

***Survival of the Funniest
Adult Contestants
2009***

NOTE: Entries are unedited.

THE LITTLE MAN AT THE DOOR

by Jean Thompson Barrick
Los Gatos, California

The other day I heard someone say, "Well I'm not *perfect*, you know." So who is? Even I have to admit one minor shortcoming—I lose things.

When I lived in London back in the 50's every respectable female over sixteen had a pair of plain black suede pumps to go with her basic black dress. Those high-heeled instruments of torture were often kicked off toward the end of a party or dance. So, at a farewell gathering for friends returning to the States, we girls took our shoes off. When it was time to go home we put them back on and left. Anything wrong with that?

Well, a week later, when I went to the closet to put on those pumps, I discovered the shoes didn't match. Thinking my housemates were playing another trick on me, I confronted them. "Okaaay, gals, where's my other shoe?"

"What shoe?"

"The mate to this one," I responded, holding it up.

"What are you *talking* about?" Liz sounded exasperated.

"We haven't done anything with your shoe," Mary added, "*honest*."

Then it dawned on me what probably happened. The shoes we had taken off at the party were nearly identical and this one was even my size. It must have been the guest of honor who ended up with my shoe, I reasoned, remembering where I sat next to her.

"I didn't notice anything unusual," said a voice on the other end of the telephone line, "but most of our clothes have been packed with the household goods, and they were picked up yesterday. I'll have to check when I get back to the States. If I have an odd shoe, I'll mail it to you and you can return mine." A couple months later I had matching shoes again.

That shoe is just the beginning of a whole list of things I have lost over the years. To make it worse, every time I ask my husband if he has seen a lost item, I can count on him to reply, "A little man came to the door wanting _____" He finishes that sentence with whatever I've lost. His attempt to be funny does not amuse me.

About the time I turned forty I started losing my eyeglasses, setting them down somewhere in the house and spending an eon searching for them. So I

vowed to stop. I tried parking them on top of my head, Jackie Kennedy style, but that didn't work. I would forget where they were. Next I tried attaching them to a chain to hang around my neck. It seemed a good solution for a while. But, after seeing how silly other middle-aged women looked taking them off and on repeatedly, I stopped that too. As I became more farsighted and my arms didn't grow any longer, the only solution seemed to be to put them on and leave them on.

As for cameras, I have had but one stray—my favorite little Zeiss Ikonta—lost in Washington, DC. *I must have left it in the car.* Not there. *Then it must be at Carol's house.* Not there either. Apparently it was left on a bench in Lafayette Park when a demonstration in front of the White House distracted me.

Now there really is some excuse for losing umbrellas. When you go out it's raining, but then it stops. One can hardly be expected to remember an umbrella when it isn't even raining anymore.

Then there are the lost gold earrings. It isn't fair to have ears that deliberately eject jewelry. My husband has even pondered buying them by the gross, investing in earring stock or hawking mismatched pairs.

Over the years I have lost many other things, including my reputation when the ring my sister loaned me disappeared. Scarves and gloves have vanished, my husband's socks have been eaten by the clothes dryer, and things I barely remember have evaporated like a magician's rabbit.

But shoes are still the worst culprits. When I broke a bone in my foot, I first wore a hard cast, then a wooden clog with Velcro fastener. As the bone began to heal, I started wearing regular shoes for short intervals, but when I went out I took the clog along in case my foot swelled. That started the old problem. "I can't find my right shoe," I admitted to my husband, knowing he'd consider it the next sign of dementia. Then I saw the look on his face, and turned away just as he began the ritual, "A little man came." A week later I found my shoe, right there in the fluffs under our bed.

I have finally learned to weather the humiliation that comes with discovery of each loss. After all, most of these things are not really lost, only mindlessly gone astray. And going public like this, I already feel better.

But sometimes I wonder if there really is a little man who comes to the door.

MY FLEA ADVENTURE

by Marianne Bickett
Campbell, California

When I studied music as a child, a mnemonic phrase helped me learn to read notes on the ukulele. Now, the phrase "My dog has fleas" has a newer, more visceral meaning for me: the invasion of unwanted body and houseguests.

According to Webster's New and Unabridged Dictionary, a flea is: "any of several small, wingless, jumping insects that are parasitic and bloodsucking." Also, something I didn't know, a flea can be "a sharp, stinging rebuke, rebuff or hint: a flea in one's ear." Now I can add to my list of "unwanted creatures sucking blood out of my body" the name of "flea", right next to "tick" and "mosquito".

We rescued this lovely golden retriever over a year ago and we love her. Our precious dog, Lucy, is a five-year-old female with a big heart and has brought great joy into our lives. One of her health issues is a severe allergy to fleabites. I've spent the past year trying various preventative anti-flea medications, give her daily garlic and special vitamins that are supposed to be unpalatable to fleas, and even given serious consideration to dancing naked under a full moon cursing the small demons. So far, well, we've not had great success. Living in the Bay area of California is like living in a flea heaven. There's usually no winter frost or snow to kill the critters off and they really like it here, as do a million plus human beings with an ample supply of pets to annoy, let alone all the other wild animals in the area. In other words, the fleas far out number us with any semblance of brains. Our recent colder weather has helped, I'm sure, but last summer there was no shortage of fleas!

Our story begins one evening in August 2008, when my husband, Brian, was repairing an archway in our school garden. I entertained Lucy by playing ball with her and when Brian was finished, he threw the ball one last time before it was time to leave; dusk was soon upon us. I turned and gazed at the lush, green field, the blue sky, when suddenly I hear my husband say, "Look, she's rolling in something!" I knew from experience, and my gut feeling immediately resounded in agreement, that this was not a good thing. Knowing how dogs love to roll in stinky, and often times dead creatures, I yelled as I ran. Sure enough, there she was, rolling like she had found heaven on earth. And I'm sure it must have been heaven for her because if dogs can smile, she was exuberant. The happier she looks, I thought in terror as I ran, the worse this must be. As I grabbed her from her reverie, I screamed in horror: a small, most disgusting dead possum was there and the smell was beyond comprehension.

We ran home with lightening speed and bathed Lucy. One thing I should have done was re-apply the flea medication after she was dry. But, I didn't and within a few days, much to my surprise and dread, I discovered fleas literally crawling all over my 75-pound baby and she was having a reaction (welts around the bites, huge rashes all over her body). I gasped at the veterinarian's office when I saw her shaved hind legs, so red and sore. How could I have let this happen? The kind veterinarian smiled and told me, "Don't worry, she's experiencing life. She got to roll on a dead thing, she gets to go to the beach, and she has you to love: she's having the best dog's life in spite of all this mess!" I think of those words often as I spend literally twelve hours the next day cleaning and

spraying our house.

Once again our brave pooch was on antibiotics, steroids, and, new flea medicine. I think of my dog, who looked up at me as I was paying the \$150.00 bill with her precious smile, tongue hanging out, and eyes bright and full of trust and love. During our drive home from the vet she put her nose out the window, with her mouth open, and most certainly a smile, her hair blew in the wind. I turned and caught a glimpse of her that way, so free and at peace, shaved legs and all, and it made me think about the concept of Faith. In spite of all she'd gone through, the bites and irritation, she found her favorite tennis ball when we got home and eagerly looked at me with anticipation. I couldn't help myself from crying as I saw such sweetness, forgiveness, and love. "Fleas happen, my dear", I hear from the depths of her soul, "and, by the way, Mommy; when do we go walkies?"

Author's note: We returned the next day to the scene of the crime and my kind husband collected the dead baby possum and disposed of it. Lucy recovered just fine. Part of the cost of our ordeal was six months of flea spraying inside and outside by professionals; we learned that flea larvae can live up to six months! I can happily proclaim we have been flea-free for some time now, but I still itch whenever I think of fleas and may do so for a long time to come.

OPERATION HAMSTER

by Kristine Ciraulo
Morgan Hill, California

As a child, I always longed for a pet of my own. Dogs and cats were never an option since we lived in a small apartment, but I begged and pleaded with my parents for a hamster, a guinea pig, or a fluffy little bunny. I guess they were concerned about the smell or the noise or something, because I was never allowed to get anything except a stupid goldfish in a bowl.

I don't recall a lot of the details regarding said fish, but I do remember being quite disappointed that it wasn't the cute and cuddly critter I had hoped for.

Fast forward 20 years. I'm now an adult with a wonderful daughter of my own. And in the magical land of motherhood, I found myself to be.....well.....how can I put this? I may have been just a tiny bit over-indulgent with my daughter.

OK so maybe that's an understatement. I'm not gonna lie.....She was spoiled!

So when she was little and wanted a pet, I of course always gave in to her wishes. What resulted was a ridiculous assortment of birds, frogs, fish, turtles, cats, dogs, ducks, rabbits and hamsters parading through our lives during those early years.

Now you must understand that as an extremely over-indulgent mommy, I was crazed. I once spent my weekly grocery allowance buying Beanie Babies on E-bay to add to my daughter's already burgeoning collection. Crazy right? But that's how it was.

And so I speak today of the Great Hamster Caper of 1999.

It started one morning when my sweet little angel woke up and announced "Mommy, I would just LOVE to have a cute lil'hamster for a pet."

So of course I was at the pet store that afternoon with checkbook in hand. And of course I got her not one but TWO hamsters.... and an elaborate habitat complete with an exercise wheel and a maze of yellow tubes..... and food.....and water bottles..... and snacks..... and toys..... and bedding..... Cha-Ching!! We are talking hundreds of dollars in hamster supplies. (Remember..... I was crazed)

Of course, my darling daughter was delighted with her new friends, and she named the little fur balls Fudge and Cupcake. Fudge was a dark chocolate brown with white patches, and Cupcake was the color of an iced latte.

I guess it was kind of fun watching them as they rolled around the house in their clear acrylic ball, or when they crawled through the yellow tubes that were attached to their cage. My daughter certainly got a kick out of them. And they did look sort of cute when they curled up together and went to sleep. But to tell you the truth, I still wasn't all that fond of them. They were an awful lot of work without a lot of rewards.

All night long they ran endlessly on their metal exercise wheel, costing me precious hours of sleep due to the incessant squeaking of metal on metal. And it was positively disgusting to clean their cage every week. Let me tell you.....those yellow plastic tubes, (aka: hamster potties) REALLY stink! And to be honest, the little fur balls didn't seem quite so cute when I was gagging at the stench of hamster pee first thing in the morning!

Well as fate would have it, I had unknowingly purchased a boy hamster AND a girl hamster. And what happened next was inevitable. Oh yes.....Cupcake got pregnant!

At first I hoped she was just getting fat from eating too much and not working out enough on the exercise wheel. (As if that were possible!) But shortly thereafter I had to face the truth when she gave birth to what seemed like 17,000,000 babies. Ugly, hairless, pink, squirming blobs of baby hamster nuggets.

Ugly or not, we were pleased to have witnessed the miracle of birth. So you can imagine my horror when Daddy Fudge waddled over and began to nonchalantly EAT the babies! How horrific is that? I quickly scooted my daughter out of the room and assured her that Fudge was only playing with his offspring.

It was all very traumatic to say the least, but I was able to rescue several of the babies who were later sold back to the pet store. And the proud papa went to live in exile in a separate part of the cage.

I had horrible visions of Fudge somehow breaching security and ending up back in Cupcake's wing looking for some more romance....which would have led to more babies....which would have led to more carnage! I knew that something had to be done immediately to ensure that this nightmare would never, EVER be repeated. So the next day I called the vet and made an appointment to have Fudge neutered.

Well "Operation Hamster" concluded with \$200 in vet bills, and little Fudge was sent home with a hand-made collar around his neck fashioned out of a DIXIE CUP so he couldn't bite at his stitches. Actually it was just one stitch.....One teeny-tiny \$200 stitch.

And.... to add insult to injury, the vet actually SNICKERED at me when I picked Fudge up. She said that she had never "fixed" a hamster before. What?

Are you kidding me? Could it really be that no one else had ever been in this situation before?

Ultimately, after costing me tons of money and causing me great humiliation at the vet's office, both Fudge and Cupcake had the audacity to DIE a few months later. Ungrateful little heathens.....

Looking back, I can hardly believe that I willingly went through all that expense and inconvenience for a couple of rodents. I sometimes wonder if the word "sucker" is stamped across my forehead.

I can't help but think that I would have been better off buying my daughter a couple of hamster Beanie Babies on E-bay.....

SURVIVAL: NOT A GENUINE HOUSEWIFE

by Jeanmarie Tarmann Derry
Gilroy, California

My grandmother was called a hausfrau. I have been called a housewife. Actually I am not married to my house. I am married to my life, my job, my children, my teaching, my students who have numbered, since 1979, 9,990. I could open a town with all the kidlets I have taught.

The most important of these are my own three daughters. They have been with me through thick and thin. And by that I mean Thin Mints; we did sell the most Thin Mints, when my eldest daughter was a Girl Scout, but only because her auntie Claire bought many boxes of every kind and stuck them in her freezer.

My daughters are always with me. Via text messaging, internet messages, email. And the proverbial, "MAAAAAm where are you?"

My eldest once called the police because for once, her mother who never swam, decided to take midnight swim and then soak in the hot tub.

First she called our neighbor Pita to say, "Mom's missing."

Our neighbor, Pita, asked her all the usual questions. "Is she on the john? Is she in the garage doing laundry?"

"No she's not here," my daughter whimpered.

Three policemen with flashlights came into the backyard just as I stepped out of our steaming hot tub like Venus rising from the ocean buck naked.

"See. There's your mom, Shannon."

"Yes, while this has been very relaxing deputies, you may go home. I thought for once, during this full moon, I 'd go out and soak in a nice hot tub alone with only the moon, the hot steaming water and me."

"Thanks Pita. Nightie night,"

And I sang my daughter to sleep with our usual lullabye.

"I love you Sweetheart. Oh yes I do. When you're not with me I'm blue, oh Sweet heart it's true, oh Sweetheart I love you."

And as I sang and rubbed her back, tickle rubs Cayla calls it, she fell asleep.

This frustrated poet, oxymoron there, and moron I am, became a sports writer, local columnist for the ***Pinnacle News***. When the editor heard this couch potato was running her first triathlon, (I was raising money for the Leukemia Lymphoma Society) I found out the children's great aunt has leukemia.

While the life situation is tragic, my daughter's guffaws told me, there's nothing funnier than this fat derriere squeezing into latex and a wet suit to swim a mile and a half around orange cones in the San Francisco Bay.

The first day in the pool the coaches said, "Swim 60 laps." I barely made
The next day our coach who zipped by us on our bikes said, "I'm gonna make you cry."

The next Saturday, I got into my groove. Eights weeks later I finished the race. The only person behind me was a gal who was nearly drowning in the bay. But when I finished, everyone else who had run that day was already at the finish line and I felt like I had run the Olympics and won. Everyone was there cheering me on.

But, when, you ask, do you write if you're married to your house?

I get up at 4 AM to write.

I write about Max and Gussie, my parents, doing Arthur Murray Dance Studio every Thursday night. It's the only way they got out of the house when we were little.

To this day my dad can cut a rug. He trips the light fantastic.

Unlike my mother and I who need our sleep. Gussie was an emergency room nurse who worked 11 pm – 7 AM so she could drive us to school.

Yes, (yawn) I need my sleep.

When I've have no zzzz's I make no sense. You may have noticed this today.

With no sleep my Mom and I lose everything, our keys, our minds. My girls lose everything. I say the usual mom stuff..."Dear Saint Anthony, please come down something has been lost and must be found, Mariah's black eye liner."

Or, "Retrace your steps." Or, "Did you leave it at Alex's house when you spent the night?"

Then, there are the joys of a thin wallet.

The kids know I always have a hidden \$20.00 somewhere. \$20 for the pizza boy, the dry cleaner. Unfortunately they've found all my hiding places.

Same thing at Christmas. By the time we locate the presents I hid last year, the children have grown an inch or a shoe size. Some of the little Xmas jammies I've bought will have to be presents for as yet unborn grandbabies.

Ah, the housing market. That tickles our ribs.

I paid my mortgage faithfully every month since 1981. However with my daughter who got married this year, we're a little short on cash.

Pay for the the Vera Wang dress or the house payment?

"Mom," the bride to be said, "I want to do what girls do nowadays and lay in the mud the day after my wedding."

"Well, keep your dress for your someday daughter or my name is mud."

Survival: Not a genuine housewife. Oh I cooked every night for the first 13 years. The second 13, my kids have learned to cook or graze. We call our middle daughter's cooking Cayla's Catering.

We will survive we will thrive. All are happy healthy and serve the lord. This is what I prayed every day the girls were in my womb. I asked Granka Ellen (My daughter couldn't pronounce grandma), "Will my daughters be nuns?" She said we can serve God in other ways, as deputy sheriffs, nurses, or film makers or artists. What matters is being true to ourselves." Wise woman.

So God bless. Take care. And as I tell my daughters each time I see them, be happy and safe.

MY DOG JACK

by Donald Eugene Egbert
Milpitas, California

Let me tell you about my first DOG! When I was about ten years old or so and living in Deerfield, Kansas with my parents, I had morning and evening paper routes for the Hutchinson Herald and the Wichita Beacon. I was technically the local agent for these papers since I was the only one delivering newspapers.

One day, a stray dog came to town and made up with me. He was full grown, SHORT-HAIRED and WHITE-HAIRED WITH BLACK SPOTS. I asked Mother if I could keep him? Mother and Dad said yess but he had to stay outside. That was okay with me, I never knew where he spent the night even in blizzards. I can remember once when the overnight temperature was over 20 degrees below zero. There were a few times he accidentally got locked up in the Santa Fe Depot Lobby. He could not get out. He had to stay to morning.

Mother was convinced after a while that he was sucking eggs and we needed to get rid of him. which meant the choice way was to haul him to the next town and dump him which was about 10 miles to a placed Holcomb and dump him. That is what we did and then went on to the next town of Garden City to spend the evening.

We usually spent every Saturday night with Mother and Dad shopping, movies and visiting with friends, Dorothy and I seeing the latest movie.

We then started home as usual. Apparently Jack headed for home as soon as we dumped him. He was there on the back porch when we arrived home. Dad said a dog that could do that had a lot of character and would not eat the eggs. Probably a small wild animal had sucked the eggs. It was no longer Jack's problem.

From then on, you could not get Jack in a car.

From then on he was apparently ny dog although he barked my Dad around town while my Dad delivered the freight from the deport to different businesses in town.

I spent a lot of time while waiting for the bus in the morning and train in the evening. Waiting for the morning bus and evening train gave me a lot of time to play with the dog. This is when I taught him many tricks such as rough hose, shake hands, roll over and many other tricks. I used leather gloves for safety when palying rough house with him. As a matter of fact, after teaching him rough house and shake hands, we played rough house and he got too rough. I hollered "ouch!" and the stopped the game and he offered his paw to apologize.

During afternoon paper deliveries, Jack would repeatedly fight with one specific dog in town that he did not like and Jack would always lose. Jack would usually fight this dog and disappear afterward, and I would assume that that was the end of him. In 3 to 4 days, he would return in spotless condition. My Dad, finally spotted him coming back from the Arkansas River. You must realize that the other dog was not always home and hence not fight that day.

After a few years, I went to work in a service station and did not have time for him, but he still followed my sister and took care as she delivered the papers. Eventually I changed schools to the Garden City school system and really forgot about Jack except when I came home to visit. He still "delivered" the freight at the depot.

Eventually, my parents decided to move to Cimarron, Kansas and leave Jack behind. (Please note: In the time since Jack had returned to Deerfield, no one could get him in a car.)

Jack never got in a car again after that first time. Every one should understand that, right? When all belongings were loaded from the house to the box car, Jack jumped in the car and would not get out. Dad decided to take him along. After moving to Cimarron, Jack took up duties at the Depot such as delivering freight. Jack had eventually stopped coming home to eat since there were two restaurants in town that gave steaks. I went in the Air Force and finally was sent to Germany for the last two years, two months, and two days but who is counting. Anyway, I did not see Jack during all of that time. When I returned home, I was in a hurry to get to go to Kansas State University. While getting ready to go, I decided to go to the Depot. There was Jack who greeted me with a hand shake which I returned with a hand shake! He followed me home that day and stayed two weeks after that which was when I knew for the first time that he was really MY DOG!!!

He passed away about two years later under a baggage cart at the Depot a couple of days before I was coming home for a weekend. Mother had me bury him.

Dad was asked to provide an obituary for the local paper, the Jacksonian in Cimarron, Kansas. That story was published in the Jacksonian with a photograph, both on the front page. Not bad for a stray dog that lived over 18 years by my estimate. By the way, his name was Jack.

Jack always got in the photographs at family gatherings. Attached is a photograph of my sister Dorothy, Jack and myself.

PUT HIM IN THE BIN

by Sian Ferguson
Campbell, California

There's times I want to put my baby
brother in the bin
At first he didn't seem to mind, because
he fitted in
His bottom half was downward and his
legs were sticking up
But then he started crying, when he
knew that he was stuck
When I feel I've had enough of him,
I wish that he would go
But then I love him once again,
my love swings to and fro
And when I think of Mom and Dad - I love
them both a ton
But brother - yes, the pesty - is my
true love - number one!

EVERYDAY FUN WITH WORDS

by Howard Gray
Morgan Hill, California

I would like you to think of words as paint colors on a pallet, your intellect and mouth as your brush and everyone else you meet as your canvas. It helps to have a good vocabulary but more importantly is the act of listening well, and being observant and to read and hear everything around you as if the writer or talker really means what they say.

Government offices large and small are excellent venues of inspiration as are the continuum of advertisements we see and hear all around us. The success in confronting bureaucrats with their often dual meaning messages is to approach them with humility and a natural and reasonable sounding voice. The following are two examples from the small town where I live.

Scene one is the public library, a sign next to the checkout counter reads **“Line Forms Here.”** Naturally I read this and take its meaning literally. So I stand next to the checkout table waiting until a clerk is available. She arrives.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’d like a form, please.”

“A form! for what?”

“Apparently I need a form to get into line.” I said while moving my eyes in the direction of the sign. The clerk getting a little exasperated now.

“You don’t need a form! It means the line forms here!”

“Ah! So, the form needs lines?”

“No there are no forms with or without lines, give me your books and I’ll check you out.”

“I’m sorry about the confusion but I think you must admit that the wording on the sign is a bit ambiguous and since we are in a library, while the only currency is words I would have expected a little more clarity.”

Scene two my local US Post Office, standing in line I notice a sign in front of each of the Postal employees positions, it reads. **“Fill out Forms in Advance.”** Eventually I am beckoned by a lady whose name according to her tag on her uniform is Beth.

It has been my experience that if you can engage people in these situations by their first name it makes the encounter a little less hostile, they tend to regard you as a relative (maybe a distant relative that they would rather forget) instead of a deranged stranger.

“Tell me Beth do you speak Advance?”

“Pardon”

“Advance, do you speak it? It says here to Fill out the Forms in Advance. I have seen signs that say fill out forms in English or Spanish but never in Advance, I assumed with all the recent immigration to America that this must be another minority language we must accommodate.”

“No” she says leaning toward me as a nothyer would to a child, “It means fill out any forms you have before you come to the counter!”

“O’ really, thank you Beth that clears up everything but hopefully you can

see the cause for the confusion?"

Phone calls from companies and organizations are often a good source of engagement again listen to exactly to what is being said, and how I reacted to the specific words being spoken in the following two examples.

"Hi, this is Doctor Jones office".... but, before the talker could go any further I said. "How impressive, a talking office what else can you do?" Note the voice characterized them-selves as an office not as a person. So it was easy to take advantage of this difference.

Another phone call "Hello my name is Sue I'm with the American Heart Association Before she could go on I said "Thanks for calling Sue, but you really didn't really need to bother, I already have one.

"Have what?" she asked.

"A heart silly, I assume you want to sell me a new heart." I said

Several years ago Safeway introduced a new line of beef, called "Rancers Reserve." At the entrance to my local store a very nice lady was handing out discount coupons and samples of B.B.Q'D tri-tip beef. It was indeed very good.

But not content in letting the sample do the talking she went on to sell the new brand finally she said "This is the best beef we have ever sold at Safeway."

After this statement I let a pause in the conversation hang for a while then I said. "I want to make sure I understand exactly what you are telling me. You said that this is the best beef that Safeway has ever sold is that correct?"

"Yes that's right."

"Now I've been a loyal customer at this store for close to twenty years, and you're telling me, for all those years you have been selling me inferior beef?"

"No, now that's not what I mean, it's just that this is very good beef."

"But if this is the best beef you have ever sold, then before what you sold me must have been inferior to this beef. " There was no way out for her to defend the un-defendable I added salt to wound by sayig "From now on I think I'll shop at Knob Hill I'm sure they know how to look after their long time customers, good day."

To effectively master the craft of punning and word-smithing requires quick thinking and the ability to blend clever and creative puns or words into normal conversation with a straight face and the appropriate voice.

Another verbal counter was at Heathrow Airport just prior to boarding the plane a nice young lady asked if I was taking anything sharp on board? "Only my whit," I replied.

If a Punster really pays attention there are hundreds of opportunities every day to engage in word play whether it is your lover, mother, or the person in the next cubicle at work.

So go out into this great big wide world and confuse and amuse people, the pun is fun my son.

THE HEALING POWER OF SHOES

by Laura G. Hastings
Saratoga, California

Chapter One

My dad joked at the Thanksgiving table, as he always did. He chatted with his sons in law about the economy and his investments. Everyone laughed. Unfortunately that was our last time with him. I am always grateful it was a joyous time. He died suddenly. The whirlwind of activity began with all the phone calls, appointments and paperwork. Soon, we were almost upon the day of the funeral. In my fog I ducked into Target to possibly pick up something to wear. I held 2 dresses and wandered into the shoe department.

As I tried on a pair of shoes, a woman next to me commented on how cute they were. She chose the same pair in a different size. Then she said something that would make anyone cringe: "Well maybe we'll wear them at the same time, in the same place." I held back the tears, but as I spoke, I just cried, "I don't think so. I am buying them to wear to my dad's funeral." I hated to say it but it just came out. She looked at me, startled and sympathetic and said, "Oh my gosh. Are you OK?" I cried more and she hugged me, right there in Target. As she hugged me, she said, "It'll be alright...If it makes you feel better, I might wear these to my niece's baptism. "

I said, "That is beautiful. I will think of you and pray that it is a beautiful day for all of you. Take care."

With that, I moved away, feeling uplifted by the kindness of a stranger. I didn't even try on the clothes. I purchased the items, but left the store with so much more than clothes and shoes! I left with the hope of the goodness in people.

Chapter Two

Somehow my 8 year old son had mysteriously lost his tennis shoes. How could this happen? Is it possible that in mid-October we went somewhere and left in such a hurry that he left without his shoes?! He thought he had possibly left them at a friend's house during a Halloween party. I emailed the family, but she replied that she did not find them. This was sad for my son because he does like his things and dislikes losing them.

A few weeks later was when his Grandpa died suddenly. For my son, it was another, much greater loss. Days began and days ended and I am not sure all that went on in between. It was a difficult, emotional, and busy time for all of us. In the midst, our friend left a brief message that she had, in fact, found the missing shoes in the far corner of their backyard. She left them at our front door. My son was relieved to find the shoes. We cried and laughed together as we realized some things come back to us- perhaps they can provide us with a small amount of comfort for the loss of things we really love best.

SWAP GIRL

by Kristine Lewis
Palo Alto, California

Author's note: I smiled through public jeers and my own tears when I worked off a ticket for driving under the influence in San Francisco. The system is justifiably tough on this serious crime. My consequences included a one-year driver's license suspension, three years probation, a permanent criminal record, and thousands of dollars in fines and fees. I regret my actions, thank the universe that no one was hurt, and count the entire experience as a wake-up call.

The single worst piece of legal advice I ever followed? "Don't ever, ever talk to the police until your attorney arrives." When the California Highway Patrol stopped me near the Cesar Chavez exit on the 101 freeway in San Francisco for weaving in traffic, I said four words, over and over, "I want an attorney."

Remaining "silent" accelerated my trip to the city jail on Bryant Street. Jail made me cold, scared, and most of all, claustrophobic. I pounded futilely on the clouded Plexiglas window of the odious cell until my release seven hours later. I prayed every prayer a good Lutheran girl knows and one more. *I prayed that I would never again see the inside of a jail.* When my day in court arrived, I agreed to the humiliation of community service instead of more jail time.

The day I reported to SWAP, the Sheriff Worker Assistance Program, Deputy Sheriff Dupre told me exactly how I would repay my debt to society. "Be here by 8 a.m. or you won't be allowed to work. Keep your vest on at all times. Don't take it off at the end of the day until an officer tells you to. You can bring a purse. No phone." He looked at my wide eyes. "You've never had anything like this happen to you before, have you?"

"No. No sir."

For three weeks, I wore an orange vest that blared SWAP on the back in huge black letters. I called myself SWAP girl. Every day meant riding with a supervisor in a white Department of Water and Power van to sweep city streets, gutters, and sidewalks.

One morning, Stanley, a linebacker look-alike, drove our work crew through the Hunter's Point Bayview district. We stopped at a red light. Three young black men waited to cross the street. I reached over and clicked down the door lock.

Stanley glanced at the men, looked me up and down, and chuckled. "Do you really think those men are going to jump a city van with ME driving?"

That was exactly what I imagined.

The women in the backseat started laughing.

“Okay! Enough already!” I laughed, seeing myself as they saw me, an overly cautious white woman.

After another mind-numbing morning sweeping the steamy gutters of the Mission District, the women in my van started talking about cell phones. Packing our phones to work inside ours bras gave us that much in common.

Desiree said, “I do Metro PCS.”

LaTasha added, “Forty dollars for everything.”

I said I didn’t know anyone who used Metro PCS. “If it’s so great, why doesn’t everyone use it?”

“Everybody DO DO Metro PCS!” the women said coolly. I shut up.

Days with Shantae as our driver meant the constant blare of her favorite place on the radio dial. We listened to a fundamentalist Christian station while the van rolled over Potrero Hill and through Hayes Valley. The radio preacher told the Samson and Delilah story.

Bored beyond belief, I launched a campaign to get Shantae to view Bible stories metaphorically instead of literally. “Have you ever considered that the story could be a metaphor?”

“God ANNOINTED Samson’s hair. When Delilah cut it off, he LOST his anointment.”

“Maybe the story is symbolic. Maybe it’s a moral lesson that if you play fast and loose with sex, bad things will happen to you.”

There was only one correct way to look at the story on that day. Let’s just say we had a metaphorical tit fight.

“God *anointed* Samson. The anointment was in his hair,” she repeated

“I’m just saying, maybe the story is a lesson in living, like one of the parables Jesus told.”

Tension. Silence filled the van. Another woman on the work crew rescued me from myself.

“Stop saying those things, Kristine! It makes her ANGRY!” said Mandy, a former heroin addict who got fixes through a city-run methadone program. Mandy whispered, “You could lose your day.” I stopped talking.

I had heard the stories told in hushed tones about other workers who had bucked authority. “If you talk back, a supervisor can drive you back to the Sheriff’s department. Your day won’t count against your sentence. The sheriff can even send you back to jail.”

At lunch Shantae growled, “Stay in the van.” She picked up our phoned-in food orders from a pizza and sandwich place. Other days she had allowed us to remove our vests and go into the restaurant with her, a small freedom. *Did I put her in this foul mood?*

I worked my ass off that afternoon under an I-280 freeway exit. I waded through the thick ivy picking out all kinds of litter from rotting food and used hypodermic needles to an old blanket. My new goal—garnering approval from the offended Shantae to avoid losing my day.

Work finished about 1:30. We tossed our gray leather and denim gloves, bright red plastic rakes and shovels into the van’s rear door. Relief flowed through me when I heard Shantae’s loud and approving voice. “You worked hard GIRL!”

Whew!

RISING TO NEW HEIGHTS

by Nancy M. Lowe
Morgan Hill, California

He was tall. I mean, seriously tall. I wasn't quite sure how just much air space separated Bob's layer of the atmosphere from mine, but I could tell it was A LOT by the lightning bolt that struck every time I looked up into his - soft green eyes. This lightning storm was not the beating of a love-struck heart. No, rather it was the pleading of an age-struck neck, begging not to be twisted and tortured like pretzel dough – because that's what it felt like every time I looked up at him. But! Bob was funny. He was interesting. He was handsome. And there are times in the life of a 40-something single woman when sacrifices must - be - made. So when Bob asked me out for Friday night I ignored the threat of torticollis - and I said yes.

When Friday finally came, I was at my desk at Kaiser when my daughter called. I picked up the phone and all I could hear on the other end was a raspy croak. My daughter had no voice, and her vicious cough was getting so bad that her friend was bringing her in to see the doctor. Six hours later, I was driving her home with a sack full of medications and a diagnosis of “not-pneumonia-just-a bad-case-of-bronchitis”.

My daughter needed rest. But I was late for my date with Bob! When I called him, amazingly, I didn't hear any whining. No griping. There was not even a guilt factory in operation. All I heard was Bob saying, “Don't worry. Just take care of your daughter. Once you get her home, if she's doing okay, we'll just go to dinner, then you can get right back to her.” This was a dream come true. Not only was Bob interesting, funny and handsome, but I could now add to his list of attributes *Understanding*. He put children first. He put my child first! I got my daughter settled, and then Bob and I went to the little Italian place downtown. The dinner was heavenly. And it wasn't just because of the angel hair pasta. The green eyes were growing softer by the minute and the candle on our table was not the only thing that was beginning to melt. So - I invited him home for dessert.

Once we got there, Bob was not fazed by being in a bronchitis-laden house. He liked my cooking (which consisted of slicing peaches and scooping ice cream). He laughed at my jokes. And best of all, he loved my favorite game, cribbage. n hour and twenty minutes later, on just our first date, I got lucky!

At cribbage.....

I won by 18 points.....

But when he kissed me good night I got a crick in my neck that lasted longer than my daughter's laryngitis.

WHY DID EVERY GUY I DATED HAVE to have SOMETHING WRONG WITH HIM? First there was the guy with the long auburn tresses who, as it turned out,

was delivering illegal drugs along with pizzas for Pizza Man. I found him out when one of his “customers” followed him to my front door. And this guy wasn’t looking for pepperoni.

Next there was the initially mild-mannered man whose jealousy issues were manifested in the throwing of dishes and golf clubs. Now I didn’t really care about his five iron but five of my favorite Mikasa plates -shattered - and he was the one getting thrown – out the door.

And now here was Bob – interesting, understanding, and with no power over the genetic treachery that made him tower over me by twelve inches. It was not his fault. In fact, at 6’5” he was the second shortest of six brothers. My problem could easily have been a couple of inches worse. But my neck wasn’t listening to rhetoric. All my neck knew was that every time I thought about another date with Bob the lightning bolts would start flying with the zeal of Zeus.

This dream come true was becoming a nightmare. I really wanted to see him but I did not want to become an Advil addict. Everybody knows that can lead to use of the hard stuff. Heck! - I might end up becoming a customer of one of those illicit pizza delivery guys.

I thought about starting to wear 5-inch spike heels. I thought about asking Bob to get his legs shortened. I did work with a group of orthopedic surgeons after all. But none of my strategies seemed quite right - until finally I hit on a solution that saved both my neck and my relationship. It was drug-free, non-surgical, footwear-neutral, and it fit us like a tandem bicycle. It was something called *communication*, and it works, in its many forms. We often communicate to teach, to give directions, and to get a job done. But try communicating to connect yourself with others. When you have a problem and you don’t know what to do: *Communicate*. Because in this world, and especially in these times, we can all use some help. And we must all help each other. When we work together we can accomplish things that are impossible alone.

In the case of my too-tall friend and me: Communication resulted in Bob learning to place his hand – gently - on the back of my head to support my neck whenever he bent down to give me a kiss. I developed hawk-like vision that – no matter where we were - could detect the nearest curb, stone, stair or hillock on which I could stand to raise myself closer to his level. The lightning bolts went away and they were replaced by rays of hope.

My Friends, when we communicate to connect with one another, when we tackle our problems together, there is no mountain so high (nor boyfriend so tall) as to keep us from reaching our dreams.

(Untitled)
by Tom Mancuso
Morgan Hill, California

If any power or mystique could be applied to a piece of clothing, it would be the salmon colored pants that I had in my wardrobe early in my marriage. I can still hear the ringing in my ears after my wife discovered the suspect clothing when we were going out for dinner and I wore those pants for the first time in her presence. "Where did you get those hideous pants," my wife said. "You would have to wait until after we were married to start dressing like this," she continued. I had those pants since my early college days and at the time I had thought they were quite hip. I even liked the two dollar signs embroidered on the right back pocket. They fit very comfortably and I thought the style quite unique, however, my better half certainly didn't share my feelings. Well after that night I had agreed not to wear them again, though I couldn't bear to throw them away. I retired them to our garage and there they remained until 6 years later.

I was working in the restaurant industry at that time and I had taken a general manager position with a well-known national chain. This employment required us to relocate to Portland, Oregon away from the security and comfort of family, friends and surroundings in Spokane, Washington. From the very beginning it was not the job I had thought it would be and the promise of generous bonuses and salary potential didn't materialize. With two children and some medical issues that arose we were finding ourselves swimming in debt and desperately trying to keep our heads above water.

My wife had unsuccessfully tried to find a job to supplement my income, so she decided to start her own home-based house cleaning business that she got the idea from reading the newspaper ads. She had managed to get six clients after a few months of soliciting homes with a marketing flyer she had created. This helped our financial struggle, however, it was very hard work, and the employees she hired to help her were not always reliable.

My situation was not much better and the goals my employer had set for me were not realistic considering the history of problems I had inherited from the former manager I had taken over from. The assistant manager that was working in the restaurant had felt slighted by not being promoted and resented me as the new general manager. He was also quite popular with the staff so I really was viewed as an outsider, though I tried hard to dispel this perception. It is not a good feeling to be working in an environment that you don't feel comfortable and your support staff goes out of their way to make your job more difficult. I knew the feeling of being "stuck in a rut." However, since my wife and I were living paycheck to paycheck I didn't feel there was any way out of my predicament.

Now, back to those hideous pants that have been stowed away for the last six years I was rummaging through boxes in my garage looking for some old clothes to donate to Goodwill which had advertised a pickup in my neighborhood.

I came across those hold threads that I originally couldn't throw away and brought them in the house to wash, dry and fold away in my drawer. They still looked near new and fit as well as when I first got them. I never thought I would be wearing them again, especially after the tongue-lashing my wife gave me for even thinking they were cool. However, the following week my boss from out of town called me with an urgent request to meet him Saturday morning at my restaurant. The work clothes I normally wear were at the cleaners and I was running late with the short notice I was given for the ad hoc meeting. So without hesitation I grabbed my old salmon colored pants to wear and hurried down to meet my boss.

As I entered the rear door of the restaurant I felt a bit uncomfortable and my assistant manager whom I saw in the kitchen diverted his attention toward me and exited to the dining room without saying a word. My boss must have sensed my entry as he opened the office door before I could grab the knob. He asked that I walk with him out the door to the back of the restaurant and out the door to the back courtyard. He then gave me an envelope with my final paycheck and said with a cold, nonchalant voice that I was fired. There wasn't much explanation or fanfare, only that things were not working out and he needed to go in a different direction. I stood there speechless and shocked as this had happened so quickly and further discussion seemed futile.

Driving home seemed like an eternity and I didn't know what I would say to my wife. When I got home and walked through the door my wife looked at me and then down at my pants and said, "You didn't wear those to see your boss?" She must have also noticed the dejected look in my eyes as she stood there and told her I had been fired. There was a pause and then laughter as she said that it was because of those pants that I lost my job. I started to laugh also, and felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Now I could move on and find something that I truly enjoyed and had my wife's support. Maybe those pants had a special magic to them. If by chance there was a connection to this event in my life and there was a final purpose for those hideous salmon colored pants then it would end here. This was the day I finally retired those pants for good and moved on with my life.

BAIL YOURSELF OUT!

by Darya Martelle
Morgan Hill, California

You seem like a nice person. You're kind to small, fuzzy things. You never let the water run while you're brushing your teeth. You haven't run over any of the neighbors lately. Nice person.

So why are you waking up at 3:15 a.m. with all these dark thought and questions running through your mind? Feeling that your type is about to become extinct, and no foundation is going to com up with funds to protect your dying species? wondering why, since you've always played by all the rules you're not....should we say this out loud? Happy.

Guilty, too. You've got the house, the spouse, the dog, the cat, and half a parakeet. What's to complain about? You're still working, no one's stolen your identity. Yet. You have friends, or at least acquaintances you don't completely dislike. And you're not happy!; nothing remotely resembling "happy". what's wrong with you?

Probably the same thing that's wrong with everyone you know. Or don't know. Sure, sure, they're all walking around smiling and saying how happy they are, or will be as soon as they lose 300 lbs., get those hair transplants, their 39 year old sons move out of the house. Or at least when they learn to operate their cell phones. Certainly when the economy recovers and life returns to normal.

You know they're lying, don't you? To you, to themselves. Did you think you were the only one to wake up at 3:15 a.m., naive person? Get up, go take a Valium, and let's look at this situation. Truth is, you're just reacting normally, These are not normal times, so you have to be. It's a survival thing. Everything is out of whack, it's not your imagination.

Snow in July? Eighty ghastly new diseases popping up every month? When did it become obligatory to travel the subway wearing chain mail every day? Used to be you only had to do that on Saturday nights, right? And how come YOU never win the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes? Everyone else does. What more proof do you need?

I know you're not the whiny type, but even a stoic like you has limits. Go gobble up a handful of Elavil and sit down here while we sort his out. Does it seem right to you that the price of everything you need to survive has gone up 250%, while the money you earn isn't quite as good as Monopoly dollars? Why is YOUR government giving out Your tax dollars to everyone and anyone while maintaining a blind eye to the really important needy cases? Like yours, for instance?

Still have those Zoloft tablets in your nightstand drawer? Weren't they recalled? Never mind, stuff yourself with a mouthful-they're great for stopping uncontrollable crying or they CAUSE uncontrollable crying? Who can remember. We've got more important things on our minds.

Look there's not a whole lot you can do about the government, or your messy life. You can lose yourself in escapist literature. Affordable if totally useless. You can watch people make fools of themselves on YOUTUBE. Mildly amusing, but also not a solution to anything. You could check with Doctor Phil on ways to keep yourself centered, grounded, and nearly sane. Okay, that's good. It's a start. But you know these are all temporary fixes.

Some may try more drastic measures. Buy a piece of land in a third world country where everyone hates Americans. Raise llamas or auracanas and become self sufficient. Get away from all the problems.

Others will just buy new underwear and cheat on their spouses. You may not be able to afford the first thing, and if you opt for the second, would you please not tell me about it?

How are you doing? Want some Vodka to go with those little pink-striped pills I see there in your hand?

So. Are there any real solutions? The answer to that is HAHA-but wait-there might be some things you can still do to keep yourself getting up every morning and facing yet another frustrating day. Does anyone have answer? That doesn't involve Oxycontin? Someone does. Or did. Remember what your grandmother used to say? Good or bad, nothing lasts forever.

She's probably advise you to wake up tomorrow at 3::15 a.m. (because that's normal now, remember?) Then you go to work, you live through your day as usual. And in six months, (okay, who are we kidding here?) in a year, two years...everything will be better. Or at least different. Because GOOD OR BAD, NOTHING LASTS FOREVER! It's worth repeating. Grandmother did.

See how easy that was?

(Can I have that Prozac if you're not going to use it now?)

STAY-AT-HOME MOM GOES UNDERCOVER IN 21st CENTURY WORKPLACE

by A. Murphy
Cupertino, California

I just re-entered the work force after being out 13 years as an at-home mom. While I was sleeping, the work place changed a bit. Computers took over and people stopped interacting with each other directly. Well, in some companies, that is. I happened to end up at one of these companies.

On my first day back into the world devoid of children, I was welcomed warmly and escorted to my office cubicle of tan fabric walls, L-shaped Formica counter—I mean, desk—wheeled chair and, you guessed it, the ubiquitous computer. My 8-year-old son saw my cubicle weeks later on a Saturday visit and said, “Perfect! You could play all day here.” Oh and, there was a phone—a regular telephone with buttons and a ringing sound, a last vestige of days gone by. But here’s what I’ve noticed: it never rings. Well, I heard it once so I know it has the ability to ring. But apparently, it’s an unnecessary expenditure because people don’t use the phone. They just email or instant message each other. My manager is just four cubicles away and he IMs me. Don’t people still top by? Heck, my kids could fling oatmeal that far.

In the first days on the job, I dove into several computer programs—I mean, software—that I hadn’t used much. Okay, so, as a mom I only used email and Word. But I swear I could at least get around in PowerPoint and Excel. The one that boggled me was a program called Squad Spy. Umm, I lie. I changed the name to protect the innocent, and because, well...because it *ought* to be named Squad Spy. I’m not sure what use was intended for this program, but my company uses it to send a work request, called a “ticket,” which then ends up being the recipient’s electronic *to do list* that everyone can see and analyze. After my initial thoughts of, “Can’t you just call someone when you need something?” and “Where does Big Brother sit?” I realized it could be helpful for keeping all the parts of a far flung company in the loop. Fair enough. My phone didn’t work, so I was told to send a “ticket” to Information technology. It felt kind of mean, but I stumbled through Squad Spy’s pull down menus and did the dirty deed. It felt like I was shooting my son in laser tag, making his vest light up and vibrate. Pow—I tagged you with a ticket! Wouldn’t that liven up the workplace, if we all wore laser tag bests and got shot by email confirming my ticket submission. Then came two emails saying the ticket had been assigned to Joe Schmo (In the first week I couldn’t retain any names). Joe fixed the phone that day. Then I got two emails saying the ticket was closed. “Okay.” I thought. “Didn’t need all that, but it must somehow be efficient for them.” After all, the phone did get fixed quickly. And Joe Schmo, the IT guy, got to prioritize his tasks. So it’s all good.

The next day I noticed a door latch in the women's bathroom had broken and no one could use that stall. I mentioned it to the receptionist, thinking she took care of such calls to Facilities. I checked in with her, asking "Is that something you normally handle, or shall I take care of it and call someone?" She said I could take care of it by submitting a ticket. My forehead slowly scrunched, one eyebrow raised and my voice accidentally formed the words. "Are you serious?" Give days and six Squad Spy emails later, the latch was fixed and I was notified of such through the ticketing system. "Pity about all those emails," I thought, "I would have noticed it was fixed."

The following week I was engrossed in a project to scan documents and lightweight postcards into a printer. Occasionally the postcards would jam the paper path. I looked above my jammed card to the wall where a sign instructed, "Don't fix your own paper jam. Submit a ticket to Facilities for all work on these machines." ARE YOU KIDDING? I'd rather risk it than shoot Joe Schmo's vest and get the rash of emails. I pulled the postcard out myself. Don't tell anyone, but I've been doing so ever since. It's my own private rebellion.

Last week an email said, "There seems to be some confusion about who manages Squad Spy issues because people have been submitting tickets to IT about Squad Spy. Next time you have an issue with Squad Spy, please open a ticket for the Big Brother department (I'm kidding—but the real name is eerily close) either by using Squad Spy (if you can), or by sending an email to Big Brother's support." Aha—the old use-a-ticket-to-tell-us-there's-something-wrong-with-the=ticket-software-trick! Or email is always an option. Either way, laryngitis shouldn't be an obstacle.

MIDNIGHT VISITOR

by Joan Prather
Morgan Hill, California

“Chloe, stop it,” I mumbled. “You stupid cat, what are you doing?”

“Yeeooooowwwww,” moaned Chloe, the sound deep in her throat. But the scratching continued.

“It’s midnight, what’s going on?” I said, switching on the light. Chloe and my other cat, Bear, were clawing at the nightstand trying to reach whatever lurked behind. A pungent odor filled my nostrils, earthy and strong. I pulled the nightstand slowly away from the corner. “Oh Lord, help me,” I pleaded.

Until seven years ago, my two cats and I lived in a large house with a very small yard. Since it was not safe for the cats to wander outside, they spent most of their time in the house prowling the huge basement. We only used this area for storage so over the years it had become home to hoards of mice, lizards, spiders, and other creatures too numerous to mention.

Chloe, a Siamese and excellent hunter, would bring mortally wounded ‘treasures’ up from the basement and drop them at my feet. “Sweet cat, brave hunter” I would coo, giving her all the praise I could muster, while silently grimacing.

Bear, a black cat of unknown ancestry, had no interest in hunting. She knew where her meals came from... a can.

In 2002, we moved to a small country home with a large yard. It was not easy for the two cats to cohabitate peacefully in this small place, but they picked their territory, and kept to themselves. All was calm for the first week, while I kept them inside.

Then I opened... THE CAT DOOR.

What a godsend this turned out to be—at least for a few months. The cats mastered the door quickly; when you are in, you can go out, and when you are out, you can come in. So back and forth they went, until lock-down time each evening.

The cats now had three acres where they could run and play. And Chloe had a wonderful place to hunt. ‘Toss and Kill’ became Chloe’s favorite pastime; she would pick up her ‘kill’, shake it from side to side, and toss it into the air. Fascinated, she would watch the poor thing fall to the ground in a bloody heap. When there was no life left in the little creature, Chloe would deposit it on the porch for me to admire. Sometimes Bear would saunter over to watch the game, or try to join in, but Chloe would hiss a warning for Bear to back off.

Chloe still hesitated before going through the cat door. Pushing the hinged piece of rubber with her head was not her favorite thing, but it was necessary if she wanted in or out. Since I was aware of her hesitation, I stupidly believed she wouldn't try to maneuver through the door with anything dangling from her mouth.

Then the unthinkable happened. One warm summer night, I locked the cat door as usual, and went to bed. Unbeknownst to me, sometime during that day Chloe did bring something in through the cat door and hid it in my bedroom.

So here I am, awake at midnight, staring at a GOPHER. The thing, blinded by the light, was scratching and bumping his head against the wall, trying desperately to escape.

I had to do something quickly, before this demon clawed its way on my bed and bit me to death. Would my cats come to my rescue? No, I was on my own. So with shaky hands I grabbed my wastebasket and plunked it upside-down over the wiggling brown form. "Now what am I supposed to do?" I wailed. "Chloe, why did you do this?" I looked over at 'the hunter' now back on my bed staring at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

I grabbed a magazine from my dresser, cautiously tilted the wastebasket and wedged the magazine under the gopher. Then, as I turned the wastebasket upright, the gopher slid off the magazine and sank down to the bottom.

The cats watched my performance, without so much as a meow. 'Nothing interesting going on here' their looks seemed to say.

"Well, I can't sleep with this thing in the house." I said, picking up the wastebasket. I didn't let the cats follow, nor did they try. In a far corner of the yard, I dumped the gopher onto ground and watched it scurry under a bush, thankful it was gone.

Now wide-awake, I returned to my bed. "Well, guys, the show's over. Maybe I'll read awhile," I said. It was well after 2 a.m. before I felt drowsy and turned off the light. With Chloe beside me on the bed, and Bear in the windowsill, we went to sleep.

As for the cat door, we don't use it anymore; it remains locked FOREVER. Yes, I know, I have to get up and let the cats out, and in, and out, etc. But I would rather have a little inconvenience during the day, than have another visitor at midnight.

THE CHALLENGE OF GROWING OLDER

by Alvin Sacks
Los Altos Hills, California

It was early afternoon on a clear lazy Monday with beautiful weather, and little traffic as I drove alone to a 1:30pm hearing aid appointment in Los Altos. I was driving at the speed limit when the light turned yellow and my foot went to the brake pedal (or so I thought). Suddenly I was accelerating and could not stop as the light turned red and I crossed the intersection! Luckily, no one was crossing my path. As I regained control, I realized that nothing was wrong with my reliable 1987 Lincoln Mark VII, which has never failed me. The problem was that I had lost proprioception in my right foot. This is the complex coordination of brain, nerves, muscles, and senses that tell us where our hands and feet are in space, even when out of our sight.

I did arrive safely at my destination, and later drove home without incident. But later in the day, I realized that whatever has been causing my leg pain over the past year had now produced effects that must be dealt with in order to reduce the risk of injury or death on the highway. The time had come for me to decide that driving is indeed a privilege that we all must decline at the appropriate time. It seems that my time is now.

So the first thing I decided to do was tell my wife Dolly, because I knew she would force me to make the right decision, even when I might think that now it's ok to drive. I remember how hard it was for Dolly's mother, nearing ninety, to give up driving after she hit a tree. I also found myself thinking of my old Lincoln as my trusty steed standing impatiently in the driveway waiting for our next drive.

But, while accepting reality, I intend to make the most of what I have at my disposal. Therefore, I first called my physician, who confirmed my decision, agreeing that he saw no immediate medical solution to the problem. I then called three of my former colleagues, all former members of the team working at the Palo Alto Veterans Hospital Rehabilitation R&D Center regarding the modification of automobiles to enable paraplegic drivers by the installation of hand-activated controls. At the end of the day, I had obtained the name and number of a company in Sunnyvale that carries out that precise task, with available options, depending on the make and model of the automobile. In the meantime, my wife is the filling designated driver, which allows me a little more freedom. While I take care of the driving problem, my physicians and I will continue to attempt to slow the losses that come with aging.

I am continually impressed with the change in my focus with the passing years. About a year or so ago, I would arise early for my one-hour routine of complete exercise before fixing breakfast and preparing for a day of planned and scheduled activities of my choosing, in coordination with my wife's plans. Being retired offered an even wider choice than when I was working full-time and planning for work related study, meetings, lab work, or business travel. It is now clear that our focus is changed by increasing limitations, but it also encourages our innovation and gives us a much better basis on which to understand our fellow human beings and our own role in the scheme of things.

The result of that Monday's frightening experience at this point was: 1) acceptance of my own aging limitations; 2) a way of possibly restoring my ability to drive; and 3) some ideas for volunteer work that will help shut-in veterans through chess, based on my past experience of volunteering as chess teacher for elementary schools. All in all, it reminded me of the famous prayer of St. Francis:

“Lord, grant me the
Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can
and Wisdom to know the difference.”

But, three weeks after accepting my new challenge, I reported my scary experience to my neurologist, who listened carefully. He then said: “You don't have to do that. All you need to do is become a two-footed driver, like all the race car drivers! It costs nothing, and is much easier to learn than hand controls. I taught it to my mother-in-law, who is doing just fine. You simply keep your left foot on the brake, your right foot on the accelerator, and apply pressure (or not) without moving either foot.” In other words, the heels remain fixed on the floor, and the toes apply pressure without moving either foot. It even reduces your response time!

I have been practicing in my driveway ever since, with many trips into empty parking lots and an occasional foray into town. Back in the saddle again! Now I feel like a teenager with a new driver's license, but without the need to get there first! After all, we all share the same final destination, and the aggressive driver will indeed get there first.

MALAMUTT

by Terrele Schumake
San Jose, California

With the purchase of our first home in Bloomingdale, Illinois came the chance to realize a long time wish. I was going to get a dog. I had never owned a pet due to one reason or another. I wanted a big, petable pooch, not some fragile lap thing. An Alaskan Malamute sounded exciting. An ad in the *Chicago Tribune* caught my eye. It read, "Purebred Alaskan Malamute puppies, AKA registered. Willow Springs, Illinois--\$175." Hurriedly, I made an appointment to see the puppies the next evening.

My husband, Tom, was in the hospital. A friend, Mara Scudder, who worked with me at the *Chicago Defender* agreed to go with me.

Willow Springs was twenty-five miles southwest of Chicago. The town reminded me of one in a John Steinbeck novel. A railroad ran through the center of town with ramshackle houses dotting the landscape. A smattering of small businesses was located on the main street.

The seller of the puppies expected me later in the evening and was not at home. Mara and I sat in my yellow Volkswagon and observed our surroundings. At one house, an old man, dressed in a railroad uniform complete with a cap, sat looking out the window. Another old man rode by on a huge tricycle. "I'm going down to Springfield this weekend to my daughter's wedding." he yelled to the man in the window. The two exchanged a few words before he pedaled the tricycle into the distance.

It was beginning to get dark. Mara grew apprehensive. "Terry, this is not the place that two young ladies should be at night. Let's go!" I ignored her. I was determined not to leave without my puppy. A few minutes later, she tried a different approach, "I have to use the restroom."

"There was a restaurant on the main street. Maybe there is a" Mara cut me off. "I am not going in there!" she retorted. We could hear the puppies yelping and playing inside the house.

Fortunately, the seller finally arrived. Before she could reach my car, the old man in the window chewed her out for making me wait so long.

The puppies, all twelve of them, were enclosed in a long pen. They were all beautiful. A few trotted over, decided that I lacked interest and retreated. One little black and tan fellow stood on his hind legs and wagged his tail furiously. "Pick me," he seemed to say. He was the one that I chose. The mother, a large nondescript specimen, was resting in the corner. She appeared not to care how many of those puppies that I took.

Before we left, the seller showed us a picture of a noble Malamute in a book. "This is what the father, Cher Nook, looked like," she said. A brief instant of doubt tugged at my mind, but I pushed it aside. I was just so happy to have my puppy.

From his hospital bed, Tom named the puppy Renaissance. Every morning (much to my consternation) at six he called. "It's time to take the dog out."

At first, I took Renaissance everywhere. He was such a cute, cuddly ball of fur. "Oh, look at that cute little German Shepherd." people would say.

"He's a Malamute, not a Shepherd," I corrected them. A few people gave me a side long glance. If you say so, Lady.

Another time, I had Renaissance at the Laundromat. he was nestled in my arms to prevent an accident on the floor. "John!" squealed an elderly white woman to her son. "There's a black one in here."

"I don't know if she means you or me," I whispered to the puppy.

"And she's got a dog in her arms," the old lady continued. Everyone in the business made sounds of embarrassed apologies.

As he grew older, Renaissance who had become "Rennie" looked more and more like a German Shepherd. He bore no resemblance to the noble dog in the book or the shapeless form in the corner, The seller maintained that he was a purebred Malamute and the registry papers would prove it.

When the AKC registry papers arrived, I refused to return them. What good would it have done to register Rennie as something that he was not? He became known as the "Malamutt."