

Jim Kevin

Simple Problems, Simple Solutions

I first met Steve and Julie in 1994 when I moved to Tennessee to pursue a graduate degree in storytelling at ETSU. They were working on a joint degree in that same program. Over the next four years, I became increasingly impressed by their intelligence, simplicity, directness, honesty, and sense of humor. After graduating from ETSU, I remained in Johnson City and established a small business as a freelance editor. Steve and Julie's sense of hospitality led them to invite me to share their home. I hesitated to accept such a generous offer, because I was not accustomed to such forthright openness. But eventually they prevailed. In January 1998 I moved to Chuckey and took up residence at their home on the banks of the Nolichucky River, for which I gladly offered my editing services to help them complete their thesis.

The newer portion of their home, in which Ben and Erin had rooms, also had a basement recreation room. Ted installed enough amenities there to make that space self-sufficient and comfortable for me. To enter it required walking down an outside path and under an overhanging roof to the only door. That winter proved to be a bleak one. For 42 days the sun did not show its face. A major snowstorm brought down power lines across several counties and produced brilliant blue-green light displays at night that reflected off the low clouds. When the spring thaw came, and rains replaced the snows, it was then I noticed that the gutter above the door to my room was blocked and overflowing. I mentioned the problem to Steve and he agreed to take corrective action.

An hour later I was sitting at my desk, preparing some computer documents, when the roar of a shotgun just outside my window sent me toppling out of my swivel chair. I raced outside expecting to find a newly dead rat, or stray dog, or other denizen of the forest. Steve was climbing the path back to the main house, carrying the smoking gun. Above me a torrent of months-old rainwater cascaded down from a hole in space where the gutter used to be. For the rest of my time there, that gutter never again backed up. Amazing.

An Indicator of Creative Genius

When the FAA moved their headquarters to a new airport in Oklahoma City (near my hometown) long ago, I thought it rather ostentatious of them to name it a "World" airport. That seemed a juvenile exercise in one-upmanship over the numerous "International" airports around the globe. When construction began on Steve's 2300-foot airstrip near Ted's tobacco field off Chuckey Pike, he planned to honor it with the name of Edward Huffaker. Talk of UFOs and the prospect of extraterrestrial visitors was not unknown in the area; and I was stilled galled by the FAA's audacity in naming the Oklahoma airfield. So I suggested that Steve forego all semblance of modesty (which he could manage admirably), and expand the name to "the Edward C. Huffaker Memorial Intergalactic Airstrip." He liked the idea, and even thought it might encourage alien visitors.

Often short on discretionary funds, Steve faced the problem of providing incoming pilots with a wind direction indicator. He had hoped to convince a Knoxville windsock manufacturer to donate a \$20 orange cone to his new Intergalactic Airstrip. At a Florida air show I listened to him try to convince that gentleman of the public relations benefits of such a donation. But Steve was destined to be disappointed in this objective. (The Florida trip cost us much more than \$20.)

A week or so after our return, I drove out to see the construction progress on Huffaker Memorial Airfield and was startled by a flash of white fabric atop a long pole, roughly cut from a nearby pine tree and propped up against the fence at the north end of the landing strip. The breeze made it difficult to distinguish the details of the indicator at first, but during a calm lull I saw clearly that it was a pair of old-fashioned bloomers. Steve later explained, in a matter-of-fact manner, that he had borrowed them from an aunt (whose name discretion forbids me to mention here).

The Great White Shark

Not since childhood had I experienced life in a crime-free setting, where owners could leave house doors and parked cars unlocked. That was one of the memorable aspects of life in Chuckey. I did think it a bit risky, however, to leave car keys in their ignition switches. Steve was fond of his white 1969 Dodge Monaco. He called it the Great White Shark. It had a powerful engine that enabled him to tow aircraft and other items with ease. Curious, though, was his custom of piling bags of food scraps and accumulated household garbage into the Shark and leaving it there for days, for weeks, before his next trip to the county garbage collection station. The first time he invited me to join him on a garbage run to the "Inconvenience Center," so named for its odd business hours, I learned why

his confidence in the Shark's security never wavered. Over 12 large bags of garbage -- the 33-gallon size -- had been sun-ripening inside the car for weeks. (On this occasion, Steve had procrastinated longer than usual.) Though the weather was still chilly, I had to hang my head out the passenger window to keep from gagging on the fumes emanating from the trunk, the back seat, and the sack on the front floor between my feet. It was then I learned that he had no sense of smell. Cruising down the highway, puffing contentedly on a cigar, he spoke eloquently on the coming of springtime, pointing out the driver's window at the greening fields and speculating on the fine flying weather soon to appear. At the opposite window, I was hanging out like a Labrador retriever, struggling to keep my stomach contents where they belonged. I don't think Steve even noticed. When I later asked him about the wisdom of delaying garbage runs for so long, thereby permitting such quantities to pile up (and ferment), he looked at me with an straight-faced expression of total innocence and explained that this was the most effective anti-theft system he had ever developed to protect his most valuable car. I could not argue with that.

Steve was a good teacher. Today I no longer fight the encroaching rust on my vehicle; nor do I wash it or wax it any more to make it look attractive. And when I must leave it untended for a few weeks, I toss a bag of aromatic garbage into the rear compartment and park the car in the sun until I return. It works. And with the money I saved on premiums after canceling my auto theft insurance, I go flying once in a while.