

Laughing All the Way

By Darrell Bain

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*To Rob and Pat Pass and to Randy Bain
Thanks for the contributions!*

Introduction

I suppose a little history is in order here. A few years ago I began writing short, humorous pieces about everyday events occurring on our Christmas tree farm, which is located on *Santa Claus Lane*. Yes, that's right. *Santa Claus Lane* is a real post office address and my wife Betty and I grow Christmas trees here. We once grew chickens but thankfully, that is now history. At the present time we only grow cats and dogs, the dogs one at a time.

You might think that things happening around here would be funny only to us and the rest of the family, which is what I thought at first, too. However, our daughter Colleen began passing the stories around at work where she teaches school and before long relayed word back that I had an appreciative audience reading the stories. Not only that, they began clamoring to Colleen for a collection of the stories. Clamors affect me positively, so that's what I did: collect the stories. That was the easy part. The hard part was finding a publisher.

Print publishing companies were singularly underwhelmed by the collection, which I titled *Life on Santa Claus Lane*, but eventually I found an electronic book publishing company which recognized my great talent and put the stories out under that title as an e-book, a new paradigm in the publishing world. And then, lo and behold, the reviews began coming in, with statements such as "...*absolutely delightful*." and "...*all the makings of an old time story teller*" and so on. Eventually a small print publisher believed all those good reviews and brought the book out as a trade paperback.

In the meantime, I started a newsletter for fans and always included one of my wacky stories in each issue. I held a contest to name the newsletter with first prize a copy of one of my novels, *Medics Wild*. The winning entry, picked by yours truly, caused the newsletter to be named *Laughing All The Way*. And now, constant reader, as you may suspect, this book is a collection of the stories which have appeared in the newsletter. My readers simply demanded that I put the collection all in one place. So I did, and hence you are now reading it, that is if I ever finish this introduction. Bear with me, it won't take much longer.

Besides myself, my wife Betty, our dachshund doggie named Biscuit and a few cats, there is also some other family members living on Santa Claus Lane. We and the Christmas tree farm occupy the front fifty acres. Two sets of kids and their families and one granddaughter and her family reside on the back 20 acres. There is daughter Pat and son-in-law Rob and granddaughter Robyn, then son Mike and daughter-in-law Linda and granddaughter Amy and granddaughter Bridgette and her two kids, Matthew and Cheyanne. There. I think that's everyone.

Whoops! Almost forgot. I have to include Biscuit the Weenie Dog since he lives in the house and has wormed himself not only into our hearts but under the blankets, too. At first he wasn't allowed on the bed, and then on the bed but not under the covers and ultimately under the covers, but doggie people will understand how those things go. However, right at first that wasn't the case and Betty could take a nap in piece. I wrote the following while he was still a puppy.

Biscuit knows he's not allowed to lick either of us in the face. Biscuit knows he isn't supposed to get up on the bed. What do little kids and puppy dogs do when they know they aren't supposed to do something? Why, they do it, of course. In Biscuit's case he waits until Betty has napped an hour, no longer, or until daylight in the morning, no longer. If she isn't up

out of the bed by then, here he comes, thunkety thunk thunk, little short legs pumping, and takes a flying leap, plop, onto the bed then galumph galumph, up Betty's back (or front) he scampers, slurp slurp goes his tongue up the side of her face and down the other side as she comes wide awake, then galumph galumph, down her other side after she's rolled over, plop onto the floor he goes and thunkety thump thump, little legs churning, as he runs in to tell me what a good doggie he is, grinning and wagging his tail, as exuberant as a boy who has just raided a cookie jar without being caught.

We and the kids and grandkids and great grandkids all live in peace and harmony on the seventy-five or so acres where Santa Claus Lane meanders down at a right angle from the blacktop road, through the Christmas trees, past our house, on past Pat and Rob's house and Bridgette's house and all the way back to Mike and Linda's house which backs up onto a cypress break replete with alligators, wild hogs, turkeys, bobcats, and all kinds of other varmints.

Peace and harmony reigns over this seventy five acres. That is except during the Christmas season when we all lose our collective sanity and during the rest of the year except when either Biscuit or I get into trouble.

The Christmas tree farm is and has been sort of a family enterprise for twenty years now. The kids work during the selling season and the grandkids grew up helping and now their kids are out there greeting customers and handing out flyers. It has been a grand experience and we hope we can keep it up for many more years.

Now, let's get on with the stories. You'll meet everyone again-especially me, as I go my lazy, bumbling way, trying to avoid work by writing books and hiring grandkids and day laborers to do what I should be doing and complaining about my bad back while Betty is out trimming trees, making wreaths and driving tractors. It's a wonderful life. Most of the time.

Chapter One

Personal History and Strange Things

Since I started writing books, a few people have asked what I'm like and what I've done in life. Now that's a hard one, but I'll try.

I am handsome, intelligent, genial, healthy, amiable, pleasant, gracious, clever, able, superbly handsome for my years and a wonderfully gifted writer. I have been a brave soldier, a medical person who always cared for his patients, a paperboy who never threw the paper on the roof and an ice cream machine operator who produced almost as much ice cream as he ate. I am married to the loveliest and most gracious woman in existence who never, ever argues or gets mad. She is also a good cook, a wonderful lover and believes all my stories about having a bad back when I'm trying to get out of work. My dog is smarter than any other dog in the world and my cat can purr louder than your cat.

There. Now you know all about me.

It was the post office which decided that we and the kids had to have a real street address rather than a route number. When they dubbed the road running through our fifty acres and on to the ten acres each belonging to the kids Santa Claus Lane, our daughter-in-law Linda promptly abolished her mailbox and got a post office box number to handle their mail. She said she wasn't going to be laughed at every time someone asked for her address. I can't say I blame her. It is the perfect address for a Christmas tree farm but I have noticed we get some rather strange looks and have to explain to a lot of people when asked that yes, it really is a real address.

Besides the strange looks, strange things seem to happen on Santa Claus Lane. When the aliens land, they will probably come down right in our driveway. One of the strangest is that, as mentioned, I managed to have a book published about the odd happenings here. Folks who have read the first book, *Life on Santa Claus Lane*, have accused me of being lazy. That's a canard. I'm not lazy, I just like to work sitting down and writing is easy work if you're just telling the truth about what's going on around your place. Well, almost the truth, barring a bit of literary elaboration. All right, so I exaggerate. I bet you have some bad habits, too, don't you? But sometimes I tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, which brings me to the point of relating one of the most fantastic strings of calamities ever to befall one family trying to move into a new home.

The calamities happened to our son-in-law Rob when he and Pat bought a new mobile home to replace their old one on Santa Claus Lane. Everyone except Pat and Rob thought the events were funny but absolutely no one believed I was telling the unvarnished truth and nothing but the truth when I wrote about them. They thought I was making the whole thing up!

Pat and Rob were happily occupying a fourteen foot wide mobile home and owned another old mobile home they had lived in previously and kept on hand for relatives to occupy when and if needed. Pat was perfectly content with her little place until Rob started making so much money that he hired Pat as his administrative assistant-and then she decided it was time to move up in the mobile home world. Did I tell you that Rob manages mobile home lots for a living? No? Well, that's probably where the trouble started. He thought he knew everything there was to know about mobile homes. And moving mobile homes. And setting up mobile homes. Boy, was he wrong!

Chapter Two

Big Mama and Hubris

When Pat told us about the new mobile home they had bought, I immediately named it “Big Mama” in honor of its size. It was one of the largest, tallest double-wide homes ever made, according to Pat and probably the heaviest after Rob had the factory add all the extra bracing, insulation, and so forth.

Okay, now let’s leave Big Mama for a moment and return to the ten acres back behind us where Pat and Rob live. Remember that extra old mobile home they kept around for visitors, out of work relatives and so forth? They had sort of thought of fixing it up as a home for Rob’s parents for when they were no longer able to drive but as it turned out, the company doing the financing accepted it as a down payment on Big Mama. Pat and Rob were very happy since that meant they could keep the one they were living in, which was newer and in much better shape, as the spare. Rob was really proud of himself for making that deal. He bragged about it, which perhaps he shouldn’t have. Hubris has a way of turning around and biting your behind off if you’re not careful. Just to prove this thesis, listen to what happened a week or two later.

Once Rob had consummated the deal, the old trailer had to be moved to make room for the new double-wide, and of course their financial institution wanted to see it ensconced at the lot Rob runs, all renovated and ready for them to get their money back from it. Moving a trailer costs anywhere from several hundred dollars up to a thousand or two, so Rob decided to do the moving himself, with the help of a friend who owned a big truck.

The first I knew of it, Rob came over to borrow my air tanks to inflate the tires on the old trailer. Then throughout the morning and on into the afternoon Betty and I heard periodic moving noises. At least that’s what we assumed they were. When I went for the mail I happened to notice my big tractor was missing. That should have told me something was wrong, but somehow it didn’t click. We listened to more sounds coming from back behind the trees, some of them rather strange, truth to tell, and sounding not at all like a trailer being moved. Eventually, shortly before dark, all the noises ceased and we thought the job had been accomplished. At least when I stepped outside and looked in the carport I saw that my tractor and air tanks were back home.

Betty and I decided to walk over and admire Rob’s accomplishment, which he had assured Pat would save them hundreds of dollars, money which they could then spend with happy abandon while they were on an imminent three day vacation to Cancun that Rob had won for exceptional sales ability. He may be a great salesman but his trailer moving abilities, and those of the friend he had hired to help, left much to be desired.

The trailer was still there, what was left of it. Rob and his friend had somehow, with the aid of the moving truck and my tractor, gotten the trailer so entangled with the numerous pine trees surrounding it that they had bent the frame, pulled the body apart at the top in three separate places and wedged it so tightly amongst the trees that nothing short of a bonafide miracle was ever going to get it loose. And now, not only did they not have the trailer to trade, they were going to have to pay someone to come cut some trees and haul away the junk the trailer had been turned into because Big Mama was still rapidly making her way down the assembly line-after Rob quickly substituted a substantial amount of money in place of the trailer he had gotten such a good deal on as a trade-in.

They left the next morning for romantic Cancun-with Pat not speaking to Rob and Rob snarling whenever he opened his mouth. Betty and I figured that if Pat came back without him, no one would ask questions because no jury in the world would convict her. They would call it justifiable homicide.

Chapter Three

Gary versus the Guinea's

The story of Big Mama is nowhere near finished. In fact, it so occupied the attention of everyone living on Santa Claus Lane for so long, and the further adventures became so unbelievable that I have decided to give everyone a chance to catch their breath by only talking about Big Mama every other chapter or so. That being the case, let's leave her on the assembly line and Pat and Rob in Cancun (if Rob is still amongst the living) and touch on another subject, my next younger brother Gary, and a memorable episode with his son and some guinea hens which he likes to raise. While this story didn't take place on Santa Claus Lane, strictly speaking, Gary was visiting with us when he told it so I believe it's legally permissible to include it in this book.

Right after Gary retired from the Marines he rented a house out in the country on a hundred acres in North Carolina. He lived there for about a year and put in a garden and what he said was tobacco but which looked to me more like that other funny stuff you smoke, but never mind. Maybe it was real tobacco. Besides the garden, he bought some guineas. (Don't ask me why-I haven't the faintest idea.) Anyway, he was divorced then and his son, who must have been about ten or eleven, came to visit just about the time the guineas were big enough to eat.

Now Gary really did live on a farm when he was a boy, the same as me, but I don't remember a whole lot about it so I know he hardly remembers anything. Nevertheless, he tried to pretend that he was an old farm hand in front of his son, which brings us back to the guineas. Gary decided to kill a couple of them for a meal and brought Bryan out to watch, all the time rambling on about how it takes a special skill to chop a chicken's head off (or a guinea's in this case). The guineas were pretty tame so he had no problem capturing one and stretching its neck onto the chopping block. (The guinea did begin to suspect all was not well at this point but it was a little late by then.)

"Now this is how we used to do it on the farm, son," Gary said. "Watch closely." With that, holding the bird's feet with one hand, he raised the hatchet in the other hand and brought the blade squarely down across the guinea's neck, severing its head. The look of satisfaction on Gary's face at a job well done lasted approximately one tenth of one second because he had forgotten to let go of the guinea. He was still holding it by the legs and it was flopping wildly and spraying arterial blood from the neck over him, over Bryan, over him again and back over Bryan. By the time he had the presence of mind to let go of the guinea's legs he and Bryan were a bloody mess from head to toe.

Gary is stubborn-or perhaps a little short on gray matter. We all know about Marines, don't we? Quickly, he whipped out his bandana and wiped the blood off their faces while assuring Bryan that guinea blood would have no lasting ill effects and that as soon as he showed him the really proper way to kill a hen they would wash the rest of it off and have roast guinea for supper. Bryan was an obedient boy at that age and still thought his dad had all the answers so he held still until enough of his face was wiped off that he could see again.

"Now, son, it has been a long time since I've done this, I have to admit," Gary said. "I simply forgot that you're supposed to fling the hen away from you the second you chop its head off. Let's catch another guinea and I'll show you."

The guineas had an idea something was not right with their world by this time so it did take a bit of scrambling to corral another one, which allowed the blood on their clothes time to dry and ruin them (and later on, causing Bryan's mother to launch an investigation to find out what the hell was going on at that farm while her son was there). One guinea had the bad luck to get caught after being trapped in a cul de sac where it couldn't fly and it was brought over to the old chopping block.

Gary held the guinea by its legs again and stretched its neck out on the chopping block. "All right son. Are we ready?"

"Ready." Bryan said, peeking from between the fingers covering his face. He didn't intend to get blood in his eyes this time.

Gary made a couple of little practice swings, wanting to get his rhythm right so he could fling the bird away just after the hatchet severed its neck. Then, thinking he had his movements all timed and scripted, he took a mighty swing down with the hand holding the hatchet, while almost simultaneously up went his other hand with the legs, flinging the guinea away, intending for it to be sans head and far enough away to avoid a blood bath this time.

Thunk! Went the ax. "*Squawk!*" went the guinea. "*Squawk, squawk, squawk,*" it went, the cries becoming fainter and fainter as it disappeared over the horizon, never to be seen again. Gary had flung it away before the ax got to its neck! After that, he retired to the house to show Bryan how to make rum disappear from a bottle and other manly deeds bearing no relation to his years of growing up on a farm.

Chapter Four

Big Mama and the Joshua Tree

In the meantime, while we were taking a break with Gary and the guineas, *Days Of Our Lives* could have filmed their soap opera here. Remember Rob trying to move the trailer and pulling the top and frame askew? Well, it certainly was no good as a trade-in anymore, but the frame was still sort of intact, Rob and Pat thought, even though wedged with one end dug into the dirt and the other two thirds wedged amongst several trees in a pattern which would put a Chinese puzzle to shame. Maybe it could still be used for something, but in the meantime, time was passing and the double-wide *Big Mama* was due to come off the assembly in only a week and head our way.

Rob happened to be short of money because he spent so much in Cancun trying to get Pat to talk to him instead of killing him, but they *had* to get ready for Big Mama, so somehow that battered old trailer was going to have to get unhooked from its jammed position. Which was going to involve money, naturally.

As I said, a soap opera. Okay, let's leave Rob and Pat while they decide what to do and flash forward to Mike and Linda, our son and daughter-in-law who had taken off for a few days. They came back to find that Linda's mother had gone for her physical for a kidney transplant which Linda or one of her sisters were going to try to donate. The doc ran an EKG on the mother and told her sorry, you are supposed to already be dead from heart disease. Bridgette's car broke down, Mike's car broke down and Bridgette lost her job, finishing off their glorious day.

A soap opera would quit here, but not us, so let's leave Mike and Linda wondering who gets to donate the kidney once Linda's mother recovers from the surgery and go to my family for just one phone call.

Allan, my oldest son, lives in California. I haven't seen him in several years. I got a call from my sister Carla who lives in Louisiana where the folks are in the nursing home. She told me mother is beginning to show the same symptoms she had before her surgery and miraculous recovery but never mind that, she wanted to know what Allan was doing in Louisiana and why he invited himself to supper and an overnight stay-which would have been fine except he brought his new wife (whom none of us had seen yet), his mother (my ex-wife, of course) and his grandmother (my ex-mother-in-law) whom she had never met. I told Carla to relax, they were all nice people just like Allan and hadn't she ever had strange overnight guests before? I reminded her we used to do it all the time with our Bed and Breakfast deal. Our conversation was interrupted by a loud crash coming from the direction of Rob and Pat's place so let's go back and see what else the soap opera director dreamed up.

In order to get Big Mama in, the old ex-trade-in trailer had to be moved from its wedged position, and a huge old pine tree, named "Joshua" for its triple trunk, had to be cut and moved, a stump grinder had to come in to wipe out the stump and a bulldozer had to then level the extra space. Being short of money, Rob had gotten another "friend" (like the one which tried to move the trailer in the first place) to cut Joshua. That's what the crash was. The friend had cut the first huge arm-like curved trunk which started about 20 feet above the ground. Why, I don't know, when he could have cut the whole thing at once by starting lower. I guess he did it that way because he was charging them for cutting three trees and figured he had to do the arms

separately. Unfortunately, he hadn't had his rope tied tight enough. The trunk twisted and fell on the trailer. It dug a hole in the roof and bent the trailer a little more out of shape and was wedged on top of it.

"No big deal," the man said when Pat arrived home from an errand, dropping her groceries on the ground and breaking the eggs when she saw what had happened. "We'll just cut the limb up and move it and fix the roof." Pat left again, unable to watch. Or maybe she went to call Rob about the quality of his friends.

Continue the soap opera. The next cut made the trunk roll from its wedged position on top of the trailer. It gashed out another 20 foot section of the trailer, top to bottom and front to back and demolished everything inside that part of it completely, which consisted mainly of things belonging to their nephew who had been living there until recently, but they had been unable to contact him to tell him to come get his stuff. Now that everything was open to the weather, the nephew's stuff had to be moved, but when they looked it was mostly ruined anyway from the forty ton section of the Joshua tree falling on it and the mangled trailer certainly could not be pulled anywhere for the time being. And remember, while all this was going on, Big Mama was still racing down the assembly line.

Pat came back outside, saw the carnage and called Rob, who had been intending to stay overnight at work. (It is a pretty good drive and sometimes if he's working late he just stays in a spare furnished trailer.) He decided to come home. I had intended to work on the Christmas trees that day, but being a good guy, I decided to get a day-laborer to move cement blocks for the new trailer and to unload that demolished one and to do some clearing for poor Rob. Besides being a good guy, I was going to try to talk Rob and Pat into letting me salvage the refrigerator from the wreckage to use in our shop but it turned out that it was wrecked, too.

Rob needed to get home before the bulldozer he had ordered arrived anyway, so he and Pat could talk things over and decide whether to have the dozer bury the wrecked trailer, push it deep into the woods or push/pull it in pieces out into the pasture on the other side of the road and leave it to be burned later.

And since this still sounds like a soap opera, I figured the day would end by the bulldozer coming and cutting the power lines or the stump grinder falling off the new culvert I had just had put in or Allan showing up here with his extended family who are cleanliness fanatics if I remember, and naturally we've been too busy lately to worry much about the house.

Besides that, Betty got a call to come get the plums she ordered because they were ready and she was busy all day and unable to help anyone and I had the day laborer who turned out to have just arrived from Mexico and Betty is the only one who speaks Spanish and Bridgette needed a ride somewhere and...

Stay tuned, folks. Relax and try to figure out what else is going to happen next with Big Mama. And remember-this is all absolutely true! But in the meantime, let's take a short break so you can learn about toilet seats. Toilet seats? Yup. Can't let Big Mama hog all the pages.

Chapter Five

The Fabulous Toilet Seats

There is something in the soul of a woman which can't stand to leave households as they are. One thing or another (or sometimes everything in a room) has to periodically either be moved, replaced or refurbished. If this is not done the woman goes into fits of depression which can be cured only by succumbing to the desire or by replacing her whole wardrobe instead of the furniture. On average, it is simpler and less expensive to indulge the urge to change rather than let it fester, mainly because most urges involve fairly simple things rather whole new kitchens or bedrooms. Mostly it's different colored curtains or a new flower vase or such. In Betty's case I saw it coming. She walked around the house for several days, touching things at random with this glassy look in her eyes and I held my breath, hoping that whatever she came up with wouldn't involve me. Alas, it was not to be. I should have figured that out when she left for Wal-Mart with her daughter who was getting ready to furnish a new home. One woman out shopping is bad news, two together and you may as well prepare yourself.

Later in the day Betty and Pat returned. Well, I didn't see Pat but I presume she isn't still at the store, at least not unless Rob has gotten a substantial raise we haven't heard about. Betty came into the house carrying this enormous parcel.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Leather toilet seats!" Betty exclaimed as happily as if she had just won a lottery.

"Uh, did you say leather toilet seats?" Of all the things I was expecting this had to be the last on the list.

"You're going to love them, I just know you will." Betty fished them out of the bag one at a time and laid them on a spare chair. There were two sets of the things, one for each bathroom.

Well, whatever makes her happy, I thought, forbearing to ask what we needed leather toilet seats for when the wooden ones worked perfectly well. I turned away to go back to my easy chair.

"Wait! You have to put them on for me," Betty said.

"Don't they just clip on or something?"

Betty gave me her exasperated look, the one that tells me I'm being stupider than usual. "Of course not. There's some screws and bolts and things."

And things. I might have known. "Okay, leave them there, I'll get around to it shortly."

The new leather toilet seats stayed in the chair a couple of days while I tried to forget them. Actually I did develop a blind spot for that chair pretty quick but one morning I went to the john and found myself staring at leather toilet seats leaning against the wall. Well shucks, they weren't hurting anything there so I just stared back. This went on for a couple of more days. Then one morning I went into the bathroom and the new leather seats were lying on top of the regular ones. I figured that was a pretty strong hint so I decided to go ahead and change them out.

A while later I decided that one of the reasons Betty had bought new toilet seats was so she could see me make an idiot of myself trying to put them on. I fiddled and worked and pulled and twisted and tugged, and pinched fingers with pliers, and poked holes in my hand with screwdrivers and bumped my head on unyielding surfaces for an hour or so, all the while wishing the computer was handy so I could get on the internet and look up some new cusswords.

Finally I gave up for the morning.

Over the years I have developed a theory about household repairs, to wit: if it can't be fixed with a can of WD-40 or a hammer or duct tape, it probably isn't worth fixing. Sure enough, I sprayed a little WD-40, waited a while, tapped with a hammer and the bolts did loosen. It was easy to take them loose, remove the old seats and put the new leather seats on. All I had to do was crouch in a corner between the wall and toilet with plenty of room for any decent sized Chihuahua, stick one elbow in my ear and the other in my back pocket and smush my head up against the lower part of the tank hard enough that I could feel my teeth cutting holes through my cheek, then use a screwdriver with my left hand, no mean trick for a right-handed person, while finagling a pair of pliers into a space meant for tweezers to hold onto a nut while holding everything in alignment with my third hand, and by golly after a while there we were with brand new leather toilet seats. And no comments about that third hand. All men keep a third hand in another dimension and drag it out for close work like that. Oh yes. Repeat for the other bathroom.

I brought the old toilet seats out into the living room and laid them on the floor while I caught my breath. "I'm done. Here in a minute I'll take these old seats out to the truck so I can haul them off."

Betty looked at me as if I had suggested throwing out her new bedroom suite. "Oh no! Don't throw them away, they're still good!"

I stood there, my head sort of still tilting to one side from the crick in my neck, my left arm hanging crooked from where my elbow wouldn't quite go back in place and the smell of WD-40 wafting up from the old toilet seats.

"What are they good for?" I asked, thinking of my friend Will who was in the process of trying to discard some old things, so far without success.

"Well, we might need them someday."

Sometimes a man has to take a stand. "What did you do when you decided we needed new toilet seats?"

"I bought new ones, but-"

"But me no buts," I proclaimed. "I'll save old chairs, old rugs, old linoleum, maybe even old lawn chairs without the webbing. I will not save old toilet seats. What would the neighbors think?"

Betty wouldn't give up easily. "They wouldn't know. You could put them out in the barn."

"Sure we could. What about Matthew?" Matthew is our four-year-old great-grandson.

"What about him?"

"Just think. I mean, what four-year-old, especially Matthew, could resist playing with old toilet seats? He would drag them out in the yard and pretend to go potty, or maybe really go potty, or try to flush the cats through them or...."

Reluctantly, Betty gave up.

The toilet seats went to the dump.

I count that as one of my few victories in the household wars but it does give me some encouragement. The next time Betty gets that look in her eye I'm going to hang around my computer all day long, just staring at it and hope she decides it needs to be replaced with a nicer looking model. Well, a fellow can hope, can't he?

Chapter Six

Here Comes Big Mama

Okay, have you caught your breath? If so, let's continue with the saga of *Big Mama*.

If you remember, we left Rob and Pat with one trailer demolished and the one they are living in now having to be put up for sale because they needed even more money after their trade-in came off second best with Rob, his friends and the Joshua Tree. They were waiting on Big Mama, the huge 2,000 sq. ft. new home, which was on the way off the assembly line. They were also waiting on a bulldozer and for the stump grinder to come back and finish preparing the site for Big Mama. Here's how the next day went:

Wednesday morning. Still no bulldozer to clear the area. Still no stump grinder. The stump grinder was supposed to grind down the huge stump left by the Joshua Tree and a few others where trees had had to be removed, since Big Mama was going to occupy more than twice as much area as the wrecked home. To give him credit, the stump grinder had arrived once, then had come back once more after his rig broke down but he only finished the one stump he was working on and left another one equally as large. And then Pat got a phone call telling them Big Mama is rolling down the highway already, with no turning back!

Wednesday afternoon. Big Mama is here, at the entrance to Santa Claus Lane, only a quarter mile from her new home. The problem: getting over a small culvert and over our new culvert and through the narrow lane between the huge pine trees which line the part of the lane as it passes our house. And finding a parking place for Big Mama until the bulldozer arrives. Also there is still a wrecked trailer occupying her prospective resting spot which she isn't going to be happy about.

Wednesday Evening: Very slowly the two huge sections move up the road. They are so wide that they can't pass the small culvert. The only solution is to go around, through a low spot. They do, with everyone holding their breath. They don't get stuck. They come to the new culvert, which isn't quite set yet and sort of soft. Slowly they go across. It is barely wide enough and wheels go along the edges where it's still soft. Slowly the wheels sink into the earth. The middles drags. The trucks speed up. The sections come across, leaving twin, two foot deep and two foot wide ruts in our new culvert crossing.

"We'll worry about that later," Rob said.

"Okay," I answer. What the heck, I only spent a couple of thousand bucks a week ago having it repaired and what's a few thousand dollars between father-in-law and son-in-law? I'm not going to answer that in writing so let's continue.

On Big Mama comes, up the lane. Big Mama stops. A pine tree halts progress long enough to gouge out the edge of the roof on one section. Pat turns her back on the proceedings, unable to watch what is happening to her new home. On they come. Another pine tree gouges out the facing on the other section. With no place to put them, they are slowly moved and parked in the hay field across the road, coincidentally, right by the spot where a decision has been made to bury the ruins of the old trailer, which of course the bulldozer hasn't buried yet because it hasn't gotten here yet. It appears that the ruins of the old might block the new from going to its allotted space for a while to come. Of course a bulldozer would help things along. Getting that other big stump out would help, too.

Rob prevailed on the two trucks which had brought in the two sections of Big Mama to drag the old wrecked trailer across the road to where it will be buried if the bulldozer ever shows up. He did his prevailing while assuring Pat that there was only minor damage to the roof of her new home.

“Then how come I heard you using your mobile phone to ask Darrell for all the tarpaulins from the Christmas tree shop?” Pat wanted to know.

“Just precautionary.”

“All right, but while you have the phone in your hand, call me a roofer.”

“What for?” Rob asked.

“Just precautionary,” Pat said.

Was Betty interested in all this? No, she was undergoing her own trials that fateful Wednesday. The dentist was going to uncap one of her molars and fill a cavity. After getting her uncapped and drilling and drilling at the cavity, he decided the tooth couldn't be saved and decided to pull it. It broke in three pieces and had to be dug out. The root hung up on an adjoining tooth where it was curved in under the bone. It had to be cut free. As the dentist and several assistants all had their hands in Betty's mouth he said, “If I had anticipated all this I would have put you in the hospital to do it.” A fine time to tell her. Eventually, a couple of hours later, it finally got done. Betty came home looking like a week old possum Biscuit had drug around the yard and buried a time or two. She had the dentist's home phone number and had gotten medicine for infection, medicine for swelling, medicine for pain and a loaded gun ready to shoot her husband if he asks one more time, “Does it hurt?”

On the other hand, my day went pretty good that Wednesday. I took my \$50.00 winning lottery ticket to cash it in and it turned out to be a \$104.00 winner. I spent the day trying not to grin in sight of Betty or Rob or Pat. No sense borrowing trouble.

Chapter Seven

Smart Doggie

While Betty was suffering from her dental experience and Rob and Pat were suffering from their trailer experiences I ran all the errands. I didn't really mind since it gave me a good excuse to avoid work and also gave me a chance to let Biscuit, our dachshund puppy dog, go for rides. He loves riding.

It all started with me giving Biscuit a ride up to check the mail. He liked riding in my old truck and pretty soon he was begging to go everywhere I went. He wasn't much trouble so I began letting him go along to town with me while I ran my errands. At first he just sat quietly on the seat but soon he was in my lap, and since my truck has no air conditioning, before long he was sticking his head out the window and barking at all and sundry who were using his road. Yep, every road we drove on belonged to him.

I thought it was pretty funny and the trips continued. On rainy or cold days, of course I left the windows up and Biscuit would sit in my lap then. And that's what led to the trouble. Sitting in my lap gave him a better vantage point and he began to prefer that over hanging out the window, other than when we stopped and a strange dog, cat, animal or person approached his truck on his road. In that case, he had to stick his head out (if the window was open) and tell them in no uncertain terms to get the hell off his territory.

Besides the vantage point given by sitting in my lap, Biscuit was able to occasionally accidentally honk the horn. He's a pretty smart dog, I'll give him that. Before long he learned where both horn buttons were and that they were responsible for making all that neat noise. The first time we pulled up in front of the house and Biscuit honked all the way from the last culvert on to the house to let everyone know he was home, Betty ran out the back door thinking I was in dire trouble. I was, but I just didn't know it yet.

Besides scaring Betty when we drove up until she got used to it, Biscuit learned other uses for the horn. For instance, he soon found out that he could get me moving faster if he gave a couple of toots on the horn. Now that was fine on country roads but there is no getting out of it: I have to stop when I come to the busy highway and attempt to cross it to get into town. Biscuit can't read of course (at least I don't think so). At any rate he doesn't pay any attention to stop signs. One day we pulled up behind a big off-road pickup waiting to cross the highway. Biscuit gave him about two seconds to get out of our way then began tooting the horn, even though I could see by the line of traffic on the highway that he couldn't move yet. I pulled Biscuit's paws off the horn. He slobbered my face and while I was busy wiping it off he tooted some more.

Biscuit was busy wetting down my face again when I saw the door of the big pickup ahead of me swing open. A huge burly redneck with sleeves rolled up over biceps about the size of my thighs got out. He hitched up his pants, spit on his hands and slowly walked up to where I sat with Biscuit in my arms, wishing now that I had signed up for that concealed handgun class and was armed to the teeth instead of having to depend on a sixteen pound idiot dog to protect me.

"You in a hurry, bud?" The big fellow asked.

"It was my dog," I said as quickly as I could.

"Yeah, I bet. I think you're looking for trouble."

"No, really, it was my dog. Here, I'll show you. Biscuit, blow the horn for the nice man."

Biscuit slobbered my face some more and barked rudely at the redneck. I prepared myself

for the afterlife.

I guess maybe the big boy liked dogs because he looked disbelievingly at me and reached into the cab of the truck and scratched Biscuit's ears.

"You got a nice dog, bud. You oughten to blame things you do on him. Now don't honk at me again, you hear?"

"I won't," I said, holding Biscuit tight.

The highway cleared. The big-wheeled pickup began moving. I let go of Biscuit to start up again. Biscuit promptly honked the horn. I shivered, but the big truck couldn't stop, he was already out onto the highway. Biscuit gave him a final toot to hurry him on the way while I silently prayed our paths didn't cross again until I could go take that handgun course and arm myself.

Besides honking at vehicles, Biscuit tended to honk for me if I took too long in the grocery store or convenience store or post office. The manager of the grocery store got real uptight one busy day when Biscuit honked for five minutes straight until I could get outside to quiet him down by offering my face as a sacrifice.

As time passed, Biscuit got the idea, accidentally at first but soon purposely, that the little arms sticking out from beneath the steering wheel would do interesting things when he tweaked them, like making the windshield wipers work or the turn blinkers come on and so forth. I got to where I was very careful never to leave the truck running with Biscuit in it by himself for fear he would suddenly decide to see what the gearshift lever would do if he moved it to a different position.

Now on to the day we were out running errands. We had already crossed the highway and were headed to the post office when we got behind a slow moving state patrol car. It was moving way too slow for Biscuit. He began honking the horn. I pulled him away from it. He promptly turned on the turn blinker. The wrong one, since we were turning the opposite direction (he never has learned left from right). I put the blinker back. Biscuit honked the horn again as I let go of him long enough to turn the corner. The cop car slowed down. Biscuit honked the horn again. I pulled him off it. He turned on both the blinker and the windshield wipers. The cop car turned on *his* blinker, only his was on top of his car. Biscuit thought it was for him and honked the horn again. I pulled him off while coming to a very erratic stop.

"Now you've done it," I told my dog while I reached for my license.

The state trooper walked slowly toward my truck, hand hovering over his holster. He got to the window of my truck. Biscuit barked at him. I shushed him (or tried to) and held out my driver's license. The trooper ignored it.

"Sir, it appears you may be driving under the influence."

"No way," I said, truthfully. "Not only am I cold sober but I don't even drink any more."

That might possibly have gone over but the trooper looked a little familiar and suddenly I recognized him. He was the same officer who had got me for DUI ten years ago, the last time I ever took a beer with me when I drove.

"I'll bet," he said. "Get out of your car."

"It's a truck," I said, not very wisely.

"I don't care what it is, get out."

I did so, while Biscuit barked and barked. He didn't like all that blue color, apparently.

"Officer, I can explain. That was my dog honking the horn and turning on the blinkers and all."

“Sure it was. See that white line on the road? Let’s see how straight you can walk.”

I walked as straight as I ever have in my life. The officer appeared a little puzzled but he wasn’t giving up.

“All right, let’s see you touch your nose with your eyes closed.”

Heck that was easy. I knew where my nose was as well as Biscuit did. I touched it several times.

“How come you were acting so funny?” the trooper asked, stymied in proving me drunk with field sobriety tests.

“I keep telling you, sir, it was my dog. He likes to honk the horn and stuff.”

“Okay, have him honk the horn for me.”

We walked over to the truck.

“Biscuit, honk the horn,” I said.”

Biscuit barked.

“Well, turn on the wipers and blinkers,” I pleaded.

Biscuit barked, looking pleased at all the attention.

The officer reached in the window and scratched Biscuit’s head. He retaliated by slobbering all over his hand. At least it shut up the barking.

“He just does it when he wants to,” I said.

“What’s his name?”

“Biscuit.”

Biscuit barked. And then, thankfully, he decided we had spent enough time in that one spot. He honked the horn, loud and clear. The officer smiled. I breathed easier for about two seconds.

“Okay, I guess you’re not under the influence, but I’m still going to have to issue a ticket for erratic driving. Give me your license.”

I did so, wondering what Betty was going to say about this. She’s the one always getting tickets, and here I was getting cited.

The officer finished writing, tore off the ticket and handed it to me to sign. I did so without looking at it very hard. By then I just wanted to get on my way.

The officer walked off. I started up my truck and we drove away. Biscuit gave another honk and I got out of there as quickly as I could while not going over the speed limit.

When I got home I looked at the ticket before going inside, then began laughing. The officer had written the ticket in Biscuit’s name, citing him for driving without a license.

I got inside and told the story and showed it to Betty. She laughed, too, despite the pain of her dental work. We kept laughing about the incident right up until the time I got a notice in the mail that a person identified as Biscuit Dog was due in the courthouse the following week to answer the summons for driving without a license.

The next week, Biscuit and I drove to the county seat so I could take him to the traffic court. We could have saved our time. They told me no dogs were allowed in the courthouse. I showed them Biscuit’s citation. The guard said he didn’t care what was written on that paper, no dogs were allowed inside.

As soon as I returned home, I wrote a nice letter and included a copy of the citation, explaining the circumstances. I’ve never heard anything about it since then, but give us time. Biscuit has been pawing at the gearshift lever lately. If he would ever learn left from right I would just give him the keys and let him run the errands. Come to think of it, maybe we should have let him do the driving when Rob and his friend were first trying to move the old trailer. He sure couldn’t have done any worse!

Chapter Eight

Big Mama Awaits Her Home Site

One day the following week Rob came over to borrow some tools to fix our tractor he had borrowed in order to fix our culvert. Remember those two feet deep, two feet wide ruts Big mama left? That's what he was going to fix. I don't know whether Rob broke the tractor or it was going to break anyway but what probably happened is the tractor heard how the job over at Big Mama's place was going and decided on its own that it didn't want to have anything to do with the man in charge, Rob, who was still trying to get the site ready for Big Mama before it rained.

The stump grinder showed up again. He fooled around all day with one stump then left again. The tree people, missing a week or so, returned to try rolling some more sections of the tree off down the slope. This was after the dozer finally showed up and parked, presumably intending to get to work some day when the cows come home. The reason I didn't think it was in a hurry was that the dozer showed up with a van trailing it with three other men in it. The man driving the trailer with the dozer parked it, informed Rob that they had to go round up some cattle and they all disappeared.

Rob sure hires some strange people.

In the meantime, Betty's mouth was feeling better and since Rob and Pat and Robyn had been living on cold soup and warm tea and uncooked hot dogs for a week Betty invited them over for fried chicken. That probably sustained them through the next ordeal.

The bulldozer team finally made another appearance. After some mighty stressing and straining it appeared that the dozer wasn't quite big enough for the job—at least so far as one particular sweet gum tree went. After a morning's work, the bulldozer gave up and moved on to easier pickings and the sweet gum still stands there to this day, scarred but victorious. What the heck, it makes a good shade tree even if it does drop all those little pointy balls that prevent you from walking barefoot around it in the summer.

After abandoning the sweet gum to its own devices, the bulldozer moved on. A little while later Pat came over asking if she could wash clothes at our house. A big tree might defeat that dozer but by golly it wasn't taking any lip from a simple water line. It dug it up and mangled about fourteen feet of line real good and went on its way with valor restored. In fact, it restored its valor so much that a little while later Pat returned, asking if she could use our phone. Pat began braiding her way through the phone menu in hopes of reaching a real person one day so she can get their phone service restored. Again. I forgot to mention that when Big Mama mangled my new culvert, it also mangled the phone line, which had only been repaired a day or two before.

All was quiet for a while but then I heard the dozer going again. I figured he was trying for the power line so he could claim a full sweep, all in one day.

Actually, the dozer operator waited for three whole days before coming back to get the power line, which he immediately cut, then disappeared again for a day, then returned again, obviously operating on some strange schedule not apparent to non-bulldozer people. This resulted in me offering to BBQ a meal for the Pass family since they hadn't had anything to eat since that fried chicken except tuna and Kool-Aid and Moon Pies. And the day before that I had

gotten into trouble of my own.

This is not a story, just the way that day went. I was going to spray herbicide in the morning and so I did. Normally I never do more than one tank a day but that morning there was no wind so I decided to do the other tank and be done with it so I could be free to help Rob out of whatever disaster happened to him next.

I got the tank full again and went down to where I had left off, and intended to raise the full tank up high and began spraying. Somehow I did the reverse and lowered it to the ground. Ordinarily this wouldn't have made a difference but this time I couldn't get the tank to come back up. I figured the hydraulic system had gone out, so I disconnected the tank (try getting over 400 pounds of tank off a tractor when it's sitting on the ground) with much grunting and groaning and sweating, and began driving the tractor back to the house, intending to unhook the bush hog from the big tractor and take it back to get the tank. About the time I got there I happened to think that if I just spilled a little of the herbicide from the tank, maybe it would raise up. Besides, I couldn't bear the thought of unhooking and hooking the bush hog back up because it's so heavy. So, back to the field I went and began to try to rehook the tractor to the full tank. Since it weighs well over 400 pounds full there was no way to shift it, thereby necessitating backing the tractor to where the rear arms would line up precisely with the attachments on the tank. After 45 minutes of backing and forwarding and kicking and lifting and shoving the arms trying to get them into that last millimeter of lined up right, I finally backed one of the arms into the tank, my foot slipped off the brake and the arm tipped the tank completely over. Of course it was too heavy for me to get back upright with all that herbicide in it, so there was no other solution but to waste it, which I did.

Hooking back up was relatively easy then, except I was already exhausted and drenched with sweat. Finally I did get hooked up and took the tank back to the house. As I was leaving I noticed that I had been on a slope and wondered if that was why the tank wouldn't come up. Also I wondered why on earth I hadn't just spilled about a quarter of it in the first place and tried to make it come back up. Anyway, when I got to the house on level ground I filled the tank and it worked fine. The moral of this story is, I believe, don't get so darn ambitious and try to spray two tanks a day instead of one like you've been doing for 15 years. There wasn't any hurry to begin with.

Before starting to barbecue that hog (well, a hog's worth of ribs anyway. They were on special and Betty decided to use up all the freezer space) I decided to finish up the spraying. And now, as much as I hate to admit it, your stupid farmer friend found out what was wrong with the tractor. The hydraulic lever is next to the seat. The hard plastic edging which goes around the soft part of the seat and connects it to the metal part had torn in just the right spot, creating a space. As I leaned to the right, the seat shifted and the lever fit right into that little space as if it had been designed for it and therefore wouldn't move. I found that out the next morning while I had the mower on. While I had that dadgumed tank on, if I had just tried moving it up while I was off the tractor there wouldn't have been a problem because sitting on the seat shifted it just enough to hang up the lever. I showed it to Betty and she agreed that I am stupid and mechanically challenged. Even now, I hate to admit what I went through when I didn't have to! If I had just looked.....or got off the tractor and tried...or asked Biscuit to look at the problem...

I barbecued that hog but since ribs were still on special, Betty went back and bought a

couple more. I really did do a good job on the BBQ, though admittedly with the help of four ounces of Blackjack I had been saving for a special occasion (and having to BBQ a whole hog qualified, I thought) and it turned out they were the best ribs I've ever done. We needed them.

Chapter Nine

Bobcats, Tractors and Dozers

Let's see, where were we? The bulldozer was busy again after momentary pauses from cutting the telephone line and water line. Rob was busy running back and forth to the hardware store for parts for the water line and the tractor store for parts to keep a huge borrowed tractor running which is supposed to save him some of that \$75.00/hour the bulldozer is costing. So far Rob had spent several hundred dollars and many hours on the tractor and hadn't done much but tip over the light pole far enough that it would have to be reset. By professionals, according to Pat.

Are all the parties and machines in place? Okay, here we go. Rob got the big borrowed tractor fixed temporarily and after the bulldozer operator put in his three hour day Rob got busy. He used the front end loader to haul dirt from the hole the bulldozer was digging to bury the wrecked trailer in over to Big Mama's homesite if she ever got there, then used it as a dozer blade, smoothing out the dirt and leveling it for runners to be put into place for Big Mama.

Rob did a terrific job, and he thought things were fine until the concrete guys came out and cut the septic line in five places with the Bobcat (a miniature bulldozer). Fortunately, the line runs downhill at a steep angle and disappears into the forest, so they could still operate their facilities in a minimal and very careful way. Rob spent more time running down pipes and fittings to repair the septic line than he did leveling. But boy, it was really nice and smooth when he finished. Unfortunately, the concrete guys came out and told him that the dirt he was using from the burial ground of the old trailer wasn't suited and it had to be a base of 60/40 something or other and he had to buy it from them.

That was no problem since by this time Rob was very used to spending lots of money several times a day while getting moved in, or trying to. He told me when the money was gone, that was it and he just hoped it didn't run out before he got ready for the air-conditioning unit, this being high summer by now.

Remember the light pole? Rob tilted it almost over again because the bulldozer had covered up the electrical conduits that go in under a trailer and he was digging them back up. Rob remarked to me yesterday that he wished he had just hired a few Chinook choppers to bring everything in here because not only was the trailer messed up but our new culvert looked as bad as our old one after all these trailers, trucks, bulldozers and now concrete trucks had passed over it-after a week of rain. He also said it was ironic that all this is was happening to a guy who makes a living selling and placing mobile homes.

It would seem that Rob and Pat had already had more problems with Big Mama than any two humans could possibly conceive of. I kept writing friends and family about them and they kept writing back and telling me I was making it up-things couldn't possibly keep messing up that badly. They did, though. However, let's take a break from Rob and Pat and Big Mama and zero in on some other things that go wrong. Like when I go near a tractor, for instance.

Chapter Ten

Contagious Things

A good friend of mine who is lazing his life away in blissful, riches-filled retirement among the sunny beaches of Florida once told me (well, more than once-a bunches of times) that one shouldn't get too close to work because it might be catching. That theorem proved abundantly correct one day while Rob and Pat were taking a breather before tackling Big Mama again.

The day started by me having to change out the mower for the spray tank on Tractor, a task I really detest. Detest is a high-falootin way of saying I hate to do that job. Howsomever, it has to be done sometimes so that morning I girded my loins, rolled up my sleeves, spit on my hands and kissed Betty goodbye just in case Tractor decided to fight to the death instead of merely whipping me two falls out of three the way it usually does.

The way it most often goes is that I start off by dropping the mower on my foot by accidentally bumping the hydraulic lever while taking up some slack in the supporting chains so I can get them loose, then straining both gluteuses and a couple of biceptuses trying to simultaneously reach back for the lever to raise the mower while pounding my fist on the fender, yelling at Tractor to let go, and at the same time cussing it for starting right off in the feint-shift-and-kill mode instead of just putting its dukes up for a fair fight like it should.

Once I get my foot loose I almost always pinch the skin on my hand with the wire pliers in enough places so that they look like they belong to a bare-knuckled boxer, and speaking of knuckles, they get barked by wrenches and the PTO (power takeoff) attachment every dern time because I forget and pull it too hard while getting it loose and bump my hand on the sharp end of a hose attachment, thereby causing me to cuss and drop the end of the PTO sleeve on my other hand. This makes the two hands look alike anyway, both bruised and showing the first drops of blood.

Next comes untightening the gangs on each side because implement makers don't know enough to make the attachments all either on one side or the other of implements. The mower attaches inside and the sprayer outside. Besides that, I always tighten the lock nuts too tight on the gangs, then can't remember which way they turn so I wind up getting them *really* tight before discovering I'm going the wrong way, but in the meantime my big pliers have slipped off the nuts ten dozen times and every time my hand or finger or thumb or forearm bangs into a projecting part and cuts or punctures or abrades or bruises as Tractor proceeds to give me another lesson in counter-punching and body blows.

Eventually, with the aid of WD-40, hammer, vise-clamps and a diagram drawn in my own blood showing which way each nut should turn (and don't tell me about righty-tighty, lefty-loosey because gang nuts don't always work that way), I get the gangs loosened enough so that I'm ready to detach the PTO arms from the mower. This means flipping up the ring of the ring clamp, pulling it out of its slot then screaming bloody murder as the ring flips back down of its own accord and catches two fingernails between the ring and the shaft of the ring clamp.

A short pause while I heat a paper clip and drill holes in my fingernails to let the blood from beneath them (an old trick I learned in the army), then it is time to unhook the top arm of the three point hitch. For this I use the other hand to handle the ring clamp so that both hands will match when it destroys the nails on that hand just like the other.

Now every thing is loose. I count to be sure. Three hitches. Three loose. One PTO sleeve. One loose. However, if I were removing the spray tank I would forget to remove the nut and bolt holding the chain which prevents the PTO from winding up the hoses, and when I started up I would drag the tank behind me for a few yards before it tipped over and told me I was a mechanical idiot. Fortunately, I was detaching the mower this time so Tractor didn't say much, just muttered a little under his breath about all the blood I was getting on him.

Now I go over and back Tractor up in order to attach the spray tank. This involves forgetting to take the gear drive out of rabbit and put it in turtle and zooming backwards at a thousand miles an hour and backing into the tank, knocking it over and gouging out great chunks of turf while trying to figure out what is going wrong. Once the initial maneuvering is over, the rest of the chore is simple, merely involving lifting one end of the tank with one hand, positioning one of the side arms of the three point hitch with the other hand and lining up the side shaft of the tank with the hole of the side arm with another hand and if you counted three hands you are perfectly correct, because that's how many it takes to do that. However, if you reach carefully into the fourth dimension and don't stay there long you can bend space-time around so that it appears you have a third hand and then the attachment works with only a bruise and long slash to the forehead where you have been supporting the weight of the three hundred pound tank while using your hands for the lining up job. If you're real careful there, you can usually come out of it without hitting an artery and spraying blood everywhere and just bleed normally from the veins like always.

Repeat for the other arm after first wrapping greasy bandana around head to keep blood from getting in eyes and blinding you.

Now I'm almost finished and barely even feel the ring clamp eat the fingers of my left hand again, then turn around and chomp on the fingers of the other hand because I forgot to put the retaining washer on first when attaching the top arm and have to start over.

About this time one of the grandkids will pass by and ask Granny why Grandpa is saying all those bad words to his tractor and she will tell him or her that Grandpa always talks that way when he's putting something on or taking something off the tractor and the grandkid will go on his way repeating what I have just said and get me in a lot of trouble later on with their parents, but right now I'm already in trouble so I don't worry about it.

Last but not least is sliding the PTO pump sleeve over the PTO head on the tractor, which is naturally buried deep in a dark hole that is too narrow to fit your hand into in order to press the little button attached to a spring, which releases tension on a retaining pin, so that by the time you have it on it also has on all the skin which would normally be residing on your hand.

Oh yes, I forgot one more step which is tightening the gang nuts so tight that I can't get them off next time even if I could remember which way they turn.

And normally of course I have strained every muscle in my back and neck while bending and stooping and contorting arms and legs and spine into positions which they were never designed for but which they must assume in order to perform the tasks described above so that when all the above is finally finished one may see Grandpa crawling away from the completed tasks on his hands and knees, dragging his twisted limbs and back, leaving a trail of blood, sweat, tears and hurling epithets right left and behind about the origins, habits and destinations of engineers who designed tractors so hard to work on.

That's what happens normally. I had to describe it in order to start this story because this morning, after only an hour or so I was able to actually walk away from the job, and was only

stooped over some and was only dripping blood rather than pouring it, and had at least half my skin intact and hadn't punctured myself with the screwdriver more than three or four times while tightening up a hose clamp which had worked loose.

All in all I felt as if I had fought Tractor to at least a draw and decided that if work was going that well this morning I should try to get some more done and that's when I got into trouble just like my friend in Florida warned me about.

I started up Tractor after washing off some of the grease and sweat and blood and headed out to do a little bush hogging with him. Tractor acted like he didn't want to go. I looked down and saw that his front foot was sort of flat. I guess I should have been thankful it was there at all after both Mike and Rob had used it since I had. I got my air tank to air it up and found it was empty, then remembered Rob had used it to air up the old trailer tires and obviously hadn't gotten around to refilling it. Fortunately, I have been through that before so I keep a spare air tank hidden under my bed, figuring they will never look there, and all I have to worry about is Betty complaining about the greasy carpets but those can be cleaned and besides, I've found out the grease spots look just like the dark spots on the carpet that are naturally there anyway and damned if I know how Betty always spots them but never mind. I got my spare tank, aired up Tractor's front paw and actually did go mow for a while-until I noticed the tire was low again.

Back at the house again, I saw that the tire was beginning to separate from the rim. I thought about calling the tractor place and demanding a replacement since it was only 20 years old but decided the paperwork would probably have been lost by now so I thought I would go ahead and get a new tire. First though, I had to jack up Tractor and get the old one off, which meant finding a lug wrench. That's where I should have stopped and called Marley's Tire Service because after my last experience with changing a tire I had sworn I would never do it again. I did though, and I know just what my friend is going to tell me so he may as well not do it.

I went out to the barn where tools like that are supposed to live. I guess I should have never told the boys they live there because ever since then I have never ever been able to find a tool for a job when I want one. My friend would tell me that that proves I shouldn't have been doing something like looking for a lug wrench in the first place because that leads to work but I did anyway. Not finding a lug wrench in the barn despite the fact that I have bought at least half a dozen in the last 20 years, I headed for Rob's house. He wasn't home. I looked in his shop. I found my post hole diggers, my ax, a pair of shears I thought I had lost and bought new ones, my old fishing tackle and bunches of other stuff which looked suspiciously familiar but no lug wrench.

I went to Mike's house. He was home.

"Hi Mike," I said. "Have you by chance borrowed my lug wrench?"

"What lug wrench?"

"The lug wrench that lives in my barn."

"Oh, that lug wrench. Sure did."

"Oh. Well, I need to borrow it back," I said.

Mike looked pensive. I didn't like the look.

"Hmm." Mike said. "Oh-now I remember. The last time I saw it was that day we had so much chicken we couldn't eat it all."

"Why not?" I asked, intrigued. Mike and family could eat chicken til the cows come home.

"Matthew was playing boomerang," he said. Matthew is a four-year-old great grandson.

"What's that got to do with it?" I asked.

“He was playing boomerang with the lug wrench.”

“So?”

“He was playing boomerang with the lug wrench in the chicken yard.”

“Oh.” I commented. “Well, can I play with the lug wrench now?”

“As soon as I find it.”

I didn't wait for the missing lug wrench to turn up. I went to town and bought another one, then got out my jack which I keep hid in one of Betty's old jelly boilers. So far neither of the boys has caught on to that one.

I pinched my thumb and finger turning the little twisty thing to make the jack work then pinched it again when I jacked it up too far before sliding it under the Tractor's axle then pinched it again when I slid the jack under the axle. After that, I got down on hands and knees and began working at lugs which hadn't been touched for twenty years. There were six lugs holding Tractor's front paw on. There are six horizontal and six lateral muscles in my back that will never be the same, likewise for six vertebrae and six disks. And six thumbs, each of which got the skin rubbed off them when I thought the lugs were loose and they weren't.

I may be dumb and mechanically challenged and not listen when I should but no one has ever told me I'm not persistent. Eventually the lugs took pity on me and gave up the struggle. I slowly, carefully, grunting and groaning each inch of the way stood up and then reached down to take the tire off the rim. It didn't move an inch.

In the olden days I would have gone in and had a quick six pack to fortify me and came back out raring to go. Now I was just raring. I got a hammer and banged on the tire. Eventually I banged too close to where I was holding and then I was really raring. Finally I sat down in the dirt by the tire and wiped sweat and blood from my body. There, staring me in the face were six screws. Aha!

I called Betty several times and eventually she came out and helped me to my feet. I went to look for a my big Phillips head screwdriver. Let's not go into that again, shall we. Suffice to say that after another trip to town I found myself back down in the dirt working on those six screws. It turns out that I have more than six muscles in my back. All the rest of them began complaining. I told them to shut up, that I started this job and by gum I was going to finish it.

Eventually the screws came loose. Off popped the cover, revealing a gob of grease. Grease? I stuck my finger in it and felt little balls rolling around. Balls? Ball bearings? Rats. The screws just uncovered the cap to the joint on Tractor's foot. I always wondered where all that grease went.

On with the screws. Biscuit the dog got interested during this operation and came over to help. He licked up sweat and blood until he got bored then ran off with the pliers and was burying the hammer when I caught him. A good thing because I needed that hammer. Since the screws obviously had nothing to do with the flat tire, I just figured I needed to hammer harder than I had before to get the tire off. I got to my feet, wobbling a bit and began banging again. Harder. Harder. Eureka! The tire came off the rim. Alas! My banging jittered the jack from its precarious position and the whole left front side of Tractor dropped into the dust.

(Interval of cussing, censored).

By this time it was very late and that miserable little job had eaten up the whole morning and wasn't finished yet. Since I have no air conditioning in my truck and the temperature was approaching a hundred degrees (this is Texas, remember) I borrowed Betty's car to take the tire to Marley's Tire Shop, which I should have called to come take care of the whole business in the first place. I very carefully spread newspapers in the trunk so I didn't get Betty's car dirty, then

got ready to go. Biscuit wanted to come. I let him in. He promptly traced gobs of grease onto the passenger's seat from where he had been helping me. I carefully ignored it, hoping I could think up some reason for Betty's car to be all greasy inside before she noticed it, like maybe the grocery sacker got hair oil on it or something, but leave that for now.

I got to Marley's and the nice man told me the tire was so old he would have to send for a replacement which wouldn't be in until next Tuesday. I blessed him and thanked him profusely and told him that when the tire came in that he should put it on his service truck along with a big jack and a husky young helper and come to my place and see how good I save money by doing chores myself.

Now the job isn't finished yet but I do believe I will let Marley's take care of getting Tractor jacked back up and his new front paw put back on. And there is a moral or two to this story.

One, always listen to your friends in Florida.

Two, once you've finished a job, don't look for more work. It will only get you in trouble.

Three, remember that work is contagious. If you hang around it you will wind up finding more work so it is best to avoid it whenever you can.

Four, tractors are evil and should all be put in prison.

And finally, if you want to keep your tools, hide them under the bed or in old jelly pots. Your kids will never think of looking there.

Chapter Eleven

Wasps and Rats

Okay, let's get back to Rob and Pat and Big Mama. Now remember, while I may stretch a story just a wee bit on occasion, I have told the absolute, unvarnished truth about this summer of Rob and Pat getting their new home. The following things happened just like I'm writing them down.

Remember now, we left Rob with the concrete man insisting on his own mix of dirt base to pour the runners on and Rob sort of wondering how he was going to pay the man for the additional truckloads of stuff he was hauling in. Let's pick up on him the next day. No, first let's end the day with the concrete men wanting some water for something or other. They used the outlet that Rob had miraculously repaired-just in time for them to leave the water running all night long and flooding half the base where Big Mama was to go, turning the new layer of dirt and all the downhill dirt into muddy Jell-O. Rob saw it the next morning and shut it off-then begin praying for lots of sun before they came back to lay the forms for the concrete runners.

Something finally worked right. I guess the Lord took pity on Rob-or more likely decided that he had been tested enough for one day. The sun came out and dried things out enough so that the concrete trucks only sank to their hubcaps instead of disappearing from sight. The reason they didn't disappear is that they'd had practice only sinking to their hubcaps while driving over my new culvert until it got to be safer to go around than over. And let's do the next few paragraphs in the present tense.

Now then, as the concrete man is watching his crew work, he spies an old truck abandoned by Cheryl, Rob's daughter. He takes a notion to own it and Rob promptly and delightedly begins negotiating, thinking that at last the outward cash flow of the last couple of months might be temporarily and locally arrested. He takes the guy over to the truck. Here, he says, just look at the interior. Like new, he says, flinging open the door. A swarm of wasps flies out of the interior and begins stinging everyone in sight. All work halts as Rob, the concrete man and his crew run for cover. Eventually, they return, bringing cans of wasp spray. Eventually they dispose of the wasps and work resumes. For the moment.

Rob really wants to not only get rid of that eyesore of a truck but have his concrete bill reduced. He corrals the guy and resumes praising the truck. "Just look at these perfect windows," he says. "Just look at the perfect windshield," he says. "Just look at this motor," he says, flinging up the hood.

Out pops a white rat a foot long, just as if Stephen King were orchestrating the day. A stray wasp or two gets the rat to running around baring its teeth.

"Kill it!" Rob shouts, knowing nothing good can come from a mutant rat hiding under the hood of a truck he wants to sell. The concrete man and his crew grab some handy steel rebars and begin stalking the white rat around the motor and front end of the truck. One crewman kills the carburetor. Another whaps off the side mirrors. Another destroys that perfect windshield. The rat gets away and goes back to wherever foot-long white rats come from. The price of the truck has been reduced to almost nothing. Rob pulls out more money as the cash flow resumes its outward journey.

The concrete runners get poured. They are so positioned and the remaining trees and lay of

land is such that Big Mama is going to have to be put on the runners by moving the two sections sideways into position. That night I dream that the first section tips over when that sideways move is attempted. I tell Rob and Pat not to worry, that my dreams seldom come true. Besides, I say, it's a week before the concrete will be cured enough to move Big Mama into position. We may get a tornado before then and you won't have to worry any more.

Rob and Pat still wished me a happy Father's Day despite the dream. We all left for the beach for a week.

Chapter Twelve

Return to the Beach *A Tale of Woe*

While we were at the beach we met with some old friends, Gordon and Marsha. Gordon and his brother were getting involved in putting out a magazine called *Tropical Attitudes* and he asked me to do a story for him. Since we were already at the beach and the magazine dealt with beaches and waterfronts and stuff like that, it wasn't really hard to cook up a little story for him. All I had to do was just tell about what was actually happening on our vacation. Here's what I gave him.

Up until twenty years or so Betty and I used to spend a lot of time at the beach, but then somehow work, family illnesses and other complications of living caused a long hiatus. This year, though, we finally went back.

The first difference I noticed was that bathing suits had shrunk. Mine had shrunk, Betty's had shrunk but my goodness, the ones the young ladies were wearing must have been made out of second hand fabric because they had shrunk to almost nothing. If I were them I would shop at better stores next year. When I pointed this out to Betty she told me I was going to get a crick in my neck from staring and besides, when did I get to be a fabric expert? Some questions don't deserve answers so I didn't say anything.

Next I found out that the sun is much hotter than it used to be while you're wearing a bathing suit. I hadn't been out in it more than a couple of minutes when I began turning red. I was surprised that I haven't read anything about hotter suns in the news because I didn't used to sunburn like that. In order to get out of the sun I asked Betty if she wanted to stop for a drink. She said sure and we did. All the drinks had names like Drunken Sailor's Grog or Popskull's Delight or crazy names like that instead of Vodka Collins or Manhattans like they used to. I'm pretty sure that's what I read on the drink menu but I can't be certain because I didn't have my bifocals with me. Anyway, I ordered a double something or other, just like I used to, and shushed Betty when she told me to take it easy. I know my limits and didn't think they had changed that much. I ordered another just to show her I knew what I was doing.

The food at the place where we stopped to eat wasn't very tasty. I don't know why Betty enjoyed it so much when my taste buds just felt numb. She told me it was because I was drinking too much but I didn't think so and neither did the waiter when he asked us to leave. He probably just got tired of me spilling things because I didn't have my bifocals with me, and I'm sure that bottle of wine I had with dinner had nothing to do with it.

Sex at the beach used to be nice. Betty says I can't write about our sex life, but what's to write about when she said I passed out but I say I just went to sleep before even starting? The next morning I woke up as red as a lobster, my neck was so sore I couldn't turn it even if I had wanted to which I didn't because my head was hurting awful bad so I couldn't even think about what I might have missed the night before.

Yep, the beach sure has changed in twenty years. I think we ought to go to Ft. Worth for our next vacation. I wonder if they still have cowboys?

I said that all the extended family left for the beach. That included everyone except Rob.

Having just come off vacation he couldn't get any time off. Even though Rob still had to go to work, he joined Pat and the rest of us at night. At least for two nights. Tuesday evening he came to the beach from work with that look on his face, and we all knew something new had happened-something concerning Big Mama.

"I have to take off work tomorrow," Rob told us.

No one asked why.

"Isn't anyone going to ask why?" he asked.

No one said a thing.

Rob suddenly realized that we had all recognized that glazed look in his eyes. He relented and sat down and told us why he must take off work the next day

. It seems that the guy doing the final moving went with Rob to inspect the site. He looked at the concrete runners drying in the sun, one end four feet above the lay of the land and the other end blocked by trees. He inspected Big Mama and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Rob asked.

"It's heavy," the mover said.

"Of course it is," Rob said proudly. "We ordered it that way. Special built. Extra bracing. Heavier rafters. Double coat of paint. Steel reinforced-"

"That's what's wrong," the mover said. "I can't put it in place by moving it sideways. Too heavy. It'll have to go in lengthwise, on wheels."

Rob looked at the end blocked by trees. He looked at the end where the concrete runners were four feet above ground level. He looked back at the mover. "What should I do?" He asked.

"Build a ramp," the mover told him. "I'll be back Friday to move it."

"And that's why I have to take off work and go home," Rob said. I have to order four more truckloads of dirt and build a ramp. You better come too, Pat," he said hopefully.

"No way," Pat said. "I'm on vacation."

Rob left to order some dirt and build a ramp.

Chapter Thirteen

Big Mama Moves in -- Sort of Little Old Wine Makers

Rob left to build his ramp and Pat decided to follow-or rather go to work in his place while he learned how to build ramps. We heard the rest of the story from Rob Sunday night after we got home-and of course couldn't bear the suspense so ran and looked first thing. Big Mama was gone from the field and in place on the runners. Well, sort of in place. The two sections weren't married yet. In fact it didn't look as if they were even courting. But let's let Rob tell the story, shall we?

"I ordered four truckloads of dirt," Rob said, "then started building my ramp on Wednesday. In the rain. I built Thursday. In the rain. And used all my dirt but got that blasted ramp done. And I started thinking: it's not a total loss; I can use the dirt after Big Mama is in place to landscape our future yard.

"The mover showed up Friday right on time. And by golly, my ramp worked. Big Mama went on up it and onto the rollers. Sorta. Each section was pretty well separated and looked like they didn't even want to get married, but I was satisfied. Now for-

"Whoops! I felt a drop of rain. And more rain. And much more rain. I called for help. Pat left work and came home and helped. In the rain. Why? Because the blasted sections of Big Mama weren't mated yet and this rainstorm would get water inside on our new carpets.

"We foraged for tarps (now I know why the light was on in my storeroom at the shop-Rob had borrowed all my tarps again). We put up tarps. Tarps got blown away. We put up tarps. They-never mind. We finally got Big Mama sealed and ran for cover. We got seven inches of rain in three hours before dark.

"The next morning. I don't really want to talk about it, but you would notice anyway. All that dirt I used building the ramp and intended to use for landscaping washed downhill. The only good thing there is that it filled up the huge holes made by the bulldozer operating on wet ground.

"Anyway, Big Mama is on her rollers and the rest should go easy. All I have to do is mate the sections and block them."

That's what Rob told us.

And early Monday morning Rob called and asked where I usually got my Mexican laborers. I told him, hesitantly. With all that had gone wrong so far I wondered what was going to happen with Rob working men who can't even speak English! I was also wondering how long it would be before Rob was driven to drink. And that got me to thinking about a funny episode of Betty and me trying to make wine in the spare bathtub from possum grapes our first year on the farm. And that in turn reminded me of how we came to be wine-makers to begin with.

Right after we married, we spent a year working in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, if you want wine you make your own. Most of it is made from bottled grape juice which is sold by the case. And sugar sold by the fifty pound bag. The big drawback (other than the taste) is that it takes a while to ferment. The first batch I made was from a recipe which produced a wine with an alcoholic content not much greater than 3.2 beer. Next time, I added bunches more yeast and sugar and when the time came that I thought it was ready, I bottled it up in the same bottles the

grape juice came in. They had funny little tops with a built-on gadget serving as stoppers which made it nice. No corks to buy.

While Betty and I were finishing off the first batch, a new friend who had seen me hauling home sugar and cases of grape juice asked how the second batch was coming along. I told him that it was ready; we were just finishing off our first batch before trying it. He told me that he had a girl friend, a nurse, who he had been trying really hard to get over to his apartment where he hoped to carry on a seduction. She had finally agreed—even inviting him to *her* apartment and he was growing wild with desire. However, he figured a little booze would probably help his plans and wanted to know if he could borrow a couple of bottles of my wine since he was temporarily out. That was fine by me and I gave him two bottles.

When I ran across him in the dining room the next day, I sat down and asked how his date had gone.

“You SOB,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The wine,”

“Oh-had it gone to vinegar?” I asked.

“Vinegar!” he practically shouted. “It has to finish fermenting before it can go to vinegar, you idiot!”

Which shows how much I knew about wine making at the time. I gradually got the story from him. He got the girl all seated and asked her if she would like some wine. Sure, she said. He picked up the bottle and flipped that little gadget holding the rubber stopper in. Unfortunately, the neck of the bottle was pointing at the girl. Also unfortunately, I hadn’t let the fermentation finish before bottling the wine and it had completed the process inside the bottles. He said the pressure was so fantastic that the liter of half-finished wine sprayed the girl from head to foot before he could get it pointed in another direction, which happened to be up. When he saw that he was spraying the ceiling of her apartment with wine he put his thumb over the top of the bottle. The pressure was so great he got the girl again. Startled, he let go and promptly sprayed her new curtains, a box of letters from home and her cat, which jumped for cover up onto the curtain rods, bringing them down in a heap.

“For a few minutes there I thought it would work out anyway,” he said. “I asked her if she didn’t want to get out of those wine soaked clothes.”

“Did she?” I asked.

“No. She opened the other bottle and spewed it all over me. Then she told me to go home.” He eyed me suspiciously, as if perhaps I had planned the whole thing as a not very funny joke.

By this time I thought it might be a good time for me to leave. I needed to go make some new friends. This one was a lost cause.

Chapter Fourteen

Big Mama No Habla Español Solo Performance

All day Monday, Betty and I heard banging and yelling and hollering and motors running and we thought we heard some cussing but probably not since Rob doesn't cuss.

Monday evening Betty and I wandered over to see what progress had been made. No one was in sight except someone running some kind of motor from a pickup truck and a Mexican wandering around as if he was looking for the way back to the Rio Grande. The two sections of Big Mama were closer but the preacher still hadn't gotten them married. There were blocks under the sections, sitting atop the concrete runners but many of them weren't meeting what they were supposed to be supporting. And then we heard a noise. Rob's borrowed tractor that he had rebuilt came from behind their old home which is up for sale to pay for all the expenses of getting Big Mama settled in.

Rob jumped off the tractor. He didn't say hi or how are you or anything like that. He said, "I have never been so ticked off in my whole life! None of these guys know what the heck they are doing! And that includes the Mexicans!" We could practically see smoke streaming out his ears.

Betty and I made a discrete withdrawal. I could tell Rob didn't want me to open my mouth. I felt almost like that time in the fifth grade where...

I was in the fifth grade and our class was selected to do a radio presentation. I can't remember much of what it was about but it had a couple of songs in it. During rehearsals I just sang my little fifth grade heart out. Alas, the teacher didn't appreciate my musical ability and (very nicely) told me that I would have to be restricted to speaking parts and not to join in when the others were singing. It sort of hurt my feelings but I managed to get over it and did remain silent during rehearsals, mostly, only forgetting occasionally. On those occasions the teacher reminded me again not to sing.

When the big day finally came we were loaded into a school bus and taken to the studio. This was a live broadcast, by the way. I was really excited because we lived way out in the country and I rarely saw anything much besides cows and trees and cotton. The teacher and producer got us all seated and pretty soon the program began. Boy, it went great, just like we rehearsed it. I did my speaking part fine. Then came the first song. By this time I was really into the program and before I realized what was happening I had joined in the singing. I really put my heart into the song, I mean, just belting it out with my head thrown back and my eyes closed and my little hands waving and my little booted feet stomping the wooden floor like an old Arkansas Hoedown. Going great, right? Then all of a sudden I realized I was the only one singing. I had gotten completely off tune, off key and off center and was lagging a full thirty seconds behind every one else. They had finished but I just kept on going into the finale where I really sang loud and long, fairly screeching the words out in my enthusiasm. As I gulped in a huge lungful of air preparing to shout out the last few words, which I expected the others to join me in (not realizing they had already finished), I saw the teacher's face. It was fiery red and she was glaring at me with looks that could burn holes through ten point steel, part embarrassment but mostly exasperation at my solo debut. Then I remembered that I wasn't supposed to be singing. Now my face turned red while a deathly quiet settled over the studio. The producer or disk jockey or

whatever they called him harrumphed, the teacher gave a cue for the next speaking part and our presentation limped on to its dismal end, with everyone staring at me, the teacher frowning but the rest of the class trying to get through their parts without giggling or bursting into outright laughter.

Surprisingly, the teacher never mentioned the subject again and the other kids soon forgot it, as kids will do. I remembered though, and still do. There is an empty spot in my soul, an itch that will now never be scratched. I really did want to do that last line of the song.

Chapter Fifteen

Big Mama Settles In

If I remember right, we left Rob and his crew still trying to get the two halves of Big Mama mated, but we hadn't dared speak to Rob for fear of having a shovel thrown at us. Betty crept back the next morning walking softly so as not to arouse anyone who might be sleeping or perchance not to vibrate the ground and cause the whole shebang to slip downhill. Pat came out and told her Rob had finally gotten the sections of Big Mama married and almost blocked. Robyn had seen her new room.

Now, on with the saga of Big Mama. Her two sections were married, but that was only the nuptials. The marriage hadn't been consummated yet.

I decided to go over and have a look inside Big Mama for the first time. Rob was standing in front of an opened section of wall where the two sections of Big Mama had been joined. There was a tangle of big electrical cords inside the wall.

"What are all those cords for?" I asked.

Rob held up the ends of some of them. "These are the things I have to connect to each other so the electric power goes to both sections from the power pole," he said.

"It sure looks complicated to me," I ventured. "I guess there must be a manual or something to tell you how to do it, isn't there?"

"Well, no but I think I have it figured out."

I shuddered. Heretofore I had not insinuated my opinion into the saga of Big Mama but I couldn't pass on this one. "Rob, why don't you check with Mike first before you connect those things? He knows all about electricity and wiring and stuff."

Rob is a fellow who likes to do things himself as I'm sure you have found out by now. "I think I can do it," he repeated.

I spent several minutes trying to talk him into checking with Mike first then gave up. That night I dreamed of sparks, fire, electrocutions, and so on. The next morning I went outside and walked the little distance to where I could see Big Mama. She still appeared to be intact. I headed that way, cautiously, and saw Rob step outside.

"Hi Rob!" I called.

"Hi." Rob said.

I couldn't wait. "Did you get Big Mama all connected?"

Rob kicked up a tuft of dirt. "Sure did."

"That's great," I said, really meaning it. "And I guess I was wrong about you needing to check with Mike, huh?"

Rob kicked at some more dirt. "Well, actually, I got all ready to connect the cables and then at the last second decided maybe I ought to ask Mike what he thought."

"He must have thought it was all okay," I remarked. I could see lights shining inside.

Rob gave a half-hearted grin. "Yup. Mike said it was okay the way I was going to hook her up. He said if I had gone ahead the way I had it worked out I would only have burnt out all of Big Mama's wiring, set her on fire, exploded the light pole and knocked out half the electricity to San Jacinto Country. Other than that, everything would have been fine."

I didn't say anything else.

And I suppose now that Big Mama is all in place that no one wants to hear about how all the grass Rob planted in the new yard washed down the hill three times running and how the bulldozer had killed the roots of the shade trees he had so carefully marked to be saved and...well, you know. But you don't want to read about that.

Too bad.

A few more episodes and I could head to Hollywood and sell them a script.

Last note: I talked to Pat a day or so ago and from a few things she let slip I suspect there is a parallel story about Big Mama, one told from her viewpoint rather than Rob's. It might be even more interesting!

Interlude

Betty made peach cobbler the other night and I discovered a truism: if a cobbler is so sweet and gooey that your teeth stick together while eating it, there is no way short of adding French Vanilla ice cream to improve on it.

As Betty was bandaging my broken body the other day, she remarked that it really isn't a good idea to run through a dark room containing a black chair.

Biscuit believes that our eight-month-old great-granddaughter was created for him to play with and can't understand why we won't let him treat her like he does the cats.

Chapter Sixteen

Fish Story

After all the hoorah about getting Big Mama settled in, Betty and I spent a day or two helping Pat and Rob move the stuff from the old trailer into Big Mama. This involved a lot of lifting and carrying and made mincemeat of my back. I told Rob he should have called for a family reunion and made everyone help move before they got anything to eat. He said why don't we take a break? That was fine with me, and while we were breaking, we got to drinking beer and talking about family reunions.

Back when I was a little boy we went to a family gathering of some sort. It has been so long that I don't remember exactly what the occasion for the gathering was, but I do remember pretty well what happened there. Everyone was outside gathered around a bunch of folding tables getting ready to eat. At the table next to where some of us kids were sitting was one of my fat, near-sighted aunts that I didn't like very much because she was always hugging and kissing me. That was bad enough but Aunt Zelda kept getting me mixed up with one of my cousins and I didn't think it was fair that those huge embraces that smeared purple lipstick all over my face weren't even meant for me.

Part of the family gathering was for fishing and a fish fry as best I remember. At any rate, I had some minnows in a jar I was intending to use after dinner, and being scared I would lose them, I had the jar right with me, sitting under my chair. Well, boys will be boys. While no one was looking I fished a minnow out of my jar and held it in my hand, then while the blessing was being said and everyone's eyes were closed I reached over and placed it on my fat near-sighted aunt's plate.

I figured near-sighted Aunt Zelda would think it was a piece of lettuce or something and eat it and that would be my revenge for all those unwanted hugs and kisses. I watched from the corner of my eye and pretty soon after the blessing was finished she picked it up with her fork, sort of squinting, but finally deciding it was something edible.

I guess that minnow wasn't quite as ready to be eaten as I thought it was, and also I guess my aunt wasn't quite as near-sighted as I thought she was because as soon as she started to put the minnow in her mouth it started wiggling. Or maybe she just wasn't used to live food. She screamed and jerked the fork away from her mouth. The minnow flew into the air, still wiggling. I don't know what Aunt Zelda was thinking, but she tried to stab the minnow with her fork while it was tumbling end over end above her head. She missed it entirely and got her fork and hand entangled in her sister Aunt Nelda's hair, which was put up in a huge beehive structure. The minnow came on down and landed on the bridge of Aunt Zelda's nose. I guess it had gotten some jelly or something on it from her plate because it stuck there. She goggled cross-eyed at it, wanting to brush it away but she was still clutching the fork that had one hand tangled in Aunt Nelda's hair and the other hand was holding her plate. The minnow wiggled again. She screamed and shook her head, then tossed her plate into the air and reached to slap the minnow away with her other hand, in the meantime slamming Aunt Nelda's head down onto the table into a bowl of potato salad with the hand holding the fork still entangled in the beehive of hair. Aunt Nelda shouted so loud it distracted Aunt Zelda and the minnow slipped on down toward her mouth, still moving a bit and in the meantime the airborne plate came back to its owner, bottom side up, right

on top of her head, neatly depositing her meal in her hair, less a few portions which come loose and landed on Aunt Nelda..

Aunt Zelda really howled now, then drew a big breath to scream again. The minnow slipped lower and was caught in the slipstream of her indrawn breath. Zip. Down the minnow went, into her mouth and down her gullet. She gagged and fell to the floor, still clutching her fork which was still tangled in Aunt Nelda's hair and thereby drug her to the floor, too. As I mentioned, the tables where we were eating were outside and my dog, Devil, was hanging around hoping someone would give him a bite to eat. He liked to eat but even better, he liked to lick faces whenever he got a chance and now he had two faces to lick with both of my aunts down on their hands and knees. He proceeded to slurp both their faces with great doggie enthusiasm, especially Aunt Zelda's face which now had some yummy bits of food on it which had slid down from where it had been deposited in her hair by the flying plate.

"Get him off, get him off!" Aunt Zelda screamed. I don't know whether she meant the minnow or the dog or the food, but by this time other relatives and guests were talking loudly, asking each other what was going on, especially since the aunts' table just then tipped over from their frantic efforts to get away from my dog or the minnow or both. Food spilled everywhere, including onto the old ladies, adding to what was already in their hair and on Aunt Zelda's face, minus what Devil had slurped off.

Now even a little boy knows when his joke has gone too far. I tried to call off my dog.

"Here, Devil, here Devil!" I called.

Devil had found more stuff to eat, namely all the scraps covering the dresses of Aunt Zelda and Aunt Nelda. He wasn't going anywhere until it was finished and meanwhile the hubub from the other people only got louder.

One of my great-uncles was a preacher. He heard me calling my dog and obviously thought I was asking the Devil in to lunch.

"Blasphemy!" he shouted. "Devil, get thee behind me!"

Devil did get behind him since both my aunts were crawling around on their hands and knees and they crawled to his table, hoping for salvation maybe. The old preacher tried to get out of the way and only succeeded in tripping and falling down and knocking over his table, too. That made more food for Devil, not to mention another face to lick and I decided not to call him any more, feeling like I was already in enough trouble.

It didn't matter. Aunt Zelda was blubbing about live food in such a hysterical voice that Preacher Henry got the wrong idea and went off on another track.

"Praise the Lord! She's talking in tongues! The fishes are multiplying!" he yelled over the clamor.

I got the wrong idea, too. I thought maybe Aunt Zelda had several tongues in her mouth and I just never had noticed. Or maybe swallowing the minnow had activated them. I started crying because I thought I had started the whole thing.

"What's wrong with you?" Ma asked, having to shout over the clamor.

"Aunt Zelda swallowed my fish," I confessed.

"Nonsense. Your fish is right there on your plate," Ma told me.

"It was alive," I blubbered.

"Of course it was fried," Ma said. She was kind of hard of hearing, too.

I gave up, but I wanted nothing more to do with minnows. I reached under the table and poured them all out of their jar. Oh boy, was that the wrong thing to do! Maybe they had seen what happened to the first of their group because they started vigorously flipping and flopping

everywhere, up britches legs and under skirts and even up onto tables, obviously trying to avoid being swallowed like their friend had.

If there was pandemonium before there really was now. Two more tables tipped over and I think a couple more minnows got swallowed before order was restored. By that time Ma finally figured out what had happened. She grabbed me by the ear and headed for the woodshed. The last thing I saw as I looked back was half the family on their knees amongst the still flipping and flopping minnows while my Uncle shouted out praises to the Lord for providing fishes just like in the Bible and imploring Him to not only make them a little bigger but to add some bread while He was at it.

Ma was too embarrassed to say anything after my Uncle started praying and I think my minnow jar got gathered up and mixed in with the other picnic dishes. I sure never saw it again anyway.

At family reunions they still bring up the story but it has been distorted over time until now people say it rained fishes from a clear blue sky that day. Only Ma and I know what really happened and neither of us will ever tell. She's too embarrassed and I don't want to go to the woodshed again.

After I told that story Rob said it deserved another beer and I agreed and as the day progressed we drank more and more beer and got less and less moving done. It had been a while since I had drunk much beer and naturally I overdid it. The next morning I felt much as I did one long ago day in the Army.

Chapter Seventeen

Feeling Tested

This happened years ago, but I still remember it perfectly, probably because my head has never hurt that bad again. What happened was that after four years as a surgery tech in the Air Force, I really wanted to get in to the Medical Laboratory field, mainly because I still wasn't planning on making the service a career and I knew that lab techs could always get a job in civilian life, whereas there wasn't much call for surgical techs. In fact, Medical Lab Techs were paid well enough that I planned on going to the army lab school then getting out of the army after my three-year enlistment and starting college.

The recruiting sergeant told me I would have to have good test scores to get into the laboratory field in the army. I figured I could do it. I had had pretty good test scores in the Air Force and had grown a little since then. At any rate, the tests were scheduled for the next day.

There were a bunch of other youngsters 17, 18, and 19 enlisting at the same time, and we were all put up in a hotel that night. I was stone cold broke. Some of the teenagers had money but were too young to buy liquor. That created a happy medium of exchange: they supplied the money, I bought the booze. And more booze. And more. And....

I woke up in the bathtub in the bathroom of my hotel room the next morning. No, I didn't wake up either. It had to be a dream. No one could possibly feel that bad in real life. The dripping faucet in the bathtub sounded like the cataracts Niagara Falls in flood stage. The chirp of a stray cricket which had gotten into the room was akin to the roar of Godzilla on the warpath. My tummy was away somewhere on a roller coaster which had broken loose from its rails. I was spinning in space. I put out my arms to brace myself and the movement told me immediately that during the night someone had fixed me to a rack and was winding the handle. I opened my eyes to try to get loose and someone shot me in the face with a ray gun. Spit dribbled down my chin, then turned into something much worse. I got to my hands and knees in the bathtub only after taking several blows to the head by a gang of burly construction workers. I finally got the water running and used that square piece of sandpaper someone had substituted for a wash cloth to clean up with. I heard cannon balls bouncing off the door to my room and crawled over to get in the line of fire so I could die quickly. God wasn't letting me off that easily. The door opened and one of those teenagers who had led me astray used a bullhorn to shout, "Good Morning, Sarge! Boy, didn't we have a great time last night?"

Good morning? No way. The morning had already lasted two and a half centuries and it wasn't even eight o'clock.

"It's breakfast time, Sarge," the teenager shouted again, a deep bass roar that tore into my eardrums, punctured them, and blasted into my brain, turning it into slush. Breakfast? Gawd! I crawled back to the bathtub and filled it halfway full with the lining of my stomach.

"Can't you tell a dead man when you see one?" I asked pitifully. I couldn't tell if he heard me because John Henry had come back to life and was pounding a railroad spike into my skull. I covered my head, trying to defend myself. It was no use. Some gremlins had crawled inside my head and were hammering from the inside.

"Bring me some coffee," I told the kid. "Black. And if there's any of that rotgut left, fill the coffee cup half full with it first. If you can't find any coffee, call the coroner."

The kid came back, bringing his friends. They had never seen a dead man either and he

wanted to show them one. He would have died on the spot except that he handed me a cup of coffee flavored with whatever I had bought last the night before. I opened my mouth to take a swallow and a rank odor assaulted my nostrils. It took a moment for me to realize it was my breath. Then I began to taste what my mouth smelled like. Lizard potty. Essence of barnyard. Boiled skunk. C-rations. I gagged and drank the coffee and hoped the booze would conceal the taste. Now my mouth tasted like fuel oil, which is what the coffee reminded me of. That kid had probably been raised on cokes and didn't know the difference between coffee and what's left in the pot after being heated and re-heated for 24 hours. Somehow I got it down, hoping all the caffeine hadn't boiled away.

"We're going to breakfast, Sarge," the kid said. "Don't forget, the tests start at eight o'clock."

Oh, Gawd. Tests. My eyes hurt just as they were. I could feel them rolling around in my sockets which were filled with sandpaper and roofing tacks. Joe DiMaggio was using the rest of my head for batting practice. I held up my hand. It was shaking so bad I couldn't tell what time it was from my watch. No way I could hold a pencil. *There goes the lab school*, I thought.

The kids found me leaning up against a wall which was trying to fall on me. One got on each side of me to help me stand upright and off we went to the test center. The florescent lights were gone, replaced by 10,000 candlepower carbon arc spotlights. Every one of them was shining in my eyes. DiMaggio had finished with my head and turned it over to a street repair crew, who were using jackhammers, mistaking my dark hair for asphalt. I collapsed into a desk and laid my head down, dribbling drool from my mouth and trying to wave the jackhammers away. Someone placed an instruction sheet and a test sheet in front of me and the day began. It lasted well into the next millennium. I got another test sheet after being poked into an upright position. Without listening to the instructor giving out instructions in a voice which would have done justice to a hard of hearing train conductor, I made some marks on the test and lay my head back down on the nails which comprised the surface of the desk. Every one of them punctured the side of my face and drilled on into my skull. Someone poked me again with a two by four. Another test paper. I scribbled some marks and excused myself to go throw up my coffee and that rotgut I had bought the night before, Old Popskull or something like that. The stomach spasms rippled upwards and vibrated my brain like a dog shaking a rat.

More test papers. More scribbles. A lunch break. I stayed where I was and stretched out on the floor. It had nails in it too. More tests that afternoon while I was wasting away to a skeleton, so dehydrated that my skin was wrinkling into ridges. That hurt, too. Five o'clock and we finished up the seven hundredth test and finally I was free to crawl off somewhere and die in peace. I'm sure I did, but I was reincarnated the next day.

That day was devoted to assigning potential job specialties to us new soldiers. I knew I could forget about the lab. I just hoped they didn't make me a cook's third assistant helper in charge of pots and pans or put me on permanent grounds and yard duty. My name was called. I sat down in front of the NCO, the non-commissioned officer who was going to take care of me. He opened my file. He studied it for a moment. His mouth opened but he didn't say a word. He got up and went over to another NCO and showed him my file. That guy called some others over. One of them picked up a phone. Soon they were joined by a Captain and a Major. All of them began talking and gesturing to each other, occasionally stopping long enough to point at me, as if I were some bug that needed to be stepped on, or so I thought.

I knew I had messed up on the tests but heck, I hadn't even been able to read the questions, much less think about them. They had made my eyes hurt and turned what few brain cells that

were still undissolved by alcohol into dust. I had been barely conscious of the little boxes marked a, b, c, d. I had simply pried one eyelid up for a microsecond, got a gestalt of the question and stabbed at one of those little boxes, then squinted my eyelids shut against the carbon arc spot lights blinding me. I wondered whether all the hubbub might be the result of me getting negative scores, less than zero, a theoretical impossibility.

The group of NCOs and officers grew to a dozen or so, all talking and glancing in my direction. I was sure they were wondering what idiot of a recruiter had enlisted me. My test scores must indicate an IQ of 14, if not lower.

Finally, the Major and a Master Sergeant separated from the group and came over to me. I stood up, expecting to be told to go back to the home for retarded adults I had escaped from.

The Major held out his hand. Bewildered, I took it. I figured that maybe he thought he had to lead me away since my test scores must indicate that I was too dumb to find my way home by myself. Instead, he said, "Son, we are proud to have you in the Army. The Sergeant here tells me that the test center has never seen anyone who tested as well as you did across the board."

"Huh?" I said, showing my newfound brilliance.

"That's right," the Master Sergeant said. "You were only five points off perfect on the GT, the general intelligence test, and all your other scores are way above the mean. It is almost scary to see someone with so much potential talent in so many fields. What would you like to do?"

"I want to be a Medical Laboratory Tech," I said.

"How about Officers Candidate School?" the Major asked.

"No, just Medical Lab," I repeated.

"See to it Sergeant," the Major said. "And congratulations again. You will go places in this man's army."

I was sent to Hawaii for on the job training as a pharmacy specialist. I had to take a short reenlistment two years later to get into lab school.

So much for great test scores.

Chapter Eighteen

There's a Varmint in the House

Just in case you're thinking stuff like Big Mama and dogs learning to drive only began to happen recently on Santa Claus Lane, I have news: they started happening almost as soon as we moved in. Or not quite. Soon after the warranty on the house ran out would be more accurate.

Everything went great for the first 365 days. For anyone who doesn't suspect where this story is going, 365 days equals one year, which is how long the warranty on the house lasted.

On the 366th day, Betty began complaining to me. "Honey, we have a leak in the kitchen."

Fortunately, although not very mechanically inclined or talented, I knew what to do about a leak. "Call the plumber," I said.

"You're the man, you call the plumber," Betty answered.

(Betty grew up in the old school as you can tell from that remark).

I called. The plumber promised to be out the next day.

Next day. No plumber.

I called. The plumber promised to be out the next day.

Next day. No plumber.

I called...repeat several more times.

"I want that leak fixed!" Betty told me in no uncertain terms one night in the bedroom.

Orders from bedrooms are serious business. It doesn't take a man long to get a message put in that particular way.

Lacking a plumber I decided to tackle the job myself. After all, somewhere in my library of a couple of thousand books there must be something about fixing a simple leak under a kitchen sink. But first I decided to locate it.

I crawled under the kitchen sink, no mean feat in a space cramped with drain pipes, coils of copper tubing, wooden bracings and odds and ends and bottle and jars and cans of things Betty keeps in that space, most of which I didn't recognize except a jar of vinegar that I promptly tipped over and broke, thereby delaying the job for several more days until the fumes abated. (Men, take note: keep a convenient jar of vinegar anywhere you don't want to have to work, especially during football season).

The vinegar trick only worked that once since Betty didn't replace it, a smart move on her part. Eventually I had to crawl under the sink again-and by this time I could sympathize with Betty's concern. My knees and hands got wet. I did discover where the leak was coming from, though: behind the wall.

"The leak is coming from behind the wall," I announced as I backed out.

"What are you going to do?"

"Tear the wall out," I said, gathering up a hammer, saw, crowbar and other implements inherited from my father which I had never used before.

"Maybe you should call the plumber again," Betty said.

"Plumbers don't exist. They're only a figment."

"They're listed in the phone book."

"The phone book lies. All the plumbers in Texas have migrated to California where they have unions."

"What do unions have to do with it?"

“How should I know? I’m not a plumber.”

“Then why are you going to fix that leak?” my wife asked.

Maybe some men would have answered that, but not me. I crawled back under the sink and proceeded to wipe out the wall as if fixing the leak had been all my idea in the first place. Actually, tearing up the wall was sort of interesting and kind of fun. There was a layer of linoleum, then some sort of plywoody stuff, then a bunch of pink panther insulation stuff, then a mice nest, some stray nails the carpenter had left in the wall, a few two by fours going this way and that, a set of keys and to top it off, it was all intertwined with copper pipes and PVC pipes and electrical lines and some insulated pipes which turned out to be empty and finally a heavy, immovable wooden beam which appeared large and solid enough to support the leaning tower of Pisa. And naturally, the leak was coming from somewhere behind that beam. I backed out, or rather tried to. I couldn’t move. I had torn out so much of the wall and piled so much of the debris behind me that I couldn’t go anywhere.

“Help!” I shouted.

Several more shouts brought Betty, sloshing through an inch of water that something I had torn loose had released. Then she started shouting. “What have you done to my cabinet! What did you do to the wall! Why are we flooding now instead of leaking? Why are you tearing our house down?” This while shoveling away debris so I could back out of the cabinet.

“I’m fixing that leak, just like you asked me to, remember?” I said, as soon as I could stand up.

“No I don’t. What I remember is asking you to call a plumber!”

“I did call a plumber,” I said virtuously. “In fact I called several of them.”

“Well, where are they?”

“They have gone to wherever plumbers go when they say they are going to come out the next day; that is, if in fact plumbers really exist. I’m beginning to have reason to doubt it lately.”

“Well, all right. Did you fix the leak?”

“No,” I admitted. “I can’t get to it from this side. I’ll have to go through the brick wall from outside.”

Betty looked at my simple tools. She grinned. “Ha! You can’t go through a brick wall with that little hammer and saw and crowbar. You better try calling the plumbers again.”

I had given up on the plumbers but since I had to go to the building supply store anyway to buy 16 tons of materials to replace the wall inside the cabinet I had torn out, I picked up a handy dandy brand new sledgehammer while I was at it.

As soon as Betty felt the house shaking from me pounding a hole through the bricks from outside, she screamed and ran for the phone. Amazingly, a few hours later a real, live plumber showed up. I have since concluded that they will only and always show up when a woman calls, assuming women know nothing of plumbing like me and other men do, and figuring they can rip off the unsuspecting women easily.

Not me. I proved that easily. The plumber worked a toothpick around in his mouth, shook his head at the pile of bricks displaced by the new hole in the house running through the bricks into the cabinet where the leak was. He shook his head again when he saw the pile of stuff I had ripped out looking for that stupid little leak. He pulled a little gadget out of his pocket, knelt and reached in under the cabinet and two seconds later stood back up.

“It’s fixed,” he said.

“What was wrong?” I had to ask.

“Carpenter got careless with a nail when the house was being built. It was in the pipe, then

worked loose when you disturbed it. Here's my bill."

I paid the man \$457.63 for his two seconds of work, glad he hadn't come when Betty was by herself or he would surely have overcharged her.

Well, the leak was fixed. I headed for my easy chair and a well-deserved rest. Fixing leaks is hard work.

Betty came over and stood in front of me. "What about that hole in our house?"

"I'll fix it after the football game," I told her. However, this was the height of the season and it seemed as if there was a football game on every day for the next two weeks.

The hole stayed open, but heck, I didn't see where it was hurting much of anything, especially since we could keep the cabinet door closed. However...

One day while I was busy watching football while lying on the couch with my eyes closed (this is something only men can do), I heard Betty shout.

"Honey, come quick!"

"How about at half-time?"

"How about now!" Betty said, in a voice I knew well. Something was dreadfully wrong. I got up and came to look.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just look!" Betty pulled open the cabinet door. She had moved some of the stuff back into it, in particular the garbage compost bucket. I bent over to look-and saw what she was talking about. Right there beside the bucket, some critter had gone potty.

"Uh oh," I said.

"Uh oh, my hind foot. You get that varmint out of there."

I looked closer. "I think it must be a rat that got in while the house building was going on."

"Well, if that's so, what has it been living on all this time?"

"Mice?"

"Mice! You get that thing out of here right now!"

"It's not that easy," I told her. I had had some experience along those lines, having had to exterminate mice in another house. But from the droppings I saw, this was obviously a rat, not a mouse.

"I'll buy a rat trap pretty soon," I said.

"How about right this instant?"

"I would, but it's Sunday. Besides, what's more important, a little old rat or the Dallas Cowboys?"

I guess I don't have to tell you what the response to that statement was, but I promised faithfully that I would go to town the next day and get a rat trap, and I did.

However, the next day also happened to be when we had invited a few couples over for dinner. Nevertheless, I baited the rat trap with a big piece of cheese and set it right by the compost bucket. And by the way, if any of you city folks are wondering what a compost bucket is, just imagine a home without a garbage disposal in the sink and without regular garbage pickup service-and a little woman who loves to feed her chickens all the kitchen scraps the dogs and cats don't like, and you will know what a compost bucket is.

The dinner went well and afterward, we were sitting around talking when there came a loud *SNAP!* from the kitchen. Everyone stopped talking for a moment. Neither Betty nor I said anything, not wanting to admit that we had a rat and possibly mice in our new home. However, after the *Snap!* came a series of *Crash! Bang! Boing! Klunk!* noises impossible to ignore. I knew that the rat had tripped the trap!

“What’s that?” someone asked.

“Uh, maybe branches falling on the roof?” I suggested. Who wants to admit they have rats in their kitchen?

“I didn’t notice any trees by your house,” that someone said with a grin, obviously seeing my discomfiture and not wanting to let me off the hook.

“Maybe the cat and dog are feuding,” Betty suggested, a poor excuse since the cat was sitting in her lap at the moment and the dog was outside barking at the moon.

“It sounds like something is loose in the kitchen,” one of the ladies said.

“Impossible,” I said. “It’s just a plain old kitchen.”

“Let’s go see,” one of the other men said.

I hate curious people, especially dinner guests, but the idea took hold. Everyone got up and trooped into the kitchen, then we all stood around, with Betty and I holding our breath, hoping that by this time the rat was lying dead in the trap. Our hopes were in vain. Another series of crashing, thumping noises came from beneath the sink.

“Something is loose in there!” one of the ladies said, backing up a bit.

“Sounds pretty big, too,” the curious man said.

“It’s just a rat in a trap,” I said, finally deciding to confess and end the suspense.

“It’s my husband’s fault. I told him he needed to fix that hole in the wall.” Betty has always been very supportive.

“But it’s football season!”

The men nodded sympathetically. The women stared at me as if football and beer were my only occupations. Betty didn’t say anything to that, maybe because besides a little farming, it sort of approached the truth.

“Well, anyway, it sounds as if you caught it,” one of the other men declared.

Some more crashes and banging sounds came from the cabinet beneath the sink, not quite as loud as before. In fact, the noises sounded almost purposeful. Now I was curious. I stepped forward and gingerly pulled open the cabinet door.

I guess I’m a slow thinker. Everyone else not only stampeded out of the kitchen but vacated the house as well, while I stood there stupefied, watching a small black animal with a white stripe down its back struggling with its neck caught in my rat trap.

Now a rat trap is designed to break a rat’s neck when it snaps on it but perhaps little skunks have stronger vertebrae or something. Anyway, while I stood watching and trying to decide whether to run for my pistol, try to stick my foot in and stomp the skunk or just close the door and hope for the best, the little skunk went about determinedly figuring out how to get the trap off its neck-and finally did. It placed both forepaws on the edge of the trap then very slowly, exerting all its strength, gradually raised its neck and began to slide it out from under the steel band of the trap.

That decided me. I hurriedly closed the cabinet door and simply hoped I had been hallucinating. I wasn’t about to stand there and wait for the skunk to work itself loose then turn its attention on the trap-setter!

About that time Betty crept cautiously back into the kitchen. “Is it dead?”

“No,” I admitted. “In fact, I think it’s loose from the trap.”

“You mean I have a skunk loose in my kitchen cabinets? No more football for you, mister. Get that skunk out of my house!”

“But--”

“Now!”

“How?”

“You let him in, you get him out.”

“I know, I’ll call a plumber,” I said.

If I remember right, Betty decided at that point to go visit her mother for a couple of days, leaving me with the skunk in the house and asking me to call her when it was gone. I went and turned on a football game so I could think the situation over. I thought and thought and finally something occurred to me: the skunk hadn’t smelled like a skunk, not even a little bit. Obviously, it wasn’t grown up enough to operate that infamous skunk defensive/offensive system which repels all enemies, foreign and domestic. The Cowboys’ coaches should take some lessons.

Now that I had young Mr. Skunk figured out, I got up and went and opened the kitchen cabinet again with a big hammer in my hand, no longer afraid of the consequences should I whap the skunk into submission with it. I peered inside. The skunk was gone and the trap was empty. I looked closer. The old piece of plywood I had stood up against the house to sort of cover the missing bricks and interior wall had been knocked over. The skunk obviously had decided that getting caught in a rat trap was no longer worth living in happy proximity to a compost bucket and a leaky pipe, even though judging from the potty piles it had subsisted on both for several days.

I blocked off the hole in the house temporarily then bought some cement mix and plugged it back up. For some reason it didn’t match the rest of the exterior of the house, perhaps because I don’t know much about brick laying. I bent a convenient Azalea bush over far enough to hide my work and went back to watching football. When Betty called I told her the skunk problem was cured and she could back home.

“How did you get rid of it?” was the first thing she asked.

“Easy,” I said. “I just laid a trail of compost out to the chicken yard and it followed.”

“You mean I have a skunk in my chicken yard now?”

“Just kidding.” I said.

I don’t think Betty believed me. From that day on, I not only had to carry the compost to the chicken yard, I became the designated egg-gatherer forevermore. Which shows that it is dangerous to kid around with your wife, no matter how much she loves you.

Interlude

I just received a Christmas gift from my granddaughter Robyn, *Creating Web Pages For Idiots*. If you have seen my web page, <http://www.darrellbain.com>, you know it is a sorely needed addition to my library. I think she is trying to tell me something, but dadgummit, she could have at least bought me the *Dummies* book instead of the *Idiot’s* version, which is for the really low IQ set. I’m a dummy, not an idiot. Wait, that didn’t come out right! I’m...never mind. Quit while you’re ahead I always say.

Chapter Nineteen

Betty and the Snakes

Even before the episode of the skunk in the house, and me being delegated to gather the eggs because I opened my big mouth, there had been trouble in the henhouse in the form of snakes. Back when we first moved out to the farm Betty practically walked on tippy toes everywhere she went, afraid she might step on a snake. Heck, she is so afraid of snakes she would hardly go outside for fear of just *seeing* one, much less being attacked. When she began to go berry picking, she not only carried a big stick to beat the bushes before sticking her hands near them, she trained our new German Shepherd, Deputy Dog to be a snake dog. And boy was he a snake dog! The bigger the better was Deputy Dog's motto. One day he cornered a snake up against a tree and wouldn't leave it alone. He also wouldn't kill it like he usually did; he just kept barking until Betty went to see. She came running back to me, waving her arms and shouting, "Get your gun! Get a hoe! Get my stick! There's a big snake out there!"

I didn't get very excited because Betty's idea of a monster snake usually turned out to be a harmless grass snake about a foot long. I did have my trusty six shooter handy at the time since I usually carried it when we first moved to the farm. I casually headed toward the tree where Deputy dog was barking, accompanied by Betty jumping up and down and shouting, "Big snake! Big snake!"

I just grinned, knowing I would find maybe a two foot long black snake or something like that. And I was still wondering why Deputy Dog hadn't already eaten it. I knew he had a snake because he was using his distinctive snake bark. I got closer and then I saw the snake. And then I jumped up and down and shouted "Big snake! Big Snake!"

It was a gigantic snake. I don't blame Deputy Dog for not tackling it. Its head looked almost as big as his own-and it was much longer than him. I drew my pistol. Unfortunately, I was suffering from tendonitis in the arm I used for shooting (really) and missed the darn snake every time until my gun was empty. Trying to avoid shooting the dog and trying to draw a bead on a weaving snake's head didn't help matters.

I was out of bullets and didn't know what to do next. Betty did though. Ignoring my sore arm, she thrust a hoe into my hand. A hoe to tackle a snake twenty feet long? Well, it seemed like it might be. With more courage than sense, I charged, screaming every time I swung the hoe and hurt my already sore arm. Between me and Deputy Dog, we finally subdued the snake. When I measured, it was eleven feet long. I looked in our wildlife book but there was no snake resembling it there. I can only conclude it was someone's pet which had gotten loose-and it sure didn't help Betty's snake phobia, not even a little bit. Truth be told, I started watching a little more closely when I was outside.

Well, every storyteller strays sometimes and that's what I've done here. What I was really going to tell about was when we (read Betty) first started raising chickens and our overpopulation of snakes discovered the fact. They began getting into the henhouse and stealing eggs, causing me to have to go out and kill a snake every two or three days while Betty watched from a safe distance. One day, however, I wasn't around at the right moment-and Betty had to make a decision: does the snake eat the eggs or does Betty attack the snake and rescue the eggs?

I heard her yelling as I came around the house.

"No you don't you shoulderless monster!"

“You give them back, you footless thing you!”

Then I heard sounds.

Whap! Whap! Crash! Bang! Whap! Whap!

“That’ll teach you not to eat eggs you dirty sneaky snake, you!”

“Whap! Whap!”

“Give me my eggs back! Give them back! Right now, you snaky excuse for a legless lizard!”

I cringed as I neared the door to the henhouse, hoping Betty wouldn’t mistake me for an egg thief.

I dodged a wild swing of the hoe and watched in amazement as my gentle, snake-fearing wife proceeded to pound a huge chicken snake to pieces. And as it got pounded, it began disgorging eggs.

“That’s one! Give me the rest, you thieving trespasser!”

I watched as the snake dodged the wrong way and got whapped again. It spit out another whole egg.

“That’s not all of them, you wiggly rascal, you! Give me that last egg back!”

“Whap! Whap!”

The snake let out a long defeated sigh and spit out the last of the three eggs it had swallowed, perhaps hoping that having surrendered the loot it could slither away and try again another day. Unfortunately, it spit the last egg right into the path of the hoe. It splattered to pieces, throwing yellow egg yoke all over the place and that really made Betty mad.

Whap! Whap! Whap! Whap!

“Break my egg, will you? I’ll teach you!”

Whap! Whap!

“Uh, sweetie--” I tried to interrupt.

“Did you see what that stupid snake did? It ate my eggs! And it broke one of them when I told it to spit it out!” *Whap! Whap!*

I didn’t try disputing who broke the egg, not while she still had a hoe in her hand and fire in her eyes. However, I did get a glance into the chickenhouse. The nests were a shambles, broken into splinters and straw. The snake was breathing its last.

Betty saw where I was looking.

“Gather the eggs,” she said triumphantly, wiping egg yolk from her face with her shirt sleeve and heading for the house.

Dubiously, I picked up the two eggs, still wet from the snake’s gullet but miraculously unbroken amidst the carnage of battle.

As I followed Betty back to the house I began wondering whether any other farmer ever had to eat second hand eggs.

Chapter Twenty

How to Spell Datsun

We have fond memories of Deputy Dog. He was a real guardian and a friendly fellow despite his ferocious appearance and there has never been another snake dog like him. Our little weenie dog tries hard, but every time he's run up against a snake it has cost us a fortune in vet bills getting him cured from the bite. He just doesn't know how to zig instead of zag. He is a lovable little dog though, but I thought we would have to give him back there for a while. The problem was that the first time I started to write someone about him I ran into a problem....I couldn't spell him.

I always thought I was a pretty good speller until we got our new doggie, a little datsun whom we named Biscuit. He hadn't been around very long before his antics inspired the idea for a story-not that he was so funny (though he was); it's just that most any antic can inspire a story from me. Just ask Betty about her antics. No, don't do that. I remember-

Never mind. Let's concentrate on the doggie. I got my computer going, and began writing. Very soon, say the first sentence or so, I noticed that my spelling of datsun didn't look quite right even though phonetically it sounded okay. I noticed because smart-alec computers these days will immediately underline in red any misspelled word and boy do I wish I had had something like that in second grade, but never mind.

As soon as I turned the spell-checker on and put the cursor on datsun it told me there was no such word in the dictionary (the computer's dictionary, not the real dictionary). The real one, Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, lives on a shelf over Computer, ever ready to show Computer that he doesn't know everything and Dictionary can still teach him a thing or two. They are always fussing. I tried Computer first.

Computer listed some alternate choices, like datastore, datamoras, damsel and other useless words and near words but nothing at all resembling the word I wanted.

I give up, Computer finally said, very reluctantly.

Ha! I'll show you some real smarts, Dictionary proclaimed, jumping down into my lap from the shelf where he lived.

Dictionary showed me some words starting with dat such as datum, dateline, dative and datura but nothing identifiable as a doggie.

"Where are those smarts?" I asked.

It must be your fault, Computer and Dictionary both told me.

Why don't I try a computer search engine? Computer proposed. *I bet that will find out how to spell datsun.*

Now that sounded like a good idea. Computer uploaded Google, one of its smartest search engines. I typed in datsun and two seconds later had a nice picture of a Japanese car and 2,324,613 other hits about cars, Japanese work methods, engine displacement, dealerships, etc. but nothing at all resembling a dog.

Dictionary snickered.

All right, smarty, let's see you do better, Computer said.

I will, Dictionary retorted and began flipping pages. *I would have already spelled it if this stupid guy knew how to get started.*

“Watch it, bub,” I said. “You can be replaced. The new edition just came out.”

Ulp. Yessir!

There’s nothing like a little threat of replacing with a newer model to get things moving. I understand this works with women, too, but only by hearsay. I’m perfectly satisfied, myself. Besides, Betty reads all my stories.

Maybe it’s spelled dashound, Dictionary suggested.

That looked about right. I learned that *dashi* is a fish broth and a *dashpot* is a device for damping movement but there was nothing there about doggies. Rats.

Betty came into the office to look for something and asked me what I was doing with the dictionary.

“I’m trying to find out how to spell datsun for my story.”

“Oh, that’s easy.”

“Really? Okay, how?” To heck with Computer and Dictionary. My own dear wife would solve the problem.

“It’s spelled d-a-t-s-u-n-d.”

“Thanks, honey,” I said. Betty can’t spell any better than I can.

“That’s not right?”

“Nope. I’ve already tried.”

“Well, maybe there’s an aich there somewhere. I remember an aich in datsun.”

“I thought so, too, but maybe I put it in the wrong place. I’ll try again.” I very carefully typed in d-a-h-t-s-u-n and sat back. A red underline appeared immediately. Double rats.

Dictionary began jumping up and down in my lap like our little dat-uh, daht-um, das-our little puppy does when he’s happy. *I can do it! I can do it! I remember, too. It does have an aich in it. Computer just doesn’t know enough words to get it!*

I know all the good words, Computer said loftily.

“I know some good words, too, but Betty won’t let me use them in the house,” I told them.

I looked in Dictionary beginning with daht and learned that dah is a dash and dalia is a flower but still no doggie.

Maybe the aich goes in the other part of the word, Computer suggested.

I tried datshund. That looked almost right, but Computer immediately red-lined it.

Nyah, nyah, na na nyah! Dictionary said.

Datsuns don’t exist, I thought. I’m just imagining we own a Weenie Dog.

About that time one of the grandkids came in the back door. “Hi, Grandpa.”

“Hi. How do you spell datsun?” I asked.

“They don’t teach spelling in schools anymore, grandpa. Computers spell the words for us.”

“What if they spell it wrong?”

She snickered. “They can’t spell a word wrong, grandpa. You just typed it in wrong.”

“Well, how about you try it, then?” I asked.

She sat down at the computer and typed in dshtfrhnd. I agree. Schools obviously don’t teach spelling any more. Computer red-lined it before she even finished typing.

One of the greatgrandkids came in. “Hi grandpa! Can I play with the weenie dog?”

“Only if you can spell datsun,” I said.

“Won’t the computer spell it?”

“Nope. It doesn’t know how.”

“Can it spell Weenie Dog?”

I typed in weenie dog. No red line.

“Computer can spell weenie dog, all right, but how does that help?”

“Simple. Use Google to search for weenie dogs instead of datsuns.”

Out of the mouths of babes, Computer said.

Why didn't I think of that? Dictionary asked.

I typed “Weenie Dogs” into Google and clicked the Search button.

In 0.22 seconds, Google searched out 5,520 sites mentioning weenie dogs and every one of them on the first page also spelled datsun, only they spelled it d-a-c-h-s-h-u-n-d, dachshund.

I would have been happy but Dictionary jumped back up onto the shelf where he lives and covered himself up with some old catalogs and began sulking. Computer thought the whole matter over for 0.23 seconds and froze everything up tight, making me lose what I had already written, including the proper way to spell datshund, or something like that.

Now I know why schools stopped teaching kids how to spell. It doesn't do any good because every time, they will use the slang expression instead of the real word, like weenie dog instead of datsuchshund or whatever. Even when they know how to spell a word they won't use it anyway. And in the case of dshcound, I don't blame them one bit.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ice Cream Doggie

I think I've mentioned that Biscuit is a pretty smart little Weenie Dog. He watches everything, including the way I eat ice cream. I didn't know it yet, but Biscuit and ice cream were practically made for each other. Or maybe he learned it from me because I have perfected the way to serve and eat ice cream. If you really like ice cream, there's just no other way to do it.

The first and most important rule for serving yourself ice cream is to never worry about leaving any in the carton for the next person. If they want ice cream, let them go get their own. If you feel generous, I suppose it's okay to let them lick the bowl when you're finished. And speaking of bowls, don't get led astray by those little bitsy bowls women like to keep in the kitchen cabinets. They don't hold enough ice cream to feed a mouse. You may as well eat from the scoop. Search around the kitchen and you'll find something bigger than the little woman keeps hidden for some useless purposes like salads or flower bouquets. Get the biggest bowl you can find, except there's no need to use a container bigger than a gallon because that's all the biggest ice cream cartons hold.

Now you can either use a big spoon or a regular ice cream scoop to dip the ice cream. I personally prefer a big spoon because you can go ahead and eat with it while you're dipping and also when you're finished dipping and also not waste any time discarding the scoop and looking for a spoon since you will already have one in your hand.

Once you begin dipping ice cream it is very important that you position the dips or scoops of ice cream so as to leave the smallest air spaces in the bowl as possible. Always remember, ice cream tastes much better than air spaces. In fact, you should try to arrange the scoops of ice cream so that you can smush them down and not leave any air pockets at all because chances are you are using a container holding less than a gallon, and you want to put all the ice cream it will hold into it.

Once the container is filled to the brim, you can begin heaping it into a pile, the higher the better, again trying to avoid air spaces and being careful not to let any ice cream fall off the heap until one finally does. You can then eat that stray bit of ice cream and figure you now have all the ice cream the container will hold. If you have run out of ice cream during these proceedings, it's a pretty safe bet that you have been alternating dips between your bowl and your mouth. This is perfectly understandable and should cause no upset to anyone. Just take another carton of ice cream out of the freezer and continue about your business until your bowl is full.

You have now properly served yourself a regular helping of ice cream. I don't think there's any need to tell you how to eat it, but I would be glad to demonstrate. We'll have to use your ice cream, though. I've eaten all of mine. However, there are a few little pointers I'll pass on.

One: An hour or two before you intend to eat your ice cream, place your bowl in the freezer and take it out only when you're ready to begin dipping. The cold bowl will keep the ice cream firm while you are eating it and also prolong your pleasure since firmer ice cream takes longer to eat.

Two: Eat the ice cream in bed with a good pocket book. Do not take a hard cover book to bed with your ice cream as it is difficult to hold with one hand and you must never release your grip on your ice cream spoon lest someone, not mentioning names but my wife Betty comes to

mind, grabs the spoon and steals some of your ice cream.

Three: Do not eat just plain vanilla ice cream. Always buy French Vanilla. French Vanilla ice cream contains 20% more butterfat than regular vanilla and is smoother and richer and pleasanter on the palate. If you're going to eat ice cream, don't settle for half measures.

Four: If your doggie has succumbed to a craving for ice cream, for example like our dachshund Biscuit, train him to always beg for his ice cream from your wife. Women are more apt to worry about calories and will probably part with some of theirs, thereby leaving more for you. It is permissible to let your doggie lick the bowl when you're finished so long as you leave a film of melted ice cream no thicker than 0.002 inches thick.

Five: The only variety of ice cream other than French Vanilla worthy of serving in the fashion described above is Cherry Vanilla. Anyone who eats any other flavors is not a real ice cream connoisseur. Note: other flavors may reluctantly be consumed only when the two primary flavors are totally unavailable, which should never happen. The only time wife-beating is ever appropriate is when said wife allows the freezer to run out of the only two real flavors of ice cream.

Six: Never pay attention to what the bathroom scales may read after you become an ice cream aficionado. They have been rigged by your spouse in the hopes that you will quit eating all the ice cream in the house and leave some for her. Just continue about your regular ice cream-eating routine and make her buy her own-plus yours, of course.

Seven: There are ice creams and ice creams. Bluebell is the only real ice cream. Accept no substitutes. If it is unavailable in your area, charter a plane to fly it in for you. Ignore your spouse if she complains about the expense. Ice cream is one of the major food groups and is absolutely essential for your continued good health.

Eight: Seasons have nothing to do with when you should eat ice cream. You should eat it every day, year round. As noted, it is essential to good health and strong bodies.

Nine: It is all right to mix cake and ice cream at birthday parties but that is the only occasion. Ice cream is too good as it is for the flavor to be diluted with other sweets. Besides, if you mix it, that leaves less room inside you for a full serving of ice cream.

Ten: Anyone who does not agree with everything in this ice cream dissertation is a skinny no-good low IQ idiot who probably spends all his time worrying about cholesterol, body fat and other unimportant things instead of concentrating on how to prevent terrorists from blowing up all the Bluebell Ice Cream factories in America and thus sealing our doom as a nation.

There. Now that we have that out of the way, let's get back to Biscuit and his ice cream. I didn't know it, but watching me scoop ice cream and being allowed to lick the bowl had created a craving for ice cream in him. He began leading a double life which I wasn't aware of until one day....

...when Betty and Biscuit and I went for a ride to look for a produce stand. We were going to pick up some peaches Betty had ordered. I let Betty drive since when I drive Biscuit sits in my lap, turns the steering wheel, honks the horn and uses the blinkers. He really thinks he is doing the driving. Heck, if he could reach the brakes I might let him try. Anyway, this story isn't about driving, which I think you've already heard about. It is about ice cream. You see, Biscuit likes ice cream. He hangs by my bed every night, waiting on me to finish my ice cream so he can lick the bowl. What I didn't know is that Betty had gotten into the habit of getting him a cup of ice cream when they went driving alone. I didn't suspect a thing when we pulled into the Dairy Queen-until Betty placed the order.

“We’ll have two cones and one cup of ice cream,” she told the young lady at the drive-through window.

I blinked. Me plus Betty makes two. Two cones and a cup make three. “Who is the cup of ice cream for?” I asked.

“It’s for Biscuit, ninny. You wouldn’t want us eating ice cream in front of him and not let him have any, would you?”

This was a new one on me. “How is he supposed to eat it without spilling it?” I would have to ask.

“You hold the cup for him and Biscuit will take care of the rest.”

“How long has this been going on?” I asked.

“Ever since you got too busy writing to go to the vet with us. He is so good there that I always reward him with a cup of ice cream.”

“And he eats it all?”

“Don’t ask silly questions. Of course he does!”

I wondered then why he ever bothered with my used bowl of ice cream at night when he was getting full cups of it from Betty, but there is no explanation for ice cream addicts. We-I mean, Biscuit must be addicted. At any rate, as soon as our order was brought to the window Betty handed me Biscuit’s cup of ice cream. Before I hardly had my hand around it Biscuit had his nose in it up to his eyes. His busy little tongue was lapping so fast it was a blur. The girl who was making change acted like she had never seen a dog eat ice cream before in her whole life. Biscuit must have felt the same about her. He looked up from where I was holding the cup for him and barked at her. Frankly, I think he was trying to tell her not to just stand there, bring more ice cream.

I took a lick of my cone as Betty drove away. Betty took a lick of hers. Biscuit finished his, licked his chops and began eyeing my cone. He lunged for it.

“No,” I said firmly, jerking it up and away. Unfortunately, I forgot we were in the car. I smashed the cone against the inside of the cab, directly over my head. Ice cream began dripping down into my hair and onto my face. I transferred the cone to my other hand and reached up to wipe the ice cream off the roof. I heard Biscuit’s enthusiastic bark but it was already too late. By the time I turned to look, his little paws had my forearm in a death grip and his tongue was busier than ever-with my ice cream.

“Hey, Biscuit licked my ice cream!” I said indignantly, trying to jerk it away.

Betty glanced over and laughed. “He’s doing more than lick--acckk!!”

Biscuit loosed his hold on my arm, which shot upwards with the reduced pressure. This time the cone smashed into the roof over Betty’s head. Most of it stuck there but a good bit splashed over on Betty’s face. She didn’t notice because another good bit of it was dropping in gobs into my hair-and when I looked up a blob got me right between the eyes. I must have looked funny because Betty started laughing like crazy while I again tried wiping ice cream off the interior. I needn’t have bothered. It was dripping faster than I could wipe and running down my arm. In the meantime, with my cone out of his reach, Biscuit crawled over my lap and lunged for Betty’s. She jerked it away and this time she was the culprit, smashing the cone into the roof to the left of the place I had hit the first time. A big blob of ice cream stuck there momentarily then came loose, landed on her head and slithered down her front and into her lap.

While simultaneously trying to keep her cone away from Biscuit with one hand and wiping at her lap and face with the other, and trying to shove Biscuit away to stop him from licking her face when he couldn’t get to her cone, she almost side-swiped a car next to us. The man in the

car sort of glared at first then went goggle-eyed as the last of the ice cream came loose from the roof and landed on Biscuit's head. I don't know what the guy thought was going on but he speeded up and was soon lost from sight.

It is a well-known fact of the road that there are never any napkins in the car when you really need them so we were both using our bare hands to wipe ice cream, which only resulted in smearing more ice cream around our faces when we tried to get them clean enough so that we could at least see through the milky, melting, sticky stuff. Then I got smart and began wiping my hands on Biscuit wherever he wasn't already covered with ice cream, figuring he would lick it off himself. Instead, he spied Betty's cone again and managed to plop one foot in it when Betty swerved again as the last remnants from the roof turned loose and again landed on her head.

I laughed, but I shouldn't have. With one foot in Betty's cone, Biscuit attacked me again. Before he could do more damage I simply set my cone down in the cup holder, something I should have thought of earlier. Biscuit was polite enough to give me a quick woof-woof thank you for stopping all the fooling around and putting more ice cream where he could get at it easily, which he did by removing his foot from Betty's cone and plopping it into my groin, smearing it with ice cream, too.

Betty gave up on hers, too, and set the remains of her cone in in the other cup holder. It looked sort of distorted in case you've never seen an ice cream cone stepped on by a rambunctious dog. Biscuit thanked her by turning sideways and rubbing her chest with his ice cream-smear head. The blob which had fallen on his head was melting and getting into his eyes and he thought Betty's blouse was a perfect place to clear his eyesight with.

About this time we pulled into the peach place. We left Biscuit to what was left of our cones and approached the produce counter of the roadside stand.

"Do you have any napkins?" was the first thing Betty said.

"I could use a couple myself," I added.

The vendor looked at us strangely. I stared back at him, trying to maintain my dignity but it was a lost cause, especially after Betty's next statement.

"Don't mind him," Betty said. "He makes messes every time I bring him out in public."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Pie-Maker

Messes? Me? Betty claims I made a mess in the kitchen one time back when I was learning to cook but that's not the way I remember it. There was a perfectly legitimate reason for everything that happened in the kitchen that day.

Right after I thought I had really pulled a sneaky one by talking Betty into letting me quit my job to grow Christmas trees and write books while she kept working, I found out that I had outfoxed myself. I was now expected to use my free afternoons to cook supper and have it waiting when Betty got home from work, not to mention doing the wash, polishing furniture and other mundane activities which I really thought were too mundane for a budding writer but found that they had to be done anyway.

Well, what the heck, I've always been a good loser so I taught myself to cook, after a fashion. Before long I even began producing edible meals, and not long after that began getting compliments. Maybe Betty shouldn't have been so generous with her praise. If she had toned it down a bit I might have stuck with meat and potatoes and not tried to graduate into pastries. But I did.

One afternoon I decided to make a pie. I had seen Betty rolling out dough and it didn't look all that hard. I mean, you lay the dough down and roll the rolling pin over it then pick it up and put it in a pie pan. Right? I got started.

First you stir up the batter. I put some biscuit mix in a pan and added an egg and milk and stirred. It got all gummy and began to gob up on my spoon. I added more milk. It got all runny. I added more mix. Too thick. More milk. Too thin. The milk jug went empty before I decided that pie dough was just plain contrary. I had to use water to finally get it right. However, it seemed like I was forgetting something. Oh yeah. Sugar. I dumped in a cupful, wondering as I did why half the sugar jumped out of the scoop on the way to the cup and most of the rest jumped out of the cup on the way to the mixing bowl, and in the first case landed on the cabinet, and in the second case on the floor, where it made little crunchy noises under my feet until it dissolved in the milk that had somehow made its way to the floor, too. I decided that some of the elves that are always loose around the place during the off season were responsible and made a note to ask Betty later what she did about them.

In the meantime, hadn't I seen Betty adding shortening to her crusts? Or was I remembering all those juicy looking pictures of pies I had seen in ads for Crisco? Whatever, I figured it couldn't hurt and spooned out a few gobs of Crisco and stirred. Know what? Crisco doesn't stir very good. I mean it doesn't mix with other stuff very well. It just makes big sticky blobs. Well, I knew how to fix that. Into the electric mixer it went. No pie dough was going to get the best of me, by dern. I scraped out the rest of the mess that resisted going into the bowl with the big mixing spoon but then it wouldn't let loose of the spoon. I slid it off with my finger and it stuck there. I shook my finger over the mixer bowl. It wouldn't come loose. I shook harder. Whoops! It came loose on the upswing and splattered way up on the cabinet door. Out of reach. Well, I could get it later.

I attached the mixer thingy. Somehow, the batter seemed to be spreading. Besides that glob up on the cabinet I had drips and drabs all over my jeans and shirt. Suddenly I knew why Betty

was always wearing an apron when she made pastries. Oh well, I could change clothes when I finished. I turned on the mixer. Maybe I had made too much, what with thinning then thickening. Betty's pie crust mix never jumped out of the mixing bowl like mine did. It sprayed itself all around the kitchen, including the ceiling. Never mind, I could clean it up before changing clothes. Right now, by golly I was going to make a pie come heck or high water.

I poured what was left of the dough in the mixing bowl out onto the kitchen counter. My spoon was across the way where the mixer lived so I just used my hand to rake out the rest of the batter onto the counter. What the heck, I had washed my hands that morning and had wiped off all the oil from changing out that tractor filter. On with the pie. I got most of the dough onto the counter but couldn't figure out why it kept sticking to my hands and not spreading out on the counter like a decent-behaving pie dough should. Oh yeah, dern it. I had forgotten the wax paper like I had seen Betty use before. I got some out and made a note to remember to wash the batter off the cabinet handles while I was cleaning the walls and ceiling. I spread out the wax paper beside the dough and grabbed a big double handful of it to put on the wax paper. I placed it there and reached back for more. The wax paper came with me. I shook it but the batter had glued it to my hand. I slithered batter down off my hands, well maybe from down off my elbows to my hands and then off, since it had somehow spread up my arms while trying to get it onto the wax paper, which by the way was now all wadded up in the dough. By the time I got the wax paper loose from most of the batter, it looked to me like it was getting too thick again (the dough, not the wax paper).

Well, I wasn't about to go near that mixer again so I just poured some milk on top of the batter while it was on the counter. Dern it, the milk didn't mix, it just ran off the batter and over the counter and onto the floor before I could get it to mixing together. I made a note to mop the floor there when I was finished cleaning the walls and ceiling, while in the meantime wishing the milk would dissolve the rest of that pesky sugar on the floor so it wouldn't keep crunching underfoot.

Wax paper didn't really seem to be necessary even if I did think I had seen Betty using it. I got out the rolling pin, making a note to clean that drawer handle when I was finished. Now, I was certain I had seen Betty put flour on the rolling pin before rolling so I got out a handful and sprinkled it on the roller, meantime making a note to clean the top of the flour canister sometime before the weekend. The dadgummed flour just fell off the rolling pin onto the floor and before I knew it I had tracked it into the milk that had run off the counter into the sugar, but in the meantime I noticed that when I set the rolling pin down for a minute it got into some of the milk still on the counter, and that made some flour stick to it. Aha! Now I had it figured. You have to get the rolling pin wet. I ran it under the faucet for a few seconds and said to heck with cleaning the faucet handle. I already had too many other things to clean.

I dribbled flour over the rolling pin while trying to hold it in my hand and turning it around and around, but that didn't work too good and a lot of the flour still went on the floor and counter and onto my boots and down the front of my jeans. I figured it was already way too late for an apron so didn't bother hunting for one. Anyway, I finally figured out the best way to get the flour onto the rolling pin was to dump some out onto the counter-no! Now I knew why the dough stuck to the wax paper. I hadn't put any flour on it! I set the rolling pin down for a minute since I didn't want to make a mess and got out some more wax paper and put some water on it so the flour would stick to it and the dough wouldn't, but somehow all I did was make a bunch of paste like when I was a kid. Then I got smart and decided you should put the flour on dry wax paper then roll the wet rolling pin over it to get the flour to stick to it, so the dough won't stick to the

rolling pin, so that was what I did.

Next I tried to roll out the dough but heck, it was still sticking to the counter. That caused me to figure out that I should put flour on dry wax paper, then put the dough on top of it then flour on top of the dough and then use the floured-up rolling pin. I did, and it worked sort of, after I scooped up what dough I could get off the counter and used up some more wax paper before learning to put water then a bunch of flour on my hands first. By this time I was running out of flour and opened another bag and hoped Betty didn't notice all the white marks on the cupboard door and handle because like I mentioned, I already had enough cleaning to do and I still hadn't even got the pie dough finished, much less the pie.

I saw pretty quick that I didn't have much dough left to roll out and I couldn't figure out why. There wasn't that much of the blamed stuff on the floor or walls or cabinets. Anyway, most of it stuck to the rolling pin no matter how much water and flour I put on it until I emptied that other bag of flour over the dough. That was a pretty good trick in itself, because what with getting the rolling pin and paper and dough and stuff all ready to roll out, a bunch of it was gobbled up on my hands and I suspect on my face where I had to brush away flour that made a cloud in the air around my head when I dumped it. I got it done though, rolled all out pretty even if it was kind of lumpy from that derved Crisco that never did mix in good with the other stuff.

I picked up the rolled-out dough to put it in a pie pan but it came apart before I could get it to the pie pan so I just put the pieces in the pan and sort of pressed them against each other, figuring cooking would weld them together. Right about then, I thought I better look in the cookbook and see whether to cook the pie crust first then add the blackberries or add them and cook it all at once. See, I was going to surprise Betty with a blackberry pie instead of a blackberry cobbler.

The cookbook never did say, not that I could find out anyhow, and pretty soon I couldn't read it anyway for all the white marks from dough and flour and so on, but I thought a new cook book would make a nice birthday present for Betty so didn't worry about it. I did know you had to add sugar to the berries so I dumped a couple of cups into them. It actually took four cups because like I said before, sugar doesn't stay in a cup or scoop until you get it to where you want it to go, which annoyed me because now I had more sugar on the floor just as I was about to get the last of the first bunch dissolved in the milk down there. I poured what sugar was left over the pie crust, but then I remembered I hadn't stirred the berries and sugar up so I did it while they were sitting there. I think my spoon might have gouged out the bottom of the crust where it wasn't already broken but I couldn't see through the berries to tell for sure so I just let it go. That's when I noticed I didn't have enough crust left to make a top for my pie, but I had it all down pat now so I got started and a couple of hours later I had a top for my pie.

I wrote on the grocery list on the wall to be sure and buy more biscuit mix and flour and Crisco and sugar because I sure did seem to have used a whole bunch of that stuff for one little old pie, and while I was at it I made a note to clean that wall next week.

Since I had forgotten to read how high to set the oven before the cookbook got to where I couldn't read it, I figured 500 degrees ought to get it done pretty quick because I was about out of time and hadn't even started supper yet. Right quick I decided to let the pie cook and just run get some hamburgers from Dairy Queen for supper. There was a line and a lot of traffic and by the time I got back I saw Betty's car already in the driveway. I ran inside and saw her holding something black and smoking in her hand with a potholder.

"Sorry, honey, I got delayed." I said.

Betty didn't say anything. She put the burnt pie down and just stared and stared around at

the kitchen then began staring at me while her mouth kind of hung open.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. I wondered if she was sick because usually she said at least a word or two when she got home.

“What on earth have you been doing?” Betty finally managed to blurt out. I suppose she was looking at the few little dabs of flour on my jeans.

“Well, I was making a pie.”

She reached out and touched her fingers to my hair. They came back white. She looked at my jeans and shirt. She gazed at the walls and ceilings and down at the floor.

“I guess a little flour got loose,” I said.

I never have seen a woman sit down smack in the middle of a kitchen floor and laugh and laugh and laugh the way she did. After a while I figured out that she was laughing at me and that got me all annoyed that she didn’t appreciate my efforts.

See if I ever make her another pie.

Chapter Twenty-Three

See Farmers Have Fun

My life isn't all fighting with tractors and cooking and getting in trouble with Biscuit. And life on the farm isn't always idyllic, though it is always fun. I remember one Christmas season when I was having so much fun that I wrote a letter to a friend describing it.

Hi-

Boy, am I really having fun now. There is nothing like trying to get a Christmas tree farm ready for the selling season where there has been seven inches of cold wet rain since the first of the month, which seems like a million years ago. Add the cold wet wind to the rain and watch Darrell out in the cold wet windy rain dipping wreaths in green glop which has ice cubes floating in it and observe him down on his hands and knees with cold wet rain dripping off his hair and running down his neck while cutting Charlie Brown trees to turn into wreaths. Watch Darrell laugh as he cripples his back while tossing hundred pound trees into and out of the pickup truck in cold wet driving windy rain. See how the trees shake on the shaking machine. See how Darrell shakes from the cold wet clothes he is now wearing after cutting and shaking those wet trees. Listen to the cheerful chatter of his teeth while working to clip all the branches off those trees so he can mash his fingers in the wreath machine while making more wreaths to dip in green goo in the cold wet windy rain. See how Darrell nonchalantly loads up fifty pound wreaths into the pickup, wrapping each one of them in plastic so the green glop doesn't wash off, and see him splash through mud puddles two feet deep as he hauls the wreaths up to the carport which he has turned into an emergency drying and dripping area since it is obvious that the sun has decided to quit shining from now on. See how Darrell laughs off the load of rock which he borrowed money to buy and borrowed money for help to spread wash down the hill. And now--drum roll--as if Darrell isn't cold and wet enough already, and having so much fun, watch how much more fun he has emptying and completing the defrosting of the freezer where his dear wife has left the door ajar overnight. Boy, is all that stuff fun, or not? Shucks, even Betty is having fun with Biscuit stealing the dog biscuits out of her Santa-Paws stockings and chewing the red ribbons off them and eating them. What a really fun business this is. I haven't laughed so much since the last time I had swollen piles at the same time I was suffering from the runs and was too weak to get out of bed from a debilitating headache brought on by coughing too much from the flu. Yup, that was the last time I had near as much fun, but I really believe this is an even happier time because it is all worth it. I know because yesterday I sold our first Christmas tree for \$29.96 and I heard the weather forecasters talking about snow and sleet and how this mess might go on for another month or two. This whole situation is so hilarious I would really like some company to help me enjoy it. Is anyone interested?

And lest you think that I'm the only Christmas tree farmer in the world who has fun, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Skip Glasgow, who also grows Christmas trees. Here's a letter he wrote me.

Hi-

Last year we ordered Fraser firs for the first time. We had no idea how to handle them and really didn't think about it much. Several people had told us they were really heavy but Leylands are heavy too and we didn't lose any sleep over it. Also, the people we talked to said to keep them in water but I had a "secret solution" for that. One corner of our pond is shallow and I decided we'd drive steel fence posts in the pond, string a rope between them and then, when the Frasers came in, all we'd have to do would be to take them down there, trim a little off the bottoms with a chain saw, then stand them up against the rope. The day before the trees got here we loaded 300 Leylands on four Central Freight trailers to go to Dallas and then the morning the Frasers arrived we loaded several small loads and a 100 tree load going to Houston. The Frasers arrived about 11:00 AM in the biggest tractor trailer rig I've ever seen. Refrigerated, no less, and loooooong. We were his last stop and our trees were up at the very front of the trailer. He backed in our Exit gate and down the drive until he was almost even with the barn.

When I opened the doors in the back of the truck and looked in there I could just barely see them in a little pile way up front. It looked like I was going to have to walk all the way to Dallas to get to those trees, but I went ahead and got up in there and made it all the way to my trees. They'd been wrapped with string and were really tight. I bent over and tried to pick one up and I seriously thought it was hung on something. I couldn't even roll it to one side! My crew (two kids helping me) got up in there and they couldn't believe it either. Those things bring new meaning to the word heavy!

By the time we got the trees out and on the ground it was time for lunch and the crew left. I was afraid they wouldn't come back after lunch, but they did. (I didn't say they were smart.) But we had some more of our own trees going out and spent the rest of the afternoon dealing with them.

Then, in the evening when we were good and tired, it was time to take the Frasers down to the pond and stand them up. We loaded them on my trailer, hauled them down there and commenced to stand them up against the rope. You gotta know that when we put something like the fifth tree against that rope the whole works went into the pond-rope, fence posts, trees and all!

Back to the drawing board. But now we're running out of light and we're all absolutely out of gas. So we laid the trees down on the bank and slid them into the water until their butts were covered. It worked so well, in fact, that we decided to leave them like that.

Then on the day after Thanksgiving we opened. We had a dozen or fifteen Frasers tied to steel fence posts out front and they smelled just as good as they looked. (I wish we could grow those things-they are absolutely gorgeous!). And the customers started coming in, and they would see the Fraser and go over and look at them, and say, "Those are beautiful trees, and they smell so good! Where are your Leylands this year?"

The first weekend-three busy days-we sold one Fraser fir! They cost me an arm and both legs and people weren't buying them! To her credit, Rolena didn't say a thing. But she sure could have!

Then on the second weekend people began to buy the Frasers. And we had to go down to the pond to get replacements. And they were just as heavy as they had been when we unloaded them. And now we were carrying them up hill. And they were full of tadpoles and crawfish! We had crawfish crawling all over the place and these giant bullfrog tadpoles wriggling around. And, being conservation minded, we were trying to get them all back in the pond.

And we finally got those replacements up. But then they began to turn brown on one side.

The pond bank was wet and the sun had been hot and we had effectively steamed one side of each tree.

Back to the drawing board. I think we managed to salvage all of the trees but many of them were a lot shorter when they left here than they had been when they arrived.

This year we built a holding rack with water right behind the barn and put the Frasers in that. Compared to last year, this year was so easy it was like stealing.

End of story.

Note: Leylands are a type of tree which can be grown in pots and used as live Christmas trees, which is what Skip mostly does these days. If you are interested in Leylands and/or living Christmas trees, please contact Skip at skip@lcc.net or <http://www.ironcreek.com>

And shucks, you don't even have to become a Christmas tree farmer to have fun on the farm. My younger brother Gary, he of the guineas, recently acquired a place in central Oklahoma. After I wrote him and he heard how much fun I was having, he wrote back:

You're right, it's fun to learn maintenance on stupid tractor, or hunt for worms to fish (there ain't a gd worm on this 40 acres), or chase Great Pyrenees around the country, or desert survival or how not to grow plants, or sub-zero survival or how not to grow plants, or how to grow bermuda grass at 3 trillion dollars an acre to feed a 20 dollar horse, or how to clear land so you work the land so you can do more futile work, etc., etc. Yeah, you're right, this is really a lot of fun!!

And then: (the howler)

I'm *really* having fun this morning. After yesterday I decided to relax today. What happened was that I started the day off, (Barb at horse seminar) by doing my first honey-do. Barb had asked me to fill the bird feeders with sunflower seeds. No problem, I thought as I dutifully picked up 50# bag and carried it from garage to front porch, transiting the entire length of our house as I accomplished this herculean task. I thought the bag wasn't as heavy when I got there as when I first picked it up or that, boy, I was getting strong in my old age. Then I looked behind me, seeds from one end of the house to the other. Barb had opened the bag and neatly stuffed it back together and as I walked, I was feeding birds throughout the house!!

Next project, fix birdhouse the horses had destroyed when venturing into yard. Horses love birdseed and especially those black sunflower seeds that are full of oil so they naturally seek those out first when intruding on our space in yard. At any rate, there I was in my workshop with birdfeeder, still full of seeds. So I dump them into this container in one fell swoop. Only problem is, wooden container has less than structurally sound bottom. Oops!! Seeds throughout shop floor. Now mice really, really like seeds and naturally gravitate to my shop anyway, so I might start raising mice and feeding them weeds when I run short of seeds. Then on to maintenance on tractor, a quick oil change and it would be ready.

Not to belabor the issue, tractor still needs oil change. It's still in the barn with big puddle of oil underneath on the concrete where I forgot to replace oil plug before adding oil and where I told Barb I would never leave so much as drop a drop of oil on her concrete barn floor. I figure if the tractor doesn't move from that position she won't notice, and if it doesn't move, I won't have to work and everybody is happy.

Next, I decided to water horse in stall. I very expertly put hose in bucket, turned water on and then saw the puppies go scooting past chasing something into the woods, so I haul ass after them. Caught them about a mile into the woods and staggered back with a hundred pounds of

Great Pyrenees (one under each arm) and decided to go inside and eat some brownies, and I did, and then on to brush my teeth, of course. I noticed we didn't have much water pressure. Oh hell!! Run out to flooded stall, shut water off and decided to do something really constructive, so pulled my martin house down to get it ready for the sparrows, starlings and every other bird in the nation 'cause martins hate my martin house. Hmmm. Wonder how these twenty-two caliber holes appeared in the house? Somebody must be hunting martins around here cause the only thing I shoot are starlings and sparrows and I'm an expert marksman. Oh well, I needed a new martin house anyway.

Well, Barb gets home and I tell her my tales of woe but she's not interested and only wants to talk about the exciting day she had at the horse seminar where one learns how to spend money training horses to eat sunflower seeds and other such antics. Oh well, she fixed a gourmet chicken dinner and with more brownies for dessert so all is well on the farm.

Oh yes, we got a big storm last night that dumped about three inches in a few minutes and I'm certain I can blame that flooded stall on the downpour. Probably a leak or something!!

Gary wrote me another letter soon afterward.

There I was, peacefully at my computer after Barb had left for work. I was all alone enjoying running the farm from the computer here when all hell breaks loose in the dog pen outside. Inside the 10'x10' pen are my two young Great Pyrenees, known for their prowess as Guard Dogs.

I quickly grabbed my pistol and made haste getting outside hoping I would finally have a chance to blow away a burglar, intruder, escaped convict or some kind of felon anyway. I looked all around, the dogs still barking to beat the band and I didn't see anything or anybody. My adrenaline was pumping, expecting something is going to attack me any second. I finally noticed Willey was barking in the immediate vicinity of the bottom of the fence and his gaze and attention were focused on a particular spot. I raised the pistol, locked and loaded, and proceeded, thinking perhaps I had a midget or pygmy intruder hiding in the leaves by the edge of the fence. Then I spotted it!!

Right there before my very eyes, fangs bared, in the attack mode, was the most fearsome, four-legged critter on the face of the earth, a full fledged terrapin!! And to top it off I got to him before he actually penetrated the fence and devoured my dogs. Willey was reluctant to leave the confines of the pen to make further investigation, leaving the details to me after his professional alert. Sugar, however, leaped at the opportunity, ran around the pen, and before I could stop her, ignoring the immediate danger, she grabbed the turtle and it disappeared into her massive jowls, and the next thing I saw she was burying it to ripen for a while before consumption and before Willey got wise. I'm sure she remembered her other most delectable turtle that she buried and left for a couple of weeks then dug up, rolled on and brought back to the porch.

The Pyrenees are proving to be worth their weight in cats 'cause that turtle sure could have caused some problems. Just think if it got in my garden and ate some of my prize aphids, grasshoppers or weevils. Then I would be over-supplied with veggies and such and have to figure out how to transport all the goodies to the neighbors, friends and relatives. So the Pyrs are saving me work, and boy I like that!!

*And y'all think I'm funny? DB

Chapter Twenty-Four

Exciting Life

As long as we're on the subject of my brother Gary, we may as well continue for a bit.

I'm a writer and sort of passive. My younger brother Gary is active. Very active. He was a fighter pilot in Vietnam and after retirement a Dive Boat Captain in the Cayman Islands. He ran the boats and produced several very good underwater movies. That's where he met his wife, Barbara. Not underwater, in the Caymans.

When Barbara took a vacation she decided to do something different, like go to the Caymans and scuba dive, something she had never done before. Well, maybe they did meet underwater. Whatever, in the normal course of things she and Gary fell in love and decided to get married.

I met Barbara once before the ceremony. I told her, "Whatever else may happen when you marry Gary, I can promise you that life with him won't be dull." She smiled and nodded. She should have listened closer.

A few months later Gary's hard work was rewarded. He got the contract to take a brand new Dive boat to Truk Island in the middle of the Pacific, about as far away from anywhere as it is possible to get. Barbara decided to go with him. They sailed away.

Two thousand miles from the nearest land, halfway to their destination, the rudder fell off Gary's new boat. They were stranded in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"What are you going to do?" Barbara asked.

Gary has the tropical attitude. "Can't do much without a rudder. May as well go fishing," he told her-and proceeded to do so. He fished for several days, hoping someone would come along and give them a tow. No boat showed up, but the sharks did. Lots and lots of sharks. They circled and circled the stranded, disabled boat, looking hungrier and hungrier and scaring Barbara half out of her wits. And suddenly she remembered what I had told her.

Barb turned to Gary, hands on her hips and complained bitterly, "Darrell told me being married to you wouldn't be dull, but this is ridiculous!"

A couple of days later they were in the middle of a typhoon. Clinging to a broken spar, held by a safety harness and expecting the disabled boat to sink at any moment, she screamed, "I should have listened to Darrell!"

Once the storm died the sharks reappeared, looking hungrier than ever. Gary eventually stirred himself into exploring their options and finally got them on their way by somehow driving the boat backwards, the only way he could steer it. The Coast Guard picked them up 500 miles later.

Barb still didn't learn her lesson. If anyone would like to know about hers and Gary's "vacation" in the high Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, just ask her. Or ask me. I like to tell that story, too.

After they moved into their country place, Gary began to grow all kinds of things besides, or rather instead of, Christmas trees like his stupid brother. He even developed a theory about the interrelationship of the animals on his and Barb's farm.

The Theory of Eggs, Chickens and Great Pyrenees According to Gary: Start off with

someone (my brother) who has moved onto a country spread in central Oklahoma. Postulate that this someone likes country eggs and Great Pyrenees dogs and chickens and critters. If you doubt he likes critters, tell me about anyone else you know who has got up early every morning for two months to catch grasshoppers for some orphaned Purple Martins, then took them to work with him in the Suburban so he could feed them during the day until they could fly and forage for themselves. And by the way, his cats, Black and Blacker, didn't care for Purple Martins in their territory. Or perhaps they did, but didn't like the fact that they were being protected by that human they tolerated because he gave them breakfast. One of the cats, an adventurous soul, tried to get into the suburban and have a Purple Martin for breakfast. He got as far as under the hood, rode 40 miles to work there, then jumped out and escaped. Sometime during the day, remembering the martins, he climbed back under the hood, still figuring that was the way into the interior, and rode home. He jumped out not quite in time and not only surprised Gary into almost running over a bevy (herd? flock?) of guinea hens but caught himself in the fan blade and got skinned so badly that he should have been called White instead of Black until his hair grew back in.

I seem to have strayed here. We were talking about proving that Gary likes critters. I think I've made a fair start, but he is absolutely the only person I know who once befriended a buzzard with a broken wing and fed and petted it until it got well. He named it Barney. Barney the Buzzard. There. Proof immutable. Now on with the story.

The first thing I noticed after going up to see him a year or two after he and Barbara bought the place was that it seemed to be overrun with chickens. When I asked him why so many, he said, "We like these country eggs."

Well, heck, we like country eggs, too, but it seemed to me that Gary was on the road to becoming the major farm egg producer in central Oklahoma.

As we wandered around, Gary pointed out nests in various places as well as half-grown hens and full-grown hens with baby chicks scurrying around near them.

"How many eggs a day do you and Barbara eat?" I asked, wondering what their cholesterol level might be.

"A couple apiece on weekends," he said.

Duh.

I had to ask, "What do you do with the rest of them?"

"What rest of them?"

Something wasn't computing.

"I see a bunch of chickens around here. Enough, in fact, that if the grown hens are laying you can feed eggs to half of Oklahoma."

It doesn't work that way," Gary said.

"What happens? Do the coyotes get them?"

"They used to until Lucky Dog came along. Now he protects them."

"Lucky?"

"That's Lucky," Gary said, pointing to a mutt of indeterminate breed.

"Why Lucky?"

"He's lucky I'm soft hearted and kept him when someone dropped him off here."

"You said sometimes. Don't the coyotes eat the chickens otherwise?"

"No, that's Lucky's job."

"Wait, wait," I said, all confused. "You mean you raise all these chickens just so your dog can eat them?"

“He only eats them when he’s hungry. The rest of the time he protects them from coyotes and wildcats and such.”

“Why do you let him eat chickens?” I had to ask.

“Simple. We used to grow just a few chickens at a time. The coyotes got them, the possums got them, the coons got them, the wildcats got them and we wound up with no fried chicken and no eggs. Once Lucky showed up, he stopped all that. Now we just grow lots of chickens, let him have one or two whenever he wants them, and he protects the rest. They are his food source, after all. We don’t buy dog food anymore. Or we didn’t until Babe and Bubba and White and Whiter and all their puppies came along.”

It made a weird sort of sense but I wondered what he meant about Babe and Bubba and White and Whiter. About that time a female Great Pyrenees dog came from behind the barn, trailed by a dozen or so little Great Pyrenees puppies. The puppies were already bigger than Lucky. Now I got it. Those were his names for the dogs.

“Wow!” I said. “I didn’t know you had gotten another Great Pyrenees after you told me about your last one getting run over and one running away and one getting stolen and one...”

“Oh, yeah, but I changed my mind.”

“How come?” I had to ask.

Gary explained, “Well, I just love these big old friendly dogs, but out here in the country they have to run free and I kept losing them.”

Gary waited expectantly. About that time another three or four half-grown Great Pyrenees appeared. One of them made a move toward a chicken. Medium-sized Lucky was on him like a Junebug on a duck, protecting his food.

“See?” Gary said. “Lucky protects the chickens except when he’s hungry.”

“Okay, I can see that. But what’s with all the Great Pyrenees?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he explained as another of the big dogs came around a corner of the house and proceeded to give me a thorough washing with his foot long tongue. “Raising enough chickens to keep us in chickens and eggs gave me the idea. I’m just letting the dogs multiply at will and so far it’s worked out. I always have enough of them around to protect the house and us and to pet and have fun with and usually I don’t even miss one when he or she strays.”

It made another weird sort of sense. Raise enough doggies and you always have a few around. I sat down and let my lap fill with white shaggy puppies not much smaller than Shetland ponies. In fact, when we left the next day, Gary gathered up an armful of pups and stuffed most of them into our car except for one or two that spilled out and didn’t get to come with us.

I had a hell of a time finding homes for those pups. Biscuit, our dachshund, has established a one-dog household and we don’t have anything to say about it.

A few days later Gary and I were talking on the phone and I was gritching about not having any real farm eggs to eat since we got out of the chicken and egg business.

A week later, I got a dozen brown, golden yolk farm eggs in the mail. Only three of them were broken, not bad for sending eggs by the Postal Service

I suspect Gary has more eggs than he let on. And more doggies. If I get a big package in the mail that barks, I’m forwarding it to one of my neighbors.

And while I’m on the subject, I have a web site, too, <http://www.darrellbain.com> where you can find a listing of all my books and stuff about the farm.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sonic Doggie

Speaking of barking, after Biscuit came to live with us he learned pretty quickly how to bark for what he wants when sitting up and begging or bumping us with his nose doesn't get results. The most barking we have ever heard out of him came one day when we took him for a ride.

Biscuit has always been a polite, well-mannered doggie from the time he was just a sleek little puppy with floppy, dumbo ears and a waggledy tail. He is so polite that he even waits on us to sit down at the dining room table before he will touch his own food. He is still polite, but his manners leave a little something to be desired under some circumstances now-in fact, ever since his first trip to the local Sonic drive-in.

When Biscuit made that trip he was already accustomed to riding with us, in my lap if I were in the truck, between us if Betty and I were in the car. By this time he had already not only learned that the word "go" meant a ride, he had even learned it meant the same thing when we spelled it, gee-oh, when we wanted to leave him at home. That's when we decided we had a really smart doggie, one learning to spell. Anyway, that evening Betty didn't feel like cooking.

"Why don't we g-o to Sonic?" She spelled out, not wanting to take Biscuit when we were going after food. She had learned this after a trip to the grocery store one day when Biscuit helped himself to a big rump roast among the groceries in the back seat.

Biscuit immediately began turning in circles, jumping up and down and wagging his little tail at about the same speed as a helicopter rotor, stopping only when he stepped on one of his floppy ears and fell on his face.

"I think he knows we're g-o ing," I said, which immediately got Biscuit back on his feet and turning circles again, this time in the opposite direction, perhaps thinking that the ear on that side might be shorter. It wasn't and he fell on his face again, but never mind.

"Oh, what the heck, let's let him go," Betty said. "You can watch him."

I agreed, and away we went, Betty driving and Biscuit happily ensconced between us with his front legs on the seat divider so he could get high enough to see. As we pulled into the Sonic Drive-in, his snuffly little nose began twitching at all the good smells. As soon as Betty rolled the window down, he began twitching all over.

Betty began ordering, speaking into the menu thingy.

"Two hamburgers with tomatoes, lettuce and mayo, two vanilla shakes and-"

Biscuit entered the conversation. "Woof!"

The menu thingy said "Two vanilla shakes and I didn't get that last part. It sounded like Woof. I don't think we carry Woofs."

Biscuit was annoyed at not being understood. "Woof! Woof!" he went, louder this time.

Betty tried to override him. "The last part was two fries."

"Woof! Woof!" Biscuit barked over her voice.

"Was that fries or woofs? I told you we don't have woofs."

I muzzled our dog long enough for Betty to complete the order, then let him loose. He immediately jumped over into Betty's lap and stretched the upper part of his body out the window. When you're speaking of dachshunds, that's a long stretch. Before we could stop him, his nose was touching the menu, right where the speaker was. All those good smells of cooking meat and potatoes and hot dogs and other good stuff were getting to him.

“Growrff!” he yelled. We knew what that meant: Hurry up with the chow! I’m hungry!

The person at the other end of the speaker evidently knew what it meant, too. “Please be patient. We’re hurrying!”

“Woof!” Biscuit said before Betty could drag him back inside. Remember, she was dragging a dachshund so it took a while. The middle part of dachshunds goes on forever, particularly when you’re hunting for the front end to shut it up.

“I’m sorry, but I told you we don’t have Woofs. Try McDonald’s.”

Biscuit hopped from lap to lap, making a nuisance of himself while we waited for our food. We didn’t know what a nuisance really was until it arrived.

The waitress ran up with our food. Betty rolled down the window. Biscuit levitated from my lap to Betty’s and stuck the first three feet of his body out the window, which put his snuffly nose right in the middle of our to-go tray and startled the young lady almost out of her wits.

“Eek!” She said, juggling our food and trying to fend off a ravenous dog.

Betty grabbed his back legs and I grabbed his tail and hand over hand we reeled him in, protesting vigorously. “Werf! Woof! Growf! Gimme some food! You’re starving me to death!”

We were astounded, never having seen him act this way. Finally I had all wiggling, slippery, sleek seventeen feet of him in my lap while Betty paid for the food, then cautiously flipped back the seat dividers and set it down between us.

I thought Biscuit would have gone for the hamburgers first, dogs being meat eaters and all that, but no, our peculiar dog wanted french fries. As soon as I unloaded the little bags he took one sniff and began barking like crazy. “Woof! Woof!!!”

I put a fry under his nose and almost lost a finger as he inhaled it. I picked up another one and on the way to putting it in my mouth it got ambushed. Biscuit licked his chops and barked for more. I held him with one hand and ate a fry myself, just to see what they were made of that had him so excited.

That was a mistake. There is no way to hold down fourteen feet of sleek, slitherly dachshund with one hand. While I was eating my fry, Biscuit saw that Betty was busy driving and took the opportunity to snatch a fry from her hand that was feeling around in the bag. Betty slapped him away and he immediately twisted his snaky body around and grabbed another of my fries just before it reached my mouth.

There was just no stopping him. He wanted french fries and by golly, we had to feed him french fries or there was no peace. If we tried to shush him or hold him still he went into paroxysms, woofing and barking and growfing and slithering around and between us, and up and over arms and legs and steering wheels and all points in between, positively insisting that he couldn’t live another second without another french fry.

By the time we got home my bag was empty. We took our drinks and burgers inside and sat down at our easy chairs to finish eating. Betty’s bag was soon empty, too or nearly so. Biscuit annoyed her so much that very few fries made it to her mouth. Finally she just gave up and went and got a saucer and put the remainder of the french fries on the floor by her chair.

“Werf?” Biscuit asked. I interpreted that to mean, “What the heck is this? You’re supposed to feed them to me.” And that contrary dog wouldn’t eat another one. He just sat there and werfed until finally Betty cursed, picked up the bowl and fed him the remaining fries one by one from her fingers. As I mentioned, Biscuit is a smart dog. He figured out immediately that french fries are supposed to be eaten from fingers and would accept no substitute. And he never has since.

Now when we go to Sonic, he goes happily along and woofs and barks as we order three

fries so that he has his own bag of them. He barks as we order and barks impatiently until we begin feeding them to him on the way home and after we get home. Three orders leaves Betty and I a few fries for ourselves. Problem solved.

Well, almost. The last time we were there I noticed a new addition to the menu. In big bold letters it states: WE DO NOT HAVE WOOFs.

There was one other time Biscuit really got excited, or rather I should say got everyone else excited when he went for a ride. One day Biscuit and I went to haul the trash to the county waste processing center, something he loves to do because of all the good smells there. On the way home I decided to stop by the our Precinct building to report a missing road sign, and of course told Biscuit to wait for me in the truck.

At this point I must mention that this trip to town occurred just a few days after the World Trade Center attack and all across America people were nervous and upset. Very nervous and upset.

Anyway, after I got inside and was leaning my elbows on the counter explaining to a clerk about the missing road sign, there suddenly came this awful wailing sound. It went on and on, not rising, not falling, just a steady, high-pitched blaring that grated on the ear. Somehow it sounded familiar, but it was out of context there, and I didn't catch on for a few moments.

In the meantime, ears begin perking up, phones began ringing, clerks and typists and computer operators began looking around nervously and within the bowels of the building I could hear chairs tipping over and the sound of running feet. Shortly the running feet were attached to people rushing by me, shouting something or other unintelligible, and dumb old me still hadn't caught on.

About that time a deputy sheriff rushed into the office with his hand on his pistol, ready to draw as soon as he spotted a terrorist. And the phones were ringing louder than ever as clerks called each other asking what the noise was and whether they should take cover and the deputy sheriff hollered, "What's that noise? Are we under attack?"

That got others to asking the same question to as they began to head for the doors. And finally I saw the light.

"I know what it is!" I said. I turned and rushed outside to my truck.

"What?" someone yelled as I left.

I turned just long enough to fling an answer behind me. "It's my stupid dog!" I never saw such a puzzled expression on anyone's face.

When I got outside, there was Biscuit, sitting up in the seat with both paws on the truck horn, holding it down and looking around with his mouth open in a big doggy grin, tongue lolling and eyes as bright and alert as if he were warning everyone for miles round to beware of dangerous cats or possums or deputy sheriffs.

They still talk about it to this day there at the precinct office. And my ears still burn as I remember the chewing out I got from the deputy sheriff as he told me in no uncertain terms to keep my dog at home if I couldn't keep him off the horn in the truck. I just stood and took it, not daring to mention that Biscuit could also work the blinkers and steering wheel.

Sometimes, though, I pass someone who works at the precinct office on one of the roads or streets around town when Biscuit is hanging his head out the window for a change instead of honking or blinking or steering, and get a smile and shake of the head in remembrance of the day Biscuit did his imitation of a terrorist alert downtown.

Chapter Twenty-Six

A Special Trip

One day I got all caught up on my farm duties and decided that I would like to do something nice for Betty since she had been working harder than I do. (Well, some folks say she always does, but they don't count my computer time. I've been writing for pay for ten years now. One of these days I expect to really get paid and surprise everyone, but mostly Betty). Anyhow, we hadn't been anywhere for a while and I thought a little excursion might cheer her up and maybe get her in the mood to help me trim trees in a few days.

Around our house, the favorite form of trip involves a visit to a bookstore, a lunch out somewhere at a nice restaurant, and a stop to buy some chocolate bridge mix on the way home. After that the rest of the day is spent in our respective easy chairs eating chocolate and reading.

Betty was certainly agreeable. Usually it's me that is in a hurry to get somewhere when we get ready to go but not this time. Betty was up and dressed and asking me when I would be ready, for a change. And asking me where we were going.

"We haven't visited that bookstore in Huntsville for a while," I said.

"I wonder if it's still open?" Betty asked.

"I'll phone and see. It really had been a while. Neither of us could remember the name of the store. I had to call information and got someone on the phone I believe to be from New York because he talked real fast and I had trouble understanding him. I did get that they didn't trade books but had a computer that would price them and buy our used books. *Same place*, I thought. I wrote down the address.

"Where will we eat?" Betty wanted to know.

"How about that place where we used to meet the county growers?" I said.

"Fine. I always liked their shrimp."

Personally, I couldn't remember what the food there was like because that was back in the days when I usually had a few drinks before the meal. I did sort of vaguely remember that their cheesecake was good which was why I suggested it, forgetting that Betty didn't care for cheesecake.

I loaded up the used books and off we went, after suggesting to Betty that she drive because my back hurt. Cheesecake isn't the only thing I forgot. I forgot how far away Huntsville is and how bad the traffic there is, what with the main prison there and a student population of 20,000 or so. Sixty miles and an hour and a half later we pulled into the bookstore right in front of the big "CLOSED" sign.

"I thought you called," Betty said.

"I did." I pulled the piece of paper out that I had written the address on. "See?"

Betty looked at it. Then she looked at me. "That's not where we are."

"Well I never was very good with directions," I said defensively.

She sighed. "Well, let's go check out this bookstore you did call. Maybe they will have some good books."

A half hour later, after winding through horrendous traffic and spending half the time trapped at red lights we found the bookstore. The sign out front read *Used Books*.

"Is this your idea of a bookstore nowadays?" Betty asked.

"The guy talked real fast. I think he must have been a Yankee." I said. That's always a good

excuse down south. If something goes wrong, blame it on the Yankees.

“Never mind. Let’s go eat,” Betty said.

“Do you remember the way?” I asked.

“Yes. Do you?”

“I don’t even know where I am.”

“A true statement,” my wife agreed. She began driving back through traffic. The car began heating up. Betty began playing with the air conditioner. It got hotter inside the car.

“I think the air conditioner isn’t working very well,” I said.

“I think it isn’t working at all,” Betty said.

By the time we got to the restaurant I could tell that Betty wasn’t having much fun. However, some good shrimp ought to cheer her up. We parked and went inside, where it wasn’t much cooler than outside. They were having air conditioning problems, too. The hostess was gone from the desk. A man in jeans and rolled up sleeves who talked as if he might have been smoking one of those funny cigarettes found us a place, complaining all the time that this wasn’t his job. He brushed crumbs from the table with his hands and sauntered away.

We sweated for a while until our waitress showed up with menus. Betty pushed hers aside. “I want the shrimp.” she said.

“No shrimp. This is steak day.”

Vague memories began stirring. Was this the place that served the sirloin so tough that I gave up and drank my dinner?

I looked at the menu. “I’ll have the chicken fried steak,” I said, figuring they couldn’t screw up chicken fried steak.

Betty handed back her menu resignedly. “I’ll have the same.”

While we were waiting for our steaks Betty went off to the ladies room and when the waitress brought us our iced tea I ordered cheesecake for both of us. Within a few minutes our chicken fried steaks arrived. They got them to our table so fast that I believe that was all they were cooking that day. Or perhaps a shipment of steaks was nearing the end of their edible lives.

We each had a few bites of our steak. The few bites took a half hour to chew and swallow. I was wrong. They could mess up chicken fried steak. Finally, in silent agreement, we each pushed our plates away with the steak mostly uneaten. It would probably have been possible to eat it but we didn’t have that much time. Betty asked for a doggie bag.

“Hey, if we won’t eat this stuff, Biscuit won’t either,” I said. “He’s no dummie.”

“It’s for the cats,” Betty told me, stuffing the alleged meat and leftover fries into the doggie bag. The waitress brought our cheesecake.

“This ought to cheer you up,” I said, biting into it.

Betty looked at me as if my brains were in the doggie bag. “You know I don’t like cheesecake.”

“It’s no good anyway,” I said, taking another huge bite.

“I can tell you don’t enjoy it.”

I left half of the cheesecake uneaten, afraid to enjoy it too much.

We paid and left.

Back outside the temperature was stretching for a record high-and surpassing it. We had forgotten about the air conditioner and left the windows up. The car was like an oven and didn’t get any better. Twenty miles down the road Betty realized she had forgotten the doggie cattie bag. “Now we don’t get anything out of that meal,” she said.

“It wasn’t very good anyway,” I reminded her.

“Don’t remind me,” she reminded me.

“We could stop for some chocolate bridge mix,” I suggested.

Betty wiped sweat from her face. “What for? It would melt before we got home.”

“How about the bookstore in Livingston?”

“How about the bookstore on Santa Claus Lane?” Coincidentally, we live on Santa Claus Lane. I took that to mean that Betty wanted to go straight home and read from our own bookshelves so I didn’t say anything else.

Once we hit the cool of the house, her spirits seemed to revive so I started talking again. “Well that was quite a trip.”

“Sure was. Why don’t you go get the eggs?”

“What for?”

“So I can put one on your face.”

I didn’t understand. I kept talking. “Did you have fun, sweetie?”

“I sure did. The whole time I was ecstatic at the thought of Barnes and Noble and Papa’s Seafood in Humble, only a short thirty miles away. No stop signs.”

I took that to mean we ought to let her suggest the direction the next time I decided to take her on an outing.

Husbands never get any credit for good intentions.

And just to add to the misery of that day, guess what happened? When I got home I saw one of the tires on the car was almost flat. I tried to get Betty to change it after I had done so good taking her on that trip and all, but she was strangely uncooperative.

There comes a watershed in every man’s life, a time when he sucks up his gut, narrows his eyes and makes those hard, philosophical, earth-shaking decisions which change the course of his life. Thus it happened to me with that blasted flat tire. I swear, on my oath, by everything that is Holy, I will never again, so long as road tire service and tow trucks exist, even think about changing another flat tire.

Just as sure as politicians lie through their teeth, that nail was thrown out onto the road with my name printed all over it. The previous year we had a malicious nail-flinger who haunted our road and we had picked up all kinds of nails, as many as fourteen in a single tire once, but never had a tire gone completely flat before we could get to the tire place. Not this time. One lousy little nail and I woke up with a flat on Betty’s car. I ignored it for a while, hoping it would go away, or thinking I might wake up and laugh over a bad dream. I would probably still be ignoring it but Betty told me that if I wanted her to go pick up her paycheck I had better do something about it.

I hadn’t had to change a tire in 15 years, so this was a new adventure for me. To begin with, I wonder whatever happened to bumper jacks and those nice four armed lug wrenches you could get some leverage with? Heck, it took me an hour to even find the combination jack/lug wrench. The apparatus had been wadded up into a gadget about four inches by eight inches by two inches and hidden in a deep well under the upholstery in the trunk. I didn’t even recognize what it was until I saw a part of it that looked kind of like the working end of a lug wrench folded up inside it.

There was nothing else in the trunk even resembling a jack and/or lug wrench so I took a chance and tried unfolding it. After failing the first few times I went and got a large screwdriver and small crowbar and a medium sized hammer and finally got the thing unwound until it was in

two pieces, one of which vaguely resembled a jack and the other I recognized as a lug wrench once I got the working end unfolded out of the handle.

By that time I had already broken three fingernails and extended my time in purgatory by about a thousand years, and hadn't even started on the tire. After crawling around on my stomach in the dirt under the car for a couple of miles I finally found out how to fit the little jack into a little slot under the car, then proceeded to make quarter turns with the other end of the lug wrench which doubled as the jack handle. It was too short to get any leverage and too low to the ground to make a full turn even if you wanted to.

Three hours later I had the car jacked up, suffering only minor damage to my back, and ignoring skinned knuckles and knees and disregarding the cannon-like popping noises as my knees slowly straightened out into their normal position. I bumped my head against the side of the car when I bent to pull off the tire because by this time I was blinded by sweat mixed with a trickle of blood from where I had cut my forehead on the end of the tailpipe and couldn't see what I was doing.

Fortunately for my health and sanity, once the tire was off, I was able to take a break in my easy chair for a few minutes before driving to the service station to have the flat fixed. I was in the chair for only a few minutes because Betty shook her broom at me and told me to get my dirty, greasy self either outside or into the bathroom before I got sweat and grease and blood on the chair covers. When I asked what chair covers were for anyhow, she told me to never mind, just scoot. I scooted, albeit slowly and once my heartbeat got back under two hundred per minute, off to the service station I went.

Five dollars poorer and thirty minutes later, back home was me with a fixed tire, leaving only the chore of putting it back on. That part was relatively easy, requiring only a few strained muscles and another moderately ruptured disk in my back. Following that, I had to try to bend my knees to unjack the car. That was the easy part. Unjacking required exactly the same amount of energy as jacking, just done in reverse, and this time I cut my forehead on the oil plug and the blood ran down into my eyes, obscuring my vision and causing me to trip and fall on my face and mix some dirt with the blood and sweat.

A little later, during which time I would have drunk all the liquor in the house if I had had any, I tried to put the jack/lug wrench/handle back into its wadded up shape. Naturally it wouldn't go, since part of it had apparently resided in the fourth dimension while in storage. It still lies unwadded in the trunk. The next time the car is due for servicing I figured I could let the mechanics worry about putting it back where it belongs. In the meantime, I've made sure I have the number of a 24 hour tire repair place which does house calls in my wallet, in the car, in the truck, in the computer, pasted to the door and posted on the internet.

Never again, I swear. I will die first. I will be beaten and burned and thrown to the alligators first. My oath. I swear. Never again will I change a flat tire.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Great Closet Expedition

Biscuit has gotten most of the attention here when it comes to the Junior Citizens on our farm. However, we've always had lots of cats roaming around. They are supposed to help keep the gopher population under control but for some reason they seem to prefer cat food instead of gopher meat. Anyway, we do have cats, and usually they start out in the house as kittens. There was this one kitten that really caused a commotion.

I convinced Betty to let me quit my job fifteen years ago while she kept working by telling her how much money I was going to make writing and/or growing Christmas trees. That's still what I'm telling her. I'm going to make bunches of money "pretty soon." Warning to husbands: don't try this unless you are very good at pretending to farm and/or writing bestsellers. Or have an extremely supportive wife like Betty.

Actually, I think Betty may have kept her job while I piddled around with trees and writing for two reasons. One, she advanced rapidly in the Home Health field and was soon making bunches of money, and two, her job title entitled (required?) her to travel a lot. And Betty has never met a new city she didn't like. Or need new clothes for. She teased the CEO into more trips than I make going up to the road in the morning to check on whether our lazy paper carrier has decided whether to start his day yet.

Betty seemed to be gone on two and three day trips all the time. I missed her but loved the money she was making. And I missed her for one more thing: raising two new kittens in the house is a two person job. Believe me. Maybe even a three person job.

Got the picture so far? Okay, let's back up a bit. When we built this house way back when, Betty helped design it. Of the 2,000 square feet, she allotted 1,499 square feet for her closet, and over the years, especially as she rose in the corporate ranks, she insisted her job required five thousand dollars worth of new clothes per week. Well, since I was never a big corporate executive, I had very few grounds for argument, so the clothes accumulated.

One day Betty said, "I need new closet space."

"Three quarters of the house is already closet. Why do you need more space?" I was foolish enough to ask.

"To put my new clothes in."

Then I said something really dumb. "I've got an idea! Why don't you just get rid of some of the clothes you bought that I never see you wear and we can save all the money a new closet will cost?"

You would have thought I was suggesting that we sacrifice one of the children. Or one of the kittens, maybe.

"Oh, no! Everything in my closet is something I might wear again."

"But you've gained-"

The glare I got for that statement shut me up and scared both kittens into the curtains. By the time we got them down we were not only talking new closet space but new curtains as well. I retreated with as much grace as I could muster and called the contractor. Carpenters came and went, carrying enormous amounts of building material into Betty's closet. Hammering and sawing sounds ensued. They left and Betty had a smile on her face for the next month. I did

notice that when she was in her closet her voice sounded kind of muffled and distant at times, but dismissed the idea that she was farther away than she used to be. I just didn't know, not being inclined to poke around in women's closets.

Betty got promoted again. "Honey," she said, "I need more closet space."

"But--"

"Get it taken care of real quick. I've got to get some new clothes to go with my new title."

"You mean women's clothes have to match their job title now?"

"Of course, dummy. Hurry up and call. I'm leaving on another trip next week and I want it finished by then."

"But--"

Betty frowned and the kittens clawed their way to the top of a lamp, sending it crashing to the floor and the next thing I knew I was calling the contractor and Betty was out shopping for new lamps along with new clothes. When she came home with a truckload of new clothes and another truckload of lamps I never said a word. Clothes have to match. Lamps have to match. Break one, buy all new.

Carpenters came and went. Hammering and sawing sounds ensued. Great loads of building materials went into her closet but none ever came out. Occasionally I wondered how many square feet of closet we had now but it was only idle speculation. Besides, how could you measure it beneath all the clothes and shoes anyway?

Betty got another promotion. Repeat story, and now we're all set. Almost. Betty went on another trip, leaving me with the kittens. The second day after she was gone one of them turned up missing. I searched the house then searched again, practically turning it upside down. Finally I decided it had gotten outside somehow, probably streaking between my feet while I wasn't looking. I searched outside. No kitten. I finally gave it up for lost, wondering how I was going to explain it to Betty. She loved those kittens and it wasn't just because every time one nicked a dress or pantsuit with a tiny claw she ran off to the nearest store to replace it (the dress, not the kitten), never mind that even with my bifocals I could never see any damage.

That night I was getting ready for bed. It was coming a storm. I was in the bathroom when, over the rumble of thunder and drumming of rain on the roof I thought I heard a very faint *mew, mew*. I turned off the water and cocked my good ear. *Mew, mew*, the sound came again. I went into the bedroom. The other kitten had woken from its nap and was busily shredding my pillow. I went back into the bathroom. *Mew, mew, mew*. It was definitely a kitten and the sounds were definitely coming from somewhere in the bathroom-or nearby.

I opened the door to Betty's closet. *Mew, mew!* The sounds were louder. Aha! Mystery of the missing kitten solved.

"Here, kittie, kittie, kittie," I called, and waited for the little bundle of fur to come running. Poor thing, it must have wandered into the closet while Betty was getting ready for her trip and gotten closed in. No kitty. Only mews, still sounding far off.

I peered into the distance, trying to see past racks of dresses, shelves of hats, rows of dresses, tons of tops and shoes which seemed to be climbing the wall until I noticed they were in some sort of holders. Some of them.

"Here, Kitty!" I called again, flicking the light switch off and on, trying to get more light. The bulb went out. I stared into the dark bowels of the closet, then went to get a new bulb-and a flashlight. The light bulb was quite a ways into the closet and the darkness looked sort of threatening to me.

I returned with the flashlight and braved the depths of the closet. Far in the distance I could

see the burnt out bulb. Waving my flashlight I walked forward a hundred yards or so and at that moment a great crash of thunder ensued and all the lights in the house went out. I knew they went out because way back behind me the faint glow of the bathroom lights shining into the cavernous closet blinked out. And right then, I knew I should have changed the batteries in the flashlight before setting out on an expedition into unexplored territory. At least unexplored by me. The flashlight was putting out a beam so weak that it drooped. It wouldn't even shine far enough to see my feet. Fortunately, there were other flashlights in the house. I decided to go back and get one, ignoring the little *mews* which now seemed to be coming from all around me.

As quickly as I started back to the bathroom, I tripped over something, a clothes basket I think, and fell on my face. Fortunately I held on to the flashlight, such as it was, and continued back toward the bathroom. It sure seemed like a long way. And I didn't remember that sudden right turn, nor the four steps leading down, nor a huge stack of what felt like clothes trunks blocking my way. Evidently, I had gotten turned around when I fell down. Now what?

Go back the way you came, silly, I told myself, trying to put down the panic as my flashlight steadily dimmed. I had visions of being lost in the closet and starving to death or dying of thirst. I went back the way I came, I thought.

It led nowhere I was familiar with. Eventually, the flashlight dimmed to nothing brighter than a teensy coal, then it went out completely. *Don't panic*, I told myself. After all, the house is only so big and even if it does have enough closet space to hide the inventory of a moderately sized department store, I can't really be lost.

I could really be lost. I staggered around, tripped and fell down, bumped into shelves, steel wooden and otherwise, wandered into someplace where a rain of shoes began falling on my head and shoulders from unknown heights, and began imagining that wild animals might have found their way into the closet along with the lost kitten. My heart began beating faster as I thought I could hear growls mixing in with the mews.

Just as I was on the edge of real panic, the lights came back on, except the one where the bulb was still burnt out, of course. However, there was one shining almost overhead. Way overhead. How did the closet get this high? And long? Never mind, I just wanted to get the out of here!

I walked and walked, around corners, past stairs-stairs? where did stairs in Betty's closet come from?-around corners, and into small rooms with clothes hanging everywhere, shoeboxes stacked to the ceiling and skirts and tops and sweatshirts and tee shirts folded and hanging and blocking paths, and all the time I kept hearing *mew mew*. Boy, I really felt sorry for that poor kitten, being lost in the closet. Heck, I felt sorry for *me* being lost in the closet! I wondered if I would ever find my way out.

While I was peering into an alcove which appeared to contain the complete inventory of a reputable department store, I felt something brush my leg, then began climbing up my jeans. I looked down. A bewildered kitten looked up. *Mew* it said. *Get me out of this stupid closet!*

Well, I was willing. However...

Hours later, kitten clinging to my shoulder in a death grip, we accidentally came to a door I thought I recognized. If I weren't mistaken, it was the inside of the door to the closet in the other guest bedroom, which was way on the other side of the house from the master bedroom where I had begun my quest for the lost kitten. Tentatively, I pushed it open and sure enough, there I was in the guest bedroom. Those contractors had extended the closet all the way through the house to the closet there, allowing Betty to surreptitiously take over all that closet space, too.

I shuddered to think of ever having to retrace my path back through that closet. I think I

know now why Betty is always asking me for more twine for her tomato plants. I bet she keeps most of it all rolled up at the entrance to her closet and trails it back behind her so she can find her way out. That's sure what I will do if I ever go in it again.

I carried the kitten into the kitchen where he jumped down, and ignoring growls from Biscuit the dog, proceeded to drink his water bowl dry then eat all the dog food. Exploring closets takes lots of energy. Myself, I took some liquid refreshment, too. I offered some to kitten but he declined the Jack Daniels and asked for some cat food. I fed him and he ate it all then climbed up some curtains to get a well-deserved nap. I shrugged and added more new curtains to the shopping list.

When Betty came home she asked if anything had happened while she was gone. I started to tell the truth, then decided to keep it simple.

"Just a lost kitten," I said. "No problem."

"Fine," Betty said, picking up the phone.

"Who are you calling?" I asked.

"The contractors. I just got another promotion."

We recently acquired another kitten, courtesy of the surplus up in Oklahoma when we went up for a visit to Gary and Barb. When we got ready to go, this little six-week-old kitten came bounding up to me, jumped up on my leg, levitated to my chest and stuck there as if his fur was made of velcro.

"Looks like you have a kitten," Gary said, relief showing on his face at getting rid of one more of the herd of kittens running around the place despite all the dogs could do to keep the population under control.

What could I say? The last time he visited us, I sent him home with two kittens.

An hour later while we were heading back to Texas, and after finally prying the new kitten off my chest, he had a name. Velcro.

Since Velcro the Kitten came to live with us three months ago he has:

Chewed on Biscuit's tail several hours a day.

Dipped his little paw into the dry dogfood and flipped it all over the kitchen at least once a day.

Knocked over every flower vase in the house at least once a week.

Attacked our feet so many times we are afraid to walk around without shoes on.

Got locked up in the closet by accident at least a dozen times.

Gotten into the Christmas Prize Box through the entry slot several times and had to be rescued.

Chewed on Biscuit's ears until they look ratty.

Sharpened his claws on every piece of furniture in the house except the sharpening post we bought for him.

Sneaked a lick of ice cream from our bowls at least twice a week.

Attacked Biscuit from hiding a dozen or two times a day, startling him silly.

Attacked us from hiding several times a day, startling us silly.

However, he has never failed to use the potty box, has a cute four-colored nose, is beginning to learn (we think) to live in a house instead of a barn where he spent his first six weeks, and has the loudest and most soothing purr you ever heard from a cat. I guess we'll keep him, as long as Betty is the one to rescue him from her closet.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Meeces

Thinking of how bad Velcro is reminds me of another cat a long, long time ago who was really, really good. He was such a good cat that one day I brought a special present home from the lab for him.

Back when I was going through the advanced lab school in the army we had to learn how to use mice in experiments. Part of this involved injecting substances into their brains without killing them. Considering our inexperience you can imagine that the white mice weren't good for much afterwards even though they were still alive-well, some of them were still alive. Our earnest efforts killed about half of them and made the other half do weird things like run in circles, walk on hind legs, etc. After finishing with the mice we were supposed to gently send them on their way to micey heaven with an overdose of ether. While everyone else was doing this I began thinking of my old tomcat, who was named Becket and how stupid he would think I was for wasting perfectly good mice (in his opinion). So, while the others ethered their meeces I dropped several handfuls of mine into a paper bag and walked off with them at the end of the day, intending to let them loose in the yard and see what Becket made of goofy mice with white fur.

I got home that afternoon and greeted my wife (this is my first wife I'm referring to) and three year old son in the usual fashion. I decided that not telling my wife I had brought home a bagful of live mice would probably be better than telling her I had, so I left the bag on my desk along with my books and went to change out of fatigues. I didn't know my son had already let the cat in. I found out pretty quick that he had. I didn't even have to see the cat. Laughter from my son, screams from my wife and a hearty meowrrr!! from old Becket told me plainer than words that my surprise had been discovered before I had prepared the household.

I ran back into the living room in my shorts and socks. My son was giggling at the antics of Becket who was lying on his back with the paper bag in the air over him. He was jouncing it with all four feet to keep it in the air and it was leaking mice. As I watched a couple more mice bounced out of the bag. My son Allan grabbed one in each hand and ran to show his mother, who was not in a receptive mood. In fact, she was already standing on the couch and making every effort to climb higher when the protective mother instinct got the best of her. "Allan, drop those mice!" she screamed.

Allan dropped them-on the couch. Becket, who had been watching, abandoned the half-full paper sack and bounded to the couch. He caught one mouse and flipped it into the air but the other one did a backward flip and disappeared into the cushions. I remembered that mouse from the lab. Every third step its brain was now wired to make it leap into the air, usually backwards. The mouse Becket had flipped into the air coincidentally landed next to the paper bag which was lying on its side disgorging a steady stream of mice onto the carpet. Becket immediately jumped into the midst of them. For a few seconds there was a flurry of white mice erupting into the air like the ping pong balls in a bingo cage or popcorn from an electric popper. Becket was having a great time except for the fact that some mice were escaping while he tried to look in too many directions at once.

Some of the mice were escaping up the inside of Allan's britches legs, garnering more

screams from my wife, who acted as if the little white mice were raging carnivores. She grabbed a broom and began beating at them. The soft broom bristles only succeeded in dispersing them. It was too much for me. I collapsed into helpless laughter. Allan laughed some more too while he tried to help Becket catch mice. Neither of them were notably successful. Allan would catch one and put it on a table while he looked for another, and it would promptly jump, slither or hop off, depending on how badly its brain had been affected. Becket would bat one across the room and while running to give it a second whap be distracted by another. He especially liked the one which was affected so badly that it sat up and waved its paws at him, as if challenging him to a fight. He made short work of it. Allan grabbed it and showed it to me where I lay rolling on the floor. My wife grabbed him and ran from the room, pursued by another mouse whose brain made it rush toward fluttering movements like a skirt. They all disappeared behind a slamming door.

Just as I was getting to my feet a scream guaranteed to wake the dead burst from the other room. It made Allan start crying. The door flew open. My wife flew in, slapping at her skirt and screaming bloody murder. She had lost one of her shoes. She stepped on a mouse which wasn't very agile and that did it. She fainted dead away. Allan came over and looked at her. "Is she sleeping, Daddy?" he asked.

"You might say so, son," I told him. "Now how about taking Becket outside and let's gather up these mice for him."

Easier said than done. Becket was more interested in playing with them, but Allan and I caught all the visible ones, living, not living and all the ones somewhere in between. We took them outside and turned them loose and went back to succor mama while Becket continued playing with his new friends.

It was not a happy household for the next two weeks or so, especially the morning after my wife was woke up by a little white mouse chewing on her nightgown, and especially after one meece which had been hiding in the cushions slithered up under her blouse, and most especially when one of the last meeces picked the time she was setting on the potty to come out from cover and begin to play with her toes. Allan kept asking me why didn't mama like mice and why didn't I bring some more home?

Becket was the happiest. He stayed outside for three days in a row chasing down all the white mice he could find and for the next month or two met me after work every day, hoping I was bringing him another bagful of them to play with. I might have brought some more except I was scared of a divorce, although in retrospect I may as well have brought them, because I got divorced anyway. And I don't think the mice had a thing to do with it, I don't care what her lawyer said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It Can't Be That Hard, Can It?

This is a story by my youngest son, Randy Bain. He was at a half-way house when he wrote it, getting ready to re-enter the free world after a ten year absence. Note to you young people from Randy: he says to stay away from drugs.

Big Red and It Can't Be Too Hard, Can it?

By Randy Bain

The first thing this morning, my boss Ken gave me something to do at the auto towing yard where I went to work recently and temporarily. He pointed to a big battery charger and said, "Drag the battery charger around back, run an extension cord out to it, and plug it right square into the tractor's heart. Leave it on all day and then I'll teach you to drive it tomorrow. There's work to be done."

All right, I thought. Work is just what I've been wanting on this job to speed the days up until I find a real job. Not to mention how surprised he'll be to find out I can drive a tractor already. After all, I drove my Dad's tractor for him when I was twelve years old and his back was hurting. Shucks, that's only been 15 or 20 years ago. Piece of cake.

I was real excited about dragging the battery charger around back and meeting Tractor and giving him a boost to prepare him for the big work day Ken said we had in store. I stayed excited right up until I rounded the corner and realized there wasn't a tractor in sight, or at least nothing resembling the one I had driven for Dad. There I was with the extension cord wrapped around my arms, legs and neck like a boa constrictor and pushing a heavy metal box with only two wheels, which made it impossible to balance, and at the same time keep the extension cord from coming alive and strangling me or straining my back (which was still feeling the wrath of my new friend, Sink, which I had met at my other job where I got introduced to lots of dirty dishes).

The balancing trick was finally managed by duckwalking the whole way, but when I got to where I thought I should be, the only thing I saw with its heart exposed that didn't look like an old automobile was a giant red monster. It somewhat resembled a tractor, but I thought it must be a lot older and wiser than a regular tractor like I was looking for. Boy, was I wrong!

I think Big Red must actually be younger than most tractors; in fact I believe it is probably still a teenager because it has a smart mouth. It saw me coming towards it and spouted off, "What the heck are you looking at?"

"Uh...I'm looking for Tractor," I said. "I'm going to work his butt off tomorrow after I juice his lazy bum up today."

"Ha Ha," Big Red laughed. "You city boys sure are dumb. I'm the one who is supposed to get some juice so I can work *your* lazy bum off tomorrow. And for your information, I'm not called Tractor. I'm an all-purpose, all-terrain land maintenance machine. But you can call me Big Red."

I gulped. Big Red sure didn't look like any tractor I had ever driven. It had a big scoopy thing on front, about nine levers coming out of its chest, and six or seven pedals going to his feet. It also had a roof and something attached to its tail that looked like nothing so much as two big fangs and a steel scraper. I couldn't imagine what that might be, other than an ornament of some

sort, but I wasn't about to be shown up. I mean, how hard could it be?

"I don't care what you call yourself, there's work to be done," I said loudly, quoting my boss and hoping I was as intimidating as him.

"It's not March yet," Big Red said. "I don't work in the cold. That's why my battery is dead. No Spring time, no work."

"That's what you think," I answered. "The weather is going to be pretty all week and I've got big heavy body parts to move, rocks to smooth and dirt to haul, all of which you will help me with tremendously-as soon as I learn to use you."

I maybe shouldn't have come on so strong because Big Red started howling like a hyena. "You don't actually think you can master my operational expertise without years of practice, do you?"

"Piece of cake," I said. "I've been driving tractors since I was twelve. How hard could that scoopy thing of yours be to use?" Maybe I shouldn't have called it a scoopy thing.

"That's not a scoopy thing, city boy, it's called a bucket and it takes practice to use. I'm a dangerous piece of machinery but I can sympathize a bit. You look like you come from some pretty smart genes, and I've seen that you work pretty hard, unlike most of the help around here. Heck I had one guy trying to operate me and he was so dumb he shoveled the same load of dirt into the bucket seven times in a row and I just kept dumping it back on the ground. It was hilarious, but I promise to only do it to you twice. And if you use me with extreme caution all the time I'll try not to hurt you. Good luck tomorrow, city boy, and now if you don't mind, I'm going to sleep while you charge my battery, and you better charge yours while you're at it, for the work day is coming, even if it isn't Spring. The boss has spoken."

The above came in a letter from Randy. He added, "I must be a natural Dad! Big Red was actually nice to me and wished me luck. I sort of think he's pulling my leg but I'll be ready for his tricks. I mean, how hard could it be?" And then I had to bite my nails for the next ten days until I heard from Randy again.

A couple of days passed without Ken having time to give me the driving lessons on Big Red. When he finally had a minute, that's all he had was a minute. "This is the gas, this is the brake, this moves the bucket, this moves the rear attachment, now take it out there in the back of the yard where all that gravel and rock is and spread it out evenly. Just set your rear blade at a level close to the ground and drag it around. How hard can that be?" He turned and left, having condensed a twelve hour course of instruction into 30 seconds, generously speaking.

"No sweat," I said to his retreating back. "See ya in a bit."

Of course I let him get out of sight before cranking Big Red in case I had forgotten something. I didn't want him to see me jerking Big Red around or running into things. Once he was gone I cranked Big Red with authority.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing, city boy?" Big Red asked in a deep voice.

"Just going to level out the turnaround spot in back where all the rocks are," I replied.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, city boy?" Big Red asked.

I was certain I could figure everything out so I goofed and told Big Red, "How hard could it be? I've already had a twelve hour course of instruction."

Big Red held his laughter this time, cynically knowing what was in my immediate future. In the meantime, I was already muttering to myself, "Let's see, Ken said they usually leave it in third, so all I have to do is push the clutch, put it in forward, then let off the clutch..."

Big Red whined, jerked, inched forward and tipped forward then whined louder, still jerking and making weird noises. Remember, I had promised to operate him safely so I had my other foot on the brake in case something went wrong. Suddenly I realized (probably from Big Red laughing so loud) that the bucket was all the way down (the proper way to leave it when you're parked, I learned later) and was digging straight into the earth in front of me.

"You could have told me about the bucket, you dumb tractor," I said.

"Sticks and stones," Big Red replied, "And besides, how will you ever learn if I tell you everything along the way? Boy, that sure was funny the way your face turned red and your heart started pounding like you were rolling off a cliff or something. Ha, ha. I've never seen anyone so scared sitting at a dead stop!"

"Shut up, Red. I wasn't scared the least little bit," I said, surreptitiously wiping sweat from my forehead. "I was just marking our parking spot with the bucket. See the big long trench there? That's it."

"Creative thinking, if nothing else. Now that you've marked the parking spot do you suppose we can get on out back and level some rocks before it starts raining?"

I fumbled around with the bucket control trying to raise it and managed to make a really good parking spot, much deeper and wider by "rolling" the bucket instead of raising it, but eventually managed to get going forward. The pace seemed a little slow for me so I shifted into "5" and hit the gas.

"Now we're rolling," I told Big Red. "See, I can drive you just fine." I said that even though we were sort of bucking and bumping.

Big Red spoke up. "Push that lever right to the left of your left leg."

"Okay," I agreed. Right left lever to left of right leg or something like that. I pushed.

"Whoa!! You got it backwards you dummy city boy. Right lever left."

"Right," I said, trying to hang on.

"No, no! Left!"

"Left, right?"

"No, left, I said."

"Right. No stop! You've got me confused now!"

I hit the brakes but forgot the gas. The front end bucket dug in and stopped us though, even if it did make another parking spot.

I wiped some more sweat off. "What did you say that lever was supposed to do?"

"It would make the ride easier and save on gas if you would move it the right way, dummy," Big Red said with a sneer.

I wondered if he had intentionally tried to make a fool of me by telling me the wrong way to shift that lever but I was as mixed up as he was now. I looked down and saw a diagram of how the gears were to be shifted.

"Nice try, Big Red, but I'm on to you now," I told him over his spitting and sputtering while he waited on me to do something. "I see a picture of a turtle and a rabbit on that lever and I learned from my old man's wife Betty that 'Rabbit' ain't for city boys or women tilling gardens."

Big Red laughed out loud. "You aren't by chance related to that woman in East Texas who killed my cousin, Tilly, are you? She put him in 'Rabbit' and ran him slap into a tree for some reason. He was a good ol boy, too before she whacked him."

No telling what Big red might do if I admitted she was my stepmother. "No," I said, "My Dad lives in, uh...Utah or uh..Kansas or somewhere like that."

I don't know whether Big Red believed me or not but he was pretty nice to me the rest of the day while I was driving, but I think someone should tell Ken that smoothing out golfball sized rocks on uneven ground with a straight blade on the back of your machine can't, repeat can't be done by just leaving the blade at one height all the time. I tried that for a couple of hours and all I did was make big piles of rocks all over the place. I didn't think it was a bit funny but Big Red almost laughed himself into a stupor.

After a couple of hours of making hills of rocks, I decided I would have to drive to a hill, lower the blade then raise the blade slowly while driving off slowly into a low spot while looking backwards, but not hitting any cars, and at the same time ignoring Big Red's heehaws while also not hitting the wrong lever or moving the right lever the wrong way, causing the blade to go back down and digging another hole and/or making another pile of rocks.

Nothing to it. Two days later I had only a few of the piles of rocks I had made myself smoothed back out, only about a millionth of the area which needed to be done.

About that time Ken walked up. "What have you been doing for two days?" he wanted to know. I could sort of understand since things looked much as he had left them other than a bunch of tractor tracks zigzagging all over the place and a bunch of new little piles of rocks.

"Uh...uh..." The fast-thinking Bain genes kicked in just in time. "Damn engineers, man! They made this blade backwards and it will only build those little hills with the rocks, but I figured since it built them so good I would just put one every three or four feet to slow people down when they're turning around back here; that way, they won't make ruts in the rocks that need smoothing out. Once they knock all the hills down I'll build them back up again."

I figured out later that saying that statement real fast made it sound almost like it made sense, because I waited for Ken to start shouting at me but all he did was scratch his head and say, "Damn, why didn't I think of that? You're pretty swift for a city boy. Come on down now. We've got a tow and I'm going to show you how to pull a car out of the mud."

"Be right there," I said. "I've just got a couple more hills to build."

When he walked off I scooped up the rocks that took me two days to smooth out and piled them back up in hills in about three seconds.

Big Red stopped breathing later that night. Apparently he had laughed himself to death, I thought, but it turned out to be a ground cable that had burned through and it was grounded right in the middle of his innards, causing me to almost completely disassemble him over a three day stretch before I learned that the cable could be grounded just about anywhere on him. But that's another story. You and Big Red can laugh at me some more another time.

Not bad for someone who dropped out of school in the tenth grade, huh? On the other hand, I dropped out in the ninth so I ought to be an even better writer.

Chapter Thirty

Floors R Us

Three seconds after Betty said, “I do,” she said, “I hate to vacuum,” so there’s no sense claiming I didn’t have fair notice. However, my solution and her solution to the “I hate to vacuum” refrain began to deviate about four seconds after the honeymoon. Betty hauled out the vacuum cleaner.

“I thought you hated to vacuum,” I said.

“I do.”

Well,” I asked reasonably, “if you hate to vacuum so much, what are you doing holding up that vacuum cleaner?”

“I thought maybe if I stood here and held it long enough, the dirt would magically disappear. Or maybe a big husky helper would grab hold of it.”

“What dirt? I don’t see any dirt. I don’t see any big husky helper, either. As a matter of fact, if I saw a big husky in here that I hadn’t been introduced to I would run for my shootin’ iron.”

Betty misunderstood. “Iron? You do ironing?”

“Ironing? I don’t even do vacuuming.”

“Then how did you get dirt out of your carpet before we got married?”

“I never saw any dirt. That’s why I like shag carpets. They absorb dirt and stuff like that.”

“Like magic, I bet.”

“No, I think it’s shag carpet technology that makes dirt disappear.”

“It’s there, trust me.”

“Okay, I trust you. I love you, too. Anything else on your mind?”

“Not at the moment. I can see I need to use a different approach.”

“Whatever works,” I agreed.

For the next 22 years the vacuuming somehow got done. At first, I was doing heavy work outside on the farm most of my time off so I didn’t hear anything about vacuuming. I assume either Betty did it or the shag carpets were doing their technological magic trick. Then when I quit work to farm full time, Betty suddenly began making so much money as an executive that we simply hired a housekeeper to come in once a week and do it, along with the washing, dusting and cleaning.

That worked great for a while. It even allowed me to do my work outside, do the cooking during the week and still have enough time to start a writing career, which is a story in itself and won’t be mentioned here again.

And then Betty retired, and it quickly became apparent who had been keeping the farm afloat. We could no longer afford a housekeeper. Heck, we could hardly afford a house on what I was making on the farm. But fortunately-I mean unfortunately-about that time I developed a bad back which vacuuming, or even the mention of vacuuming seemed to aggravate. I could go out and plant a thousand trees or shear 500 and not feel a quiver, but try putting me behind a vacuum cleaner or over a kitchen sink and my vertebrae recognized immediately a job they weren’t designed for.

And bless Betty’s little lovable heart, when I saw her doing most of the housework, helping

me on the farm and doing all the gardening, I would offer to help with the vacuuming and she would tell me, "No, you might hurt your back." Now is that love, or not?

But then...Betty's back developed an aversion to vacuuming. The vacuum cleaner made fewer and fewer appearances and for some reason or other the shag carpet technology magic began to fail at the same time. I began to notice dirt on the carpet, not to mention dental floss, bits of dried clay from my boots, cookie crumbs by my chair and so on. It was then that Betty began to mention wooden flooring.

Well, wooden flooring has two virtues: one, it prevents vacuuming, and two, it supports lots of doctors from all the hips which get fractured on it. The second virtue is the one I kept repeating to Betty every time she mentioned wooden flooring. Really, what I was concerned with was the cost. Besides, we had just had the carpet replaced only 15 or 20 years ago when I got drunk and set the house on fire and I didn't think we had gotten our money's worth out of it yet. I was cooking when I got drunk and set the house on fire by forgetting some bacon I was frying to put in the peas I was cooking for Betty, who was busy making money, so at least I had an excuse.

One day the vacuum cleaner broke.

"Oh boy, I don't have to vacuum," Betty said.

"I can fix it," I said.

"You? You can't even change a light bulb without getting into trouble."

"Well, maybe not but I bet I can fix a vacuum cleaner."

"Why don't we just get wooden flooring?"

"I'll fix it," I said, and by golly I did, by simply replacing the rubber band that makes it whomp the floor and suck up dirt, and miraculously even got it all back together again.

Betty tried it with a smirk on her face. She knew I couldn't fix anything even as simple as untied shoelaces, which is why I wore boots all the time.

She turned on the switchy thing. It began vacuuming like crazy. "It works," Betty said disgustedly. "He can't saw a board straight, yet he fixes the)^(*% ^\$#!\$and#%\$@^)% * vacuum cleaner. I'm going to talk to God about this."

Maybe Betty talked to someone, because the week before Christmas I watched her straining to get all the floors vacuumed and refusing my help, and walking sort of crooked afterwards, and something snapped. I put a card in her Christmas stocking with the words "Wooden Floors" on it. And thereupon, I learned that wooden flooring doesn't do magic like carpets do. No, I take that back. Wooden floors can do magic, too. They make all your money disappear no matter how many times you go to the bank to get more.

I have to admit that Christmas day and night and the next day and night were all very pleasant what with Betty having visions of wooden floors swimming around in her head like sugarplums. In fact, those sugarplum visions became so persistent that she insisted on turning them into reality. Shucks. There for a while I thought I might get away with just the card and a promise, but I found out pretty quick who was the dummy in the family. Actually, we already both knew who the dummy in the family is but Betty is very nice and hardly ever mentions it.

Anyway, a day or two before Betty was due to go visit her daughter, I woke up one morning in the car which was heading in a straight line toward Home Depot. I think Betty knows how to

do magic herself because I don't even remember waking up, much less getting in the car, but the next thing I knew there we were, at this gigantic warehouse some financial genius designed to separate husbands from money and women from husbands when the money runs out. The financial genius named it Home Depot. He should have named it Home Wrecker for the number of marriages it busted up but I guess he wouldn't have made any money then.

Of course Betty knew every nook and cranny of that monster building, having gone there countless times for useless stuff like timers to water the potted trees and garden, both of which make money for the farm. I never have understood why she can't just stand out in the July sun for a few hours every day and get some vitamin D while watering with the garden hose. Oh well, I admit I don't understand the universe.

As usual, I didn't even make enough money on the Christmas trees for the year to pay off my loans so I was really antsy about how much this flooring stuff would cost. I figured it couldn't be too much. I mean after all, the forests are filled with wood aren't they? Supply and demand and all that.

Betty led me over to where vast stacks of flooring were lying in wait for unwary husbands.

"I think I like this design," Betty said.

"Okay," I agreed. Then I looked at the price per square foot, estimated the square footage in our house and did some mental arithmetic. A bit later I felt my cheeks being slapped and cold water being sprinkled in my face. I looked up from where I lay flat on my back.

"What am I doing down here?" I asked.

"I don't know," Betty said. "You just suddenly fainted. Are you sick?"

Then I remembered those calculations. "Yes, but I don't think there's any medicine which will cure me." I staggered to my feet.

"I guess you like that design so well it took your breath away," Betty gushed.

"It sure, did, Sweetie," I said. "Well, I figure we can pay it off by roughly the year 2017 if we really scrimp and save. We'll go ahead and get it."

"Great!" my loving wife said. "And it only costs \$7.95 cents per square foot for installation."

Another quick mental calculation and I was on the floor and flat on my back again. After Betty and the salesman revived me and helped me to my feet I shook my head. We could pay off the flooring and installation costs by the year 2039, at which time I would only be a hundred years old. No problem. All I had to do to manage it was write three best selling novels and purchase a couple of winning lottery tickets.

"We can't afford it," I said.

Betty's face fell. I'm a sucker for falling faces, I admit it, especially if the face belongs to Betty. However, so far none of my thirteen novels had been best sellers and the cantankerous lottery tickets I bought faithfully every week insisted on not matching the winning numbers. I tried to think of another solution, one requiring only a virgin sacrifice and mortgaging our first born son.

First born son refused to be mortgaged until I reached a hundred years and I discovered that there aren't any virgins any more. Besides, Betty wouldn't let me play with one if there were any, assuming they would agree to be sacrificed anyhow.

Betty's face fell farther. I thought harder. And then suddenly I remembered, on one of the last days of selling Christmas trees, that a gentleman had really impressed me by buying one of

my books along with his tree and he had handed me a business card. I suddenly remembered that it said something about flooring, installed cheap. I checked my wallet. Sure 'nuff, there was the card with the name and phone number and it said plain as day, "Flooring installed, reasonable prices." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Okay sweetie, break out all your credit cards. I'll combine them with mine and we'll order your flooring."

The credit card machine didn't crack as our cards slid through the little slots and before you could say "wooden floors" we were the proud owners of a jillion pieces of flooring, only awaiting someone to deliver it, install it and (though I didn't know this beforehand) to clean up the mess.

Home Depot agreed to deliver the flooring for only an additional small fortune. I calculated when my next royalty check was due to arrive, said a prayer to the Postal Gods and wrote an additional check since the machine refused to even sniff at any more of our credit cards.

"Well, that's taken care of," I said, thinking of ways to sabotage the bank's computer in case that royalty check didn't arrive on time. We started to head toward the exit.

"Wait!" the salesman called. "I forgot; if you want this stuff in your house out of the weather, there's a small additional unloading charge, only ten dollars per box or roll."

I calculated how many boxes of flooring and how many rolls of the blue underfloor padding (don't ask me why it's blue since no one will ever see it once it's installed) we had ordered, counted all the cash in my billfold, counted all the money in Betty's purse, dug out the change in my pocket and offered the salesman all that plus a lottery ticket with two weeks to go before expiration. He looked at the ticket dubiously but his eyes lit up when he saw all that green stuff. I suspect there is a delivery man in his family somewhere, but never mind. He took the cash and I borrowed gas money to get home from a fellow husband who took sympathy on me; his wife was only there for a new bathroom.

I'll say one thing about Home Depot; they do deliver fast. The truck damn near beat us home. It was a substitute driver. He drove up in the big truck, opened the doors of it and stood by waiting on me to unload five thousand pounds of flooring, obviously knowing nothing of the unloading charge I had already paid. I offered to split the job with him: I would carry in the blue stuff which only weighed four ounces per roll (and don't ask me how that is supposed to support five thousand pounds of flooring. I haven't a clue) and he could carry in the flooring. He refused until I showed him the ticket which plainly stated that I had a bad back and could only handle packages up to four ounces. The poor old man began unloading. Eventually I took pity on him and brought out some inducement. He really appreciated that money I had stashed away for Betty's next birthday.

"Boy, what did you do to him?" Betty asked. "He's unloading like crazy now!"

"I told him I would sic Biscuit on him if he didn't hurry," I said.

"Ha! I don't believe a word of that. Biscuit wouldn't hurt a flea."

"I threatened to shoot out his tires."

"Ha! I remember that possum you tried to shoot. It was sitting still and you missed nine times in a row."

"I gave him your birthday money."

"Ha--what?"

“Nothing. Look, he’s almost finished.”

The man had fulfilled the contract: he brought all the materials into the house. And at least five steps further. He stacked it in great heaps in our combination office/sewing room/library, which is the first room you enter by coming in the back door. People don’t come to our front door because of a simple little error anyone could make when designing a home for the first time, and Betty only reminds me of it three or four times a week now since it’s been over twenty years since it happened, but I seem to be getting sidetracked here. I was telling how high the stacks got in the office. They were higher than me. They were so high we couldn’t turn the fan on, not that I would have wanted to since it was roughly forty degrees below zero outside and the door had been left standing open now for five hours while the unloading proceeded, one box or roll at a time. They were piled on the couch and chairs and sewing machine and he even tried to stack them on my computer, but I sicced Biscuit on him and he laughed so hard he dropped the carton he was holding on his foot. I had to finish the unloading and promise him a bonus if I ever saw any money that belonged to me again if he wouldn’t sue me for making our dog attack him, which seems unfair since Biscuit is a fifteen pound dachshund who spends his life lying in Betty’s lap or sitting up asking to be fed by hand and is about as dangerous as a Barbie Doll.

I thanked the nice man for the unloading job and brushed icicles from the door frame so I could get the door closed, then turned the heat up to 90 and told Betty not to turn it back down until next July. I called the guy who had given me the business card and told him I needed a floor installed and told him how many square feet.

“No problem,” he said. “That shouldn’t take more than a couple of days, and I only charge five hundred a day. I made a rapid mental calculation and figured out that this was still a lot cheaper than \$7.95 a square foot so I told him to come on.

The next morning Betty left on her trip and a little while later the floor installer arrived, bringing along a helper who was hard of hearing and was easily older than me, was which is saying quite a bit. He also must have gone through some hippie years because he was wearing rings in both ears and one in his nose. I didn’t look closely enough to see whether or not his tongue was pierced. I immediately came to the conclusion that the man’s helper must be a brother-in-law or uncle or some other relative. And just for this story’s sake, and since I can no longer afford to be sued, let’s call the helper Jim and the flooring man Ralph.

Ralph got right to work. He examined the boxes and rolls and took out a pad and began scribbling. Then he handed it to me. “Here,” he said. “This is what else you’ll need for the flooring.”

“Huh?” I said. “The salesman didn’t tell me I would need anything else.”

Ralph looked at me pityingly. Well, I already told you who the dummy in the family is so no need to repeat myself. I looked at the list.

5,000 feet of quarter round.
27 tubes of silicone caulking.
399 feet of floor to tile strips.
399 feet of tile to floor strips.
444 feet of bathtub sealant.
3 flapper vales.
3 commode extender pipes.

188 floor protector coasters for furniture feet.
71 finaglers.
33 murphy law repellers.
149 carpet to floor strips.
149 floor to carpet strips.
43 doohickeys.
77 thingamabobs.

I stopped reading even though I was only halfway down the list, and tucked the paper in my pocket. "Any idea of what all this might cost?" I asked.

"How should I know? I never put this kind of floor in. I usually do laminated tile work."

I decided right then and there that I would never tell Betty that I had hired someone who didn't know beans about putting in the type of flooring we had bought. And while I was making that promise to myself, I ran out and jumped in my truck and hurried to the bank so I could get there before it closed.

My banker, as usual, was happy to see me.

"Hi Mr. Bain," he said. "I notice that you didn't pay off your farm loans this Christmas. I guess that means we'll be collecting more interest from you all year, ha ha."

"Well, sure," I said. "Why would I want to stop paying you interest on my loans when I've been doing it ever since I had that great idea about starting a Christmas tree farm?"

"It really was a great idea," my banker agreed. "Why, I don't know if the bank would have survived a couple of times without your support."

"That's nice to know, because now I need some of your support."

"How much do you need this time?"

"Oh, just enough to replace my wife's birthday present money I had to use for an emergency," I told him.

"And how much is that?"

"Probably five thousand should do it," I said, thinking of that thirty dollars I had saved up to buy Betty something pretty next August.

"Boy, you must really love your wife to spend that kind of money on her birthday," my banker said.

"You don't know the half of it. If you think I spend a lot on birthdays, you should see what she got for Christmas!"

"Well, tell your wife not to give my wife any ideas. The bank examiners are already suspicious. And by the way, next time you come by, bring the title to your tractors. They said your loans were uncollateralized."

"Okay," I said, wishing I knew how to use big words like unclatterabulldized and all.

Remember now, Betty had gone on her trip so I used the excuse of the flooring men being in the house to avoid work on the farm, merely sitting in the office by the fire and getting up to go offer friendly advice whenever my tailbone got tired.

The first time I got up, I saw that all the furniture from the master bedroom and bathroom had been moved and stacked, willy-nilly, in the small guest bedroom. And all the drawers had been pulled out of dressers and chest of drawers and bedside tables beforehand and stacked on top of all the stuff that was stacked on top of the regular furniture. What I had really gotten up for was my comb to comb my hair. I couldn't find it of course, mainly because it had used to live

on top of the dresser in a little tray. I could see the little tray way off in the distance sitting on top of a lamp up near the ceiling fan, but there wasn't a chance in heck of progressing more than two feet into that room packed full of furniture to the ceiling. Well, what the heck, I thought, I can go two days without combing my hair, because Ralph said it was only a two day job.

The second time I got up I noticed that Ralph and Jim had transmogrified into Eskimos because they had the heat turned completely off (and it was freezing outside); had the patio door wide open, and were complaining of it being too hot. I wondered why, if they were so hot, they had set up their saw horses and buzz saws in the bedroom instead of outside but figured it was some esoteric flooring reason and would be explained to me in due course after they had the flooring down and had cleaned up the mess.

At the end of the day, Ralph and Jim waved goodbye and I went to check on their progress. Part of the master bedroom had new flooring, leaving only a couple more thousand feet to do in one day, leading me to the sneaky suspicion that this might turn into more than a two day job. Besides, I hadn't even gone to get all that other stuff he said he needed because I wanted Betty to go with me. The reason for wanting her to go is that if she doesn't see money being spent she believes it's still in the bank or in my billfold or hiding in credit cards and ATM machines.

Betty came home the afternoon of the next day, the 29th of December, I believe. I went to meet her at the car so I could help her over the piles of carpet and undercarpet which had been stripped off all the floors and was stacked in the driveway.

"Is is finished yet?" Betty asked, not even noticing I had hugged and kissed her or that she was knee deep in wet carpet that had been rained on and was beginning to smell like a mountain of wet dog fur.

"Uh, not quite," I said, trying to behave nonchalantly.

Finally she looked at me. "What's wrong with your hair? It looks like you haven't combed it since I've been gone."

"Well, I tried to," I said, running my hands through my hair. For some reason it felt gritty, as if sawdust had gotten into it somehow.

"And what's that stuff in it? It looks like sawdust."

"Mumble, mumble," I said.

About this time Betty felt her feet getting wet and looked down. For the first time she noticed that she was standing knee deep in wet carpet.

"Why is all the carpet piled here?" she asked.

"That's just the big pieces. There's another pile out the back patio door where they're throwing the small pieces and scraps from the floor and stuff."

"Well, if that's the case, they must almost be finished. I can't wait to see it!" She hurried past me and into the house before I could prepare her. She stopped and stared uncomprehendingly. The kitchen looked the same. The big den that takes up half the house looked the same, other than the floors were now concrete instead of carpet.

"Where's my new flooring?" she wailed.

"They're working on it," I said.

"They better be." She opened the door to the master bedroom. Ralph and Jim were just setting up another sheet of flooring on their sawhorses. The saw screeched, sawdust flew everywhere, including onto curtains and walls.

Betty screeched. "What are you doing! You're getting sawdust everywhere!"

Ralph stopped sawing and looked up. “Just sawing where we’re working, trying to save time.”

“Does that mean you’ll be finished tomorrow?”

“At least one more day,” Ralph said. “You still have to get me that other stuff.”

I helped Betty out of the master bedroom. For some reason her legs were a little shaky.

“What are they talking about, ‘other stuff?’” she asked.

“Well, he said we didn’t get everything. We have to go shopping again tomorrow.”

Betty’s legs stiffened and her eyes brightened. “Shopping! Why didn’t you say so!” The sawdust was apparently forgotten.

Something else was forgotten, as we discovered shortly after Ralph and Jim left for the day. Remember, everything, and I mean everything, from the master bedroom was stacked in the guest bedroom, jammed in as tight as new cars on an 18 wheeler, right to the ceiling.

“Where are we going to sleep tonight?” Betty asked.

“Why in our.....hmm. How about on the couch in the office?”

“Fine, except I doubt we’ll both fit.”

“Doesn’t it fold out?”

“No it doesn’t fold out. One of us will have to sleep on the floor.”

“Boy,” I said. “I sure am glad-I mean I sure am sorry that I have a bad back. I would love to sleep on the floor and let you have the couch, but I’m afraid it would hurt too much. I would just keep you up all night moaning and groaning.”

I have convinced everyone I know that I have a bad back, except maybe God and he doesn’t tell. I think. Anyway, I spent the night on the couch in the office and Betty tried the floor. She must really have been thinking about that shopping trip because she forgot all about the short little couch in the den which was still available except for a little sawdust which had drifted onto it, only a half inch or so thick, nothing serious. And of course it is only about four feet long, and that’s also where Biscuit the dog usually sleeps. However, I guess indoor-outdoor carpet is pretty hard because that’s where I found her the next morning when she was missing from the carpet.

“Let’s go shopping!” Betty said when I woke her up where she was curled into a little ball on the little couch.

“Uh, wouldn’t you like something to eat first?” I asked, speaking loudly enough to be heard over my stomach rumbling.

“We can eat when we get back. Come on, someone may have bought everything by the time we get there if we don’t hurry.”

“No one but us would buy what we’re going after.”

I shouldn’t have said that.

“You don’t like my new flooring, do you?”

“Did I say that? Heck no! In fact, our banker even said he loves it.”

“All right, let’s go.”

The first place we went was Home Depot of course, which was only a hundred or so miles from home and had lots of stuff on that list I handed Betty. She bought everything on it that was possible and/or that my truck could haul, but we still didn’t get it all. Neither of us was sure about some of the tile to floor or floor to carpet strips. In case you’re wondering about the carpet part of the strips, I am a forceful man. When we decided to cover the two main rooms with

flooring, I put my foot down after it expanded to include the bathrooms and kitchen and laundry alcove. I absolutely refused to have the new flooring put in our closets. I guess that shows you how much of a man I am.

Anyway, Betty told me that it was a dead certain cinch the guy I hired wasn't going to be finished today and we could ask him those things when we got home and go back the next day and do some more shopping. That last statement really made my heart sing for joy, I can tell you. There's nothing like driving a hundred miles to shop for flooring supplies to make a man happy, ha ha.

"What are we having for supper?" I asked while we were driving home. Well, actually Betty was driving while I was holding onto 5,000 feet of quarter round and another couple of thousand feet of extenders, all sections of which were more than ten feet long, and since my truck is a little twenty year old Toyota, the stuff had to be run through the rear window to allow me hold it in order to get it home.

"Whatever you want, Sweetie," Betty said. Well, one thing about taking a woman shopping, it makes them happy. As we pulled into the driveway I was having visions of Porterhouse steak, baked potato, pumpkin pie and ice cream and a bottle of good white zanfadel. Those visions lasted only until we got to the kitchen.

"What are you guys doing!!!!" Betty screeched, dropping her purse and all her packages of things she had bought besides flooring supplies.

I looked over her shoulder. All the dishes and stuff from the buffet and cabinets and tables and anything at all movable was stacked in the kitchen and the furniture they had once been in was all stacked against one wall and taking up a good third of the den. All the good dishes and stuff like that were piled on every available space in the kitchen. Another third of the den was covered with the new flooring. The other third held sawhorses. It was easy to tell we had been getting our money's worth because all the cups and plates and glasses and stuff had an inch of sawdust in them or on them and even the air was thick with sawdust. Or maybe that was ice crystals in the air and on the dishes since it was still forty degrees below freezing outside and Ralph and Jim had the front door standing wide open.

"We're working up a storm," Ralph grinned from where the air was thick with sawdust and ice crystals from a section of flooring he was cutting. Betty watched as the sawdust added another layer to uncovered chairs and tables and curtains and the sofa she had slept on the night before.

"Well, what are you doing with the door standing open?" Betty asked

"It's hot in here," Ralph said.

"Good. Then you can take your stuff outside on the porch and saw."

Betty trounced off to see the progress. She found the master bedroom almost finished but they were still working on the bathroom and that part of the floor near it. That bathroom was also where my spare comb was kept. I figured neither of us would be using that bathroom for a while since the commode was sitting in the bathtub. And everything in that bathroom was covered in sawdust. Or maybe ice, since the bedroom patio door was standing wide open, too.

When I met Betty back in the office, I asked again, "What are we having for supper?"

"Do you know what Biscuit eats?"

"Balogna when you're not letting him beg at the table."

"Me? You're the one who lets him beg."

"Never mind, I'm hungry," I said.

“Me, too.” She tossed me the car keys. “Let’s go to Sonic.”

I suppose it could have been worse. The hamburgers weren’t as cold as they usually are and Biscuit only ate half my french fries instead of three quarters of them the way he usually does. And Betty very kindly let me have the couch while she took the floor again. Even the little couch wasn’t available now. It was piled up with dishes and guns and stuff from the other buffet and end tables and gun cabinet.

We went back the next day for those tile carpet or whatever thingys. The first Home Depot told us didn’t have them after looking for an hour or two. The associate (formerly know as salesman) checked his handy dandy computer.

“The store up the road has them,” he said.

The store up the road was only another fifty miles. We live in Texas, remember? We went there. Biscuit was with us. I told Betty to walk the dog and I would shop for a change and ran off before she could object. Two hours later she found me inside.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find anyone to help me,” I said.

“I should have known not to let a man take care of shopping,” Betty waited until someone important looking came by and batted her eyes at him. He made a quick u-turn and came back.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” he asked. One day I’m going to have to try that eye-batting trick when I’m too old to have some guy think I’m making a pass at him. I tried it on a young lady once recently and she looked at my gray hair and helped someone else and threatened to report me for sexual harassment when I did it again.

The gentleman took us to an associate who spent the next two hours telling us that he knew they had what we wanted because the computer said so and computers are never wrong. When we left, he was still insisting plaintively that it was absolutely in stock but he just couldn’t find it. We went back to the store we had just come from fifty miles back and Betty bought some stuff she thought would work.

When we got home I trailed behind Betty examining the progress made while we had been gone. Frankly, I couldn’t see much. A bit more of the den was done but the master bedroom and bath still wasn’t finished and there still wasn’t anything to eat out of or drink out of or sleep on except the couch. Sighing, Betty reached for the car keys again.

“You go ahead to the car, sweetie,” I said.

I went back into the house and grabbed Ralph by the arm. “See here, bud, you said two days and its been three. Or four. Hell I don’t know how many. But tomorrow is our 25th wedding anniversary and if we don’t have our own bed to sleep in, you ain’t getting paid. Understand?”

“What did you go back for,” Betty asked.

“I just told the guy to hurry,” I said innocently.

The next day, new Year’s Eve and also our anniversary, and also our 25th wedding anniversary mind you, went very slow. At five o’clock our bathroom still had the commode sitting in the tub and none of the bedroom furniture was back in the master bedroom, not to mention the fact that I hadn’t been able to comb my hair or change underwear for several days. Maybe I looked mean when I threatened violence. Or maybe it was the fact that I tunneled into the spare bedroom and found the six shooter I keep for emergencies and strapped it on. At any

rate, when I blocked the door as they were ready to leave with my hand resting suggestively on the butt of the pistol strapped to my side, there was a heck of a bunch of furniture moving that took place very quickly.

We did sleep in our own bed that night and I began to look forward to eventually eating out of our own dishes and using the master bathroom again. Oh yes. We had a very happy celebration and only drank one bottle of champagne and one bottle of white zinfandel between us. I sure wished I could say the same about our flooring crew.

The next morning we waited and waited on the crew to show up. I say crew because Ralph had added a teenage boy as a helper when the old hippie began having problems with his hearing from all the electric sawing and his back from all the bending. We waited and waited. At last Ralph showed up somewhere close to noon, there in body but his spirit was obviously still in some dark hole recovering from the excesses of demon rum. His normally brown face had a greenish cast to it and when he croaked hello, I almost got drunk right on the spot from breathing the fumes from his breath.

He staggered in and began work, though, I have to give him that. If it had been me and I looked like he felt, or felt what he looked like, I would have just gone off and died somewhere. I think he came to work only because I had told him the previous day that I was out of money and if he wasn't finished by January the 2nd Betty was going to have words with him. After sleeping in her own bed again, she was agitating for some of her dishes-and her bathroom.

Sometime that afternoon, after Ralph had been working in the bathroom for a while, he came out with two sections of copper pipe. "See these?" he asked.

"I can see a hell of a lot better than you can today," I replied, my evil nature suddenly asserting itself because I was already suspecting another shopping trip.

"Well, I need two new commode extenders," he said.

I didn't bother asking what in hell a commode extender was. I just took those pieces of pipe and went and told Betty we had to go shopping again. That turned her grim visage into a smile. She had been examining the layer of sawdust in the house now an inch thick on everything. She had been examining it in her parka because every time she went back to the office where I had a fire going to get warm, Ralph opened every door in the house. And it was still freezing and wet and maybe the flooring crew had turned into Eskimos but we sure hadn't.

Do I need to tell you that the new commode extenders we bought after driving a hundred miles in the rain wouldn't work? I thought not. I thought of that hundred mile drive and went back to the office and told Betty. Believe it or not, even women eventually reach their limit of shopping desire. "Let me handle this," she said.

I followed along behind as she went into the master bathroom where Ralph was putting in some of those ten dollar an inch floor to carpet strips in the door of Betty's closet in the bathroom.

"Stand up," Betty said.

Ralph did.

Betty pointed into the corner where the old commode extenders were lying. "See those?"

"Uh, yes ma'am. They're too old to put back on, and those new extenders are for new commodes. They don't work."

"You put those old ones back on and make them work, or else."

“Or else what?” Ralph said, grinning for the first time that day.

“Or else I’ll sic Biscuit on you.”

Ralph laughed out loud. Biscuit had been following him around every time I let him loose, wagging his tail and hoping for a treat.

“Sic ‘em, Biscuit,” Betty said.

Biscuit went over and peed on Ralph’s trouser leg and tennis shoes and followed Betty out of the bathroom. Ralph looked at his wet leg and down at the commode and at the old commode extenders and got out a wrench and the next thing I knew they were back on and working.. I began to wonder right then if maybe Ralph owned stock in Home Depot.

Letting Biscuit pee in the house was a mistake, even if it had been for a good cause. Biscuit had gotten fed up at not getting any treats from the home invaders and now Betty had apparently given approval for drastic measures. He started peeing on the floor or on Ralph or Jim every time he escaped from the office, telling them plainly to get the hell off his territory, and he didn’t stop peeing on the new floor until February. After Betty and Biscuit left, I had some words with Ralph, too.

“Tomorrow is the 2nd of January, which makes either six or seven days instead of two. And I’ve used up all my money buying all that other stuff you said we had to have. So guess what? Betty is going to have to pay you out of her check which arrives tomorrow. And she isn’t going to appreciate giving you part of her shopping money. You better have this place ready to live in by tomorrow evening because she won’t pay you for another day. She already told me she is going to BigSpend Store this weekend for new drapes and furniture to match the floor.”

It isn’t the initial cost, its the upkeep.

Ralph started working in the kitchen the next day. Boy, what a day. As soon as Ralph and Jim and teenager moved the freezer out a bit we began smelling a smell. We looked and looked and couldn’t see anything because the freezer wasn’t out very far yet. However, later in the day, Ralph and Jim and teenager came bursting into the office and out the back door holding their noses and gagging. We couldn’t imagine what was happening except maybe Biscuit had gotten really disgusted with the non-treat providing invaders and drug a dead skunk into the house to get rid of them. Pretty soon the smell wafted into the office and drove us outside, too.

“What in heck is that awful smell?” I asked.

“Don’t know, but you gotta get rid of it.” Ralph said, still gagging.

I took a whiff. It smelled horrible, even from outside the house. “Uh uh. I’m the homeowner. You get rid of it.”

Ralph sniffed. “Uh uh. I’m the boss. Jim, you get rid of it.”

Jim tested the air. “Uh uh. Teenager is the helper. He can get rid of it.”

Teenager looked all around but couldn’t find anyone he outranked except the cat and everyone knows cats won’t take orders. He didn’t even try. He wetted his handkerchief with gasoline, shook hands with each of us and went bravely forward into battle.

A half hour later, after reviving Teenager from where he had passed out after staggering from the house, I asked him what on earth the terrible odor had been caused from.

“Don’t know,” he gasped, “but it looked like rotten meat covered with hair.”

I looked at Velcro the cat. He put up a paw, licked it and looked innocent, but I knew. While we hadn’t been watching, he had brought in a dead rat and hid it behind the freezer. When one of

the freezer legs ran over it and punctured the bloated corpse, that's what cleared the kitchen and office so quickly.

Betty and I headed back to the store for a case of deodorizer. It was really hard getting the crew back inside the house, even after spraying with two dozen cans of lysol. That smell really was horrible.

Evening came and went and the flooring crew worked on. Full darkness came and Betty and I refused to let them leave. Even Betty had absolutely had it with flooring. Finally, along about midnight, Ralph announced that they were finished. We paid him off and he left.

The next morning I went outside the house and suddenly found myself up to my knees in old mildewed carpet. I climbed out of it and went around back. There was a small mountain of shredded flooring, used carpeting and siding, wrapping that the flooring had come in, empty silicon goop bottles, and it all made a mountain only a couple of dozen feet high. While I was debating with myself that night on how I was going to get them back out to clean up their mess, a thunderstorm came up and blew off the roof of the shop.

When Betty got up she told me to get busy cleaning.

"No way," I said. "Ralph is going to do it."

"Hah," Betty said.

"Sure he will. I'll get him out here to repair the roof and make him take off that carpet before I pay him."

"Does he know how to repair roofs?"

"No, but he didn't know how to...uh, never mind."

Ralph came out and fixed the roof for only another small fortune. And he hauled off the carpet in front. But he never, never came back for that mountain of debris left in back of the house. Since we were busy for the next three weeks shoveling sawdust out of the house, I couldn't get to it. I suggested to Betty that she plant flowers on it. That didn't go over very good. I said how about using it to bury dead cats in?

"That works for me," she said, thinking of the odor still lingering in the house after all this time.

"Great," I said.

Now all I have to do is catch the cat.

Chapter Thirty-One

Stealing Stuff

Writing about that odor made me remember something I still have problems believing really happened. My brother-in-law Jack owned a number of acres in East Texas. Now everyone knows that all Texans keep cows and horses on their places and Jack was no exception. He had quite a few cows and a couple of horses running around his little ranch.

Jack was also a gardener. He loved to plant this great huge garden every year and grow enough potatoes and beans and stuff to feed half the county.

Jack was also a very thrifty man. He hated to spend money on fertilizer for his garden, and having cows and horses provided the perfect solution. Cows and horses leave cow patties and horse patties lying around on the ground as they graze and they are perfectly harmless so long as you watch where you step. Jack turned them into a positive product.

During the year, Jack would periodically tour his pastures with a wheelbarrow and shovel up the patties that had dried sufficiently to be shoveled rather than dipped. He then wheeled the moderately dry patties to a place he had fixed for them to finish drying. By the end of the year he would have a huge pile of cow and horse patties just waiting for Spring to roll around so he could use them to fertilize his garden.

One year, just before it was time to break the ground for his garden and till in all that good fertilizer, he had to take a two-day trip. No big deal. He and Margie went off with no worries. This was the country after all, and you could normally leave stuff lying around and doors unlocked and so on, which is what they did.

Upon arriving back from the trip, they found their house and farm equipment and animals just as they had left them. The next morning Jack went out to start his garden but something seemed not quit right.

Jack looked around, trying to figure out what was wrong and then it finally hit him. That huge manure pile he had accumulated over the past year was gone!

Believe it or not, while he and Margie were absent, someone had backed up a big truck and stole their shit! Nothing else was touched, just the shit.

For the next several months, Jack toured the nearby countryside, suspiciously examining every garden he spotted, looking for one that appeared exceptionally fertile.

His search was unsuccessful. He never did find out who the thief was.

And I guess the moral of this story is that people will steal anything, even a pile of manure.

Interludes

Every year we go down to Mexico to buy cheap medicine. Don't ask how our trip to Mexico to buy medicine went this last time. It went just about the same way it did the time I wrote about it in *Life On Santa Claus Lane*. It you think this is a subtle hint to buy the book, you're probably right, but even authors have to make a living.

We even took Biscuit on the trip for the first time. I herewith make formal public apology for any disparaging remarks I ever made about people who take their doggies with them on trips. Biscuit went visiting with us because he sat up on his rear end with his front paws tucked into his

chest for three solid hours while watching us pack. I finally relented and said, “Okay, you stupid dog, you can go. Just behave yourself, hear? Don’t act like the elves that time I took them visiting and they drank up all the Budweiser and started playing volleyball with Aunt Tessie’s cat.”

One bad thing about living on Santa Claus Lane is that elves have begun using our place as a refuge. They lie around on their bums doing nothing except teasing the cats. I wanted to give them something to do. When I got a book published I tried to get the elves to give me a cheer. Okay Elves, off your bums and let’s get that drumroll going. Elves? Hey! Leave that Budweiser along and get in here! Okay, drumroll, please. What? You lost your drumsticks? Oh, for-never mind. Go make some toys or something, but no more robot dogs that pee on the floor. Okay? Geez. Would anyone like a bunch of elves? They’ve been hanging around here since Christmas and won’t go home until Santa starts paying union wages. That’s their story, anyway.

The main reason for keeping cats in the house is to have something soft to trip over.

If you liked this book, go to <http://www.darrellbain.com> and see what else I’ve written.

Betty and I went to a used bookstore for my birthday. About half the books we bought turned out to be ones we had read previously. One thing about getting old, though: neither of us remembered how most of them ended, so it was pretty close to getting new books anyway.

The End

Darrell Bain

Epilogue

Every year Betty gives me a Christmas card and she writes in it, telling me she is still crazy about me, even after all these years. She hands me the card with a straight face, too. Perhaps she means I just drive her crazy, but I always give her the benefit of the doubt anyway.

Author Bio

Darrell is the author of about two dozen books, in many genres, running the gamut from humor to mystery and science fiction to non-fiction and a few humorous works that are sort of fictional non-fiction, if that makes any sense. He has even written for children. For the last several years he has concentrated on humor and science fiction, both short fiction, non-fiction (sort of) and novels. He is currently writing the fourth novel in the series begun with *Medics Wild*.

Darrell served thirteen years in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, *Medics Wild*. Darrell has been writing off and on all his life but really got serious about it only after the advent of computers. He purchased his first one in 1989 and has been writing furiously ever since.

While Darrell was working as a lab manager at a hospital in Texas, he met his wife Betty. He trapped her under a mistletoe sprig and they were married a year later. Darrell and Betty now own and operate a Christmas tree farm in East Texas that has become the subject and backdrop for many of his humorous stories and books.

You can visit with Darrell at his web site, <http://www.darrellbain.com>.

He welcomes correspondence from his readers.