced "That is enough for now. I am going upstairs. I CAN GO UP MYSELF. I AM 3 YEARS OLD."

After helping her up the ladder I heard her say to a friend of her brother's "HI, MY NAME IS LAURA. I AM 3 YEARS OLD I LIVE WITH MY 3 BROTHERS AND 2 SISTERS. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DO YOU WANT SOME HELP? I CAN HELP. I AM A GOOD WORKER. WHAT DO YOU THINK? HUH?"

## A Tale

Most tales start with “once upon a time.....” This one start” not too long ago ....:” But then time has a funny of distorting itself. Remember when you were in school? Waiting for the day to end? Remember how 5 minutes would take a full hour? Or when your father was telling a story in the car? A full hour would take only five minutes. Can you figure out who is writing this tale???

Anyway, back to the story. There was a family. They lived in the woods, in a log cabin. Life was glorious. The children were young and innocent. The mother and father delighted in the children. For the children, everything was an adventure. The falling snow was an adventure. Everyone went out to see it, feel it, taste it, comment on it and fall in it. The boys took off their shoes and ran around in it. Some even took off their pants (much to their sisters’ secret delight) and jumped off the porch into it.

Raising turkeys was an adventure. The family bought cute little baby turkeys, all soft and fuzzy. Each child had its own baby turkey. They watched the baby turnkeys learn to walk. It was hilarious to see them stand up and fall forward into a dead run until they hit the wall or another turkey. One day Ian (who was then named George) came into the house. “Dad, one of the turkeys is funny. I didn’t do it.” Sure enough, it was funny. The head was pointing backwards. It was asleep. It did not want to wake up. “I was just poking it with a stick. I wanted to watch it run into the wall.” We all had to inspect the “sleeping” turkey. Sure enough, it never woke up. Two others met their untimely demise as the hands of a marauding band of raccoons. Amazing how stupid turkeys are. They did not even run away from the raccoons. Just stood there. Another walked under the horse. We would up with only one turkey for thanksgiving. Total cost: \$258.00. No one would eat it. It had become not only a family member but a



“survivor.” Would you eat the sole survivor??

Then there were the two “free” horses. Another adventure. By the way, there is no such thing as a “free” horse. The two “free” horses cost \$5,250.00. Horses only eat designer hay (at twice the normal price). Horses require designer pastures. Regular pastures are dangerous. They might walk into a tree limb and stab themselves. Recall the family lived in the WOODS. No pastures. Land had to be cleared. Stalls had to be constructed. Hay had to be purchased. It was expensive. Farriers had to be hired. These are experts at everything. They can tell you everything you have done wrong since the time you were born. And the prior farrier did the job all wrong. Not only do you have to pay them, but you also have to suffer their insults. Vets must be hired. At least the vet did not insult me. On the other hand. It was worth it. Ranger, the older of the two “free” horses would lay his head in Ian’s lap. Ian would pet and talk to Ranger. It was glorious to watch. Calvin would launch himself on Max bareback. No bridle. Then race up the pasture at full speed, holding on only to the mane. The children learned all about horses. They learned all about responsibility (they had to feed and water them twice a day). They learned all about horse nature. It was glorious.

A favorite adventure was a trip to the North Wolcott Country Store. it was especially wonderful, because everyone got candy. Did I say who everyone was? There was a mother. There was a father. And there were 6 children. The children had not come into their “real” names. Garballa was called Carrie. Calvin (the anointed) was called Jimmy, Ponaquah (enchantress) was Kathleen, Ian (the visionary) was George, Kulaki (the sweet) was Laura, and the lord of men (Talgor) was called John The family would go to the store and spend hours deciding what to buy. First there was the issue of money. How much was each child allotted? However, much it was, the amount was too small. There was the customary begging for more. The kids were clever. They know

not to bite the hand that feeds them, or in this case buys them candy. They begged for more in a loving and positive manor. Usually that worked. If not, they thanked the parents anyway and proceeded to figure exactly how to spend their money. Kathleen was always quick at math. She could figure it to the last penny. After hours of deciding and undeciding and redeciding, they made their purchases. Each walked out with a bag of treasure. The boys ate theirs before they got home. The girls savored each bit. Making it last for hours.

One thanksgiving, the family went to Uncle Carl and Aunty Nan's house. Aunty Nan makes the best thanksgiving dinners in the whole world. There is enough food for an army. The children spent a whole month anticipating the "feast." They arrived on the anointed day to the smell of turkey, apple pie, yams, hams, potatoes, shoe peg corn, lemon meringue pie, chocolate pie, rolls, peas, pearl onions and a whole host of drinks. The kids were sitting at the table. They were on their best behavior, waiting for the food. Uncle Carl noticed only one child was not sucking his thumb. "Jimmy" he said "you are such a big boy. You are the only child not sucking his thumb." "No sir." Jimmy said, "but I pick my nose."

Christmas was the big holiday. The family began just after Thanksgiving.

That reminds me of the time George thought toilet paper was optional. At that same time, the father arranged for a Chinese professor to come for dinner. The father told the kids "Be on your best behavior I want you to show Professor Hu that American children can behave properly." "We can do it dad. Don't worry." During the dinner, George raised his hand. "Father" he said, "may I be excused, I have to go to the bathroom." After a few minutes, George emerged, stark naked. Backing up to his mother, he bent over, spread his cheeks, and said "It that good mama?" He was proud of his handy work.

The family lived for several years in their log cabin. They learned

about nature. They learned about life. The family was tightly bound together by love. They even had poetry contests. Each child had to write a poem. There was a “poetry reading.” The great thing about the poetry contest was the ice cream afterwards. Each child got a pint of their choice. Ian’s first poem was:

tree pee  
way to be

One summer the family took a vacation. It was a long trip. They traveled from Vermont to Washington DC. There they toured their nation’s capital. It was August (hot and humid). They took a cab from the hotel to the Washington monument. The cab driver (Mr. K. Bang, from Korea) offered a “hole big tooooure, all over cittley, only fifteeeeeee daaa laaaa” It was very hot. The prospect of walking around DC with 6 whining kids was the deciding factor. “OK” the father said. K Bang said, “Get in cab, not go here to hot, line long, takeee to better place.” Back in the cab we climbed. “Go to national cathedral, betta view.” On the way he paused at an intersection “rob here last week, two men, hold gun to head, say ‘give money or die’ I give fifteeeeeee daaaa laaaa.” He turned the corner. “Here we are, National Cathedral. best view” Mr Bang was wonderful. He carried John (the baby) during the entire tour of the cathedral. He was right, wonderful view. “Now go air-plane mu-see-um, you like. Once again, he paused at a corner. “Rob here two year go. Four men, hold gun head say ‘give money or die’ I give fifteeeee daaa laaaa. Police in car. I yell help, help! Police not come. After four man leave, I go police. ask ‘why not help?’ police say ‘you cause trouble, loose cab license’ “he went a few more blocks “Here FBI building, you take tour after air-plane.” He dropped us off at the Air and Space Museum. “Meet here 2 hour, set clock, meet right here.” He departed. He was a man of word,

I knew he would return. I wondered if he would be robbed while he was gone. After all, he had my fiftteeeee daaa laaaa. Only in America could an “all American family” get a tour of their nation’s capital by a Korean who hardly spoke English and was robbed as often as he changed is shirt.

After the “Washington” experience the family went to Richmond VA. There they totally lost themselves in amusements parks. There were rides for everyone. Nice little rides for the babies, huge roller coasters for the brave and everything in between. They ate junk food, drank gallons of soda and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They went to dinner at the “smoky pig” barbecue, a local delight. They swam in the pool (at the hotel) and relaxed in the warm sun. From there they went to Tennessee. They joined up with their cousins (whom they had never met). And the caravan traveled to Minnesota for a family reunion. The reunion was full of delightful mischief. The children got into “stuff” they were not supposed to. It was very exciting. Children played, ate and stayed up late talking with their newfound cousins.

Following the reunion, the family headed north. Crossing into Canada, they followed the northern route to James Bay. They went on a tour boat out into the bay. They saw beluga whales, ate native Indian food, and learned about their culture. By the time they headed back to Vermont, they were all exhausted. Everyone was ready to be home.

Returning home was yet another adventure. Barney, Kathleen’s dog, stayed at the kennels. Kathleen dearly loved her dog. Her littles eyes were filled with tears of joy when they brought Barney to her. She hugged and hugged him. Kissed him and told him she would never leave him again. It was a solemn promise only a 7-year-old girl can make. Barney was overjoyed. He wiggled and licked and wiggled and licked his way through every family member. Next came the reunion with the horses. Max and Ranger were not quite as excited as Barney. But the prospect of a little grain brought them right into the spirit of

the reunion. Everyone cried when they first saw the horses. We were home. Life was wonderful.

## AIRPORT

Waiting in an airport is not one of my favorite past times. I have yet to learn how to relax and enjoy the view. In large airports it is quite interesting. Rarely can a rural Vermonter see such a diverse group of people. Unfortunately, some little voice inside my head keeps whispering "The plane is going to be delayed. You will miss your connection." Try as I may, I cannot keep it from talking to me.

One Christmas, Uncle Don was coming from Germany. The weather was particularly bad. It had rained most of the day. The forecast was for freezing rain during the evening. Uncle Don was to arrive at 7:45 pm. Since we lived 62 miles from the Burlington Vermont airport, we decided to drive in early. We would have pizza then pick up Uncle Don. The kids were looking forward to pizza. It was their big night out in a "real" city. Because of the weather, we decided to stop by the airport on the way to dinner. If the flight was delayed or canceled, we would eat, then return home. The arrival monitor said, "on time". We were home free. The voice said, "that's what you think." All went well at dinner. There was the usual spilling of coke, dropping pizza on the floor and trips to the potty. Someone did have a cold. I remember going the convenience store (next door) for aspirin.

We arrived at the airport at 7:30 pm. Right on schedule. Fearing the worst, I ran to the arrival monitor. His flight was to arrive on time. Great! The voice was wrong. The voice spoke again. I ignored it. Only fifteen minutes to wait. Fifteen minutes came. Fifteen minutes went. Twenty minutes went. Twenty-five minutes went. I went. I asked the ticket agent. "What is the status of flight 203 from Boston?" I knew I was in trouble when the agent said, "on time." I said, "it was due in 10 minutes ago." "Minor delay. Due in any moment." All of this was said without the agent looking at me. She was typing into her computer. I hoped for the best. After all, the ticket agent should know. Ten more

minutes went by. I couldn't wait any longer. The voice was screaming in my head. I returned to the ticked agent. By this time the arrival monitor had been updated to "Delayed". I ask if any new information had come in about flight 203. She looked up. I saw in her eyes what was coming. "There is a big storm in Boston. Your flight is still in New York. They can't leave for Boston until the storm clears. We are advised the storm is clearing now. They should be leaving for Boston in the next few minutes." I asked the inevitable but stupid question "when will it arrive here in Vermont." "That depends on the turnaround time in Boston." I could see further conversation was pointless.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked my wife. We will wait until 9 pm she said. Just like that. No shouting, confusion, anxiety. She simply said 9 pm. What a wife. Now I know why I married her. We waited. The kids ran all over the airport. The baby took off all his clothes and threw them off the balcony. The other kids were greatly delighted. We went to every bathroom in the airport. We all had cokes at 50 times the normal price. I made a trip back to the ticket counter. By this time the female agent had gone home. Her replacement was a 25-year-old combination baggage handler, janitor and ticket agent. He knew even less than she did. At least she could type on the computer. He never touched it.

At 9 pm I asked the "what-is-the-status-of-flight-203 question?" He said it had arrived in Boston. They were preparing it for departure even as we spoke. I again asked my wife what to do. I had completely lost control. The voice could have told me to jump off the balcony and I would have. She said, "we will wait 30 more minutes." We waited. The kids were trying to be good. The harder they tried, the worse it got. "George touched me." "That is because you looked at me." You know the story. We all watched the clock. We counted the minutes

until 9:30. It was pure agony. At 9:30 we returned to the ticket counter. Again, we asked the status question. This time we got vague responses. "It should be airborne. It is coming from Boston, perhaps. I am not sure. It could still be at the Boston airport. All flights are delayed out of Boston. Have a nice day." Leila said wait 15 more minutes. I was mumbling to myself. I lost it. All I could do is focus on the clock. The kids saw my state and stayed away from me. They knew I was unsafe.

9:45. We returned to the counter. The arrival monitor had been updated. Flight 203 CANCELED. No one was behind the counter. I started shouting "is anyone here." No one came out. In a fit of rage, I went behind the counter.

Federal law 68-124387.A52 forbids unauthorized personnel behind the counter upon punishment of death, life imprisonment, execution and immediate full income tax audit. Six ticket agents were pushing me back into the lobby. The 25-year-old was the man in authority. Using an authoritarian voice, he ordered me out. "Look Ah So" (the actual words were too profane to write) I said, "no one was behind the counter, and I want service." Everyone in the immediate area heard me, including the kids. The junior G man took this as a violation of his law. He said "In the first place I don't have to talk to you unless you are civil. And secondly, that is no way to talk in front of your kids." By this time, we had returned to the lobby, I looked up at him. I thought "Yea he is right, I should say I was wrong, then ask about flight 203." On the other hand. I knew he didn't have additional information to offer. So I looked up again and said "you are an ah so" and walked out. Everyone was shocked. The kids were stunned. All the way home they talked about it.

Several weeks later, Laura (3 years old) was in the bathtub singing "ah so ah so, ah so ah so." "Laura" I said, "where did you hear such awful words?" "Daddy", she said, "that is what you called the



man in the airport. So, I made up the Ah So song."

## **Saturday Morning**

Saturday morning, 5:37 AM. The biological clock of children is amazing. During the week, it is impossible to get them out of bed. Saturday morning, however, they are awake at 5 AM. George is especially bad. He is always the first up. George is much like a grazing animal. He is always eating. At 5 AM he is especially hungry. In the past, George would wake us up. He wanted his mother to feed him. This no longer happens. We have trained him to get his own food. We used the IF THEN method of training. IF you ever wake us up again before 7 am THEN we will kill you. He understood that right away. It didn't take any actual killing for him to get the picture. So, now he doesn't wake us up. What he does do is quietly come up the stairs to our bedroom. Sit on the top stair and munch away. He has developed the art of munching to the point that he can wake us up without waking us up. We are aware of his presence. But, we can't hear or see him. He silently munches until we are awake. It is like a grazing animal; continuous, melodic, munching.

His goal is to get in bed with us. Like a patient animal, he waits, always munching. Finally my eyes open. There he is. Smiling. He has succeeded again. "Hi dad. Can I get in bed with you?"

I am defeated, completely awake. No use in arguing. He has won.

"Yes George."

As he snuggles up to me he starts wiggling. Being a boy, it is biologically impossible for him to lay still. First one leg the another bash into me. He just wants to get comfortable.

## **JOHN AND THE HELMET**

**By Kathleen black**

On the night of January 7, 1993 I was setting the table with my older sister Carrie, my Mom was reading a book, Dad and Jimmy were complaining and George and Laura were fighting. While all this was going on, in the bathroom John was silently putting a helmet on his head that didn't actually look like a helmet. I didn't worry about him because why should I? He's never in any harm. Anyway, John came into the kitchen with the helmet on his head.

"Look I got a helmet on !" John said happily. "By golly he's got underwear on his head!" I shouted. Mom said " Those go on your bottom, John." "Put them on your pow bud." Dad added. John didn't put them on the right way, instead he tried to get them off but ended with the underwear on his head like a headband. He didn't put them on at dinner and after dinner he had a bath and stayed naked for quite a while.

## **KATHLEEN WAS HERE**

You can always tell when a young child has been in a room. This is especially true when in the kitchen. Grandpa Schultz says our children are like little tornados. They go from room to room destroying it. As the parents are cleaning up one mess, they are making another. Their favorite room is the kitchen. I guess that is because this is the room with the most stickey and goeey stuff. Peanut butter and jelly are the all time favorites. Not only do they taste good, they make an excellent mess.

We began to worry about Kathleen when she was very little.

She didn't seem to make messes. At first we were delighted. Finally a clean and neat kid. She would play games like pick up the toys, fold her clothes and sweep the floor. Her older siblings thought this was great. They would make a mess so she could clean it up.

## **MEL GAR**

As educated parents, my wife and I felt the absolute necessity to make our children speak properly. After all, speech is how people will know we are educated. If our children speak properly, it will be a sign of their intelligence. We applied this idea most faithfully to our first child. Carrie was a talker to begin with. She would start talking first thing in the morning. In fact, words would come out of her mouth before her eyes were open. We began teaching her to pronounce words properly. We wouldn't allow any cute phrases with mispronounced words. We had to work hard. The popsicle man was "pack coo man." Carrie's grandparents thought this was adorable. They would say "does baby waby wann a pack coo?" We would shudder.

By and large we were successful. People began to remark on how well she pronounced her words. They said she was very "mature". We were very proud.

Our first sign that this may have been a mistake happened in a grocery store. We were in the vegetable section when Carrie saw a black man. She said to her mother, in well pronounced and completely understandable English, "mommie, why is that man a monkey?" She

was expecting the usual well thought and cogent explanation. Instead, she was whisked to the checkout counter.

Jimmy, our second child, had a problem confusing F for T. He always substituted F for T in Truck. Occasionally he would drop the R. This led to real problems. Thus we continued the "intellectual" approach. After all, we couldn't have him going around getting TRUCK wrong.

Jimmy had another problem. When he asked a question, he wanted an answer. This was our own doing. We had taught him to be articulate and inquisitive. Thus, he was going to get an answer. He would just keep asking. He knew eventually we would give in. It became a game with him.

All of this came together in a K-Mart. We were living in Seattle. Jimmy was two. It was the era of the "Blue Light Specials". A blue strobe light would start. Then over the PA system you would hear "Shoppers, there is a blue light special in the bakery. We have just baked six lemon meringue pies. Just out of the oven. Only six. One dollar each. Only six." There was a mad rush. It wasn't safe to be in the way of the stampede. Jimmy and his mother were already at the bakery. His eyes widened as he saw the trampling hoard. One woman caught his eye. As she approached the counter Jimmy said "mommie, why is that woman so fat?" This woman was really fat. We are talking 275 - 300 lbs. He really wanted to know. The throng was building. The pressure of obese humanity kept pressing in. Leila was unable to leave. She was trapped. Jimmy, undaunted by the lack of reply said "mommie, I have never seen a person as fat as a cow. How come she is fat as a cow. A humongous cow. Maybe two cows. "Trapped, Leila had to answer. Jimmy would not shut up until she did. The cow lady heard him. She was not happy. More over, she missed out on the pies. She glared. Of course, this set Jimmy off for another round of

questioning. "Mommie, why is that fat cow lady staring. Do all fat people stare?"

Leila died a thousand deaths.

When I arrived home that night, I was faced with a choice. Either stop this stupid intellectual crap or become the family shopper. Being the family shopper was out of the question. I wasn't about to suffer as my wife had.

Thus ended intellectualism. From that moment on, it was cute unintelligible words. Going to the bathroom (number two) became guck. We did this with George. Poor George. He was in the first grade before he learned what POOP meant. We had moved to rural Vermont when John (our last, I think) was born. He speaks in a language only our family understands. He will be in a special speech program when he enters school. Garbage is **gar**. Smell is **mel**. The other day he was in the post office standing behind a dairy farmer. The smell of cow guck was overwhelming. John looked up at him and said "you mel gar." The farmer replied "No, my name is Fred Allen."

I have only one regret. I wish I had never started this intellectualism stuff. While I am writing this story, my oldest son, Jimmy "truck" Black, is correcting me. Adding useful comments. His points about spelling and punctuation are particularly irritating. For the next week he can contemplate the epistemological significance of taking out the GAR.

## **MOTHER HAS PRACTICALLY NOTHING TO DO**

as everyone knows, she has nothing to do all day long except:

1. to decide what is to be done
2. to tell someone to do it
3. to listen to reasons why it should not be done, why it should be done by someone else, or why it should be done in a different way.
4. to follow up to see if the thing has been done.
5. to discover that it has not been done.
6. to inquire WHY it has not been done.
7. to listen to excuses from the person who should have done it.
8. to follow up again to see if the thing has been done, only to discover it has been done incorrectly.
9. to point out how it should have been done properly.
10. to conclude that as long as it has been done, it might as well be left where it is.
11. to wonder if someone else can do a better job.
12. to reflect that any replacement would probably be just as bad, maybe worse.
13. to consider how much simpler and better it would

have been to have done it herself in the first place.

14. to reflect, sadly, that she could have done it right in 20 minutes, and now she has to spend 2 days to find out why it has taken 3 weeks for someone else to do it wrong.

## TOILET PAPER

When George was four he believed toilet paper was optional. We worked hard trying to get him to use it, with out much success.

During this era, we invited a visiting Chinese professor for dinner. Our college had an exchange program. I, being a good employee, wanted to make the professor welcome. Thus, the dinner invitation. I lined up the kids at attention (like the captain did in Sound of Music).

"Alright" I said,

"We are having company for dinner. I want each of you to behave properly. I **DO NOT** want them to think you are a bunch of wild and unruly animals ".

They all said they would be good. I had my doubts. We will see, I thought. On the night of the appointed evening, the kids were excellent. They really did good. We were in the middle of dinner when George raised his hand. He thought he should have permission to speak.

"Yes George" I said.

"May I be excused?" he said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Yes, of course" I said.

The bathroom was adjacent to the dining room. Off he went. The next thing I see is the door opening. In the door way is the back of a stark naked four year old boy. He backs into the room, bends over and spreads his cheeks. Then he says

"Is that good, mom?"

He wanted to show us he used toilet paper.





## THE TRIP

Have you ever noticed the sound of starting a car? First, there is the whine of the starter. Then, the engine roars to life.

For a child, this has a life and death meaning. It is an air raid siren. The whine of the starter is, in fact, an air raid warning. It is warning that the engine is about to start,

which means that the car is about to leave,  
which means you have less than 10 seconds before you are left behind (being left behind is worse than nuclear fallout),  
which means you have only 10 seconds to save your life.

I recently went out to the car. I noticed there weren't any kids around. "Good", I thought. I

can get this done quickly. I placed the key in the ignition. No kids. I kicked in the starter motor. No kids. The engine roared to life.

Jimmy! No luck. "Wait Dad. Where are you going? Can I go?"

"Yes, get in."

By this time George has arrived on the scene.

"Wait Dad. Where are you going? Can I go?"

"Yes, get in."

He gets in. Too late. Two more have arrived.

"Wait Dad. Where are you going? Can we go?"

"Yes, get in."

By this time the two toddlers figured out what is going on. They are rushing to the car.

"STOP" yells Kathleen.

I slam on the breaks, fearing I was about to run over one of the toddlers.

"What is the matter?" I yell in panic and fear to Kathleen.

"Barnie (the dog) wants to go."

"Forget it! The dog is not going."

"What about the babies?" Pleads Carrie.

It is time to place order into the rapidly deteriorating situation. I shut off the motor.

"All right. Everyone can go. Carrie, you are the oldest. Get diapers for Johnnie (the youngest)".

"Jimmy" (the second oldest), "you are responsible for Laura" (the second youngest). George and

"Kathleen you are responsible for yourself"

"George, go ask mom if she wants to go!"

There, I have taken back control. I feel much better.

Five minutes later we are all assembled in the car. Once again, I start the motor. Secretly, I

I am watching to see how many neighbor kids come running. None. They must know the sound of the starter is not their call to death.

I put the car in reverse. I back up 10 feet swinging the back into the turn out. Next I put the car into drive. Now comes the moment of truth. I drive 15 feet into the garage.

"OK, everyone out."

"All I wanted to do is put the car away for the night".

"Dad" says Jimmy "that is NOT funny!!"

## VIDEO JOHN

My youngest "Video John" came up for air the other day. He spends his life playing video and computer games. At eight, he is the youngest and best player in the house. It is funny to hear his 14 year old brother say "John come over here and help me. I can't seem to get to the next level." Anyway, last weekend we were working on a puzzle. It was 1000 pieces. I thought it would be a good weekend activity.

"Video John" decided to take a break from killing space aliens.

"Wow, what are you doing?" he asks.

"A new game" I said.

"Where are the controllers?" he asks.

"Virtual" I said.

"Wow, what is the goal?" he asks.

"You have to put all the pieces together."

"Wow, how many levels?"

It took me a minute to figure out his question.

"Well, this is an integrated puzzlewhacker-with-dual-hyper-condense."

"Wow, that sounds cool. So this is a game without levels. Nice concept."

"Can I download applets?"

"No", I said. "It is virtual, you are on your own. No help from the net."

I should explain, to Video John, virtual is anything NOT on a computer. Real is a computer.

"OK, I'll play."

Where upon he placed all his energies in putting the puzzle together. He spent hours. He went late into the night. Lots of blue sky pieces. A real difficult one. Everyone but John was getting

disillusioned. We had worked all day and only put about 250 pieced together. We had not even started on the blue sky.

“Coming to bed John?”

“

No response. I guess not. He was concentrating. We went to bed. Next morning we awoke. It was warm and sunny. Fresh air. What a glorious day. I went upstairs. There was video John. sound asleep beside the completed puzzle. He look haggard. He was still wearing his clothes. It looked like he stayed up most of the night.

“John wake up.”

“You did it. You finished it all by yourself. I am really proud of you. How long did it take you to finish it?”

“Wow, this game suck. After I put in the last piece it didn’t ask for my name. It didn’t give me my points, and I didn’t get my time.”

“Dad, I couldn’t find a web site or chat room for this game. I think this virtual stuff is getting to you. You should stick with reality.”

With that he went back to Duke Nuke-Em 3D. He has already earned 16 gabillion points in 2 nanoseconds.

## WASHINGTON D.C.

I am a proud American. I believe in my country. I realize it has many problems. Problems that must be corrected. Nevertheless, I believe in my country. That is why I wanted to take my family to Washington D.C. I wanted the children to see and feel how great America is. Our nation's capital, with all its monuments, government buildings and museums, is the Americana.

We arrived on a very hot and humid August morning. Our newly purchased 15 passenger van was full of kids, clothes and miscellaneous items that must accompany every trip. It looked more like a school tour. The Vermont plates confirmed our tourist status. As Vermonters, we were not use to the traffic. In our county there is not one multicolored (red, green, yellow) traffic light. Things began bad. Leila said turn left. I turned right. I now realize why many marriages end in divorce. Two more rights and I was back to the original intersection. This time I turned left. After several more left, rights and a few "where the \*\*\*##@ are we's" we arrived at the hotel. Thank God. "Everyone out." The first stop was the pool. Pool is a code word. It really means the second worst nightmare a mother could ever have. This pool was on the roof. A ten-story fall to certain death. Every instant a child was out of the pool, mother was watching. In the pool was a slower more uncertain death. Would the child drown or just be brain dead? This pool did not have a shallow end. Every child under four feet would drown the moment they entered the pool.

"Everyone out of the pool." It was time for the grand tour. Leila was already on tranquilizers. It was the only way she could cope.

I had a plan.

"We are going to tour our nation's capital" I declared with pride

and enthusiasm. Ignoring the looks of disdain from my family, I announced,

“We take a cab to the National Mall. From there we will visit the Washington Monument, Smithsonian Museum (I did not know there were several) and the Capital. If we have time, we can visit the White House”.

More groans from the “peanut gallery”

Exiting the hotel, we found a cab. It was white, with big black letters “K BANG” on the back fender. With confidence and pride, I told the driver “National Mall”. He smiles, and helped us all climb in.

Arriving I was overwhelmed with both the overwhelming humidity and length of the mall. I looked at my wife, she saw and felt what I felt, so did K BANG.

“I give you hole day tour, fifty dollah”

Neither Leila or I said a word. We loaded the kids back in the air-conditioned car. Here we were, in our national capital, given a tour by K BANG, who has only been in the USA 2 or 3 years.

“Go Jef-fer-son monument” he announced. We were so happy to be in air conditioning we nodded approval.

He drove right up to the front. Parked the car, helped the kids get out of the car and even carried the baby. He showed us all around and even explained where the marble came from.



“Now go Nat-on-al Ka-redrial” he announced. “Best view”.

On the way, we stopped at a red light.

“Last year” his voice animated, “red light, shop. 2 men jump in car, hold gun hear, say give money or die”.

“Go police, report. Told you complain lose cab license.”

We pull up to the National Cathedral. He takes us in, leads us through sanctuary. We are awestruck.

“Go up elevator... see best view”

He was right, we could see the entire mall. It was magnificent.

“Go Air Space” he says. Best museum. He dropped us off in front.

“Pick up 4 pm take back hotel”.

We toured the museum, had lunch, and rode the merry-go-round on the mall. At exactly 4 pm he was there to take us back to the hotel.

Where else could you get a tour of a national capital by someone who barely spoke English and knew all the monuments as well as the places he was robbed.

I love America!!!