

40 Years in the Desert

Volume 10
Number 1

The Further Adventures of Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer

As always, I will start with contact details for the Saroff Brood™. Our address and phone number are still the same: 3702 Labyrinth Road, Baltimore, MD 21215, and (410)585-1508. Our emails remain msaroff@pobox.com for me and sindara@pobox.com for Sharon¹. As always, my home page is <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/>. Back issues are online at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/40/>.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Natalie has turned 5, and has moved from Ner Tamid Montessori preschool to Kindergarten at Rambam, a Jewish K-12 school, while Charlie has moved up one class at the preschool.

Charlie is a whiz with letters for a 3 year old, being able to identify all the letters in English and Hebrew, and Natalie is doing well with them too, though it looks like she may have some auditory processing issues, as she has difficulties in putting the sounds together and doing things like rhyming.

Natalie has an aptitude for music, and is fascinated by a friend's harp². I want her to learn the bagpipes, as she would be a lead pipe cinch to be one of the top 20 girl Jewish bagpipers in Maryland³.

And on a note that goes straight from the musical into the twilight zone, when we have problems getting Natalie to answer when we call her, we get her to respond by saying, "Earth to Natalie" twice. When we do this, she notices us.

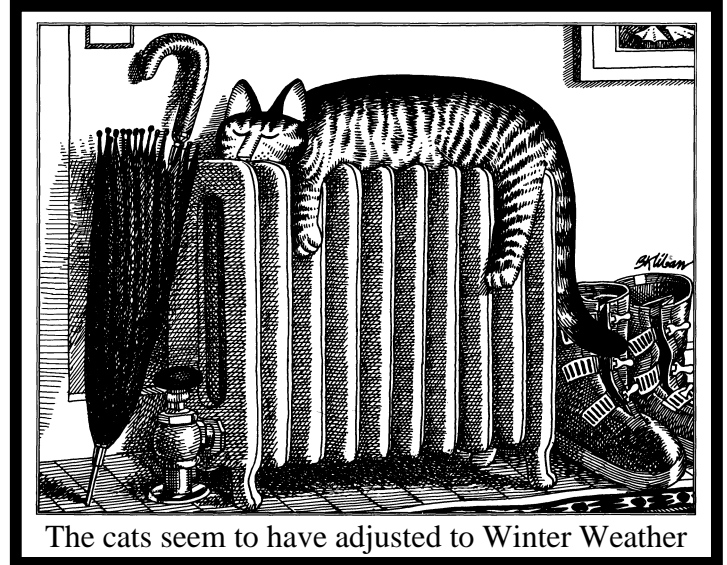
This is spooky because my family has been doing this to me for years, but my daughter has never been exposed to this phenomenon. Genetics are truly an odd thing.

In Which Our Hero Wanders Aimlessly, and Sharon¹ Lands on Her Feet

This has not been a good year to be a contractor. I've been through three contracts, and about 6 months without work.

After I finished up at Raytheon⁴, I secured a contract with a battery manufacturer called Saft, America⁵, in Cockeysville, MD, that specializes in advanced battery technology⁶.

They brought on a number of contractors with the idea that



The cats seem to have adjusted to Winter Weather

they might make permanent offers at a later date, but the contract rate was low, so I was not interested. I don't believe in "workplace intangibles". If they underpay you, then you are not valued as an employee⁷, so I did what any good entrepreneurial American does, I updated my resume. I also parked and ate my lunch in my car and called employment agencies on my cell phone⁸.

By not being part of the lunch crowd, they got the impression that I was a short timer, so when the backlog of work was finished, so was I.

For the next 4 months, I enjoyed the Shrub⁹ depression while spending about 8 hours a day on the phone calling my 800+ employment contacts¹⁰ before my perseverance paid off.

A number of people that I know have been out of work for over a year in this economy.

This economy isn't bad for everyone, of course. It's a boon for the very wealthy, who find it easier to get decent domestic help that know their place. This explains why the economy is not a priority for the Republican National Committee¹¹.

By dint of regularly calling my 800+ contacts and generally making a minor pest of myself, I landed a job with EG&G Ocean Systems in Ijamsville, MD¹² working on an air droppable soil sampling system.

The idea is that the system would overfly a suspected weapons site, and drop the probe which would return a small soil sample

A modern conservative is engaged in one of man's oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is, the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness.

-- John Kenneth Galbraith

¹ Love of my life, light of the cosmos, SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED, my wife.

² Remarkably enough for a 5 year old, when she got the chance to try playing she instinctively assumed the proper hand position, as opposed to doing the "claw thing".

³ For some reason, my wife threatens me with serious bodily harm whenever I bring up bagpipes.

⁴ See the last issue. My position with Raytheon ended in December, 2001. Of course, if I'm sending this to you, you are already getting that issue at the same time, as I've procrastinated about sending out the last issue.

⁵ The parent company is French.

⁶ Lithium Ion (LiIon) and Nickel Metal Hydride (NiMH) batteries, which provide significantly higher performance than the Lead Acid batteries one finds in most cars.

⁷ This is not as absolute as it sounds. I figure in the value of the benefits when making a decision. Additionally, Saft just felt funny. Management had a problem with their engineers talking to each other while they were working, and while I understand concerns about excessive water cooler talk, at Saft, it also included engineers talking out problems with each other, which is counterproductive, as this is how engineers work out problems.

⁸ The omission of my cell phone number from our contact information is intentional. Incoming calls count against my minute quota. In any case, I check my voice mail on my land line regularly.

⁹ A "Shrub" is a little Bush. Molly Ivins coined the term to refer to GW Bush.

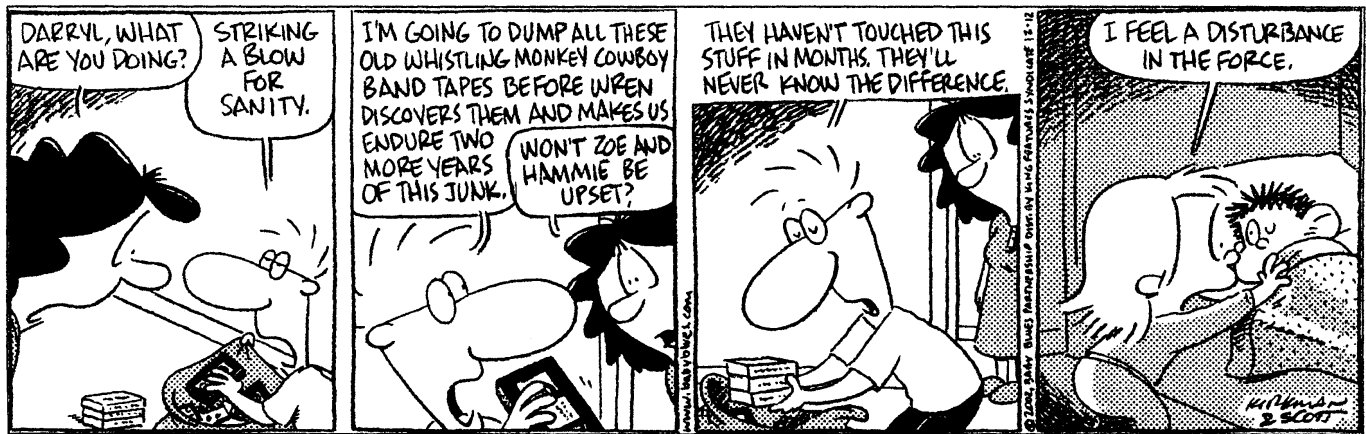
¹⁰ I have about 1,100 employment contacts, but I only make phone calls to the ones that are either local or have toll free numbers. The rest I use email to touch base with. Never underestimate the power of sheer bloody mindedness.

¹¹ Of course, the RNC is has more pressing concerns, what with race baiting and selling outs to the pharmaceutical industry, so they are too busy to worry about the well being of the average American. So much venality, so little time.

¹² Pretty much the middle of nowhere in Maryland. It's at least 10 miles from any decent Chinese restaurant¹³.

¹³ I have a theory that posits that the level of social development of an area is in some manner proportional to the availability of Pot Stickers. I will test this one day by looking for the best Chinese restaurant in Bozeman, Montana.

BABY BLUES KIRKMAN & SCOTT



Been there, done that, as have all parents

back to the launching aircraft, which is taken to a lab.

Unfortunately, the customer decided not to pursue full development of the system, so I was done after 6 weeks. I think the EG&G's customer realized that the US government, was not interested in collecting real data. The "chicken hawk" set are rather too eager to invade ... everywhere ... and they can't let something as trivial as the facts get in the way of their war.

I got lucky this time, and found a new position after only one week¹⁴, I found a contract working on the Marine Corps new amphibious landing vehicle, the Advanced Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAAV) at General Dynamics in Woodbridge, Virginia.

The AAAV will replace the existing vehicle, the AAV7A1. It has more fire power (30mm cannon vs. .50 Cal machinegun), greater water speed and range (20+ Knots and 25+ Nautical miles vs. 5 knots and 2 nautical miles), better armor, and sufficient land mobility to keep up with M1A1 tanks¹⁵.

There is a striking resemblance between the AAAV and the Char B, a late 1930s heavy tank (and a fairly good design at that) deployed with astonishing ineptitude by the French Army against the Wehrmacht in 1940 which I find rather amusing.

I've been assigned to work as the Mobility Group's (engine, transmission, land and water propulsion) liaison with prognostics.

Prognostics is an extension of preventative maintenance, where incidents with the component, such as a water jet ingesting a 400 pound Tuna¹⁶, are recorded and used to determine how this effects system life. By servicing parts on actual wear and tear, as opposed to rigid schedules, you can significantly reduce maintenance cost.

Sharon¹ didn't have her contract renewed at Beth Tfiloh high school. They were looking more for someone to sell their special education services than to actually develop these services.

Sharon¹ landed on her feet. She found a job with Care

Resources, a special ed consulting firm. She works as an IEP manager in the Baltimore City Schools, and has traded up in pay and benefits¹⁷.

Everyone Talks About the Weather, but No One Ever Does Anything About It

Unlike the 2001-02 winter which was unseasonably warm, with only a very brief cold snap (about 20°F) and a dusting of snow in January, we have had real Winter weather this year with 6 inches of snow in Baltimore in early December. Charlie and Natalie made their first snowman¹⁸.

Sharon¹ found it annoying, but I loved it, even with a 75 mile and three hour commute²⁰ that day.

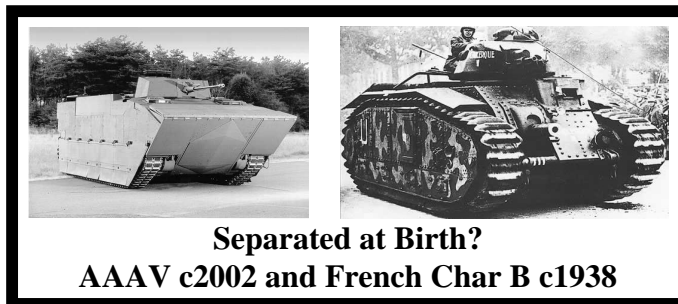
We also got a couple of inches of snow on December 25, and it looks like the drought this area has resolved itself.

In Which the Author Discusses Producing This Bit of Foolscap

I started doing this with photocopies, and then went to offset printing because I've included photos and 6 point footnotes. The quality of laser printers have improved to the point where they have quality nearly that of offset printing, and for small print runs, they are more flexible, and much cheaper so I've rented an HP 8150, which was what was available from rental firms, for this run.

Our old printer²¹ is 7 years old now, and while it still soldiers on reliably in it's own 300dpi 4PPM way, it's not long for this world, if just consumables are now a two week back order.

We are considering getting a Postscript® printer that handles B-sized paper, and hopefully has a reliable envelope feed, so we are looking for recommendations.²³



Separated at Birth?
AAAV c2002 and French Char B c1938

¹⁴ And a short week at that, as it was Thanksgiving week.

¹⁵ If you are wondering, I pulled this information off the Marine Corps web page at <http://www.aav.usmc.mil>, so it's all public information. I'm not particularly interested in being declared an enemy combatant by John Ashcroft.

¹⁶ I think that this must qualify as the world's most expensive sushi machine.

¹⁷ Sharon¹ maintains that teaching is not a profession well suited to job hopping. Based on her experience, I'm not so sure about that.

¹⁸ Note that the use of the term "snowman" is not particularly accurate. It was more of an abstract snow sculpture that seemed to come from the mind of H.R. Giger¹⁹, and it got even more disturbing as it melted.

¹⁹ H.R. Giger is a Swiss artist and sculptor who is known for creating profoundly disturbing art. His best known creation, at least in popular culture, is that he was the designer who created the Alien for the movie of the same name.

²⁰ The commute is a killer, so I'm looking at mass transit to cover my commute to Woodbridge.

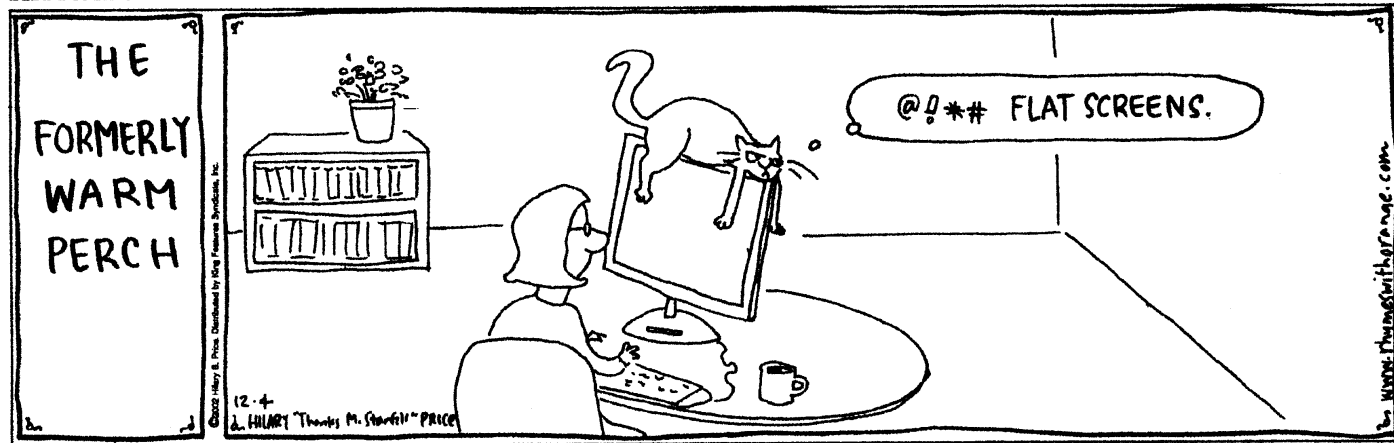
²¹ A Panasonic KX-P5400 LED²² side writer (it stands vertically, like a tower PC, and paper goes in its side).

²² Yes, I know that without a laser, it's not really a laser jet printer, but it's a simply shorthand for describing a printer that uses Xerography to fuse toner to paper.

²³ I'm trying to avoid HP²⁴ because of their unitary toner cartridge and drum. One of the nice things about the old Panasonic is the separate toner cartridge, which reduces the cost of consumables. Additionally, when it says to replace the drum, I just crack open the drum, and dump the spent toner, and we're ready to go. We get about ten times the recommended life out of a drum by doing this. You replace the drum when the print quality starts to get streaky.

²⁴ Most particularly, not the HP 8150. It's a decent printer, but at 29-1/2" h x 46-3/4" w x 35" d with a weight of 112 pounds, and a duty cycle of 150,000 pages per month, it's more LOT printer than we need.

RHYMES WITH ORANGE HILARY PRICE



Why Cats Are Luddites

In my last issue, I did some (very) preliminary work setting thoughts to paper well before the last two months of the year, and when I went back in November to look at what I had done, I noticed that I had information that I would not have remembered if I had waited till year's end. Now I'm trying to put down notes more regularly. This should give a better picture of what happens throughout the year, as opposed to just the year's end²⁵.

You Can't Win for Losing

One of the side effects of my being out of work during the past year was that I had the time to make use of my JCC²⁶ membership and exercise 3-5 times a week.

The immediate result was a **6-7 pound weight gain**.

I'm sick and tired of scaring dolphins when I wear black and white, and if one more person shouts "Free Willie" at me, I'll scream.

Arisia Again

I went to Arisia 2002, and Sharon¹ and I had a great time there. We saw a bunch of old friends. Additionally, my subversive T-shirts²⁷, were the theme for Cris Shuldiner's party there. It seems that the consumption of mass quantities of alcohol improves the marketability of my T-shirts. I sold most of them, and I am in the black on the project to the tune of about \$5.00.

We will be back in Boston for Arisia '03.

Childhood Pleasures Revisited

Stephen, my older brother²⁸ sent us Norton Juster's children's book, *The Phantom Tollbooth* as a Hanukah present for my kids.

Armed with this book, I spent the next two weeks reading the book to Charlie and Natalie.

While the symbolism is more heavy handed than my recollections as a nine year old²⁹, it still holds up very well. I had a much appreciated opportunity to rediscover the book.

In addition to Mr. Juster's wonderful story and characters, I

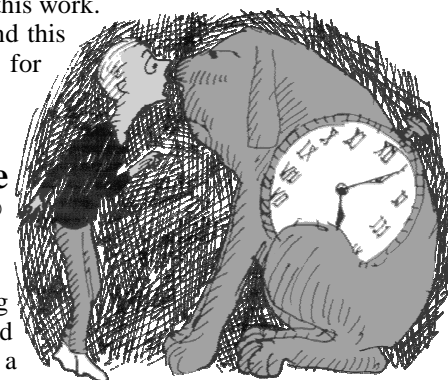
have to mention the role that Jules Feiffer's wonderful illustrations, played in this work.

I highly recommend this as a children's book for adults to reread.

Thanks Stephen.

Exploding the Pop Tarts[®] Myth

While I was going through some old things, I came across a



box of Pop Tarts[®]. It had an expiration date of November, 1999. I have always been told that the two things that would survive the end of the world would be Cockroaches and Pop Tarts[®] in their foil wrappers, so I decided to test this theory.

I can now state with a reasonable degree of assurance that this is not true. Upon opening the wrappers, I determined that the frosting had dissolved, and an odor reminiscent of rubbing alcohol wafted from the package. Even I, who has asked Click and Clack, The Tappet Brothers about the edibility of automotive³⁰ fluids knew better than to taste them.

This test is not truly definitive though, as it was an all-natural Pop Tart[®] clone. In further experiments, I will expose pop tarts to concentrated cosmic rays to see if they develop super powers³².

Milestones

Sharon's Grandmother, Anna Perlman, died this December, she was 92 years old.

Grandma Saroff, age 94, had a mild stroke followed by, or perhaps preceded by, a fall in October. She has recovered nicely³³, but the consensus is that her driving days are now behind her.

²⁵ This additional detail will no doubt come in handy when I'm famous, and I refer to old issues of *40 Years in the Desert* for the purpose of collaborating with a ghost-writer on my fabulously popular memoir.

²⁶ Jewish Community Center

²⁷ See Volume 8, Number 1 of *40 Years in the Desert*. I still have a half a dozen of my Shrub[®] "LIAR" T-shirts available if you are interested.

²⁸ And hairiest of the Saroff clan.

²⁹ Though it is in no way as mind numbingly blatant and literal as I found C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* chronicles when I read them as an adult.

³⁰ I.e. Tom and Ray Magliozzi, the hosts of "Car Talk". I was on their show in 1997 asking about tasting tiny amounts of automotive fluids because I had just freaked out my sister-in-law, Margaret³¹ by moistening a finger tip and touching it to my tongue to identify the source of a spot under Sharon's³² car (it was radiator fluid).

³¹ It's not as difficult to freak her out as one would think. She's a native Minnesotan.

³² Hey, it worked for the *Fantastic Four*, and radioactive spiders are expensive.

³³ She's already driving her children nutso again.

The Rabbi at our synagogue, Ervin Preis, died of bile duct cancer at age 67 on December 21.

On May 7, Tova Pechenick, a free spirit and unabashed flirt that I've known since my UMass undergrad days died at age 36.

Sharon's Cat of 13 years, Bronwyn, died in November of Kidney failure.

On a considerably happier note, albeit one that presages the apocalypse, the most confirmed bachelor in the world, Cris Shuldiner, got married on October 13 to Leah Chiavacci. The wedding was tremendously fun, and I am happy that Cris has found a life partner with the (requisite) poor taste in men that rivals that of the Saroff women³⁴ (particularly Sharon¹).

It's time for a recipe

This recipe is not good for you. It's full of sugar, saturated fats, and cholesterol. Expect nothing less of my grandmother's cheesecake, and it does wonders for the soul.

I got the recipe when I spent a few weeks with her one summer in the late 1970s³⁵.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb Cream Cheese
- 1 lb Pot Cheese (you can substitute dry curd cottage cheese)
- 1 Cup Sour Cream
- 1 Cup Sugar
- 3 tbsp. Corn Starch
- 5 Large Eggs (I generally use large eggs)
- 1 tsp. **REAL** Vanilla (not imitation; read the label)
- Butter
- Graham Crackers

Once you have assembled the ingredients together, do the following:

Separate the 5 eggs, keeping both the yolks and the whites, then beat the egg whites until stiff.

Using a blender³⁶, which works better in my experience than



A Boat Ride in Baltimore's Inner Harbor This Fall

This Spot
Left for
Mailing
Sticker

food processors, add the sour cream and egg yolks. I then slowly add the pot cheese, followed by the cream cheese. You must add the cheeses slowly, a bit at a time, and blend until smooth before adding the next bit. After this, fold in the beaten egg whites, Vanilla, sugar, and corn starch. Blend until the mixture is completely smooth, which can take a **long** time. It's a very thick mixture.

Butter a 12" springform pan, and cover the bottom of the pan with 3/8" of tightly packed Graham cracker crumbs.

Preheat oven to 300°F.

Put mixture in pan and bake for 1-1/2 hours at 300°F, then allow the oven to cool 45 minutes before removing the cake.

I think that it tastes best when chilled in the refrigerator first, and you can top with fruit.

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

³⁴ Once, when asked why she married my father, my stepmother replied that she did so because she, "Wanted a life long project".

³⁵ Damn, I feel old.

³⁶ You could do this by hand, but it would be a Herculean task. I think that you might want to push cheeses through a fine strainer first in order to thin it out for hand work. Heating in a double boiler might also soften up the cheese for mixing. It should be noted that I've never tried **either** of these things in the preparation of the cheesecake, so I make no guarantees. Obviously, if you mix this hot, don't put the eggs in until it has cooled to room temperature.

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED