

# 40 Years in the Desert

OK, I get it. It's not really Vol. 13, I missed deadline by over 6 bloody months. **Me Bad**

Volume 13  
Number 4

The Further Adventures of Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer

As always, I will start with contact details for the Saroff Brood™. **We have moved.** We are now at 123 Embleton Road, Owings Mills, MD 21117, and (410)356-1046. Our emails remain msaroff@pobox.com for me and sindara@pobox.com for Sharon<sup>1</sup>. My home page is <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/>. Back issues are online at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/40/>.

## Keep Him Away from Toilet Paper, Because He'll Sign Anything<sup>2</sup>

We've joined the ranks of the massively indebted<sup>3</sup> when we bought a house, a cozy<sup>4</sup> 3 bedroom rancher with a finished basement in October of 2004. It's one heck of an anniversary gift<sup>5</sup>.

Closings involve a **lot** signatures. By the end, if I had been given a document ceding our house to the King of Spain, I would have signed it. Considering **that** bit of history<sup>6</sup>, it means that my hand was operating independent of higher order brain functions<sup>8</sup>.

While closing was a chore, house shopping is fun. We went to a number of neighborhoods, Greenspring, Randallstown, and Owings Mills, with sportscaster turned realtor John Buren.

We liked it enough that we later dropped in on an open house for a historic (100+ year old) residence just for kicks<sup>9</sup>.

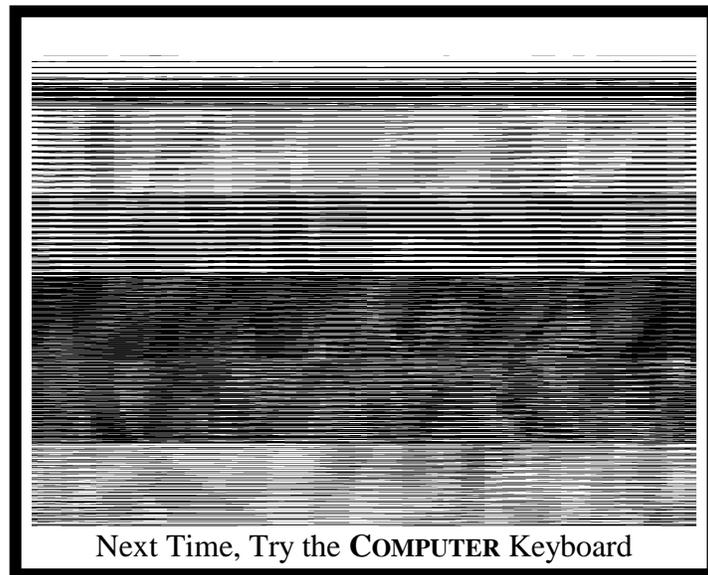
## Christopher Columbus Can Kiss My ..., Or Adventures in Moving.

I had to dispose of recyclables, so I went to the city recycling station, which was closed for Columbus day. Needless to say, my feelings towards Columbus at that moment required using colloquial components of Anglo Saxon linguistic components of English.

It's at moments like this that I seriously consider the kerosene and a lit match method of moving. I still vividly recall my feelings of exultation when our garage flooded in Texas<sup>10</sup> and we had to throw away many boxes of sodden detritus of life experience.

## My New 'Hood

We have moved to Owings Mills to a mixed (20-40% minority) neighborhood, within walking distance of the Timber Grove elementary school and a small synagogue, though we generally drive to one that's about two miles away, and not as black hat<sup>11</sup>.



We (me) are more comfortable there, but my mother-in-law can visit, and walk to shul as is her custom.

Natalie has become friends with two girls, one living next door, and the other living 4 houses down, Megan and Jordan, and Charlie is friends with a child who lives two houses down, Bryan.

## The Year of the Bug

In the spring of 2004, as they do every 17 years, the Cicadas emerge in Maryland and the Eastern US.

It's an adolescence sucking tree roots, then a frenzy of mating, so loud that it threatens damage to your hearing. It's like college freshmen on Spring break, and at the end, the piles of bodies on the ground made it impossible to avoid stepping on them, yet another eerie parallel to the Spring Break

Of course, the college students will generally moan and complain in response to being trod upon, while the dead insects only make a sickening high pitched crunch.

## Being a Parent Means

Saying things that you would never have believed would ever come out of your mouth.

The most recent example came at dinner time<sup>12</sup>, when the kids were eating dinner **TOO** enthusiastically. Between the sounds of gnashing molars and what can only as animal noises, it was a spectacle resembling lions dining on a kill on the savannah.

Exasperated, I said, "It's OK to make noise when you eat, but only human noises. **It's not buffet time at the Wildebeest.**"

**"The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."**

-- *Anatole France*

<sup>1</sup> Love of my life, light of the cosmos, **SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED**, my wife.

<sup>2</sup> Said of President of the Weimar republic, Paul von Hindenburg during his dotage. As president he had significant of power, but would put his pen to anything in front of him, which largely allowed Chancellor Hitler to seize power.

<sup>3</sup> 30 years fixed at 5.75%.

<sup>4</sup> At least when you consider all the crap that Sharon<sup>1</sup> and I have accumulated in our lives, the phrase "cozy" could apply to Versailles.

<sup>5</sup> We were married on October 30, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> The expulsion of the Jews from Spain by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av<sup>7</sup>, 1492.

<sup>7</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, aka Tisha b'Av, is the most somber of Jewish holidays. It recalls a number of disasters in Jewish history, the condemnation of the generation of Jews who came out of Egypt die in the wandering in the desert for 40 years (My newsletter is named for the wandering engendered by this event), the destruction of 1<sup>st</sup> temple by Babylonians in 586 BCE, the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple by the Romans in 70 CE, Ferdinand's edict of expulsion<sup>8</sup>, the start of the World War I, the death of Moses, Edwards expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, and the declaration of the Crusades by Pope Urban II in 1095. (Note to self: avoid initiating any major projects on Tisha b'Av).

<sup>8</sup> Not infrequently, the same has been suggested about my mouth.

<sup>9</sup> Which makes us any open house holder's 2<sup>nd</sup> worst nightmare (number one steals items from the house).

<sup>10</sup> Which, upon inspection of the archives, I realize this incident never made into an issue of *40 Years in the Desert*. My Apologies.

<sup>11</sup> A term referring to extremely Orthodox Jews. It comes from the fact that most of them wear black hats, typically Fedoras, as a part of their every day wear.

<sup>12</sup> Which, along with bath time, creates the most "I said what?" moments as a parent.

## Brownie, You're Doing a Heck Of a Job<sup>13</sup>

'Nuff said.

## Kids Educational/Legal Travails

Both kids have learning disabilities. Natalie has a visual processing problem which causes reading difficulties, and Charlie has Asperger's Syndrome, an Autism spectrum disorder, that tends to manifest itself behaviorally

The private religious schools were unwilling and unable to address this, so we placed our kids in public schools<sup>16</sup>, and into the Individualized Educational Program (IEP<sup>17</sup>) process designed to ensure that children with disabilities get appropriate services.

Notwithstanding the fact that my wife is a professional in the field whose knowledge of the law matches, and in some cases exceeds that of lawyers specializing in disability law, administrators, still refuse to **follow** the law, so we to "lawyer up" in order to get the basic services and testing that the law requires.

For all the jokes that are made about Lawyers, our experiences of lawyers on both sides proved to be remarkably pleasant, if pricey. They are the rational people in the room. Since we **chose to** listen to our lawyer, and the school staff **had to** listen to theirs, so we ended up with solutions that work.

Baltimore County is now spending 5 to 10 times as much for a private placement for Charlie as they would have if they had provided adequate services at Timber Grove, because he ended up in a private placement at the Forbush school in Towson. But since Charlie is the beneficiary of their incompetence, I can sleep at night.

## Sharon's Foray Into Private Practice

Sharon<sup>1</sup> left her job with the Baltimore County School system, mainly for the reasons above, and hung out a shingle.

She provides testing, tutoring, and advocacy for special needs students. See <http://www.mydisabilityresource.com/>.

## The Criminal Justice System

As you may recall in the last issue, I was assaulted by someone, and I testified at his trial.

The courtroom environment, particularly before the Judge arrived was interesting. There was actually a sort of a locker room camaraderie between the police, bailiffs, and clerks.

There were prosecutions dropped because the officer in question had been called up to serve in Iraq. Thanks, Ralph<sup>18</sup>.

The charges were dismissed by the judge, who saw it as just a dispute over a parking space. It might have been a bit different if the prior *nolo* plea to assault had been brought up by the prosecution, but a punch is not something that garners a lot of resources in the context of law enforcement in the city of Baltimore.

He had to get a lawyer, which cost him a significant amount of money, which may dissuade him from doing this a **third** time.

**Q:** Very few people wake up in the morning and say, "I'm going to do some evil today."

**George Clooney:** Yeah, I think they believe in what they're doing and that they're going to get seventy virgins after they die -- but, really, who wants seventy virgins? I want eight pros.

-- *The Rolling Stone Interview*<sup>15</sup>

## You Actually Win Some

You may recall two of our cats died despite significant veterinary intervention<sup>19</sup>. This time, we "won" one. Lavi survived Hepatic Lipidosis<sup>20</sup> brought on by rapid weight loss.

I got some generic brand cat food on sale. Lavi hated the food, and dropped weight rapidly. It seemed a good thing, as Lavi had gotten chubby, but after a month, I noticed her spine was sticking out like a fence post. She had stopped eating, even when we tried wet food, though her brother was enough of that for two cats.

Later, I was looking at her stomach, and the skin was the color of a 6 day old bruise.<sup>21</sup> She had Jaundice, so we took her to the vet, and who put in a feeding tube. We fed her a mixture of cat food, nutrients, and the feline baby formula for three weeks.

Then she pulled out her feeding tube. We called the vet, and they said, "See if she eats. If she doesn't bring her in Sunday".

Lavi then proceeded to dive face first into the dry cat food with the ferocity of Garfield tucking into a pan of lasagna.

She is healthier now than before her illness. She is more active and mobile, her descent into meatloaf catdom arrested by the weight loss.

## I've Been Calling My Cat What?????

For those of you who have been reading *40 Years in the Desert*, you know that I have two cats, Lavi, Hebrew for young lion, and Tudza, Chinese for rabbit.

The other day I was talking to my next door neighbor, a military intelligence officer who shipped off to Iraq this January<sup>22</sup> with

language training in Chinese about my cats, and he found Tudza's name amusing. It seems that *Tudza* is Chinese slang for gay, something that my sister-in-law never mentioned when I first asked her for the Chinese word for "rabbit".

## The World's Biggest Stoner

I just exposed my cats to catnip in its pure form (organic, in a bag) for the first time. The typical reaction to their first exposure is to sniff, get the "Ohh...This looks interesting" expression on their face, and start consuming, followed by intoxication.

This was true of Lavi, but Tudza went after the stuff with the enthusiasm of George W. Bush going after a 5<sup>th</sup> of Jack Daniels<sup>23</sup>. When I opened the bag when he was on my lap, and immediately his head was deep in the bag and he was **devouring** the stuff.

I made a toy with some Catnip and an old sock. He spent the weekend with around it, his pupils the size of saucers.

Lavi enjoyed it too, though her access was limited, because Tudza was seriously Bogarting<sup>24</sup> the sock.

I think that it's his name. He doesn't care about sexual preference, it's that someone managed to pull a practical joke on him.

It's undoubtedly a cat thing that us mere mortals cannot possibly hope to comprehend.

<sup>13</sup> George W. Bush, to Michael Brown<sup>13</sup>, failed head of FEMA, formerly failed Arabian Horse fancier, on his performance regarding of Hurricane Katrina. People were still dying because at that time.

<sup>14</sup> What is even **more** frightening about this is that subsequent reporting showed that Mr. Brown was actually the most competent and conscientious person involved in the whole debacle.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/\\_/id/8957203](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/_/id/8957203)

<sup>16</sup> I'm happy about this. In addition to the money, the social exposure in private religious schools is very limited. My kids will be living in a world largely populated by non-Jews, and I think that they need to grow up in this world too.

<sup>17</sup> This is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regarding Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for children with disabilities. (<http://www.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/index.html>)

<sup>18</sup> Nader that is.

<sup>19</sup> Both Elryn and Bronwyn died of kidney failure (see volumes 10 and 11 of *40 Years in the Desert*) after significant medical interventions.

<sup>20</sup> Fatty Liver.

<sup>21</sup> Jaundice looks like an old bruise because old bruises are colored by Bilirubin, a blood pigment that hangs around longer than Hemoglobin, and an accumulation of Bilirubin is associated with liver problems.

<sup>22</sup> He returned, apparently no worse for the wear, this May.

<sup>23</sup> You can argue that it's not that mark of a good person to mock someone's addictions, but I've never claimed to be a good person.

<sup>24</sup> This term actually comes from pot smoking. When more than one person is sharing a joint, and one of them is taking more than his share, the rejoinder is "Hey, don't Bogart<sup>25</sup> that joint!".

<sup>25</sup> This refers to someone taking excessive hits on a Marijuana joint, and is itself derived from Humphrey Bogart's ever present cigarette in life and on film.

## People Have Wondered Why I Haven't Been Brewing for a While

### I am the Abramoff Scandal

And it seems a number of other Republican villainies.

I have a number of ties to über lobbyist and confessed felon Jack Abramoff, our babysitter goes to the same school as his daughter, and his wife works at there too.

Additionally, "Staffer A" in Abramhoff's plea deal, is Tony C. Rudy, who was a classmate of mine, and a fellow SGA senator, at U.Mass, who has now pled guilty to federal conspiracy charges.

Despite our differences, we were social, though I once called a motion of his "#@&ing stupid" on the floor of the SGA senate.

At this rate, I'm going to be asking Tudza to stop Bogarting the sock. I need something<sup>26</sup> just to deal with this.

I am also connected to the horrific spectacle that was the Terri Schiavo<sup>27</sup> affair, where the political opportunism of Jeb Bush, his idiot brother, and the rest of the usual suspects simply leaves me with a stunned expression on my face resembling that of a cow that has just stepped on its own udder. I am amazed at how much this offends me. I wasn't this upset by the right's making of political hay over the deaths of over three thousand people on 9-11, nor am I as upset with the deaths of over 2200 US Servicemen, and as many as one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians<sup>28</sup>.

Something is to be wrong with me when a nasty family spat over the end of life offends me more than the deaths of thousands.

But wait, there's more: Brian Darling, the counsel for Senator Mel Martinez (R-Taliban) wrote the infamous "Schiavo Memo" about maximizing political advantage out of her plight, is **ALSO** a former right wing SGA senator that I served with<sup>30</sup>.

### Trick or Treating

One of the joys of moving to a new neighborhood is that I can take the kids trick-or-treating, the old neighborhood was **very** black hat<sup>11</sup>, and it really wasn't possible to trick or treat there.

Natalie dressed up as a dead/spectral rock and roller, and Charlie dressed up as a wizard. Much fun was had by all.

### Talk About Being a Slow Learner

In February 1985, I went to my first science fiction convention. In October, I ran a fiction convention, NotJustAnother<sup>1</sup> Con (NJAC). I did it again in 1986, and then Arisia in 1990 and 1991.

I've now realized that **I don't like science fiction conven-**

**tions.** When I go to a con, I have either work, or self medicated.<sup>31</sup>

So it took 20 years to realize that I hated my hobby/obsession, and I've found the community rather unremarkable.<sup>32</sup> It is time to cut my losses.

So, following a **remarkably unpleasant**<sup>33</sup> exchange with Arisia, Incorporated and the for-profit database vendor to whom they have outsourced their attendance and mailing list management, I had my information, and that of my wife and children, expunged from the Arisia database. I'm done.

Next time I think about calling someone "#@&ing stupid", perhaps this experience will make me a bit kinder.<sup>34</sup>

### Passings

Max Fessel, Sharon's great uncle, Jan 16, 2006, Age 102.

Jack Chalker, author and guest of honor at Arisia 1991, died on Feb. 11, 2005, of congestive heart and kidney failure, age 61.

### Well, at Least He's Honest

The former V.P. & GM of BAE Ground Systems Division put out periodic memos. When discussing the impacts of the war and Katrina on the budget process and new systems procurement, he was honest, and said the following, "Folks - especially those fully engaged in FCS - my advice as to the right way to approach concerns like this is to remain individually well-informed but certainly don't lay awake at night, and above all stay ready to exploit the new opportunities that such challenges create."

This translates to, "Update your resume, dude."

I'm missing the days when executives lied to their employees.

### Yes Virginia, there is a Panty Clause<sup>35</sup>

*Attention, parents: The state of Virginia understands that you lead busy lives, but lawmakers are confident that you will be only too happy to tack just one more task onto your morning routine -- a quick pants check as the kids head out the door.*

*The House of Delegates voted 60 to 34 Tuesday to impose a \$50 fine on anyone found wearing pants low enough that a substantial portion of undergarments is showing. Note the vote: It wasn't even close.*

I am glad that I'm living across the of the Potomac, where the phrase "Republican dominated legislature" applies to **other** states.

<sup>26</sup> Please send Slivovitz, a plum brandy favored in Slavic Europe which originated in the Balkans, comes to mind.

<sup>27</sup> See "Majikthise : Lies Terri Schiavo's parents told me" at [http://majikthise.typepad.com/majikthise\\_/2005/03/debunking\\_lies\\_.html](http://majikthise.typepad.com/majikthise_/2005/03/debunking_lies_.html).

<sup>28</sup> See "100,000 Iraqi civilians dead, says study" from *The Graunad*<sup>29</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,1338749,00.html>.

<sup>29</sup> That's actually *The Guardian*, formerly *The Manchester Guardian*, a paper in the UK. It got the nickname because of their predilection for egregious typographical errors.

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most bizarre fact about all this was that I was, as a Mondale Democrat, firmly in the "conservative" wing of the SGA Senate, compared to the "US Out of North America" crowd on the left. It's just that these guys were coming from somewhere to the right of the planet Skaro.

<sup>31</sup> Mammoth, some would say legendary drunks.

<sup>32</sup> Which anyone who has ever discussed SF Fans with me knows.

<sup>33</sup> What part of "remove me from the list" is so hard to understand? Needless to say, this Further justified my sense of ambivalence toward science fiction fans.

<sup>34</sup> Nope. I'll still judge them harshly. Let's be honest here. I'm going to be calling people who do stupid things while I still have two brain cells left to rub together.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12612-2005Feb9.html>

## Sauce for the Gander

Or the chicken, or the lamb, or the beef.

In 2004, I played sous chef<sup>36</sup> for Sharon<sup>1</sup> at *Trial by Fire*, a Medieval camp cooking competition that our local SCA<sup>38</sup> group puts on. In 2005, encouraged by exposure to Alton Brown<sup>39</sup>, I decided to compete.

My performance was less than stellar. The pottage was bland, and my smoked barbecue lamb was nearly raw. I screwed up my fire management, though using stems and leaves from fresh Rosemary to flavor the smoke, and the lamb, worked out very nicely after we got home, and put the lamb in the oven for a couple of hours at 250°F wrapped in foil after we got home.

Here is my plum barbecue sauce, where I replaced tomato with plum, and generally<sup>40</sup> avoided capsicum peppers, because they are a new world crop.

### Ingredients:

1½ C Plums, Finely chopped  
¾ C White Onion, Finely Chopped  
4, TBSP Garlic, Minced  
1, TBSP, Yellow Mustard Seed, Ground  
1 TBSP Brown Mustard Seed, Ground  
8 Tsp Apple Cider Vinegar  
8 TBSP Dark Brown Sugar  
4 TBSP Molasses, I use black strap molasses  
2 TBSP Rosemary Chopped, fresh. (This is lamb specific)  
¼ Tsp White Pepper  
1 Tsp Ground Paprika  
Vegetable Oil, As needed for sautéing the aromatics  
Water, as needed.  
Pinch Salt

Take the 1½ C of chopped plums and put in pot and just cover with water. Bring to boil, then turn down to medium simmer., then add sugar and molasses, stirring occasionally until the plums have become the consistency of apple sauce.

While this cooking, lightly oil a pan, and take the Onions,



We are the Saroffs, and We **WILL** Get Medieval on You

This Spot  
Left for  
Mailing  
Sticker

Garlic, and Rosemary, and cook until soft and aromatic.

Once the plums are reduced to sauce, add onions, garlic, rosemary, vinegar, mustard, Paprika, and pepper to pot and simmer until all onions soften and turn to mush, and most of the sharpness of the vinegar has gone away.

This is typically about ½ hour, but the process can be accelerated by use of a wand blender.

Taste it. If you want more hot, add white pepper or other hots; more sweet, sugar; more "coffee" overtones more molasses; more tartness, more vinegar.

Brush on meat during cooking, or keep separate for use after cooking<sup>41</sup>. If you are smoking the meat, you probably want to leave the sauce off for at least the first 30 minutes, and then apply lightly about every half hour.

Remember, if you can't see the meat, neither can the smoke.

That's about it for now, but stay tuned for the further adventures of *Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer*.

<sup>36</sup> Literally, it means second chef, and performs most of the production duties in a restaurant to free the chief chef to perform more administrative functions, such as menu planning, and dealing with vendors<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> In my case, I was less assistant chef than I was chief gopher, chopping things, opening packages, and tending the fire.

<sup>38</sup> Society for Creative Anachronism, a group that does medieval "living history".

<sup>39</sup> He is the **GEEK** God of cooking. He has a show on the Food Network called *Good Eats* is a fascinating exercise on cooking techniques, and the complex science (mostly Chemistry) involved the preparation of foods.

<sup>40</sup> To be fair, I did include Paprika, which is a capsicum pepper, but barbecue sauce without Paprika is just not right. Besides, we have historical records of the Turks forcing the Hungarians to grow Paprika for them in the late 1500s.

<sup>41</sup> This is a matter of significant disputation in the barbecue world as to whether you apply the sauce during or after cooking, with differences sometimes taking on the outward manifestations of Jihad. I'm inclined to put in on in the last 30-60 minutes and finish at a relatively high temperature to caramelize the sugars.

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