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## **These Are a Few of the Things That I Hate**

By Kenneth Books

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Kenneth Books

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## *JANUARY*

### **New Year's Resolutions**

The trouble with trying to make improvements each time the earth passes a specific point in orbit is that it's just another invitation to frustration.

One New Year's, I spent about six hours over two weeks probing my very psyche, looking inward, arguing with myself and engaging in much heavier thinking than I usually do, all to write a list of New Year's Resolutions.

When I was finished, I had 16 well thought out, comprehensive resolutions designed to improve character, tone up the flesh and renew the mind intellectually. I showed them to my wife, and what do you think happened? She refused to follow them! She even acted insulted.

See if I go to all that trouble for her in the future.

Instead of accepting my resolutions for the constructive criticism they represented (for example: "I resolve to tiptoe while doing the laundry and cooking so I don't interfere with the sound of the ball game on TV"), my wife suggested I come up with some resolutions for myself.



Well, I tell you, I've never been so offended in all my life. The nerve of that woman! Just goes to show, you never really know them.

But, realizing that men can never win any argument against any woman because eventually they'll outlive us, I decided to humor her. So I sat down for about 90 seconds and came up with a list of resolutions that I believe address my most serious faults, if faults they are.

For example, I resolved to tuck my wife back in after I wake her up at 3:30 a.m. on a day I'm going fishing. That's after she makes me my favorite breakfast – buttered toast.

And I resolved to look at her at least every third time I grunt during dinner, just so she knows she's appreciated (and so she'll be willing to dish out dessert).

Try as I may, I couldn't think of any other area where I'd fallen short. By the way, I'm happily married, so there's no need for any of the women reading this to try to steal away a gem such as myself.

I took my list next door and showed it to my neighbor, Bruno. He spent several minutes reading it and finally told me I needed to put one more on the list. He suggested I resolve to let the dog sleep on my wife's pillow so it's nice and warm when she's ready for it at

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night. I thanked Bruno, but there's no way I'm going to put that on the list. The dog already sleeps there.

Finally, with much fanfare, I showed my list to my wife. She looked at it and burst into tears. I love it when I can make a woman so happy she cries.

"Get your own dinner, you pig!" she screamed. For a while, I thought she wanted to go out for pork barbecue, but she wouldn't unlock the bedroom door, so I guess something was bothering her.

I don't know who upset her, but if I ever find out, he's in trouble.

## New Year's

New Year's is a "holiday" that, if I didn't know better from the displays at the drug store, I'd be convinced was made up by Hallmark to sell a few more rectangles of cheap, stiff paper at several hundred percent markup. But, thank God, New Year's cards have never really caught on, except among lunatics.

So what's the point in designating one day as special when, if you consider it philosophically, every day begins a new year? What makes this particular point where the earth's rotation carries it more important than, say, August 14? Why don't we celebrate April 20, which, being my birthday, is truly a day for rejoicing?

I can only conclude it's part of our deep-seated need to have definitive starting and stopping points, to measure our lives from a finite point, to drink ourselves into oblivion until the next day's throbbing of our heads causes the TV to turn on and off.

Aha! I have reached an epiphany. (For those of you who have graduated from government schools in the last couple of decades – and more about that later – go borrow a dictionary from someone older and ask

someone to read the definition of that word to you.) The entire concept of the new year centers on booze.

Why this should be is beyond me. I don't drink anymore, as one drink would get me drunk. I can't remember if it was the ninth or tenth. But in my hard-drinking days, I didn't much care what the calendar said. Any excuse was good enough for a bender, usually followed by a hangover in which the pounding in my brain interfered with cell phone reception for miles around.

Alas, I can no longer carry on the way I did when I was younger. There was a time when I could drink all weekend, sleep for an hour and feel great on Monday morning. Now I drink for an hour, sleep all weekend and feel like hell Monday.

My usual method of celebrating the shift from one year to another is to roll over, snore festively and continue my nightmare.

New Year's is big business, too. At least, the last day of the previous year is a time of great money-making, especially among the hotels, restaurants and bars. Decoration companies have a field day as well. (I have to wonder how a decoration company stays in business. Granted, Christmas is a time of decoration, and New Year's to a lesser extent. But how many people do you know who buy decorations the rest of the year? Even

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birthdays are usually just a matter of a cake given grudgingly by family members who can barely stand the sight of you and adorned with candles that the celebrant can blow out with his bacteria-laden breath.)

New Year's Eve is commonly referred to as "Amateur Night" by those for whom boozing is a hobby. And it's true that many people who hardly drink at all during the year go out and get schnockered by midnight, kiss the nearest member of the (usually) opposite sex and generally destroy in a couple of hours a reputation they spent the entire previous year building. They wear ridiculous little hats that make them look like demented elves, sound horns that have a tone resembling an adenoidal teenager blowing his nose and pretend it's a really big deal when midnight comes.

Several years ago, I moved from the Eastern Time Zone to the Central Time Zone. That meant when it hit midnight for my family and friends, it was still an hour until the new year began for me. The whole world became out of sync with me, a situation I've noticed frequently. I was getting a used new year!

Another problem with New Year's Eve is that it comes in the coldest part of the year. Whose stupid idea was that, anyhow? New Year's Eve is often accompanied by temperatures below zero, several feet

of snow, made filthy and disgusting by the passage of millions of vehicles, blanketing the world and invisible black ice making highways treacherous. Into this scenario comes people on their knees outside, barfing into the snow, then trying to weave their way home to sleep it off.

No, no New Year's Eve celebration for me. Not unless and until they move it to April 20.

## Super Bowl Sunday

Football fanatics all over the country wait with anticipation this climactic game of the season. They buy magazines predicting the outcome, stock up on artery-clogging goodies, invite people who they would never associate with if they were in their right minds over to watch the game and hang on every word of every commentator, no matter how enormous a moron he happens to be.

Then the game comes along. And it stinks.

The Super Bowl has to be the biggest disappointment of any sport in any season. Good, close, hard-fought games are separated by decades of dreary, boring blowouts. Yet, the hype continues.

It must be remembered that the game is not as boring as it must seem. Nothing could be. It's an American icon, a cultural watermark that we must get through, no matter how excruciating it is, much like the presidential election campaign.

And I admit, I get caught up in it too. Each year, I wait for the Super Bowl, turn on the TV and find my mind wandering as the favored team piles on the points and the underdog looks like St. John's Prep School for the Puny.

This is not the fault of the players. Most football players are college graduates, even if they can't read. They can say "Duh," although they can't spell it. They're in college to pull in the bucks at the stadium, the better to hire well-educated professors to warp the minds of the genuine students. If they couldn't play football, they'd be looking you in the eyes and saying, "Do you want – duh – fries with that?"

During the last Super Bowl, I found my attention focused on a fly trying to escape a web as a spider approached. It was not only more interesting than the game, but it was a more evenly matched contest.

Flies are pretty stupid, you know. If they were bigger, they could play pro football.

I have to admit, I'm not what you would call a football fanatic. I watch some games, mainly when the team I sort of follow is playing, but football to me is 22 thugs slamming into each other and trying to steal each others' land. It's a lot like the early American settlers and the American Indians, if both sides were composed exclusively of imbeciles and neither had lethal weapons.

Football has gained tremendous popularity in the United States, which is a testament to our decline as a civilization. It used to be that the king of all sports, baseball, was the Great American Pastime, a game you



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could watch for hours with nothing of consequence happening. At least some of those guys could speak an entire grammatical sentence.

But eventually, the Super Bowl drones to its inevitable 66-10 conclusion. You'd think that would be the end of it and we'd be spared any memory of it, just as the mind blanks out memories of injurious auto accidents. But no. Now it's time for the commentators, most of whom would be handing you a towel in the men's room if they weren't on TV, to rehash every tedious, mind-numbing play of the game as if its outcome weren't assured five minutes into the first quarter.

"Szymanski's one-yard run on third and 29 was almost a breakaway that could have altered the results," one talking head will say, referring to one of the louts on the losing team.

"Yes, but Brogndzkmsky's desperation, last-ditch tackle stopped him and showed why this is a team for the ages," his partner will blather.

And on and on and on, for what seems months.

Someday, I'd like to see a Stupor Bowl played with no commentary whatsoever, before, during or after the game. Just to make it perfect, let's stage the game in an empty stadium.

Then, let's let the winner of the opening coin toss claim victory and we'll all go out and celebrate the survival of otherwise doomed brain cells.

## **Puff the Magic Dragon**

I am one of the great pariahs of the 21st century. I am a smoker.

Actually, I guess I'm only partially evil, since I don't smoke cigarettes. In many elementary and middle school classrooms around the country, the students are being taught that cigarette smokers are "bad people." This, to today's educational elite, means they should be killed or, worse, forced to listen to Al Franken for several hours. But my pipe and cigars qualify me only as defective. It's my behavior that makes me "bad."

I like the taste of pipe and cigar smoke. I like the ritual of punching a hole in the end of a good cigar, holding it just above the flame of a wooden match and lighting it up, all the while enjoying the disgusted glares from nearby women, the envious stares from henpecked husbands and the plots against my life by brainwashed children and Al Franken. And I've found that a pipe smoker can escape having to answer any tough question. As soon as I am posed a problem I'm unlikely to be able to solve ("If you're so bloody smart, how come you're not rich?"), I simply pull out a pipe, casually run a pipe cleaner through it several times, leisurely fill it with tobacco a pinch at a time and

painstakingly light up. By the time it's halfway full, the pest will have either answered the question himself or stalked away in a rage.

I started, like most people, by stealing my mother's cigarettes. I finally kicked that habit when I was 24, but the process was anything but pretty. Those who are quitting cigarettes invariably display miserable mood swings and hair-trigger tempers. Oddly, when I quit, nobody seemed to mind that. Of course, I was wearing a funny outfit in Vietnam at the time.

There are many ways to give up the habit. Personally, I went cold turkey, which is a lot like leaping face first into a pit of angry scorpions and ground glass. It was tough, but I didn't regret it for one day. The one day I didn't regret it I was delirious with the flu and hallucinated that I was smoking.

Some people cut back gradually, smoking five packs the first day, five packs minus one cigarette the second and so on. But few can keep up that reckless pace for more than three or four days.

And some use the patch. I once knew a guy who had a four patch a day habit.

The reason to quit cigarettes, of course, is to improve your health, despite the customary 200-pound gain afterward, and to live well beyond your usefulness. Thus, the ex-smoker can look forward to

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becoming a burden to his family and friends. But at least they won't complain that he's stinking up the house with his cigarettes.

Six years after I quit cigarettes, I bought a pipe, found I loved it and have smoked one ever since. I had tried "pipes" before, but they were drug store pipes and burned like a furnace, yielding the same pleasure one would get from putting a live coal on his tongue. I've since learned to steer clear of Dr. Grabow, whose real name is Dr. Frankenstein.

Several years after that, I was given a good cigar. A good cigar differs from a drug store cigar by about as much as a good meal differs from chewing on your belt. A good cigar is made by skilled, professional rollers, using only the finest tobaccos and the most painstaking techniques. Drug store cigars, on the other hand, are made with the inferior tobacco discarded by the pros. Often it's wilted or diseased or the dog peed on it. Remember that the next time you see some old geezer chomping merrily on a nickel stogie.

The biggest problem with smoking is not the kids who have undergone Pavlovian conditioning; it's the rabid adult anti-smokers, who apparently believe they'll never die unless smoke touches them. Most of these are former smokers who, having seen the light, desire to

convert everyone around them. There's nothing more annoying than a whore who has found religion.

I've had people complain about my smoking while riding in my car! As soon as I offer to pull over and let them out, they stop whining. I've even been criticized because my clothes may smell of smoke now and then. What are these people doing smelling me in the first place?

My den is filled with pipes, my cigar humidor, five pipe tobacco humidors, books about smoking and little placards that say things like "The smoking lamp is lit." I like smoking. Those who don't shouldn't smoke. But in the meantime, thank you for not thanking me for not smoking. This means you, Al.

## APRIL

### **Tax Time**

If you're looking at a calendar, check how close April 15 is. If it's a month or less away, feel free to run, screaming and frothing at the mouth, from the room. Hide under the sofa until May.

Alas, it will do you no good.

The only things that are certain, it is said, are death and taxes. It's a shame they can't come in that order, particularly since they so closely resemble each other. Actually, they are somewhat different. You only die once.

Everyone is eager for winter to end. Perhaps they would appreciate the hateful cold, perpetual snowfall and wretched taste of death if they would but realize that the government is polishing its hands with sandpaper, the better to pick our pockets.

This is why it's illegal to steal. It's against the law to compete with the government.

There are ways of dealing with the Ides of April. There are methods of dealing with the Internal Revenue agent other than grabbing him by the **THROAT AND SQUEEZING, SQUEEZING, GLEEFULLY**

**CAACKLING AS YOU *CHOK*E THE *VERY LIFE* *OUT OF*..**

Ahem. Sorry. Got carried away there.

There are ways to shield your money from the tax man. They are legal or, at least, workable. Here are a few:

1. Donate something of value to a charitable institution. The key to this is to assign value to things that no one in his right mind would want, such as a former president's underwear. I've donated my used dental floss to the Smithsonian, my empty tissue boxes to the Guggenheim Museum and my toenail clippings to the Salvation Army.

As none of them have ever sent these valuable artifacts back, I assume they are on display. Therefore, I have assigned a value of \$25,000 to them.

2. Place your cash in a tax shelter. The problem is, most people do not know of a tax shelter. If that's your problem, all you need to do is send me all your extra cash and I'll see to it that the I.R.S. never finds it. There will, of course, be a small fee for this service, which I will disclose upon request in person at my branch office in Tehran.

The fee is tax-deductible if you can get away with it.



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3. Accrue legitimate deductions. The best tax dodge is a house. If you don't have a house, perhaps your dog would let you use his, since few dogs worry about taxes anyway. I have appraised my dog's house at \$250,000. When the tax man asks me, I tell him that I am an animal lover and encourage my dog to live better than I do. Then I clutch his throat, constricting it **AS I REVEL IN HIS GASPS, PLEAS AND SUFFERING, THEN LAUGH – LAUGH I SAY! – AS HIS EYES BULGE AND HIS TONGUE SWELLS AND...**

Ahem. Sorry. Natural reaction.

Now, what were we talking about? Oh, yes.

4. Lie, cheat and steal. If you have any questions about how this is done, simply look at the president, your senator or congressman, your mayor or your governor. There, you will learn that confiscatory taxation can be called "contributions," spending other people's money as if it were water can be called "investment," criminal investigations uncovering hideous wrongdoing can be called "witch hunts," useless pork-barrel waste to buy votes can be called "servicing the constituents" and a lifetime of skullduggery, sleight of hand, sin and treachery for self-enrichment can be called a "career in public service."

If you have qualms about emulating such reptilian profligates, I'll be happy to do so for a minimal fee, which is tax-deductible if you can get away with it.

5. Maximize your deductions. The best and easiest way to do this is to add dependents. Kids, unfortunately, cost a lot of money to raise and then turn on you anyway when they're grown. I recommend claiming pets as your deductions. The best things about pets are that they will love you no matter what a crud you are, they don't go to college, they're happy eating garbage and they don't go off and join some cult that teaches you are a tool of Satan. And if they get to be too much trouble, you can take them out into the woods and shoot them. Just try to get away with doing that to your kids.

The I.R.S. now requires dependents to have Social Security numbers, the better to regulate them and to force them to march in lockstep with the government's latest idiocies. In my home, I have Social Security numbers for my dog, my cat, my parakeet, three spiders that live in the corner and a squirrel I frequently see frolicking in the back yard.

While, technically, the tax man (who should be nailed to a board, **PLACED ON AN ANTHILL AND HAVE HONEY POURED OVER HIS FACE, THE BETTER TO ENCOURAGE THE SWARMING,**

**BITING, STINGING LITTLE BEASTS AS THEY CHEW, CHEW AT HIS FACE AND I SHRIEK IN ECSTASY AS...**

Ahem. Sorry.

While technically the tax man requires your dependents to be human beings, that is never specifically mentioned in the tax code. As I provide food, shelter and affection for my animals, who is to say they are not dependents? Certainly not the I.R.S., which still claims in its tax forms that its annual larceny is a "voluntary contribution."

These are only a few of the ways one can reduce the tax bite. And best of all, once you try one or more of them, you will find your taxes reduced significantly for 10 to 20 years, with time off for good behavior.

## **The Criminal Life**

Having said all this, I decided it's better to join them (and enrich myself at the expense of my fellow citizens, just like your representatives in Congress) than to fight them. Thus, I applied for work with the Internal Revenue Service.

After all, we should remember that IRS agents are just people, like us. They have the same diseases other people have (at least if those other people are Hitler, Stalin or Idi Amin), the same emotions (as Jack the Ripper or Ted Bundy) and the same worries (as John Dillinger).

Think about it. How would you like to live a life in which everyone you meet, from the stranger on the street to the family dog (or, in the case of IRS agents, the family komodo dragon) hates you on sight and plots to do you mayhem? What kind of a life would it be, spending every day of every week of every year inflicting unimaginable tortures and hardships on innocent people you've never before laid eyes on? Would you like that kind of life?

Me too.

Unfortunately, when I was starting out, I wasn't qualified to work for the IRS. I tried. I went to the IRS

office, leaped over the moat filled with hissing creatures, ducked my head to avoid banging it on the "Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here" sign and told the resident agent, who wore a sexy gown, diamond earrings and a pearl necklace, all of which would have been quite enchanting had he been a woman, that I wanted to be just like him.

He smiled (at least, I think it was a smile, although in retrospect, it may have been a grimace), pointed toward a door bearing a blood-drenched skull insignia and kicked me through it with his hobnailed boot.

There, I took the special would-be IRS agent test. The first part was easy, as it concerned ethics and I'm as strong on that as any other former newspaper editor. Questions such as "If offered a bribe, what would you do?" weren't that hard, although since they didn't specify the amount of the bribe, I think it was a trick question. I answered that I would refuse the bribe, then hit the guy with a club as soon as he turned his back and take all his money.

I was a born IRS agent.

Then came the problematic part – the math portion. I'm good at math. In fact, I got all the questions right. The tester told me the IRS didn't want anyone like me because of that. I turned to go and he hit me with a club and took all my money.

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When I regained consciousness in an alley somewhere, I knew my dream was ended and I would never have the pleasure of serving my fellow taxpayer as an IRS agent. This was a bitter pill to swallow, especially considering my eyesight wasn't good enough to become a Mafia hit man like my brothers.

So I did the next best thing and became a newspaperman.

I always considered this story somewhat heart-warming. But when I told it to a casual acquaintance, he turned ashen and slowly backed away from me, turned and darted out the door as quickly as he could.

At first, this bothered me, since I consider myself an unusually sensitive guy, even to the point of turning down seconds on fried spotted owl unless I'm really hungry. But I'm over it now. After all, I, like an IRS agent, have plenty of self-esteem.

## Government

Having already expounded on the benefits of the I.R.S. (and if you're a tax man, I was only kidding – really – please don't audit me), perhaps we should examine all the good the government does.

There. All done.

Heh, heh. Just kidding. Ours is the best, the finest, the most beneficial government that money can buy.

For example, I had a headache and didn't know exactly what to do. It was then that I remembered the president's last speech, in which he said all our problems could be solved if we'd just trust the government to run our lives.

I called 911. "Send the government over," I said.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. I peeked out and thought there was a covey of Mafia hit men on the porch. Then one of them flashed a badge. "Government, sir," he said in a Jack Webb monotone. "Here to solve all your problems."

I opened the door and they came in, carefully inspecting everything, making notes and stealing only the most expensive items.

"What's the problem, sir," asked one, strolling through my living room and leaving a trail of slime.

"Headache," I said. "Bad one."

I opened a bottle of aspirin to toss three or four of them into my pie hole.

"Hold it right there!" cried one of my benefactors, slapping the bottle from my hand and breaking two of my fingers. "FDA here. We'll examine those drugs and give them back to you when we determine they're safe."

"How long will that be?" I asked, my head pounding.

"Seven or eight years. Nine at the most. Maybe 10," he said.

I decided to lie down on my bed. Before my back hit the sheet, another government angel grabbed me and tossed me to the floor, breaking my hip.

"Are you sure that's safe?" he asked, flashing an OSHA identification card. "There aren't any bars or anything. You could fall out."

"I haven't done that in 40 years," I said, limping toward him.

"Then you're due!" he shouted.

He shoved me into the bed and strapped me in with a pair of makeshift seat belts, one on my thighs and another on my chest. He backed up, looked critically at his work, then put another belt across my forehead. He pulled all three belts tight, until I could no longer breathe, much less think.



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While all this was going on, I noticed another government elf inspecting the items on the dresser.

"I see there's a quarter lying here," he said, fangs extending from his upper lip. "I trust you reported it last April." He flashed an Internal Revenue Service Badge at me. I thought at first it was rust-colored, then I noticed it was simply caked with dried blood.

He pulled out a laptop computer, emblazoned with a skull and crossbones, and punched in some information. "Aha!" he roared, drooling. "No record of it!"

I pointed out that there was a strong possibility I acquired that quarter this year, so it wouldn't have to be reported until next April if I should be so unfortunate as to live that long.

"All right," he said, his face drooping with disappointment. "But I'll be watching you." He sat down in a corner, pulled a large bone from his pocket and gnawed on it sullenly.

"Nice houseplant," said another federal helper who identified himself as an employee of the Department of Agriculture. "What is it, a pine tree or something?"

"Uh, no, it's a geranium," I replied.

He stroked my geranium and it promptly curled up and died.

A huge man in a uniform bedecked with multicolored ribbons stepped forward. "Enough talk," he said. "I'll get rid of that headache." He pulled a bazooka out of a backpack and aimed it squarely at my temple.

"That's it!" I yelled, squirming in my bedbelts. "I've had enough. Get out of here or I'll vote Libertarian."

Like rats fleeing a burning ship, they scurried out the door, slamming it hard behind them.

Luckily, the noise didn't bother my headache. It disappeared as soon as they did. The president was right.

## Birthdays

My birthday is April 20. That's the same day as that of Jessica Lange and Adolph Hitler. Somewhere, there may be meaning in that, but don't ask me.

I am not a fan of birthdays. About a day and a half ago, I was 18. My wife tells me this is because as one approaches senility, the memory fades.

Nonetheless, there are lessons to be learned as one ages and, despite my best efforts, I have learned some of them.

They include:

1. Always buy two-ply.
2. When a government agent smiles at you, hold on to your wallet.
3. The older you get, the less you need an alarm clock, as the cracking of your spine will awaken you.
4. If a dog growls and wags his tail at the same time, believe the growl. This also holds true regarding women.

The worst part of growing older is that I see life passing and I have not yet achieved my most heartfelt goals. I've never eaten a live goldfish, for example, or even a live chipmunk. I've never had the chance to play

the Groucho Marx role in "Duck Soup." I've never constructed a log cabin with my bare hands, complete with a log refrigerator, a log television and a log bathroom, equipped with log two-ply.

But all things considered, I don't feel any different than I did when I was 25. I was sick that year.

Besides, I intend to live to 130 or 140, hoping to amaze some people and infuriate others. When I told my wife how long I intended to live, she said, "Then I want to die right now." But she didn't. Don't you hate a lying woman?

Actually, the nice thing about being over the hill is it's a lot easier to go downhill than to go up. If only one's faculties didn't go downhill along with you.

Until I was 45, I didn't wear glasses. I had a pair, but seldom bothered to put them on because they were uncomfortable and detracted oh so slightly from my incredible, virile, sexy appearance.

Now I wear trifocals.

Each morning I put them on as soon as I get out of the shower, lest I use the dog to brush my teeth or something. I once tried to comb my hair before I put on my glasses. Thus was born punk.

The first pair of trifocals came after an optometrist or oculist or whatever they call themselves put a magazine on my lap and said, "read this."

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I'm a bit far-sighted. So I walked across the street, propped the magazine on a window sill, came back, squinted until my eyelids creaked, and read a few lines.

She retrieved the magazine and put it back on my lap. Then she thrust a piece of glass between me and it. Suddenly, type appeared on the page. I was astonished. I was pleased.

I was old.

She explained that I would never again be able to see my feet because the lower portion of my glasses is only for close work. This was OK with me, as my feet hold no tremendous visual appeal for me. Objects more than four feet or so away blur, much as everything had before the miracle lens experiment. And she told me I'd have to watch a ball game through the top of my glasses in order to focus. The middle is for moderate distances, none of which I have been able to find yet. This means when you talk to me, I lower my head and peer at you through the tops of my glasses, unless you're sitting on my lap. In that case, I look up, giving you a bird's-eye view of the inner workings of my nostrils. The effect in a mixed atmosphere is a lot like those bobbing-head toys you see on dashboards of pickup trucks and in ballparks.

The biggest problem with glasses, I've found, is that the prescription changes, sometimes moments after

you've just coughed up hundreds of bucks for brand new frog-like appendages. When I got my first pair of trifocals, the eye exam cost \$35, which I thought was criminal. Then I learned the glasses themselves would cost another \$110. I considered having my eyes amputated and sitting on a blanket on the street with a cup, but learned the retirement plan for that kind of career isn't much, so I bit the bullet (I had to, since I could no longer afford food) and paid up.

My most recent eye exam cost \$65. But the new glasses cost me \$260, *and I used my old frames!* I'm in the wrong business.

Another aspect of growing older is your hair begins to lose its lustrous sheen and starts to look like curdled milk. The other night, I was relaxing quietly when my wife kindly pointed out that my hair is now going gray on the top as well as on the sides.

I can't tell you how much I appreciated this revelation. I made a mental note to reward the woman for her observational powers by leaving even more dirty clothing lying around the house and pinching my nose closed when I turn in to ensure a serenade of loud and uninterrupted snoring.

Men who note their hair turning gray (or, as I prefer to put it, *silver*) react in a number of ways. Some race to the drug store and spend their life's savings (in my

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case, about six bucks) on a vat of Grecian Formula. Then they slap the stuff on their hair in hopes of restoring their lost youth.

Naturally, they must then take a lengthy nap to recover from all that effort.

A friend of mine (a much older friend) died a while back. He had had a face-lift, dyed his hair black, had several teeth replaced with devices that had been excruciatingly screwed into his very jaw and lost 40 pounds through liposuction. "Doesn't he look natural?" an old lady asked as she gazed at him in the coffin.

Some even trowel coloring agents on beards and mustaches. These tend to grow faster because God understands how much pleasure every man takes in shaving, resulting in a two-tone face by noon every day, sort of like a field filled with old dandelions, their fuzzy tops contrasted to their green stems.

My hair may be turning gray... er, *silver*, but at least there's something up there to change color. While my hair is going gray, the hair of many other men is simply going.

I recall when I was a boy, one of my favorite baseball players was Clay Dalrymple, the mediocre catcher for the Phillies. I know, I know. He wasn't exactly Mickey Mantle, was he? But when you're a

Phillies fan, you take what you can get, and that's usually the bottom of the barrel.

One day, to my joy, I got to meet Dalrymple. Well, I didn't actually *meet* the great man. I was running toward old Connie Mack Stadium to witness my favorite team's latest crushing defeat when I ran head-first into his stomach. He fell back on his tailbone and his hat (remember, this was the early 1960s when men still wore such things and even wore ties to match) flew into the gutter. I was all but destroyed as I watched him dash after his chapeau, now floating along in a stream of filthy water toward a Philadelphia drainpipe.

I didn't care that I had ruined his hat. I figured he could always buy another one, but it wasn't every day he had the privilege of being butted breathless by a hyperactive young maniac. My chagrin stemmed from the fact that he was bald! Bald as an egg!

Instantly, I shifted my allegiance from this uncrested charlatan to Johnny Callison, who was a better player anyway and had hair to boot.

Some guys react to growing old with as much commotion as others do to going gray.

A guy I graduated from high school with hides his baldness with a toupee that looks as if someone ran up to a warthog and ripped off its rump. Naturally, this causes everyone he meets to notice immediately that



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he's wearing a rug that only Don King could love. Incidentally, he's a barber. I often wonder why he hasn't starved to death.

Others handle baldness by growing one side of their hair down to the floor and flipping it over, thinking people will be fooled by a hairstyle whose part is somewhere under the ear. I'd pay real money to see one of these guys in the shower.

Luckily, I'm mature enough not to mind becoming a distinguished-looking silver-haired gentleman. I wear my faded plumage proudly, knowing I've earned it. And even if I were to go bald, I wouldn't let it affect my life at all.

If you could call that a life.

## Harbingers of Spring

Ah, spring. When the snow melts, the weather turns pleasant and billions and billions of tiny pests arrive to remind us that no silver lining comes without its cloud.

There are, of course, some people who don't realize that the housefly is the true harbinger of the coming warmth. Some have the ridiculous notion that it's the robin, probably because of some bizarre lie their parents told them in a March moment when they were desperate to get their kids out of the house and out of their hair.

"Go out and look for the robin redbreast, Sonny. That'll mean spring is here." (Translation: "If I have to look at you for the next five minutes, I'll certainly kill you.")

After the hell of winter, it's a pleasure to see and slay the little winged fellow. I usually even take a few seconds to admire him and welcome him back before I crush his little head.

Soon, we'll be overrun with flies, gnats, mosquitoes (the biting kind are always female, which may tell you guys something) and other denizens of the underworld. There will be enormous bugs the size of our thumbs, suitable for attaching landing lights to. There will be

the tiny little guys who like to fly into our eyes or bite our ankles, even through our socks. There will be the few remaining flies that were introduced in the 1970s to kill gypsy moths, which will allow you to pick them up, then slowly stroll away, giving you a dirty look over their shoulders (if they have shoulders) after you put them down. And there will be the iridescent, festively colored bluebottle flies.

Those last ones are the most intriguing. Has anyone else noticed that there doesn't seem to be as many bluebottle flies around as there used to be? When I was a kid, it seemed there was one bluebottle fly for every three black ones. It could be that most of them have been killed off. Fly-crushing aficionados such as myself understand that a bluebottle fly is unusually frail. Just the slightest touch from a baseball bat or a cast iron frying pan and their innards spread several feet from the midpoint.

Then there are those scowling, bad-tempered little guys who like to bite. If you grab one and force his mouth open, you'll discover that, although the fly is only one-eighth of an inch in diameter, his mouth is seven feet wide, just like your kid's.

Animal rights crackpots get upset with people like me who like to smash the tiny entrails of flies just for the sheer joy of watching them die and, if your ears are

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good enough, hearing them scream. But flies that bite are asking for it. It's almost as if they land on your ankle, look up at you with a sheepish grin, then sink their teeth into your flesh while begging you to assassinate them. I'm only too happy to oblige.

Mosquitoes, however, are the most insidious of the tiny flying vampires. If you swat a mosquito who has been eating unusually well, you'll find she bursts open, spraying her blood (and, presumably, that of several of her previous victims) all over you. This is her revenge for your homicidal tendencies. It's worth it.

Then, there is the bee. Experts will tell you such nasty little monsters as bees, hornets, yellowjackets and wasps will only sting you if you bother them. Then these same experts will sit back, stir a martini and prepare to enjoy the show.

What they don't tell you, is that bees, hornets, yellowjackets and wasps loathe the sight of people. That's enough impetus for them to do their worst. I was once stung just over the eye by a wasp who was furious that I was throwing a bag of trash into a dumpster. Since that day, I have made it my mission to make waspdom in general pay for that bug's irascibility. Hundreds – nay, thousands – of the little cretins have perished under the gleeful stomping of my boot.

Last summer, three wasps dragged a smaller wasp kicking and struggling over to me, offering to let me torture it as I wished as a peace offering. Naturally, I stomped the whole group. I'm holding out for cash.

But, as you complain about flies, mosquitos, bees, wasps, hornets and other tools of Satan, remember, they will be gone when the snow flies. And so will the snakes.

## Advice Columnists

If you've wasted any time reading Abby, Ann or any of the other self-styled experts in human behavior, you know their responses bear little resemblance to the world we actually live in. Each has a special macro built into her (and it's always a woman, isn't it?) computer that, when the proper sequence of keys is touched, automatically types, "See a therapist."

That's one good reason to start a column called "Dear George." The other good reason is it's an easy way to make a quick wad of cash.

*Dear George:*

*The economy sucks, the president is a lunatic, the weather stinks, my husband has hidden in the closet wailing since baseball season ended and my kids have joined a religious cult that teaches I'm Satan.*

*Sometimes I just feel like giving up.*

*At The End of My Rope*

**Dear End:**

**So, what's holding you back?**

*Dear George:*

*My wife and I received the shock of our lives yesterday. Our only son told us he was gay. We just don't know how to cope with this. Can he be changed?*

*How do we tell our friends and families that our boy is gay?*

*Crying Parents*

**Dear Crybabies:**

**People like you make me sick, whining and bellyaching over nothing. With all the sadness and depression in the world, I'd think you'd jump for joy to learn your son is gay, but no. You want him to be a sourpuss, just like you. I suggest you and your crabby wife study your son and learn from him. With luck, maybe you, too, can be gay.**

*Dear George:*

*I was sneaking around snooping into my husband's stuff the other day while he was out mowing the lawn and found a book describing methods of murder in the bottom drawer of his desk.*

*Needless to say, I'm terrified. I always thought we had a good marriage. Every time I would slink around and pry into his personal things in the past, I found only innocuous stuff.*

*Why do you think he put that book in his bottom drawer?*

*Sleeping With One Eye Open*

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**Dear Eye:**

**It probably didn't fit in the top drawer.**

*Dear George:*

*Who do you think is the greatest person ever?*

*Student of History*

**Dear Stud:**

**Aside from myself, I'd have to say the greatest person ever is Maury Fitzbein, who lent me five bucks last week. It almost makes me sorry I plan to stiff him. Almost.**

*Dear George:*

*If you had the option of marrying Hillary Clinton or Madonna, what would you choose?*

*Star Struck*

**Dear Struck:**

**Strychnine, probably.**

*Dear George:*

*I started a small business last spring, which has made a small profit, but I am still paying off my equipment. How does one go about depreciating goods for a tax deduction?*

*Infernal Revenuer*

**Dear Rev:**

**If you were in front of me, I'd paste you one right in the chops. It's people like you who cost taxpayers money every year with your schemes to defraud the**



**government. Remember, the money you earn belongs to our government to do with as it pleases.**

**You're scum. If you'd included your address with your smarmy little cheat note, I'd sic the cops – or my ex-wife – on you.**

*Dear George:*

*In July, my partner and I robbed the local bank and shot two tellers. We got away with \$11,000, but during the getaway, the car we had stolen got a flat tire. Luckily, we escaped when we blew up a bridge and kept the cops on the other side.*

*Should we report our \$11,000 to the IRS and can we deduct the cost of the tire and the TNT?*

*Rocco and Icepick*

**Dear R and I:**

**You have to pay taxes only on money earned legitimately. Instead of taking the deduction on the tire and TNT, why not simply steal a new car? Of course, you're still out the cost of the explosive, but that's the price of doing business these days.**

**If I were you, I wouldn't even bother filing a return.**

*Dear George:*

*Last year, my wife left me, running off with my best friend and business partner, who had embezzled all the*

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*cash from our firm. That forced me into bankruptcy and, eventually, debtor's prison.*

*When I got out of jail, I learned I had tuberculosis. I went into a sanitarium for three months, came out and was run over by a truck. While I was recovering in the hospital, I learned I had cancer.*

*My daughter, who ran away from home just before my wife left, wrote me from Colorado, where she has joined a cult that worships O.J. Simpson. She told me she can't see me again because I'm a tool of evil.*

*After I recovered from being run over, I bought a house near the hospital so I could be nearby for my chemotherapy. As I started my car to go to the insurance company to pay for fire insurance, the engine burst into flame, setting the garage and then the house on fire. I suffered third-degree burns in the fire.*

*I'm at the end of my rope. I don't know how much more of this crap I can take.*

*I'm a Loser*

**Dear Loser:**

**Look, pal, I don't care how bad things seem to you—although I must say you strike me as something of a whiner. Nothing can excuse use of such vulgar language. What would you say if I told your mother how you talk?**

**Someone should wash your mouth out with soap.**

*Kenneth Books*

*(Suffering angst, depression and the weight of the world? Send for my booklet, "Send me money." Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope and \$20 [U.S. funds only].)*

## Doctors

I am not what you would call stoic. If I get a head cold, I am firmly convinced that it will go away much faster if I force everyone around me to suffer along with me.

Needless to say, neither am I a fan of doctors.

I recognize that doctors play a necessary role in our society, much like lawyers, politicians and vampire bats. And I can honestly say that most doctors I have been forced to visit have not reminded me of Adolph Hitler. Jack the Ripper, maybe.

One of the worst things about going to a doctor is their studied methods of making you feel like an idiot.

I recently had to visit a doctor several times for back pain. After filling out a life history chart that included such necessary information as blood type, triglyceride level and location and numbers of all bank accounts, the nurse commanded me to get on the scale to be weighed.

I used to be thin and strong and generally quite the hunk. Now I'm older, no longer what you would call "thin" without the assistance of powerful non-prescriptive substances and the only hunk I am is of

cheese. I would no more own a home scale than I would own a home electric chair.

When I got on the scale, the weights flew up so hard that they embedded themselves in the metal slide thing. "Let's just call it 200 pounds," I said to the nurse. "The doctor has decided to give you all his cash," she replied.

"Wow!" I said. "Are you kidding?"

"Yes," she said. "But you started it."

Later, Nurse deSade practiced taking blood. She selected her favorite needle – the one with serrated edges and a corkscrew shape – and drove it into my arm seven inches.

"This may sting a little," she said, smiling, as she pried me from the wall.

The results of that test were positive. I had blood all right.

Finally, I got to see the doctor. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked.

I was about to tell him that he was the doctor so he should find out when I remembered that corkscrew needle.

"My back hurts," I whined.

"Of course it hurts," he said, absently rattling the keys to his BMW. "You're old and fat and have the muscle tone of a Slinky. You're not getting any younger, you know."

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That's the kind of bedside manner you can't buy. That's because the doctor charges too much for it.

"I know that," I said. "It's your job to make me older. Besides, if you don't fix it, I'll be too stiff to reach for my wallet."

That got some action.

The doctor got up, walked behind me and punched me in the kidney as hard as he could.

"That hurt?" he asked in a professional way.

I finished writhing, got up from the floor, and said, "Nah."

He was winding up for another test when I decided to shift gears.

"Haven't you got some kind of drugs or something to control this pain?" I asked.

"Drugs!" he yelled. "Drugs! You come here for help and have the nerve to ask me for drugs! No! Absolutely not! All the drugs are mine and I'm not sharing them!"

"Well, what can I do then, Doc?" I asked. "The only time it doesn't hurt is when I'm mowing the lawn."

He was kind enough to arrange for me several lawn-mowing jobs, starting with his palatial waterfront manor. My pain stopped, but then I learned he was charged people for the mowing and I wasn't getting a cent. Worse, he was charging me at the same time for

medical consultation and services. I dropped him like the proverbial hot potato.

My back still hurts. But at least I got rid of a major pain.

## Shaping Up

Having found no other way to combat my bad back, I realized it was time to start exercising. I shudder even to type the word. But, with a little research, I discovered there are ways to exercise that don't involve breaking up your day with time-consuming gym visits, annoying sweating and whimper-producing muscle pain.

Experts agree that the best way to avoid looking like a talking hog is through diet and exercise. Of course, they usually prescribe food like lettuce and carrots – forgetting that the human body requires massive amounts of ice cream, peanut butter and fried chicken to survive – and calisthenics that put as much pain in our midribs as the IRS does in our wallets.

A sadistic lot, these experts.

There are other ways. They don't want you to know it, since they feed on your pain and suffering. In fact, they'll go to great lengths to discredit the tactics I'm going to recommend, just so they can pour themselves a cold beer, light up a big black cigar and sit back to enjoy your anguish. Don't listen to them. I am an expert on fat, having carried around many pounds of it for years.



First, it's necessary to modify your diet, but not through starvation on rubbish like salads, fish and wimpy watercress sandwiches. I've found that eating with your eyes closed fools your system into thinking the delicious steak or nutritious Snickers bar you're ingesting contains no calories or fat. If your system is unusually perceptive, you might want to periodically say, "My, isn't this cottage cheese delicious," meanwhile scarfing potato chips by the bag and washing them down with eggnog. Remember, your system is pretty stupid, actually. In fact, it's only eight or 10 times as smart as the nearest politician.

There are know-it-alls who now claim that each of us will die immediately if we ingest any fat at all. Thus, we have store shelves stocked with fat-free onion crackers that taste like sand, only drier, fat-free potato chips that resemble roofing shingles and even fat-free hot dogs. Is nothing sacred?

Fat is good for you. The bloodless little pantywaists who would have us give up our cars, our homes, our pets and our assault rifles simply because they prefer to cringe in craven terror from life have been lying to you. They want to control you and turn you into the same kind of chicken-livered wusses they are. Don't let them. It's natural for your arteries to resemble a tube of

lipstick. Pour that fat down your throat. You'll feel better for it.

Exercise can help keep that unwanted tonnage down to its natural level, which is approximately 75 to 100 percent higher than what insurance companies laughingly call your "natural weight."

For example, when ordering a second or subsequent drink in a bar or restaurant, don't just call out drunkenly to the waiter. For one thing, they might flag you when you slur so badly they can't understand you. Sit up straight and point your finger into the air to get their attention (calorie expenditure: 4), then point smartly to your empty drink glass (calorie expenditure: 6).

One caution: Before you embark on an exercise program such as this one, be sure to consult your doctor. He may wish to join you and doctors usually have enough money to pick up the tab.

When diving into your nightly steak, don't ask the nearest passer-by to cut it into bite-size portions for you, tempting as that is. Instead, cut it yourself and *use a dull knife*. That little tactic will expend between three calories (for a petite filet) to a whopping 16 (for a two-pound cowboy cut).

If you're still not too sore, when you retire for the night, instead of gently removing your shoes (or having your wife remove them while you watch TV from the

recliner), balance them on your toes and flip them with your ankles onto the pile of clothing, debris and empty potato chip bags on your bedroom floor (calorie expenditure: 3 for size 10; up to 5 if you happen to be a "bigfoot").

Each day, as you go about your normal business, you can find other, similar ways to burn off fat, sometimes at the rate of as many as 10 or even 15 calories per hour. If you begin to feel dizzy, lie down and nap for eight or nine hours.

And this year, when the bronzed bully, his muscles defined like knife edges, comes up to you to kick sand in your face on the beach, just belt him one in the mouth. In his weakened condition from death-dealing practices like aerobics and weight lifting, the cholesterol on your hands will probably kill him.

## Lawyers

One of my best friends is a lawyer. I was pleased just last week when he visited me, ate vast quantities of my food, drank up all my best liquor, smoked my last expensive cigar, but billed me only half-price for the time it took him to do all that.

This guy has always done well for me. Just a year or two ago, he handled a legal matter for me that required the filing of a paragraph with the county. After seven months of bills, I asked him what was the holdup. "The wheels of justice grind slowly," he said. I looked that up in my handy-dandy Lawyer-to-English dictionary. It meant, "I bill by the hour."

Actually, I'm being facetious. I find it appalling that lawyers have to take the amount of abuse they do. After all, if these people weren't lawyers, what would they be? IRS agents? Mafia hit men? That about covers it, I guess, and either way we're better off with lawyers. At least they don't take all our money in one fell swoop, preferring to drag it out over a period of years while we continue to earn more and more to transfer to their account, or blow our brains out without so much as a hello, a violation of etiquette that fewer than half of all lawyers would condone.

Actually, my friend visited because he was in the throes of a dilemma and knew I could look at matters from a viewpoint other than whether they could enrich me or not, a trait which he usually considered a handicap in life.

It seems he has a client who always pays him with a crisp hundred dollar bill. But at their last consultation, the client accidentally gave him a second hundred, stuck to the first. My friend didn't notice until after the client had left.

So now, he's faced with a serious ethical question. Should he tell his partner or not?

I asked him what his partner would do in such a case. He turned red and cursed. "Why, I'll punch him in the mouth, first thing tomorrow," he ranted.

Problem solved.

I met his partner once. The three of us had lunch together. As soon as I saw him, my wallet began to tingle, a reaction I usually get only when a politician appears on TV to tell me how he's going to improve my life.

As we were eating, my friend sat bolt upright. "Oh, no!" he said. "I forgot to lock the safe!"

"What are you worried about?" his partner asked. "We're both here."

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We enjoyed the rest of the meal, except I had to fend off first my friend and then his partner, over and over again, as they attempted to pick my pocket. When that failed, both tried to get me to punch out a guy on the other side of the room, hoping to drum up some new business.

At any rate, I'm always pleased to visit with my friend or any of his fellow lawyers, except after they sit on my sofa I need to have it reupholstered. Can't get the slime out any other way.

And if anything I said here offends a lawyer for some reason, I apologize. I realize they are a protected group, just like crocodiles, barracudas and certain lower forms of slugs.

## Gas Prices

Yesterday, I went to the bank with the intention of taking out a second mortgage. "You have to own a house, first," I was told, bursting my bubble.

Alas, I had to take drastic measures, so I sold my wife into indentured servitude. But it's all right. She gets home in time to cook my dinner every night.

My desperation was the result of a deep and engrossing need to fill my gas tank.

I remember when I was a kid you could buy Sinclair Dino gasoline for 28 cents a gallon—less if you were the beneficiary of a gas war—and the attendant would wash your windshield and check your fluids. He'd even check the oil and water in your car.

Our happy days were over in the 1970s when the oil companies faced harsh reality. "Hey, these guys need us so badly we can stick it to them royally," they empathized. Sensors were immediately placed in gas pumps, capable of determining the amount of money in a customer's wallet and adjusting the price accordingly.

I still remember my outrage when it cost me \$5 to fill my VW bug with regular at the felonious price of 50 cents a gallon. Of course, in those days, \$5 was worth \$3 or so, instead of the dime of today.

Every week, we figured gas prices had reached their zenith. We made these calculations by the pitch of the oil company executives who were singing "What a Friend We Have in Abdul" as they danced around the cash register. And every week we were wrong.

Today, we are so brainwashed that we actually figure two or three bucks a gallon is cheap. *Two or three bucks a gallon!* Of course, we also feel fortunate when the president doesn't plunge the economy into depression or sell us out to communism or start a nuclear war against Albania or when 10 seconds of a popular television show has the rudiments of a plot instead of incongruous one-liners or scatological references.

This is indicated by conversations I heard over the current price of gas.

"Three fifty. Why, I remember when gas was only a three and a quarter."

"Those were the good old days."

This comment is usually punctuated by a *ka-ching!* that accompanies another ten cent per gallon rise in pump prices.

To get the lowdown on this phenomenon and to find out if it was going to be necessary to sell my car and buy a camel, I called a friend who is an employee of a local oil company. Jerry works part-time as a



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messenger and coffee-maker, earning \$260,000 per year. He hopes someday to become janitor so he can make some real money.

"You've got to understand that the oil business is one of high risk and overhead," Jerry told me, the sound of a champagne cork popping in the background. "Why, just last month, my company drilled two wells. One of them took more than three minutes to pay for itself and start generating profits. The price at the pump is just a reflection of that."

I thanked Jerry, hung up the phone, walked over to his office and punched him in the mouth. He said he doesn't hold it against me, as he gets punched in the mouth by angry gas customers several times a day. "We have one executive whose only job is to get punched in the mouth," he said, picking a tooth up from the floor. "It helps that he's a dead ringer for the president."

I felt a little better, but only until I saw a gas pump, which now sold gas at 40 cents more than it had that morning. But I'm going to fight back. No more mister nice guy. Then let's see if these oil barons are as smug. I'm converting my car to take a cheaper, alternative fuel.

I just have to decide if it should be Dom Perignon or dollar bills.

## JUNE

### **Golf**

I'll admit it right up front. I've never been able to get excited about golf.

I mean, think about it. I figure golf is simply some guy – usually some old and overweight guy (unlike me, ahem) – walking around a pasture, keeping one eye on his ball and the other ahead of him, lest he step in something. I grew up in farm country and I know a thing or two about pastures.

Once he reaches the ball, he hits it with a funny looking stick, watches its flight, curses bitterly and starts the process all over again.

I once tried to play golf. I stepped up to the tee, addressed the ball (Box 654, Cleveland, Ohio), and swung my funny looking stick. But I broke the mold. I neither watched its flight nor cursed, even though both of these actions are pretty much expected by fellow golfers. Instead, I missed the ball entirely.

The problem, I discovered, is that I swing a golf club precisely the same way I swing a baseball bat. Alas, I could never hit a baseball, either.

I recognized right away what I was doing wrong. So I gave the clubs back to the pathetic obsessive-compulsive I borrowed them from and went home. Problem solved!

Actually, I still play golf on occasion. But I always seem to get crossed up somehow. Usually, it's at the windmill.

I realize my disdain for fairways, greens, hideously expensive greens fees and other accouterments of what seems to be a neurotic fixation of so many men puts me in the minority in Florida, where I live. Here, every body of water is surrounded by a rage-inducing pattern of green, catering to the unshakable urge of men to golf, the unquenchable quest for competition and the unending impulse of entrepreneurs to force people to pay tons of money for something that costs them virtually nothing.

I've been told I just don't understand the lure of the game. That may be true. I also don't understand the lure of life in an Islamic dictatorship, yet some seem to like it.

The game of golf was invented by the Scots, which I find ironic, considering how expensive it is to play. They used hand-hewn wooden clubs and guzzled the product of their culture that I *do* understand in order to

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make extreme frustration on icy moors tolerable and, by the 10th hole or so, even enjoyable.

It was imported to America and other semi-civilized countries by a group of Scottish terrorists determined to take over the world by getting all the soldiers and potential soldiers addicted to a time-wasting and impossible goal of breaking par every time.

Their plot gained credence when their agent, Dwight D. Eisenhower, fresh from being kidnapped and brainwashed by Scottish agents on the shores of Normandy, gained the White House and promoted the game from there. It gains today, bit by subversive bit, crazed golf addict by crazed golf addict. Soon, the radicals will make their move and all of us will be forced to eat haggis and all the men will have to wear skirts, which is unacceptable everywhere today except in San Francisco.

Don't let them dupe you. Remember, golf spelled backwards is flog!

## Drivers

The convenient thing about winter is all the incompetent bozos on the road can blame weather conditions for their stupidity. But, come the warmer weather, no excuse remains. These people are exposed for – what's the politically correct term? – ah, yes, jerks.

I've given up trying to teach people to drive like intelligent, hip, sensible folks. Like me, that is. Instead, these swerving, speeding, road-hogging schlemiels should at least have some fun. Drivers can accumulate points and trade them for valuable prizes, like a new jacket whose sleeves are strapped to the back or a year's vacation at a plush new country club prison.

For example, lunatics who cruise blithely along in the passing lane at 25 mph earn two points. That may not sound like much (and it isn't) but driving at a snail's pace is so common, so easy, so infuriating to others, that points build up fast.

Driving at 25 mph in the left lane while keeping pace with a car in the right lane going exactly the same speed is worth four points for each of you. Performing this act while a fire engine is directly behind you with sirens blaring and horns blowing garners each a whopping 10 points.

Refusing to use turn signals is worth five points. It would be worth more, but so few people know what that little handle on the left of the steering column is for, it just doesn't seem fair. If, however, you do know how to signal a turn, be sure to refrain from doing so, both for the points and for your personal privacy. Remember, it's nobody else's business where you're going.

Activating your right turn signal, then turning left can earn three points—six if the maneuver includes zipping through on-coming traffic and cutting someone off. And turning on your signal and letting it blink for 30 or 40 miles on a narrow road while refusing to let the guy behind you pass can add a cool 10 points.

In a strange area (and for some of these folks, their home street qualifies), many people pull over and consult a road map. But that won't get you any points. Instead, stop in the street and look around. Depending on the amount of traffic, this can get from four points (5 a.m., Dec. 26) to 13 points (high noon, July 4). Extra points are available for getting out of your car and flagging down others as they wend their way past you, cursing a blue streak.

When turning left, instead of waiting for traffic in the opposing lane to clear, edge out an inch at a time. Before other motorists realize what has happened,

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you'll have effectively blocked one lane and be well on your way to creating total gridlock. Your reward: six points.

Speed limits can gain quick points, too. Remember to consider every speed limit in one of two ways: either with a decimal point in the middle or squared. Thus, a 55 mph sign indicates you can travel either 5.5 mph or 3,025 mph. No other number is acceptable if you want to increase your point total.

Even small actions gain points, provided you are sufficiently insensitive to the annoying concerns of other people. Those who drive vans or panel trucks earn points by parking right against a corner, ensuring that anyone trying to pull out takes his life into his own hands. (And if you own a mere car, you can erect plywood barriers for the same effect.) When a bicyclist is approaching, a swift move to open your car door a split second before he passes can put a point or two in your knapsack.

Speaking of parking, double-parking earns no points at all. Anyone can do that. But if you double-park against a car filled with perishable groceries or a crying baby, take three points. If the car you block is on fire, double your score.

By the way, this point system doesn't count in Florida, where I live. Stay away.

## Family Conversation

In May, schools tend to let out, at least here in the South, requiring families to spend more time with one another and, when no alternative can be identified, try to communicate.

With the increased time together, parents and kids may notice they can no longer substitute incoherent grunts for actual conversation, as in: "Don't you have homework, son?" "Unh." "Mom, can you chaperone the school dance?" "Gibr."

No, it's now time to use actual words, strung into real sentences, just the way the cavemen did. But conversation between kids and adults is not always what it seems. Mostly, it's a steady process of kids trying to get out of doing anything at all while holding open the option of complaining that there's nothing to do and of parents attempting to chisel away at the self-esteem their kids acquired during the school year, knowing they are in for severe disappointment when they learn they're not quite smart enough to work at McDonald's.

Kids, send Mom and Dad out to inspect and reject the job you did on the lawn and look over these simple phrases, with their translations:



*When I was your age...* This is a catch-all phrase which is used to denote that whatever it is you want to do or have, it ain't gonna happen. Parents remember their childhoods with great nostalgia, except when they can be used as a weapon to bludgeon your desires into submission. In those times, their memories of childhood resemble the bleakest imaginings of Charles Dickens.

*If the other kids wanted to jump off a cliff, would you want to join them?* There is no answer to this that will suffice. If you say no, you are automatically disqualified from doing anything other people are doing for the rest of your life. If you say yes, you will be on the receiving end of an interminable lecture about common sense and priorities. The best way to handle this question is through diversion. "What cliff are we talking about, Mom? Would I have a parachute or a hang glider? Who are these other kids?" Ask enough questions and your parent will become disgusted, walk out of the room and you can pretend to take that as a yes.

*Because I said so.* This is the standard answer a parent will give you if you ask for an explanation for a truly bizarre directive. Remember not to use it against them yourself, as they will reply, "And who the hell are you?," which is another answer you can't use.

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*I'll tell you when you're older.* The translation for this is either "I don't know" – a comment you'll never hear a parent utter – or "I'm too embarrassed to tell you." You've probably already figured this out, but you're never old enough to hear what you want to know. Take my advice and learn it on the street.

*If you're bored, I'll give you something to do.* This is the most devastatingly horrible thing a parent can say. Remember, never, *ever* admit you're bored. Instead, talk constantly all summer about how busy you are and how much pressure you're under, even if your most challenging task involved finding someone to buy you booze. It probably won't keep Dad from commanding you to mow the lawn, but it's worth a crack.

Oops. Hide this. Mom and Dad are back. I'll talk to them as soon as they're done criticizing your work and predicting a horrible future of poverty and want for you.

OK, parents. Your turn. Kidese is a little easier to translate than Parentese, since the youngsters have not yet had the lifetime of experience lying, cajoling, nagging and finagling that you've enjoyed. Here are a few samples:

*I want it, I want it, I want it!* This is usually uttered at the top of one's voice, preferably in a public place,

like church. The proper response is "Shut up." Sometimes, this advice must be repeated several times before it becomes effective and occasionally, it must be accompanied by the threat or actual implementation of physical violence.

*Why?* Younger kids will ask this question, sometimes several hundred times per hour, perpetually giving you a chance to expose your abysmal ignorance. The proper response is "Shut up."

*May I have \$5 for something educational?* This is a disguised plea for cash to purchase weapons, forbidden literature or drugs. The proper answer is "Shut up."

As you can see, memorizing the questions is somewhat complicated, but the answers should give you no major problem.

Enjoy your summer. And if having to hang around your family gets to be too much for you, you can always get a 10- to 20-year vacation just for sticking up a gas station. Just be sure you get caught.

## Wilderness Adventures

Ah, summer. A time when we can put away our heavy coats, turn off the expensive heat and look forward to hot, sticky days of expensive air conditioning and enough bugs to drive us mad.

It's also a time to get out into nature.

I had never done that, so I decided this was the year I'd strike out into the wilderness, take on the environment on my own terms and relive the kind of inner tranquility that must have been part and parcel of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and most homeless people in big cities.

As a nation, we're getting soft. It used to be that we worked with our hands, plying the earth and forcing it to yield our goodies, then went home and pumped iron or something.

Well, we don't do that anymore, and for good reason. It's boring. But we need to substitute something for it, other than watching Animal Planet on TV. So it was that I set out into the woods to study nature first-hand. I hoped it would provide me with some needed exercise, bring me into the fresh air and put me into contact with the gentle woodland creatures, many of which are good to eat.

Early one Saturday morning, I strapped on my backpack, filled with items I would need to survive in the rough country: potato chips, a pillow for nap time, a pack of matches in case I ran into a delectable forest denizen and dip for the potato chips.

I wasn't out five minutes before I turned back and put on something in addition to the backpack. The neighbors were pointing and laughing.

By the time I reached the woods, I already felt renewed. I was in the far country. I was a genuine frontiersman. I almost forgot to watch my favorite cartoons on the portable TV I had brought.

After hiking through the overgrown thicket, I quickly understood what I had been missing – blisters. But that wasn't going to stop me, although it was cause enough for me to whine softly to myself for a mile or two. I desperately wished I had taken the advice of a book on hiking and put some moleskin on the blister. But the book never told me where to find a mole.

Eventually, the beauty of the surroundings overcame my natural wimpiness in the face of even the most trivial pain and I took a good look around.

Everywhere I looked, there were trees. Trees to the left, trees to the right, trees in front, trees behind. Have you ever noticed that all trees look pretty much alike?

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Bored nearly to tears (again), I decided I had been out long enough for my first nap.

When I awoke, refreshed, and replenished my energy with chips and dip, I realized I was not alone. A wild animal was just 10 feet from me!

Afraid to breathe, lest I bring his wrath upon me, I lay still, sweating and thinking of death. Then it happened. The outside air caused me to sneeze.

Fortunately, the noise scared the bunny away. But it was a close call.

My courage supplemented by my conquest of the monster, I brazenly strode into the midst of a flock of sparrows. But as I neared them, much to my surprise, they all flew off. I wasn't going to hurt them, for crying out loud. What a way to live.

After a nap and lunch (potato chips and dip), I looked around and spied a sign that said, "Badger area." As I had never seen a badger, I searched for an animal that would look like one should look. After several hours of hunting (during which, to my chagrin, the potato chips were depleted), I came across three mustachioed guys in brown uniforms. "Where are the badgers?" I asked.

"Batchers?" one said, scowling. "We don' need no stinkin' batchers." He reached into his coat and pulled

out a razor. Luckily, he couldn't find any place to plug it in, so I escaped.

I ran out of the woods as fast as I could, meanwhile admiring the supersonic lines of a three-toed sloth who passed me en route.

Now, back in the comfort of home, I can reflect on my ordeal far from civilization. I have no doubt it was good for me. Just like geometry.

## Vacations

I recently spent a week and tons of cash in South Florida and I'm appalled at the way some people try to communicate with those who were born in other countries.

"Parlor voose Frank-case?" I heard one yahoo say to a visitor from Paris. "Sprethen Zye Dee-utch?" Another asked a man from Berlin.

Later, these two bilingualists made fun of the Frenchman's and German's pronunciation. At least they understood what words they were uttering, even if they were somewhat off on the accenting. You can hardly blame them for calling their questioners "Boob-a."

On second thought, maybe they were pronouncing the words exactly as they should have been pronounced.

I am perfectly qualified to address this phenomenon. I speak several languages: English (although some would argue the point); Pig Latin; Spanish and Arabic (don't ask). I learned the latter because it's so much fun. Even when you're just discussing the weather, you sound as if you're cursing.

But my knowledge of these intricate communication systems and the problems in speaking



them (for example, what's the Pig Latin for "a?") have taught me the best ways to get my message across, no matter what dictator rules the turf upon which I sit.

The key, as some have instinctively grasped, is volume.

It is a fact of the universe that everyone – German, Spanish, French, Bosnian, Russian and even space aliens – can understand English if it is spoken loud enough.

I pity the poor schlemiel who sits in a restaurant patiently trying to get the waiter to understand that he's been poisoned and needs immediate medical attention.

If I were in such a situation, I'd get my point across simply. "Yo, Pedro!" I'd say in a voice that would ensure the English would penetrate a brain made less efficient by the use of another language. "Sick! Poisoned! Get a sawbones pronto or I'll rip out your spine!"

Naturally, threats such as these are necessary only in an emergency. In casual conversation, one should speak slowly as well as loud.

"How! Do! You! Like! American! Food!" you might ask the visitor from an exotic clime, sounding almost exactly like Captain Kirk on Star Trek. Don't bother with this particular question, though, if he's eating scrapple. You won't want to know.

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Despite the natural ability of everyone everywhere to understand high-decibel English, it's usually a good idea to learn a phrase or two, just to impress your hosts when visiting another, lesser, nation.

In Mexico or Spain, for example, you want to learn to say "Una cerveza." This means "One beer." Don't worry if you have trouble pronouncing it. If they want good pronunciation, they should speak English.

After you finish your "cerveza," you'll want to say, "Donde esta el bano?" which is "Where is the bathroom?"

Other countries have odd body language, too. Here, for example, if you scratch your nose, it simply means your nose itches (unless, of course, you're a politician, in which case it, like everything else, means you're lying). If you scratch your nose in Afghanistan, though, you are likely to be taken hostage and murdered by a band of Bahai terrorists. And if you scratch your nose in France, you are likely to be approached by someone with a vaguely obscene suggestion.

Of course, that's the case no matter what you do in France.

It's also important to remember to shift back to normal after the foreign visitor leaves or you come back to America. Otherwise, as you enter the airport in

Miami or New York, someone will take offense and  
plug you.

But isn't it great to be back home again?

## Elevators

One of the advantages of living in Florida, where there are few multistory buildings, is the absence of elevators. Elevators make normal people weird. And they make weird people psychopaths.

One of my pet peeves is those dufuses (dufi?) who charge out of an elevator the instant it stops and the doors open. It never seems to occur to them that someone more important than they – me, for instance – may wish to get on. Sometimes they'll crash right into me, bounce off and land on their cabooses, from which they'll level a gaze of mixed surprise and outrage on me as if it's my fault. I've tried saying, "Excuse me," or helping them up, but I find the best thing to do is to point at them and laugh uproariously. At least, that's the thing that's the most enjoyable.

Once inside an elevator, normally gregarious and thinking people turn into mutants.

I once watched as a young couple, chattering animatedly with each other, approached the elevator I was riding. As soon as they got inside, they both clammed up and stood rigidly, staring at the bank of numbers over the door.

They kept watch on those numbers until the elevator arrived at their destination, at which time they charged off without looking, instantly resuming a fervent conversation.

Since then, I've noticed that in an elevator everyone gawks at those numbers as if willing the car to move. Everyone except me, that is. I'm too busy gawking at the gawkers.

This makes the gawkers uncomfortable. Somehow, it has become normal in our society for strangers to stare at a row of lighted numbers instead of interacting with one another as human beings. I'm all in favor of that. It seems every time I try to interact like a human being, someone finds me out.

There was a day when elevator riders removed their hats, put out their smokes and actually stepped aside so tiny, feeble people in the back of the car could get through. I was once in an elevator with a rider who puffed laboriously on a cigar that had obviously been bought for a nickel a yard, and cut off what the rider wanted to smoke. The rider then pretended not to notice someone trying to push through to get off at a stop.

It was only recently that I realized that rude passenger was Hillary Clinton.

Ha, ha! Just kidding, of course. Hillary Clinton smokes only good cigars.

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If you want to have some fun next time you ride an elevator, try to talk to the people on board. "Hey, take this route a lot?" you might ask. A cold sweat will break out on the forehead of your target as he tries to pretend he didn't hear you. In hard cases, you have to climb right up in front of that bank of numbers. As he's trained himself to be an automaton, he'll have no choice but to look at you.

But beware. Remember that elevators carry some sort of bacteria that breed maniacs. Renfield, King George III, Jeffrey Dahmer and Hillary Clinton were all elevator operators at some point in their lives.

If there's going to be a maniac on that elevator, make sure it's you.

## Pets

My home just wouldn't be the same without the familiar pitter-patter of eight little feet. For one thing, it would be a lot cleaner.

Everyone should have a dog. I have two. Or, rather, they have me. Remember, a home without a dog is a home without hair and filth.

Dogs fulfill a deep human need to have someone to yell at. I frequently yell at my dogs, but they just come to me and lick my face in spasms of unbridled joy. My wife, on the other hand, threatens my happiness for decades to come if I should raise my voice a quarter octave. If only my dogs could cook.

I've had good luck with dogs. Two of them have been among the smartest I've ever seen – a black lab named Molly and a border collie named Dottie, who still lives with me and often ponders the question of why she should wear the collar, rather than me.

But not all my dogs have been canine geniuses. Molly's brother, Josh, was perhaps the stupidest quadruped ever born. He once had a stomach ache and tried to eat grass, but the grass kept outwitting him. Many times, I spent six or seven seconds teaching something to Molly – Boolean algebra, for example –

and she would then spend weeks or sometimes months teaching Josh what little his microscopic brain could grasp.

Needless to say, Josh was one of my favorite dogs of all time.

Sometimes I ask people who seem lonely why they don't join those of us who enjoy the destruction of their vacuum cleaners by Volkswagen-sized clumps of hair and the soothing aroma of a dog who just walked in out of the rain after rolling around in something dead.

Generally, they respond with excuses, like "It's too hard to train one of those beasts" or "I like cats better" or "Why don't you mind your own business?"

It's not hard to train a dog. One must just keep in mind that the dog is, for all intents and purposes, a foreigner. As I pointed out previously, you can force, say, a Frenchman to understand English through sheer volume; so can you teach a dog to do your bidding through window-shattering shrieks.

To teach a dog to sit, for example, simply say, "Sit. Sit! Sit, you stupid mutt!" over and over again in ever-increasing volume. Eventually, your bellowing will lose its entertainment value for Fido and, bored, he will sit down to wait for it to stop. At that point, catch your breath, pet Fido and rasp, "Good dog," assuming you have any voice left.



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Dogs, for some reason known only to them, want to please us. This is the main way they differ from children. This is why you can housebreak a dog in a day but it takes years to accomplish the same end with your son.

Some people seem to latch on to pets that seem strange, alien and idiotic. The craze a few years ago for hedgehogs comes to mind. A hedgehog is a tiny, pointed, unconscious little object with no personality. There's more hedge than hog there. Al Gore owns a hedgehog. In fact, he owns seven.

Others like snakes, lizards, even tarantulas. I once held a tarantula. It was a fuzzy little guy. I petted him, but deep down I knew he really just wanted to eat me but couldn't figure out the logistics.

Then there are cats. I happen to like cats, having had a couple that were pretty nice – that is, that acted just like dogs.

But cats usually do not have that desirable quality. Usually, they will sit on the TV set sharpening their claws on the drapes while you call for them in vain. Nothing will cause a cat to stir unless it spies something to kill. If no victim happens by, you'd be well advised to guard your ankles.

Most cats are basically houseplants with teeth and an attitude. Those who own such a cat should throw it

away and immediately get half a dozen dogs. You'll never miss the cat. You'll never have time.

## Telemarketers

The telephone rang, right on schedule, in the middle of dinner. I tied my meal to the stake in the center of the table, lest it escape, and answered.

"Hi, Ken? How are you, buddy?" the voice, which I did not recognize, said.

"Uh, fine, fine. And how are you?" I replied jovially. For all I knew, it may have been Ed McMahon with my \$10 million.

"Great," the voice said unctuously. "Say, Ken, I'd like to discuss your insurance needs with you."

My head suddenly ached. My stomach heaved. I knew I'd have to free dinner for tomorrow's hunt.

"Gee, I'm sorry, but I don't have time to talk right now," I said. "If you'll give me your home telephone number, I'll call you back later."

"I don't conduct business from my home," the caller said haughtily.

"Neither do I," I said, triumphantly slamming the phone down hard enough to ensure he would soon need an eardrum transplant.

I fired a tranquilizer dart into the hide of dinner and put it outside, where it could go home until I could find

it again. Then I went inside and opened a book I was reading, "The Secret Life of Cement."

Just as I was getting engrossed in the plot, the telephone rang.

Grumbling, I hung the book on the stuffed warthog on my wall and stomped over to the phone. "Hello," I said gruffly.

"Congratulations!" the disgustingly cheery voice on the other end said. "You have been selected to receive a lifetime subscription to *Belly Button Lint Collector Weekly*. This upscale magazine contains interviews with prominent belly button lint collectors, including each of our last seven presidents, as well as tips on displaying your collection to its best advantage and news from the world of belly button lint collecting. If you'll state your name at the beep, we'll start your subscription immediately and bill you later for the \$93 annual charge."

The telephone beeped and I left my ex-wife's name and address. Then I hung up, wondering if I should give in to my innate desire to rip the telephone right out of the wall or not. I decided to give it one more chance. One.

I couldn't get interested in my book again, so I decided to see what was on television. As usual,

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nothing decent was on the networks. Thank goodness for satellite.

I turned to the All Albanian channel and quickly got wrapped up in a political comedy about life under Khrushchev. Someday, I'll have to learn Albanian so I'll know what these guys are saying. At any rate, the executions were hilarious.

Just at the climax – or what I took to be the climax – the telephone rang.

"Aarrgh!" I commented, scaring the bejabbers out of my aardvark. I trudged to the phone, picked it up and barked, "Yeah?"

"Mr. Books, this is the Society for the Prevention of Dandruff in Parakeets," a voice said. I sighed and leaned against the wall, rubbing my eyes.

"According to our records, you own or once owned a parakeet," the caller said. "Perhaps yours is one of the lucky few who have not been debilitated by dandruff. But even if that is the case, there are thousands and thousands of poor Pollys who suffer beyond imagination from this horrible malady. Could we count on you for a modest donation? Perhaps \$500?"

"You can count on me to hunt you down, rip your nose out of your face with such vigor that your toes go into your feet and toss you into a vat of dandruff," I

said, somewhat miffed. "Don't call here! Don't ever call here! Leave me alone!"

A large crack appeared on the receiver as I placed it into its cradle with appropriate force.

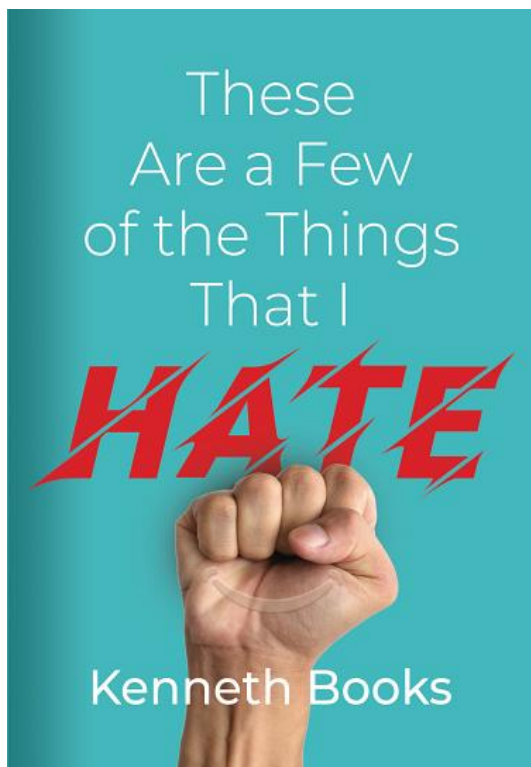
The program was over when I got back and had been replaced by a cooking show. As the local grocery stores simply refuse to stock canned walrus, there was no point in watching.

I sat down at my desk and got out my rock collection. I'm especially proud of this collection, which consists of 200 rocks that look exactly like every other one in the collection. The color, shape, weight and size are all identical. If you think accumulating a collection like that is easy, just try it.

The telephone rang. My eyes widened and my teeth grated. I ran to the phone, picked up the receiver and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Whaddaya want, Orifice?"

"Well, if that's how you want it, just forget it," said the voice on the other end and the line went dead.

It was Ed McMahon.



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