

THE
DANGEROUS
ANIMALS
CLUB

STEPHEN
TOBOLOWSKY

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Stephen Tobolowsky

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*For my boys Robert and William.
As dear and dangerous as they come.*

THE DANGEROUS ANIMALS CLUB

DON'T ASK ME, "How are the kids?" I never have any idea. I know they eat and get dressed and go to school, but as to what is going on in their lives and in their heads, forget it. It is the secret world: the world that every child has and that no parent gets to see.

Ann and I are active parents. We try to meet all of our kids' friends and their parents and ask questions and look under the bed, and check in the closets, tap their phones—but we still don't know the various deals with Satan they may make when they leave the house. We're not unique. Every parent is in the dark.

When I was five, I had an invisible monster that lived alternately in my closet and under my bed in a kind of winter-home/summer-home arrangement. His name was "Eye the Monster." Eye would come out of hiding when I was alone and we would talk.

I had an up-and-down relationship with Eye. I often appreciated his middle-of-the-night visits. We would talk about school and about girls I had crushes on. You would think that Eye the Monster didn't care about the opposite sex. But he did. He always argued for patience and honesty. He urged me to be more aggressive with the ladies on square dance day. It was hard advice to take. I was never a player. I thought five years of age was too young to be married. But not Eye. He thought I could be a trailblazer and be married and have children before I was in fourth grade. And this was years before MTV.

Besides being a confidant and an advisor, Eye had another side. He could be angry. There was a period when his opening my closet door and coming into my room at midnight terrified me. I snuck a steak knife from the kitchen and kept it under my pillow as a last line of defense. I hid the knife in the morning so Mom would never see it when she made my bed. Love, terror, and steak knives were a part of my secret world.

Eventually, my parents became aware of Eye the Monster. On a car trip to San Antonio, Eye came out from under the backseat. He told my dad, who was driving, that we had to go back home. Dad said, "Crockett was at the Alamo, and we could get killed by Mexicans. Dad didn't listen. I started crying. Eye the Monster started screaming at Dad.

Dad was not pleased. He had to work hard to get a few days off to go on a family vacation. Being a pediatrician, he realized that what he wanted was a vacation from screaming, crying kids. By the time we got to Waxahachie, Dad turned the car around and we came home.

The big secret my parents never knew was that I was also a member of a club across the alley at Billy Hart's house. I would kiss Mom on the cheek and "go out to play." In reality I ran down to Billy's for a meeting of the Dangerous Animals Club.

Billy already had a clubhouse in his backyard so it was only natural that he should be the president. He was also older than I was. He was almost seven, and I was content to put myself in his capable hands.

The purpose of the Dangerous Animals Club was straightforward. Both Billy and I were big fans of dangerous creatures. We made a list of all the dangerous creatures we wanted to catch. Being in Texas, there were a lot of them. The list included: rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins, black widows, scorpions, tarantulas, centipedes, leeches, and the deadly coral snake, which we were hoping lived in

the woods nearby.

~~We went out into the fields and hills and creeks carrying jelly jars and burlap sacks. We used broomsticks and umbrellas as tools of capture or weapons, if necessary. We would lift rocks and roll them over rotten trees, hoping to find something horrible, catching it alive and bringing it back to the clubhouse, effectively making Billy's backyard the most dangerous place in Texas.~~

Charlie Harp, another neighborhood boy, a little younger than I, became aware of the Dangerous Animals Club. He heard our mission statement; he saw the clubhouse. He wanted in. Billy and I refused at first. What good is a secret club if everybody is a member? Charlie ran home and came back with a brown paper bag. Inside was a genuine rattlesnake skull. He said we could display it in the clubhouse if he could be a member. He was in. And we were now three.

So I kissed Mom good-bye and told her I was going out to play. I ran over to Billy's where we met and swore that if we told anyone about the club, we would be put to death. We had a disagreement as to whether it should be a blood pact. Charlie Harp argued it had to be a blood pact if punishment for telling was death. There was a logic to that, but I was opposed to any kind of bleeding that happened on purpose. Billy, being a natural leader, said the blood oath wasn't necessary. The activities of the Club were already dangerous enough.

We agreed and went out for our first task: to find a scorpion or a centipede. Billy was sure that if we went down to the creek we would find a scorpion. He heard that they liked rotting wood. There were several dead trees lying on the ground.

As I think about it, Billy was a damn good president. His instincts were right on. We went down to the creek and found a fallen tree. We moved a decaying branch with our bare hands—and what there was a scorpion!

We slapped a jelly jar over it. The scorpion started slashing at the glass and our hands with its tail, a scorpions are wont to do. We righted the jar and filled it with rubbing alcohol. The scorpion started swimming furiously. We screwed on the top and we headed back to the clubhouse. One day, about thirty minutes of time invested, and something nasty in our possession. Priceless.

I ran home for dinner. Mom asked me if I had fun playing with Billy. I said emphatically, "Yes!"

The next day we headed down to the creek where Billy hoped we could catch some leeches, and we were lucky, a water moccasin, one of Texas's four poisonous snake species. Billy told me that water moccasins weren't as deadly as coral snakes—which was disappointing—but they were more aggressive. That encouraged me. I didn't want to be wasting my time with something that wasn't potentially lethal.

We started wading through the creek water. Leeches swam up and tried to attach themselves to our legs. How great was that! We just scooped them up in a jar and we had leeches. Another creature to check off our list. Too easy.

Now we were on to the snakes. Water moccasins apparently love stagnant water—so we were in the right place. The water had a thick green foam on top of it and you could see the mosquito larvae swimming under the murky surface. Billy suggested we start turning over rocks by the bank of the creek.

I flipped over a big piece of limestone and there was a baby water moccasin. It opened its little mouth and showed its baby fangs. Billy reminded me that the babies are just as poisonous as the grown-ups. I nodded and reached down to get it. Billy yelled to me to remember to grab it behind the head. Not to worry. I knew that. Everyone in Texas knows you grab a poisonous snake behind the head.

But the water moccasin didn't want to be caught and it took off through a field of tall grass. I ran after it shouting to Billy that it was headed toward him. I could see the snake making a rippling trail in front of me. It seemed to stop for a second. There was movement near my feet. I reached down quickly

and pulled up—the mother water moccasin! She was four feet long and angry. In all of my haste, hadn't grabbed her behind the head but around the fat middle of her body. She hissed and readied an attack, showing her trademark white mouth and huge fangs.

I screamed and started swinging the snake over my head. I used the centrifugal force to keep her from bending back and biting me. I was now holding her by the tail, swinging her around my head and walking around wondering what to do. Billy came up to me to give me advice. He assured me that as long as I could spin the snake fast enough, the g-force would keep her from striking. I told him I was getting tired. I needed to throw the snake. He told me I couldn't. He said the water moccasin was not only aggressive, but it had a good memory and would follow me home.

I started to cry.

I told Billy that I had to let it fly, to let him get a head start for the clubhouse. Billy started running. I screamed after him, "If I throw the snake and run, will she be able to follow me?" Billy stopped and shouted back, "She'll track you by scent. It could take days, but she'll find you." He took off like a jackrabbit. I stood in the middle of the swamp grass, swinging the snake over my head and crying.

I couldn't do this forever. I decided that the snake was probably dizzy and disoriented. That would buy me some time. I slung the snake. She twirled, helicopterlike, several yards through the air and landed in the creek. I took off. I ran as fast as I had ever run in my life. To confuse the snake, I didn't run directly home, but took a circuitous route in the opposite direction. I ran over to Driftwood Street and down the alley behind Mark Henley's house. There was a terrifying German shepherd that always barked at us when we rode our bicycles. I figured if the snake tried to track me, she would have to deal with the dog first.

I got home in full gallop. I blasted through the kitchen door. Mom was putting supper on the table. She asked if I had a good time playing with Billy. I said "yeah" as she spooned some lima beans onto my plate. I asked her if we lock the doors at night. Mom looked at me with a touch of surprise and answered, "Yes, honey. Always. Why?" I started eating and said, "Oh, just wanted to make sure no one could break in." Mom rubbed my back. "Oh, don't worry. I always lock the doors." I smiled. I was as safe as I possibly could be in an unsafe world.

BILLY HART AND I had a cooling off period of about three days, waiting for some sign that the mother cottonmouth hadn't tracked me down. When she never showed up, we figured the DAC could begin its full-scale operations once again. Billy produced a huge Whitman pickle jar from the Wynnewood Movie Theater, our local Saturday matinee hangout. He had a sly grin on his face. "Know what we're gonna do with this jar?"

"No," I said.

"We're going to catch us a tarantula."

This was the best news I had heard since I found out the tooth fairy paid more money for bigger teeth. A real tarantula. The clubhouse would be a showplace with a tarantula next to the leeches, next to the scorpion, next to a real rattlesnake skull.

"When do we get the tarantula?"

Billy thought for a moment. "We have to get some supplies. My brother has to go to the drugstore and buy denatured alcohol."

"What is that?"

Billy again showed his expertise. "It's deadly poisonous. They only sell it to adults. My brother will buy some and give it to us. Then we go out and find a tarantula hole. And then we find its escape hole."

and put the pickle jar over it. Then we pour the denatured alcohol down the main hole and when the tarantula tries to escape out the back, we got him.”

Let me just say right now, Billy Hart was a genius. He was right about everything, except for maybe the bit about the mother snake following me home. Anyway, Billy’s brother bought the awful stuff and gave it to us, and we wandered into the hills behind our homes.

For the uninitiated, the way you find a tarantula hole is to find an arid locale (most of Texas), then you look for a hole in the ground that looks kind of like a gopher hole but with some telltale webbing around the entrance. Once you find the main hole, you walk in small but ever-widening concentric circles until you find another hole with a slight trace of spiderweb around the outside. This is the escape hole. It’s usually about twenty to thirty feet away.

Billy and I found a hole that looked suspicious. It was three inches in diameter with some cobwebs blowing in the breeze. We walked around the hole, and sure enough, about twenty feet away on the other side of a scrub oak was a second hole. I put the Whitman pickle jar over the escape hole. Billy pulled out the denatured alcohol. He handed me a thick piece of cardboard for phase two of the operation.

He said, “We don’t know if the hole is deserted or not. I’ll pour this in and if a spider jumps in the jar, you slide the cardboard under it and we’ll have us a tarantula.” We laughed. We would have done a high five if it had existed back then. Billy unscrewed the cap, turned his head, and held the can as far away from him as possible so as not to be poisoned by the fumes. He poured the entire contents down the main hole. He threw the can away and then ran to join me behind a boulder, where I was stationed, watching for any action in the pickle jar.

We waited an eternity, which was probably more like ninety seconds, when— *plop*—a huge, brown tarantula popped into the jar. We screamed with glee. We had a giant, reddish brown, hairy spider with a leg span of about eight inches in the pickle jar. Billy nudged me to slide the cardboard under the mouth of the jar. I ran up and reached down to slide the cardboard in place when *plop*. Another large spider popped into the jar. And then *plop*, another, and *plop*, another. I ran back to join Billy.

Another plopped into the jar and then *plop. Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop*. A half dozen more. The jar was about half full with angry, squirming spiders. *Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop*. It didn’t stop. They kept filling the jar. There had to be fifty tarantulas in there. The entire pickle jar was filled and more spiders kept jumping into it from the escape hole.

Billy and I started to panic. “Now what are we going to do?” I asked him. Billy thought about it and said, “We can’t take the jar back to the clubhouse and we can’t leave them in the jar. That would be cruel.” Billy thought about it some more. After due consideration, he said, “We have to knock the jar over and run.”

Remembering my recent run-in with the snake, I asked, “Will they follow us?”

Billy shook his head, “No. Spiders are stupid. But we have to make sure we never come back to that part of the woods again. We poisoned that hole so there’ll be tarantulas everywhere.” We knocked over the pickle jar. Once again we bolted.

I got home and Mom was in the kitchen. “You’re back early,” she said.

I walked over and grabbed a chocolate-chip cookie she had just pulled from the oven.

“You and Billy have a good time?”

I grunted with a mouthful of cookie, “It was okay,” and went into the den to watch TV.

The next day Billy and I met at the clubhouse to discuss future missions. We didn’t have a lot to show for our trouble. Things got worse when Charlie Harp, who had never joined us on any of our excursions, came over and said he had to take the rattlesnake skull back home. It was a major setback.

for the club.

The real blow came when Billy decided we had to mount and display the scorpion, which was currently floating near the bottom of the jelly jar we caught him in. I took the top off, reached in, pulled the scorpion out, and placed it on the table when it flashed its tail at us. It was still alive! It ran off the table and into the clubhouse. Billy and I screamed and ran into the yard. Miraculously, the scorpion had lived for days in an environment of pure alcohol, much like I did in the 1980s.

With the scorpion on the loose, we had to abandon our clubhouse. Billy pointed out that since the clubhouse was made of rotten wood, which scorpions love, it would never leave. We didn't dare go back inside.

There was something poetic about the scorpion taking over the Dangerous Animals Club clubhouse. If there were such a thing as a "scorpion poet," he may have sung of the Beowulflike heroism of one of their own who survived so many trials for such a rich reward.

We never talked about it, but these were dark days for the DAC. Billy and I still played together, but it was hard to continue without a clubhouse, a rattlesnake skull, and all of nature turned against us.

There was one brief moment when the DAC thought of staging a comeback. One afternoon a large, beautiful box turtle was sitting on my patio. Just sitting there! As if dropped from the heavens. I ran over to get Billy to show him my find. I asked him if we could include the turtle as a trophy for the Dangerous Animals Club. Billy pondered and furrowed his brow. It was doubtful, he said. The turtle could hardly be considered dangerous. It just sat there. But it could be a part of a new wildlife club: the Wildlife Club of Texas. The purpose of the club would be the same as the DAC, but its reach would be more ecumenical.

I called Mom outside to see the turtle. She was impressed. I asked her if we could keep it. Mom looked unenthusiastic, but agreed to take me to the pet store to buy it a proper home.

I described the size of the turtle to the man at the pet store. I should mention that in those days, the late 1950s, pet stores were not staffed with the young enthusiastic animal lovers that work at pet stores today. The people who ran pet stores back then were just one cut above carnival people, the scariest people on earth.

Our pet store man, who had no bottom teeth, said we would need a tub for the turtle. We would need bags of gravel for the bottom of the tub. He sold us two large bags of colored pebbles. He said the turtle might appreciate a couple of the plastic palm trees he sold as turtle tank decorations. Most importantly, we would need snails.

"Snails?" Mom asked.

"Yes, ma'am. They eat the feces and keep the tub clean. You don't want to be cleaning that tub yourself."

Mom made a face and looked at me. She bought two snails. We headed home with the tub and the gravel, two palm trees, and two snails. The ride was joyous as we tried out different names for the turtle. They ranged from the dignified like "Sam" or "Tom" to the ironic like "Speedy" or "Lightning."

We got out of the car brimming with enthusiasm. I ran onto the patio. The turtle was gone. Never to be seen again. Mom and I unpacked the tub and the gravel and palm trees. We filled it with water. And that's how we ended up with two pet snails.

The Dangerous Animals Club had officially slipped into the realm of memory. Fade-out.

Fade-in, some forty years later. I was married, just as Eye the Monster had urged me to do. Annie and I, and my two boys, Robert, age twelve, and William, age seven, took off on an adventure one summer to live in a three-hundred-year-old farmhouse in the little Alps of southern France. It was late afternoon in this wild place of mountains and forests and dirt roads and ruins that date back to Roman

times. I was sitting at our kitchen table drinking a glass of wine when my seven-year-old son, William, came running into the house. “Daddy, Daddy, come quick. I just saw a giant lizard on the hillside. We could catch him and take him back to America if you come quick.”

I was up in a flash. I found myself laughing in a most peculiar way as I ran out the door, grabbing an umbrella to use as a tool of capture or, if necessary, a weapon. I ran with William into the mountains at dusk, honored to be invited into his secret world and proud that yet another member of the Dangerous Animals Club had stepped forward to do the job so few are willing to do.

I WAS NOT up for much when we arrived in France. I fell into a near-terminal case of jet lag. I would sleep on the couch. I would sleep on the floor. I slept while Ann explained to me how I had to force myself to stay awake to stop the sleep cycle. I had become Snow White in the story of my life, but even the kiss from my beloved couldn't help.

One afternoon while I was sleeping on the kitchen table, William came running inside to tell me to come quick—he had learned to talk to the bats.

I muttered, “Talk to the bats?”

William said, “Sure, Dad, they're everywhere. Now that I know their language, I can make them my friends.”

Parents know that occasionally children will utter a sentence in which every word can make you question the fabric of sanity. But I believe that it is in these moments when you get a peek at the secret world your children have had all along. I had no idea we had bats at our house in the country, let alone that they “were everywhere.” I had no idea William was working on breaking the language barrier. I had no idea what being friends with a bat would entail, and if it was a road I was willing to travel.

I got up and followed William outside the farmhouse. He ran about ten yards away from me and started squeaking. It was loud. It could be heard for miles. If there were any glass nearby, it would have broken. Overhead I saw a dark circle forming. I couldn't believe it. It was clear that my son was doing something that engaged the bats on a critter level. He continued the call. Occasionally a bat swooped out of the sky and landed on his shoulder. My reaction was a strange mix of pride and nausea. He was a genius. Kind of like the young Mozart, except instead of playing the piano blindfolded, he was a vermicelli magnet.

Like any good father, I tried to calculate ways I could monetize this ability. The only options that came to mind involved the circus or the military. I called out, “William, this is great.” Ann came outside. I whispered to her, “Baby, can you believe this? Our son can talk to bats.”

Ann was not amused. She said, “Stephen, the bats could have rabies.” I said, “I know. I know. You're right. You're right. They probably all do. This should stop.”

I turned to William and congratulated him on his accomplishment and asked if there was a safe way to get the bats off of his head. William said, “I'll just ask them to go away.” He started turning in circles and squeaking again. As if by magic, the bats began to disperse. I promised Ann I wouldn't encourage William in his bat-talking experiments anymore.

But you can only keep that kind of light under a bushel for so long. One afternoon I was in a deep coma, when the bat signal awakened me once more. I dragged myself out of bed and saw William down the road calling the bats at our landlord's home. My son Robert was displaying him to our neighbors and asking for contributions. Our eighty-year-old Iraqi landlord was impressed with William's talent. Robert came alongside of me and whispered conspiratorially, “What a scam. It's just sound frequency. Not William.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But he’s the only one doing the frequency.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Who else would want to? He’s just weird.”

“I have to agree with you there, Robert. It’s a weird thing to want to do.”

Robert got serious. “Any way we can make some serious money off of this?”

I shook my head. “Already thought about it. I doubt it.”

“What about *America’s Funniest Home Videos*?” Robert asked.

I hadn’t thought of that. That was far more practical than sending William off to the circus. Robert

added, “Only thing wrong is that he would probably have to get bitten for us to win.”

After the bat-calling session, our landlord suggested we go down the mountain a ways. A Pakistani chess master and his eleven-year-old son were living on a farm over the summer. They might enjoy the bat calling.

William was thriving with his newfound notoriety. He had even perfected the blush of false modesty.

A big factor in any fascination is proximity. If you’re close to the object of your passion, it can blossom. Fantasy can turn into romance. That was the case with William and the black bull snake. This snake was about four to five feet long and he lived on our mountain. We would find snake skins all around our house and pool. We had little doubt that our home was ground zero in the bull-snake world.

One day I was passed out in the living room when William ran inside and asked me, “Daddy, if I capture a bull snake, can we bring it home to America?” I mumbled, “Doubt it,” before I rolled over and continued to sleep it off. Robert came in and said, “Hey, Dad. The pool is filled with snakes.”

I roused myself and staggered out toward the pool area. There were several snakes in the water swimming. Several sunning on the bank. It didn’t look safe. It was starting to resemble something from an Indiana Jones movie. I called our landlord to come and take a look. He drove up about five minutes later. He looked in the pool. He looked up at the mountain. He checked the angle of the sun in the sky and then felt the temperature of the water. He nodded and said, “Yes. Yes. This is about right. They like to spend the summers in the pool. It gets so hot.”

“I understand. We like to spend the summers in the pool, too, which is why we rented your house. It would be nice to do it without the snakes. Is there someone we can call?”

Our landlord laughed and said, “Who would you call? There are hundreds of snakes in the mountains. They love it here. They come down and have sex in the pool. The big lizards come down here, too. You may find them mating here in the morning and evening. They won’t hurt you. They just want to have sex and eat the rats. The rats are everywhere.”

I gathered my thoughts. “So you are saying our backyard is the Playboy Mansion for the reptiles of Europe?”

“No. Just for the bull snakes. They are the only ones who go in the pool. I promise you there will never be a rat inside the house. After a while, you will get used to it. I have come to find it amusing to watch them court. The dance of love. It is beautiful.”

I avoided getting misty-eyed and stayed on point. “Do they bite?” Our landlord looked at me like I was crazy. “Only if you get in the pool with them,” he said. I was feeling too sleepy to stand my ground on any sort of rent reduction. I was just able to ask, “Any other snakes around here? I read you have poisonous snakes, too. Vipers.”

Our landlord’s countenance grew serious. “Yes. The viper is very dangerous, but they are not around here. They are short, only about a foot or eighteen inches long. You can’t miss them. They are bright yellow with a black diamond pattern down their back. They have a triangular head.”

I puffed up with a certain amount of authority and said, “Yes, I know. Poisonous snakes have triangular heads. ~~When I was a little boy, I was in the Dangerous Animals Club in Texas. We tried to catch poisonous snakes alive and bring them back to our clubhouse.~~” Our landlord looked at me and smiled. “That is really crazy,” he said. “But if what you say is true, I would think a few bull snakes in the pool shouldn’t bother you.” He headed off to his car. “I think your son has a gift with those bats. He really impressed our neighbor from Pakistan.”

A FEW DAYS later we headed out on a day trip to visit something else you don’t see every day. The Pont du Gard. This is the ruin of a Roman aqueduct built in the first century AD. Ancient graffiti covers the stones. Looking at all of the inscriptions you see that the power of humanity isn’t always found in great art. Over the centuries, lovers, soldiers, poets, and scoundrels have met here and left behind messages to the world: “Max and Emma—Love—1806” or “To God—1640” or “Freedom 1783.” You don’t need much more than that to understand the history of mankind.

We crossed the Gard River and started exploring the other side. Ann wanted to take in the beauty of it all. She sat down on the bank while Robert, William, and I set out to see what we could find. We got to a place where the river was narrow enough and we could throw rocks across to the other side. We started firing at will when William said casually from the log behind us, “Daddy, look. A viprish.”

“A viprish?”

“Yes, a cute, little, beautiful viprish.” I turned and looked back at the log where William was hunting for rocks. Coming out to check on the commotion was a short snake with a bright yellow body and distinctive dark diamond pattern. I froze. “William, walk toward me now. Walk slowly and steadily, honey,” I whispered.

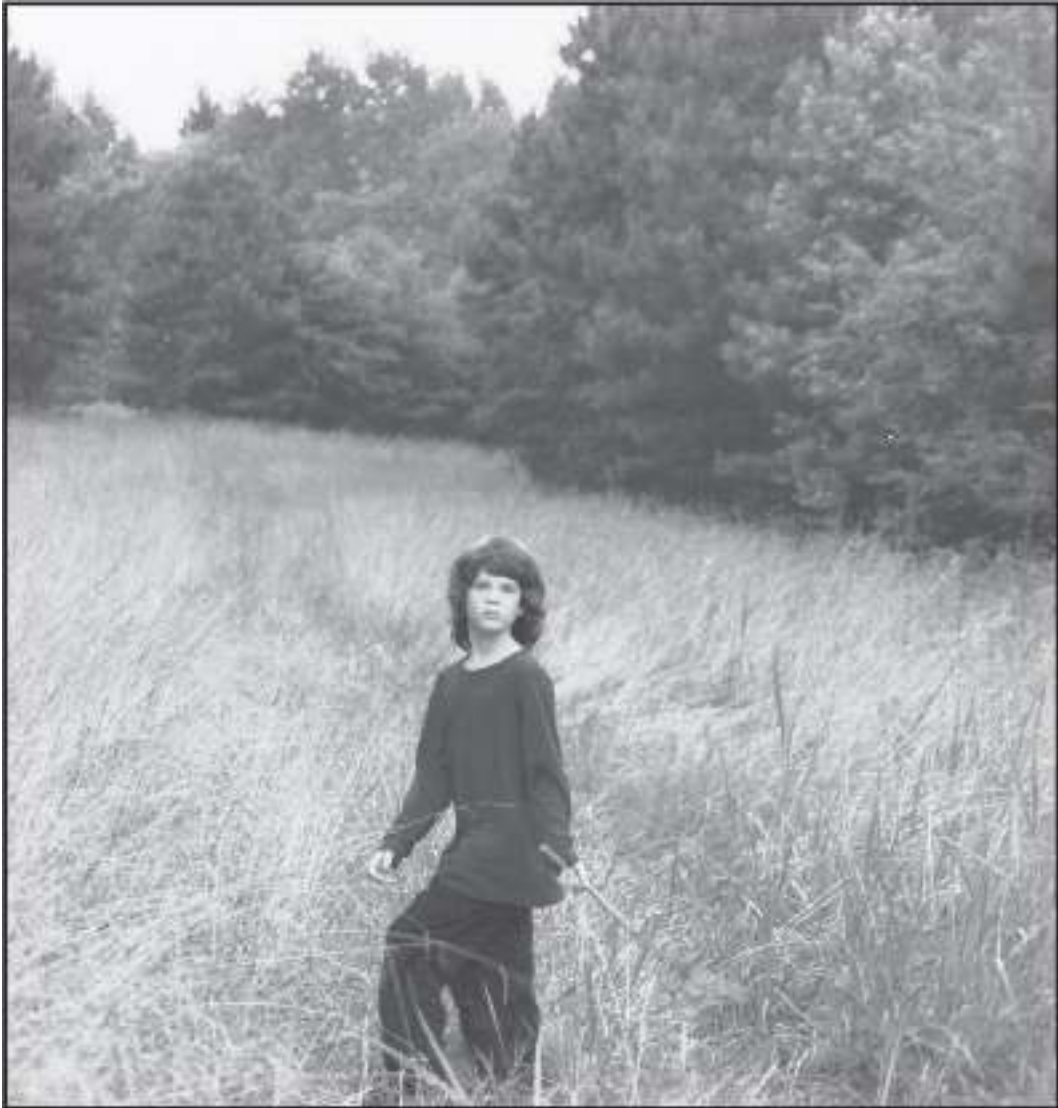
“No, Daddy, let’s catch him and take him back.”

For some unexplainable reason, it sounded like a good idea. “Wait. I know how to grab him. Behind the head!” I said.

Robert and William and I started chasing the terrified snake. At one point it crawled over my foot just out of my clutches. The viper disappeared in some tall grass on a low-lying hill. Robert quieted up and said, “Let me take a look.” We waited in silence, afraid to breathe too loudly. Robert lifted himself to look over the crest of the hill. His face turned red. He tried to squelch his laugh as his eyes filled with tears. I said, “Robert, what is it? Did you see the snake?”

“No. Worse. Nudies. Lots of nudies.”

I lifted myself over the hill and he was right. Several heavysset nudists were sunbathing. Some had apparently never heard of sunblock. William ran up for his look and started to laugh hysterically. The nudies looked back at us in disgust. The three of us turned like madmen and ran back to Ann. We arrived breathless from the run and the laughter. She waited to hear what the commotion was all about. We began our stories. Her face changed as most women’s do when they listen to their men: from amusement to horror to incomprehensibility. We told her about the viper and our brush with death and the cluster of nudies. I lay down on the shore with the Gard River running beside me, and as I started to fall asleep, I smiled with the knowledge that the human being is still the most dangerous animal of all.



William in the wilderness on the trail of something awful.

FAQ

MY IQ INCREASED dramatically in 1995. I'm not talking about my intelligence. That was cooked in 1968. I am talking about my "interview quotient." Before 1995, I was rarely interviewed. I didn't become more interesting in 1995. I just finished shooting a television show called *Dweebs* for CBS. It was going to be put on the fall schedule. The network arranged for all of the actors to take part in what is referred to as a "satellite tour."

The satellite tour is like a lot of things in acting. It sounds far more interesting than it actually is. The actor shows up at a nondescript location. A room. Even a hallway will do. He or she sits on a metal folding chair and is sequentially interviewed by several dozen reporters from all over the world in about two hours.

The members of the press were always the same. They were affable and had no idea who I was. I was nervous. I couldn't help but wonder what handful of questions they would ask me. Were they intent on boiling me down to my essentials like my mother with a chicken? Did they have questions honed by time and experience that would pluck out the heart of my mystery? No. Not even interested. To a man (and woman), they smiled and said, "It will be painless. A few softballs. All routine. Nothing tricky." They would just hit me with some *fak*.

I nodded as if I understood, but I had no idea what *fak* was and if it was appropriate for them to hit me with it. Used in a sentence, *fak* sounded dirty. It sounded like something you would find at the bottom of a monkey cage. After an hour and a dozen reporters, I got the idea that *fak* was *fak*. It wasn't going to change. Its purpose was to reveal nothing. Sitting on my folding chair, the interviews began to feel like a curious exercise in indifference.

I was disappointed. I always imagined being interviewed would be a defining moment in my life as an actor. If it didn't mean I had arrived, at least it meant I had been cast.

During hour number two, I muscled up the nerve and asked a friendly and partially intoxicated interviewer from Australia what *fak* was, thinking if it was naughty, at least he lived on a different continent. He laughed and explained that *fak* wasn't a thing. It was three letters—FAQ—and it stood for Frequently Asked Questions.

"Really? It's initials?"

"That's right, mate. Shorthand. They call it an acronym."

"Like 'scuba'?"

"Right."

"You're kidding," I said.

The interviewer laughed. "I wouldn't do that to ya."

I was fascinated. FAQ became a mystery. Not the "question" part of it, but the "frequently" part.

"Are these the questions people ask with great frequency?"

"I don't know. I expect so."

"Why?" I asked.

"A way to get to know you, maybe?" His eyes were especially bright from a combination of the Foster's and the fact that this interview was different from the last fifteen he had done.

“But does anyone know me after these questions? ‘What’s your name? Where were you born? How long have you been an actor? What do you think of your part?’ Do people want to know these things? Seems kind of unimportant.”

My Aussie interviewer looked at me over the tops of his black-framed glasses as he took notes with more vigor. “What questions would you ask? With frequency?”

I rocked back in my folding chair. I looked at his open face. “If I was the interviewer I would ask you who was the first person you ever fell in love with?”

The interviewer flushed red. He smiled and shook his head. He thought about it for about half a second. “Lord. That would have to be Sally. Sally Carmichael.”

“When did you meet Sally?” I said.

He started laughing and looking at the ceiling. “Ten. I was ten.”

“And what was it about Sally that did it for you?”

He looked me in the eye. He leaned forward as if he were revealing an age-old secret. “Her laugh. She had a great, good sense of humor. She brightened up the room. Her hair was blond and always had a perfect little curl to it. I got the nerve one day to walk her home. I have never had such a good time with a girl as on that twenty-minute walk to her house.”

“Where is Sally now?”

“Married. Three children. Lives in another town. I tracked her down and wrote her last year.”

I started laughing. “Did she write you back?”

He nodded.

“Did you learn anything more about her?”

He nodded again. “Yeah. She still remembers the walk.” He blushed.

An employee of CBS came by and said that our time was up and there were other interviews scheduled. We stood and shook hands and wished each other good luck. The afternoon continued. Inundated in a sea of FAQ.

ACCORDING TO THE reporters at the satellite tour, the answers to my most frequently asked questions would be: Stephen Tobolowsky. Dallas, Texas. Yep. Born there. Yes, Cowboys fan. Six foot three. And I have been a professional actor most of my working life.

Well, stop right there. To be fair, that’s somewhat interesting. There aren’t many professional actors walking around. And I am an actor that works *in* show business. That’s even more unusual. You can never be too sure when an actor says they’re working, what they really mean.

Case in point: in 1972, my girlfriend, Beth, and I did summer stock in upstate New York. We were doing a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when Jack (who shall remain otherwise nameless) left our company because he had gotten “a job on Broadway in *Pippin*.” We had a big good-bye celebration for him. He said the next time we were in the city, we should see the show and come back to the stage door afterward to say hello.

We took him up on the offer a couple of months later. Beth and I went to *Pippin*, but Jack was nowhere to be seen. We went to the stage door and asked for him. The guard called back for Jack. He showed up wearing elbow-length black rubber gloves. I told him we enjoyed the show but missed him onstage. I asked if he was in the chorus. Beth asked if he was disguised as a mushroom or a tree.

Jack was not amused. He said he never claimed he was *in* the show. He said he worked *on* the show. He was in charge of giving enemas to the animals that appeared onstage so they wouldn’t have an accident during a musical number and horrify the audience.

Pause.

~~There have only been a few times in my life when I have been speechless. In this case it was the combination of horror, surprise, and curiosity as to how much the job paid and if they offered it to me would I take it.~~

Jack was rightfully offended by whatever look we had on our faces. He hit us with a now classic rejoinder: "Hey, at least I'm on Broadway." Jack and his rubber gloves taught me never to trust an actor when they say they're working.

For years I have assumed that one reason why I am not frequently asked interesting questions is that I am a character actor. Even though I have been in hundreds of shows, I am not famous by any unit measure. You would recognize me if you saw me in line at the coffee shop. Not necessarily as an actor. There is a fifty-fifty chance you might think that I was the guy who used to work there. Or a science teacher at your high school. Or the man who sold insurance to your parents. In Canada, one man came up to me on the street thinking we had played hockey together.

I was premiering my film *Stephen Tobolowsky's Birthday Party* at the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen in 2005. As a sociological experiment, I asked strangers on the street if they had heard of Stephen Tobolowsky. They all had.

One man said he just read about Stephen Tobolowsky that morning. He was a serial killer in Denver about to be released from prison. There was a huge protest. Another man said that he thought that Stephen Tobolowsky was the real name of a popular porn star, someone named Rick "Hot Rocket Rocket." Unfamiliar with Mr. Rocket's work, I moved on. One woman had a kinder but equally incorrect view of the universe. She thought Stephen Tobolowsky was either a financial expert or a physicist who had just discovered something about time.

I liked that one.

Time has always interested me. We always tend to imagine time as a line of past, present, and future. But I don't think we experience it that way. In our lives, memory rarely serves as a measurement of time, but rather as a measurement of meaning. The associations we make are rarely linear. Time and memory combine to create an unpredictable picture. We never can know what moments will rise to the level of significance. The strangest, smallest things can become your evening star.

FAQ will almost always relate to work. I've been asked dozens of times over the years, "What was like to perform on Broadway the first time?"

To tell the truth, my opening night on Broadway in 1982 is a blur. Not completely. I remember I wore blue boxer shorts. But the play and the applause, nothing. You would think, being an actor, that event would be central to my personal history. But it's not. Unpredictably, two events that happened when I was five years old dwarf my first night on Broadway. These memories are always with me.

I was five and had just proposed to the first girl I ever fell in love with, Alice Nell Allen. She was also five. I ran home and told my mother that I was getting married and would probably be leaving soon to start a family of my own. Mom took the news well. "That's nice," she said.

I dashed out of our kitchen screen door and ran across our backyard into the world. I was as excited as only a young man in love could be. I wanted to give my mother a gift to thank her for her kindness and support during my early, formative years.

Behind our house in Oak Cliff, Texas, was a tangle of wildness. There were fields and woods and a creek. But there was also a meadow that covered an entire block. It was filled with the most beautiful flowers I had ever seen in my life. They were red, and yellow, and orange.

I ran barefoot through the field at sundown to pick a bouquet. I came running back into the kitchen. I put my flowers in a glass with a little water and offered them to Mom. She looked down at me

holding my flowers as she washed the chicken. "Stepidoors, those are just weeds. Those aren't nice flowers that you give to someone. Throw them away," she said. I couldn't move. Mom took the wildflowers out of the glass and tossed them into the trash.

I was devastated and embarrassed. My mother, though the kindest person I have ever known, could not have understood what those flowers meant to me. They were the most beautiful things I had ever seen, and I wanted to share that beauty with her.

A week later the land where the wildflowers grew was sold and plowed over. They started building homes on the lots. The flowers never returned. I looked for them for years, but they were gone. That was the last time I saw those reds, yellows, and oranges by our home. They entered the realm of memory, becoming a sort of evening star that warned me to protect what I loved.

Another important story comes from the same distant era. I'm afraid I need to explain some ancient history. Back then, in the early 1950s, kids walked. We walked everywhere. Or we ran or rode bikes. We were on our own a lot. I remember I had walked down to Daughtery's Drug Store to buy a candy bar and read comic books. Thick in the middle of the latest *Batman*, I noticed the sky had darkened. I thought I should head back. Texas was always prone to sudden and dangerous shifts in the weather. I didn't want to get caught in a thunderstorm.

I started to walk down the bumpy, tar-covered, two-lane road that led back home. I saw something about half a mile away that upset me. There was something wrong. I couldn't quite make it out. As I got closer I saw a car was leaning sideways on the shoulder of the road. I could smell smoke in the air.

I ran toward the wreck to investigate. Steam was coming from the radiator. I heard a noise and I saw movement and turned. There was a man lying by the side of the road. I froze.

He was wearing light blue pants and a light blue shirt and he had a black belt with a silver buckle. He whispered to me. "Buddy, come here." I obeyed. He said, "Help me here, buddy. I need to sit up."

I knelt beside the man and put my arms around him and helped him. He didn't have the strength to sit. I kept holding him. He said, "Thanks. I can't be lying there like that." A sudden stream of blood flowed out of his mouth onto his blue shirt.

I gasped. "You're bleeding."

"Don't worry, buddy. I'm okay. I don't hurt at all. So don't be scared. I may need to ask you for a favor."

I was trembling but said, "Yes, sir."

"I may need you to find my daughter. Her name is Diane. I may need you to tell her that I'm okay."

"Yes, sir," I replied.

I heard the sounds of tires screeching on the road behind me and footsteps running. A grown man in a light-colored jacket came up to me and said, "What happened?"

"I found him here," I said.

The injured man looked around at the scene. Other cars stopped. More help ran over. He turned to me and said, "Buddy, I guess you can go on home now."

"What about your daughter, Diane?"

"Don't worry. It'll all be fine."

I handed my charge off to those more capable. I started to leave. I looked back at the man one more time. He tried to gesture to me. I remember his pale blue eyes and his parting words, "Go on home now. And, buddy, don't be afraid."

I am sorry to say I have been unable to honor his request. I have been afraid. Often. When I asked Claire Richards to the prom. When I was held hostage at gunpoint in a grocery store. The first time I made love. Just about every audition I've had. And yes, opening night on Broadway in 1982. The list is

too long. But I still see the man dressed in light blue—broken, in need of a doctor, worried for his daughter. Yet he spent a moment to quiet the fears of a child he happened to meet by the side of the road.

Of the many questions I have never been asked, one stands out as being significant. “What were the happiest moments in your life?” There are the obvious answers: when I fell in love, the birth of my children, the second time I married my wife, Ann—but there is one I have never mentioned.

Several years ago, I was in one of those periods in my life when happiness was hard to come by. I returned to Dallas to visit my family. I thought family would make things better—or not. My brother took me out on a bike ride to White Rock Lake and to have breakfast with his friends. I hadn’t ridden a bike in ages. It was a beautiful day. I felt like I was flying. We crested a hill, and as if by divine gift I saw something that took my breath away. There, before my eyes, were my wildflowers—the reds, yellows, and oranges—acres and acres and acres of them in every direction. They were never gone. I just thought they were. I smiled for the first time in months, knowing they were probably here all along. I had just never ridden on the right path.

A question I frequently ask myself: why do I tell these stories? My answer: the mystery.

It is a mystery as to what makes us do what we do. It is the other side of the mystery as to what makes us who we are. One of my favorite philosophers, Epictetus, said that the only things we can control in our lives are what we are drawn to and what we are repelled by. Somewhere between the large field of wildflowers and the words of comfort from a dying man, there was something powerful that made me stop and take notice.

Telling a story is my way of living up to the high standards created for me by the woman in Aspen. It is to be the physicist who has come up with something new about time. It is the only way I know to make sense of the unpredictable. It is the only way I know to search for Diane.

LOCAL HERO

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with heroism was in the figure of Davy Crockett, ably portrayed by Mr. Fess Parker on Walt Disney's television program. Or miniseries. Or whatever it was. I don't think it was called *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* yet. At that point in time, the world was pretty much black and white. It was the mid-1950s. It was a time so simple, so innocent, that if you could time-travel and magically run an episode of *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, millions of Americans would believe that they had died in their sleep and gone straight to hell.

Simplicity doesn't mean simpleminded. It just meant we didn't have cell phones, or computers, or automatic transmissions. We thought wrestling was real. We liked our symbols like we liked our scotch—straight up. Davy was a symbol. He wore the signature coonskin cap and lived in the woods with his wife, Polly. He had a friend, Georgie, played by Buddy Ebsen, in a pre-*Beverly Hillbillies* role. Through an eerie act of Hollywood precognition, Ebsen, as Georgie, was costumed almost exactly like Jerry Clampett.

Davy was a great shot. Always. But when he wanted to shoot really well, he would lick his thumb and transfer the spit to the metal gun sight on the end of the barrel of his rifle. I tried this technique when I was five, playing Cowboys and Indians. I would carry an imaginary rifle and lick my thumb and swipe it across the imaginary metal sight when I wanted to insure real accuracy with my imaginary bullets.

My father bought me a coonskin cap. I almost broke down into tears I was so happy. The cap and I were inseparable. Most photos taken of me when I was four and five feature me in this hat. But the hat was more than a fashion statement. It was also a symbol. A symbol of the heroic life. Of rugged individualism. Of personal skill. Of manhood.

On television, Davy had to combat men like Mike Fink. You knew they were bad because they had unappealing names and they never shaved. Shaving was a big part of heroism. The one contradiction to the shaving rule was the comic sidekick. For men like Buddy Ebsen and Gabby Hayes, spotty personal hygiene was an indication that despite their good nature and appeal, they had not achieved full hero status.

On television, Davy once had to hypnotize a bear to save a little boy. Even though Davy had a knife and gun, he knew violence was not always necessary. Not always the best way. Not when you had the powers of hypnosis. He knew the ways of the bear almost better than the ways of man.

Like most men, Davy was uneasy on the dance floor, but his wife, Polly, didn't mind. She knew learning bear hypnosis took time. Davy could only muster an awkward two-step. There were many endearing shots of Polly and Buddy Ebsen smiling and shaking their heads at Davy's poor but earnest attempts on dance night.

Davy went to Washington, D.C., as a congressman from Tennessee. They all made fun of his clothes and especially the coonskin cap. He was little more than a savage to those blowhards who were running the country. But Davy had a couple of powerful skills: reason and plain speaking. What could have been an embarrassing episode turned once again into triumph.

The television show was so successful Disney decided to cobble all three television movies into a

actual motion picture called *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier*. Davy Crockett on the big screen. This was better than butter pecan ice cream. It opened in downtown Dallas at one of the big theaters, the Tower or the Majestic. The line on that cold, cold Saturday morning had to have two or three hundred children, all in coonskin caps. All of us were there to see Davy Crockett. It included a new installment to the story: Davy Crockett at the Alamo! It sounded exciting.

God help us all.

We had no idea. It was like walking into an airplane propeller. None of us were prepared for the Alamo. The movie began innocently enough. There were bears, there was Polly, there were rasslin' matches, there were displays of gunmanship with the signature "licking of the thumb and transferring spit to the gun sight." There were rude, unshaven men bested by Davy.

And then there was more. There was a new character, Jim Bowie. He was well shaven. He carried a huge knife. He also knew his way around a bear. He told Davy about a place called Texas where a man could be a man. Davy listened with interest.

I was uneasy. This didn't make sense. Why Texas? Tennessee was fine. Tennessee had everything a man could need. Then the fever came and Polly died! Polly died! The fever? What was that? That wasn't on the television show! Buddy Ebsen tried to comfort Davy in his grief, but Davy was inconsolable. He left for Texas with Jim Bowie. That wasn't on the television show, either. Something was going terribly wrong.

Davy got to Texas. Frankly, it was not scenic. It looked a lot like the deserty areas of Southern California. There were no bears and no forests. Even worse, there were Mexicans.

The Mexicans were in control of Texas and almost none of them shaved. Davy ended up in a little mission church called the Alamo with a lot of other men. The cleanest of all of them was William Travis. He was almost a sissy he was so clean. He told the men that Sam Houston was trying to get an army together to defeat the Mexicans, and they had to stall the onslaught of Santa Anna at all costs. At all costs. My five-year-old brain could not grasp the significance of "at all costs."

The Alamo was not a good arena for Davy's skills. He couldn't use stealth, he couldn't rattle, bear hypnosis was useless. He was trapped in a little building. My anxiety level was rising. But then, hurray! Buddy Ebsen showed up full of irony and good humor. His presence gave me a sense that everything would be all right.

It wasn't. Buddy Ebsen got shot. In the heart. He died in Davy's arms. He tried to muster a smile as he died—ironic to the end. With his last breath, he said, "I'll say hello to Polly for you." I burst into tears. My little five-year-old heart broke.

Heartbreak was not what I had bargained for when I bought my ticket. Buddy Ebsen, the soul of decency and rural humor, was dead. But it was going to get so much worse. The Mexicans stormed the walls. Davy and Jim Bowie fought back to back. A pile of Mexicans formed at their feet. The camera started to pull away. What? The camera pull-away is what always happened at the end of a movie. Was this the end? Certainly Davy could not survive.

How could Disney do this to me? It wasn't just the end of a story. It was the end of a hero, of a coonskin cap. It was the end of someone I looked up to. Something with real meaning. It was the end of decency, of reason and plain speaking. It was the end of bear hypnosis and all mountain skills lost to the dusty books of time.

Without my hero, what would fill the void? Some of my friends had to wait for *Star Trek*. Others had to wait for *Star Wars*. Other poor souls still play numbly with their remotes, switching between *American Idol* and *Survivor*, hoping for something to replace the coonskin cap.

Two rival thoughts come to mind. One comes from Bertolt Brecht in *Galileo*. The play ends with

Galileo renouncing his findings. A disheartened observer comments, "Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero." Galileo answers him, "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero."

Second is the truism from G. K. Chesterton in the early twentieth century: "When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't believe in nothing; he believes in anything."

UNDER THE CATEGORY of those doomed to believe in anything, in March of 1978 an amazing story emerged from Southern California. The story began as the simple escape of a pigmy hippopotamus from a San Diego wildlife park. But this story grew until it gripped the nation. Now, over thirty years later, the event has vanished into the ash bin of history. But these were powerful times to have lived through. I, for one, feel this history deserves resurrection.

One must cast one's mind back to the sunny days of the late seventies. Jimmy Carter was advocating multiculturalism and the neutron bomb. If you don't remember the neutron bomb, it was a weapon whose positive feature was that it killed people but left buildings intact. True to form, Carter is still in the housing business.

Multiculturalism is still with us, albeit in a mercifully limited form. Its main expression today is in the kind of take-out you can get in Los Angeles and New York—and the types of holidays celebrated in the Santa Monica School District.

Back in the late seventies, there was a deep belief that multiculturalism could catch on, like folk music in the sixties. In that fever, there was an attempt to find something African to bring to America. It wasn't going to be slavery this time. We didn't care for the famines, genocides, and plagues. But just about everybody agreed on the animals. We loved the animals.

Problem. We already had zoos. So what could we do? Answer: No cages!! We'd let the beasts roam free!! Like in Africa!! And the wildlife park was born.

The concept had limitations. The animals were dangerous so the park couldn't be near major population centers. It had to cover a large area to accommodate grazers such as rhinos and giraffes and antelope, so the only cost-effective way to create these parks was to grab up huge tracts of cheap unusable land, like floodplains or the vast acreage under high-voltage towers.

The result was that visitors would have to drive long distances to a deserted, inhospitable area to see lions from the comfort of their cars. I know it sounds crazy now, but this was the late seventies.

The long drive time and ominous high-tension power poles meant a low volume of visitors. Consequently, the bottom line dictated that staff be cut to the minimum. People willing to deal with lions and fifty thousand volts often tend to have personal problems, like mild schizophrenia or heavy drinking.

Shake this cocktail up with a huge perimeter to maintain and you have the perfect prescription for a breakout. These parks were always susceptible to animal escapes. A band of chimpanzees escaped in Arlington, Texas, and lived off garbage for weeks. It was the subject of many crude jokes about the future birthrate in that area. The police weren't laughing. They set up dragnets to haul in the monkeys. It was rumored that not all of the chimps were caught. One of my friends joked that they nabbed a couple of them teaching at a local junior college.

In San Diego it was a single pigmy hippo named Bubbles who made her break for freedom. Bubbles escaped into the nearby suburbs and also lived on trash. The story barely got any play. After all, it was just a single little hippopotamus. How far could she get?

After a week, Bubbles was still free. The Los Angeles newspapers started carrying the story. "Bubbles Eludes Capture Again." "Wildlife Officers Bamboozled by Bubbles." They followed her trail

anticipated the garbage cans they thought she would raid, but she defied expectations again and again. She would double back, jump ahead, revisit old garbage cans right before garbage day. It was as though she had inside information.

They needed help. They brought in a hippo expert from the San Diego Zoo, one of the top zoos in the world. Interviews on television confirmed what we all began to suspect. Bubbles was one smart hippo. And thus she captured the imagination of the nation.

If there is one thing that runs deep in the human soul—if there's one thing that Disney can count on—it is that we are all suckers for smart animals. Television commercials have shown talking dogs and cats for years. Even though they mainly talk about food, litter, and occasionally insurance, we are still amused. A staple of the sitcom has been the pet that is smarter than its family. I was in the pilot of a sitcom in which the lead often talked to his rat for advice. A rat. For advice.

When you think about it, if the only issues that concern you are food and comfort, why not listen to your dog?

Sidenote: our household is no exception. We are beholden to our smart pets and always turn to them in moments of crisis. They are often the focus of our attention and concern. Once I made up an objective list of the relative intelligence in our home from smartest to the stupidest:

- 1. Blackberry (rabbit)**
- 2. Ann (wife)**
- 3. Bandit (cat)**
- 4. William (eleven-year-old son)**
- 5. Robert (sixteen-year-old son)**
- 6. Thistle (rabbit)**
- 7. Rosie (rabbit)**
- 8. Stephen (me)**
- 9. Champion (rabbit)**
- 10. Fleury (rabbit)**
- 11. Tugger (turtle)**

In my defense I need to point out that I *never* have gone to Tugger for any advice or comfort. But I digress.

Bubbles was not only a “smart” hippo, but a hippo that was smarter than several humans, including the hippo expert. That was all the press and the public needed. Bubbles was becoming a folk legend.

San Diego TV news stations interviewed locals whose trash cans were knocked over and looted the night. Bubbles's charm was evident by people laughing and smiling as they cleaned up the mess in their back alleys: “We heard a noise. Thought it was kids or something. Now they tell us it was a hippopotamus, I just don't know. Sounds crazy to me.”

Articles about Bubbles appeared on the front page of papers all over California. "Day 12: Bubbles Still on the Loose!"

Apparently there was a system of swamps that Bubbles was ducking into as home base. The park rangers just didn't have the manpower to cover such a large area. And there was too much garbage to cut off Bubbles's food supply. The situation was getting out of control.

That's when the San Diego Sheriff's Department stepped into the picture. The solution? Shoot Bubbles. After all, Fish and Game couldn't handle the problem, the park rangers couldn't handle the problem, and no matter how cute a pigmy hippo was, she was still a wild animal. During the sheriff's interview they showed file footage of high-powered rifles being loaded with very long bullets.

Outcry! Explosion! Chaos! A cute story turned not so cute. It was unthinkable. Shoot Bubbles? The hippo had done nothing. She was just foraging. She had displayed no hostility. She just had a taste for trash. The midnight raids were amusing. To be ransacked by Bubbles was almost a bragging point. I was like hearing Santa on your roof on Christmas Eve. Now they were sending in lethal force?

The story went national. Animal rights activists had a face to go with their cause. And it was the face of a hippopotamus. People who had never protested anything, people who had missed out on Vietnam, were getting ready to march. Phone calls to newspapers, television stations, and houses of government streamed in.

The assassination of Bubbles was put on hold. There was an emergency meeting. Police met with government officials and animal experts. A new plan was hatched. A trap would be set. A tranquilizer dart would be used. If the tranquilizer didn't work, a dozen armed police would be ready to finish the hippo off.

I remember that day. I was doing children's theater with the Twelfth Night Repertory Company. We were driving in a carpool to our first school. All we could talk about was Bubbles. The subject touched on some archetypal nerve connected to our metaphoric midbrain. That responsible people would shoot Bubbles as a first option chilled us like the witch in *Snow White*.

Memories of Davy Crockett and the abusive Disney Corporation hung in the air. Could such horrors be possible in a good world? I was the voice of optimism. I told my friends in the car, "Things like that don't happen. The animal park people and the zoo people are in charge. It was on the news. They'll use a tranquilizer dart."

Just the thought of a tranquilizer dart gave us comfort. All of us had grown up with Marlin Perkins and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Jim Fowler often used the tranquilizer dart. It was a good thing. He used it to relocate wild pigs that were tearing up a farm in Borneo. Once he used it to get a Bengal tiger to the animal dentist. It was about as close to a sure thing as exists in this world. Bubbles would be fine.

In San Diego the trap was set. A pile of garbage was laid out by the bank of the swamp. Animal control officers stood poised with dart guns a few yards away. Behind them, cops, armed with high-powered rifles.

In Los Angeles we performed at our first school. We ran out to the car afterward to hear the news. Nothing. No word of Bubbles.

The day wore on. No sightings. Not a word on the radio. I got home. My girlfriend, Beth, was in the bedroom switching channels for any updates. We sat on the bed and held hands fixated on the television screen. Finally, there was a news break in the early evening. Bubbles was dead.

My heart stopped. I went numb. Beth exploded into tears. I stared at the set stupidly. I was so sick and so sad. I couldn't even cry. I held my pillow and watched the report.

Bubbles was not shot by the police. She came out of the water and was shot by a zookeeper with

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