



The Evil Empire

It's All About Value.

"I can't go in there."

"What?"

"My dad owns a small business. If I go into a WalMart, bolts of lightning will strike me dead."

"No way!"

"I'll stay in the car." (Vague, pet-like panting.)

"Get OUT of the car."

"No."

"Yes"

"You're so pushy. I'm out, I'm out. Let's go."

And so my sick fascination with WalMart began. At first, I clung to the natural sunlight found only at the entrance. The initial Aisle of Special Buys was too much for me. I craved the occasional bursts of air from the automatic doors, higher prices, and the knowledge that I wasn't screwing over small businesses. Elderly women with names like Ethel, Maude, and Fanny eyed me suspiciously while their wizened claws clutched receipts for oversized items. I remained Virtue Incarnate! Friends loped through the cash registers bearing every conceivable personal care product, in addition to housewares whose prices were admittedly below those of other stores, but I remained immune. My twelve-dollar knives were better than their nine-dollar knives simply because they hadn't come from WalMart.^f My sixty-cent candy bars were superior to their fifty-cent candy bars because they came from the guy in the 'hood who sells forties[†] to underage-kids. My purchase habits were helping to forge a brave new world, free of the scourge of the Big Blue W.

Until I needed a roll of Scotch Wall-Saver tape.

The Scotch Company, a division of 3M, worked a miracle with WallSaver. The adhesive membrane dispenses like double-stick tape, but is easily removed from walls and paper by rubbing, much like rubber cement. As an added bonus, you can use



^f Let's not examine too closely the logic that allowed me to purchase knives from Lechters or Lechmere. Where I grew up, WalMart (and, coincidentally, LeAnn Rimes) represented everything bad in the universe. Other chains were mere inconveniences, but WalMart was a predator.

[†] "Denounce the Forty-Ounce!" -- Detroit anti-alcohol campaign slogan

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it to fake truly revolting skin rashes, as its pasty-white colour screams "sun blisters" and its flexibility is truly astounding. Mind you, I had not been squandering the roll of tape I had located in my hometown stationery store. You can only get your new housemate so many times with "OH GOD WHAT IS THAT THING GROWING ON MY ARM?!" Instead, I had been carefully constructing a Hanson-style shrine to Jim Dine, a California painter and engraver. Then of course, all of those pictures of drunken naked people came back from CVS and I had to prominently display them.^ß

Pictures of your friend's lust object adorned in nothing but your British flag apron may be amusing, but don't merit framing. Wall-Saver was the obvious weapon of choice. Again, Mr. Dine is a fairly prolific man, so I was out of tape.

Me: Damn! I don't have anymore Wall-Saver.

Housemate: You could get that at WalMart.

Me: Dude,^Σ my dad would kill me. You can't tell anybody.

I should explain about my housemate. Kristen is a very nice person, a conscientious kitchen cleaner and a Saturn-driver. However, she did grow up in central New York, land of the religious freaks[¥] and WalMart monopoly. I like to think that a good excuse for my reaction to WalMart is "We didn't have them where I grew up." We didn't have a lot of things where I grew up...Twinkies, running water... the point here being that where I grew up there were no WalMarts; where Kristen grew up, there were no small businesses.

WalMart did try to bring me into the fold earlier. I spent eighteen idyllic years running around in rural eastern New York, summer home to New York City denizens and Timothy Leary before he was welcomed to the Hotel California. Would Tim Leary have lived in a place that sucked? I think not. We had diners and "mom and pop" stores. The largest commercial chain to hit our town while I was growing up was CVS. How much damage can a couple of sale-priced Band-Aids do when people

^ß Many people take up photography to ensure that they remain sober, fully clothed, and behind the camera.

^Σ I have several speaking habits that I am not very proud of. The first, of course, is excessive use of profanity. The second is the repetitive and completely subconscious use of the words "like," "dude," and "ohmygod" pronounced as one word. The third is the use of "like" to mean "he/she/it thought" AND/OR "he/she/it said."

[¥] Not to be confused with Nebraska. (See Vol. 10 Issue 1)

still take their kids to Dr. Weinstien, the pharmacist, before calling a physician?^ø

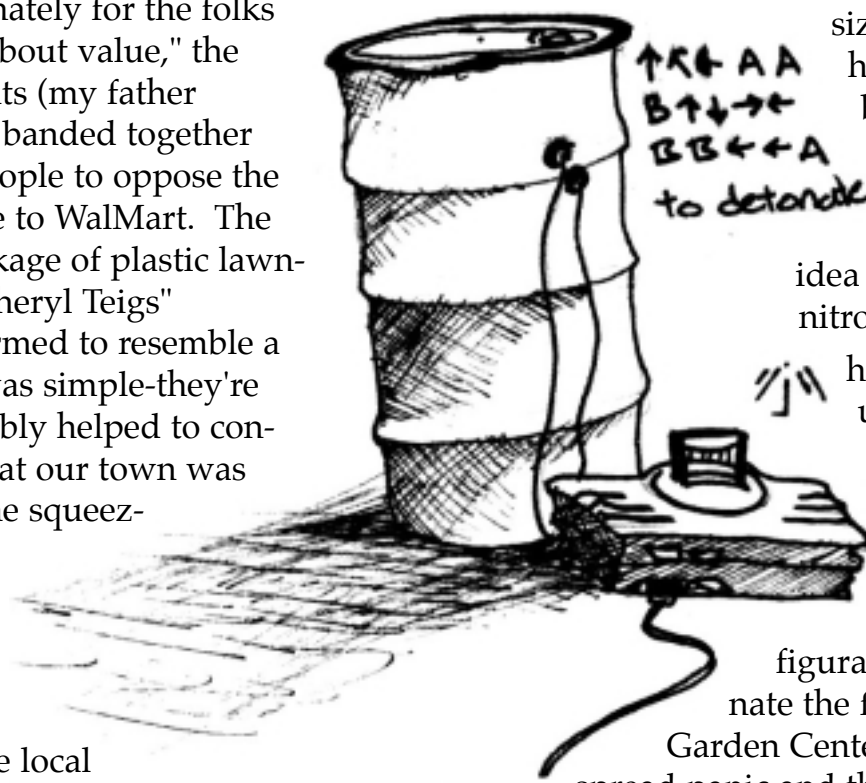
Anyway, WalMart saw in our humble town two niches- a financial one that it could carve out by mashing local businesses flat, and a physical one in the fallow fields just west of the Lee farm.

Unfortunately for the folks who are "all about value," the local merchants (my father among them) banded together with townspeople to oppose the sale of the site to WalMart. The flaming wreckage of plastic lawn-chairs and "Cheryl Teigs" swimwear formed to resemble a WalMart (it was simple-they're square) probably helped to convince them that our town was not ripe for the squeezing. And if THAT didn't do it, the signs painted on rooftops at the local trailer park- "PLEASE GOD, NOT ANOTHER TWISTER. REMEMBER GOSHEN 1990"^π and "WALMART SUX!" certainly reinforced the idea.

So I remained a WalMart virgin until junior year of college. Arguably, before the consummation of our relationship in the form of the Wall-Saver purchase, WalMart and I had done "everything but" when the greeters first forced me to enter the display

areas. These well-meaning elderly people were only there to round out their Social Security payments, basking in the benevolence of Big Blue. Unfortunately, after greeting me twice, Greeting Associate Maude began to appear visibly upset by my failure to move into the inner sanctum (if an inner sanctum can be a building the size of an aircraft hangar). Perhaps the bed head, cargo pants, and ripped "Beck Local Crew" shirt were giving her the idea that I was one of those nitrous-sniffing alterna-tot hacker^ð types obviously up to no good. Perhaps my associates were at that very moment hardwiring the video games into some unfortunate configuration that would detonate the fertilizer over in the Garden Center, resulting in widespread panic and the intolerable interruption of the constant consumption upon which the WalMart empire is based. Perhaps they were even sniffing model airplane glue (which Maude was undoubtedly incredibly allergic to) on their way to do the dastardly deed. In any event, her beady eyes had pinned me against the "SkilCrane" and she had begun to hyperventilate. It was time to move on.

I caught up to Cesar and Skip (who do,



^ø Dr. W often makes that all-important call between "Well, Mrs. Johnson, your boy's been shoving peas up his nose, and that's what's causing the blockage" and "Well, Mrs. Johnson, your boy may be developing a nasty sinus infection."

^π Eastern New York does experience a small number of tornadoes. The trailer parks lure them.

^ð People acquainted with members of either group may consider these categories mutually exclusive, but to anybody unfamiliar with Sublime, both are members of the *lumpenproletariat* of evil.

in all honesty, look like people capable of cobbling together Sega Genesis systems, a trash can, some STP motor oil, and a bunch of fertilizer into a bomb) in the "snackfood/impulse buy" aisle. Cesar entered his hardcore social butterfly mode and flamed, "Oh, look who's decided to join us."

In a vague Minnesota accent, Skip chuckled: "We've worn her down."

"But that woman at the front of the store was giving me the eye," I replied, drawing thumb to middle and ring finger in the age-old "your children will be idgits" gesture I learned from my

great-grandmother Assunta.^Δ "Can we get this over with?"

"Gotta get some cat food, wheresah cat food..." mumbled Cesar. Skip was fixating on the giant bags of Oreos and had to be dragged away by force. Merchandise was everywhere. It was all I could do not to cower on the brightly waxed "almond puke" patterned linoleum and whimper. Initially, my brain responded as though taunted by construction workers:^Ω

"Hey bay-BEE. You KNOW you want this obnoxious pink and orange sandbucket."

"Yo, chicquita, I got some hot stuff over

here with these lemon-scented kitchen sponges."

You get the idea. It was awful.

Eventually, though, my American-made brain succumbed. WalMart was beginning to work its magic. I don't know what did it first, exact-

ly. Perhaps it was knowledge that Oreos were a whole fifteen cents cheaper here. Perhaps it was the wall of hair-care products. The vast, colour-coded expanse of the Housewares area was too much to bear. Cesar had wandered off in

search of cat food,

but I was lost in the

rapture of the Royal Velvet section.

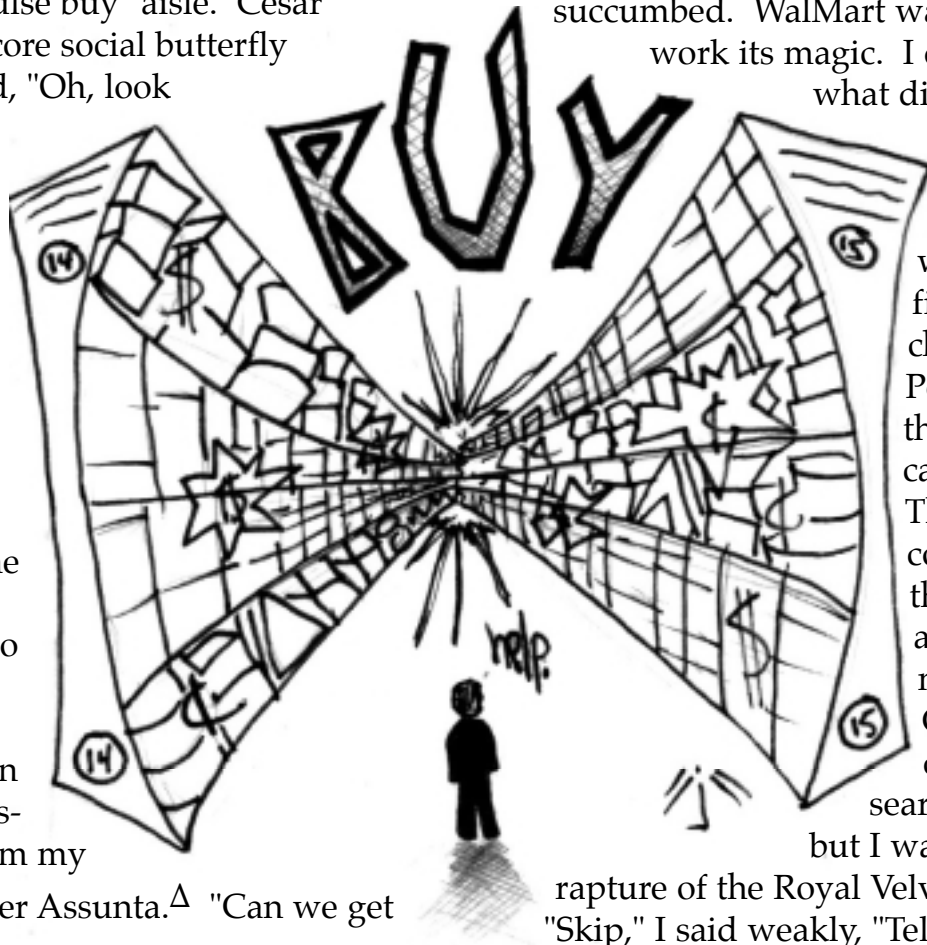
"Skip," I said weakly, "Tell me that I don't need any towels."

"Of COURSE you need towels," he replied. Skip is poor at following orders. My mouth dried out and my extremities began to shake. I began to feel slightly flushed.

"We've got to get out of here," I croaked, my hands buried in a pile of celery green bath towels. "We've just got to."

"Hey, guys," Cesar called as I was examining a matching toothbrush holder next to the towels.

"Guys, I couldn't find the cat food, but



^Δ Not to be confused with the "your children ARE idgits," which involved a slightly less delicate gesture.

^Ω Which is not to say I'm regularly taunted by construction workers. Must be the large sidearm I'm required to carry by law.

you have GOT to see the 215 CD holder that's on sale."

I moaned. Skip glanced at me with "I can't take you anywhere" irritation.

'C'mon," Cesar prodded. The fluorescent lights became brighter, as though some stockroom employee had located the hidden "blind the consumers and make them know the way" switch, usually only turned on at Christmas and other consumer high holidays, such as Labor Day. I swayed unsteadily. Had the coffee from Jay's been drugged? Had I eaten my last "cheese omelet with homefries and white" ? Was this the end?

The thought of all of those matching towels must have caused some sort of shock to my system, because the next thing I remember clearly is standing at the checkout lane as Cesar and Skip purchased cat food, packing tape, a CD holder, and insect spray. "Jesus," I thought, blearily clinging to the edge of the check-out conveyor belt, "where have I been?" The cashier, who peered at us through glasses clearly designed to make her eyes appear as small as possible, was not forthcoming. She collected Skip and Cesars crumpled bills in hands stained with the blood of modest businessmen like my father. My neck ached vaguely and I deeply craved some Dr. Pepper. I lurched to the car behind Skip and Cesar, believing that I would never again set foot inside WalMart.

Foolish youth had not prepared me for their insidious sales tactics. I now believe that my physiological response to the WalMart experience was the result of some form of small implant, perhaps inhaled while I was standing over the towels.~ The business began to invade my home in small, insignificant ways. First, there was the flyer that happened to nestle between the pages of my housemate's Sunday newspaper. Then there

was the direct mailing that found its slimy way into our humble mailbox. By the time Kristen noted that we could obtain Wall-Saver at WalMart, my brain had subconsciously developed the desire to purchase from the Evil Empire.

The first purchase was, of course, the beginning of a rapid descent into the maelstrom of rank consumer gratification. It took a while to actually FIND the tape, of course. But since I was going to buy tape anyway, I figured that the little diversions from the ultimate goal wouldn't be quite *so* bad. We had to sample the Kitchenwares aisle, for instance, where those knives hang out. The filing cabinets were also seductive, as were the rows of irons, coffeepots, and food processors, all displayed in that charming, haphazard WalMart manner that signals *big value* to the American consumer. The major marketing strategies in the local WalMart seem to be "hide the product inside an area with many products like it so they'll buy more" and "keep shelves half-stocked and supremely cluttered to create the appearance of "bargain basement" pricing." We were not to be easily fooled, however, and just barely escaped with the tape before the glue worked its evil voodoo upon us.

Later, of course, there were subsequent trips to the WalMart. By now, I've become something of a seasoned WalMart pilgrim. It's the appearance of value in the little things that keeps me going back- the shampoo and toilet paper are a little cheaper, as are the hanging file folders. The furniture still amuses me with its "sneeze on us and we'll disintegrate" nature. What ultimately draws me back, though, are those WalMart people, who demand that all of their worldly possessions are affordable, in one place, and readily available in any of eighteen check-out lines.

~ WalMart, taking bioengineering to the masses. Kids: Anthrax!



Shirk'n'Shout

This Week - Rants from Work by Eric Thomas

A conversation regarding Jerry Springer, politician cum whoremaster cum talk show superstar (possibly the most natural progression in America):

"Trailer Trash from middle America duking it out on national television. That's my kind of entertainment. Think any of those people are for real?"

"I don't think it matters. There are stupid people in the world; whether or not they're on television is irrelevant."

Let's Bring Back The Public Stoning

I was watching a "man-on-the-street" interview on the local nightly news ("Later this evening: are carnivorous parasites ruining your anus? We'll show you how to stop the bleeding on HealthBeat!") recently. A woman in her early thirties was being interrogated by a floating microphone. When asked why she never misses an episode of "The Jerry Springer Show," she promptly replied that it made her thankful for what she doesn't have.

Presumably, she was talking about gratitude for what life has given her: good health, shiny hair, a professional-looking wardrobe. This is a lovely sentiment, and the woman should be commended for appreciating life in such a way.

As you and I know, however, this woman must be severely mentally handicapped.

Anyone who uses "The Jerry Springer Show" as an opportunity for introspection and quiet reflection on their personal Horn of Plenty should be shot in the face. Apparently, it is all too easy to mistake the cheap thrill of tawdry voyeurism for a warm feeling of self-worth.

"Boy, am I grateful that I'm not the World's Fattest Stripper!"

People watch Jerry Springer because they can relate to Jerry Springer, and because they like to pretend that they're better than other people.

First of all, Jerry's television persona is a lot like you and I. He's done some things he regrets (such as paying hookers with personal checks while Mayor of Cincinnati), but for the most part, he's a humble guy. He was born in London of parents fleeing the Holocaust and grew up in the Midwest. Think about it. An immigrant from America's Heartland. Who could be more accessible to the most coveted audience in television, the Average Joe? Besides retarded Nazis, I mean.

Springer's true brilliance is this, though: when it comes to his guests, he is just as indignant and self-righteous as you are. The man is a certified champion when it comes to seizing the moral high ground. His show becomes a pecking party. Jerry draws the lines between the Good Guests and the Bad Guests, and the studio audience delivers the beatings.

This isolation of society's evil element does give average idiots a morale boost; I will credit our misguided interviewee for that meager insight. Her fatal error, though,

is affecting a positive stance on that warm feeling. In fact, the charge she gets from watching Springer in action is not directed inward, but rather at the rest of America. This woman has a marginally fucked-up life (as we all do). Her only relief is to transform her fear and self-pity into hatred for and judgement of those she believes to be *_really_* fucked-up.

Amazing that I understand all this about a woman I've never met, just by seeing

"Do what you want / Do all you can / Break all the fuckin' rules / And go to Hell with Superman / And die like a champion, ya-heh!"

-Bad Religion, "Do What You Want"

It's almost too easy for adults to ignore young smartasses like us. After all, what the hell do we know? We haven't been anywhere or done anything yet. Most of us aren't married, don't own homes, and have never been sent to other countries to kill people. We haven't experienced the acceptable amounts of pain and responsibility necessary for adulthood. We can still mock the world, because the world hasn't chewed us up to show us who's boss.

Our youthful naivete is our greatest

her on television for 5 seconds, isn't it?

A little bit ironic, too.

I'm guilty of the same crimes. The difference is that I'm more articulate about it.

And did you believe me? Were you convinced? Were you laughing at that woman, and thanking God above that you're not her? Somehow, I think so. We're all ridiculous individuals, and we all like to see each other drown. Amen.

asset, though, and precisely for that reason. We still have the ability to learn, to think, to question. The authority figures in our lives haven't beaten it out of us. We think we're immortal. We think we know everything. We see the absurdity of our surroundings, from redundant bureaucracies to transparent authority to that guy over there with a football helmet and no pants on. We laugh at it, half because we want to change it for ourselves and half because we're afraid of what it will do to us.



We see our parents and our teachers, miserable in their dead-end careers with defeated looks in their eyes. We know that most of the people we are taught to respect have never been worthy of us. When we break the rules, we do so because the rules are stupid. When they abuse the power that they wield over us, we know they are trying to make our lives as joyless as theirs turned out to be.

They tell us that these are (everyone together, now) "The Best Years Of Your Life." In essence, this is "Enjoy it while you can, brats, because sooner or later life will shit on you, and you'll end up just like me." Don't judge them too harshly, though; they are merely longing for the freedom they once had. They envy us our idealism. They had our opportunity, and missed it. They fell in line - the slow march to death, punctuated with marriage, career, and family.

But what do they want from us? What do they want for us? As mentors, they want us to succeed; it reflects well on them. As people, though, they'd rather us fall into the same line humans have marched from the beginning of civilized society. How discouraging, to see those younger than you, whom you have always dismissed as ignorant and trivial, succeed where you failed! How embarrassing! Outwardly, they are proud of your accomplishments. In their minds, they wonder where they went wrong.

We are born with powers beyond our comprehension. Throughout our lives, those powers are disciplined out of us. We forget what we are capable of. We are made to choose a life without learning, without creation. We can, however, break out of that course. We can use our immeasurable abilities to forge our own meandering path. In the end, we will have died like champions.

Party at the P.D.!

When I was arrested, I was taken to a "booking room" to be "booked." Book 'em, Dano!

I was sitting on a metal bench, my legs manacled to the bench's legs and my hands cuffed behind me. At the UMass Police Department, they take no chances with hardened criminals, especially first-time offenders charged with transportation of alcohol.

The door to the booking room was locked from both sides, to keep me from getting out and other degenerates from getting in. I was telling them my birthdate and age for the thirtieth time (cops aren't trained to do subtraction, you know), when another officer unlocked the booking room door and entered, interrupting my monologue.

Cop 1: "Hey, have you seen the keys to

the gun locker?"

Cop 2: "No, I haven't used that thing since the beginning of my shift."

Cop 1: "Well, your card is in the slot."

Cop 2: "Is it? Oh, shit. Can you take over for me, Kirk?"

Cop 3: "Sure." (To me) "What the hell are you smirking at?!"

Voice in my head: "Oh, just the fact that you well-trained and generally competent officers of the law lost the keys to the place where you keep your guns. I think that's very funny. I further suspect that your entire 'Police Force,' if you could really call it that, are a bunch of bumbling imbeciles. It makes me extraordinarily happy to know that it doesn't take much to outsmart you people."

Me: "Nothing."

"My mouth is full of happy presents from the earth."

-overheard

Gar

By John Hatt



in fact he realized he was real small...



so he killed the fool, no-talent creator - DEAD!



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pictures, words, hate mail, food -- diablo@csh.rit.edu

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North Lounge, 3rd Floor NRH (RIT) 14.00 Saturdays



Ask the Bare-Foot Girl

by Kelly Gunter

DATE: SAT, 08 AUG 1998 15:19:39 -0700

FROM: JOE

TO: GDT@INAME.COM

SUBJECT: BAREFOOT GIRLS FEET

DEAR BAREFOOT GIRL,

ARE YOU REALLY BAREFOOT AND IF YOU ARE COULD YOU SEND ME SOME PICS OF YOUR PRETTY FEET?

Joe-

Yes I am "really" barefoot and I am also physically capable of sending you "pics" of my "pretty feet", but you're making a rather large assumption. Given the fact that I've been walking bare-foot for approximately ten years, how pretty do you think my feet could be? Just imagine all the times I must have walked over broken glass which then got lodged in my heel leaving me to perform minor surgery with an unsterile scapel. In the end the soles of my feet look more like the surface of the moon with major asteroid damage. Then just think of all the times my backalley surgical equipment led to big pus-oozing infections. Finally I want you to think about all of those cold harsh New York winters. Toes falling off left and right. I always have to have a tube of Krazy-Glue handy in

case of emergency. I remember the one time I didn't; I was forced to use a hot glue gun. I still have those little glue strings trailing off in every direction like some kind of deranged foot decoration. What do you think I'm going to say?

"...Sure I'll send you pictures of my feet."

Why, so I can feed every foot fetish within a one hundred mile radius? What is it with people taking pictures of their feet?

If you want some kind of thrill, take off your shoes and socks and take a picture of your own feet. Send it to yourself in the mail; it will be like Christmas, honest. WHATEVER you do, and this is the really important part, DON'T, and I mean don't, send them to me. Believe me, I've had enough people send me pictures of their feet for inexplicable reasons along with questions asking how they make me feel. Ah, let me see...uncomfortable? There are only so many things you can do with pictures of other people's feet.

It is a given that I will answer any question sent to me, maybe not correctly or how the person had planned, but answered to some degree or another. But please send me something interesting, for a change.

-the Bare-foot Girl

Just a Reminder by Kelly Gunter

I'd rather not add one more word to the piles of editorials stacking up demanding the resignation of the President. Personally, I don't give a damn what he did or said. As far as I'm concerned, the question should never have been asked in the first place. What really annoys me is the way history repeats itself and why in hell nobody seems to notice. Maybe it is because it gets in the way of a

sensational story, but the only people who seem interested in this "scandal" are the press and the politicians who mistakenly think the media accurately reflects the views of voters.

I'm sick of continually hearing about the "liberal press". The press was liberal once, but those days are long gone. It seems more likely these days that the press is being led

along on a rather nice leash, playing dog to the Republican party's master. The press dotes on every word they're dropped; licking it up, smacking their lips, and waiting for more. Not to say that the press is a misguided and naïve child; on the contrary, they know exactly what they're doing and they're enjoying every minute of it. Reporting news is no longer about, well...reporting news. It's about who's reporting it, it's about the reporter. Members of the press have been riding one big ego trip after another until they don't know their own opinions anymore. What they do know is where the power lies, and who's willing to share it if they say the right thing.

Before anyone says anything about my being a bleeding-heart liberal, stop. I vote democratically, that's true, but not for the reasons you'd suspect. The political system is so derailed at this point that everything is about individuals, and not the public that they are supposed to represent. I maintain that this statement holds true for both the

Republican and Democratic parties; this is not one-sided. The act of voting has come down to a choice of who to vote against instead of who to vote for, a decision of which candidate is the lesser of two evils. For that reason alone I vote Democratically, for while I know that neither group will work on my behalf as the voting public, I also know that the Republicans can get things done--things I don't necessarily want getting done. The Republicans can work together as a cohesive group, whereas the Democrats are as capable of harmonious work as my elementary school band was. Thus the lesser of two evils; I intentionally support mediocrity specifically because there are no feasible vehicles for change. No mentions of Ross Perot, please, I said feasible.

As a fine example of the Democratic Party's inept attempts at commanding attention and presence, we have the history of the situation which has been so long neglected. Is the righteous American public willing to support a philandering president? We all

**IT'S ABOUT TIME A
CEREAL CAME ALONG
WITH MORAL FIBRE...**

**WHEN IT'S RIGHT FOR
YOU, WHEN IT'S
RIGHT FOR
YOUR COUN-
TRY, IT'S GOT
TO BE JUST
RIGHT™.**

**JUST
RIGHT™**

**NOW WITH MORE MORAL FIBRE
THAN EVER!**

**NOW WITH MORE MORAL FIBRE
THAN EVER!**

know the answer to this one, say it with me now.

Yes. Need examples? Take Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Rutherford B. Hayes, just to name a few. History is filled with object lessons in power as an aphrodisiac. Often, men are attracted to high positions of office precisely for that reason.

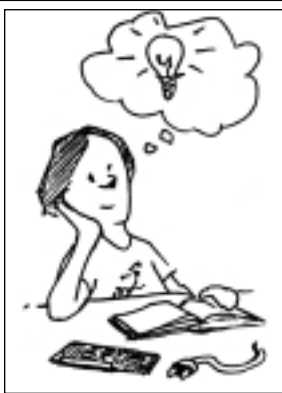
"Wait a minute, wait a minute," somebody says, "this is not an issue of sexual misconduct, but an issue of trust. The president lied under oath. That's perjury."

Huh. Well, yes, it is, but will the American public elect a president who has no difficulty in lying to them? Why not? They've done it before. Why, there's already a precedent for it.

Take your thoughts back to a story about a great American hero, Lieutenant Colonel Emeritus Oliver North. North was touted as a hero when the whole Iran-Contra story broke. For the moment, we will disregard the fact that these were highly illegal actions and attend to the meat of the matter: then-Vice President Bush stated under oath that he had never attended any of the meetings associated with the Iran-Contra scandal. Yet after Caspar Weinberger stated under oath that he had not taken notes of these

meetings, it happened that his non-existent notes were found and clearly demonstrated that such meetings had been attended by the Vice President. Shortly thereafter, we the people elected him to the presidency. Are the circumstances so different? In one case, we elect a president who lies about an affair he is having with an intern while in office. In the other, we elect a man to office knowing that he is more than willing to purjure himself before Congress and the American public in order to disavow his involvement in highly illegal activities. Obviously, the American public has already proven its indifference to having such men in office.

Our history tells us that this sort of thing has happened before and that the men involved were often esteemed statesmen and/or great presidents, so why is it so different now? It isn't; the only difference is the way the press is covering it: "...the nation is outraged...." The nation isn't outraged. The Republicans are jubilant, the Democrats are flustered (their natural state), the general public is bored off their couch-shaped keisters, and the only one who may have a right to be outraged is the first lady. Leave the story at that and let's get on with the business of national politics as usual.



pulling a blank *by Sean Hammond*

This week: "...these are a few of my favorite things."

The temperature outside of the Radio Shack was perceptibly cooler than the rest of the area, as though I had stumbled into a technological haunting. Perhaps the Spirit of Vacuum Tubes Past had come to torment the buyers of transistors:

"Whoooo...guitar amps just don't have the same sound as they used to... whooooo!"

In reality, the chill air was due to the freon escaping from the hallowed hut of low-grade electronic equipment and questionably priced widgets. As I entered the door and their photoptic Cerberus barked its piezo-electric chime, I could think only one thing:

"...pleasedontaskifyoucanhelpfindanythingpleasedontaskifyoucanhelpfindanything..."

“Hi. Can I help you find anything?”

I looked into the freshly scrubbed face of the red-shirted youth who had me in his sights before I even got through the door. His facial structure made it difficult to tell if he was in high school or college. Clean-shaven with a conservative haircut, he looked as though he was recovering from the ravages of a stubborn acne problem. Reddish welts were still visible on his forehead and temples. I personally had to live through years of acne; the scars stand out plainly on my temples and forehead today. In spite of all this, I felt no rapport with this spring loaded instrument of thinly veiled condescension.

For a moment I hesitated. I thought, “Yes, you can leave me alone,” but it came out as, “No, thank you. I'll look on my own.”

I wandered back into the depths of the store looking for...well, I didn't know its official name. Many times I've wandered into a store looking for a product and finally ended up describing how it worked to a clerk in the hope that they could help me find it. Along with assistance, I almost always get a healthy dose of condescension:

“Oooooohhhhhh! You want a Model-7 flambang.”

I guess so. If I knew what it was called, I wouldn't have had to describe it to you, you prat. Why can't you simply say, “I think I might have what you need,” and take me to it. Instead, you hurl jargon at me as though only the most savage of Calibans wouldn't know about Model-7 flambangs.

In this case, I was searching Radio Shack for a y-adapter for a computer hard drive power supply. I'd acquired another drive, but lacked the necessary wires to juice it up. Knowing I couldn't possibly be the only person with this problem, I assumed there was an off-the-shelf solution.

It's so much easier to go into a situation when you know what's going on than to enter clueless. Sometimes, though, there's just no way to do advance research on something. You have to blunder into things with full knowledge that you'll make faux pas after faux pas...like not knowing what a Model-7 flambang is, for instance.

There are all kinds of subtle differences in stores and organizations that affect how comfortable a shopper will be when it comes to asking for help. Some stores don't expect you to know what's going on, and really do try to help. Others just sit back and watch you screw up. I think this is why Wal-Mart is starting to institute the practice of punching receipts as people exit. If you don't know that's the standard operating procedure and the doorman is busy with someone else, big burly men will holler at you as you try to exit. In areas closer to Wal-Headquarters, they frequently punch you *and* your receipt. There's nothing like dredging up subliminal guilt by invoking memories of childhood shoplifting.

Stores like Radio Shack, however, combine the worst of both worlds. They know that given the nature of their wares, most people entering the store won't know the exact phylum, order, and species of their target item. To address this concern, they instruct their clerks to ask people if they need help. In “helping”, however, the clerks inadvertently stress that the shopper is on unfamiliar turf.

“Pay for your flambang and get outta here, boy. We don't like your kind in these parts.”

While I was looking around Radio Shack, I found a small stand that had a long articulated arm equipped with two alligator clips and a magnifying glass toward one end. I'd been looking for something like that

to help make a sculpture I had in mind, but didn't know what it was called. Suddenly, here it was: "Helping Hands(tm) with magnifier, an indispensable tool for hobbyists." Of course.

As I picked up the Helping Hands(tm) and renewed my search, I overheard a customer who had broken down and asked for help.

Poor Bastard: Hi. I'm not sure what it's called, but I'm looking for a little jobby that plugs into, like, a headphone jack, and lets you plug in a speaker.

Condescending Clerk: Oh, you mean a...

I walked away.

Word of advice: never use the word "jobby" when forced to describe a product to a clerk. You immediately go into the "idiot" category.

"Jobby" is acceptable only in hardware stores and only when dealing with someone who looks like they've worked in construction for a respectable part of their life.

It shortly became apparent that I wasn't going to find my power adapter without help. As I swallowed loudly, my breathing became labored and my palms went damp. Walking up to the poor pimply-faced guy who'd accosted me at the door, I explained what it was that I wanted. A cloud passed over the intricate landscape of his face.

"Hmmm. I don't think we sell anything like that."

Oh well. I wasn't sure such a thing existed anyway. On the upside, he didn't shame me by rattling off the arcane name of this vapor-product. He scored points for that.

This chivalrous young man and I headed for the register when I caught something in my visual periphery and swerved. Nestled amongst the CB equipment and phony surveillance cameras, I saw a number of computer parts. There, looking embarrassed for being caught, was what I'd been seeking. The package proudly tagged it as a "254mm Disk Drive Y-Adapter Power Cable."



The pock-faced troll sidled up beside me as I grabbed my prize. Maybe he knew I would have slain him with my "Helping Hands"(tm) if he'd said anything, because he remained blissfully silent. He didn't even process my name and zip code during the check-out, a vital part of the Radio Shack buying ritual. The balance of power, at least this time, had shifted in the customer's favor.

There was no time to regale the other shoppers with my tale of victory and determine how best to celebrate. I paid for my toys and escaped into the reassuring warmth of my car. God, how I hated going into situations blind. No, it wasn't that. I hated going into a situation that had specific rules that others simply expected you to know.

Arriving home, I packed some clothing and a few boxes. I was on my way to Baltimore, Maryland, a place I'd never been to, and one in which I had no place to stay. In short, I was going in like a cave fish...pasty white and with no foreknowledge. In many respects, it was not unlike a trip to Radio Shack.

Needless to say, I was thrilled.