

Barefoot in the Park

by *Ted Roberts*

There's an old story about two young brothers who loved to play in the woods around their house. In their games the clearings became the buffalo prairies of the west and the trees, on windy days, were galleons that sailed the seven seas. On quiet days the trees became the ramparts of castles that the boys manned against their invisible foes.

There was one flaw in this fairyland—real snakes lived in the woods along with the imaginary buffaloes, galleons, and castles.

So the mother of the two adventurers urged them to wear shoes—even better, boots. “Snakes bite,” lectured Mama. And one of the boys nodded violently and started strapping on his boots.

But the other reflected that plush, velvety cool grass feels good on bare soles; and wading through the sandy-bottom creek between the buffalo prairie and the fortress is better than bubble gum. I'll take my chances, he thought.

Well, that's where the story ends. We never know how the gamble turns out, but we assume that the booted brother never was snake-bit and the barefoot boy always enjoyed the cool green under his feet.

The story says more about life than the whole philosophy section in your public

library. Some of us wear boots. Some wear shoes. Some of us go barefoot.

My good friend Herb goes barefoot. He's a biker, but uses the helmet his wife gave him to decorate the mantelpiece. He even leaves his car keys overnight in the car—which boldly squats in the driveway daring any car thieves who happen to work the neighborhood. “So far,” says the barefoot boy, “I've gotten away with it for 6,352 mornings.” He keeps score.

I tell him about the snakes—so to speak. The risk. He tells me how convenient it is not to conduct a safari every morning searching for his shy, elusive key chain. It's bad enough, says Herb, that he's gotta shave, wash up, find his briefcase and wallet. Then he must remember to kiss wife, Hilda, goodbye.

But he always remembers to bend over a plate of ham and eggs flanked by two slices of buttered toast. “Exponential multipliers of LDL,” says Hilda when she's in a mathematical mood. One morning she substituted niacin-fortified bran fiber muffins—for the toast. “Keeps you regular,” stated Hilda.

Herb, who usually whispers his marital complaints to the cat, yelled so violently that the startled animal took a suicide plunge off the kitchen counter into a shallow bowl of 1 percent low-fat, non-nutritional skim milk. It sits next to her meal of cat food, enriched with urinary tract supplements. (Hilda's in charge of the cat.)

As you can tell, Herb's house is in turmoil

Ted Roberts (ted@HiWAAY.net) is a freelance writer in Huntsville, Alabama, who often writes on public-policy issues.

over the gods of our new century: health and personal safety.

What an era for H.L. Mencken (who'd die laughing) and P.T. Barnum (who'd die rich). And Chicken Little (who'd be our prophet and king).

Herb reads a lot of black headlines about global warming.

"I knew something was up when I noticed that my heat bill went *down* this past February."

I explained to my carefree friend that more data is required than just one heat bill.

"You might need five or six scattered through the fall and winter months," I warned, displaying my knowledge of the scientific method.

Some scientists agree. They argue that even ten years of data say little about a "trend" on a planet that is *literally* "older than dirt."

I remember the old brick-in-the-toilet-trick. We learned about it in the '70s, when there was a three-year arid spell; a mere blink of Mama Nature's eyes. Rainmakers franchised their act. Indian medicine men were leading aerobic rain dance classes for depressed farmers. It was easier to get a glass of sparkling champagne than fresh water in a New York restaurant. Reservoirs in the northeast United States were showing their bottoms of rusty bed springs, Mafia skeletons, and slick truck tires.

That's when the brick-in-the-toilet-tank became popular. I learned about it at a cocktail party, while I was talking to a neighbor who had consumed just enough gin to

remain standing, but too much to talk. A perfect conversation partner.

So, as he dozed on his feet I told him that a house down the street, like mine, had just sold for some significant fraction of a million dollars. This was in the days when a man's castle was his mint.

"Well, that's cute," said my swaying pal, "but I've got a brick in my toilet tank." (Why was I wasting my data on a drunk with a brick obsession?) And he went on to say that if 50 million Americans did the same, we'd save an immense number of gallons of water.

The brick mania spread like wildfire as a cocktail party topic. There was talk of the size of the brick. And its density. (If it were over-porous—well, what's the point?) Then there was the "why not two?" school. Double the savings. And if it worked in the toilet—how 'bout a "bathe with a brick" campaign. Even the washing machine was susceptible to the brick concept if you didn't mind a little grit in your underwear.

We mortals continued to talk about the desiccation of planet Earth until a puckish Mother Nature, who sneers at our puny extrapolations, deluged us with three years of incredibly lavish rainfall. Cocktail party talk shifted to lifeboats and levee construction.

And so it goes. There's drought, flooding, asbestos, red meat, nuclear energy, ozone depletion, charcoaled hot dogs, tobacco, and booze. They'll all do you in. But so will fear and trembling. Try going barefoot once in a while. □

