



One Ringy-Dingy...

I Can Hear You Now (But I Wish I Couldn't)

By Maggie Barnes

How does he always know? I stared at my phone in disbelief. Once again, Bobby was calling at the exact moment I didn't want him to.

"Do you have your phone?" I've had to get in the habit of asking my husband this when he is leaving the house, as he has gotten in the habit of forgetting. No big deal, really, but the whole idea of mobile phones is to allow people to get ahold of you if they need you.

Bob thinks the purpose is to annoy him.

"I hate this thing," he grumbles as he walks out again, stuffing the cursed object in his jacket pocket. His distrust of technology in general has fostered an adversarial relationship with that rectangle of metal, glass, and circuitry.

"Maggie wants to know if you need milk," my stepdaughter, Angie, said to her father one weekend.

"Why doesn't she text me?" Bob asked. "Because she wants a reply?" Angie countered.

His lack of cellular response is a tiny flaw and one I have learned to work around. Angie knows that if a tree falls on me in our woods, I will text her to call 911 and trust that Bob will notice the ambulance when it rolls up and come looking for me. Which is why his ability to reach out to me, at the exact moment I have screwed something up, is so maddening.

We had worked hard on a home renovation in our last town and, on the day of a party to celebrate, I was putting away the wood stain we had used on some trim. I still don't know how I did it, but the silly can popped out of my hand, the lid launched to points unknown, and several ounces of the stain danced down the freshly painted walls of the entranceway. As I stood there, the can's

momentum rolling it back and forth around my feet, watching the dark stain stream down the beige wall, my phone rang.

"How's it going? We ready for company?"

"Umm..."

It seems to happen all the time. I swear the barometric pressure around his head shifts, he sniffs the air like a basset hound, and nods, "Yep, my wife just did something stupid." He calls and I am left with the uncomfortable choice of either dancing around the facts or fessing up to being a complete doofus.

On Valentine's weekend we decided on a last-minute getaway, which required boarding Rex, our shepherd-and-six-other-breeds mix. The kennel is atop a hill with lots of room to roam and wrestle, the perfect setting for pups. The driveway to the place can give a human pause though, and I

always navigate the narrow span carefully. Especially on days it snows, which it had on this particular day.

I got Rex dropped off and was heading back out when another car rounded the bend coming toward me. We both stopped. My heart sank with the realization that I was much closer to the parking lot than the other car was to the main road, and the onus would be on me to back up and get out of the way.

I hate backing up.

It's not that I think of reversing in some deep emotional sense—like I'm retreating or compromising and I'm worried my id will suffer. (It's a psych term, children—look it up.) I just have no aptitude for working in the opposite realm, mirrors notwithstanding. Bob, of course, could K-turn a Mississippi riverboat and not spill a drop of the Colonel's bourbon.

I had no choice but to try, and I reminded myself that there was a pull-off several feet behind me. All I had to do was bend the car back around the curve just a teeny bit and pull off on the right side of the road. I went agonizingly slowly, trying to calculate information from the side and rearview mirrors and over my shoulder.

When I got to where the pull-off should have been, I gently cranked the wheel to the right—or is it left?—and nudged my way off the road.

The Jeep immediately dropped off the pavement, sank to its rear axle in snow, and lurched to a stop that expelled an involuntary yelp from my lungs. Figuring it was pointless, I put it in drive and tried to go forward. All that bought forth was that grinding sound that confirms you are stuck—possibly until April. Getting out of the car was labor-intensive, as it was at a severe angle, and I had to shove the driver's door open with my foot and push myself uphill. As I gazed upon my cockeyed ride, two things happened. First, the person who was driving into the parking lot sailed by me without so much as a glance of token sympathy. Second, my phone rang.

I didn't even have to look. I knew.

When there is one pot roast left at Ted's (Ted Clark's Busy Market in Waverly) and I need to know if he wants that much meat, he doesn't answer my text. When I bust my glasses and need him to run my back-up pair to me, there's no response. When he's been out in the ice storm for four hours and I'd like to know if he's still in one piece, I get nothing.

But just let me have an Olympic-class brain cramp, and his nose is in the air.

I stared at the winter blue sky, gulped the spicy air, and debated. I could just ignore it. I could answer and tell him everything is fine. Or I could fish around the universe and find that last sliver of self-respect I had and grind it under 4,856 pounds of SUV.

I leaned in the car, punched the answer button on the dash and chirped, "Hi, babe!" "How did it go dropping the dog off?"

It took nearly an hour of moving snow and a pull from the kennel owner's truck to return the Jeep to pavement. At one point, I looked into the yard and Rex was sitting at the fence with his back to me. "My owner? That idiot? No, my owner knows how to drive."

One male who doesn't pay attention when I screw up, and one male who never misses when I screw up. Is this what they mean by life balance?

Maggie Barnes has won several IRMAs and Keystone Press Awards. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut

Saving the World One Squirrel at a Time

By Maggie Barnes

“We’re all here, so let’s get started.” It was the 10,000th Zoom call of the year. We were planning a commemorative coin if it went well. I settled in for another hour in front of my screen, staring at my colleagues in their corporate *Hollywood Squares* boxes.

My part was over early, so I minimized the screen and worked on other things, while listening to the proceedings. That’s when I noticed my squirrel.

My office has a window looking out on a parking area and fenced-off space for equipment. Last year I saw a little gray squirrel hanging out on the fence and the half wall. Thin, ragged, with a tail that bore evidence of some sort of attack, he wasn’t the least bit cute. But my heart always went out to him. About once a week, I dumped a few handfuls of peanuts on the half wall, and he rewarded me by sitting within my

view while he munched.

A medical leave kept me from being faithful with the peanuts and the squirrel wanted me to know I’d dropped the ball. When I looked out, he stood up on his hind legs, tiny gray paws clasped together, staring at me pleadingly. I thought of the brand-new bag of peanuts in my car on the other side of the campus and fought the age-old battle of logic versus emotion.

“I can’t,” I said through the window. “I’m on a call.”

He continued to stare.

After ten minutes, my heart couldn’t take it. I was calculating the time left in the meeting and the distance to my car when my eyes fell on the large jar of cashews I keep in my office for afternoon snack attacks.

That’s it!

“Hang on, buddy, I’ve got a treat for you.”

I grabbed the jar and headed outside. I arrived to find him sitting on the fence, regarding me silently.

As I dumped a hefty portion of cashews on the half wall, I chatted away at him.

“I know, I’ve been gone for a while, but this will make up for it. Something special!”

I trotted around the building, clutching the jar of cashews and feeling proud of myself.

Like most corporate settings, we have only one entrance open these days where you are screened for COVID every time you enter. The screener raised her brows at the cashews but waved me through.

Back to my desk. Back to the meeting. I watched the squirrel push the cashews around with his paws, seemingly unsure whether he should take one. Odd. I mean he’s a squirrel, it’s a nut, what’s the issue here? He finally selected one and headed back to

the fence.

The meeting continued on.

Idly, I Googled “Do squirrels like cashews?”

The website that came up blasted me with a bolded message— You should never feed squirrels cashews of any kind!

I snapped to attention at my monitor and read the whole entry. Apparently, a high level of phosphorous in cashews depletes the squirrels of calcium. One or two is okay, but more are toxic.

Holy crap.

A second later I watched the little fella pop the cashew in his mouth.

I leapt from my seat and waved my arms frantically. Keeping my voice down to avoid alerting my co-workers, I hissed at the window.

“Spit that out! You can’t have that!”

I looked at my heaping gift of poison pills, then at the squirrel and began to panic. Great. I was about to single-handedly wipe out the gray squirrel population in East Elmira.

As I watched in horror, he snagged another.

Two down. One more and his bones would fall out of his body. I envisioned his suddenly frameless body draped over the fence like an unmanned hand puppet. Wonder how many chest compressions you do on a squirrel?

I had to get those nuts back.

Ten minutes left in the meeting.

Out the door again, I ran the length of the campus to the employee parking lot. Well, what passes for my running. I looked like a person trying to smuggle two stolen brooms down my pant legs. Drove my car around the block and parked closer to my office. Grabbed the bag of peanuts and trotted around the building. My friend was back on the fence, second cashew at the ready.

“No! Put that down, you can’t have it!”

Into his mouth it went.

Frantic now, I dumped half the bag of peanuts on the wall. “No more! Are you feeling okay? Are your bones brittle or anything?”

Making a pocket with the tail of my shirt, I scraped up the cashews and folded them against me. I figured I was about three minutes ahead of the security detail I was sure had been dispatched.

“Look, I screwed this up. I didn’t know. Whoever would think you, of all creatures, have a nut allergy?”

Juggling my car keys, the open bag of peanuts and the shirt filled with cashews, I headed back for the a garbage can, then staggered the length of the building again to go in for my third screening of the day.

The nurse looked at the bag of peanuts, the remnants of the cashews on my shirt, and my sweating face.

“Do you walk all your nuts on Thursdays?”

I looked straight ahead. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She took my temperature and tilted the scanner. “Slightly elevated.” Above her mask, her blue eyes twinkled.

“Shut up, Lucy.” And I kept walking.

The next morning the peanuts were gone and the squirrel was still there.

I’ll start him on calcium supplements next week.

Maggie Barnes has won several IRMAs and Keystone Press Awards. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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Over the River and Through the Woods

When Tradition's a Force to be Reckoned With

By Maggie Barnes

“Mom wants to do Thanksgiving this year.” I paused in my losing battle with the leaf pile to squint through autumn sunlight at my husband on the deck.

“She does? I’m surprised, but it’s okay with me.”

It was the first holiday season since the death of my father-in-law, and I didn’t anticipate Mom wanting to tackle the biggest meal of the year. But Rosalie was nothing if not sure of her own ability, so I didn’t see a problem. Until Bob went on.

“It will have to be later than usual. Eric and Angie both have to work.”

Ah, there’s the problem.

Like most folks of her generation, Mom could be a bit...set in her ways. Like a flagpole in cement. For my husband’s entire life, Thanksgiving was one of those stalwart traditions you could set your

watch by. The men went out early for hunting, came back in for a feast at 2 p.m., then caught the last of the daylight for another attempt in the woods. It had never been any other way. Asking for dinner to be, say, four hours later, was like requesting the Statue of Liberty to shift the torch to her other hand.

The change was mandated by another aspect of life that Mom simply did not agree with—the undeniable fact her grandchildren were growing up. Two of our three kids were in the workforce now and, being the new person, pulled the holiday shift. I’d suspected Mom was digging in her heels on this concept earlier in the year at Angie’s birthday. Grandmother insisted on making her cake and it was lovely, an elaborate creation with a Barbie doll in the center and the doll’s skirt made of cake with swirling pink frosting.

Minor problem—it was Angie’s sixteenth birthday. Forget Barbie’s dream house—she wanted the convertible.

Now, we were facing one of the true milepost markers on the calendar and asking her to adapt to a new timetable. Trepidation began buzzing in the back of my brain, as we drove to Mom’s in the dark of Thanksgiving evening. David, our youngest at twelve, was chirping away in the backseat like a happy robin, anticipating his favorite meal of the year.

“You all better take your mashed potatoes first,” he laughed, “because I’m gonna clean out the bowl!” No idle threat—I had seen the kid inhale a mountain of spuds before. My mother-in-law was an excellent cook and everything from the rolls to the cherry pie would be memorable.

We barely got in the door when Mom

hustled us to the table. Platters of food were shuttled out of the kitchen and the first sign of trouble was the turkey. When I tried to spear a slice, it disintegrated. Just broke apart like plaster. My husband and I locked eyes across the table. As the bowls circulated around the table, the kids’ chatter began to quiet. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched David use his spoon to push the hardened mashed potatoes off the ladle. He opened his mouth, but I gave him a stern look to stay silent. Eric moved the gravy boat in circles, peering into it as though trying to determine whether it was a liquid or a solid. Choking erupted from Angie when she sampled the dressing, and her brothers pounded her back with the enthusiasm natural to siblings.

Our little group was realizing Grandma hadn’t adjusted her timetable to accommodate latecomers. Dinner, as always, was ready at 2 p.m. Too bad for us we weren’t there.

When Mom set the cherry pie in the center of the table, I covered my eyes.

Normally, her pies were things of beauty, bursting with luscious fruit encased in a cookbook-worthy golden crust. What stood before us bore a shape that could be described as concave. The crust, dark brown and brittle, sloped down inside the tin to a depth of maybe a half inch.

David looked sadly at the dehydrated tart where his cherished pie was supposed to be.

“Good grief, Grandma!” he erupted. “Did you use more than four cherries?”

The cork was out of the bottle and the kids rewound the tape on the entire meal.

“Was that gravy or creamed corn?”

“Save me a roll in case I ever have to break a window.”

“Who needs paste when you have those potatoes?”

Mom was undisturbed as laughter bounced around the room and we practically tumbled out of our chairs. She knew the dinner had been beautiful at dinnertime. Bob suddenly developed a twitch and I chewed on the inside of my cheek to keep from joining in the hilarity. Angie leaned over and wrapped her arms around her grandmother.

“It’s okay, Grandma, we still love you,” she grinned.

Chin in the air and her dignity very much intact, my mother-in-law turned and glared at her son.

“Six o’clock is not a decent hour for Thanksgiving dinner!” She was right, the rest of the world was wrong, and that was that.

Still giggling, we took care of the dishes, then dug out a frozen pizza when we got home.

For our family, Thanksgiving stayed a moveable feast whose timing fluctuated with work schedules and other commitments. Never mind when it was scheduled, Mom always arrived at the “proper” time—1 p.m.—regardless of when we were eating. It was just her way.

David makes awesome mashed potatoes these days—his secret ingredient is ranch dressing; and Angie has blossomed into quite a baker. They take after their grandmother. And every year, we recount that memorable Thanksgiving and renew our love for a lady who believed in tradition at any price—including indigestion.

Maggie Barnes has won several IRMAs and Keystone Press Awards. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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