

TO MY BROTHER, WHO TEMPTS FATE

Tinkering can be an electrifying experience

They say certain things run in families, like hair loss, politics, “big bones” and buck teeth. In my family, where nobody runs, a wonderful mechanical aptitude occurs, passed down from father to son. Unfortunately, in my case, this aptitude leap-frogged over me and landed on the second child, my brother.

My dear old dad was a born tinkerer. He could fix or assemble just about any mechanical thing without referring to an owner’s manual. What he fixed actually worked too, which distinguished him from many of those who believe owner’s manuals are a senseless waste of trees.

Yet he had certain work habits that contradicted his normally careful practices. For one thing, he kept me around to help when he fixed engines, despite my difficulty learning which end of a torque wrench was which. This tended to slow his projects down somewhat.

As another example, whenever dad worked on his car, he had a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. Often, the engine would be running with him bent over it, tuning it up - cigarette glowing brightly. Didn’t seem that safe to me, so I always kept my distance. Probably another reason why I didn’t learn much about motors.

My brother proudly carries on in dad’s footsteps. He scoffs at owner’s manuals and loves tinkering with engines. Thankfully, he doesn’t have dad’s habit of smoking around gasoline, but he has developed other - unique - work habits.

Like when he’s deep inside his car engine, adding a new chrome-plated high-performance framistat, and he needs to strip a wire. Instead of wasting precious time searching for a wire stripper or pair of pliers, he uses the natural equipment God gave him: his

teeth.

Sometimes, he discovers the wire is live - the hard way. Yet the resulting electric shock is always mild, which reassures him that using pliers is as unnecessary as owner's manuals.

Having used his chompers for years in this manner, he thought nothing of stripping other wires the same way.

Until that fateful day last winter when he was remodeling his teenage daughter's bedroom, installing boyfriend-proof bars on the windows, motion-sensors on the door, and other doting-dad type stuff.

When he was relocating her land-line phone, he needed to strip the phone wire to reconnect it. Of course, the pliers were in their detached garage, a distance that seemed like miles away in the 40-below Edmonton weather.

Drawing on the vast storehouse of logic accumulated over decades of cheating death or serious injury while tinkering, he reasoned that if the shock was mild when he stripped thick car wires with his teeth, then it should be minuscule with the thin phone wire.

So he bit the wire with his teeth.

The shock burned his moustache, blackened his lower face, and caused a yelp so loud his son heard it over the blaring TV. My brother found himself sitting down, dizzy and smoking.

Clearing his head with a few swigs from the beer bottle that was an essential part of his toolbox (occupying the space where a wire stripper or pliers should be), he decided the shock had been an anomaly. Besides, the phone wire still needed stripping and the garage was still miles away.

So he bit it again.

He really appreciated the flowers I sent him while recuperating in hospital.

Duct-taped to the vase was a brand-new wire stripper.

(I never strip wires with my teeth. That's what my wife's potato peeler is for.)

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

Differing approaches to a bat in our belfry

According to sacred comic book lore, Bruce Wayne was sitting in his study late one night, brooding over what costumed persona he should adopt to strike fear into criminals (widely known as a superstitious and cowardly lot), when a giant bat crashed through the window.

“Aha!” said Bruce. And so The Batman was born.

When a bat entered our house recently, the reaction was somewhat different.

“AAAH!” said Bruce.

“Calm down,” said my wife. “It’s only a little bat. And it won’t fly into either of us, silly, so stop cringing. Especially you; your chrome dome is a perfect reflector for its sonar.”

Nonetheless, as the expected defender of our household, I dove for the closet and emerged holding a bat of my own. The other kind, used by petulant millionaire ball players. I approached the winged rodent, gripping my weapon, ready for battle. Bat against bat.

“Keep calm! Don’t get hysterical!” I yelled to my Better Half in an authoritative tone that somewhat concealed my own hysteria. “I’ll soon put paid to this creature!”

I deftly manoeuvred around couch and coffee table, filled with savage triumph as I bore down on the beast, before gracefully sprawling headlong over an ottoman.

“No!” yelled She Who Commands. “Don’t hurt the poor thing! It just flew in here by mistake. There’s an easier way to get rid of it.”

It was obvious that blind panic had clouded her reasoning. Thank God I could still think clearly.

I jumped to my feet. Eons of primal hunter/killer instinct

coursed through me. The small black fiend zipped around our livingroom almost too fast for the eye to follow, taunting me. I felt myself giving in to the hard-wired male stress response: hit something.

As I stood there, a pot-bellied Babe Ruth waiting for the opportunity to belt Killer Bat out of the ballpark, my encyclopaedic brain swiftly reviewed what I knew of bat lore. The Little Brown Bat, *myotis lucifugus*, loved eating insects, especially mosquitos (so perhaps we should keep it around to help protect us from West Nile Virus?). However, it was also a fact, verified by countless movies, that many bats had the distressing habit of transforming into bloodsucking vampires. Was this one of those? Surely not; it seemed much too small. Perhaps it was rabid? Yes, that had to be it. Why else had it invaded our home, except in the throes of a crazed dementia similar to men doing all their Christmas shopping late on December 24? Any second now, it would alight on one of us, sinking its sharp fangs into our overtaxed Canadian flesh, then becoming furious upon realizing we had already been bled dry by our elected vampires.

I raised my weapon, my eyes tracking the intruder like a dog watching the approach of a full supper dish.

“You’re mine, bat,” I muttered. “Just slow down a bit and you’re one dead varmint.”

“Will you PLEASE put down that baseball bat, before you start swinging and break some of our stuff!” ordered the umpire. I growled in frustration, but complied. Thirty years of marriage had taught me that you don’t mess with the ump.

“Good. Now I’ll go open the back door, while you close all the doors leading into the livingroom except the one closest to the back door.”

Ah! I understood her plan perfectly. Trap this creature of the night and smother it with a large throw pillow! Would cause far less damage than the baseball bat.

So I shut the required doors, grabbed a pillow from the couch, and slowly advanced towards the noxious beast. It had perched atop a bookcase and was trembling (an obvious ruse to elicit sympathy).

“Stop that!” barked you-know-who, re-entering the livingroom.

“We’re not out to kill it, but to free it. Now, just walk towards it with your arms wide, get it flying again, but don’t get between it and the one open door. We want it to find its way out of this room, and then go outside.”

“Free it?” I said incredulously. “But it’s vermin that invaded our home! We have the right to clobber it! It’s in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms!”

She gave me The Glare. I did as instructed, still certain that only drastic measures, involving chasing and swearing, with a dash of blood-letting, would rid us of this nocturnal devil. Well, let us try it her way, then when that failed, she’ll let me whack the beast a good one. I was positive I could accomplish the execution with only a minimum of property damage; a lamp or a plant at most. Maybe.

The creature became airborne again, circled the room once, then, like a bat out of you-know-where, darted through both the open livingroom door and the back door and was gone.

“There, see?” said She, with a smug look. “No muss, no fuss, no violence.”

“Yeah. Wonderful.” The hunter/killer urge reluctantly subsided, grumbling. “So, uh, how’d you know that would work?”

“Elementary, my dear goof: I know how their sonar works and figured the bat wanted out as badly as we wanted it out.”

“Really? Huh.”

So, besides her full-time paid job as Executive Assistant and her full-time unpaid duties as wife, mother, best friend, chef, shrink, nurse, painter, gardener, sanitary engineer, barber, judge, jury and executioner, my Better Half can now add another title to her lengthy resume: Master of Bats.

Batwife.

(Hmmm, I wonder if she sneaks out at night dressed in a skintight black costume with a bat symbol on her chest and a flowing cape? And if she does, do you think she’d let me be Robin?)

WET BEHIND THE EARS

When disaster strikes, go shopping

Years ago, when our son was only three, we took him to Los Angeles in March. While I spent my days trapped in a conference for association managers, my wife and son went on tours arranged by the conference organizers.

One such was a boat tour of the stars' waterfront homes. It was only after the tour bus collected my family, that they discovered said boat trip comprised only 25% of the excursion (and came last on the itinerary). The other 75% was visiting a floral nursery and a shopping mall. Major disappointment. Deposited at the mega-mall, my dynamic duo grudgingly explored it. Finally, with 15 minutes left before the tour bus departed, they plopped down on the rim of a wide fountain to rest. Spotting a fruit vendor, my wife turned to ask our son if he'd like a treat.

He was gone.

Milliseconds later, she heard a splash right behind her. Snapping her head around, she saw the water close over our son. The slippery little weasel had fallen in.

Hauling him out of the shallow water, she realized in horror that they were miles from our hotel, with no change of clothes, and a bus departing in 15 minutes for the boat dock.

Now had that been me, I would have begged a big garbage bag from a custodian, placed our dripping heir in it with his little blond head poking out, then cabbled it back to the hotel. Game over.

Not my wife. She paid for that tour and they both really wanted to go on the boat trip. But she didn't want our soaked sardine catching cold on the boat, either.

Sprinting into a nearby washroom, she shucked off his wet togs and dried him under the hand drier. Wrapping him in her sweater, she quickly located a children's clothing store, ran inside,

and grabbed clothes in his size. As boys' underwear was only sold in packs of six, she seized a pair of girls' undies, hoping it wouldn't affect him later in life.

She dashed to the cash, giving the surprised cashier the clothes in the order needed to dress a child. The cashier scanned, then cut off, the tag on each item, while my wife dressed our son on the spot.

Asking directions to the nearest children's shoe store, she sprinted off, glancing at her watch.

Five minutes left.

She tore inside the shoe store, grabbed a pair of son-sized sneakers, and sped to the cash.

Three people were ahead of her.

She blurted out her need to pay for the shoes immediately, explaining that time and tour waited for no woman. The cashier archly stated that my wife would wait her turn. The people in line glowered, faces expressing disbelief in her story.

Muttering a phrase that would turn a California tan white, my wife left the shoes and bolted for another washroom. She put his sopping sneakers under the hand drier for several minutes, then snatched some paper towels and made it to the tour bus just as the doors were closing.

En route to the boat dock, she packed the sneakers with paper towels, drying them as best she could.

That evening, when I returned to our hotel room, our son proudly showed off his new set of clothes.

I failed to deduce what that meant. After whining about how I'd been cooped up inside at seminars all day, I remarked about how they must have enjoyed their relaxing boat tour.

At this point, my wife abandoned all the qualities of resolve and grace under pressure that she had demonstrated earlier in the day.

It would have been less painful if I had simply walked into a hornets' nest.

She should have been one of the experts on my conference's panel that afternoon: it dealt with Crisis Management.

(I still walk into hornets' nests on occasion.)

SYMPHONIE NOCTURNE

My family's Music of the Night

I write this at great personal risk, as you will understand when you read further.

Once the family that it shelters retires for the night, a house grows quiet. But not silent. Creaks and groans occur regularly, especially in winter after thermostats are lowered and timbers cool as outside cold invades. In some houses, other nocturnal noises occasionally intrude, like the plaintive cry of a child needing consoling from a nightmare, or the muffled weeping of NHL hockey fans at the latest loss of their favorite team.

At our house, the Symphonie Nocturne usually involves mysterious and sometimes frightening sounds reminiscent of large industrial factories, auto-crushing machines, and powerful turbo-prop aircraft engines coughing into reluctant life.

In other words: snoring.

Every single member of my household stoutly - and sometimes angrily - denies that they snore. Yet, as the nighthawk who is usually the last to climb into bed and then tries to get to sleep, I can attest that they do.

Sometimes it's quiet, almost peaceful, droning, like that of a large animal, say a lion or antelope, exhausted after a long day of chasing and being chased. Other times, the lion and antelope are stampeding madly across the plains, fleeing for their lives, chased by a herd of enraged bull elephants with yapping hyenas as outriders.

At times, the Nocturnal Symphony is abruptly interrupted, as if, mid-way through the concert, the orchestra suddenly refuses to play until their salary demands are met. Or you wonder if they have just suffered a group heart attack. The silence is deafening, an almost physical assault on your eardrums. Worried, you hold your

breath. Then, just as suddenly and with a rasping groan like your Grandpa's ancient Chevy struggling to life in 30-below weather, the performance resumes, louder than before. Your breathing also resumes.

Also amazing is how coordinated the concert is. Normal orchestras play together in one place, but my family's symphony is performed by chainsaws in separate rooms. Yet the performance is beautifully coordinated: one saw revs up while the other slows down, waiting for another log.

Measures to stop the snorer rarely work. Shoveling the slumbering body into a new position elicits grunts, protests, sometimes a physical counterattack - then, for all your trouble, stentorian breathing like that of a great whale resumes several minutes later. A pillow placed over the snorer's face is risky; there are laws about smothering someone to death. Unfortunately.

Some evenings, the volume is so loud that I wonder why the snorers don't jerk awake, startled. That's certainly what happens to me, sleeping amongst these busy factory workers.

Other nights, reading quietly in our livingroom, sudden sounds similar to rupturing pipes or a tree crashing through our roof, cause me to dash upstairs in a panic, only to find that it's the usual suspects serenading the world. Yowling cats in heat are quieter.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I am not musically inclined whatsoever. In our talented Von Trapp Family of musicians, I'm the guy selling tickets out front. Hotly denying this, my son once surreptitiously captured me on video, snoring away like an asthmatic dragon. Well, it was faked; he dubbed the sound of a snorting hippo onto the tape. He has the technical skills to do this: he majored in TV Broadcast Production in college.

I sleep silent as a fawn. Ask anyone in my family.

(Unauthorized copies of my son's video are available.)

OUR SON, THE TV PSYCHIC

Uncanny predictions

Our son graduated college with a diploma in Television Broadcasting and, unlike his dad and many others, was fortunate enough to quickly land a job in his chosen profession. He works for a major national TV network in Toronto, in Master Control, which fortunately has nothing to do with taking over the world, and everything to do with making sure the right TV program gets aired at the right time with - and this is crucial - the right commercials.

Besides paying him to watch television eight hours a day, working at the network also unleashed our son's latent psychic abilities.

My wife and I first became aware of his hitherto-unknown psychic powers during the time contestant Ken Jennings was earning his way to super-stardom on *Jeopardy*. As each show started, our son predicted Jennings would win. He was always 100% correct. He even predicted the exact episode when Jennings' unprecedented winning streak would end. Right again.

He then started predicting major events on other shows we watched, like who was next to die on *Lost*, who would next jump into bed with whom on *Desperate Housewives*, and who committed the week's grisly murder on *CSI*. All as each show's opening credits rolled.

100% accurate, every time. (His reliable divinations only applied to television; he had the same luck we all have picking winning lottery numbers: abysmal.)

Amazed, my wife started humming the old *Twilight Zone* theme whenever our son made his perceptive prognostications. Equally amazed, I started thinking of ways to cash in on his newfound uncanny ability, like betting on the outcomes of televised sports events. In fact, why limit it to sports? Imagine

predicting the outcome of a national election, before the TV networks did. Or who'd win the million on *Survivor*.

My tiny mind boggled.

Then I started to notice a pattern.

He refused to predict the outcomes of shows or sports events on networks other than his employer. He also never predicted the outcome of a live sports event, no matter what network aired it.

Hmmm.

Then one day, under threat of severe inhumane torture (no second helping of Mom's Awesome Lasagna), he finally revealed his secret.

Turns out the little weasel is no more psychic than the \$.95-a-minute hotline hucksters advertising on TV in the wee hours of the morning.

By virtue of his job, he has access to tapes of shows days in advance of their broadcast dates. Whenever he worked the midnight shift (his preferred shift, since pesky bosses are home snug in their beds), he watched these shows when his real work was done.

Then he'd astonish his gullible parents with his so-called psychic powers.

The brat.

(Brattiness comes from his mother's side of the family; everyone's a complete angel on my side. Four out of ten police officers will verify this.)

Now that his secret's out, he still tells us the outcomes of shows, totally ruining the suspense we get from watching them. Told you he was a brat. No longer Our Son The TV Psychic; he is now Mr. Spoil Sport.

In some countries, I hear it's a capital offense to ruin the ending of a TV show, movie, or novel. People get sent to prison for that. Or shot. Maybe we should do this in Canada, too. I'll write my MP today - just as soon as I make a wager with a colleague on who will win *The Amazing Race*.

I got some inside information.

(I also know who shot JR.)

MURDER, SHE PLANNED

Family plot has grave implications

A female colleague where our son works in Toronto, said she read somewhere that all married women, at some point in their relationship, get fed up enough to concoct a plan to kill their husbands. She herself, after seven years of marriage, planned to do her hubby in with a wood chipper, just like in the movie *Fargo*. Having watched many episodes of *CSI* on TV, she outlined the careful steps she'd take to avoid forensic detection after her dastardly deed.

Our son unfortunately related this tale to my wife, whose eyes lit up at once.

"She has a plan to off her husband after only a measly seven years of marriage?" she said. "She's still a newlywed! Boy, have I ever been missing out - I've been married for 32 excruciating years! I've got a lot of catching up to do!"

I could tell her brain was already churning with possible ways to hasten my inevitable departure from this mortal coil. Our son grabbed some paper, eager to take notes.

I started to feel uneasy.

"It has to be unusual, unexpected," she mused. "Nothing mundane."

"So your cooking is out," I said. She shot me a withering look.

"How about the spa?" offered our son, always anxious to help his mother. "We could fill it with pirana and disconnect the underwater light. Then when Dad uses it at night, he won't see them."

"Yes, and when the water starts frothing around him, he'll think it was the spa jets making bubbles!" said my wife, rubbing her hands, obviously excited by the idea. "We'd only be left with bones to bury, and I know the perfect place to hide the evidence."

“Your garden!” I blurted, then wondered if perhaps I shouldn’t be so helpful, considering the topic of conversation.

“Here’s another idea,” said our son, rapidly on his way to being cut out of my Will. “Dad likes sleeping in his hammock in summertime, right? So we get one or two big 30-foot pythons, put them up the trees his hammock hangs from, then let nature take its course when he lies beneath. The snakes will even dispose of the evidence for us, one gulp at a time.”

“Great idea.” I said sarcastically. They took it as encouragement and pressed on.

“Scaring him might bring on The Big One,” said my wife. “Men his age are prone to heart attacks. He gets easily startled when he’s working away in his noisy laundry room or workshop, his back to the door, and you come up behind him and say something loudly. The coroner would see it as sudden death by heart failure. We’d be completely in the clear.”

“Gee, I had no idea you two would be so inventive at brainstorming my murder,” I said, wishing I had a tape recorder running, to gather evidence. “Perhaps I should get a gun, for self-defense.”

“Yeah, that’s it!” said our son. “Then we could arrange a Hemingway - a fatal accident when you’re cleaning it.”

I glared at him, thinking that fatal accidents can work both ways, and said:

“Well, you two just better watch yourselves: I’m writing a story about all this, and when it’s published, everyone will read about your evil plans, so you wouldn’t dare off me after that.”

They snorted in unison.

“Oh, c’mon Dad,” said our son. “Don’t you know that no one reads your stuff? Mom and I are safe as houses.”

(If you email me and I don’t reply, please notify the police. They should check the garden first.)

SWM SEEKS SWF. OBJECT: ACROBATICS

Technosavvy twentysomethings try to get dates

It amazes me that many members of today's twentysomething and thirtysomething generations still face the same challenge that we of the dinosaur generation had when we were their age:

Getting a date.

Once a person has finished their schooling and plunged into the hurly-burly working world, some find it hard to make a date connection. This is astounding, considering all the electronic means now available: Facebook, Youtube, MySpace, text-messaging, blogging, personal websites ("sexydevil.org"), I-Phones, Palm Pilots, Palm Co-Pilots, Global Positioning Satellites, neural implants, and so on.

In my day, millennia ago, before Steve Jobs had taken a bite of his first Apple, when we were casting for post-graduate dates, we relied on social groups, church gatherings, clubs, dances, parties at friends' houses, chance encounters at grocery stores, arranged encounters at auntie's house, and so on.

In short, face-to-face, instead of Facebook.

Nowadays, groups and clubs meet via online "chat rooms", church services are on television, groceries are ordered over the Internet, and auntie is off touring the world with her fourth husband.

In today's e-age, there's precious little face-to-face interaction. Younger folks have no idea how to go about it. Take away their electronic gizmos, and they're as helpless as a bureaucrat tasked with streamlining paperwork.

For instance, take my e-savvy totally-plugged-in twentysomething son (please). He's a college graduate, holds two well-paying jobs, has money in the bank, owns a late-model car,

and is very well-travelled. He is bright, articulate, funny, and can talk your ear off on the issues of the day. Despite his father's genes, he's good-looking with a full head of hair.

You'd think women would be lining up to go out with him (did I mention he can also cook?).

Yet he has great difficulty in getting a date.

Maybe it's because he has those two jobs, meaning he usually works seven days a week. Perhaps it's because he often works the midnight-to-eight shift and sleeps during the day; it's hard to socialize with that schedule, unless you're courting Dracula's daughter.

Or it could be that he's related to me.

But all that shouldn't matter, what with the plethora of electronic aids available to connect with potential dates.

However, it seems the potential dates are themselves too busy pursuing careers to invest in a little in-person socializing. Either that, or they're wary of someone who keeps a vampire's hours.

His current dilemma is that he purchased two prime-seat tickets for the August 16 performance of the new Cirque du Soleil show, *Kooza*, in Toronto. So far, he's been unable to secure an occupant for the seat next to his. Everyone he's asked is either too busy, has a time conflict, or wouldn't know what the world-famous Cirque du Soleil is if the troupe's Grand Chapiteau (Big Top) fell on them.

He's becoming convinced the dating pool has been drained, right in the middle of the summer swimming season.

I'd like to help him out.

So, dear readers, if any of you are, or know someone who is, a twentysomething non-smoking single female with an interest in the outstanding acrobatics and hilarious clowning of Cirque, preceded by a delightful dinner, and wouldn't mind a date with a really nice person, then please contact me.

Otherwise, he'll be forced to take his dad to the show, and sit there totally embarrassed when that dad jumps up on stage and joins the Cirque clowns mid-way through their performance. (It's happened before.)

(My non-profit dating service is now open.)

GETTING HER JUST DESSERTS

Eating dessert first threatens the natural order

WARNING: do not let your children read this story!

My wife causes quite a stir whenever we eat in a restaurant. Not because she loudly proclaims herself as a well-known food critic, so her meal better be good. (It's me that always says that.) It's because she smiles sweetly at the wait staff - and orders dessert first. And she wants it brought when the rest of us get our main course.

The reaction of the wait staff is usually priceless: it ranges from disbelief to amusement to disapproval and, sometimes, that look people get when confronted with someone who's obviously a bit addled.

Once, a diner at the next table gaped at her and said: "You can't do that!"

"Yes I can," she replied. "My mom's not here."

See? It doesn't bother her in the least.

However, I'm quite concerned. There is a natural order to things, and we risk tampering with cosmic forces beyond our comprehension if we disrupt it.

Like broken resolutions follow New Years, like sleepless nights follow new babies, like rain follows getting your car washed, and like weddings follow pregnancies, certain things naturally occur in succession. The most important natural order of things is that desserts always follow the main course. It's been that way since cavepeople ate their first mammoth and finished off with a delicious chocolate torte. My wife strongly disagrees.

Years ago, while touring lovely P.E.I., we chanced upon a quaint out-of-the-way restaurant owned by beloved Maritimes singer Catherine McKinnon (married to Don "Charlie Farquharson" Harron). The first thing you see as you enter Catherine's eatery is

a big display of awesome mouth-watering desserts. The second thing you see is this sign:

“Life is too short. Eat dessert first.”

For my wife, that was the highlight of our trip. It vindicated her life-long practice of doing just that - whenever she could get away with it.

She is infamous at certain Peterborough restaurants as the lady who always flips to the back of the menu first. Later, while her dining companions chow down on their entree, she ecstatically devours some fluffy sugary confection. She explains that she is usually too full after the main course to have dessert, even if she forgoes the appetizer. And since desserts are usually the most exciting things on the menu, why not start with the best?

Besides, hard-working pastry chefs spend hours creating their exquisite decadent offerings. Imagine how they feel when folks fill up on the appetizer and entree, and have no room for dessert? There’s weeping in restaurant kitchens across the land. (Which often dilutes the whipped cream.)

It’s her self-proclaimed duty to stop those tears.

My wife has courageously shucked off the tyrannical rule of our well-meaning mothers: “finish your plate, or you won’t get any dessert.”

In other words, to paraphrase a Broom Hilda cartoon: “eat until you’re stuffed too full, then as a reward, you’ll get even more food.” She thinks that particular logic makes about as much sense as the male compulsion, when watching their favorite sports team on TV, to enthusiastically cheer them on, because without that encouragement, their team would surely lose.

Now waitaminute: if she’s able to disrupt the natural order by eating dessert first - and the world hasn’t ended - then my son and I should have the same right to do some disrupting of our own. Specifically: eliminating something that “must” be part of every meal.

Vegetables. (Except for potatoes. Preferably French fried, garlic mashed, or scalloped.)

(I contemplate world disorder, while rarely getting my just desserts.)

CAUGHT BETWEEN FIRE & ICE

A bride vs. her mother-in-law, with me in the middle

In the 1970s, two years after we were married, I returned to McGill University to complete my degree. Though my wife continued working to help support us, the only way we made ends meet was by moving into a low-rent basement apartment at my parents' Montreal house.

While it was “going home” for me, the experience was difficult for my bride. She not only had to put up with my peccadilloes, but those of my landlord parents as well, living above us.

The worse trial was my mother's cooking.

Now don't get me wrong: my French-Canadian mom was a great cook. We still use some of her recipes today.

However, she had a problem serving hot food. Her definition of “hot” was “lukewarm”. To my wife, raised by a French-Canadian mother who served hot food at a temperature just this side of volcanic, my mom's food was always cold.

With a palate used to lukewarm food for 22 years, I had to make quite an adjustment after our marriage to the torrid fare my wife served. Many times she faked me out: setting steaming plates in front of us (I had no idea what waves of steam meant), she started eating with gusto and, human food vacuum that I am, I quickly followed suit.

And always got third degree burns in my mouth.

She never gave me any sympathy, saying I could always wait and let it cool down. She didn't understand that, where I grew up, you had to scarf down your warmish food immediately before it either got stone cold, or a sibling swiped it off your plate.

It was survival, man.

To stretch our meagre food budget, my parents periodically

invited us up from the cellar to have dinner with them. In the interests of detente, my wife gamely promised not to complain about the temperature of the food.

And she never did, bless her - until The Day of the Lasagna.

My mom made a wonderful lasagna. This particular day, however, her fondness for serving tepid grub hit a new low on the thermometer.

The pre-assembled lasagna went directly from freezer to oven, then after baking, to the table. When our plates were placed in front of us, I started devouring lasagna with reckless abandon (a bad habit since, as my wife oft reminds me, I could gobble down tainted food before realizing its “best before” date was in 1945).

Suspicious because no heat waves emanated from her meal, my wife gingerly took a small bite.

Cold.

She then cut into the centre of the pasta.

Her fork failed to penetrate.

In horror, she realized the centre was still frozen.

She shot me a desperate look, which turned to astonishment at seeing me wolf down a dinner that concealed an iceberg.

Despite what she had promised, she couldn't bring herself to eat a lasagna-cicle. She spoke to the chef, which caused great consternation, apologies, and further heating until the ice at least melted.

My dad wisely ignored all this and concentrated on the TV news.

During the three years we lived beneath my parents, I was caught between two extremes of fire and ice: basement food served by a wife whose definition of “hot” would forge steel at a Hamilton foundry, and upstairs food from a mother whose definition of “hot” would suit a polar bear during the Arctic winter.

Novelist Tom Wolfe was right: you can't go home again.

(I should be thankful I get fed at all. However, I still burn my mouth.)

LIVING WITH THE CHANGE

Winds blow hot, winds blow cold, male sailors take warning

When women reach a certain age, they embark upon the grand adventure known as the Change of Life.

That means their Significant Others get shanghaied upon the same adventure. Even if you're not packed for the trip, you're going, buddy. It's quite an epic journey: full of hills and valleys, swamps and summits. Perils lurk around every corner. Travelling companions sometimes wonder if they'll live to see another day. Nightly prayers for divine protection become commonplace.

The term "mood swings" is cruelly deceiving. It implies a pleasurable playground activity. The correct term should be: Rollercoaster From Hell.

To the uninitiated, a Change of Life might mean a new job, new home, new lifestyle, (or sometimes a new spouse). But the true Change is like all of the above - all at the same time. Worse, it includes volcanic hot flashes. Arctic cold spells. Restless nights of only three or four hours sleep.

All of which affects everyone in the immediate vicinity, Significant Others most of all. It's more nerve-wracking than hosting a birthday party for an entire Grade One class.

There are dozens of books and hundreds of articles available to counsel women on this tumultuous mid-life journey. There are support groups, medical advice, and medication both natural and manufactured.

But there is precious little for the Significant Others. We're left to fend for ourselves in a hostile environment, with no map, a broken compass, rapidly-diminishing supplies, alligators snapping at our heels, and a Force Five hurricane bearing down on us.

For guys, it's more traumatic than a power failure in the middle of the Super Bowl.

Those accompanying their captains on their lengthy voyage of Change can relate to Captain Bligh's crew, who cast him adrift in a longboat, then sailed off to idyllic Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific. Some days, escaping to your own tropical island is very tempting. But you didn't hear that from me.

Medical science is still debating whether or not male menopause exists. Women fervently hope it does; revenge is sweet.

I used to admire those intrepid men who, in ages past, embarked upon long sailing voyages of exploration. Perilous and life-threatening trips that meant years away from home.

I now realize why they did it. They figured they had better odds of survival than if they stayed home with wives undertaking their own years-long, arduous voyage. Cannibals and typhoons were nothing, in comparison. (At least those explorers could sleep snugly, instead of having their blankets torn off whenever their partner had a nighttime hot flash.)

However, those adventurers weren't really all that brave. In fact, they were total cowards. Disappearing when their lifemates needed them most.

Men owe it to their ladies to be there during this difficult time, considering everything women put up with from us, including our sports obsessions, like the all-important hockey, baseball, football, basketball, golf, soccer, lacrosse, NASCAR, ping-pong and tiddledywinks seasons.

Some female readers may be thinking: "what do *you* have to complain about, dead meat? *We're* the ones who have to endure this terrible ordeal!"

That's very true. I certainly don't mean to belittle women's suffering. I was merely pointing out that most women don't go through it alone. So perhaps, if it please the court, a small modicum of the slightest bit of sympathy might possibly be extended to the Significant Others.

Or at least give us a handbook. It's the humane thing to do. ("What's that, dear? Do what with my handbook?")
Never mind.

(I'm living life on the edge.)

PIMP MY HUSBAND

An automotive make-over of a rusty old consort

Our son convinced my wife and me to watch one of his favorite TV shows: *Pimp My Ride*. To our relief, it has nothing to do with prostitution, and everything to do with a complete make-over of someone's vehicle. Each episode, a rusty, beat-up, outdated car, truck or van, is completely transformed into a thing of beauty.

At the conclusion of the show, my wife opined that it's too bad the show's automotive make-over experts didn't offer the same service for husbands.

Uh-oh. Was that some kind of sly disparaging remark?

Was I really a candidate for a make-over?

While I wasn't looking, have I morphed from sleek sports car to dowdy sedan? After over three decades of dependable use to my original owner, did she see me as rusty and outdated, with sagging chassis, leaky transmission, and a dragging trunk?

As objectively as possible, I took stock of myself.

Chassis: still quite sound, despite the mileage. In fact, it's a 1950s classic (or is that now an antique?). Bones solid and in good working order; no broken parts. Muscles functioning, though in desperate need of a tune-up.

Body: defined as what covers the chassis, some serious bodywork is required here. No rust, but lots of superfluous material which needs to be trimmed off, to enhance performance and reduce weight on the springs. Sandpaper alone won't suffice; this job calls for heavy-duty grinders. New paint job wouldn't hurt either.

Trim: original factory equipment generally still in place (teeth, nose, ears, etc.), except for head hair: roof has been transformed from a soft-top to a hard-top. Direct sunlight or bright lights cause blinding glare, resulting in serious road hazard for

oncoming traffic.

Upholstery: seat is definitely better padded than when model was new. However, what I consider an asset, others consider a liability. Don't know why.

Headlights: bulbs certainly not as bright as before, resulting in impaired vision. However, corrective lenses enable driver to spot a skimpy bikini at 100 yards, just like in younger days.

Engine: heart still ticks over reliably, though takes longer to reach top speed than in earlier years. Now works better on premium fuel, than when younger, when any old fuel would do. Sometimes wonder if engine will start on very cold mornings.

Fuel consumption: definitely higher than when first manufactured. Richer mix in later years results in far fewer kilometers to the litre.

Electronics: on-board computer brain still fairly sharp. However, occasional programming lapses are irritating. Certain electronic commands to the rest of the machine sometimes take much longer to activate required mechanical response (eg: repairing stuff, yard work, or taking out the garbage).

Fluids: all hoses and clamps still at full integrity; no leakages yet.

Handling: depends on who's driving, especially around tight curves.

Exhaust: nothing wrong there. Definitely far more active than in earlier years. Lemon-scented catalytic converter needed to spare the immediate environment.

Reviewing my self-diagnostic, my wife admitted that it was fairly accurate. However, she said a trained mechanic would be better qualified to give a proper assessment. (If the needed repairs were too expensive, would she trade me in for a newer model?)

I was disappointed with her suggestion of a mechanic; I thought I had sufficient diagnostic expertise.

In fact, I was preparing to do a similar evaluation on her.

Perhaps it's best if I don't; that might get me sent straight to the auto recyclers.

(I have the mind of a Ferrari in the body of a Lada. Honk if you understand.)

THE STREET THAT DISAPPEARED

Be careful what you wish for

This is a true story. Let's say it happened in the capital of the province that's Canada's economic engine: PEI.

For years, my aunt and uncle have lived on a quiet street. (Let's call it Anaconda Court.) Right across from the entrance to their street, on the other side of a connecting boulevard, was Anaconda Crescent. (The bureaucrat in charge of street names had been tired that day.)

Watering the seeds of a future identity crisis, the bureaucrat gave the houses on both streets the exact same numbers.

This caused untold hilarity over the years.

Once, an entire truck load of topsoil was dumped at Number 7 Anaconda Court, when it should have been delivered to Number 7 Anaconda Crescent. While the homeowner on Court was pleased with the unexpected bounty, his counterpart on Crescent was a tad upset, especially when the bill arrived.

One day, my aunt answered her doorbell and was astonished to see the workings of a brand new gas furnace strewn upon her front lawn, chaperoned by an impatient installer. Told she never ordered a new furnace, indeed she was quite happy with her present one (there wasn't even a gas line going to her house), the installer coloured the air a lovely shade of blue until he double-checked his work order and saw Crescent in the address, not Court.

Countless pizzas and Chinese dinners were delivered to homes that never ordered them. Gorgeous flowers for anniversaries and birthdays likewise got misdelivered. (Once the unintended female recipients took possession, just try retrieving them. Reloading a huge load of topsoil was far less hassle.) Entertainment for stag parties arrived at the wrong houses (and was rarely refused).

But there was a darker side to these confused identities.

Ambulances screeched to a halt at the right house number, wrong street. And were half-way back to base before they noticed a relative of the injured chasing them, screaming “STOP!”.

Police and fire calls were likewise misplaced, shocking occupants of the innocent homes, while giving burglars and flames precious extra minutes to do their mischief.

So my uncle spearheaded a neighbourhood petition to have Anaconda Court renamed something completely different: Burmese Python Court.

Food, flower and furniture deliveries depended on it. Lives too. It was a no-brainer. He lobbied the city bureaucracy for five years and got nowhere.

Finally, a sympathetic civil servant took pity and altered my uncle’s application to imply a major new housing development, generating major new tax revenue, necessitated the name change. The change was approved within a week.

But there was an unforeseen side effect: their street disappeared. No city map or directory showed a Burmese Python Court.

Mail wasn’t delivered. No mail meant no bills. This was no cause for celebration. No bills meant no property taxes, or water, phone, hydro and cable bills, could be paid - causing houses to be threatened with seizure and endangering essential services. Their street never got plowed after blizzards, because it simply didn’t exist on the plow crew’s map. Police, fire and ambulance couldn’t respond. Pizzas and Chinese food went cold in delivery cars. (Oddly enough, Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to ring their chimes with no trouble at all.)

After a stressful year of trying to get their new name noticed, the final insult came last Hallowe’en: Their shiny new Burmese Python Court street sign was stolen. They have now effectively ceased to exist. Their children and grandchildren are traumatized.

Now they understand the old Chinese proverb: “Be careful what you wish for, because you may get it.”

(It’s odd, but I don’t remember having relatives in Charlottetown.)

GOING SQUIRRELLY

My mom's war at home

My mother hated squirrels with a passion equaled only by the furry critters' love of her corn.

During my teenage years (150 years ago), she planted several rows of corn each spring in her vegetable garden behind our suburban Montreal home, then over the next three months, tried to keep the developing cobs safe from marauding squirrels. It was always a tight race as to who would enjoy the fruits of her labours first: us or the varmints.

The varmints usually won.

Though grossly outnumbered, my mom was not one to admit defeat. As with all wars, her squirrel conflict escalated over the years.

At first, she shooed them away from the corn whenever she saw them: charging out of the house hollering and waving a broom, bearing down on the mooching rodents like an avenging Valkyrie.

Great entertainment for the neighbours.

I think the squirrels were amused too.

When that proved both ineffective and exhausting, she set humane cages to trap them, then drove great distances to release her captured prisoners. (She never calculated the gas expense of this catch-and-release effort, compared to the cost of simply buying corn at the Farmer's Market. My dad did, but wisely held his tongue.)

For two years, she chauffeured kidnaped squirrels by the bushel, only to have four-legged reinforcements move in to continue the war.

So she changed tactics and placed a brown paper bag over each ear of corn, reasoning that "out of sight, out of mind."

She discovered the thieving beasts had a great sense of smell.

She then declared Total War.

My dad, a consummate handyman, was conscripted to build a gigantic chicken wire cage around the entire corn patch, including a wire roof. This massive fortress had a large door, so mom could tend her crop. Convinced that squirrels possessed the same cunning dexterity of raccoons, who could undo latches (perhaps the raccoons held seminars for the squirrels?), she padlocked the door.

The Cage didn't work. Squirrels are either great diggers, or great lock-pickers.

Next spring, she had my father sink chicken wire three feet down in the earth all around the cage. When Stalag Gravel was completed, I solemnly proclaimed that no corn cob would ever escape.

She was not amused.

Inside the Stalag, she again covered the ears with paper bags. Extra security.

Ears still got eaten.

Now at her wit's end, she took drastic measures. It was wartime, after all.

I came home from school one afternoon, and was immediately hit with the distinctive smell of gunpowder as I stepped into the house. My adolescent brain slowly realized that -

KA-CHOW!

A thunderous roar came from my brother's bedroom.

Distressed that my brother had committed suicide before he repaid the money he owed me, I dashed into the bedroom, which overlooked the backyard vegetable patch.

I saw my mother lower her smoking rifle from the open window, a grim smile on her face.

"That's one damn squirrel who will never eat my corn," she muttered, as she ejected the spent shell.

The bright brass casing clanged on the polished hardwood floor; a scene from some Hollywood crime flick in which I had suddenly become a bit player.

Trained in her teens to be a hunter by her dad, she obviously still had her skills years later.

I babbled that firing a gun in suburbia was probably illegal.

She retorted that was why she fired from inside the house, stupid boy, so the neighbours wouldn't notice.

She spotted another bushy-tailed bandit and smoothly swung the rifle onto her shoulder. Hawkeye Jenny took careful aim, gently squeezed the trigger, the gun boomed, and I fled the room.

My dad eventually brokered a cease-fire between her and the rodents.

To ensure a lasting peace, he hid her bullets.

(I do not own a gun or grow corn, so squirrels frolic in complete safety at my house. Now cats, on the other hand...)