

Lisa Lieberman.

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**Lisa Lieberman.**



# San Francisco Examiner

**I** *Three Rivers, Tulare County*  
LIVE IN a small town. Everybody knows everybody here. If you write a bad check or if you date someone else's boyfriend or if you're rude to the clerk in the supermarket, everybody finds out about it.

So I try to live like everything I say and do will one day be public because what goes around comes around even faster here. And most other people try to live like that, too.

Harry, who's owned the local general store for 30 years with his wife Ruth, is a good example of this. I went down to talk to him when the lock fell off my door. After 25 minutes of asking me questions about the kind of door and lock I had, Harry ascertained the nature of my problem, sold me a lock and sent me off with a long list of instructions on how to install it.

Most of the other merchants in town are a lot like Harry, always willing to do their best to help. They have to be like this because if

*Lisa Lieberman lives in Three Rivers.*

LISA LIEBERMAN

## Creeping indifference

they're not, word gets around, and people start taking their business elsewhere.

But this is not the case with the nation's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, where I went to buy a minicassette recorder. A little Sony wedged underneath a white security bar caught my eye.

"Can I try it?" I asked the clerk.

"No, I don't have the key for it, and the manager isn't here."

"What I want to know is if the tape flips over automatically when it's done recording on one side."

"I have no idea."

"Is there anyone else in this store who knows more about this than you do?"

"I'm afraid not," the clerk said, "but you can always buy it and re-

turn it later."

The clerk, quite prepared to sell me an \$80 piece of equipment in exchange for very little time, effort or information, offered quite a contrast to Harry's general willingness to spend as much time as necessary on what may sometimes amount to no more than a \$2 box of nails.

The difference between Harry and the Wal-Mart clerk is that Harry is a product of the way things used to be when people expected more for their money, and the Wal-Mart clerk is a product of the new generation, where people are in too much of a hurry to notice or care what's going on.

If something doesn't work, you can just bring it back.

So in this new generation of

three-minute fast-food drive-throughs, automated tellers and a generation of youths with attention spans limited to the seven-minute blurb of TV programs between commercials, we wonder why our country has gone downhill so much in the past few decades.

Because it takes more time in the rest of the world to see the effect of our actions than it does in a small town, we often think there aren't any. But every pebble, no matter how small, tossed into a pond creates a ripple in the water.

We produce and market too many goods too quickly without enough care, without being too concerned if we get it right or not, and that makes us less competitive in the international market.

We think in terms of "they" and feel that we have no control over the world. But the fact is that "we" make up the "they."

President Clinton might be the "president of change," but we have to be the "people of change," if we want change, even if it's only to have a key to the cassette-recorder cases so customers can try them out.

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LISA LIEBERMAN

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## Dating at Wal-Mart

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*Three Rivers, Tulare County*

**I** KNOW four single men where I live. One's a psychopath, one's a drug addict and the other two just aren't interested in me.

Of these two, one is just a womanizer, and the other should join the Future Wife Beaters of America Club.

I was telling this on the phone the other day to my cousin, who lives in Berkeley, and asked, "So which should I choose?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think maybe you should move."

But where? Dating's such a hassle. You never know for sure what's going to happen after you meet someone; whether in three months down the road he's suddenly going to stop calling you, or you're going to find out he's married, or worst of all, he snores.

"I wish dating were as easy as shopping at Wal-Mart," I told her. "At Wal-Mart, you never have to run the risk of searching around the store endlessly trying to find what you're looking for only to come home empty-handed. You just simply walk in and tell the sales clerk what you want. They direct you to the particular spot where you need to go. You pick it up, bring it to the front counter, buy it and leave."

Once you take your purchase home with you, the in-

structions usually tell you in clear, simple, easy-to-read words what your purchase is going to do and how it operates. You never have to consult psychiatrists, self-help books or your mother at 2 o'clock in the morning.

The instructions will also give you an idea as to durability by saying, "Very fragile. Treat gently." Or, for a slightly tougher product, "This one can stand a few knocks and jolts."

Then, if you become dissatisfied because it's more hassle than it's worth, or if your friend just bought a newer, shinier version and you want one too, or because you're just plain tired of it, it's never too late to bring it back.

No blaming. No guilt trips. No questions like, "Why?"

None of that. The clerk takes it back with a smile and exchanges it for anything else you might like to have in its place.

My cousin asked, "But what if you find something you really like and want to keep it and it breaks down anyway?"

"That's the best part. You always get some kind of guarantee at Wal-Mart. You get a 30-day, a five-year, or even a lifetime guarantee. It all depends on what you want for the inconvenience of all the time and gas you had to spend going down there a second time to get what you really wanted in the first place."

We both sighed.

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*Free-lance writer Lisa Lieberman likes to shop.*

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LISA LIEBERMAN

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## How to get the happy face blues

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*Three Rivers, Tulare County*

**I** DON'T MEAN to sound unsociable, but there isn't anything I hate more than when someone tells me to smile.

I like smiling, and I smile quite a lot. But whenever someone tells me that I must smile, I feel like they're running a 9-inch metal nail down a chalkboard just to drive me insane.

I mean, if I wanted to be smiling, I'd already be smiling, wouldn't I? So why should anyone tell me to smile?

I know the answer.

"I was just trying to cheer you up."

But how does anyone know I need cheering up? Maybe I am too happy to speak, much less to smile.

If I am feeling bad, I really don't want to smile.

"But maybe if you smiled, you wouldn't feel so bad."

My answer: "But smiling isn't going to cheer me up. A new boyfriend, a \$5,000 lottery ticket and a car that never breaks down would cheer me up a lot."

Actually, I've always thought smiling is overrated. It has certain hazards. For instance, smiling causes wrinkles. Smiling hurts when you walk around for hours with a grin frozen on your face, saying, "Great party, isn't it?!"

My grandmother always tells me to smile.

"Oh look how wonderful she looks when she smiles!" she says to whomever is around. "She should always be smiling."

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*Lisa Lieberman is a newspaper reporter.*

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But what honest, sane person can smile all the time? You never know for sure what someone's thinking when smiling.

Politicians, for example, smile.

Scary people smile. Who can forget Jack Nicholson in the "The Shining" with a mad gleam in his eye, wielding a sharpened ax, saying "h-e-r-e's Johnny!" — and smiling.

Or what about how the neighbors of serial killers: "Oh, but, he was such a nice, friendly man — always smiling."

Maybe if serial killers had been allowed to let off a little steam once in a while by frowning, or maybe even grimacing every now and then, they'd feel less murderous.

Other people's smiles can make me want to kill. I know a saleswoman who secretly dislikes me. The other day she told me, "I'm sorry ma'am. I'd love to do something for you, but there's absolutely nothing we can do." Her smile grew.

But what am I to do? Call up the sales manager to complain?

The manager asks, "What'd she do?"

"She, she — *smiled* at me!"

I know what I'd really, really, really like to do the next time someone tells me to smile. I'd slowly shout, "Don't . . . tell . . . me . . . to . . . SMILE!"

Then I'd say, "You see — now I feel a lot better."

I would smile.

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## LISA LIEBERMAN

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# Coming clean about housekeeping

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**T**O MAKE a short story long, I'm a messy person. When I'm driving down the street in my car and I need to dispose of my banana skins, I don't think twice about throwing them in the back seat.

Too tired to get up from my bed and toss dirty socks in the hamper, I throw them on the floor.

I never sit bolt upright in the middle of the night, worrying about the dirty spoon and saucer (and OK, maybe a few plates) sitting in the sink.

I know neat people must be grinding their teeth.

"I need to have things neat and orderly," they insist.

As for me, I was born messy, and I'll probably die messy.

My philosophy is that if everything has "one proper place," then there are fewer places to look when things disappear.

If you've always put your keys on the hallway table for the past 30 years and the black hole in outer space suddenly sucks them up, where are you going to look for them if there's "only one proper place"?

With me, there's almost never any shortage of the number of places my car keys could be: Under a pile of my clothes from yesterday, in the bushes where I threw them when I was running for the phone, or even still sticking out of my front door.

There's a lot to be said for being messy. When it comes to choosing sides, the universe will always favor messy people. After all, it started out as a compact, neat little package and then exploded into a great big cosmic, discombobular mess.

Earthquakes don't think twice about smashing your good crystal. And autumn winds don't care about scattering leaves all over freshly mown lawns.

In short, the natural order of the universe dictates that things go from being neat to messy, not the other way around.

Does that mean we should sit idly by, biting our nails and watching the dirty dishes in the sink expand and multiply?

"Certainly not!" my 80-year-old grandmother would say.

As she swept up the broken glass in her Los Angeles apartment minutes after the earthquake struck, she shouted down at her frightened neighbors who huddled under the stairways below: "You have to take control. You can't let this earthquake get the best of you!"

**I**DON'T know. For me, I've always thought that being messy makes it easier to make friends. I mean, if you're a neat person, when someone comes to your house, do you say, "Oh, please excuse my house, it's so neat"?

With a messy person, you know how it goes: "Oh, I'm so embarrassed! My house is *such* a mess!"

"Oh, really, you should see my house. It's *much* messier."

And then when your visitor goes on to tell you the unthinkable — the time she threw away all the dirty dishes in the sink and bought a whole new set because she couldn't stand the smell anymore.

You become fast friends. I mean, if you can't share your dirty secrets with a friend, who can you share them with?

LISA LIEBERMAN

## Why are the women smiling?

**I** *Three Rivers, Tulare County* WAS RAPED. I was badly beaten up and raped. According to U.S. Department of Justice statistics, more than a fourth of all American women will be raped at some point in their lives.

But that's not headline news. What's been headline news recently is the case of the severed penis, which is about John Bobbitt from Manassas, Va. Authorities say his penis was cut off by his wife, Lorena Bobbitt, after he raped her.

The Examiner headline said, "Women smile and men grimace."

It's easy to see why the men are grimacing. The question is, why are the women smiling?

Rape, an act that's always been every woman's worst nightmare, was answered with emasculation, an act horrifying to men.

Women are angry because rape isn't always taken seriously. It's the only crime where people wonder how much of it was the victim's fault. Did she lead him on? Was she wearing tight clothes? Did she want it?

But what about what the man who gets robbed at gunpoint at the grocery store. Do people wonder what he was wearing? Or how often he shops? Or even if he enjoyed getting robbed?

The idea is ingrained that rape isn't always a crime. Most people wouldn't hesitate to prosecute the person who robbed them at gunpoint. Of the average of 357 rapes that occur every day nationwide, according to statistics from the Department of Justice, only 10 percent get reported. And only 10 percent of those get convicted.

Many women actually think it's their fault.

I've heard more than one rape victim say, "I thought I wanted to have sex with him, but then I changed my mind, so I guess it wasn't rape."

But if a man goes into a shoe store, tries on 10 pairs of shoes, gets out his charge card to pay for a pair and then changes his mind, that shoe salesman hasn't got the right to force him at knife-point to buy those shoes. If he does, it's a crime.

And if a man forces a woman to have sex with him, no matter how willing, eager or promiscuous she seems, if she says no, it's rape. And it's a crime.

But the act of rape goes even beyond the

boundaries of ordinary crime, where the perpetrator seeks to steal money, jewels or other valuables.

Rape is more of an act of war where the rapist harms a person's body with a vicious act that threatens to destroy the inner being.

Rape is a war with no name. It's waged on one individual at a time. There's no notice, no helmets issued, no chance to decide whether or not to enlist, no training on which way to dodge bullets — usually no chance even to run.

**R**APE IS psychological warfare at its worst. We see it happening even now as an instrument of war in Bosnia. If the police reports are accurate, what happened between John and Lorena Bobbitt was clearly an act of war. He fired the first shot when he raped her, and she fired the second one when she cut off his penis. So does that make her right and him wrong? Or him right and her wrong?

As a rape victim myself (before I moved to this little town nestled in the Sierra forests), I understand the frustration and anger of the women who are feeling a gleeful sense of satisfaction over what happened to John Bobbitt. But I don't condone



BARRIE MAGUIRE

this atrocity, nor do I condone the atrocity done to her. Both are wrong.

In any war, there's bound to be death, destruction and casualties on both sides. It's hard to tell what the casualties are going to be in the aftermath of this latest

symbolic battle between men and women, where the links of trust are already precarious.

But one thing's for sure, neither John nor Lorena Bobbitt is going to be getting any dates any time soon.