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# A Peaceable Kingdom

Or At Least It Would Be If Wildlife Would Just Respect Our Boundaries

By Maggie Barnes

“David, let me call you back. We have company.”

It was Super Bowl Sunday, the highest of holy days for football fans, and I was ensconced in the recliner in our family room. Adult beverage on one side table, wonderfully unhealthy fried food on the other, and me, wrapped in total bliss, in the deep center of the chair. A slate gray day blew at the porch windows

in the late afternoon gloom. The fireplace danced orange light around the room while my husband chatted on the phone with our youngest.

I had been in heavy contemplation over the unlikelihood of Seattle having any hope of shutting down Tom Brady, when Bob’s sign-off on the phone call snapped me back to the moment. Company? I hadn’t heard the doorbell or the distinctive

sound of tires chewing on the gravel in our sloped driveway.

“We have visitors? Who’s here?”

Bob, a man you could not rattle if you hit him with a tire iron, pointed to a spot on the far side of the carpet and calmly said, “Snake.”

In my humble opinion, nothing surrounding the existence of snakes should ever be approached calmly. I am an ardent proponent

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of screaming, flailing arms, excessive cursing, and pleas to the Almighty for intervention. And speed. All of this must be conducted in a blur of color, indistinguishable to the human eye. Height is good, too, meaning elevation of any sort, by any means. I once hovered above the ground for a solid two minutes while my hiking partner dispatched a reptile. Think it can’t be done? Watch me.

In this particular instance, I had gone from my backside to my feet in one motion and in the next moment was standing, balanced on the now oscillating recliner. (I’ve tripped over lint on the floor, but when a snake is introduced into the picture, I am a flippin’ Wallenda.) From this position, I had a clear view of the snake.

It—no, I didn’t know the gender and you can bet your epinephrine auto-injector I was not about to find out—was lying on the artificial turf of our carpet. To my eyes, it was nine feet long, as big around as a municipal drainage pipe, with fangs that looked like Dracula’s dentist had branched into veterinary work. Bob stood a scant couple of feet away from it and lazily questioned, “Now, how did he get in here?”

How? Who cares how? If you encounter a homicidal maniac twirling an axe you don’t waste time wondering which exit off of I-86 he took to get here! Just do something to remove yourself from the situation!

Bob knew without looking that I was doing my high-wire act on the La-Z-Boy. He moved to the linen closet and returned with a large bath towel. He peered closer at the creature and smiled. “Mags, look how pretty he is.”

I had yet to breathe and when I inhaled it sounded like a choking vacuum cleaner.

“Get it out of here.”

Bob removed the snake without incident. It was another in the seemingly endless encounters we have with the creatures that called this hill home long before we got here.

Some of the episodes are gentle and mutually beneficial, like watching from inside while the deer graze or the birds practice landings on the feeder platform like pilots returning to the aircraft carrier.

Other times, though, the introduction of a critter into our world is a bit more intrusive.

Thanksgiving night, some of our family braved the cold, the crowds, and the cynicism of “Black Thursday” shopping. It was near midnight when our

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daughter Angie, family friend Brent, and I returned home and began assembling turkey sandwiches. (Which are the whole reason behind Thanksgiving, can I get an Amen?) Brent announced that one of the cats had cornered a mouse in the kitchen. Said cat toted said mouse right down the hallway, intent on presenting her find to her favorite human, my husband. He, having no appetite for crazed shopping sprees, was already asleep.

Brent gave chase, but the mouse had escaped into the closet in the bedroom.

So, at approximately midnight on Thanksgiving night, I nudged my better half awake with the news that there was a mouse on the rampage in the room. By the way, I added, your daughter and Brent are also here, so don't go flinging those covers off unless you want to foot the bill for extensive therapy in the years to come. It is a credit to Robert's ability to adapt and overcome that he said nothing, merely rolled over.

A chase ensued that involved both of the young people, both cats, and the frantic mouse. At one point, the rodent sought refuge under a dresser and Brent dropped to his knees before it. I assumed he was triangulating a path of escape and was about to enquire when the mouse, for reasons that remain unknown to this day, rocketed out from the dresser and directly into Brent's...uh....nether regions.

I now present the second case study that a human being can take flight when properly motivated. Well done, Brent.

The images that followed are a bit graphic for such a fine publication, so let's leave it with the crowd of us trooping back out of the room with Brent carrying the unconscious creature and a firm conviction to wear an athletic cup when dining late with the Barneses.

All of which brings us to the bear.

Many of the residents of our hill had spoken of seeing a large bear roam the woods. He had been found grocery shopping in some of the finer garage refrigerators and, in one memorable visit, decimated a 50-count box of pudding cups. But he hadn't been near enough to us to be sighted. Then Scott, resident of the last house on our tiny four-house road, brought down video from the night before. The birdfeeder on their deck stands seven feet tall and the bear was snacking from it like he was leaning on a table in the bar waiting for the hostess to seat his party. Scott had whispered to his wife Peggy, "I'm gonna open the slider so I can get better video of him." To which

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Peggy replied, "No, you're not because I look lousy in black."

Bob pouted. "Everyone has seen the bear but us!" I, on the other hand, planned to live a long, fabulously fulfilled life minus any bear visits.

So, a week later, while working on our home office, I truly had no idea what I was hearing outside. The bottom half of our house is built into a hillside, so the side windows are at ground level. I had to put both hands to the glass to bring the picture into view. The thought formed, "Why am I looking at the bottom of the recycling bin?"

Because the bear had tipped it over.

He was 450 pounds if he was an ounce, with a head the size of a hubcap and black as night.

I have to say, I was impressed with my own composure. I walked into the family room and simply said, "Robert. You asked about the bear? He's here."

We watched the woodland creature sit upright and, with surprising gentleness, pull each of the bags out of the bin and slice them open. He must have thought he'd found a candy store when he came on the tray liner from our recent painting. He was probably anticipating more of that sweet pudding, but when he lifted the liner, he was not impressed with the beige paint that dripped down his nose. He tried to catch some of it on his tongue until his taste buds kicked in. The tray was noisily discarded and I was sure our TripAdvisor rating had just been downgraded. But the next discovery was the bucket of fried chicken remnants and our four-star dining status was restored.

After a brief stay at the toppled bin, he rolled to his feet and ambled up the driveway. I'm sure he saw us at the window and I'm equally confident that he knew there was nothing to fear. If he talked to the local snakes at all, he knew I was a non-issue.

I was ready to check off another on the list of our country adventures and Bob was beaming. Then a cloud passed over his face.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"He didn't stay long. We need to throw out a better grade of garbage."

Somebody hand me a tire iron.

*Maggie Barnes works in health care marketing and is a resident of Waverly, New York. She is a 2015 recipient of the Keystone Press Award for her columns in Mountain Home.*

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Elizabeth Young

## “Mags, You Have to Tell the Garage Story!” You Gotta Love Family—and the Moments They Will Never Let You Live Down By Maggie Barnes

Family stories are universal. We all have them, and they fall into two categories. There are those that showcase us at our finest: acts of great courage, intellect, or devotion to mankind. And then there are those that suggest it is truly shocking that most of us manage to dress ourselves on a daily basis.

Welcome to the Holy Grail of category number two.

We had been married only six months. This simple fact does not alleviate me of any of the wrongdoing to come, but it's a ploy for sympathy to claim the role of a newlywed. Ignore the fact that I was far beyond the age

of majority. Think “Gidget” and I will come out better.

At the time, my beloved was chief of our city's fire department and a state fire instructor. It was April, a month in the northeast that can contain scattered days of sunshine and warmth.

This was not such a day. It was cool and overcast. As I tended to the dishes after dinner, Bob was headed to the garage. “The state sent me new turnout gear. I want to look at it.”

Simultaneous to that statement, the phone rang. (Pay attention, children, and you will learn some history. Back then it was a wall-mounted device with a tethered system that only let you go

so far.) It was my sister. I have two, the first friends I ever had in life and still incredibly dear to me, and we like to talk.

Our garage was not attached to the house at that time. There was a space of maybe six feet between the back kitchen door and the one-car structure. It was an old building. Can we agree that, to this point, you haven't heard anything that could possibly be blamed on me? Good. That's about to end, so let me find a bit of warmth in this moment.

I currently have an ache in the bottom of my belly and my hands are starting to sweat. We must be coming to the good part.

Bobby raised the garage door,

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stepped into the darkening interior, and started toward the large box next to the car. A moment later, the aging overhead door popped a spring, jerked off its tracks, and slammed shut behind him.

You are already ahead of me here, aren't you? Well, stay with the tour. It's better than your imagination.

Bob could not lift the door without the mechanism being in place, and there were no other doors in the garage. The only windows were the line of small panes in the door itself, facing the rear of the house. Through this glass he could clearly see into the kitchen.

After a moment of examination of his situation, my ever-logical husband resigned himself to the fact that he was truly, completely, and inarguably trapped. No problem, he reasoned, for my bride of six months—remember that?—will come get me out as soon as she realizes what has happened.

This is as good a time as any to let you know that my husband was garbed in only a t-shirt and shorts. A minute turned into fifteen, fifteen turned into thirty. As if the universe was taunting him, Bobby could see me, bathed in the warmth of the kitchen, steam from the dishwasher still dissipating from the windows. I walked back and forth, phone firmly to my ear and mouth running like a Porsche 911.

He weighed his options. He could beep the car horn to get my attention. Then what? I had less chance of opening the door from the outside than he did. If he did catch my eye, what action would result? Calling the fire department? His fire department? “Hey, Chief! (Giggle.) Need some help in there? (Snort, guffaw.) I'm glad we brought the camera. (Hee-hee.) You taught us how important documentation is. Smile!” Nope, a 911 call was not the answer.

Time rolled on. Pacing and analyzing can be strenuous activities, but they do not produce warmth. Bob's feet were icy and his legs were starting to tremble. He took the only action available to him. He broke the

seal on the box from the Empire State and donned his professional uniform: bunker pants, turnout coat, and boots.

Perhaps it was the act of dressing like a first-responder that reminded Robert of the only tactical advantage he had: the chainsaw.

Bobby cut a hole in the sidewall of the garage. I don't mean a modest hole that he could shimmy out of on his hands and knees. I mean a huge, gaping slash that Abraham Lincoln could have walked out of, complete with top hat.

How much would you have paid, dear reader, to be there when the blade of a chainsaw thrust out from inside the sealed garage and a fully dressed firefighter emerged?

Total time in the garage: one and a half hours

Status of new wife: clueless.

Yes, I was still on the phone when Bob dragged back up the kitchen stairs, in his turnout gear, lugging the chainsaw. A fine layer of dust was splattered around the world's bluest eyes as he stared at me and said nothing.

I stared back in complete astonishment and confusion. Having no idea what had happened, I did make my only decent decision of the night and ended my conversation.

“Joanne, I have to call you back,” I said with forced cheerfulness. I hung up and turned back to my silent husband. There was enough dead air between us to sing two choruses of “Stand By Your Man.”

Then he spoke.

“Would you like to know where I have been for the last hour and a half?”

“Sure, if you want to tell me.” My voice sounded as thin as cheap vodka.

“I've been trapped in the garage.”

“Oh.”

*(Give him two arms to cling to,*

*And something warm to come to,*

*When nights are cold and lonely...)*

None of what I was looking at made sense to me, and I was calculating like mad in my head. Of all the routes I could have taken, I went with, “Why

are you wearing your turnout gear?”

“Because,” he hissed through clenched teeth, “I...got...COLD!”

With that, he clunked his way back down the steps and out into the now dark night.

The evening ended in complete silence. He spoke not a word. We went to bed and the light was snapped off. I laid in the gloom, wondering if an annulment was still in play at the six-month mark and dreading the hassle with the DMV of changing my name back.

I felt a vibration and realized that his side of the bed was shaking. I leapt for the light and turned to find Robert in the throes of a classic case of silent laughter. Every inch of him shook, but there was yet no sound. A moment later, he erupted in a noise of pure glee and propped up on his elbows.

“I felt like such an idiot!” He roared. “I got laughing so hard I couldn't pull the starter cord on the chainsaw!” He spilled over like flood water for the next half hour; thinking about the fire department responding, scouring the garage for anything to use, watching me act like a teenager with a first phone while his toes went numb.

Visions of returning wedding gifts dissolved as my eyes watered from laughter. We settled down to sleep, holding hands.

As a coda to this epic family tale, when we built the new garage, Bobby included three—count 'em, three—doors, multiple windows, and what I suspect is an ejector platform to get out through the roof.

As for my phone call? I hit her back the next morning. We still had stuff to talk about.

Hey, I kept Bob in sight the whole time!



Maggie Barnes works in health care marketing and is a resident of Waverly, New York. She is a 2015 recipient of the Keystone Press Award for her columns in Mountain Home.



Suzan Richter

## Home Economics 101

Teach A Girl to Cook and She Can Feed Herself for Life. Or One Would Hope...

By Maggie Barnes

“Mom? I need to tell you something.”

My mother’s eyes shifted from the ceiling of her hospital room to me. The oxygen mask covered most of her small face, but her raised eyebrows told me she was listening.

Mom had been hospitalized many times in her later years, but this visit had a weighty feel to it that made us certain we were coming to the end of her life.

“I want to talk to you about Bob.”

Mom had only met Bobby once, so it was with trepidation that I chose

to tell her this news as we faced the prospect that she would never come home again.

“I’m going to marry him, Mom. You don’t have to worry about me anymore. He loves me and he will take great care of me. Do you understand? Is this okay with you?”

Her face brightened and I saw a flash of the smile that had warmed my soul from my earliest memories. She suddenly struggled and I helped her rise up on her elbows. When one of her hands was free, she pulled the oxygen

mask from her face. I felt the pulse of cool air from it, heard the hissing sound rush by and I braced myself. She had made a herculean effort to speak and I knew the loving words she was about to bestow would live in my heart forever.

“Marry him...” she gasped. “Or you will starve to death.”

It may not have been the sum of all wisdom, but it was the ultimate proof of how well my mother knew her baby girl.

I can’t cook. I can’t sew. I can clean a house but it is a long and clumsy

process, devoid of the brilliant shortcuts or pearls of hidden wisdom often handed down by female ancestors.

I once left a watermelon on the kitchen floor so long that it fused to the linoleum and had to be amputated like a Civil War soldier’s leg. I thought irons were doorstops that heated up for some unfathomable reason. Occasionally, I still pray for Mary Alice, who finished the required A-line dress that got me through sixth grade Home Ec. (I hadn’t made a large enough hole for my head. Who thinks of details like that??)

To the Martha Stewarts of the world, I am “She Who Must Not Be Named.”

When I moved into my first apartment, my mother gifted me a microwave. Upon opening the door, dozens of grocery coupons and recipe cards cascaded onto the floor at my feet.

By the time I met my husband, I had cultivated a solid diet based on the four major food groups: microwave, take-out, crockpot, and dinner-dates. I could handle recipes if the most complicated step was “apply heat to contents.” As my best friend at the time routinely asked me, “So, what did you dump out of a box tonight?”

There are legions of tales about my lack of domestic prowess, but when I think about my mother, it always comes back to the episode that made her laugh the hardest I ever heard her in my life.

I was in high school. It was an early day of summer vacation and I couldn’t find a pair of shorts that appealed to me. Sorting through my wardrobe in the time honored teenage method of flinging things on to the floor behind me, I came across a discarded pair of jeans. A light bulb went on over my head. It was held aloft by Daisy Duke.

I bounced down the stairs and into the dining room, equipped with the jeans and a huge pair of scissors. I cleared the table and laid the jeans out. A contemplative moment followed while I selected the perfect length and, seconds later, I was in possession of the

world’s cutest pair of cut-off shorts. I could already envision the lustful double take of the cute boy across the street. This summer would be epic.

I bounded back up the stairs for a fitting, during which time my mother and my sister Joanne returned to the living room from a late morning cup of tea on the porch.

When I came back down the stairs, I am sure my mother heard the true befuddlement in my voice. “Mom? What is the problem with this?”

I rounded the foot of the stairs and stood before the ladies with the world’s cutest cut-off shorts...pulled all the way up to my chest. The denim strands dangled near my belly button and below them sat my pink Jockey Girl underwear. The look on my face conveyed the sincere confusion of a total, unapologetic idiot.

There was silence in the house, as I slid the shorts up and down the length of my body, unabated. When I raised my head, my mother and sister were staring at me the way scientists gaze upon a lesser species of animal who spends hours fascinated by its own big toe.

In the next heartbeat, my family exploded in laughter, hard, loud laughter that made coherent speech impossible. My sister took a step toward me, but had to lean against Mom for reinforcement while the two of them howled.

It is pathetic to say, but I was now confused times two, once by the illogical behavior of the shorts and now, by this bizarre, albeit united, reaction.

My mother’s funny bone had one telltale sign of full activation. She would have to take her glasses off to wipe her flowing eyes. At the sight of me, she removed them and her face rested in her other hand while her entire body shook.

Joanne finally mustered enough strength and oxygen to gently inform me, “Mags, you cut above the crotch. Those aren’t shorts anymore.”

Hearing the situation put into words seemed too much for my mother, who erupted in fresh waves of hilarity and dropped her head onto her crossed arms on the table.

Joanne reached across the table and lifted up the remnants of the jeans.

“Didn’t you...” Jo paused to gasp and tried to straighten her aching sides. “Didn’t you think it was odd that the legs were still connected?” She offered the jeans, legs still latched together below my less-than-surgical incision.

Ohhhh...

The “shorts” made a cameo appearance at my fortieth birthday party, thanks to sisters who retain things as well as Bill Gates’ iPhone. Shortly after that they mysteriously disappeared. My neighbors reported some late digging one foggy night around the same time, but I’m not convinced there’s a connection.

The tomatoes were huge this year, weighing down the plants in our garden. They were round and chubby with ruby flesh. I picked a half dozen and sliced them thinly. The preheated piecrusts were filled, and then I added sea salt, cracked black pepper, basil, and trimmed scallions. I brushed on a layer of mayo and cheddar cheese. When the oven timer dinged the pies came out bubbling with subdued colors of red and orange in their deeply tanned crusts.

For a moment, the kitchen was still and quiet. Then a sudden lift of air blew by the house, encouraging the wind chimes to dance with the music of cathedral bells. I swore I heard her voice.

“Well done, baby girl! Just stay away from the scissors!”

*Maggie Barnes works in health care marketing and is a resident of Waverly, New York. She is a 2015 recipient of the Keystone Press Award for her columns in Mountain Home*