

Our Second Week

In Which Pete Gets A Disagreeable Bath
While I Check-in A Horse

Dear Diary:

Monday:

This week started bad and went downhill from there.

The morning mail contained a thick envelope from a law firm with more names than the starting line-up of the Toronto Blue Jays. Opening it, I started reading the letter. Two paragraphs in, I was hollering for Pete.

“We’re being sued!” I exclaimed as he bounded into the office, out of breath.

Our place was called the Pleasant Holiday Inn. Charming name. Unfortunately, the worldwide Holiday Inn chain thought so too – and they had it trade-marked. Reading the multi-page letter, with frequent use of our dictionary to translate legalese into English, we pieced together the story.

Seems the previous owner, Hal Owens, had been receiving letters about this for over a year – first from Holiday Inn, then from their lawyers. Though the motel had been using that name since it opened in 1953, it had only recently come to Holiday Inn’s attention. Owens had been warned to change the name, but he had ignored each increasingly-nasty letter. Now they were suing.

“Well, the solution’s obvious,” I said. “We can’t fight Holiday Inn. We’ll write and say we’re the new owners and that we’ll find a new name.” Pete agreed and we sent off a letter.

And thus touched off The Great Name Debate.

Tuesday:

For a couple that usually agreed on everything, we could not agree on a new name for our motel. We didn't want something obvious, like naming the place after the small city on whose outskirts we perched. The Wackimac Motel didn't float our boat. (Especially since we'd likely soon become known as the Wacky Motel.)

Nor was the Sparkling River Inn suitable, since the Woebegone River that flowed past our backyard only sparkled in spring. By early summer, it was stagnant. By late summer, it had expired into a mud flat. (Hence its name.)

In his ever-increasing dour moods, Pete suggested names like Dead End Motel or the Money Pit Inn. (In just one week, all by himself, he had managed to become wracked with doubts about our new career as innkeepers.)

I wanted something cozy and cheerful, like Mallard's Rest, in honour of the ducks that made their home along the river bank.

"But the ducks leave when the river dries up," the Pompous Idiot objected. "Hey, how about the Phantom River Inn, or the Departed Duck Depot?"

I threw a shoe at him.

We realized today that changing our name meant changing our road sign, our brochure and letterhead, and everything else with the old name on it. We had wanted a fresh look to our advertising materials, of course, but had planned to phase it in gradually. Now we had to do it all at once.

"Well, there's more money gone from our renovation fund," I said woefully.

That fund would take a major hit the next day. So would Pete.

Wednesday:

We were doing chores, still arguing about names, when Angie, our housekeeper (otherwise known as the Human Dust

Mop), approached us. Her expression was more gloomy than usual.

“Toilets won’t flush,” she muttered.

I looked at Pete, the *de facto* maintenance maestro of our little enterprise.

“Well, we gotta plunge ‘em, I guess,” he proclaimed.

He found a plunger, marched into a room, and attacked the toilet bowl with great zeal. It was the first toilet Pete had plunged in his life – at our Toronto condo, the custodian had handled all the maintenance.

Sploog! Sploog! Sploog! went the plunger. Great showers of water erupted from the bowl, landing in equal measure on the floor and Pete. (Luckily it *was* just water.) But it still wouldn’t flush when he tried it.

Dripping wet, Plumber Pete aggressively plunged the toilets in three other rooms, duplicating the mess in each. Same results: They still wouldn’t flush.

Frustrated, he took a break while Angie and I swabbed up the water. After some thought, he said:

“Y’know, with the outside water line, when the well pump seized last week and after the new pump was installed, the plumber had to bleed the line to remove air bubbles, to get it to flow properly. Maybe it’s the same principle with the sewer line. There’s probably a big air bubble in it.”

Pete used to teach high school. Not tech courses, but history. His expertise with hands-on repairs consisted of using his hands to search the Yellow Pages for help. Still, he seemed confident and his logic made sense in a Pete-sorta-way. I tagged along, in case he needed help. Or someone to call 911.

We went into the basement, where he found the plug at the end of our main sewer pipe. He took a big wrench to it with gusto. (“Gusto”, to a male, means lots of sweating, straining and swearing – in equal proportions.)

The plug came off very suddenly and very fast, shooting past Pete like a cannon ball, barely missing him. I caught a quick glimpse of my man, eyes bulging in surprise, as a solid stream of

foul brown waste water hit him and bowled him over.

Angie had silently materialized beside me.

“Huh,” she said, watching as the rest of the pipe’s reeking contents emptied onto my husband. “Shoulda kept his mouth shut.”

Draped in that awful mess, coughing and spitting, Pete no longer looked Pompous, but he sure had the Idiot part covered.

I could swear Angie was almost smiling.

The hastily-called plumber banished Pete from the basement while he fixed our system. The plumber said that we should have shut off something called a sewage injector before taking that cap off. Since our property slopes down away from the road, a sewage injector is needed to push the waste out to the main sewer line by the highway. This means our main sewer pipe is under a lot of pressure.

As Pete had found out the hard way.

My hubby had to take several disinfectant showers, then get a shot at the hospital for what had landed in his mouth.

His motel name suggestions for the next few days were extremely colourful and have no place in this Diary.

Thursday:

The day after the Sewer Incident, Pete’s father suddenly graced us with a visit. Bowed with age, Bill moved slowly with the aid of a cane. But his mind was still sharp, as was his mouth. With large black-rimmed glasses dominating a thin severe face, he looked like a hawk moonlighting as a librarian.

He still had his driver’s licence and loved to take rambling car trips all over North America. It was his one remaining passion since his wife, after 46 years of marriage, had left the miserable old coot six months after he retired. She simply could not put up with his grumpiness 24/7. (No mortal woman could, unless she had severe masochistic tendencies.) The divorce had deepened Bill’s negative outlook of women in general and wives in particular.

He didn’t much like me; despite my best efforts, we had never hit it off, even though I’d been married to his son for over two

decades. However, he was a major investor in our business: We had needed his money after the banks refused to loan us enough to buy the place on our own.

Thanks to someone's genius inspiration, Bill had been nicknamed Sarge because of his stint as a Master Sargent in the U. S. Army during World War Two. That background was still very evident as he toured the motel, passing out acerbic comments on what needed changing.

When Sarge found out that we had to rename the place and couldn't agree on a new name, he thought a minute, then suggested: "Why not call it Ellen's Fubar Motel?"

"Fubar? What's that mean?" I asked. "And what about Pete's name?"

Sarge fixed me with a shrewd look. "Fubar? Why, it doesn't mean anything, Ellen. Just like Xerox or Kodak, it's an invented name that will come to represent a unique product – in this case, your motel. And it should be just under your name, since a feminine name conjures a sense of home and comfort. Besides, I reckon buying this place was mostly your idea."

Pete sided with his dad (typical!). He liked the logic. My objections were overruled. So we called a local printer and started the ball rolling on new brochures. She wasn't busy that time of year, so we had graphic designs ready for our approval early the next morning.

Sarge left for home. He seemed amused by something. I mentioned it to Pete, but he shrugged it off.

Friday:

I got a phone call this morning from the local tourism bureau.

"Since you're not a member, we normally don't refer enquiries to you," the lady said tartly. "But there's a big horse show in town this weekend and every other place is full. Do you have any rooms available?"

I replied that I did. She hung up before I could thank her, or say that, as new owners, we were interested in joining the

bureau.

One hour later, an expensive pickup truck pulling a gleaming white horse trailer arrived. "Crawford's Purebred Arabians" was painted on the side of the trailer. Crawford himself was the driver. He rented our largest room, after first asking if it had air conditioning and if it worked. We were still in the middle of a major heat wave.

As I try to do with every guest, I chatted him up during the registration process and discovered he spoke about his horses the way most men talk about their wives or girlfriends. Then Crawford drove off, to spend the rest of the day and evening at the horse show.

Late that afternoon, Pete and I approved the artwork for our new brochures and told the printer to print 20,000 copies. I was a bit nervous with the large quantity, but Pete said: "We must distribute our brochure everywhere, over a wide area, El. Even though we're small, we have to think big! That's how we'll succeed."

I found myself getting used to our new name: Ellen's Fubar Motel. Had a nice ring to it. Maybe Sarge was finally declaring a cease-fire in our decades-long strained relationship.

Saturday:

Early this morning, some very upset guests checked out of the rooms on either side of Number 17. They said there had been very weird noises all night in that room, which disturbed their sleep.

After they left, I realized that Number 17 was rented to the owner of that show horse, who had returned late last night. I went over to have a word. After some pounding on the door, it finally opened.

The smell hit me first.

"What have you been DOING in here?" I demanded of Crawford, who was standing bleary-eyed in the doorway wearing nothing but his boxers, blinking in the morning sunlight. "It smells like a BARN!"

The second thing to hit me was a big wet set of nostrils. Horse nostrils. Poking out past Crawford, from INSIDE the bedroom!

“My God! You brought your HORSE in with you!” I exclaimed, as I shoved the horse’s head away from me. “Are you NUTS?”

“Not usually,” he replied defensively. “It was far too hot and muggy to leave him outside in his trailer all night. And I was worried someone might steal him. This is, after all, a prize-winning Arabian! Don’t worry, I brought in straw to cover the floor where he was, so there should be no damage to your carpet. I’ll clean out the straw and his poop before I leave.”

“Straw? POOP!” I was sputtering with rage. “I don’t care if this nag won the Triple Crown! This is a MOTEL room, not a STABLE! Have you no sense? You wouldn’t try this at the Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto, so why the blazes did you do it here?”

“Well,” he replied archly, “this is not the fancy Royal York, is it? It’s just a small country motel.”

“Even here in the country, we know that bedrooms are for humans and barns are for animals!” I shot back. “Do you have ANY idea of how hard it’s going to be to clean and disinfect this room? We take great pride in our rooms, Sir! They are NOT for the use of horses!”

Crawford fixed me with a crafty look: “Oh, really? Y’know lady, the Innkeeper’s Act of Ontario states you must board the horses of your guests. That Act may be over 100 years old, but it’s still valid.”

The British have a unique expression for when something totally takes you by surprise, causing your jaw to drop and your eyes to look like saucers: gobsmacked. It perfectly describes how I looked and felt at that moment.

“Wh-what?” I said. “I’ve never heard of the Innkeeper’s Act.”

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Look it up: It says you gotta give me a room and you gotta board my horse, too.”

“Well, it might very well say that, mister, but I’m damn sure

it doesn't say we must let your horse stay in your room!"

"Since you don't have a barn, where the hell else could I put it? Say, you wouldn't know where I can buy more horse feed, do you? Used the last bag last night."

I just glared at him and pushed past him into the room. Which seemed much smaller with a full-grown horse in it. I quickly noticed that the bathroom door had been removed. Peering inside, I saw that the sink was now a container for oats. The bathtub was full of hay.

Normally I'm a cheerful person. But this morning I lost it.

When Pete found me, I had finished making venomous comments about Crawford's ancestors, and was working on the ancestors of his horse. The air was blue. Pete surveyed the scene and promptly took over the shouting. I left to see if we still had that shotgun among those unpacked boxes from our move here. If I found it, my next task was to call a dog food factory to find out the going rate for fresh purebred Arabian horse meat.

The horse and Crawford were gone before I returned. Lucky for them; I'd found the gun. Pete had charged the jerk a hefty amount to cover the cleaning bill.

Pete suggested we change our motel name again, to Inn Tolerable, or maybe Inn Frustration.

I wasn't very good company for the rest of that day.

Sunday:

I had recovered most of my composure, following the trauma of the Horse Incident. After a mere two weeks as owners, Pete and I realized that for every bad-news customer, there were nine decent ones. (Which is what makes this business enjoyable, especially if you like people. It's also what keeps most innkeepers from committing suicide.)

I was checking out one of those nice people this morning: a charming elderly gentleman, touring Ontario with his wife. He noticed the artwork for our new brochure on the table behind our front desk, and laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked as I gave him his credit card

receipt.

“Why, that name on the brochure over there. I haven’t heard that phrase since World War Two. It’s a gag, isn’t it?”

“Gag?” I said, as a small knot started in my stomach. “What do you mean? That’s going to be the new name for this motel.”

“It is? My dear, don’t you realize what Fubar means?” When he saw that I did not, he went on: “Well I can’t very well tell you because ... ah, it’s language unsuitable for a lady’s ears.”

I was really concerned now. “Oh, don’t worry about my ears. You should have been here yesterday – and Wednesday too, for that matter. So, what’s Fubar mean?”

The old gentleman was silent for a long moment. Then he said:

“It came out of the Second World War. The Americans coined it, I believe, just like they did SNAFU. It’s an acronym; FUBAR is short for F**ked Up Beyond All Recognition.”

“Oh. Really. I. See.” I said, and forced a smile.

I thanked the man for his information, and stood in the doorway waving until they had driven away. Then I tracked down my husband, while working myself into another monster rage.

“THAT’S what it means?” Pete was incredulous. Then he saw I was seething with fury.

“That miserable old father of yours set us up! He’s an American war vet! He knew bloody well what Fubar meant! What a dirty trick to play on us! Especially on me: it’s ELLEN’S Fubar Motel!”

I was yelling now. Pete stepped back before my verbal assault. Then his mouth fell open.

“Omigod!” he blurted “We’ve just ordered 20,000 brochures with that name!”

That shocked me into silence. Of course, being Sunday, we could not reach the printer to cancel the order.

“I’m sure she hasn’t started printing it yet,” I said, and almost believed it. “I’ll call her first thing tomorrow.”

“Unless something else happens,” said Pete, thinking positively again.