

Lisa Lieberman.



**Life In A
Small Town**
S E L E C T I O N

**A Bundled Selection of
Articles by Lisa Lieberman
'Life in a Small Town' for The Valley Voice, CA**

Life In A Small Town

By Lisa Lieberman



Life and Death and Everything Else in Between

When I was younger, I used to think that the way life worked was that you were born, you grew up, you got married, you had kids, and you died. But it's not always like this. And even when it is like this, it's still almost never what it's cracked up to be.

This reminds me of something a very good friend of mine used to say. He used to say "We're born alone and we die alone, and anything else that happens in between is a luxury." I've thought about that a lot and I realize what he said was true — that we are born alone, that we do die alone. And no matter how much we have when we die — no matter how much money, how many friends, etc. — when it's time to die, there's no one who can cross over that threshold between life and death but us. And that's a scary thought.

Sometimes I think life is really all about getting ready for death. My very good friend, who died last year, came very close to dying once before he actually died. When he almost died the first time, he went on a long spiritual pilgrimage to the other side of the world. He would have died there on the other side of the world, but his hosts told him it would be very bad luck to die in their home. So, they said, "You can't die here. You have to go home and die", which personally, I thought was a little inhospitable.

When he got back home, I asked my friend how his life changed after he had come so close to death "Well, I try not to expect so much from people anymore. And I try to just to appreciate the little things more." He said he was a lot happier like that. And then he said, "Happiness is being able to make the most out of what you have. Misery is when you make the least out of what you have."

Sometimes I wonder what I would focus on if I knew I was going to die soon. My family and friends would be important, but I think the little things would matter a lot more to me too. Like the feeling of getting out of a mountain river, cold and goose pimply on a hot summer day and lying face down on a hot granite rock and feeling both perfectly warm and perfectly cool at the same time; or the first bite of a hot fudge sundae - sweet, cold creamy ice cream, the bitter/sweet hot fudge, and the crunchy nuts, all wrapped up together in a single spoonful; or that first excited brush stroke you make on the canvas or that first turn on the potter's wheel when you have that first brilliant idea, before you even begin realizing that you can mess the whole thing up.

My dog is dying. The vet told me she only has a few weeks left to live. My dog's on medication, so she's not in any pain. Sometimes I wonder what she'd want to do if she knew she had so little time left. Somehow, I don't think she'd want to do anything different than she does now. She'd want to go for rides in the car; she'd want to go swimming in the river and spend the whole day fetching sticks; she'd want as many treats as she could get; she'd want to continue pretending like she was a lap dog — all 65 pounds of her — and crawl up on my lap on the couch and cuddle with me at night.

My dog, of course, doesn't know that she's dying. She also doesn't know that there's a yesterday or tomorrow. She only knows that there's a today. Sometimes I envy her for that.

(Readers can e-mail Lisa at lisal@thegrid.net.)

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Setting My Own Pace

I have this friend who was a cheerleader in high school and is a world-class athlete. She's one of those happy-go-lucky people who wakes up early in the morning in a good mood with perfect hair. She's the type of person who goes on long runs in 100 plus degree heat and instead of dragging with exhaustion by the time she gets home, she's literally skipping in the air, picking up speed, as if she could go on forever and ever. The best way to describe myself is to say that I'm not her. I don't wake up early in the morning in a good mood with good hair. In fact, I refuse to wake up early in the morning at all, and in fact, rarely make any public appearances before 11 a.m.

One time I went on a backpacking trip with my world-class-athlete friend and several of her equally tough women friends. They promised me that it was going to be an easy to moderate hike, but I should have known better. Seven or eight hours into the hike, with my legs cramping, the straps of my backpack burning into my shoulders, I collapsed on the ground.

"I can't go on any further," I said valiantly. "You go on without me. I don't want to hold you up. I'll just set up camp here and catch up with you when I can."

Well, that's not what really happened. What happened is I collapsed on the ground and hoped they wouldn't leave me behind. My world-class-athlete friend, being the world-class-athlete that she is, dashed off ahead, dropped off her backpack at camp, and heroically rushed back to carry my backpack the rest of the way for me. It was a little embarrassing, but at least I didn't have to have an emergency helicopter fly in to evacuate me from this relatively flat, easy to moderate hiking trail.

The main thing I learned from the trip, was, aside from the fact that I should never go hiking with world-class-athletes, was that if I ever wanted to get anywhere, I was going to have to learn to go at my own pace. When we had first started off on the hike, I had gotten so tired trying to keep up with my friends, that later on, not only couldn't I keep up with them, I couldn't catch up to them without extra help. So, when it was time to go back home, I set out three hours earlier than my friends so I could get a head start and set my own pace. This time I started out more slowly than before. I hoisted my 45 pound backpack onto my back and started walking up the mountainside trail. I took one step at a time. I ignored the towering trees and the beautiful, sweeping mountain views around me and concentrated on picking up one foot and placing it down in front of the foot ahead of it. I stared at the little patch of ground beneath my feet where I was walking and listened to the satisfying gravelly crunch that each footstep made. Just like a recovering alcoholic whose credo is "one day at a time", I thought to myself, if I can just take one more step, I'll make it. I thought of the death marches some of my ancestors had gone on during World War II in Poland, and also imagined that I was, perhaps, some heroic hiker who had broken her ankle on the trail and was struggling back to camp. These visions kept me going for a little while, but eventually I just fell into the rhythm of the steps, not looking ahead of me to see

how far I had to go and not looking behind me to see how far I'd come. It was just one step, then another step, then another step. Eventually, it became a kind of meditation, until I felt like I could go on forever, as long as I didn't look up to see how much or how little progress I had made.

Of course, I didn't go on forever, and my friends did end up passing me up and waiting for me at the parking lot for a couple of hours. But in the end, I made it back, hardly having to think at all about how to do it.

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The Crush

I was having lunch with a good male friend of mine once who had recently broken up with his girlfriend and was absolutely heartbroken. He said to me, "How do you get over a broken heart?" And, I said, "I have no idea."

Then, he said, "OK, well how do you get over a crush?"

"You get to know the person," I said.

We both laughed. But seriously, it's true. I figure that if someone ever has a crush on me, there's nowhere to go in his eyes but downhill. I mean, if someone already thinks I'm the coolest, greatest person in the world, I'm already batting "1,000," and anything I say or do, is just going to ruin it. It's a little bit like wearing a clean, white ironed shirt for the first time. It's so perfect and unclean and unwrinkled, that you know the moment you put it on, you're going to defile it within seconds. So, you think, why put it on?. But then again, you have to ask yourself why you bought the shirt if you weren't going to wear it in the first place.

Maybe that's an unfair assertion to make about all the alleged people out there who have crushes on me. But I know, for me, when I have a crush on someone (or if I know someone has a crush on me), I usually try to do everything I can do avoid getting to know that person because I'm afraid that a) if I get to know that person, I'll no longer have a crush on him or b) even worse, if he gets to know me too well, he'll stop having a crush on me.

I don't know what men think about when they have crushes on women, (and if I did know, it probably wouldn't be fit to print anyway). I do know, though, that when women get crushes, the mental scenarios can become so intricate and complex that when you suddenly find yourself face to face with that person, you don't know what to say, so you think it's better not to say anything.

I have another male friend, with whom I was recently talking about crushes.

"Crushes are debilitating," my friend said. "That's why they're called crushes." This friend of mine is in the midst of writing a book called, "Zen and the Heart of the Lonely Man." The gist of the book is how to deal with the problem of unrequited crushes. My friend's problem, in particular, is that he tends to get lots of crushes on women he wouldn't normally stand a chance with.

So rather than getting discouraged, he's come up with a strategy which forms the basis of his book. The way it goes is like this: "First you find a woman who you fall in love with at first sight, and you get a crush," my friend says. "You imagine what it would be like to be with her. You think about all the good times and how happy you'll be together. Then, you start imagining the inevitable — the problems that come up, the fights, the indecision about breaking up, the agony of breaking up, all the heartache and regret that follows. Then, you imagine that tremendous feeling of relief you have when you can finally say, "Ahh, thank God it's over.

"That way, the whole thing's over and done within five minutes and you don't have to deal with any of the messy emotional drama or heartache. It's nice and clean and efficient."

"All right, that may be true," I said. "But what do you do when it's all over?"

"What else?" he said. "You find someone new to have a crush on."

"And the whole problem starts again," I said.

"Yes, and the whole problem starts again," he said.

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Airplane Etiquette-Wrestling for the Armrest

It seems that for almost every kind of social conflict that arises in life, there are certain kinds of etiquette that people follow:

- If someone cuts you off in traffic, you can honk and try to cut them off in return.
- If you're drunk at a bar and someone looks at you the wrong way, you can start a bar fight.
- If you're an Air Force pilot and a pilot from an enemy country flies into your airspace, you can simply shoot him down.

But the question that arises out of what to do on an airplane when the person sitting next to you is an "armrest hog" has always been a difficult dilemma to solve.

Those people, who don't usually have the privilege of flying first class with its wide, roomy armrests, know what I'm talking about when I say "armrest hog." They know what it means to struggle with trying to divvy up a skinny three-inch armrest (actually designed for one person) with a total stranger.

There are different kinds of "armrest hogs." There are the kind who lay their arm directly over the armrest, making it impossible for you to get the slightest little bit of room. Then, there are the people who battle with you in direct elbow-to-elbow contact over every inch of space.

Then, there are the more serious kind of armrest hogs who not only drape their arms over the entire armrest area, but actually go so far as to leave an elbow sticking out a few inches over the armrest into what is clearly, clearly your personal space. This problem is further exacerbated if you're one of those unfortunate sods sitting in the center of the row between two professional armrest hogs.

I know that dealing with armrest hogs may sound petty, especially in light of wars, famine, etc. but when you're stuck five to 10 hours at a stretch on an airplane, unable to move in between two armrest hogs, dire situations require drastic actions.

The first thing to remember when battling an armrest hog though, is that you can't mince words. With a smoker, you can say, "Can you please stop smoking, you're polluting my air?" With an armrest hog, you can't say to the person next to you, "Can you please move your arm one-and-a-quarter inches over to the right. You're in my personal space."

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No, in situations like this, you have to take action. One of the best things you can do, if you're really having trouble with your seatmate, is to wait until he/she gets up and goes to the bathroom. Then, you can firmly plant your elbow on the armrest and stake your claim. The only problem with that is you have to make a commitment to yourself not to get up to go to the bathroom yourself, in case your seatmate tries to pull some same trick on you. But it may be impractical to sit there holding your bladder, just so you can try to hold on to a few inches of space. So, if all else fails and you've lost the armrest, this might be a good time to reverse strategies. You might, for instance, try befriending your seatmate. And as soon as you stick out your hand to shake your seatmate's and say "nice to meet you", that's when you can firmly plant your arm back on the armrest.

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Everything and Nothing

by Lisa Lieberman

When I first moved to the mountains from the city, many of my family and friends reckoned I'd be high-tailing it out of here before two weeks went by.

"How will you live?" they asked me. "There'll be nothing to do and no one to talk to. There's no movie theaters, no museums, nothing to entertain you."

Now, two years later living up in the mountains, it's not too hard to explain. There's something more special to me about the mountains than any other home I've ever known.

Things are so free and easy here. People wave to each other to say hello and stop in the streets to chat with people they know.

There are no city lights, so the nights are pitch black and sometimes in the summers, I sleep out on my roof top under a blanket of stars as a chorus of crickets sing me to sleep.

In the mornings as the cool blue shafts of early light start turning warm and bright, I wake to the sounds of birds singing sweet melodies, happy simply to be alive instead of cars angrily honking in a hurry to get to work and anxious to finish their drive.

And when I look out from the windows of my little house perched on a hill, I am surrounded by mountains every which way - no shopping malls or rows of concrete block walls to obstruct me.

In my backyard are my old oak

trees which I've grown to know personally.

Way up high in one of the, lives a red-tailed hawk who's built her nest and raised her babies and taught them to fly.

It's really the little things I love.

A new baby calf across the street from my house in the pasture, who while all the other cows are busily munching grass, perks up its ears whenever I walk by, so full of curiosity. A family of deer, proceeding stealthily across my backyard to the river that lies below, wanting to quench their thirst. The older man down the road who brings me greens from his garden, who's always glad to see me.

"But don't you get lonely?" my friends always say.

"Yes, but I have the mountains and the river and the trees to keep the loneliness at bay."

True, life in the country can be hard, rugged and rough. And sometimes you have to be tough. You have to contend with bears and learning to live with your fears and not get the jitters of critters in the night that give you god-awful frights or slinky snake sliders and great big furry-legged spiders - though generally such hazards do little harm. And life in the country does seem to have its own special charm.

Sometimes around dusk, for instance, if you're quiet and you're still and you listen carefully with your heart and your soul and not just your ears, there are certain things that you start to hear. When you lean back and listen to the birds and the rustling leaves from the trees blowing in the cool evening breeze, when before long, the

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frogs start singing their songs and the smells of summer drift through the air, you soon find that you're no longer there, and float above and beyond to a place far away.

So when my friends from the city say, "So tell us again, what it is you do all day?"

"Everything and nothing," I always say.

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Getting Started

by Lisa Lieberman

Getting started is usually the hardest part.

Starting the beginning of the work day when the alarm clock rings at 7 a.m. is hard, especially on Monday mornings when Fridays seems so far away.

The beginnings of parties aren't always so nice, when it seems to take forever to break the ice. The first few minutes of first dates can be an awful lot like breaking in a new pair of shoes. It might feel awkward and new at first, but after some time you may feel you're with an old friend you always knew. As the old saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. The only concession if you do make a bad first impression is that the second impression (if there is one) isn't too likely to be much worse than the first.

Yes, starts can be painful.

Like diving into an icy river. You know it's going to be a cold shock at first, but after the first few seconds you'll be glad you did it. Just

remember that an entire marathon begins with a single inch, although that single inch can be the hardest step to take.

But once you get going, you build up momentum and it's not hard to keep going.

Even still, I have a hard time with starts.

Sometimes I think the hardest part about starts is getting ready to start. Even though I may love mountain bike riding or treks into the wilderness, I don't like the part about pumping up tires, fixing gears, and rummaging around my basement trying to find where I put all my gear.

The other problem I have with starts, I think, stems from my fear of endings.

I often want to know how something ends before I start. (Often, I'll flip to the end of the book before I start to see if I even want to start.)

In the course of things, I have a lot of false starts. In baseball or track races, false starts are serious things, and participants can get disqualified if they have too many false starts.

Sometimes I think I disqualify myself with false starts. I'll start a

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project and then stop. Sometimes I'll stop before I even start because I'm afraid I'll stop. So I never start.

Right now with all the things I have to do, I know I should probably get started or at least start thinking about getting started. That may not be saying much. But at least it's a start.

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By Lisa Lieberman



How to Win Friends and Influence People

I come from a somewhat dysfunctional family, which may account for the fact that some of my social skills are somewhat less than perfect. This was pointed out to me once by one of my former car mechanics. We were in the midst of a particularly rousing row about the state of my car. My main complaint was that my car had been in his shop for two months and he still had no real prognosis of the problem or when it might be fixed. His main complaint about me was that I was talking to him in a somewhat less than professional manner.

So, he pulled me aside one day and said, "Do you have problems like this with other people in your life?"

"What problems?" I said.

"Problems getting along with other people?"

I paused and thought to myself, "What does this car mechanic know about me that I don't know about myself?"

My car mechanic then went on to tell me about this book called, "How to Win Friends and Influence People." The gist of the book, he said, was that people only really want two things in life—they want to be appreciated and to be listened to.

"So, are you telling me that the reason you don't have my car fixed for me is because you feel I'm not listening to you and that I haven't been appreciating you enough?" I said.

"Well, it could be one of the reasons," he said.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I said.

"Maybe you should go home and read that book," he said.

I did read the book and was so inspired I bought copies for most of my family members and my boyfriend at the time, G., who was a disgruntled government worker. The only reason G. hadn't been fired from his job was that the government isn't allowed to get rid of people on the basis of incompetence or simply being in a bad mood.

"Everybody hates me at my job," G. would complain to me. "I don't know what to do about it."

"The whole problem," I would tell G., "is that you spend all your time thinking about what other people are thinking about you. You don't spend any time thinking about what they are actually thinking about."



Big Words

There are people out there who like to use big words. Not just big words. I'm talking about really big words. Big words to try to impress you. Big words that you don't know the meaning of. Big words that make you think the other person is so much smarter than you are because he knows a lot of big words and you don't.

I once had a crush on a guy like this. He was what I jokingly referred to as the "most gorgeous guy in the world" to my friends. This guy was movie star good looking, like Tom Cruise or Rob Lowe. The only thing with this guy was that he wasn't a movie star, and I think his good looks made him feel a little out of place around ordinary people. So, he made a practice of using the biggest, most gigantic word possible in every given conversational situation. His ploy to make people think he was smarter than them generally worked because most people are too embarrassed to admit it when they don't know what a word means.

The problem with pretending to understand something when you don't, is that you have to keep on pretending to understand as the person continues to use more big words to explain the first big word you didn't understand. I'm a little like this when it comes to politics. I have to admit that I am a little ashamed of how little I know of what's really going on in the world, due to the fact that I rarely read a newspaper. So, when hurricane Katrina hit in New Orleans two years ago where my family lives and I had no idea it was happening or when Sen. Barack Obama decided to run for president, and I didn't know who he was, I tried to disguise my ignorance as long as possible.

When it comes to not knowing the meaning of words, I'm never afraid to ask, "What does that mean?" when I don't understand a word. I'm much more curious about finding out what something means than I am afraid of looking like an idiot. I figure the more big words I know, the more ammunition I'll have against other people who try to use big words against me.

There's nothing worse, though, than being caught in the act of using a big word the wrong way by someone smarter than you.

With the most gorgeous guy in the world, I was often trying to catch him in the act of using the wrong word since I was convinced for years that I was much smarter than him.

The only thing was that since he often used words so far beyond my reach (and possibly his), I could never be sure if he was using a word incorrectly or not. Sometimes, in the heat of our passionate flirting bouts, I'd say, "And how do you spell that word?" And he would say, "I don't know," because he never professed to know how to spell the big words; he just thought he knew how to use them.

So, because of his lack of confidence with spelling and my insecurities about the big words, we both remained in the dark.

And, because neither of us knew any better, that enabled us to at least look good to each other.



Endings

One of my editors for a business publication I write for recently called me up and said, "I really like your story, but do you think you could come up with a wittier, catchier ending?"

The story was about growing old and saving for retirement. I wasn't sure what to say.

So, I said, "Endings are hard,"

Then I went on to explain how beginnings are always so much easier than endings.

There's a million ways you can start off with a joke, for instance, and all of them can be good. But if you don't have a good punch line, then the whole joke is completely worthless and it was probably better that you never made the joke in the first place.

My editor had to agree with me. He didn't want to risk me telling a bad joke with no point, so he left the ending as it was.

The more I think about it, the more I realize how true it is that endings are hard. Beginnings are much more fun. The beginning of a relationship is much more fun than the end of a relationship.

Saying good-bye in general, can be hard. Sometimes, I deliberately avoid going to parties because I know when it comes time to say "good-bye" my host won't let me leave. I have a good friend who complains about me all the time.

"You're no fun. You always want to leave early. Why don't you stay out a little longer?" she says whenever we go out.

But I guess that's better than someone being happy when you get ready to say good-bye. And that's just the thing about good-byes. No matter how glad you are to see someone leave, you can never say so. You always have to say, "Oh, don't go" or "I wish you could stay longer".

Sometimes I think the best way to deal with these situations is to avoid saying good-bye altogether. That is, just leave without saying good-bye. Of course, if you do this, you have to leave without saying goodbye to anyone because if you say goodbye to one person, you have to say goodbye to everyone. You have to find the host and say goodbye to her and to the host's husbands and to all the people you met while you were at the party.

If you do get caught up saying goodbye, it's not like you can just walk out the door either. It's like the ending of a joke. You have to say something that will be witty or at the very least,

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Painting Answers To Love's Transitions

by Lisa Lieberman

I just finished painting my house. I found it is a lot like having a relationship. It involves constant change and flux, hopefully for the better but sometimes for the worse. It takes a lot of time, effort, and energy. It means making mistakes and learning how to clean them up along the way. It teaches you how to be creative in working with what you've got, rather than always wishing for something you can't have. Often, it means starting off with an idea, which as you try to follow it through, twists and turns and eventually ends up being something quite different from what you had originally planned.

The first step in painting your house is finding the right color, which isn't always easy. A lot of it's trial and error. You can take color samples home forever, and try them out, but sooner or later you have to choose one.

Choosing is never easy. Everything's so changeable and unpredictable, and even once you've found the color you've

been looking for, you don't know that ten years down the road you'll feel the same way. There are no guarantees. Certainly I know of no paint store that will recompense you for all the money, not to mention the intensive labor you put in, should you change your mind.

These are frightening prospects, and enough to make any artist shake in his shoes and drop his paintbrushes. Yet what are the alternatives? — a house full of empty rooms; nice, easy and relatively trouble free for a short while, but in the end cold, depressing and bare.

So start with a color to your liking. Don't worry if you're not sure. It can take a long time to be sure, (or sure that you're not sure). And while you can make an educated guess as to how a certain color is going to impact your life, you'll never really know until you take the risk of splashing it all over the walls.

Before starting to paint, however, you have to do the necessary preparatory work first, which often is a bore. And while the idea of splashing on fresh, new-smelling paint, is always more exciting than scrubbing down walls, removing old layers of paint, and clearing out cobwebs, prep work simply can't be overlooked.

Just like a snake that's got to shed its skin to change and grow, one's got to

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dispose of what's old and dirty and no longer of use, because if you try to take the easy approach and just cover up what's unpleasant rather than getting rid of it, you'll find that the old dirt has a way of eventually showing through again.

Once you're ready to paint, remember that just like in love, poker, or the stock market, don't risk more than you're willing to lose, i.e., only wear clothing, valuables, jewelry that you don't mind getting a little paint on.

When you actually start painting, you may find that it takes longer than you expected. No matter how much of a hurry you're in, sometimes you just have to be patient because often it takes more than one layer of paint to get the job done right.

Painting can get very frustrating, and sometimes it's best to walk away from it for a while, so you can have some breathing space, and the paint has a chance to dry before you have your next round with it.

Taking little breaks here and there can be a good chance for you to stand back and reflect on what you're doing; what you've done well and what spots need a little more work.

For miscellaneous other problems that come up along the way, just in the same way it's good to have lots of friends around for emergencies, be sure to keep a ready supply of newspapers on hand for when you inevitably make a big spill.

If the worst case scenario occurs during all of this, and you decide that the color you put on was all wrong for you after all, don't despair, thinking that all of your labor was in vain, because at least you will have put on a good base coat, which will help in applying future layers of paint. As the old saying goes, "It's easier to paint over a wall that was painted once than one that has never been painted at all."

Before putting on your new color, though, be sure the old one is thoroughly dry, otherwise the two colors may smear, and that certainly won't look very pleasant. But be careful that you don't get lost in the cycle of woefully staring at your walls and wait too long to put on your new coat, since paintbrushes and other essential tools needed for painting have a funny way of drying up if you don't use them frequently enough.

No matter what you do, though, bear

in mind that you never really finish. Even when everything seems like it's going along just right, there's always little splotches of dirt and wear and tear that require little touch-ups here and there, and even major overhauls as the years go by. Now that I've finished painting, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I'll probably have to redecorate the whole house.

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The Drive-By

People say you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of car they drive. I say you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of cars they notice. When I first moved to Three Rivers, I remember this guy who swaggered up to me at the bar and said, "I can tell by the sound of the tire squealing on your front left hand side when you turn the corner that you're going to need to replace your tire soon."

Wow, I thought to myself, floored, I must be more popular than I thought. People are really paying attention to me.

There's no question that people read more significance into people's driving habits in a small town than they do in the city. One time, for instance, many years ago, I was wondering if my boyfriend at the time was cheating on me, so I jumped in his beat-up, old pick-truck and began driving around to see if there were any suspicious looking women waving back at me, thinking that I might be him.

Now, I know I'm not the first person in the world to do this, but there have been times when I've also driven around at night or during the day past the house of some guy who I had a crush to see what was going on in his front driveway. If his car was there, it could mean many different things. If his car wasn't there, it could mean many different things. But, if there was a strange car that I didn't recognize—or one that I did recognize—it probably meant that he had a girlfriend. Of course, there are a lot of things that can be misconstrued by these drive-bys. One time, my dad was visiting me for a couple of weeks one summer, and this woman at the supermarket came up to me and said, "So, who's your new boyfriend?"

"What new boyfriend?" I said.

"You have a new boyfriend," she said.

She sounded so sure of herself, that I thought maybe she knew something that I didn't.

"Well, who is he?" I asked.

"You know who he is," she said. "He's that guy who's been in your driveway all week, working in your yard," who of course was my dad.

So, these drive-bys can be misleading. But still, I don't think that stops me or half the people in town from doing them. The thing about drive-bys is that they're like reconnaissance missions. They can be very dangerous. You go out undercover, hoping no one notices you, drive by your target to get as much information (or misinformation) as you can and pray that you don't get caught. Drive-bys are actually the equivalent of calling someone you have a crush on and hanging up (back in the days before caller ID).

Of course, there's a flip side to all of this. It's possible that someone you've been doing drive-bys on might be doing drive-bys on you himself. Normally this would be cause for celebration, knowing the object of your affections is paying attention to you. But then again, you have to be careful about your drive-bys when you find out that your target might be watching out for you just as much as you're watching out for him.

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The Drive-By

People say you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of car they drive. I say you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of cars they notice. When I first moved to Three Rivers, I remember this guy who swaggered up to me at the bar and said, "I can tell by the sound of the tire squealing on your front left hand side when you turn the corner that you're going to need to replace your tire soon."

Wow, I thought to myself, floored, I must be more popular than I thought. People are really paying attention to me.

There's no question that people read more significance into people's driving habits in a small town than they do in the city. One time, for instance, many years ago, I was wondering if my boyfriend at the time was cheating on me, so I jumped in his beat-up, old pick-truck and began driving around to see if there were any suspicious looking women waving back at me, thinking that I might be him.

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Life In A Small Town

By Lisa Lieberman



New Year's Resolutions

I've never understood the whole point of New Year's resolutions – why so many millions of people promise themselves they're going to quit smoking, lose that extra 10 or 15 pounds, or finally end that relationship that never seems to go anywhere. The point is that New Year's resolutions don't work. If they did work, people wouldn't feel the need to make the same resolutions year after year.

It is just way too difficult to keep New Year's resolutions anyway. Sure, it sounds great – in the midst of all those drunken holiday binges and eating orgies – that at the stroke of midnight on New Year's, you're finally going to become a sane, healthy, thin person all of a sudden. But when it comes down to eating raw tofu instead of fried chicken and choking down liquid wheatgrass every night instead of a six-pack of beer, it's a whole other story. Chances are with the holidays over and vacations spent, you're going to need that cigarette or chocolate bar – (at least I know I need the chocolate) – to get you through those depressing, gray January days that seem to stretch on forever.

And then as soon as you light up that cigarette or eat that first bite of chocolate cake, you feel like a great big failure because you've just ruined another New Year's resolution. Then you beat yourself up because have to wait a whole other year to try again. Personally, if I have to fail, I would rather fail on a much smaller scale and on a more consecutive basis than once a year. That's why when I never make New Year's resolutions.

Sure, I would like to be a better person. I would like to eat less, exercise more, lose weight, do my dirty dishes at night and make my bed in the morning (even though I know my bed will just get messed up again and that there will be lots more dirty dishes to come). But who am I kidding? I know these changes are never going to stick. I have much more of a chance at succeeding if I make SMALL promises to myself, like instead of trying to lose weight, I simply try not to gain weight; or instead of training to run a full marathon, I try to add five minutes to my leisurely stroll down the street every day.

I try not to expect too much of myself or let others expect too much of me. Whenever I start dating someone who says he thinks I'm the most incredible person in the world – a not completely nonexistent phenomenon – I try to end the relationship as quickly and painlessly as possible. I always want to tell the person, “You shouldn't think so highly of me because from here, there's nowhere to go from here but down – And I don't like heights.”

My dad, who knows me very well, doesn't expect too much of me or of the world. Every time the family gets together for Thanksgiving, my father issues this prayer out to the universe: “And please, God, don't let Lisa spill the wine all over the tablecloth.”


He thinks that the less he asks for from God, the less disappointed he'll be. Of course, I do spill my wine half the time at the dinner table. But there's always recourse for that. Instead of drinking red wine, I've tried

switching to white wine. So, that way when I mess up – and I inevitably do – there's so much less to feel bad about.

(Readers can e-mail Lisa at lisal@thegrid.net.)

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Life In A Small Town



Getting Your Arms Around The Awkward Question Of Hugging

by *Lisa Lieberman*

I am not much of a hugger by nature, although I liked being hugged.

I'm not the type of person who runs up to complete strangers, or almost complete strangers at parties or social gatherings, screaming, "It's so great to see you!" (even though I just saw them last week) as I throw my arms around them. Nor am I likely to do this with long-time friends who I haven't seen in years.

It seems that there are two types of people when it comes to hugging; the initiator and the receiver.

I'm the receiver type who stands awkwardly around waiting for someone else to do the hugging.

That's OK. But in a situation that calls for a hug if the two people involved are both receivers, then it tends to cause a problem become SOMEONE has to initiate the hug.

I don't know why it's so hard for some people to be huggers. Maybe it has something to do with their fear of not being hugged back. In most cases, when you hug someone, you're going to be hugged back, so that's really not a legitimate fear.

Then there are always those awkward situations when you're not sure if the situation calls for a hug or a handshake. This can be awfully embarrassing when one person reaches out for a hug and the other person sticks out his hand for a handshake.

This happened to me once when I went to meet an editor in San Francisco who I had spoken to many times over the phone. At first I stuck out my hand, and then changing my mind, I moved in for a hug, just as he was sticking out his hand. He laughed, shaking my hand, and said, "We don't know each other well enough for a hug."

After that, I was too embarrassed to get to know him well enough for a hug.

Aside from the awkward question about one should hug another person or not, then there's the perplexing question of just HOW long one should

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hug for.

If you are hugging a friend (especially if it's someone of the opposite sex), if you hug for too long, then you run the risk of the person getting the wrong idea, (or in some cases getting the right idea).

The act of initiating a hug brings with it an awful lot of responsibility.

When you go around hugging people all the time, then people are going to expect this type of behavior from you, and if for some reason you stop, people are going to wonder what's wrong and you'll feel obligated to continue hugging them whether you feel like it or not.

Conversely, if you are not a hugger by nature, and all of a sudden you have an urge to start hugging people, this may also surprise people who may also wonder what's wrong with you, which will again make you feel reluctant to start hugging people.

In either case, both situations seem to be self-propagating.

In this awkward, ever-so-hard-to-understand world where important subjects of when to hug and when not to hug and how long to hug were never taught in school, but were replaced by irrelevant topics such as quantum physics, organic chemistry and algebra - all subjects I mastered in school, but know nothing about now - the art of when to hug and when not to hug, and how long to hug may be things that people like myself will never master.

But alas, you know you've found a true friend who understands all your neuroses and idiosyncracies inside out (or at least doesn't notice them).

I have one editor friend who when I see him, I always give him a hug. But for some reason, I only have the courage to initiate a hug once he offers his hand to me for a handshake. So invariably, I give him a hug and he gives me a handshake, and neither of us thinks anything strange about it. We just both take each other's best intentions for whatever they're worth.

(Readers can email Lisa at lisal@thegrid.net)

Life In A Small Town



The Politics of Waving

by Lisa Lieberman

Two ex-lovers were driving along opposite ends of the road one day about to pass each other in their separate cars. Each one thought to themselves, "If I wave, s/he'll think I still like him/her. If I don't wave, then s/he'll think I'm just playing it cool and will still think like him/her."

Where I grew up in the city, people hardly spoke to each other in the streets, much less waved to each other from their cars.

So that's why when I moved to a little town called Three Rivers I was surprised to find that not only do people wave at each other, but that waving is actually a form of art.

There are many different types of waves, for instance. There's the wave people give each other to signify friendliness and camaraderie, which is in many ways reminiscent of the stereotypical Native American greeting, "How" and of the cowboys who tipped their hats to one another as they passed on horseback in the old western days.

With these kind of waves, it's important to note whether the person has his hand sticking in or out of the car. I like the waves with the hand sticking out, because it always makes me feel like that person is making that extra special effort to say hello to me rather than giving me a wave I can barely see through the windshield of their car.

Then, there's the type of wave which is little more than a small flicking motion from the steering wheel. I don't

like these kind of waves because I'm never sure whether the person has actually waved at me or not. That leaves me in an uncomfortable situation because I never know whether to wave back or not. I hate the idea of waving at someone who hasn't waved at me because then I'll feel silly. But then if I don't wave when the other person has in fact waved, then I'll be left feeling guilty when the person inevitably approaches me in my local supermarket and says, "Why didn't you wave back at me?!"

But of all the waves, I have to say that the wave I hate most is the *bungled wave*. A *bungled wave* happens when I'm driving along, and I think I see a car that I know. I pick up my hand to wave, but then seeing that it's somebody else, try to take my hand down but can't. After all, how do you stop yourself in mid-wave once you've already started? There's usually only one place for your hand to go once you've shot it up in the air.

"Sometimes, I think that when it comes to really popular or well-known people, like the one and only sheriff in Three Rivers who knows everybody in town, I might be doing them a favor by waving and giving their waving hands a break."

Sometimes, I think that when it comes to really popular or well-known people, like the one and only sheriff in Three Rivers who knows everybody in town, I might be doing them a favor by not waving and giving their waving hands a break.

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Actually, when it comes to waving at the sheriff, I always feel a bit strange. After years of living in the city and thinking that a police officer was a sign of trouble; either trouble I created myself (overdue parking tickets, outdated registration, etc ...) or because of trouble other people created - traffic accidents, burglaries, murders, etc ..., I wasn't used to waving at law enforcement agents.

So now, when it comes to waving at the sheriff, I feel that if I don't wave he'll think I'm trying to hide something, but that if I do wave, he'll think I'm trying to hide something.

Sometimes, the etiquette of waving gets so confusing, I think I'd rather get lost in my music or deep in thought and forget about waving, period.

I've heard that some people seeking secrecy buy new cars so they won't be recognized. That works well for a week or two until people discover they've bought a new car and start waving all anew.

Some people think it's best to buy a car that looks a lot like everybody else's in town, so that nobody will be able to single theirs out. But the problem with this of course, is that once you start driving a car that looks like everybody else's, then a whole new slew of people are going to start waving at you, thinking that you are somebody else, in which case you'll acquire that many more people angry at you when you don't wave back.

So as the two ex-lovers in the cars passed each other, the man raised his hand to sneeze and the woman raised her hand to comb her hair back. "Whew!!" each one of them said to themselves. "I hope s/he didn't think that was a wave!"



Revisiting the Wave

Where I grew up in the city, people hardly spoke to each other in the streets, much less waved to each other from their cars. So, when I moved to Three Rivers I was surprised to find that waving is actually an art form.

There are many different types of waves. There's the open-handed wave which is in many ways reminiscent of the old Native American style of greeting, "How!" and the way cowboys used to tip their hats in the Old West. Then there's the wave where the person sticks his whole hand out of the car. I always feel extra special when someone sticks his hand out of his car to wave at me compared to the person who barely lifts his hand up from the steering wheel to wave. This barely-there kind of wave puts me in the uncomfortable position of not knowing whether to wave back or not. I don't want to wave if I haven't actually been waved at. But if I don't wave when the other person has in fact waved, I'll feel guilty when the person inevitably approaches me in the supermarket and says, "Why didn't you wave at me?!"

The worst kind of wave is the Bungled Wave. A Bungled Wave happens when I'm driving along, and think I see a car that I know. I pick up my hand to wave, but then seeing that it's somebody else, try to take my hand down, but can't. After all, how do you stop yourself in mid-wave once you've already started? There's usually only one place for your hand to go once you've shot it up in the air.

Of course, I could just go ahead and wave at this person who I mistook for somebody else, but then I risk committing myself to a life filled of waving because once you start waving at someone, it's hard to stop without causing a big problem. In some ways, it's a little like getting married.

Sometimes, I think that by not waving at really popular people, like the sheriff, who has to wave at people all day, I might actually be doing him a favor by helping give his hand a break.

I feel a bit strange waving at the sheriff. When I lived in the city, I always thought that a police officer was a sign of trouble and not someone you should wave at.

So now, when it comes to waving at the sheriff, I'm afraid if I don't wave he'll think I'm trying to hide something. Then again, if I do wave, he'll think I'm trying to be friendly because I'm trying to hide something.

Waving is so nerve wracking that I've more or less given up on waving at anyone, even to my best friends.

Some people try to deal with the problem of waving by buying new cars so they won't be recognized. But usually, you end up with a car that looks exactly like someone else's and you get a whole new group of people waving at you.


Some people think it's best to buy a car that looks a lot like everybody else's cars in town, like a white Ford pickup truck, for instance, so that nobody will ever really be able to single you out. But the problem with this of course, is that once you start driving that white Ford pickup truck, you're going to be one among many

white Ford pickup trucks, and you'll have everyone waving at you. Then, you'll really have a problem.

(Readers can e-mail Lisa at lisal@thegrid.net.)

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Life In A Small Town



Dating in a Small Town: The Question of the "Ex".

By Lisa Lieberman

In a small town, when it comes to dating, there's always the question of the "Ex". There's the ex-boyfriend. There's the ex-girlfriend of your current boyfriend. Then, there's the ex-girlfriend of your ex-boyfriend. That's a lot of exes. And when you've lived in a small town for a long time, as I have, it can feel like you're standing in a whole room full of exes when you go to the bar Saturday night.

Exes aren't such a bad thing, though. I've gotten to be good friends with some of my exes' exes, often preferring the women that my exes once dated to the exes themselves, which I supposed just goes to show, that my exes had better taste in women than I and the other exes had in men.

One time, I got to be friends with one of my ex-boyfriend's girlfriends (now his ex). For years, while they were dating we had been giving each other the evil eye when we saw each other in public. Finally, one day, I couldn't resist talking to her. She was wearing these really cool abominable snowmen boots covered in sheep's fur.

"Cool boots," I said.

"Thanks," she said, sticking out her hand. "I've been dying to meet you. I'm X," she said.

"Nice to meet you, too. I'm XX," I said.

We immediately became friends because we had so much in common—namely my ex and her future ex. For some reason, my ex didn't like our new found relationship. I guess I can understand why. It's bad enough that there are exes out there in the world who know your dirtiest, darkest secrets—things that even you, yourself would probably rather not know. It's much worse, though when two exes

get together and start talking. It's like the CIA and the FBI all rolled into one comparing notes about you.

In addition to my exes' exes, there's also my exes' exes who have become my exes, too. I once dated one of my friend's ex-boyfriends. At first, she told me it was o.k., and then changed her mind and said not to do it. I did it anyway—a decision I now regret—and as a result she and I have become exes with an extra ex in common between us.

I like to tell myself that by dating him, I was taking one for the team—that I was in effect hitting a sacrifice fly ball to right field (one in the back of my mind, I knew would surely lead to an out), so that she could score a run and possibly have the chance to meet someone else—someone who could perhaps make a better future ex than the ex she already had.

I like to think that's true, but I don't know. I guess, you never really know where your next ex will come from.

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Life In A Small Town



Certain Uncertainty

By Lisa Lieberman

In a world full of uncertainty, there's only one thing for certain and that's that nothing is for certain. And the more certain I become of this certainty the more uncertain I am, including the fact that nothing is certain.

But I'm not certain of that.

Speaking of uncertainty, just look at all the uncertainty surrounding the recent presidential election in Florida. The more everyone tries to bring certainty to an utterly uncertain situation, the more uncertain the whole mess becomes.

The supreme court case keeps dragging on and on, and all the recounts keep going on. The more people try to get involved and pin down a definitive answer, the more they find that there isn't one.

The whole act of trying to count and recount the votes reminds me of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that I learned in Physics class when I was in 11th grade.

I think this is it, but I'm not certain: Simply by the act of observing something, you are changing the very thing that you are observing. So that means if there's a mouse inside a box and you want to know if the mouse is dead or alive, once you open the box, regardless of what you see you will never know whether the mouse was really dead or alive before you opened it.

If the mouse is dead when you open the box, you'll never know if a final gust of noxious air killed the mouse just as you were opening the box, and

the mouse was really alive inside the box. And if you find the mouse alive, well...chances are that the mouse was also alive before you opened the box. But then again, nothing's for certain.

Remember--as they say, the only things certain are death and taxes. But I'm certain that there are people who will argue with that, too.

So in the midst of all this uncertainty in life, rather than trying to make certainty out of utter uncertainty, one should simply try to live with the uncertainty as best they can.

Driving through the fog is a good analogy to the uncertainty of life. You never really know what's more than a few feet ahead of you, you can't see too well what's behind you, and you have no idea what's going on around you.

Basically, there's uncertainty everywhere.

So, while driving in the fog, you have to try to see where you're going, but not try too hard to see too far ahead of yourself. That's why you use your low beams and not your high beams.

If you cave into the uncertainty, and crawl down the road at 10 mph, some other--much too certain person, will run you over. If you get too certain of yourself, you may end up barreling down on some uncertain sod going 10 mph.

The best thing, I've been told in the fog is to proceed cautiously yet travel as fast as you feel comfortable going--neither going too fast or too slow.

That's the best advice I can give, although I'm not 100 percent certain of that.

Life In A Small Town



Having Faith In Fate

by Lisa Lieberman

Lately, I've been questioning my faith in fate.

I suppose this is an oxymoron, given that in order to have faith in something you're not supposed to question it.

When I was younger, my dad always told me, "God looks out for the feeble minded."

I had faith in that since it always seemed to work for me.

But as I've gotten older, and (I like to think) wiser, I've started to worry: "If God looks out for the feeble minded, then who's looking out for me if I'm not so feeble minded anymore?"

I figured that meant I was looking out for myself. That worried me.

So anyway, I've been questioning my fate in fate when I was desperately trying to get home from Arizona the other day.

What should have been a peaceful three hour plane ride turned into a 24 hour nightmare.

Being my well-traveled worldly, savvy self, I began my journey by standing on

the wrong line in the wrong part of the airport going to the wrong place on the wrong airline.

After about an hour of this, I realized my mistake. I headed over to the right place to stand in the right line on the right airline, and rushed to the right gate only to find that they had just closed the doors for take-off.

Suddenly, the airline agent said, "You're in luck. There's maintenance problems. The flight's been delayed and they don't know when the problem will be fixed. You can get on the plane now."

So, I said to myself, "Ah, ha, this is fate telling me not to get on the plane." So I elected to get on another later flight.

Anyway, all seemed to be going well. The plane was taxiing down the runway, ready to take off when the pilot got on the mic. "Sorry folks, we're having a problem, we don't know what it is. We're going back to the gate for an undetermined period of time to figure out what this unknown problem is...For your safety, please stay seated." Upon hearing this, I immediately got out of my seat, walked down the aisle, and insisted on being let off the plane.

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Surely this was fate telling me to switch airlines. So, I did.

This time, I was sure everything was going to be OK as we taxied off the runway, got into the air, and were flying at about 3,000 feet on our way home on what I thought was the last leg of my journey...Then the pilot got on the intercom: "This is your captain speaking. This has never happened before, but there's a warning light flashing, and we have to turn around and go back immediately. I don't know what this means, but fasten your seat belt," he said.

Feeling like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, thinking how I just wanted to click my heals three times and go home, I was near tears.

The flight attendant, noticing the worried look on my face, came up to me and asked "Is there anything I can get you ma'am?" As if she was asking for my last request. I thought of ordering a shot of vodka or at least one more of those fudge cookies to help me cope, but I was too embarrassed to appear so melodramatic. So, being the perpetual reporter, I said, "I just want to know what is going on."

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"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know...This has never happened to me before," she said.

I skipped that line of questioning and said, "Well tell me, then, do you believe in fate?"

"Oh, yes. If I didn't have faith in fate, I couldn't do this job. When it's your time to go, it's your time to go," she said.

Suddenly the captain's bell went off, and she said that was her signal to go.

I sat back in my seat and sighed. I felt defeated, like Oedipus Rex, having worked so hard to avoid his fate that he ended up hastening it instead.

So I said to myself, "Well if this is it, this is it." Then I sat back in my seat and began to have faith in fate - both the good and the bad.

When the plane landed (back where we had started), I got off the plane and as I was leaving said to the flight attendant, "Well, I guess this puts everything in perspective." But I wasn't sure if that was such a good thing or not.

Readers can e-mail Lisa at lisal@thegrid.net.

Life In A Small Town

By Lisa Lieberman



A Series of Mistakes

Sometimes I look at my life and think it's just been one big, long series of mistakes. But, I guess most people must feel that way more or less. After all, if everyone lived their lives making fully informed, smart decisions and knew exactly what they were doing at the time, they probably wouldn't be doing most of the things they were doing.

When I try to conjure up in my mind that one essential mistake, though, that led me to the life I'm leading now, I think of the time when I first came up to Three Rivers. I came up for the weekend to visit my cousin who said, "Stay as long as you want." It's been 14 years and I'm still here. My cousin, who ended up begging me to leave is long since gone.

When I first came to Three Rivers, I experienced something I don't ever remember having experienced much of before or very much after--and that was clarity of mind. After that initial weekend with my cousin, there was a voice inside my head that shook my whole body and told me to stay. So, I got in my car and drove up an isolated road and pulled up a long gravelly driveway to a bed and breakfast style resort with a smattering of log cabins around a man made lake with two red canoes lying placidly in the center. I got out of my car and said to a big, burly man, who was later to become one of my best friends. "I've come here to live."

He looked at me suspiciously and said, "This is a resort. We rent cabins by the night, not by the month."

And I, who was by nature, not

normally very bold at that time, said, "Yes, but I was driving up this road and I said to myself, 'This is it. This is where I have to live.'"

He looked at me strangely and said, "Well, it's strange that you mention that because the name of this river in English means 'This is it'."

Looking back, it's very possible that that was just a pick-up line. But at the time it sounded good enough to me.

"You see," I said. "I was right. This is it."

Then I went inside the resort and we had a long discussion during which he told me about a friend who owned a house down the road that might be for rent that had a great swimming hole on the river. During our discussion I also found out another piece of heart-stopping information. The author of the screenplay, "Thelma and Louise", my favorite movie in the world, had lived in one of his cabins when she was writing the last scene of the script where the two heroines of the movie drive off a cliff. I was awe-struck. Out of all the towns that I could have gone to in the entire world and out of all the roads I could have driven down, somehow fate had plopped me here on this road where the Indian name of the river meant "This is it". I had to live on that road.

So, I called my new friend's friend about the house. (Later on I found out that the two of them were suing each other) and begged him to let me move into the house. I told him I wanted to become a writer and that my favorite writer in the world had lived on this street and that I absolutely had to live in that house. After half a dozen calls from me, he finally relented and I moved

strangeness of California water law. The point of the story is that when I heard the pounding inside my heart and I listened to the voices inside my head, somehow like a homing bird, flying thousands of miles across the continent, I landed in the right spot.

Now 14 years later, I live in a house with so much running water that it sometimes leaks into the street. I miss those early days, though, of absolute clarity. Sometimes I look back and think my decision to stay might have been a mistake. But then again, if I hadn't made that one crucial mistake, I wouldn't have stayed to make even more crucial mistakes, which I'm sure will lead to even more important mistakes--which in the end, will hopefully lead to something good.

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in. The house was perfect, except for the fact that there wasn't any water and I had to steal water from my neighbors on a nightly basis. I lived there for three years, and I did become a writer. I wrote some great stuff and I wrote some trash. Eventually I had to leave because the neighbors found out about my illegal activities and called the sheriff. But the point of the story, though, isn't to talk about the water problem or the

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For a long time, I thought I did the mouse in my house a favor by letting it live.

I found out I was wrong.

The one mouse in my house brought his friend. They produced three mice, then four mice, then five.

Even so, I hated the idea of killing them.

"Look here," I said with a sigh, "we're both creatures of the earth, so you have as much right to be here as I. But you stay away hidden during the day and don't come out to play until night when the lights are all out, and then you can scurry and run around all about."

For a long time, they abided my wishes and stayed out of the kitchen while I cooked and cleaned and did my dirty dishes. But then one day they decided to come out in hordes from the kitchen floorboards, perhaps in hope of finding life on the outside a bit more exciting.

Out in open sight, even in broad daylight, I found them in bathroom cabinets and kitchen drawers.

"Eeeeeek," I screamed.

But they didn't care. Upon seeing me, they slipped through the crevices.

"Look," I pleaded, "I don't want to harm you. I just want you to go away far far from my home and leave me alone."

But my silly entreaties didn't charm or alarm them. Not even a bit.

My friends, meanwhile, called me an achey-hearted liberal.

"Look what you've done. You've given them an inch, and they've taken a mile."

I dreaded the thought lying awake, waiting for the sound of those godawful traps snapping off their tiny little heads. I dreaded how the next morning I would have to pick them up by their tails and toss them into the garbage pail.

Finally, when I discovered a mouse in my bed, a new thought popped into my

head; the original mouse would have been better off dead. The problem I had decided to ignore had turned into war.

So I set about a dozen traps and heard them go snap, snap, snap all through the house. And then, in a somber mood, I apologized to the great-

grandfather mouse for letting him live and killing his brood, which I hoped he could forgive.

"Dear Great Grandfather Mouse," I said in my now mouseless house. "Everyone knows how the old sayings goes: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. I only wish I had known a little sooner that it's best not to pretend that little problems are OK when they're not."

Life In A Small Town



Ants

By *Lisa Lieberman*

Sometimes I worry about ants. I wonder what ants pray about when they go home to their nests after a long, hard day of work pillaging my kitchen cabinets. I wonder if they pray to God, thanking him for all their many rewards. Or, when times are bad and there are no bread crumbs to be had, I wonder if they beg God for help.

I often feel a huge sense of responsibility when it comes to ants, because in many ways, I am their god.

I have the power to destroy them or save them at will. With the flick of my foot, I can shake up their nests and cause large earthquakes which register 10 or more on their Richter Scales, and send them running for cover. Or, with a twist of my hose, I can drown them with great floods.

I can have mercy on the ants, and answer their prayers for peace and harmony by simply stepping over them when I see their nests on the ground. If I give them the blessing of an extra drop of honey outside their nests, the ants will think it no less than a miracle, and will talk about it for centuries to come.

I am often awed by the fact that even though I affect so many thousands of lives every day with my large and vast presence, I am practically invisible and incomprehensible to the ants.

It isn't always easy to know how to behave when you wield so much power. It's so easy to make mistakes. For instance, the simple act of accidentally leaving open a jar of honey, has the effect of inadvertently setting up a moral test for the ants, who must decide whether to work for their food the hard way, or fall into the easy ways of temptation.

I feel sorry for the ants who slip up and drown in the stickiness of their sins, but there's nothing I can do to save them. I also feel sorry for the lizards and grasshoppers which unwittingly make their ways into my house and fall into the clutches of my devils cat, "Tabitha". I grapple with what to do; whether to leave them to their own devices and let nature take its course, or to use Divine Intervention to save the tiny creatures. (Of course, Divine Intervention can depend on whether the phone is ringing or if I'm too busy taking a bath.)

It's easy to get distracted when you are a Divine Intervening type person. But sometimes when I stay focused, I can see their anguished little faces from afar and hear their silent prayers asking for mercy. When I bend over to free the little creatures from my cat's clenched jaw, and set them on the window sills to run off, I know to them, it's the mysterious hand of God that's come to their rescue.

I get angry at my cat for acting so evilly, but I know it's part of her base level, and I try to love her anyway for her goodness, in spite of all the evil she inflicts.

My job as "God of the house", as I see it, is not only to decide the life or death of the creatures inside the house, but to help guide those lost creatures that get off on the wrong track.

I know, though, that there are certain creatures that can't be helped. I can no more save the moths from flying straight into burning lamps and candles than the real God can do anything to stop humans from smoking themselves to death with cigarettes or other drugs.

But there are some little creatures I can help, like the lost little flies who

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Love Songs of the Country

by Lisa Lieberman

As the shroud of darkness enclosed the mountains, restless sleepers in my sleepy town listened to the silence of the night. Like an opera patron squirming restlessly in his chair waiting for the music of dawn to come.

Outside, there was pitch blackness, not a single city street light to illuminate the rising and falling sounds of the currents of the river.

As I lay there listening, I thought about how different the sounds of the city are from those of the country. Nights in the city, I used to lie awake listening to the sounds of cars honking and beeping, pounding feet on the streets, car alarms going off, sirens wailing and jets flying by.

Quite often at night in the country, there are no sounds, except for the running river, whose sound is so constant and steady that it begins to sound like the air to me, which doesn't sound like anything at all.

The quiet of the night trains the ear to search for different sounds in the darkness. Instead of listening for glass shattering and for burglars breaking into the house, I lie listening for garbage can crashing outside and the sound of the local black bear rummaging through my garbage like used goods at a yard sale. If I'm lucky, I'm able to run to the window in time to see the stealth figure in the moonlight making off with his bag of

goodies filled with orange peels and left-over vegetables.

Bears are quiet burglars. But if I listen carefully, I can sometimes hear them munching and slurping the apples underneath the apple tree outside. Apples are about as addicting to bears as popcorn and peanuts are to humans and once they get started, it's hard to get them to stop.

As summer draws near, the crickets come out at night. They rub their legs together like fiddlers singing love songs to their lovers, and playing for the amusement of their friends.

On rainy nights, I like to listen to frogs. Frogs are nice. They're such brave little creature, calling out to each other in the night. When there is danger, and the "Undertoad," not the "Undertow," comes threatening to carry them away, they are suddenly silent.

Lying in my bed, I hold my breath with them waiting for the danger to pass. . .

These are typical sounds of the night. But sometimes if you are a blessed and special country dweller,

like a dear friend of mine who once saved a dying owl on the street, you will be gifted with extra-special sounds of the night.

The owl, who had been blinded and temporarily stunned by the headlights of some passing cars on the road, was picked up by my friend who brought him home and set him on top of his refrigerator so the owl could rest and relay. The next day the owl flew free and came back that evening with owl

*Friends
Neath
and began serenading*

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and stood in a circle under-
neath my friend's bedroom window,
serenading him. "Hoo-hoo-hoo!" they
that night, and "Hoo-hoo-hoo!"
saw for the next three nights
they came back to thank my friend for
saving the owl's life.

As I lay there listening into the
deepness of the night, there were no
owl sounds, and no other sounds to
keep me company. Finally, I closed
my eyes and let myself drift down to
the murmuring gurgles of the river
outside.

At sunup, the cold, blue light of
dawn crept in through my window, I
heard the sound of a lone bird outside
chirping. There was no alarm clock in
my room. There were no sounds of
clinking dishes being taken out of the
dishwasher, which my mother used to
set on the kitchen counter, or the
sounds of sizzling bacon frying in a
pan, which used to tell me when it was
time to get up when I was a kid.

Instead, I listened as the lone bird
was joined by another bird, and the
another bird, and another bird.

Eventually, all the fragmented con-
tingents joined into the melody: A
mother calling out her baby birds.
"Chirp, chirp," she called out. They
answered sweetly in little voices,
"chirp, chirp, chirp," they answered
back, picking up their mother's tune

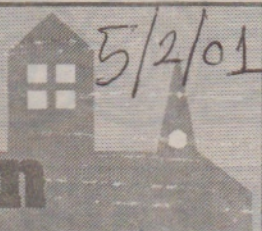
and resonating back with a slightly
different sound.

Couplets of birds held discourse
over their plans for the day. Some
pairs of birds sang out in panicked
voices, urging each other to hurry
building their nests before it was time
to lay the eggs. One baby bird,
swinging back and forth on a branch,
was oblivious to the rest of the birds'
melody and sang just to amuse him-
self. And this amused me.

Gradually the gentle singing of the
birds rose in a crescendo, as the blue
light of early morning burst into a red,
hot crimson light, I rolled over in bed
and got up to open my bedroom cur-
tains to applaud the day.

KDDH, from front page

Life In A Small Town



THE TAO OF GARDENING —

Some Things Are Worth The Wait

By Lisa Lieberman

After six unsuccessful years of attempting to grow a garden and coming up with nothing but weeds, I am bound and determined to make something grow.

I don't care what it is. I am going to make something grow this year.

I know I better be careful here in tempting the fates because as the old saying goes, "be careful what you wish for, you just might get it," likewise in gardening, be careful of what you sow; you just might reap it.

As an example, despite my friends' and neighbors' warnings, I've always been tempted to plant blackberries. They're so good and juicy and require so little effort. But the problem with blackberries is that once they get started, they grow like weeds until they take over your whole yard and their thorny bushes become the bane of your life.

No, I know when it comes to gardening, I shouldn't take the easy way out. I should plant something which will bring me long-lasting pleasure as well as sustenance and blend in harmoniously with the rest of my garden.

As it is with a lot of other things in life, a garden is something that many people think they would like to have, but is often more of a challenge than they originally anticipated.

In the past when I've set out to start a garden, I've gotten so excited about the prospect of gardening, that I went out and bought the plants, and would either forget to plant them or else in my haste, I would plant a beautiful \$5 plant in a shoddy 50-cent hole and then wonder

why nothing ever grew the way I hoped.

This year, I'm planning a more strategic attack.

Like anything else, the first few months of a baby's life, the beginning of a new business or a new relationship, the beginning of a garden is the most important part.

To start with, you've got to pull all the weeds. Then you've got to till the soil.

Then you have to add in organic matter and mix it in and blend it all together.

Sometimes when confronted with a big project like a garden, it's best to take things one step at a time.

The good thing about cultivating the soil is that there's no hurry and you can take each step at your own pace.

In fact, the slower you go, sometimes the better it is, especially when you're not afraid to get down on your hands and knees, and cover the whole garden inch by inch up close until you make sure everything is nice and smooth and even and ready.

When, finally you do get the soil all prepared and ready to go, you're still not ready to plant.

As any good warrior knows, and as my dad always said "you have to hope for the best and plan for the worst"; i.e. look out for gophers.

So now I'm in the process of trenching off my garden with chicken wire to create a solid fortress.

Just yesterday, I was finishing up digging and admiring all my cultivation efforts, when across the yard, I spied a clump of climbing roses in full bloom.

I had become so busy with all my hard work that I had forgotten that I even had roses.

The old saying is that you've got to stop and smell the roses. But in a real life garden, you've got to stop and actually pick the roses if you want more to grow.

That just goes to show that the most worthwhile things in life can be so easy and so hard at the same time.

Life In A Small Town



Men and Dogs: The Saga Continues

When I moved to Three Rivers about 10 years ago, I wrote an article about men and dogs. The gist of the article was that men are like dogs (everyone knows this right?) and need to be properly trained to make good boyfriends.

I thought I had created a masterpiece that was going to enlighten the world. Little did I know. . .A dark silence fell over the town after I published the article and no one had anything to say to me about it. I asked my cousin to read it and tell me what he thought. He sat there reading the article, which was meant to be a humor piece, in his straight back chair with a grim look on his face, not cracking a smile. After a long pause, he let out a sigh. "Well this just goes to show you have a lot to learn," he said.

"About what, men or dogs?" I said.

"Both," he said.

Now, years later, I can see his point. I did have a lot to learn about men and dogs, and still do. Two years ago I hired a professional dog psychologist to try to help me kill two birds with one stone. For three months straight, she came over to my house and sat on my couch and talked to me for four hours straight about the psychology of dogs. I took copious notes as my dog "Money" (aptnly named, since she was costing me so

much money) sat next to me on the couch and looked on.

During one of our sessions after a particularly bad night with my boyfriend, I broke into tears. My dog trainer stopped mid sentence and said, "Shall we take a break?"

"Yes," I said sniffing, "You see it's about my boyfriend...."

My dog trainer nodded sympathetically. "This topic comes up quite a bit in my dog training sessions. Do you want to tell me about it?"

After telling her about the problem, my dog trainer sat quietly for a moment, and then said. "You know, dog psychology is very tricky. People assume that dogs want to please you. But that's not necessarily the case. Just like anyone else, dogs really want to please themselves. The key to any good relationship with your dog or a man, is to teach him that it's in his best interest to want to please you. That way he'll want to please you, in order to please himself."

The next thing is to be careful not to assume anything, and to be very clear when giving your dog instructions, she said as we segued back into the lesson.

"A client of mine found this out recently, when her dog began chasing her new roommate down the highway who was on her way to work. Now, her dog who was an older, more experienced dog knew better than this. But since the roommate had never explicitly told her not to chase her down the highway, my client's dog thought it might have been

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Ok. Even though the roommate shouted "NO!" at the dog several times to try to get her to stop chasing the car, in the dog's mind the "no" might have simply have meant, "Try chasing me at a different pace, or from a different side of the road." I told my client to explain to her roommate that she had to give the dog explicit instructions when leaving the house in the mornings. "Tell her, "you stay", "you're not going", my dog trainer said.

Only when you are very clear and specific with your dog like this will you get your message across without leaving any leeway for your dog to weasel out of doing what you want him to do.

The next thing, I learned, from my dog trainer is that you need to set your dog up for success by being consistent in your communication and not giving any

mixed messages

"Consistency is everything," my trainer said, "If, for instance, you tell your dog to stop jumping all over you, you can't say "Get down!" with a big smile on your face all the while petting him on the head. Your tone of voice and your actions have to be consistent with your actual commands."

My dog and I are still working on the commands and the communication. After all these years, I think she's got the "sit" command down, but other than that we have a lot to learn. Actually, I think we have a somewhat dysfunctional, backward relationship. Instead of protecting me, like any good dog should, I often find myself protecting my dog and making excuses for her bad behavior. My dog, for instance has this bad habit of chasing bikes.

Whenever someone rides by on a bike, she runs out, snarling and nipping at

the rider's heels. I run out after her, shouting, "Wait, stop! Slow Down. Don't Move!" The bikers think I'm talking to her, but I'm actually talking to them. They generally ignore my commands and instead peddle faster and faster, trying to escape. This just exacerbates the situation. What they don't understand is that if they simply slow down and stop, Money will run up to them and lick their faces. You see, Money loves people, she just doesn't like bikes.

I've tried to explain to people that if they would just dismount their bikes and walk past my house, there wouldn't be a problem, but unfortunately none of the bikers in the neighborhood seem willing to comply. So alas, I am stuck with an eight-and-a-half year old dog who is about as addicted to chasing bikes (and other bad behaviors) as a hardcore cigarette smoker is to cigarettes. I've tried to come to terms

with this bad behavior as best I can, but I realize after many sessions with my dog trainer and through various 12 step programs, that ultimately I can't change anyone else's behavior but my own. So now, when my dog runs out into the street to chase a bike, I generally duck behind the bushes and pretend I don't know her.