

When Cameras Used Film



Tales of Ancient Life

Mark Kaplowitz

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This little book is dedicated to the Internet, without which I would still be toiling in complete obscurity instead of relative obscurity.

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Remember When You Could Bring Lip Gloss on an Airplane?

Remember when you could carry things like lip gloss, hand moisturizer, and water on an airplane without incident?

I do.

When I was a kid and my parents felt like putting me on a plane, the only items I ever carried on were paperback novels, Esquire magazine, and, just once, the Etch-A-Sketch Animator, which interfered with radar and necessitated an emergency landing in a Wal-Mart parking lot. I did not know that lip gloss and hand moisturizer even existed, and I would not have believed that people would one day pay for bottled water.

And then I got married. My wife carries around a CVS in her pocketbook, and engages in what I call “guerilla moisturizing.” Sometimes when I’m not looking she’ll apply some Neutrogena to my hands and say, “Rub it in.”

The other day we were at the airport, flying somewhere. We walk up to the security line and start placing into the gray plastic bins our shoes, belts, wallets, keys, cell phones, iPods, magazines, fuzzy dice, tongue scrapers, Texas Chainsaw Massacre bobble head dolls, Smucker’s jars containing embryonic aliens, and chewing gum.

Three items in my wife’s pocketbook catch my eye: a plastic bottle of lip gloss, a plastic bottle of hand moisturizer, and a plastic bottle of water. I consider telling her that these items might be a problem, but elect to remain silent. You learn certain things when you are married, and I know that it will be better for me if I let someone else tell her she can’t take something on the plane.

I’m directed to stand in this apparatus that looks like an upright magnetic resonance machine. Obviously I’m either going to travel through time, or be subjected to a full body scan. There is a whirring noise and I close my eyes. When I re-open them I am still in my own time, but they catch me trying to smuggle an ATM receipt onto the plane. After a TSA worker pats me down and then buys me drinks, I re-don my shoes, belt, et al.

I’m ready to graduate to the Food Court/Hudson News phase of air travel, but my wife has been detained by a TSA worker who does not look as nice as the one who patted me down. “Do you have a re-sealable plastic bag?” my wife asks me, as if I was supposed to have packed one. I reply that, alas, I do not.

Spread out before her are the lip gloss, hand moisturizer, and bottled water. “They’re saying I have to put these things in a re-sealable plastic bag. I have to go through security again.” I ask my wife why she doesn’t just throw out the water. “Are you kidding? I paid three dollars for this!” The humorless TSA worker starts

leading my wife back into the pre-security area. The chivalric thing to do would be to follow her, but chivalry is no match for Cinnabon.

A few minutes later I'm stuffing my face and wondering where my wife has gone. I see her standing just before the conveyor belt, chugging her water. I wonder if she's going to start applying all her hand moisturizer, perhaps offering it to the passengers around her. "Excuse me," she would say, "but I can't take this on the plane, and your hands look dry." Then she goes through the time warp again, and I'm about to breathe a sigh of relief, but she is detained again, this time by a different TSA worker.

I'm halfway through Steig Larsson's "The Girl Who Tried to Bring Moisturizer on a Plane" when my wife gets through security. She tells me that she had to take a taxi to a local convenience store to buy Ziploc bags. I tell her how unfair it all is, how making her go through security three times is a waste of valuable resources, and inconveniences people for no gain. I put my arm around her and she smiles a little.

But let's see her try to moisturize me now without my hearing the plastic bag.

Remember When Cameras Used Film?

Remember when you had to put film in a camera to take pictures?

I do.

My first camera was plastic and gray and flat and had a picture of the Go-Bots emblazoned on the top. The Go-Bots were fictional cartoon robots that were like a poor man's Transformers and had nothing to do with the camera's functioning.

My Go-Bots camera, like all cameras at the time, required film to take pictures. The film was rolled up inside of a cartridge and contained a limited number of pictures. The number of pictures ranged from 12 to perhaps 48 at the outer limits. There were no film cartridges that took 500 pictures, at least not at the film kiosks where I was getting ripped off.

The film cartridge that my camera required was in the shape of two small tubes connected by a flat plastic piece. It looked like a little Torah scroll. Taking a flash picture required buying a cartridge of flash bulbs, which looked like a miniature apartment building made of clear plastic.

One memory of using my Go-Bots camera stands above all others. In 1989 my parents took me to see the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in Manhattan. I was not old enough to drink heavily so I really felt the cold. The only thing that kept me from landing on Planet Whine was my Go-Bots camera and the promise it held for me of a Pulitzer Prize.

The problem was that my allowance afforded me only one roll of 27-shot film. Even were there exactly 27 floats—and there were far more than that—I would have no chance to take different angles of a float I found particularly compelling. So I would have to choose. I could not take pictures of everything.

For each float that approached I employed a three-pronged analysis. First, how many pictures do I have left? Second, is this better than what I have already seen? And third, given how many floats are likely to come by, is this particular float picture-worthy? Some things, like the many marching bands that went marching by, were easy to pass up...unless there was something unique about it, like a particularly corpulent trumpeter. Other things, however, were closer calls.

One such close call was a float of friendly dinosaurs in various colors. "How cool," I said to myself. "I simply must preserve these dinosaurs." And there went 1/27th of my film.

I regretted my decision as soon as the shutter closed. Not even a giant blown-up Woody Woodpecker could free my mind from my bad decision. "Why did I waste a picture on those stupid dinosaurs?" I asked myself. "The dinosaurs died out 65 million

years ago. Those were probably just people dressed up in dinosaur costumes.”

Still unable to accept my own mistake, I started taking pictures of things that were even less picture-worthy than the people dressed up as dinosaurs, as if to show the cosmos that my original decision was correct. I wasted irreplaceable shots on blown-up cartoon characters that did not have their own show, washed-up celebrities whose last work had been when I was an embryo, and a funnel-cake that someone had obviously found disappointing and thrown in the gutter. The funnel cake had been stepped on, but I could not even tell if the person who had bought the funnel cake was the same person who had stepped on it.

I was still in denial when the grand finale float approached. The float that we were all waiting for. The float that bridged an okay holiday to the only holiday that kids actually cared about. The shouts of children and adults alike presaged the appearance of that greatest of floats...Santa! Mommy, I see him! It's Santa! Santa! Santa!!

It is a well-known fact that Santa Claus is the final float at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. That meant I had made it on my one roll of film. Just one more picture and all my mistakes would be forgiven. But when I pressed on the picture-taking button I got nothing. I was out of pictures. My hubris had cost me a picture of the most important float. I had blundered at the critical moment. During the long, long car ride home I kept replaying the events in my mind. A hundred times I saved myself from clicking a picture of the dinosaurs and took pictures of Santa from many angles.

That would never happen today. Had the year been 2009 instead of 1989 I would have had a digital camera with a 300 gigabyte SD flash whatever and could have taken as many pictures as I wanted, of anything, and still had plenty left over for the Big S. I could have deleted those pictures of the dinosaurs the moment I realized I did not want them.

I now have a digital camera, and I have used that digital camera to take thousands of pictures, pictures that, along with the ones I took on film with my Go-Bots camera, allow me to relive the moments of my life, good and bad, happy and sad, again and again for as long as I live. Pictures that I have not looked at once since I took them.

Remember When There Was Only One Type of Post-It Note?

In the beginning there was paper, and there was tape. And if you wanted to leave a note on a page of a book, you had to tape a piece of paper bearing the note, and when you removed the note it would not come off easily, but would damage the page with its stickiness.¹ And to tape the note to another page would take more tape, for the original tape would be unfit² to carry out its duties.

And the 3M Corporation said, “Let there be Post-it notes,” and there were Post-it notes. And the 3M Corporation saw that the Post-it notes were good, and trademarked the name “Post-it.” The Post-it notes were canary yellow, and the 3M Corporation saw that the canary yellow was good, and trademarked that, too.

And the world was filled with Post-it notes, all of the same size, and the same color. And the 3M Corporation said, “Look, the Post-it notes are all the same, and everyone buys them. Who knows how much more we can sell if the Post-it notes were different?”

And the 3M Corporation said, “Let there be Post-it notes of not only 3 inches by 3 inches, but also of 3 inches by 5 inches, and of 4 inches by 6 inches, and of 1 ½ inches by 2 inches, and of 1 ¾ inches by 1 ⅞ inches.” And the 3M Corporation said, “Let there be Post-it notes of not only canary yellow®, but also of blue, and green, and orange, and pink, and of neon colors and pastel colors.” And the world was filled with Post-it notes of every size, and every color, although the 3M Corporation was unable to trademark the colors blue, green, orange, and pink.

And the 3M Corporation created Post-it notes with lines on them for people who needed to write on lines, and Post-it notes arranged in an accordion-style for people who needed to pull notes out of dispensers. And world was now filled with Post-it notes of every size and color, and every design and arrangement.

And the 3M Corporation said, “It is not good for the Post-it notes to be alone. We shall make helpmeets for them, so that they shall not be alone in the office supply storeroom, or mail room, or closet for companies that are too small or cheap to dedicate an entire room to office supplies as I have commanded. And so that we shall make a greater return for our shareholders.” And the 3M Corporation put the Post-it notes under a deep sleep, and took a piece of the patented low-stick adhesive, and formed around it Post-it tabs that could mark books of learning and pages of deposition transcripts that contained incriminating testimony so that lawyers could easily indicate which pages they wanted photocopied.

¹ Older versions had “holiness.”

² Others “unclean.”

And the 3M Corporation created Post-it tabs of the same material, but that were much smaller, and some were loaded into a pen, and some were loaded into a highlighter. And the 3M Corporation created Post-it tabs that were more durable, that would not wrinkle or crease or tear with normal use. And the 3M Corporation created Post-it tabs that were narrower, and called “flags,” some with arrows, and some without arrows, and some that came in pop-up dispensers, and some that did not come in pop-up dispensers. And the 3M Corporation saw that it was good.

And the 3M Corporation said, “The low-stick adhesive is not sticky enough for some people.” And the 3M Corporation created a Post-it note with a super sticky adhesive, and called these notes “Post-it® Super Sticky Full Adhesive Notes.” And these Post-it® Super-Sticky Full Adhesive Notes were truly the stickiest notes that the world had ever seen, and did not drop off pages easily, and gave people the confidence that their notes would stay put, but which sometimes damaged the page or ink when removed, as the 3M Corporation warned on the package.

Remember Happy Meals?

I do.

All meals have the potential to be happy, at least the ones that do not contain kale or anything else that belongs on a tree. But a Happy Meal can come only from McDonald's.

A Happy Meal was designed for children. The food of the Happy Meal, to the extent it could be called food, was no more or less happy than a regular meal at McDonald's. If you counted the effects of age on the alimentary canal, the food was probably much happier for children.

The Happy Meal's happiness was in the packaging. The burger and fries came in a little cardboard box with artwork and puzzles on the sides, and closed up at the top with a handle in the shape of double arches. Inside the box, alongside the meal, was a toy, a small plastic piece of junk that would spend ten minutes in my hands, and 10,000 years in my parents' basement.

I insisted upon Happy Meals every time. The design and theme of the box and toy would change every few weeks or months, and I had to have the new one. Sometimes the theme was based upon a movie that McDonald's thought would increase the desire for sugar, salt, and fat. Other times it was seasonal, like a Halloween themed box with witches riding French fries against a full moon.

The boxes were shaped so that one could be fit inside another, and stacked as high as the laws of physics would permit. After a few months I had stack of Happy Meals taller than I was. It was my monument to life. Sometimes I would sit in my room and look at my tower, and imagine it reaching to the sky, with a spiral staircase leading up to an observation deck and souvenir shop with snow globes containing miniature versions of my Happy Meal tower.

When the tower reached the ceiling of my bedroom, I started another one. Before long I had a city, Hamburglars and Grimaces watching over me like cathedral gargoyles. I was re-zoning the downtown when my parents finally said something.

"Mark, we need to talk about your Happy Meal boxes," they said. "We think they are a fire hazard and your grades are suffering."

I was having a little trouble seeing them around the towers of Happy Meals. One of the boxes was decorated like a house, and had a perforated window that I opened to watch my parents leaving my room, shaking their heads.

Unable to reach my family, I invited my friends to see my work. "Thanks for coming over, Clarence. Please sit over here by the East Tower. Oh wait. I had to remove the chair to make room for the pavilion and carousel. I guess you'll have to stand."

After a while my parents stopped coming in my room. They would leave my dinner outside my door and knock three times, so that I knew it was not other kids trying to steal my Happy Meal boxes. Although the only dinner that held any interest for me was a Happy Meal.

My parents had stopped taking me to McDonald's, though, forcing me to rely on other parents. I would tutor their dim children in math or social studies in exchange for rides. Even when my parents cut off my allowance, I managed to scrape enough change together by recycling soda cans that I found in the garbage bins at school. My teachers thought I was setting a great example, and gave me an "Enviro-Kid" award that I taped to my bedroom wall, facing the Ronald McDonald Senior Living Center that I had erected next to my hamper.

I came home late one night with my latest acquisition—a Roman Empire themed Happy Meal, decorated like the Colosseum, with lions dipping gladiators in sweet and sour sauce—to find my whole family sitting in a brightly lit living room.

My father stood up, walked over to me, and gently took my Happy Meal from my hands. My mother gave me hug and directed me to the sofa next to her. My brother, a good four inches taller than the last time I'd seen him, looked worried. The cardiganed man on my other side, who introduced himself as Dr. Burger, said that he was there to help.

I looked at the ground and saw a suitcase. This was actually happening. I asked if I go up to my room and get something. Dr. Burger said that I could not, and my family nodded in agreement. They wouldn't even let me see my boxes one last time.

I was taken to the Ronald McDonald Home for Wayward Teens, and shared a room with a young man who was battling addictions to methadone and the little animal figurines that came in boxes of Red Rose tea. For weeks I was under constant surveillance, and if I tried to stack something on top of something else, I was given a shot of electricity and placed on the "no dessert" list for that night.

I was so happy when it was time to go home that I did not notice the back roads route we took to avoid the strip of fast food restaurants. There was a "Welcome Home" banner above our television, and a wide open space on my bedroom floor. It was like being in another kid's room.

The other day I saw a boy carrying a Happy Meal, probably made from recycled Chicken McNuggets. The boy looked happy. I hope I did too.

Remember When Video Games Did Not Feature Flying Body Parts?

Remember when video games did not feature flying body parts?
I do.

I grew up in the days before federal law protected a child's right to play video games, and my parents decreed that it was more important that I learn to read and write and look at people when I talk to them instead of living vicariously through jump-kicking digital characters. So I had to live vicariously through my friends' vicarious living, pressing my face up against the windows of their basements, bedrooms, and dens.

The earliest games featured geometric shapes. There was one where a yellow circle moved along straight lines and right angles, gobbling up white dots and flashing ghosts. Another game involved a triangle that moved along the bottom of a screen and shot white dots straight up at falling squares. Yet another featured two rectangles that moved vertically along the left and right sides of the screen, bouncing a small circle between them, and for every miss, the rectangle had to chug a beer.

Around the time my braces forced me to take all my pizza with a fork and knife, there was a great leap forward in the detail of video games. Instead of circles and triangles there were mushrooms and shells and plumbers leaping between free-floating platforms. There was a robot that tucked into a ball and a little green knight that wielded a sword and candle.

Around the time my voice was cracking and I started taking showers every day without being reminded, there was a popular game with a little blue hedgehog that sprinted through hill and dale in search of rotating gold coins. One time my friend showed me how to break into the games codes or something so that you make coins appear as if by magic, like some magic coin-making machine. I kept asking him to make more coins until he had his parents call my parents to come pick me up.

There were also video games where that featured one person beating up another person. It was a lot like school, except instead of the victim having his parents call the assistant principal, he just flickered and vanished. The sound effects were another feature. "What are those horrible noises?" my friend's mother yelled from the kitchen. "What horrible noises?" he answered, swinging a lamppost at a group of digital insurance salesmen.

A few years after I graduated college I went to see my brother, who at 12 had run away from home with a Super Nintendo tucked under his arm. Now an adult, he was playing a so-called "first-person" video game, where you saw the world through the

character's eyes, felt what the character felt, lived what the character lived, and shot anything that moved.

But when he shot someone they would not just disappear or fall down or be consumed in a cartoonish blaze of fire. Instead, their bodies disaggregated. Heads, arms, and legs went flying in different directions. Blood and brain matter were splattered against the wall. Later on the stains would still be there. Eventually a team of digital forensic criminologists would show up and take samples of carpet fibers.

I tried to play. The control pad was not like the two-button or four-button flat ones I was used to. Instead, the controller was a bulky spaceship with buttons on the face, buttons on the sides and corners, trigger buttons underneath, and two joysticks for your thumbs that doubled as buttons. And the game was now in three dimensions. In addition to the traditional up-down-left-right, you could jump, crouch, and do Pilates.

My inexperience showed. I have a hard enough time dealing with the z-axis in real life; in a video game I was dead meat. "How do you run with your head up?" I asked my brother, who shook his head and looked around to make sure none of his friends were around. He changed the controller settings to accommodate a left-hander who read Tolstoy, but I was not any better. I died before I could splatter anyone's brains or even kick them in the throat.

Too embarrassed to continue, I relinquished the controller, and walked away...head down. The world of video games had side-scrolled without me.

Remember When Garbage Was Garbage?

Remember when garbage was garbage, and you could throw trash away without sorting it into categories?

I do.

A routine has developed in my kitchen. I finish something contained in something else – a carton of orange juice, a can of soda, a glassine bag of heroin – and I go to throw out the container. I depress the garbage can pedal with my foot, the lid opens, and my hand with the trash is suspended in the air, about to drop its payload. Then my wife magically appears and says:

“Wait. Recycle.”

I take my foot off the pedal and snort. I enter the frigid garage and toss the carton/can/glassine bag on top of a pile of other containers that I had initially tried to throw in the regular garbage before I was caught.

In the nether-reaches of my mind I recall a simpler time. A slower time, a time when people had more time for their families. A time when people polluted more. A time when anything you did not want hanging around any longer could just be thrown away along with the chicken bones and report cards that alleged you were “not working up to potential.”

I credit the environmental movement with helping to save the planet, and making me at least consider not letting the faucet run while I’m brushing my teeth. But when I was a kid we just threw things away. Or we put them in boxes in the basement that my mother would periodically attempt to launch into space. We did not sort garbage. I did not sort my laundry, my board games or my feelings. Why would I sort my garbage?

And then, one day, a present was left on our doorstep: a beige plastic garbage can bearing a green “Recycle” emblem, illustrating that saving the planet began by arranging three arrows in the shape of a triangle. The new can was accompanied by a notice from the town, proclaiming that all paper garbage, and only paper garbage, had to be put in this special can. Paper garbage found with the regular garbage would be punished by summary execution and a \$200 fine.

Separating was complicated. For “paper” included any paper product, even if it had once held something that was not paper, and had left its non-paper product smeared all over the inside of the otherwise recyclable container. So saving the planet became all about scraping the inside of take-home containers from restaurants.

The plastic can for paper garbage was only the beginning. It was followed by a series of blue bins. One for glass. One for aluminum. One for those tiny plastic round tables that go inside of pizza boxes. All garbage had to be separated into these containers. We became a

recycling family. Kind of like the Partridge Family, except instead of riding around in a bus and singing songs, we stayed at home and classified our trash.

“Dad,” I said on a garbage night, holding up the packaging to an action figure, “is this paper or plastic?” He got up from his pile of aluminum cans, rubbed his eyes, scratched his head and consulted the Talmud, which was somewhat helpful, but only by analogy. We decided that I had to give up toys. I had more important things to do. Like sorting garbage.

The different classes of garbage got picked up on different days. Glass the third Tuesday of the month. Aluminum every other Wednesday and alternate Fridays. It was like a class schedule. But the greatest challenge was that paper garbage got picked up only once every two weeks. Approximately 97% of my family’s garbage was paper. During those two weeks we drowned in newspapers and magazines and flyers for missing cats.

One episode I will never forget. It was a cold, Thursday morning, and we were all snug in our beds, dreaming of sugar-plum fairies. Suddenly my father was shaking me awake in an obvious panic. I wondered if the house was on fire. “Mark, get up!” he said. “Today’s paper garbage day, and we forgot to put out the paper garbage!”

I wished the house had been on fire. Because then I could have stopped, dropped and rolled myself out the front door and gotten some breakfast or something. But putting out the paper garbage on such short notice - I could already hear the truck - was the suburban equivalent of the four-minute mile.

We scurried around the house in a frenzy, grabbing Pennysavers, junk mail, and cereal boxes each containing a teaspoon of cereal. We were like animals, acting by instinct. Getting that paper garbage out before the truck arrived was the key to our survival.

The truck was getting closer. We were running relays in our pajamas, stuffing the paper garbage into the overflowing can. At one point I slipped and dropped a stack of unopened credit card offers behind a desk. I started to reach for them but my father put his hand on my shoulder. “Forget it, boy. We don’t have time.”

The truck was here. It was or now or in two weeks. The sanitation workers started affixing the crane to our can. My mental movie runs in slow motion. I see my father sprinting, his bathrobe flapping in the wind, our coupons flying. “Noooooooooooo,” he screams as he dives for the curb, landing on our now empty can in the dust left by the departing truck.

Not that we minded any of this. We were, and are, proud to be stepping up to our responsibility to leave the planet in better shape than we found it. Or at least try to leave it in better shape than we

found it. Or, if nothing else, think about trying to leave it in better shape than we found it. Because without a clean environment, we have nothing. And all we have to do is scrape the inside of a take-home container.

Remember Writing With Pen and Paper?

Remember when people wrote things down on paper instead of typing into a cell phone?

I do.

Throughout much of my life I have carried around a little notebook to record my thoughts, make grocery lists, and calculate how many degrees from Kevin Bacon my family members and I are removed. Sometimes I have used an inexpensive spiral notepad from the drugstore. Other times I have used the fancy schmancy leather-bound notebooks with the attached elastic band, used by great artists such as Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, and “Wendy” the Snapple Lady. The only criterion for my notebook was that it was easy to carry in my pocket and could double as a wedge to prop up a rickety table.

In my experience, being at a social gathering and taking out a little notebook and writing in it is kind of like setting yourself on fire. It tends to get attention.

“Are you writing about me?” my friend asks.

I assure him that I am not writing about him.

“I don’t believe you,” he says. “I want to know what you are writing. Let me see.”

I assure him, again, that I am not writing about him and that he cannot see my notebook. I say this because my work is private. I say this also because I have written things about him. To be careful, I close the notebook and focus my attention on the South Park rerun we’re all watching.

A few moments later I feel a tugging at my pocket. I turn and it is the same friend trying to pull the notebook out of my pocket. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“I want to see what you’re writing about me.”

“You’ll never see what I’m writing about you. And I’m not writing anything about you.”

I get up and move to another part of the room. Although standing in the closet might be considered a bit strange, I figure that this is the only way I can write unmolested. Unfortunately, there is no light in the closet so I must make my best guess as to how to form the letters on the page. Soon there is a knock at the door.

“Yes?” I reply, scribbling in the dark.

“What are you doing in there?” asks my curious friend.

“I’m doing research on coats of North America. There are some interesting specimens in here.” I rattle some coat hangers to support my story.

“Are you writing in there?”

“No. Why would I do that?”

“I want to know what you’re writing about me.”

It suddenly occurs to me that if I had been typing on a cell phone instead of writing with a pen and paper, no one would have said anything. They would have thought I was just being rude by texting instead of being rude by writing. I feel like I'm going to get sent to the Gulag if I don't change my act. When my friend opens the door I have my notebook pressed against my ear as if it is a cell phone, and I'm talking into it. "Mm hm. Okay. Sounds good. Let's circle back sometime next week." My friend looks confused and closes the door. I keep talking for a few more minutes so that my ruse is not exposed.

A month ago I bought one of those cell phones that is basically like a hand-held computer. Now, whenever I want to take notes I can pretend I'm just texting or emailing or searching for videos of street fights between Mets fans and Yankees fans.

"What are you writing?" my friend asks me while I'm writing on my cell phone.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm just texting or something."

"You can't fool me. The screen is lighting up your face. I want to know what you're writing."

Alas, the technology change has not worked. There is nothing I can do to hide my compulsion to take note of the world around me. But I will never tell him or anyone else what I'm writing. That is for me and me alone. And whoever reads my blog.

Remember Chuck E. Cheese's?

Remember childhood birthday parties at Chuck E. Cheese's?

I do.

My most memorable childhood birthday party was venues at a kid's party restaurant called Chuck E. Cheese's. It was tagged as "a place where a kid can be a kid." They could have added, "and where a parent should be on Xanax."

Chuck E. Cheese's, like Gaul, was divided into three parts: the video arcade, the restaurant, and the pit of plastic balls. For a brief period of time in my life, it was the place to be. Nintendo was still a few years away, and a room full of video games was a fantasy that most kids had only heard about in books. There was also skee-ball, and a mechanical seat that spun vertically on an eight-foot disc, just so that no parent would be deprived of the anxiety that a kid would fall on their watch. There were no windows, and the dim lighting punctuated by glowing neon beckoned children as they ran from game to game, their little pockets filled with tokens that bore the visage of Mr. Cheese. It was a lot like a casino.

The restaurant area was next to the arcade. I don't remember them serving anything other than pizza. Even then, it was not so much pizza as a child's conception of pizza. It was as if someone had taken an already baked crust, poured on tomato sauce straight from a jar, threw on a few individually wrapped slices of cheese, and placed it in a microwave that said "Fisher Price" in the top right corner. A pie of this toy pizza cost only \$15, with an additional \$3 for Maalox.

Whilst dining, the children were entertained by band of robots dressed to look like Chuck E. Cheese and his entourage. When the music played, the robots would jerk their heads and shoulders around, and their arms would hold up instruments. If you ate enough pizza, you could pretend you were seeing Joe Cocker dressed as a mouse.

The best part of hosting a birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese's was that the kids were constantly running around and screaming. In the melee it was hard to keep track of which kids had been picked up by their parents, and which ones might be still be snorkeling in the ball pit.

My father went looking for the missing, but he was told that you had to be under 4 feet tall to enter the pit. So he had to rent an ocean-floor sonar scanner to find the rest of my guests. While the machine was on someone thought it was a video game and lodged a token in the circuits, and my father couldn't get his deposit back.

Finally, the guests had either left or the search ended, and my parents and I sat amidst a pile of wrapping paper, pizza crusts, and a cake that an aspiring acupuncturist had poked with a thousand stabs

of a plastic fork. I don't remember blowing out the candles, and I don't remember unwrapping the gifts. But the look of relief on my parents' faces as we walked to the car will stay with me forever.

Remember When You Could See Around Most Vehicles?

We'd come to the end of another Saturday lunch at P.F. Chang's, and I was chewing gum so that if I got pulled over at a police checkpoint my breath wouldn't smell like gluten-free ginger chicken with broccoli. I turned the ignition, adjusted the rearview mirror, released the emergency brake, popped in my "Drive Time Gaelic" compact disc, and put the car in reverse. And then I realized I couldn't see to my left because we were flanked by a van that had plunged my gluten-free sedan into night.

"How am I supposed to see around this thing?" I asked my wife who was gazing into a compact mirror by the light of her smartphone. The van had a sticker on the rear right passenger bay window. It said, "If you can read this, you can't see anything else."

Then I remembered a scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. I asked my wife for her compact mirror. Then I took the gum out of my mouth and stuck it to the back of mirror. I affixed the mirror and gum to the snow scraper that had been lying idle on the floor of the backseat, opened my window, and stuck the whole apparatus out and angled the mirror so that I could see around the van. It was the most use the scraper got all season.

"I think I can pull out after this Honda and Panzer tank," I said.

"Okay, Field Marshal. But you're buying me a new mirror."

I got pretty handy with the scraper-scope. Any time I needed to see around a Suburban or Avalanche or Hummer, I just stuck the scope out the window and ignored the birds that came to perch. Sure there were stares from passerby, and even a few inquiries from police officers who wanted to know which facility I'd escaped from. But soon everyone recognized me, like you recognize that guy who drives around with a flag on his antenna that says, "Make Lemon Bars, Not War."

Then one day I noticed other people with scraper-scopes. Except they didn't all use scrapers and compact mirrors. Some used dentist's mirrors. Others used shaving mirrors with metal accordion extenders. I even saw someone who had trained his dog to stick its head out the window, carrying in its mouth a long bone that had been wrapped in reflective foil. We the oppressed...we the downtrodden...we the great unwashed masses of coupe-, sedan-, smart-, and zip-car drivers were united in our quest to behold the other side of sport utility vehicles. When we passed on the highway we would waive to each other with our scopes.

It was another Saturday afternoon and I was in my car, savoring the interplay of the gluten-free "Buddha's Feast" with the flourless chocolate dome. As usual my car was in eternal night thanks to a Dodge Durango and a minivan with seven gables. I stuck out my

scraper-scope, angled it to see what I could see, and just happened to focus the mirror on the mirror of another scope sticking out of a Civic three spaces down. The two mirrors instantly produced an infinite number of smaller and smaller reflections inside each other, ending in a point of light so blazing that I was unable to see for a few moments.

And when the purple splotches finally cleared from my vision, there was nothing left of the compact mirror but some smoldering dust.

“Well, that’s it,” I said to my wife. “That was our only hope of getting out of here. Now we’ll have to wait until our sun becomes a super nova and swallows up all the SUVs on Earth.” I started looking for something good on the radio.

“Is that all?” she asked me.

I thought for a few seconds.

“Or I guess I could always back out slowly.”

Remember Julius Caesar?

What can be said about Julius Caesar that has not already been said? He was a very good tipper, routinely going over 20% and making everyone else at the table feel cheap.

One time, when we were in Gaul fighting the Celts over whether their name was pronounced with a hard or a soft “C,” Caesar parked his chariot in the space reserved for a local chieftain who had 20 years of service and special sticker.

“Well I didn’t see any sign on the space,” said Caesar, but the man’s feathers were ruffled over this breach of etiquette. He didn’t care if Caesar was there to make war or not, and Marc Antony’s attempts to smooth things over with a few talents of gold and some raspberry-passionfruit wine were not successful. Eager to please, Antony remedied the situation his own way, which led to even greater disappointment.

“You told me to take care of it!” Antony said, waving his hands in the air.

“Well you didn’t have to chop his head off right there in front of everyone,” said Caesar. “How can I go to the supermarket now? It’s really awkward.”

Caesar also loved going out to new restaurants. But he made it hard for everyone because he always wanted Italian.

“But we had Italian last night,” Antony complained once. “Can’t we try that new barbecue place?”

“Yes,” said Cicero, “I heard the food was good but the service slow and desserts overpriced.”

Caesar was almost persuaded, but the omens for barbecue were bad, and he made them all get Italian for the third night in a row.

There was the time he returned from Egypt and discovered that he’d forgotten to pay his credit card bill. “It was one lousy day late!” he shouted to a scribe from the bank who was recording the entire message for quality purposes. When the credit card company refused to take off the late fee, Caesar had the scribe crucified and asked to speak with his supervisor. The late fee was taken off but the interest was, unfortunately, already chiseled in stone.

Julius Caesar was so excited when he invaded Britain. He didn’t even mind all the rain. “The savages are so polite,” he wrote in his journal. His observations were so poignant and witty that I was as surprised as he was when he couldn’t get any publishers in Rome to do even a limited printing. Caesar was told that travel memoirs had been “done to death” and the market was looking for young-adult paranormal romance.

People misunderstood Caesar’s desire to become an absolute dictator. They called him a tyrant. “I’m really not a tyrant,” he would lament. “So I want to divert a river. Big deal. Look at how it bends

in the map. Don't you think it would look better if it flowed in a straight line?"

He even got criticism for changing the calendar. He was only trying to give his daughter the perfect wedding.

"Ah, you see, there's absolutely nothing left in June," the wedding planner said, consulting his stone tablet. "Everyone wants to get married in June. So that takes us into September..."

"But I don't want to get married in September," his daughter said. "Daddy, you promised me I could have a wedding worthy of Minerva."

"Did I say that? All right. And so you shall!" Caesar said, and created the month of July, thus clearing up a few more weekends for his daughter to choose from. He still had trouble getting invitations printed up, though, as the scribes weren't used to writing the name of the new month, and took several drafts to get it right.

But all things in antiquity have to end in tragedy so that writers have something to write about. I told Caesar not to go to the Senate that day. Nothing was on the agenda except for a routine appropriations bill for vomitoria, and a total puff-piece of legislation formally recognizing that being eaten by a lion was more humane than being eaten by a bear.

"But I heard they are going to serve cake," he said.

"Sir," I said to him, "you are the absolute ruler of Rome, the most powerful man in the world, a god among men. You can have cake at home any time you want."

"Yes," Caesar said, gathering up his toga, "but the cake at home is just not the same."

Remember When You Didn't Have to Worry About Online Tracking?

I recently read an article about how companies track Internet searches to aid in marketing of products and rejection of credit applications. It is certainly easy to see what banks will do with credit applicants who search for “do I have to pay my mortgage,” or what life insurers will do with policy applicants who search for “skyscrapers that let you bungee jump.”

But Internet searches do not always fall into such neat categories. What will companies make of someone who searches for how long mayonnaise can stay on the counter before it can no longer be served to his in-laws? Or who trolls YouTube for the opening credits to the 1980s cartoon “He-Man and Masters of the Universe”? Or who wants to know if Marilyn Manson is really the same guy who played Paul Pfeiffer on “The Wonder Years”? (For the record, he is not.)

I can see the corporate scientists in the laboratory now. There is a monitor showing me sitting at my computer, searching for the video of “The King Is Half-Undressed,” the hit single by the 1990s pop band, Jellyfish.

“What is he looking at?” asks the Google overlord to his underling at the monitor.

“Well, sir, he’s watching a Jellyfish video.”

“Like one of those squishy things at the beach?”

“No, sir. Jellyfish the West Coast pop band that, true to its name, was short lived yet influential.”

“What’s with all the tambourines? Every member of the band has a tambourine. There’s even a tambourine coming out of that guy’s head.”

“I think it’s supposed to be a conceptual video, sir. How shall we proceed?”

“Charge him an extra three points on his mortgage,” says the overlord, taking a sip from his coffee mug that says “World’s Best Dad” and shifting focus to a monitor focused on someone searching for videos of people falling down the stairs.

What will health insurance companies make of my visits to the Internet Movie Database, where I’ve analyzed the career paths of the actors who starred on the Nickelodeon sketch-comedy show “You Can’t Do That On Television”? Perhaps they will call it a pre-existing condition, and raise my co-pays for hospital stays and prescriptions for green slime.

Perhaps this is all for the better. Perhaps online search tracking will enable companies to bring us better products. Perhaps one day I’ll finally come home to a cat that plays the piano.

A positive use of online tracking would be to tell us what our friends have been searching for. Then we would know what to buy them for their birthdays. Maybe one day I'll sign in to Facebook and get a reminder that it's so-and-so's birthday, along with a note that so-and-so is really interested in action figures that don't melt in the microwave.

Of course, the real issue with online tracking is privacy. No one wants to go through cyberspace labeled as someone who likes hats and pictures of skin diseases. And I'm sorry, but it is no one's business if you need to know how much Jennifer Aniston spent on cereal last month.

So I'm confident that Congress will move heaven and earth to pass an online privacy law that will be thousands of pages long and will do absolutely nothing to stop online tracking. But maybe the law will make the companies at least tell us why we're suddenly being sent samples of mayonnaise that do not need to be refrigerated.

Remember Audio Cassette Tapes?

Remember when people listened to music on cassette tapes?

I do.

The first cassette tape I ever bought was the album *Appetite For Destruction* by Guns 'N' Roses. I had never heard their music. But my friend said the band was cool and I did whatever my friends told me. After a few weeks of saving my allowance, the plastic Hess truck finally had the eight dollars I needed to buy the album in that innocent time when recorded profanity had to be bought in person.

I barely had the tape out of the cellophane when I realized that my family's sole cassette player belonged to my father, and that this cassette player was in his car. Driving myself was not an option, as I had poor motor skills and was in the fifth grade. Listening to tunes like "Nightrain" (Wake up late/Honey put on your clothes/And take your credit card/To the liquor store), "My Michelle" (Your Daddy works in porno/Now that Mommy's not around/She used to love her heroin/But now she's underground), and "It's So Easy" (Cars are crashin' every night/I drink and drive/Everything in sight) with my father in the car next to me was a little uncomfortable at first, but soon he was whistling along just like he did to Roy Orbison.

One of the things I remember most about cassettes was making mix tapes. A mix tape was a recording of assorted songs on a blank tape, usually of different artists, and frequently made for a member of the opposite sex, or, if you were me, made just for yourself. The main character in the film *High Fidelity* lists a number of rules for making mix tapes. I, however, had only one rule: Arrange the songs so that I would not have to flip over the tape in the middle of a song.

With only this one rule to obey, the mood of my mix tapes was a little erratic. For example, one of my mixes started out with "Dead Souls" by Nine Inch Nails, then "Come On Eileen" by Dexy's Midnight Runners, then Metallica's "Blackened," and then "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper. Another one of my mix tapes opened with "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees, then the main theme from "The Marriage of Figaro" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, then jumped to "Hammer Smashed Face" by Cannibal Corpse, and finally "V'Shomru" by Cantor Joseph Kanefsky. That mix was for my grandmother.

The other thing that stands out in my memory about cassettes was how they would get caught in the spokes of the tape player. I'd be pacing back and forth across the campus green, listening to *The White Album* over and over again instead of doing my Spanish homework, when all of a sudden Paul McCartney's vocals on "Why Don't We Do It In the Road" would be replaced by a loud crunching sound, and then there would be no sound but my own profanity.

Oh the humanity! I felt as if it were my arm that had been caught in the spokes, although because of the size difference only the end of my sleeve would get wound up. Try as I might to unwind the tangled tape and restore my beloved music, it almost never worked again, and even when it did the tape never sounded right. On some of the tracks it sounded like Paul was just screaming.

I no longer use cassette tapes, and even my compact discs are being featured on Antiques Roadshow. I now carry thousands of songs on my telephone. It takes seconds to arrange them in a mix, and I don't have to flip over the phone unless I feel like drawing attention to myself. The only thing missing is the sound of cassette tape getting mauled by tape player spokes.

But I'm sure they've got an app for that.

Remember When Airplane Meals Were Included With the Price of the Ticket?

Remember when meals on an airplane were included with the price of the ticket?

I do.

I don't recall the airplane meals being anything like what I would normally consider food. But still I liked them and looked forward to them. Airline food had a special taste and consistency that I could enjoy back in the days when my digestive system could still hit a curve ball.

If the flight was long enough to be considered meal-worthy, the "steward" or "stewardess" (the ancient names for flight attendants) would serve each passenger breakfast, lunch, or dinner, depending on the time of day. My favorite meal was dinner, followed by a distant lunch and an even more distant breakfast. Lunch was just some turkey with a squeezable packet of Hellman's, and breakfast was allegedly "eggs" and "sausage" but no laboratory could confirm this. But dinner was always great, and the main reason was because of the dessert.

Dessert was the crown jewel of the plastic divider plates, and carrot cake was the dominant dessert. I was on a flight to Florida to see my grandparents and eat ice cream every day when I had my first taste of airplane carrot cake. I went down the aisle of the plane, asking people if they were going to eat their carrot cake, or if they were going to finish their carrot cake if they had already started on it but looked like they might be full.

The most memorable airplane experience was when I flew to Vancouver Island the summer before my senior year of high school to spend two weeks studying killer whales and whether they preferred cable or satellite. The in-flight dessert was a Table Talk apple pie. I wolfed mine down and then asked my classmates if they were going to eat theirs. Word spread quickly throughout the Boeing 747 that I was willing to eat unwanted Table Talk apple pie, free of charge, and the white and red boxes were piling up on my fold down tray. I was only halfway done when they announced that we were landing and had to put the tray tables back in their upright positions and that our Captain had turned on the "no-gluttony" sign.

Those days are over. Today, the flight attendants go down the aisle asking if anyone wants to purchase food. I don't know if they sell dessert because I am too cheap to find out. I'm sure that some economics professor could prove to me on the back of a napkin that tickets would just be more expensive if the meals were included, and that this pricing model is really more efficient because people who don't want meals can elect to forgo them and thereby reduce their

flying costs. Of course, the professor would have to bring the napkin because I won't pay for that, either.

Soon you'll have to pay extra for a seat. The passengers will be standing on the plane as it taxis towards the runway, and the flight attendants will go down the aisle, asking three passengers at a time whether they would like to purchase a seat for the flight. Most people will decline the offer, because they will refuse to pay for something that used to be included. I know this because I will be one of them.

Remember When Containers Were Easy To Open?

Remember when containers were easy to open?

I do.

Sometime in the 1980s it was decided that the biggest threat to human existence was not disease or environmental disaster or crime or drugs or famine or political instability, but that a stranger would go into supermarkets, unscrew the tops of containers of juice and medicine, add harmful substances, screw the top back on, and walk away, leaving the tainted beverage or elixir for the unwitting consumer. I guess this actually happened a few times, because one day every container had an aluminum seal over the opening.

These aluminum seals are almost impossible to remove. There is usually a little flap that says “pull here” but this is just a joke at the consumer’s expense. The joke is particularly funny when the consumer is a coffee drinker trying to remove the seal to hazelnut creamer at 5 a.m., huffing and puffing, straining his deltoids, swearing loudly, pleading to deities, and finally reaching for the closest fork to poke a hole through the seal.

The aluminum seals are not the only part of the joke. The plastic pull-tops on cartons are great fun when the plastic ring comes off without the top. And sometimes there is not so much an added barrier as just a top that is more or less welded to the container.

One night my wife and I were getting ready to go out for the evening. She was taking longer than her usual three hours and I started getting worried.

“Honey,” I said through the door to the bathroom, “are you all right?”

She opened the door, apparently ready to go out, holding up to me a small green and pink container cylinder that I recognized from television as mascara. “I can’t get the top to this off. Can you try?”

Removing tops to containers is one of the few remaining ways to be a man in the modern world. I cherished the opportunity to slay the dragon. “Sure thing, honey.” I grabbed the container and pulled. And pulled and pulled. The top would not budge.

“Um, hang on a second,” I said, and went downstairs to my tool box. I grabbed the pliers and succeeded only in scratching up the shiny top to the mascara.

“What’s going on down there?” my wife shouted.

“Um, almost...got...it,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t give myself a hernia and have to forgo dessert. But my efforts were futile.

I left the basement, taking the pliers with me, and went next door to my neighbor. I showed him the scratched-up mascara container, the red marks on my hands, and the pliers. He took the mascara from me, and led me into his garage where he had a vise. He tightened the body of the mascara container in the vise, affixed a

wrench to the top of the mascara, and pulled while I stood behind him and pulled on his shoulders. We heard a crack . “Almost,” my neighbor said. “We’re...almost...there...keep...pulling.”

And then the body of the mascara shattered under all the pressure. Black stuff spilled onto the garage floor. The mascara top was still screwed on to the broken top half of the mascara body, with the little brush poking through. I picked up the pieces, thanked my neighbor for his help, and walked home awashed in shame.

“Where have you been?” my wife asked. “We have to go. Did you get the top to the mascara off?”

“Oh, honey,” I said, “don’t I always say you don’t need makeup to look great?”

Remember When Drinking Was a Novelty?

Remember when drinking was a novelty?

I do.

For every person who has decided to let alcohol be a part of their lives, there was that magical time when drinking was a new experience. Maybe it was when they chugged a beer in twenty seconds at a New Year's Eve party and basked in the accolades until upstaged by a Naval recruit who did it in eight. Maybe it was when they pilfered wine coolers at a family event and drank them behind a tree while their parents had the police looking for them. Maybe it was when they went out on their 21st birthday and drank so much they had to do their senior year of college from the couch. No matter what the specific details were, those early bouts with drink are usually swathed in a combination of wonder, adventure, and projectile vomiting.

As the years pass and the empty cans and bottles form a larger and larger share of the recycling bin, the novelty of drinking wears off. It goes from being something to celebrate special occasions to something to cope with the stress of putting the dishes away. But once in a while we are reminded of what those early days were like. I was so reminded this past weekend while riding the Long Island Rail Road.

The Long Island Rail Road is a commuter train that during the week shuttles people between their jobs in New York and their homes on Long Island, and during the weekend shuttles their young adult children between the bars in New York and their parents' homes on Long Island. It runs fairly regularly during waking hours, but its late-night schedule can be stroke-inducing. For the line that I take when I'm visiting the Big Apple, there is a gap between 1:16 a.m. and 2:53 a.m. And if you do not make that 1:16, you are in for a very, very long night.

I failed to make the 1:16 this past weekend. The 2:53 train is occupied almost entirely by people who are college-aged or just beyond it, dressed to the nines and doing figure-eights in the narrow aisle. Among a single-file of four people walking by, the third person is not so much walking as being shuffled along like a scene from *Weekend at Bernie's*. People are shouting to each other about how "wasted" they are and are discussing economic policy without supporting data. Young women show little compunction about walking barefoot while still inside the borough of Manhattan.

Early on in our trek east someone warns of a low wave of water flowing along the floor and I pick up my feet just in time. Evidently something in the rest room had overflowed. The waves keep coming during the ride. When the train stops at a station, the water flows east. When the train leaves a station, the water flows west. It is like

the tide coming in and going out. I'm about to take out my fishing pole. But the fish do not look appetizing.

I am getting a good workout from keeping my feet elevated. The next exercise gadget should be a device that sends commuter train toilet water rushing under your feet for an hour. Not even squats yield that kind of burn. I start to wonder what could make this ride any worse. And then I get my answer.

Two stops before my destination, we hear on the intercom that "a passenger needs medical assistance" and that our train is "being held until emergency personnel can arrive." I wonder what the EMS code is for "screaming they are going to die when they are really just drunk." It takes half an hour for the emergency personnel to arrive, and during that half an hour I hear "FML" - in both short and long form - being said into cell phones and across the aisle.

It is well past 4 a.m. when I disembark at my stop, and I know that even brunch is out of the question. As I swing from the luggage racks like monkey bars to avoid the river of dreams, I take one last look around me. I see the red eyes, the bloated food-smearred faces, the stained jackets, the chia pets, the bare feet...and I marvel at the modern world's only rite of passage.

Remember William Shakespeare?

They didn't have birth certificates in Elizabethan England, so no one knows for sure the date of William Shakespeare's birthday, something that I imagine created a lot of problems whenever Shakespeare tried to pick up a prescription at CVS. But we do know that Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. So don't forget to wish him a Happy Deathday on his Facebook profile.

In his honor, I thought I would re-read Hamlet and give a brief summary of the Bard's greatest work featuring goblets and someone named Ophelia.

We are in Denmark, and Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. His uncle, Claudius, is the King; his mother Gertrude, the Queen. Queen Gertrude used to be married to Hamlet's father, when Hamlet's father was king. But Hamlet's father was murdered, and Gertrude found being married to a corpse unbearable, as she could never get it to mow the lawn. So she married her brother-in-law, and was spared the hassle of changing her last name on her driver's license.

One evening Hamlet is approached by his father's ghost, who tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him by pouring poison in his ear while he slept. After that, the Danish kings appointed sleep testers. The sleep tester would fall asleep before the king would, and if no one poured poison in his ear, the King knew it was a safe place to nap.

Hamlet's father, the ghost, wants revenge on his brother Claudius for murdering him, seizing the throne, marrying his wife, and eating the last piece of Halloween candy. Hamlet knows he has to avenge his father's murder by murdering Claudius, perhaps with nose poison, but Hamlet is not in any great hurry. Hamlet instead walks around the castle philosophizing and making poetry and not working. This explains why Hamlet is 30 years old and still living at home.

In a later scene, Hamlet stabs what he thinks is his uncle behind a curtain, but is in fact his uncle's counselor, Polonius, pretending to be the Wizard of Oz. Hamlet now must flee, having just killed a human being and all. King Claudius sends him to England, where a Dane will surely blend in when he's not driving on the wrong side of the road.

Claudius also has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's friends, accompany him to England. Hamlet never really liked them ever since Hamlet's father made Hamlet invite these two wet blankets to Hamlet's tenth birthday party. Hamlet was forced to say, "Thank you for coming to my party. I hope you have a good time," through clenched teeth, and even had to write Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern a thank-you note for the colorful shirt they gave him.

In England, however, Hamlet convinces the English King that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have to be executed for always wanting to go back to the hotel instead of sight-seeing.

Hamlet returns to Denmark. He's hanging out with his friend Horatio, walking through a graveyard because it's the cool thing to do, and sees two clowns digging a grave. Hamlet speaks to one of the clowns, who tosses up a human skull. Then another ten clowns come out of the grave. Hamlet learns that the grave is for Ophelia, this girl he used to date before things got weird. Hamlet talks to the skull, and pretends it is talking back to him by moving the jawbone with his hands and speaking in a high voice. Horatio is starting to feel a little uncomfortable, but doesn't say anything because people at odds with this Hamlet seem to have short life spans.

In the last scene of the play, Hamlet has a duel with Laertes, Polonius's son, who is avenging his father's death. We don't know if Polonius appeared to Laertes as a ghost. Maybe he did and then Hamlet's father the ghost got angry for having his idea stolen, and challenged the dead Polonius to a duel of ghosts. Or maybe Hamlet's father the ghost did not care that the ghost idea was being stolen, until his father, Hamlet's grandfather, appeared as a ghost and told Hamlet's father the ghost that the ghost-infringement by Polonius the ghost had to be avenged.

Hamlet and Laertes duel in front of Claudius and Gertrude, who sit at a table with goblets and food like they are at Medieval Times. Gertrude has ordered another drink but the waitress is taking so long she decides to drink from Claudius's goblet. Unfortunately for her this goblet has poison instead of Diet Pepsi, and Gertrude falls dead. As it turns out, Laertes has been fighting with a poisoned sword, and stabs Hamlet with it. Hamlet, however, does not die right away, but is able to go on for a while, saying witty things and deciding what he wants to TiVo that night.

Hamlet, even while poisoned, somehow wrestles the poisoned sword from Laertes and stabs him with it, and, at last, stabs Claudius. Now everyone is dead, except Horatio, who tries to stab himself but is stopped because without him there will no one left on stage to start the slow clap. The play ends with the bodies being cleared away by the same people who clean up Times Square after New Year's Eve, and the Norwegians enter to sell their celebrated skin care formula.

Remember Napster?

Remember Napster?

I do.

Napster was a peer-to-peer file sharing program that was popular around the turn of the millennium, and enabled people to download music that would otherwise have to be purchased with their parents' hard-earned money. To get around the troublesome copyright laws, Napster employed the ancient legal doctrine of "they can't catch you all."

I used Napster solely to share my own recordings of myself playing the spoons. I never even searched for copyrighted music. One of the greatest pleasures in my life at that time was working for hours as a bumper cars operator so that I would have the \$20 to buy a CD and finding the one song that wasn't terrible.

But not everyone shared my work ethic. At college, I had this friend who downloaded thousands of songs through Napster. He would go through genres - classic rock, 80s pop, the songs by the "Zack Attack" band from *Saved by the Bell* - and play the songs for his friends when they congregated in his room to buy Tupperware and sip fine wine from red plastic cups.

Using Napster was not without its challenges. My friend lived in a fraternity house, and the House Computer Nerd, an elected position at the time, told my friend that his downloading used up so much bandwidth that the rest of the brotherhood was having trouble playing *Half-Life* in real time. At the next meeting the brotherhood voted to excommunicate my friend from the router. Unable to find other housing with sufficient bandwidth, he dropped out of school and moved back home to his parents' T-1 connection.

For a while my friend was able to live in download heaven. He was making his way through theme songs to cartoon programs when his parents got fed up with him leaving near-empty cartons of milk in the refrigerator, and turned him in to Metallica, a heavy metal band that specialized in intellectual property. At his subsequent trial my friend tried to mount a vigorous defense, but his lawyer spent the whole time downloading music instead of making objections, and my friend was sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in Siberia. I heard that he was later implicated in a snow-swapping scheme, and murdered by the people who owned the rights to the snow.

As for Napster, it was replaced by a competitor called Gnutella, which boasted faster transfer rates and could be spread on pizza dough.

Remember Wearing Fanny Packs?

Remember wearing fanny packs?

I do.

Fanny packs were manufactured pouches of canvas or leather that buckled around the waist and let people live out their fantasy of being marsupials. My fanny pack was turquoise and yellow, and it ensured that my wallet was accessible and that girls were not. My mother wrote my name in it with black magic marker so that it would not get mixed up with some other kid's turquoise and yellow fanny pack.

My fanny pack's greatest journey was on a three-day class trip to Washington, D.C. For months I sold candy bars, saved my allowance, and begged my parents to write a check just so that I could wear my fanny pack to the top of the Washington Monument. I remember being more excited about having my Go-Bots camera and Bronx Zoo wallet at my fingertips than I was about visiting America's greatest souvenir shops.

I think I will describe fanny packs to my children the way my parents described bell bottom pants to me: everyone wore them. All the kids on that class trip had fanny packs. I won't go so far as to say that you were not cool without a fanny pack, but it certainly took you a lot longer to get your \$10 out for an "authentic" copy of the Declaration of Independence without one.

We were at the Air and Space Museum, looking at the "Spirit of '76" and wondering whether they served peanuts on it, when a friend of mine tapped me on the shoulder. "Look, Mark," he said, pointing, "that's kid's wearing your fanny pack." And, lo and behold, there was another kid with a turquoise and yellow fanny pack. He was walking away and I followed him into one of the simulators in the Flight Simulator Zone, where you could say "Folks, this is your captain speaking," into a microphone and then see how creatively you could explain that the plane was not going to take off for eleven hours. It was dark in the simulator and I could not tell turquoise from other shades of blue. And when I emerged, he was gone. For the rest of that trip I kept an eye out for my fanny pack doppelgänger. I thought I saw him by the Lincoln Memorial, but it was just my own reflection in the Reflecting Pool. I never saw him again, and when I returned from the trip I retired my fanny pack.

I hear that fanny packs are back. They've added features like cup holders and USB ports, and it is rumored that Lady Gaga wears a fanny pack made of pastrami. I've even considered getting a new fanny pack just to hold all my rewards cards. I saw the perfect fanny pack in a catalog and got very excited. It was black, and leather, and had a designer's insignia emblazoned on the front. I took the picture

to show my wife what I wanted for my birthday. But when she looked at it, she looked at me, and, without a word, slowly shook her head.

Remember Y2K?

Remember Y2K?

I do.

In the late nineties, as the year 2000 approached and everyone prepared to trade in their cars for flying machines, we started hearing about something called “Y2K.” At first I thought this was a knock-off of the singing group Boyz II Men, but it was in fact a computer bug, and meant that the disk space that computer engineers had saved for pictures of people’s pets was going to be needed to express the year in four digits instead of two.

Yes, the looming end-of-millennium disaster, the moment where humanity would finally face judgment for its wickedness and fanny packs, was not an asteroid, or Godzilla, or aliens, but the inability of computers to express the year in more than two digits. How exciting. Engineering hadn’t failed us - Hollywood had. I had to picture the disaster myself: At the moment the year changed from 1999 to 2000, and people everywhere were trying to pop champagne without breaking any rare vases, computers would think it was the year 1900 and instantly turn into ticker tape machines.

It is hard to exaggerate the hysteria that surrounded the Y2K bug. I will try anyway.

Planes were going to fall out of the sky. Bank records would be deleted. Toilets would overflow. My biggest worry was that report cards would be lost, including the 90 I got in English junior year, mainly on the strength of my essay on Lady Macbeth’s shoe collection.

The government and corporations began spending billions of dollars on Y2K compliance, and I started spending my weekends going through all my old homework assignments and adding “19” to every date. There were some who criticized the prevention, saying we were going too far. One critic said that the Y2K bug would cause nothing more than a few blank TV screens. When people heard that they doubled their efforts. We all went around telling everyone that there was no way we were going to be flying when midnight struck. For months I did nothing but make preparations to not be in an airplane at the stroke of midnight.

As New Year’s Eve approached, I decided I would not take any chances by going to some booze fest in a major metropolitan area. So instead I went to a booze fest in the country, at the home of a friend of mine that, he assured me, was not in the way of any flight path. It was a fun party and only a few people threw up - obviously from Y2K jitters. We were all worried about our digital infrastructure as well as our coats, which had no doubt been tossed onto a bed along with many other similar-looking coats.

Soon it was time to prepare for the new year and the awkward election between kissing, shaking hands, or waving. The ball in Times Square began its descent. Dick Clark began the final countdown. The 1980s band Europe sang “The Final Countdown.” In those last seconds I braced against the inevitable, took one last look at the world as I knew it, and took the last brownie, confident that no one would say anything at such a moment.

The ball hit the ground, and...nothing. No planes fell out of the sky. No bank accounts were deleted. One toilet overflowed, but I don't think that had anything to do with computers. The world's digital infrastructure was fine, and I was going to have to pay back my student loans after all. “Auld Lang Syne” was just as depressing as ever.

No major problems were recorded, and the critics said this was proof that Y2K was a hoax all along. “You see?” they said, “We were right. You spent billions on Y2K compliance, and nothing happened.” And the people who spent those billions said, “Exactly.”

The Y2K bug is thankfully, along with paying for news and music, part of the past. Now we can live in simple peace and harmony and await the “Y10K” bug in 9999. Maybe by then I'll have found my coat.

Remember When Wishing Someone a Happy Birthday Was Not Done Digitally?

Remember when wishing someone a happy birthday was not done digitally?

I do.

When I was a child, happy birthdays were wished in person, by a group of peers surrounding the birthday boy or girl, wearing cone-shaped hats with an elastic chinstrap stapled to the sides, and singing the song “Happy Birthday” while a parent tried not to drop the blazing cake on anyone’s head. When my closest friend at the time – closest meaning his house was closer than any other kid’s – turned five, I was positive that the instant he blew out the candles he would grow a few inches before my very eyes. I was disappointed to see that he stayed the same size and still refused to let me sign-out his He-Man figurines.

In elementary school the procedure was the same except that it was done during class time. These were the days before peanut allergies, and the procedure was similar except that a parent of the birthday boy or girl had to take time off of work to bring in a cake so that class time could be spent wearing the cone-shaped hats and singing the song. If your birthday fell on the weekend or during the summer you were out of luck.

In high school, though, the male students adopted an odd procedure for wishing other male students a happy birthday. Instead of wearing hats, or singing songs, or eating cake, or even just saying “Happy Birthday,” the birthday wishes came in the form of birthday punches.

My seventeenth birthday is etched in my memory. It was third period math class, and I was trying to decide how many lines of notebook paper I wanted my integral symbol to occupy, when a classmate in the next row said, “Hey Kaplowitz, I heard that today’s your birthday.”

“Oh really? No one told me.”

“Very funny.” And he came over and punched me seventeen times in the upper arm, hard. “And one more for good luck,” and he punched me again. Then another classmate got me. Then another. I tried to turn away but they had no problem going to the other arm. “Happy Birthday,” each would say before laying in. They were all lined up. It was like being mugged.

By fifth period my arms were throbbing and I couldn’t hold them up. I staggered into English class like an old boxer and the words going through my head were, “Please, please no more.” But they were there in the back of the classroom, like a gang, throwing their fists softly into open palms, waiting for me. “Hey guys, it’s Kaplowitz’s birthday today!” said the ringleader, the same one who

first got me in math class. I cited an old rule from the Court of Chancery that permits only one series of birthday punches per person per birthday. “Wow, you’d make a good lawyer,” he says, and then starts punching me in the arm. He doesn’t get through them all because I start falling to the floor and our teacher starts passing out copies of *A Separate Peace*.

My arms eventually healed, which was fortunate because wishing someone a happy birthday today requires typing. But not much more than that. You enter a username and password on a social networking website, and the website reminds you of your friends’ birthdays. Click on their name, type “Happy Birthday” in the field, press return, and you’re done, your birthday wish slotted atop all the birthday wishes that came before. For a while I tried to add variety to my birthday wish by adding “Hope you have an awesome day,” but then one day I did that with two people who had the same birthday, and I got caught and it was awkward. At least I didn’t punch them.

The other day was the birthday of a good friend that I had not seen in a while. I could have posted a “Happy Birthday” on his profile page, but it felt so impersonal. I wanted to do something really special. So I texted him instead.

Remember Your First Answering Machine?

Remember your first answering machine?

I do.

In the days when I was still watching new episodes of Thundercats, if someone called and no one was home, or if someone was home but was in the shower and did not hear the phone ring, or if they did hear it ring but were afraid of getting electrocuted by picking up the phone with a wet hand, then the phone just rang and rang until the caller got tired of hearing the phone ring and went off to do something more productive with his or her life.

Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine what it was like not being able to record a message with your voice on it. Imagine the inconvenience. Imagine the missed opportunities. Imagine the bliss.

Answering machines were marketed upon the assumption that you wanted to receive telephone calls. But not all calls are wanted. If you don't pick up your phone and the caller leaves a message, you have no recourse. When you don't return the call or do what was asked, the caller can say, "Well, what you mean you didn't return the 500 fake birds and tree branches we ordered for my baby shower? I left you a message." You can run, but you can't hide.

Before answering machines, however, you could let the phone ring, and ring and ring and ring, and with each ring sense that the caller was getting tired, like a boxer hanging against the ropes in the tenth round, and would eventually go away. And when the phone stopped ringing, that was it. You could continue watching the Flintstones Meet the Jetsons or whatever, safely insulated from any constructive knowledge that you were supposed to call someone back or perhaps even do something for someone.

And then one day it all ended. They invented these machines upon which you would record a message. I remember my band director's answering machine played a steel drum band version of the theme from "Peanuts" that I heard about fifteen times when I tried to tell him that I was going to miss the Memorial Day parade because my cat was stuck behind the dryer.

My father's greeting was robot-style. "I can't come to the phone right now, but please leave your name, tel-e-phone number, and brief mes-sage after the tone. Here is the tone." And true to his word there would be a tone.

My grandparents called leaving messages "talking into the machine" and they would shout into it as if the answering machine was hard of hearing, just like all of their neighbors at Westwood 21 in Ft. Lauderdale.

People today are so used to leaving messages that they speak onto the digital medium just as if they were talking to me in person. That is why I have no trouble ignoring them.

Remember When It Was Fun To Go To the Movies?

Remember when it was fun to go to the movies?

I do.

Going to the movies as a kid was one of my more cherished experiences during the Reagan Administration. On a Friday night or Saturday afternoon, my father would ask my brother and I, “How would you boys like to see” and he would name a movie that he thought we would want to see and that he felt would be appropriate for children our age. Until I went away to college, this meant it had to be a cartoon or about a talking animal.

I distinctly remember my father handing the ticket cashier a \$20 bill for an adult and two children, and getting back enough change to buy us candy. Twizzlers were my go-to movie food. I would make sure to open it before the coming-attractions so that the deafening Twizzler-wrapper noise would not disturb my fellow viewers. Then I would take each Twizzler, bite off both ends, and blow through it like a straw.

One of my earliest movie memories was when my father took my brother and I to see a popular holiday season movie called *Gremlins*. The commercials that had probably influenced my father’s choice of film had showed these cute little primate-looking things. Except at some point the movie became less about cute little primate-looking things and more about old women sent on an electric chair speeding up several flights of stairs and jettisoned through a window to certain death. My father was more horrified than the characters in the movie. He asked my brother and I if we wanted to leave, but we shook our heads, eyes never leaving the screen so that we wouldn’t miss any of the mayhem.

My wife and I recently went to the movies for the first time in years. There were so many teenagers I thought the Garmin had accidentally sent us to the high school. I said to my wife, “So this is where people go when they are not old enough to go to bars.” She replied that my social commentary would sound a lot better while waiting on line for tickets.

While I was waiting for tickets I looked up at the prices, and realized I was going to have to hit the ATM that was conveniently located fifteen paces away in the theater lobby. While punching in my PIN I reminisced about the days when a movie ticket cost only \$7.50. After we got the tickets I wanted popcorn, and had to hit the ATM again. Thank goodness it was a week I got paid.

We sprinted to Screen # 47 and did not miss a single moment of the half-hour of coming attractions and commercials. I looked around for the remote control and finally understood what was meant by the term “captive audience.”

Half the seats the theater were occupied by teenagers, and each teenager's hands were occupied by a small glowing screen. I thought that perhaps the small screens were a visual aid for a generation so accustomed to viewing small screens that the big screen exceeded the viewing range. But upon closer inspection of the Justin Bieber seated next to me, I saw that the little screens were just smart phones that were being used in the way that everyone uses them: tune in globally, tune out locally. If there was ever really a fire in the crowded theater, at least I would be able to see where I was going.

As the movie started, I noticed that the younger members of the audience would get up and leave, and then come back, and then leave, and then come back. These antsy adolescents were either part of a cult that drank a lot of water before a movie, or were hanging out in groups and treating public space like their den.

About a half-hour into the movie, a latecomer took a seat behind me. He spent what seemed like ten minutes taking off his very large and crinkly coat, and made so much noise that I missed the framing of the protagonist's major conflict.

Then someone in the back right corner decided it was time for potato chips or some other snack that comes in a deafening bag. Two characters in the film started and ended a romance before the character in the back of the theater was done opening the bag, which the good folks at Dolby were nice enough to pipe through in surround sound.

During the final battle scene, two people a few rows back got into an argument over the federal budget. And then someone shouted into a cell phone, loudly, "Just meet us outside! The movie's almost over!" I started to get up and say something, but the soles of my shoes were stuck in congealed soda that a fellow filmgoer had wanted to share with the floor.

When I got home I called up my father. I told him about my experience at the movies, about the cell phones, the coming in and out, the talking, the eating, the glowing screens. "Dad, it's just not like it used to be," I said, and thought that he would feel my pain and join in condemnation. But he just laughed and said, "At last, my son, you are a man."

Remember Playing Board Games?

Remember playing board games?

I do.

When I was a child we did not have HBO or video games or a computer, so if I wanted to have fun I had to either set something on fire or play a board game.

Candy Land was where I matched my wits against other members of my family. The object was to advance your piece along the path until you reached the gum drop castle or you got up and quit in a huff because it looked like your little brother was going to get there first. There was a stack of cards, each with the picture of another sweet food like a candy cane, peanut brittle, or an ice cream bar, and whichever card you pulled, that was the space on the board you advanced to. The ice cream bar space was the closest to the end, so one time I fixed the cards so that I would pick the card with the ice cream bar. My plan was foolproof. But it was not Mom-proof. My mother made me go first and I ended up pulling the card for soy chips, automatically losing the game.

When I got a little older my father taught me how to play chess. I had thought he said “chest” and that the felt on the bottom of the pieces would be used to stick the pieces to our chests. I was disappointed when the pieces stayed on the board, but my disappointment turned to glee when I beat my father my very first time playing. I bragged about it for the next twenty years until my father told me in an email that he let me win.

In the late 1980s my family succumbed to a massive TV ad campaign for Mouse Trap. The point of Mouse Trap was to go around a board collecting pieces of cheese and assembling plastic pieces into a complex mechanism where at the end someone would turn a crank and set the little plastic pieces in motion that culminated in a plastic cage that looked like a small overturned laundry basket falling down on the little mouse-pieces, “trapping” them. The game would have been great if the mechanism worked. But it only worked on the commercial. In real life you had prod each component of the game until it did what it was supposed to do. Only a mouse that was already dead or had given up on life would have gotten caught in Mouse Trap.

There was Monopoly, where my strategy was to collect the cheap properties and jack up the rents like a slum lord. And Trivial Pursuit, where I always answered the questions in the form of a question, like Jeopardy, until someone flicked a small plastic wedge at my eye. And the Game of Life, which required so little strategy that it must have been designed by a Calvinist.

Scrabble was a game changer. I would comb the dictionary for obscure words that were short and contained the letter “e” to use on

my opponents. The word “en” was my favorite, even though it was a prefix. Nobody called me out on it, and I was reigning champion until someone told the authorities that I was forming words diagonally.

The board games for adults are very different. There is a lot more dependence on TV trivia or awkward topics or devices that make noise. One time I was at a party where I was forced into playing a game that had a digital timer that started beeping loudly if you took too much time to think of movies starring Kevin Bacon. The noise was so irritating that when everyone else got up to look at a YouTube video of a stranger falling down the stairs, I tossed the device out the fifth-story window into the alley below. I played dumb when they asked what happened to it, but I don’t think they believed me.

I was visiting my ancestral home last weekend, and during the time of the visit where my mother sends me to the basement to throw out more of my “junk” I came across Candy Land. I wanted to take out the board, fix the order of the cards, and challenge my brother to a rematch. But I knew it would not be the same as I remembered. I was too mature to play games. So I put the box down, covered it with old issues of Highlights, and told my mother that I’d thrown it out.

Remember Lunchboxes?

Remember lunchboxes?

I do.

My first lunch box had a Pac-Man theme and was made of metal. Inside I carried peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a thermos, and little power pellets that I'd chew on when I wanted to eat the bullies at school instead of running away from them. Then the edges of the lunchbox rusted and would cut gashes in classmates who brushed up against me.

The following year I tapped He-Man, the most powerful man in the universe, to represent my lunch. If I needed the edge for a coloring assignment, or a group of other kids who were hogging the swings, I would hold the lunchbox up to the sky and a lightning bolt would strike me, and I would shout "I have the power" and get sent to the nurse's office.

In second grade I had a Transformers lunchbox. A few twists and turns of the lunchbox would transform it into a robot that would sit on my desk and do absolutely nothing.

In third grade I bought a lunchbox based on The Wuzzles, a Disney cartoon named after creatures that were a cross of two different animals. One was a cross between a lion and a bumblebee; another was a cross between a bear and a butterfly. Yet another was a cross between a cow and a pig, and caused dietary problems for many viewers. On the way home from the store, I stole frequent glances at the face of my Wuzzles lunchbox, and could not wait to show it off at school.

The night before the first day of school, however, it occurred to me that, unlike He-Man and Transformers, The Wuzzles was not considered exclusively a "boy's show," and that some classmates might feel entitled to argue that a Wuzzles lunchbox was a "girl's" lunchbox. I prepared a brief arguing that the lunchbox was gender-neutral, and placed in my lunchbox, sandwiched in between my sandwich and cookies shaped like Keebler Elves.

The next morning I sat on the school bus with my lunchbox face down on my lap. A few times I peeked at the face of my lunchbox to see if it had changed to G.I. Joe, but the Wuzzles just peeked right back at me. And for a moment their vibrant cheery blended-species faces filled my heart with gladness.

My teacher made us put our lunchboxes in the back of the classroom. Lined up from the left were the Thundercats and Go Bots lunchboxes, and from the right were the Barbie and My Little Pony lunchboxes. And front and center was my Wuzzles lunchbox, colorful and proud.

I kept looking around the classroom at the other students, to see if anyone had figured out that the Wuzzles lunchbox belonged to

me. A group of boys seated together pointed at the lunchboxes, whispered, and laughed. Convinced they were talking about my Wuzzles lunchbox, I leaned out of my chair to get a better listen, so far that I fell out onto the floor, and said “I meant to do that” as I stood up and brushed off my new jeans.

At lunchtime I grabbed my lunchbox in the melee of students, tucked it under my arm with the face against my body, and shuffled along in the boys’ line to the cafetorium, a cross between a cafeteria and an auditorium.

I ate with my lunchbox face down. I was sure that everyone was looking at me, and with envy I saw how freely they displayed their lunchboxes to the world.

When lunch was over I picked up my lunchbox and pressed the face against my torso as I had done walking in. And that was my routine.

I wish there was some kind of dramatic denouement to this story, a moment where my lunchbox was revealed and I realized that it did not matter what was on my lunchbox, and some kid wearing a Voltron shirt started a slow clap, and everyone learned a valuable lesson that I would later write about in a college application. But there wasn’t. I don’t know if anyone cared or even noticed. They never asked, and I never told.

In the fourth grade I started brown bagging my lunch. The Wuzzles lunchbox was thrown in the basement with my other lunchboxes, and eventually became part of the Earth’s crust.

Remember Action Figures?

Remember action figures?

I do.

Like all my childhood desires for material things, my yearning for action figures began at another kid's house. One Sunday afternoon, my parents consulted the magic directory of boys my age that lived nearby, and conveyed me to a house I'd never before seen. And as I entered the boy's den, it was as if I had discovered an underground city of gold.

In this room were these little plastic figures. Properly known as "Masters of the Universe," I referred to them by the name of their fearless leader, He-Man.

The display was intoxicating. It seemed like there were hundreds of figures standing up to greet me. My new best friend let me touch them, pick them up, and pretend that they were mine for a few seconds before he took them away, wiping each one down with a sanitized cloth.

As I held He-Man aloft and gazed into his noble face, the first thing I learned was that the figure made me feel powerful and special and convinced that I had to own one. The second thing I learned about action figures was that it was very dangerous to get the web of skin between thumb and forefinger near He-Man's rotator cuff or hip.

For the rest of that school year, the only thing that I believed would brighten my little world was to own a He-Man figure. "He wants these things called Masters of the Universe," my mother told my grandmother as my birthday approached. "Just ask for those at the store."

But instead of the He-Man figure I wanted, my grandmother got me a button shirt that my mother made me wear whenever we went to my grandmother's house. "I looked all over," my grandmother said, "going from store to store, but no one had ever heard of the 'Masters of the Human Race.' Where are you supposed to find these things?"

Eventually my prayers were answered, and He-Man and a few of his friends had taken the place of my real friends and family. But He-Man needed a place to hang out. The hero of Eternia could not very well lie around on my bedroom floor like in some flophouse. Fortunately, the Mattel company had conveniently solved He-Man's housing problem by producing a replica of Castle Grayskull, where He-Man went to see the Sorceress, usually after a long wait in the reception area and a \$25 co-pay.

All I wanted was that Castle Grayskull. As the holiday season approached I told my parents and everyone I knew that I wanted Castle Grayskull. I pined away at school, my coloring uncolored

before me, imagining how Castle Grayskull would look in my room. I pictured how I would wake up every morning, and open its gates, and greet He-Man and his entourage. When I frolicked on the splintered and nail-exposed wood of the playground, I pretended that I was He-Man patrolling the ramparts of the Castle Grayskull that would no doubt soon be mine. And as I laid my weary mop-head to sleep at night, I could see the outline of the great toy sanctuary in the shadows that danced on my cartoon wallpaper.

But my Castle Grayskull never came. I received other toys, toys that time forgot, but my He-Man figures remained nomads on my bedroom floor, and eventually had to opt for a Velcro-sneaker shoebox with a sign out front that said “Interdimensional War Vet - Please Help.” Years later, as I was concluding my therapy, I found out what happened.

“I spoke to the mother of that boy you used to see,” my mother said. “You know, the one with all those He-Man things. And she said, ‘Whatever you do, don’t buy that stupid Castle Grayskull. It’s \$30 for a plastic piece of junk.’ So I got you something else instead. I hope that was all right.”

Sometimes I wonder if my life would be any different if I had gotten Castle Grayskull instead of the corduroy shirt with the cat face on the pocket. I found a semi-used Castle Grayskull on eBay, and the small product image sent a shimmer of the power down my spine. But I couldn’t bring myself to enter a bid. For He-Man, and for me, you can’t go home again.

Remember Choose Your Own Adventure Books?

Remember the “Choose Your Own Adventure” series of books?

I do.

Choose Your Own Adventure was a novel series geared towards children and young adolescents. These books were not like regular books. First, the reader was the main character, which fancy people call the “second-person.” An opening sentence would be something like:

“You are a world famous scientist”

“You find a satchel filled with a million dollars”

“You are born to a family of complainers”

A Choose Your Own Adventure book would begin just like a regular novel, but when at the end of the first scene, “you” would be faced with a choice between two options, or between three options if you happened to read the super deluxe version before I took it out of the library and then left it on the table at Fuddruckers.

“Go to the left (turn to page 28)” versus “Go to the right (turn to page 1,139)”

“Follow the strange man” versus “Tell the strange man you’re not allowed to drink soda during the week”

The reader was always a different character. I remember one where I got to be a monster and another where I was a gunslinger in the Old West. I also recall one where the reader was that furry creature from the Punky Brewster cartoon, but I could just be making that up.

The first choice would lead to another scene with another choice, and on and on, such that each book had numerous endings. Some of the endings were good endings. Others were not so good. There were endings that ended in death. These were a little disturbing. There were also endings that ended ambiguously and open-ended.

“You follow Boink to the planet Cereal, and spend the rest of your harvesting Rice Krispies.”

“You commence a lawsuit in state court.”

They should have “Choose Your Own Adventure” books for adults. The characters would be appropriate for adults:

“You are always cold.”

“You are a tier-three pensioner.”

“You are one of those people who wink at everyone.”

And the choices would be adult choices:

“Arrange to get your tax refund by direct deposit” versus “Wait for the check in the mail!”

“Pay the full balance on your credit card” versus “Ignore the letter and get another credit card!”

“Go gluten-free” versus “Step in front of oncoming traffic.”

I do not think the Choose Your Own Adventure series for adults would sell very well. No adult would want to read them. The characters would be too real, the scenes too close to home, the choices too much a reminder of the difficult choices that all adults must make in life, but without the ability to turn back a single page.

That, and the fact that it would be a series of books.

Remember When It Was Cool To Bend the Bills of Baseball Caps?

Remember when it was cool to bend the bills of baseball caps into almost a cylinder?

I do.

Baseball caps were one of the ways I showed society that I was cool. When I was a little kid, the really cool way to wear a baseball cap was by pivoting the cap around the head 180 degrees. Around the time I started high school, though, more and more baseball caps were being worn straight on the forehead but with the sides of the bills curved down so as to make a small arch above the wearer's face.

It is hard to describe what this extreme bill bend was like. People used to curve the bill so much that it almost looked like they were wearing rolled up newspapers on their foreheads. When a group of these extreme bill benders got together in a circle, they looked from afar like a gaggle of tall geese in denim.

I'm not sure how or why this trend developed. Perhaps the idea was to hide the wearer's face. For some people this was good policy.

I received a baseball cap as a gift for my fifteenth birthday and immediately started bending it into the proper shape. I did this in class when I was supposed to be learning about chlorophyll or something. A classmate in the next row over, whose baseball cap bill formed almost a perfect circle if you at it straight on, told me that I was approaching the bend all wrong. "What you have to do," he said, "is wet the bill, and put a few big rubber bands around it, and put in the freezer for a few days."

Knowing that unsolicited advice from a random high schooler could never lead me astray, I thanked him and implemented the technique as soon as I got home. I sprinkled water on the bill, and sculpted it into that curved shape, and wrapped a few thick rubber bands around it, and put it in the freezer between some hamburgers and a Cool Whip container filled with sauce. Then I went into the living room to watch *Saved By the Bell*.

Later that evening my mother was preparing dinner. "Mark," she called, "can you come in here please?" I went into the kitchen and she was holding my hat with the rubber bands still on it. "Would you mind telling me what this was doing in the freezer?"

I told her why. The die was cast.

"I do not want to find hats in my freezer ever again," she said. I wanted to ask her how she expected me to achieve the proper bend in my bill without using proper freezer technique. I wanted to tell her that if I was to be a leader among my peers, everyone was going to have to make a sacrifice. But I held my tongue, and accepted my

cold, wet, less-than-ideally-bended hat, and somehow survived my high school years.

I do not see many bended bills today, at least not the way they used to bend them. Baseball caps are still very popular, and a variety of styles have emerged to supplant the extreme bend of my high school days, and I suppose a variety of kitchen appliances are being used to achieve those styles. I don't try to keep up. Although I still have a baseball cap, it does not get much use, as people generally do not hire lawyers who go around in baseball caps.

But once in a while, when I'm at home, and feeling nostalgic...

"Mark," my wife calls from the kitchen, "can you come in here please?"

Remember When People Passed Notes in Class?

Remember when people passed notes in class?

I do.

In third grade I conspired with some classmates to make another classmate believe he was being stalked by a ghost. I wrote notes in a squiggly lettering that said things like “Your parents don’t love you” and “Corduroy pants are in your future.” We would leave the notes on his chair when he got up to sharpen his pencil. He was looking worried by the second note. I was pleased at how smoothly the plan was going. When lunchtime approached and we were forming two gender-based lines, a classmate and co-conspirator put his hand on my shoulder and said, “It’s over. He knows.”

“He knows? Who told him?” I was ready to kill this person who had the temerity to ruin my plan. But it turned out to be a kid who was much larger than I, and I decided that for the sake of everyone’s education I would not press the matter further.

When I was fourth grade I passed a note to a nearby classmate named Charles, saying “Charles is a big oaf.” Señora Goldfarb, our Spanish teacher, caught me and made me write it in Spanish a thousand times. After a few hundred I started getting tired and making mistakes, and as punishment I was not permitted to participate in the Cinco de Mayo celebration, where every student was responsible for making his parents buy an authentic Spanish dish for the class.

In high school there was a girl named Gretchen who passed notes by folding them into the little triangle, which everyone called a football. She would flick the football in the direction of her intended audience. Gretchen had bad aim and a few times the note landed near Mr. Mauser, our math teacher. Whenever this happened Mr. Mauser would pick up the football and ask who it belonged to, and when Gretchen confessed he would ask her whether the football formed an isosceles or equilateral triangle. If she was right she got the football flicked back to her. If she was wrong he opened the note and read it. Gretchen soon became the go-to sophomore on triangles.

I don’t know whether today’s students still pass notes, but I’m sure many are electing to text their cruel missives. No teachers to avoid, and no fellow students to recruit. No one would know if you were passing a note or checking your stock portfolio. Until someone accidentally texted the teacher.

Remember When You Weren't Offered A Rewards Card at Every Store?

Remember when you weren't offered a rewards card at every store you went to?

I do.

In the beginning supermarkets offered discounts through coupons, which required clipping and a fair amount of chutzpah at the checkout line. Then one day, a supermarket executive says, "Hey, if we're going to offer discounts, we may as well track our customers' purchases so we know exactly how many Tombstone pizzas or Cottonelle moist wipes they consume in a week."

And an intern asks, "But how will you accomplish that?"

And the executive replies, "Don't they teach you anything at that fancy Ivy League school? We will track their purchases with plastic. Plastic is the answer to all our problems."

And the intern, stinging, asks, "But what will you call this piece of plastic?"

And the executive leans back in his chair, and laces his hands behind his head, and looks out the large window of his corner office at a brilliant Manhattan sunset, and exhales through his nose. "We will call it a 'rewards card,'" he says, "so that the customers think they are being rewarded."

I remember that supermarkets were the first to offer rewards cards. Then electronic stores climbed aboard. Then liquor stores. Then Panera. Funeral homes will probably be next, offering a rewards card that can be affixed to a toe.

My wallet is thick enough to give me back problems solely because of rewards cards. And most of my rewards cards are in my sock drawer. I keep them there so that no one will steal them and get discounts under my name. Unfortunately, this arrangement carries the risk that I will go to a store without its rewards card.

There is nothing more devastating than shopping at a store and waiting on the checkout line and getting to the cashier and getting excited because the next time you walk through the doors of your home will be with a 36-pack of Coors Light and two boxes of Yodels, and then realizing you left your rewards card next to the argyles. I was involved in one such incident.

"Sir, do you have a rewards card?" asks the cashier, who looks like the guitarist from Phish.

"Oh, uh, yes," I say, making a show of looking for the card. "Yes, I think it's here somewhere. I know I've got one..." I'm expecting him to say, "Oh that's all right," and just swipe the "cashier's" rewards card that should be attached to the scanner by a piece of twine. But it's not there, and he's not saying anything. And the people behind me are getting impatient.

A woman offers her card. "Oh, no," I say, wondering how much protest is appropriate before I save three dollars under the name of this kind stranger. I even put up one hand while using the other hand to fish around in a pocket I know is empty.

"No, really," she says, "It's all - "

"Well, okay," I say. The woman offers her card to the cashier.

"Um," says the cashier, "I'm really not supposed to do this."

I'm an adult buying Puffins and getting red tape from someone who probably takes cigarette breaks to watch Lord of the Rings on his cell phone. He repeats that he's "not supposed to do this" and, after some pleading from everyone on the line and my sworn affidavit that I'll never do it again, he lets me use the kind woman's rewards card.

In retrospect, I don't know why I cared about the discount that much. Had coupons still been the dominant discount vehicle I would have paid top dollar for my Puffins without batting an eye. Perhaps I've been wrong about these rewards cards. Perhaps their purpose is not just to track the consuming practices of an unsuspecting public.

Perhaps rewards cards are meant to bring impatient strangers closer together.

Remember Typewriters?

Remember typewriters?

I do.

The final assignment for my seventh grade English class was a research paper on William Shakespeare. We were given months to work on it, and the night before it was due I thought I should probably start my research or at least take a look at the assignment sheet. Aside from the usual admonitions about structure, sources, and spelling, there was a direction I had never seen: "All papers must be typed! No exceptions!!" And underneath that was something I had seen before: "No extensions will be given! No exceptions!!"

Typed? I had seen typewriters in movies. All of my papers up until then had been handwritten, and it was still the time where only extremely nerdy families had computers. This typing requirement put a ripple in my usual last-minute drill. I found my mother in the kitchen consolidating boxes of cereal and asked her if we had a typewriter.

"I think there's one in the basement. Who knows if it still works? Why do you ask?"

"I have to type a research paper on William Shakespeare."

"And dare I ask when this paper is due?"

"Tomorrow."

"Of course. Well, I think I last saw it in the basement under a bunch of your old lunch boxes. When are you going to throw those things out?"

"Um, never."

Underneath the moldy and dusty lunch boxes was a moldy and dusty plastic covering under which lay a somewhat less moldy and dusty typewriter. It was large and black like a Rolls Royce and at first I thought the carriage return was a hood ornament.

With the help of a neighbor I hauled it up to my room and removed the covering. I was afraid to touch it, and as I plugged it in I felt a little like Dr. Frankenstein.

The machine whirred and I pressed one of the keys. The resulting sound was a like a gunshot, a short staccato pop and I checked the opposite wall for holes. I hit a few more keys, and figured if I could get used to the sound of Hungry Hungry Hippos I could get used to this. After a few minutes of working on my paper I realized something was wrong and had to visit my mother again.

"Mom, where does the paper come out?" I asked.

"It doesn't," she said. "You have to load typewriter paper. What have you been typing on all this time?"

"Um, never mind."

I loaded in paper from my spiral notebook but the mangled edges looked like the work of a fifth grader, so I had to persuade my mother to drive me to the office supply store for some typewriter paper.

Typing on typewriter paper was a lot more effective. Then I accidentally spelled “Stratford-upon-Avon” with a “Q” and discovered that the correction tape was missing, and again we were off to the office supply store. Using a typewriter apparently required a full tank of gas.

Not five minutes after our return the ink dried up. I could see letters being embossed on the paper, and considered filling the indentations with pen. Luckily my mother still had her coat on and again we went to the office supply store.

But alas, the ribbon was not in stock. “We really don’t carry stuff for typewriters anymore,” the manager said. “But we’d be happy to order it for you. When’s your paper due?”

We tried another store but the manager there just laughed at me. It was getting late. Stores would be closing and I did not know what I was going to do. I needed this time to be thinking about making the Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Shakespeare sound like my own words, not having my mother drive me all over Long Island looking for typewriter ribbon. Writing with a quill would have been easier than this.

Somehow my father had gotten wind of my dilemma and took me to the working typewriter at his office. I typed my paper while my father sat in the waiting room reading a book titled *You’re Almost There: Parenting Through Adolescence*. It was close to midnight when I finished, and from my father’s face I gathered that we would be not going for ice cream. My parents bought me a word processor the following year, and we traded in the typewriter for an Acura.

I just read that the last typewriter factory in the world, located in Mumbai, India, is closing its doors forever. I am sure that a lot of people are lamenting this, people who grew up with typewriters, got used to thinking with rapid-fire gunshots coming with every depression of their fingertips, people who got a thrill from hearing the ‘ding’ that told them to hit the carriage return, people who enjoyed the challenge of knowing which stores stocked their particular ribbon and correction tape. People who are not me.

Remember Using Paper Maps?

Remember using paper maps to get places?

I do.

Today people have talking computers suctioned to their car windshields to guide them to places they've never been. But when I was a kid we had only paper maps to scream at when we got lost. And each other.

The maps were a sagging bulge in the pouch at the back of the passenger seat of my father's Renault, and covered our general traveling region: upstate New York, New England, and other places that put ketchup and mustard on hamburgers unless you asked otherwise.

I don't think a single map, once unfolded, has ever been folded back again. It is the law of entropy. No matter how many diagrams and colored tags I used, I could never get the map folded up sharp and neat like it had been on the rack at the rest area store by the Roy Rodgers and the machine that flattened pennies. The best I could do was crumple the map into something approaching a rectangle, and squeeze like I had to nail a *sforzando* on an accordion.

And that was just putting the map away. Reaching for the map was even more dangerous. It often ripped. Once we were negotiating around the Boston Museum of Science and my father needed me to navigate instead of watching my breath condense on the window. But the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had become a stack of paper that I flipped through like I was counting money. Then a pigeon flew away with one of the sheets, and we could not find our motel again.

Before long trips I would spread the map or map pieces before me, and trace our intended path, imagining our car following the same red-lined trajectory as the plane in the Indiana Jones movies. Sometimes my father would whistle the Indiana Jones music while I did this. When we got lost, the whistling ceased.

"But where is the dang exit?" he would ask rhetorically on the shoulder of Interstate 95, the skies darkening, and motel vacancies vanishing by the second. "The number is right next to the highway on this page, but all I see is another sign for corn." I wanted to help him at these times, but the only things I knew how to do with a map was trace my finger along it.

The best was the time my grandparents took my brother and me to Disney World. My grandfather was following a set of directions that he'd written down on a piece of paper, and my grandmother was reading them back to him as he drove. "It says take Exit 16 A-B," my grandmother said.

"What's A-B? I never heard of an exit that ended in A-B."

“Well you wrote it. Don’t blame me.”

We passed Exit 16 A, and then we passed Exit 16 B. But no Exit “A-B.” The next exit was Exit 17. So we had to get turned around in a swamp, asking an alligator for directions that were not remembered because we all thought someone else was listening. I thought I could hear the fireworks at the Magic Kingdom over the Yiddish being screamed two feet away from my ear. Eventually we pulled over, and after more careful examination my grandfather concluded that the directions were supposed to say Exit 16 A or B. “Exit A or B,” he kept saying as we pulled into our lodgings, dreams of long lines and expensive souvenirs already dancing in my head.

Today these dramas are played out with sterile soft-spoken machines that say things like, “Turn right,” and “Recalculating; Drive...three...blocks...then...turn left.” The computer should say, “Recalculating; Pull over...and...bang your head against the...driver’s side...window.” That would add some of the old excitement that made family trips memorable. Screaming at a machine is just not the same.

Remember Your First Summer Job?

This year brings a scarcity of summer jobs for America's youth. It is unfortunate that so many will miss the tremendous learning opportunity that summer jobs present. I don't know where I'd be today without such opportunities.

My first summer job, other than making spin art and being forced to play kickball, was at for a supplier of home security devices. My task was to assemble and mail marketing materials. The work was routine, and I was soon able to stuff, seal, and put postage on the envelopes while reading the books that my English teacher had assigned over the summer. The system went fine until I accidentally sent one of our paranoid customers a copy of 1984 with our catalog.

The next summer I answered the calling to sell high quality cutlery. We were trained to use the bonds of love to convince our family and friends that the wisest move they could make in their lives was to plunk down \$600 for a set of butter knives. If they balked at the price tag, we reminded them that the knives' warranty could be bequeathed to later generations, like the estates of English gentry. To seal the deal, we would demonstrate that the knives could cut pennies in half, perfect for salad or guacamole.

The most educational summer job was working at a convenience store. My first day on the cash register I produced an error of \$900, and the IRS showed up and demanded free Slurpees. There was so much to learn. I had to remember which cigarettes were running promotions and which ones prevented osteoporosis. I had to know the price of every size of soda cup, from the 12-ounce regular to the 20-gallon Mega Gulp that included free use of the store's dolly. I had to serve hot dogs to customers without scrunching up my face.

Selling alcohol required extra vigilance. Minors would try all sorts of tricks. One time a young man told me he was 45, but that he suffered from a rare disease that made him look 19 and wear his baseball cap backwards. I asked for identification. He said he forgot it at home. When I told him that, despite his condition, I could not meet his request, he threatened to sue me and then pedaled away on his bike. I am still waiting for the summons.

Approximately 90% of our business, it seemed, was selling lottery tickets. A man once gave me a list of six numbers to play, saying that those were his magic numbers. I informed him that, statistically, he would have the same chances of hitting numbers one through six in order, and I showed him the math on a napkin. He dismissed me as crazy. I was about to pull out the calculator, but the line was getting long and people were starting to throw packets of Equal. The next day the man played his magic numbers and the numbers one through six.

My shift was eight hours long with no break for lunch. When a friend of mine saw me snapping into a Slim Jim between coffee station drills, he said that the law entitled me to a half-hour paid lunch break for every eight-hour shift. I didn't know if my friend was right, but I wasn't about to let that stop me, and I told my co-workers I was forming a union. That night at home while I stenciled my picket signs, a black car drove by and lobbed stale doughnuts at my front door. I had gotten the message, and took a few of the doughnuts for lunch the next day.

I hope that the economy turns around soon, so that young people can have the same learning opportunities that I did.

Remember When Black Friday Took Place on Friday?

The young nation was divided. The Black Friday purists who insisted on Black Friday sales not starting until the morning of Black Friday had been unable—or unwilling—to reconcile with the block of states who insisted on starting Black Friday sales on Thanksgiving, no matter how much cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie still lay uneaten on the table, or how many relatives still passed out on the couch.

Abraham Lincoln had run for President on the Purist ticket, and his very election brought the dispute to a fevered pitch. Shortly after his inauguration speech, in which the ol' Turkey Splitter insisted that he had “no intention” of interfering with the institution of big box stores, the “Target” states, as they came to be known, declared their secession from the Purists and went back to greasing the wheels of their shopping carts.

Lincoln, seeing secession as unacceptable, and worrying that all the stove pipe hats would be gone from the shelves by the time Mary Todd hit the aisles at 5 a.m. on the Friday after Thanksgiving, ordered the Union army to stop the Target States of America from seceding. The Union had more ammunition, more railroads, and more coupons from Bed Bath & Beyond which were used to equip the soldiers with much needed towel warmers and memory foam slippers. But the Target States had a passion for shopping and a general dislike of family events and an army of stock boys armed with box cutters ready to meet the Union forces.

The war dragged on and Lincoln needed a solution. He had a meeting planned that morning with Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, and Lincoln paced his lanky frame about the Oval Office, preparing himself. He tugged at his beard. Mary Todd had wanted him to shave it for the holidays. Said it was too scraggly.

“Over my dead body,” Lincoln said to himself, and double-checked the bowl of candy on his desk. Yes, there were plenty of green apple Jolly Ranchers.

“I don't think there's any other way out of this war than to strengthen the blockade of the stores,” Stanton said, tugging at his own scraggly beard. “They've pushed us to this point, and there's no way I'm missing the Cowboys game to go shopping.”

Lincoln thought about it, tugging at his scraggly beard again. The two men tugged at their scraggly beards.

“Violence is not the answer,” Lincoln said at once. “I should know. I used to hunt vampires.”

“But without violence, I won't have a job,” Stanton said. “How are you going to keep those Target States from being open on Thanksgiving without violence?”

Lincoln crossed his long legs, and leaned forward, and rested his chin in the crook between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m going to make a speech,” he said, and, dismissing the Secretary of War, went to go sharpen his pencil.

The next day President Lincoln stood before a crowd in Leesburg, Virginia, known for its many outlet stores, and gave what would become known as the Leesburg Address.

“Four score and seven years ago,” he began, “I received a gift card to a well-known retailer, and now the retailer is telling me that the card has expired.

“But that is all past. We are now engaged in a great civil war over whether it is proper that stores open for Black Friday sales on Thanksgiving. It is not a question of whether a nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that it is never too early to start Christmas shopping, can long endure the helpings of turkey and inappropriate questions from distant relatives, like ‘When are you two getting married?’ or ‘Don’t you think it’s time to do something with your life?’ or ‘Why can’t you put that device down when I’m talking to you?’

“Rather, the question is whether one can really call it Black Friday if it starts on Thursday.”

The crowd stood stunned. Abraham Lincoln had once again spoken an incontrovertible truth. It was impossible to have Black Friday on Thanksgiving, which had always been a Thursday, and always would be a Thursday. And until everyone recognized that truth, the civil war would never end.

So the name was changed to “Black Thursday,” and the stores offered turkey sandwiches and cranberry sauce at the register, and the States were once again United—now and forever, one and inseparable!

Remember When You Had Never Heard of a Fiscal Cliff?

It was cold in Washington, D.C. Cars took longer to warm up in the morning and made people late to work. Heavy coats on backs of chairs at restaurants made it hard to squeeze by. The cold air made people's hands very dry. But for the government, it was business as usual.

"Sir, what are we going to do about the fiscal cliff?" the intern asked the Director.

"Hold on a minute. I'm moisturizing. This cold air turns my hands into parchment." The Director squeezed some hand moisturizer on the knuckles of either hand, and then rubbed his knuckles together, with the palms of hands facing out.

"This way," the Director said, "I don't get that greasy moisturizer on any official documents. It's a good thing the Declaration of Independence was signed in July, otherwise there would have been greasy moisturizer stains on it. Imagine what that would have done to liberty. Now, what were we talking about?"

"The fiscal cliff, sir."

"Ah, yes. I heard something about that while I was in line at Krispy Kreme. What is it again? Some kind of landmark?"

"The fiscal cliff is the colloquial term for the set of austerity measures that automatically go into place at the end of the year as part of the debt ceiling compromise of August, 2011, sir."

"What you just said is all Greek to me."

"Sir, unless we do something about the federal budget, government programs will be cut and taxes raised, automatically on January 1, without any votes or debate."

"Oh, so this cliff isn't a real place? Like, I can't get a bumper sticker that says 'This car drove off the Fiscal Cliff?'"

"No, I don't believe so, sir."

"Bummer. All right, let's see. Where can we find money?" The Director leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling and drummed his fingers on the sides of his neck. "Money...money...money. We...need...money." He closed his eyes as if he was making a wish before blowing out birthday candles. Suddenly he opened his eyes and sat up.

"I've got it!" he said, and told the intern of his plan.

It took a little while for people to get used to the idea of the government engaging in extreme couponing. An entire new bureau had to be built and staffed with the most extreme couponers in the country, who had to be lured away from their home communities with laundry detergent and frozen steakums. Conservatives complained that the framers of the Constitution had never intended the federal government to save money. Liberals complained that

the program was going to take coupons away from teachers and firefighters.

But when the Bureau of Extreme Couponing purchased a fleet of stealth bombers and new toilet seats for every restroom in the Capitol for only \$1.37, the people embraced the program with open arms. Health care costs plummeted from 17% of GDP to less than the price of a Netflix subscription. Just by checking the Presidential Sofa for loose change, the federal government was able to restart the shuttle program, and procure canned peaches through 2043.

They started televising the purchases at the checkout line. Millions of viewers would sit on the edge of their seats, holding hands, watching the digits on the price display. In one episode, the employee at the register called out the names of each public good right before scanning it.

“Highway programs...[beep]...National Park Service...[beep] ...Coast Guard—”

“Wait, I have a coupon for that,” the Federal Couponer said. Dramatic music played while the Couponer rifled through a stack of coupons in a little zippered purse. The employee looked bored and the shoppers behind looked around for a line that was moving faster.

When the coupon was located, a fanfare was played and the price on the display went from \$487 million to zero. And as if it could not get any better, United States Postal Service pensions were buy-one-get-one that week.

“Sir, the Extreme Couponing program is a success!” the intern said. “This year we’re going to post a budget surplus along with 17 million tons of spaghetti sauce.”

“Excellent,” the Director said. “But you look troubled.”

“Well, sir, I just don’t understand how it works. The money that we’re saving, that’s great, really great. But, I mean, where are these coupons coming from?”

The Director wrinkled his brow, and stared out the window, and rested his chin on his hand, and considered the question that was his awesome responsibility to answer for the good of the nation. Suddenly his eyes gleamed and he snapped back to face the intern.

“Manifest destiny,” the Director said, and then picked up the phone to order a pasta lunch for the third time that week.

Remember Z. Cavaricci's?

I knew that Z. Cavaricci's were special pants the moment I first laid eyes on them. The wearer was a friend of mine, and the pants made him glide more than walk through the middle school cafeteria, holding a plate of fries and his head high.

The pleats were so wide I could reach out and touch them from where I sat. The legs tapered down to thick athletic socks. A constellation of belt loops rose above the waist, and front and center—running down the exterior of the fly—was the crown jewel: a little white label with “Z. Cavaricci” in vertical block lettering.

Experience told me that anyone who went to school wearing pants with a little white label running down the front of his pants would get taunted until the end of time, particularly if those pants buckled at the torso and flared out like a tarp over a family reunion. But experience was wrong. The Z. Cavaricci's raised my friend's standing among the other sixth graders, surpassing even the wearers of Reebok Pumps and authentic Bart Simpson t-shirts.

The allure of Z. Cavaricci's rested, in large part, on the rumored \$80 price tag. I tried to imagine what kind of store sold \$80 pants. I pictured my friend being welcomed by a tuxedoed salesman who, at the snap of his fingers, would summon a footman bearing the pants on a silk pillow. “This is our latest pair, sir. Would you care for a soft drink or a box drink?”

My friend wore his black Z. Cavaricci's on Fridays. I also wore my cool pants on Fridays, except that my cool pants had a label on the inside with my name in my mother's handwriting. I figured that one day per week of pants-envy was not bad. After all, I still had my health and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

But then my friend showed up to school at the beginning of the week with a pair of Z. Cavaricci's that looked like denim. And then a pair that looked like suede. Then a tan pair. And then a brown pair. And then an olive pair. The colors and patterns of these pants were multiplying before my eyes, and soon my friend had a pair of Z. Cavaricci's for every day of the week. He even had a pair in white so pure it was only slightly less blinding than the label.

Other people were wearing Z. Cavaricci's, too. But these other people would usually have just one pair, and they would wear this one pair at times where the social impact of the pants would be maximized, like school dances or Desert Storm rallies. No one I knew had an arsenal of Z. Cavaricci's like my friend.

As the summer approached I anticipated that the hot weather would closet all pants for the season. “All shorts are created equal,” I said to myself. But during one of those end-of-school-year classes where you do nothing but play Connect Four and doodle on the chalk board, my friend strolled in wearing Z. Cavaricci shorts,

disproving my Jeffersonian mantra as the Umbro company would again do a year or two later.

That little white label on the front of the Z. Cavaricci's was like the green light across the water in *The Great Gatsby*. It symbolized a life that I could see but would never attain. I daydreamed about what it would be like when I grew up and could afford a whole closet of Z. Cavaricci's.

I would wear a tan pair to important business meetings, or the black pair if the meeting was on Friday. And I would wear the suede or olive pair to clubs where bartenders would fix cocktails by throwing the bottles up in the air like Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, and everyone would see me cutting up the dance floor, that little white label a blur in the semi-darkness. I even imagined myself wearing the white pair at the funeral of an important public figure, awash with grief and surrounded by celebrities wearing ordinary pants.

In all of my fantasies, only I wore the Z. Cavaricci label.

And then one day I turned around and everyone was wearing jeans and flannel shirts and Doc Martens. MC Hammer had filed for bankruptcy and Vanilla Ice had been placed in a cryogenic. And my friend had moved on to different pants. I don't know where he put the legion of Z. Cavaricci's. I hope it was someplace safe and dry.

Despite the inferiority and years of therapy, there's a part of me that still yearns to wear a pair of Z. Cavaricci's, even if just for a moment. I could gel my hair, try on a pair, stand in front of a mirror, and maybe start to dance the running man—and see what might have been.