

Joe Cuhaj's Shorts

by Joe Cuhaj



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Introduction

While most people know me for my outdoor recreation books and now non-fiction history, my real passion is writing short stories, in particular, humorous short stories about growing up that we can all relate to, all loosely based on faulty memories, and that's where my writing career began.

My love of writing short stories was fostered by listening to my radio and literary idol, Jean Shepherd. When I was growing up in northern New Jersey in the 60s and early 70s, my radio dial was always tuned to WOR radio out of New York City and in particular to Jean's radio show where he would tell the funniest tales about everyday life and growing up. If you're not familiar with Jean, you will remember his most popular work, the movie, *A Christmas Story*, that was culled from his book, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*.

After four years in the U.S. Navy, I began my own writing career...well, attempted to start it by writing and submitting stories to magazines. I also started my radio career working at various stations in the New York City area (WWUU) and later Mobile, AL where I would tell my stories on my own late night radio show on WUNI and WMML radio.

Well, since that time, I have branched out to write those outdoor recreation guides, non-fiction history books, travel web content, and more, but the short stories keep on coming.

As a gift to you for stopping by my table and chatting, I thought I would combine three of my favorite stories into a handout for you to enjoy. All of the stories here are true, all loosely based on faulty memories.

The first story is called, *Johnson Smith, We Love You*. It is about my gang of friends, affectionately known as "the gang" (clever, right?) and our addiction to the fantastic practical jokes we could buy from our favorite company, the Johnson Smith Company, and an incident that occurred after we purchased a pair of the incredible, amazing X-Ray Glasses.

We have all experienced the incredible feeling one gets when they are first bitten by the love bug. The next story is about when the love bug first bit me and is called, *Love is a Many Splintered Thing*, the story of the first time I asked a girl out on a date, my friend Badger's sister and one of the gang, Denise.

The final story is called *A Wish Book Christmas*. It's more of a rambling piece about Christmas traditions. Do you remember the Sear's Wish Book? It was one of those iconic Christmas treasures that we all waited for as kids so we could start building our list for Santa. And brother, what things they had in that book.

I hope you enjoy my little gift to you and hope that these stories bring you smiles, laughs, and good memories.

BONUS!!!

As a bonus, you can listen to these and many more of my short stories on the *Joe Cuhaj's Shorts Podcast*. Just visit the podcast website:

<http://www.joe-cuhaj.com/joe-cuhaj-s-shorts.html>

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Johnson Smith, We Love You

Johnson Smith. To the unappreciative eye, those two names are just that: two non-descript, plain-Jane, names. There is nothing notable about them except for the fact that half the weight of your standard phone book – remember those? – comes from the sheer number of pages containing either one of those two names – Johnson or Smith.

To the un-knowing, the un-cool, the un-hip, those two names simply looked like the name of an ambulance chasing law firm or maybe the not-so-clever alias of a person on the lamb trying to evade the law. But there was a time in the not too distant past when the youth of America knew exactly who those people were, or actually, who this *person* was. Yes, Johnson Smith was a single person but that combination of names was the moniker for a fraternity, a brotherhood that linked generations of kids together with precocious pranks from the 1950's through the 1970's.

Legend has it that Johnson Smith was a gentleman who founded the company of the same name that brought an incredible amount of joy and whimsy to generations of young men and

women across the land. The company was the greatest purveyor of useless gadgets and practical jokes in the universe. They brought to the world such contraptions as *Radiation Locator Rods*, the *Whiskey Sandwich*, and *Instant Chest Hair*, but more importantly, they were conduits to the world's greatest practical jokes.

It's hard to believe but this simple company, with all of today's faster than light, golly-gee electronics and gadgets, still clings to life and remains open for business to this very day, albeit relegated to "I'm with Stupid" t-shirts and *Bart Simpson* bobble head dolls. But back in its heyday, man, what a company it was. A business designed and dedicated to perpetuating the practical joke. What would the business plan for such a venture be? "Mission: To humiliate members of the human race with simple but tantalizingly irresistible jokes."

Better yet, imagine what the conversation would have been like between Mr. Smith and his banker when he headed downtown for a startup loan:

"So, it's dog vomit?" the banker would ask.

"Yes, plastic dog vomit," Mr. Smith would reply.

"And what does it do?" The banker would ask.

"Put it anywhere – dining room table, kitchen counter, anywhere – then when some unknowing person walks in and discovers it -- "

And Mr. Smith would rock back in his chair rolling with hysterical laughter.

"Isn't it a hoot?" Mr. Smith would finally say after regaining his composure.

"So you want me to give you money for fake dog vomit?" the banker would ask.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Every kid dreamed of working for the company, inventing the next great practical joke that would fool the world and which, knowing youthful boyhood mentality, would most likely have something to do with flatulence, fire, or girls.

The Johnson Smith ads of the 60s and 70s were straightforward, no-nonsense affairs promising hilarious results for the perpetrators with simple line drawings of someone having their hand electrocuted by a Joy Buzzer, a woman squirted in the face by a water-spewing rose boutonniere, or a kid rolling on the ground trying to stop the scratching induced by itching powder. Oh, the slapstick inhumanity one could inflict with this stuff.

The ads were a weekly highlight of the comic buying set. They were usually located inside the front or back covers of *Batman*, *Superman*, or *Marvel* comics and were full-page wonders. Every month the gang would fill our Radio Flyer wagons high with old pop bottles and in a long procession of squeaking, rusty wheels, would return them to a grocery store to get some cold hard cash. Usually it was just a few nickels and dimes but just enough so that when the end of the month arrived, each one of us was able to streak into the sweet shop on the edge of town, make a beeline straight for the magazine rack, and plunk down our money for the latest adventures of our superheroes. We would rush back outside, plop ourselves down on the curb in front of the store, and head straight for the Johnson Smith ad.

Oh, those ads. Sheer marketing genius. They hooked us every week, sucking us in like a giant vortex into their slightly warped world. We would spend hours pointing, oohing and aahing

at their masterful appliances, dreaming of the precocious pranks we could pull if only we could afford to buy them. Every once in a while we would actually cough up enough cash from returning those pop bottles or selling Kool-Aid in front of our houses from cardboard box stands to buy a prank or two. Like many, the first practical joke we were drawn to was the *Whoopee Cushion*.

Flatulence extraordinaire yet simplicity itself. The Whoopee Cushion was a partially inflated bladder with a narrow nozzle at one end. When carefully and secretly placed under a seat cushion, this gem of a practical joke was sure to embarrass even the most unflappable victim. When the unsuspecting party sat down on it – BRAT! Instant fart! Genius! How many times had we perpetrated this bit of tomfoolery on our teacher, Mrs. Hammelshmitt? Each time was just as funny as the first.

From there the jokes we tried became more and more daring and outlandish. Creep loved his *Joy Buzzer*. The Joy Buzzer was a simple spring loaded device that you would wound up and place in the palm of your hand. On top of the winding mechanism was a small button. When you shook hands with someone, the unsuspecting victim would grab hold of your hand and unbeknownst to them, press the button. They would be scared half to death because they thought they were being electrocuted when in reality, the device merely vibrated insanely as it unwound and made an obnoxiously loud buzz. Our buddy Creep carried it with him everywhere and used it liberally.

There was Black Soap which was actually a small bar of white hand soap. Place it in a soap dish in the nearest bathroom and wait for the fun as someone began washing their face and hands with it. Slowly, the white outer coating dissolved away leaving a coal-black bar of soap that would turn the victim's face and hands midnight black.

The list seemed endless: pepper flavored gum guaranteed to burn the chewer's tongue. Sneezing powder that caused the victim to sneeze uncontrollably. Snapping gum that when someone removed a stick from the pack – snap! Their finger would be clipped as if it were caught in a mouse trap. And on and on and on the list went.

One ad, however, stood out above all the rest. It caught our eye week after week, beckoning us to buy it, but none of us in the gang were brave enough to do so. It was the incredible, astonishing, world famous, scientific miracle of the century –the X-Ray Glasses.

X-Ray Glasses were a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses and as the Johnson Smith ad depicted, had hypnotic swirly lenses. There were two ads for the glasses. The first hinted that by wearing them, the user could actually see through skin clear through to a person's bones. The second ad, and the one that we favored the most being young boys in our formative years just learning that there was something special about girls that we just couldn't put our finger on, showed that the wearer could look through a woman's dress and see her – *gasp* – naked body. Never did we question the impossibility of being able to only see through clothes one minute then deep into a human body the next to see a person's skeleton. We weren't rocket scientists after all, but the prior was tantalizing.

Deep within the testosterone-induced haze of our youthful boy brains the X-Ray Glasses beckoned. We were young, naïve, just learning about the birds and bees and curious as every red-blooded all-American boy is at that age. With that in mind, one would think that all of us would have jumped at the chance to own a pair of these modern marvels, but that's the conundrum. It was a fine line between being labeled a hero or a pervert, and no one wanted to be labeled a "perv."

Case in point. May I present to you exhibit A: A young man happens to stroll into his parent's bedroom. He happens to see an open dresser drawer and happens to find himself rummaging through the drawer. Quite by accident, he happens to come across a copy of his old man's *Playboy* magazine. High tailing it out of the house with bounty in hand, he quickly becomes the hero of his gang for having delivered such a coveted prize. Then suddenly, from out of nowhere, Nancy Wickmyer appears and walks over to the group of guys who are huddled around the glossy pages snickering and giggling. The young man's fate hangs in the balance.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Nancy asks sticking her head into the huddle.

Peering in and seeing them gawking at a 3-page fold out of Miss February, she bolts upright and unleashes a blood curdling cry of, "Oh my God!"

Quickly the gang's defenses go into a state of high alert. Fingers are pointed blindly at one another until they all light upon the fellow who brought the magazine into the fold in the first place.

"He did it!" they shout. "He forced us to look at it!"

Nancy tosses her head back, nose high in the air, hands on her hips and bellows, "Pervert!" and scurries off. It was the twentieth century equivalent of the Scarlet Letter.

Such was the dilemma with the X-Ray Glasses. Man, to have those little wonders in your hands and catch a glimpse of class hottie Gianna Rosalini. The owner of the specs could be a hero, a goat, or indelibly labeled a pervert. It was a real pickle.

One afternoon the gang was summoned by Fred Badger to the clubhouse, a massive tree house made from scrap lumber found around the neighborhood. The fortress was precariously anchored to the limbs of an enormous oak tree with bent and rusty nails that were salvaged from the same wood. This rustic looking cabin was the site of many overnight adventures and boyhood pranks. It creaked and groaned with the weight of the entire gang in attendance and on this day, we were. Badger said he had an important announcement to make so we were all there.

Tree house etiquette dictated that the person who called such an important meeting could be fashionably late for dramatic effect. And he was. Badger was the last to arrive. A hush fell over the room as Badger stepped off the ladder and into the fragile building. A loud groan emanated from the floorboards as the building reached its weight bearing capacity. He walked to the far end and turned briskly around on his heel to face us, then spoke.

"Guys," he began obviously holding something behind his back, "I'm not usually one to brag — "

"Get on with it!" Creep shouted. The gang mumbled a unified "yeah" in agreement.

Badger coughed lightly to clear his throat. “Fellas, may I present to you the Eighth Wonder of the World!”

His hand slipped from around his back revealing its contents to all of those assembled. It was a pair of...a pair of... sunglasses?

“Authentic *X-Ray Glasses!*” he announced triumphantly.

We all looked at the glasses in his hand, and then looked up at Badger, then at the glasses. They looked like plain old black horn-rimmed sunglasses. Not even sunglasses. They were...who knows what.

“They aren’t X-Ray Glasses,” I chided. “Where’s the swirly lenses?”

“Dunno,” he answered.

“Those aren’t real!” Creep jumped in.

“Are too,” Badger insisted, “paid a buck and a half for ‘em!”

“Those are Polaroid’s,” Creep ribbed. “You swiped ‘em out of your mom’s car!”

All moms of the day had a pair of Polaroid sunglasses, the most popular style resembled the specs that Jackie Kennedy wore. They were chic and the “hip” thing to wear. You would usually see a pair of the glasses resting with a carefree attitude about them on top of the owner’s head that was also draped in a flowery scarf that neatly protected her hairspray shellacked hairdo. The specs were never used for actual eye protection, but calling these things that Badger held before us Polaroid sunglasses was an insult even to those crummy shades. Heck, these things had flimsy red cellophane lenses.

“They ain’t Polaroid’s,” Badger said. “These are the real thing!”

“Where are the swirly lenses?” I asked again.

“Forget the swirly lenses!” Badger shouted becoming increasingly frustrated. “I just got them in the mail from the Johnson Smith Company!”

“Polaroid’s,” Creep said calmly.

“No swirly things,” I added.

“Doesn’t matter,” Badger shouted now exasperated from our downplaying of this monumental event. “I’ll prove it to you! We’ll take these babies out for a test run. Let’s head downtown.”

As the gang began to make their way toward the exit, I stopped them and made my own announcement. I had been shopping the Johnson Smith catalog myself.

“Yeah, well I’ve got something to show you, too,” I said nonchalantly.

I held out my hands. In the right hand was a clear plastic bag that contained five fake firecrackers. These gems looked like miniature sticks of dynamite with long fuses. The tube was hollow. There was no black powder in them and were not dangerous by any means, but what a hoot when you lit the fuse and you tossed the sparking fire cracker harmlessly toward an unsuspecting passerby where it fizzled out but their reaction to a fire cracker at their feet was priceless.

In the other hand was a second bag that contained ten snake pellets. These babies were little gray pellets that when ignited with a match billowed smoke and the pellet expanded into a 5-foot long ashen snake.

Life was good back then. It was pure youthful innocence as we tried to learn about life's mysteries and things that burn. At that age, unless there was flatulence involved, it didn't get any better.

We scampered down the tree and ran all the way to town landing in front of Schwartz's Five and Dime. It's where Greg and I found our prey for the fake firecrackers. Sitting on a bench in front of the store was a group of girls from our school, Brookside Elementary. Greg grabbed one of the fake firecrackers, lit the fuse, and as it began to spark, he tossed it among the girls. Seeing the firecracker fizzling at their feet, the girls screamed and ran for cover expecting it to explode at any second. We rolled with laughter as the fuse fizzled out harmlessly.

I abruptly stopped laughing as an idea slowly formed in my mind. Yes! What an idea! I put two and two together and came up with an ingenious plan. When the snake pellets were lit, they belched out a foul smelling green cloud of smoke. Why not grind up the pellets and put them inside the fake firecrackers? A smoke bomb! Sheer genius! Now, before you get ideas, we were not that devious. We would not throw them at anybody. We just wanted to see if it would work.

Greg and I set about grinding up three or four snake pellets with a small rock we had found nearby and stuffed them into the hollow tube of one of the firecrackers. As we went about our task, Creep had a question for Badger.

"Did you ever think that maybe, just maybe, if those things you have are really X-Ray Glasses that the radiation in them might be too powerful and they just might burn your eyes out and you'll never see again?"

Badger thought about that for a moment. It was something he hadn't considered, going blind from an almost lethal dose of radiation caused by the glasses. But then the thought of class hotty Gianna Rosalini and what the X-Ray Glasses held in store for him crossed his mind. This was a chance worth taking.

Badger's concentration was broken as the one and only Gianna Rosalini stepped out of the five and dime. It was as if she had stepped right out of Badger's dream.

"Hi, boys," she cooed, flicking that long hair of hers seductively causing the boys in the gang to melt like butter in a frying pan.

"Ah, h-h-hi, Gianna," Badger and Creep stuttered.

Greg and I were oblivious to the encounter. We were just finishing stuffing the last fake firecracker with snake pellets. Greg lit the fuse and the firecracker sparked to life. At that exact same moment, police officer Harrison rounded the corner. Meanwhile, Badger was preparing to put on his X-Ray Glasses.

In an event that had better timing than the finest Swiss watch, I glanced over and saw Officer Harrison approaching. We had to ditch the evidence. Quickly thinking, Greg tossed the smoke bomb away. It bounced two or three times before finally landing at Badger's feet.

Badger had just put on the glasses and in that same instant, the smoke bomb let out a belching black and green cloud, engulfing him in its veil with a stench that was far worse than the New Jersey swamps on a hot summer day.

The smoke enveloped him completely causing him to choke and wheeze. He blindly stepped out of the cloud like the Phoenix rising. His eyes were turning red and puffy as they began streaming tears. The puffiness continued to worsen until...

"The radiation!" Badger screamed. "I CAN'T SEE!"

Badger's eyes had swollen shut and he began to panic. He frantically ran around blindly running into telephone poles, mailboxes, and phone booths. Greg and I stepped back and nonchalantly leaned on the brick wall of the five and dime, looking around with a, "Hm? What? Did something just happen? We didn't do anything" attitude.

Seeing what had happened, Officer Harrison jumped into action and ran over to help Badger. Mr. Schwartz had also seen the incident through his store window and ran out to the street with a damp rag in his hand that he quickly placed over Badger's eyes. You have to remember that these were hardier times, a time when an injury like this didn't require the victim to be airlifted to the nearest hospital like these days. Hack off a finger? Don't worry about it. It'll be okay. Just stick some first aid cream and put a Band-Aid on it.

In a few short minutes it was over. The puffiness and redness subsided and Badger was able to see again.

Officer Harrison stood up straight and looked at the gang who had gathered around to watch what was happening and then said in a scolding voice, "Looks like he'll be fine, but when will you boys ever learn? Someone could be seriously injured with these pranks of yours."

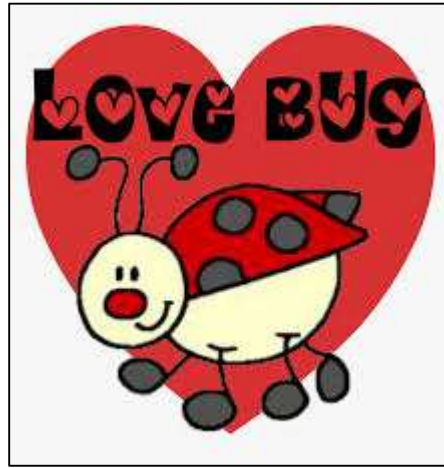
"Yes, Officer Harrison," the gang said in unison, our heads hanging low.

"We're sorry, sir," Creep said. "We won't do it again."

Officer Harrison looked at Creep with a suspicious eye, sizing him up to see if he was being honest, then a big toothy grin spread across his face and leaning over, the officer stuck his hand out to shake Creep's.

"Lesson learned!" he said cheerfully as he grabbed Creep's hand.

There was the loud BUZZZZZZZZZZ of Creep's Joy Buzzer followed by the officer's shrill scream that faded off into the distance as we ran off chuckling after a good day of practical joking.



Love is a Many Splintered Thing

“There is only one happiness in this life – to love and be loved.”

George Sand.

“A flower cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love.”

Max Muller.

“Love is something that is sent from heaven that will worry the hell out of you!”

Dolly Parton.

There have been some pretty deep philosophical discussions and poetic musings on the subject of love over the ages. Throughout recorded history, mankind’s greatest philosophers have chimed in on the subject. I’m talking about the giants like Plato, Socrates, Groucho.

Love. It really is what makes the world go round and it all starts with that itty-bitty, teeny-weenie thing we call the Love Bug. When the Love Bug bites, it bites hard, especially that very first time.

I bet you can remember the very first time you were bitten by the Love Bug. It was a feeling that was almost indescribable – your body went weak, your head started spinning. It was a feeling that washed over you like waves on a sandy beach. It took your breath away. You had no idea what was happening to you. You might have even thought you were dying, but no. You weren’t dying. You had been bitten by the Love Bug.

For many, the first time the Love Bug bites comes at a very inopportune moment of your life. It strikes during that purgatory period of time when you are no longer a kid, but you are not an adult, either. It's that Twilight Zone period of life when you are confused about life itself. The opposite sex intrigues you but you're not sure why. Your body is changing and that pipsqueak voice of yours starts turning into something unrecognizable as you try in vain to squeak out words without sounding like a dork. And while all of this is happening, you are moving up the educational ladder as you graduate from elementary school into the seventh and eighth grade. And that, my friends, is when most of us are first bitten by the Love Bug, including me.

Most school systems today call the seventh and eighth grades middle school, the interim grades between elementary and high school. Where I grew up, they called it junior high school, and it was called that for a very good reason – we would actually be attending school on the high school campus.

So there I was, in this weird period of my life where I was already confused and stressed out about what life had in store for me outside of the comfy confines of elementary school, preparing myself to be thrown to the lions. I was about to start attending a school that was filled with kids that were much older than me. I'm talking about seventeen and eighteen-year old high school seniors, many of whom I had hoped I would never see again once they made this same journey up the educational ladder. You know the ones I'm talking about. They were the kids that knocked the books out of your hand for no reason at all, kicked you in the groin just because, used your face for target practice with slush balls in the dead of winter, and gave you perpetual wedgies. Here they were, on the high school campus, waiting, lurking, prowling like a lion in tall waving savannah grass to once again pounce upon their prey.

We had some terrifying kids in my school. There was "Weasel" Willie Jordan who would rather flick your ear as hard as he could with his finger than say "hello" to you. There was Janet "Deranged" DeBartollo. She was just plain crazy. And the meanest of them all – "Knuckles" Nesmith. To this day, the mere mention of his name sends shivers down my spine.

I clearly remember the day the Love Bug took a chunk out of me. It was the early 1970s and I had just finished my first week of seventh grade. When the bell rang that Friday afternoon, I bolted out of the door and ran off to meet up with the gang.

I rushed into my friend Badger's house and flew down the stairs into his basement where all of us were going to meet up and watch a New York Yankees baseball game on television. There wasn't anything special about this basement. It was your typical cellar with drab gray cinder block walls, a washer and dryer, exposed water pipes, an oil burning furnace, an old clunky Frigidaire refrigerator that made the lights in the house dim when the compressor kicked on, and that distinct musty smell of a basement that never seemed to go away.

But the basement also had some accommodating amenities that made it the perfect gathering place for the gang, like a big frumpy couch with cushions that were so worn that when you sat on them you would almost disappear from the world as you sank deep down into them. There were two well-worn 1960s armchairs covered in brilliant gold fabric that would send up a cloud of dust at the least little touch. Between the furniture sat a coffee table that always had a

bowl full of pretzel sticks on it. No one was sure how long the pretzels had been there. And finally, along one wall, there was an old grainy Magnavox black and white TV with a set of rabbit ears on top that were covered in aluminum foil that helped provide better reception.

I nodded a silent greeting to the gang as I walked down the stairs into the basement. As I passed the fridge, I grabbed an A&W Root Beer, a handful of the dust covered pretzels from the coffee table, and plunked myself down on the couch next to Badger who was deep into the game that was already in progress.

“Bottom of the ninth, two outs,” Badger said without looking away from the TV, “Orioles are up 5-4.”

“Where did this guy ‘Waslewski’ come from?” I asked as number 54 strode to the plate for the Yankees.

“Montreal,” my buddy Stretch said sipping at his own root beer then wiping the foam from his lips with his sleeve. “He played only six games up there before being dumped.”

Stretch was our sports go-to guy, a virtual human *Who’s Who in Baseball*.

And with that brief introduction by Stretch, number 54 summarily struck out on three pitches. Game over. The Yanks had booted another one.

Badger picked up the TV’s remote control which was about the size of a shoe box with only two buttons on it – on and off – and clicked the off button. The gray image shrank to just a mere point of light in the center of the screen where it paused before flickering out.

“So, Joe,” Badger said with a pretzel stick hanging out of his mouth as he gazed thoughtfully at the remaining fistful he held in his hand. “How was your first week in seventh grade? Did you meet up with Knuckles?”

The gang laughed.

“No,” I said as I sank lower into the couch. “No I didn’t, but when I do, Knuckles and I have a score to settle!”

Everyone laughed even harder knowing that when Knuckles finally caught up with me, I would be mincemeat.

“Let me tell you,” I continued sounding quite brave, “when I see Knuckles, I’m gonna – “

I stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. My train of thought had been derailed, hurled off the tracks by a voice. It was a voice that I had heard many, many times before over the years but today, that voice sounded different. It was a voice that would turn my already topsy-turvy world of starting junior high upside down. It came without warning and was the furthest thing from my mind, but it happened.

“Hi, Joe,” a sweet young voice said with only the slightest hint of a Jersey accent. It was Badger’s sister, Denise.

I had known Denise from time immemorial, since the dawn of time, or my limited time anyway. She was also in the seventh grade while her brother was a year behind us. Denise had been part of the gang for as long as I could remember. She was our rock, our foundation, the one who would talk the rest of us down when we tried doing something stupid. She was one of my best friends, but tonight, that voice was somehow different.

“I didn’t know you were here,” she said almost as an afterthought as she walked past us, gliding through the basement and stepping outside into the adjoining garage.

I sat there dumbfounded as I watched her disappear through the door. I was paralyzed. I couldn’t move. Words wouldn’t come out of my mouth. I felt myself starting to sweat, my body started shaking. What was going on with me? She walked back into the room.

“Good to see you, Joe,” she said as she started walking back up the stairs. “We’ll catch up sometime this weekend.”

All I could muster was a feeble, “Uh... uh...okay.”

She scurried up the stairs and I sat there staring at the empty stairwell for what seemed like an eternity. What was different about her tonight? Was it the sleek sundress dress she was wearing that flowed gracefully with her every move? Was it the way the light radiated down the stairwell from upstairs that gave her a heavenly aura? No, it wasn’t that. It was that voice. That sweet angelic voice that permeated my heart.

I continued staring at the vacant staircase, my shaking had subsided to a mere quiver but my thoughts were racing. I was jolted back to reality as Stretch shook me violently.

“Joe!” he shouted. “Joe! Hello? Earth to Joe!”

I jumped from the shock of the rude awakening. “Huh? What?” I said startled.

“Thought we had lost you there, buddy,” Badger said. “What’s up with you?”

“I..I don’t know,” I replied still visibly shaken. “I think I’m getting sick.”

Just then, Badger’s eyes grew wide with a knowing look. He jumped to his feet and pointed his handful of pretzel sticks right at my face.

“I know what it is!” he shouted at me. “You like Denise, don’t you?”

I thought about it for a second. Nah, that couldn’t be. Could it? Nah.

“You do!” he exclaimed. “You like Denise!”

No. That couldn’t be. Could it?

“You know it’s true,” he continued. “The Love Bug got you. So, why don’t you ask her out on a date?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet, but yes, I really do like Denise but it felt different than just being friends and yes, I wanted to ask Denise out on a date, just the two of us.

“So what if I do like her?” I asked defensively. “That’s my business. And what if I do want to ask her out on a date?”

Badger laughed. “Face it, you’re scared. You’ll never ask her.”

Scared wasn’t the word for it. The more I thought about it, the more petrified I became. The only dealings I had with women up to this point in my life was with my mother, an aunt, two obnoxious sisters, and Denise who was, well, one of the gang. You know, one of the guys. I had never asked a girl out before and to put it mildly, the thought of it scared me.

I sat quietly on the couch, my mind a million miles away. The Love Bug had bitten me big time and I had to scratch that itch. It was simple – all I had to do was run up those stairs and ask her out. Yeah, right. Simple enough but I couldn’t muster up the courage. Even though I had

known Denise forever and a day, I had this deep rooted fear of rejection, but that wasn't enough to stop me from firing back at Badger's goading.

"I'm not afraid," I said confidently as I settled even further into the bottomless cushion.

Badger looked at the gang. "All of you who think Joe is chicken, say 'Aye'."

The gang answered in a loud, unified, "Aye," which ended in the sound of chickens cackling, "bok, bok, bok!"

"Look," Badger said placing his hands on his hips. When he did that, I knew I was in for it. "Five bucks says you won't ask her out."

"You don't have five bucks," I replied.

"Do too," he insisted, "and I'm willing to bet it all that you won't do it."

I eyed him up and down trying to size him up. Was it a bluff? What was his little game? There was one thing for sure, the gauntlet had been thrown down. The challenge had been issued. Would I fold or call his bluff? He knew me and knew me too well. I felt like there was no turning back.

"What's the catch?" I asked.

"Only one rule," he continued. "You've got to ask her out before 9 o'clock tonight."

"Why nine o'clock?" I asked.

"Because, stupid," he said, "If we didn't set a time limit, this bet would go on forever. You'd be 90 years old and would *still* be thinking about asking her out. If you don't ask before nine o'clock, I win."

My mind whirled. There were only three possible outcomes, the best, of course, was to get up the nerve, ask Denise out, and she accepted. The other two weren't as good – I either ask Denise out and she turns me down with the result being the mocking ridicule of the gang until the day I die, or even worse, she turns me down and I lose a best friend.

Ah, the fear of rejection.

Without thinking I blurted out my answer. "You're on!"

Badger and I shook hands on it. Now you would think I would have just run upstairs and asked her out. Not me. I darted out the door and raced home. I needed time to compose myself and plan my next move.

When I arrived at my house, I sped through the backdoor, rushed into my bedroom, and plopped down on the edge of my bed. The sun was setting turning the light in the room a purplish hue. A clock in the living room chimed eight times as I sat in the withering daylight. I stood and began pacing the floor back and forth like a caged lion. I couldn't think straight and had to rid myself of the butterflies that filled the void in my stomach. I just had to come up with the perfect pitch line.

I was oblivious to my surroundings as I tossed ideas about. My pitch to her had to be perfect and for me, that would be a feat. Whenever I was nervous or afraid, words flowed out of my mouth like they were being pushed through a meat grinder. They would come out as gibberish and made no sense at all. That can't happen tonight, the most important night of my young life.

I stopped pacing the floor when I heard the telephone in the kitchen ring. A second later, I heard my mom's shrill voice shout, "Joe! Telephone!"

I walked into the kitchen where my dad sat at the table flipping through a newspaper while sipping a glass of beer. I walked up to my mom and took the receiver from her hand.

"Hello?" I asked cautiously. It was Badger. What did he want? Wait a second! I knew exactly what he wanted - he was going to try and force my hand, the swine! Either that or he just wanted to hear me squirm some more. Apparently, money was no object to him.

"Hey, Joe," his voice crackled over the line. "What can I do for you?"

"What? What can you do for me?" I replied. "You called me."

"Oh, yeah," he chuckled, "so I did." There was a brief pause before he continued. "Hey, could you hang on a second?"

Over the wire I heard his hand being placed over the phone's mouthpiece, some muffled talking, then slightly off speaker I heard Badger's voice say, "Hey, Denise! Joe wants to talk with you!"

I shouted into the receiver, "Hey! What gives? You're not playing by the rules of the Geneva Convention! You just can't force the issue by..."

But before I had a chance to finish my sentence, I was cut off mid-sentence by a sweet feminine voice.

"Joe?" the voice asked. "Is that you?"

Gasp, it was Denise. No time to think. Must regroup.

"H, h, hi, D-d-Denise," I stammered.

"Fred said you wanted to talk to me."

That was Badger's first name - Fred, Fred Badger. Like most kids, we always gave our friends alternative names. For example, we had a friend whose last name was "Krepinski." We anglicized it to become, "Creep." We didn't have to think too hard about what to call Badger. That was a good name.

I took a deep breath and the words flowed from my mouth like mush through a sieve. Friends, the following is not a misprint. These are the exact words from that phone conversation:

"How would you tomorrow you me out movie and eat something get?"

That is word for word what I said. I braced for impact. What would it be? No thank you, I'm seeing someone? No thank you, we're just friends and we should keep it that way? No thank you, you sound like a blithering idiot? Instead, the unthinkable happened. She snorted out a not so pleasant hysterical laugh and said - yes!

"That would be fun," she said rather excitedly after the laughter subsided. "What time?"

What? She said yes? My heart raced in excitement. This is great! But, what? Wait! What time? I wasn't expecting this at all. I hadn't worked out the details past asking her out so I just threw out a time.

"Uh, how about seven?"

"I'll be waiting," she said cheerfully. "See you then. Do you need to speak with Fred again?"

“No, no,” I said. “I think what I have to say to him would be better said in person, but thank you.”

I hung up the phone and turned to see my old man. He was looking over the top of his newspaper and had that fatherly look that said, “I hope this doesn’t cost me money.” My mom sat at the table grinning from ear to ear.

“Isn’t this sweet?” she said. “You’re going out on your first date, and it’s with Denise!”

My mom thought the world of Denise so this was the perfect match made in heaven for her. I simply grinned and crawled off to bed where I fell into a deep sleep after an exhausting evening.

I was up early the next morning which only made the day longer. It was “D-Day” – Denise Day. I paced around the house, nervously waiting for the moment when I would start getting ready for my very first date. The monotonous ticking of the clock in the other room only made the time drag on even slower until finally, about two hours before it was time to pick up Denise, I started prepping for the big night.

I hopped into the shower and used a heavy bar of *Lava Soap*. It really does have minute particles of lava rock in it that scrubs dirt and grime away. In fact, you could scrub off anything with this stuff – paint, grease from a car engine, even three layers of skin.

Following the shower, I slathered on a good coating of *Old Spice* under each arm after which I lifted my left arm, then my right arm high into the air to give them the sniff test – sniff, sniff. Yep, I’m good.

Next, I gargled with a cup of *Scope* mouthwash, choking on it as I accidentally swallowed a shot glass full. After spitting it out, I cupped my hand over my mouth and nose and exhaled heavily. Clean breath – check.

I still didn’t have a beard yet except for one little hair that oddly protruded from my chin. I pulled out my dad’s Norelco triple head razor and whacked the hair off then doused myself liberally his *Aqua Velva* after shave. I just hoped that nobody would come near me with a lit match.

All was ready. The only thing that stood in the way of making this either a truly memorable first romantic encounter or a colossal failure was the fact that I didn’t have wheels. I was too young to drive. I would have to rely on my folks to chauffeur the two of us around. Awkward does not adequately describe what followed.

My mom and dad hopped into the front seat of the family’s work horse, a beat up fire engine red Ford Maverick that had a black vinyl half roof and quintessential 1970s plaid upholstery, a real snazzy car to impress a girl in. I jumped into the backseat.

It was a quiet ride across town as I stared blankly out the window. My heart began beating faster and faster as we got closer and closer to Denise’s house. I was so nervous that when we arrived in front of her house, I hopped out of the car before we even had wheels stop.

I scampered up the stairs to her front door where I was greeted by Denise who was waiting for me. Her parents stood behind her with big, toothy grins that said, “Aren’t they adorable?” Behind them stood Badger who had a big grin on his face as well. He gave me a

quick and hefty two thumbs up. I couldn't be mad at him. He was the one that made this night happen.

After exchanging a few quick and nervous "hellos" and assuring her parents that she was in good hands, I gathered Denise's hand and I whisked down the sidewalk to the waiting car where I jumped into backseat.

"Now Joe," my Mom said, "where are your manners?"

I thumbed through the filing cabinet of my mind, looking for the right answer. Is this a trick question? No, stupid! You forgot to open the door for Denise.

I stepped back out of the car, raced around to the other side only to find Denise already sitting in the back seat with the door closed. I rushed back to my side, hopped back in, and off we drove into the night.

It was an awkwardly quiet trip to our destination, the town's movie theater. My mom strained her neck to watch us from the front seat, a wide "proud mother" smile stretched across her face. I knew what she was thinking. "They are so cute! The perfect couple." Meanwhile, my old man was keeping his eagle eye on us through the rear view mirror just to be sure that there was no hanky panky going on.

Pulling up to the theater, I thanked my parents as Denise and I headed off to the box office. The theater was the only one for miles around and had a single screen that played one movie for a week. This week's flick was called, *Billy Jack*, the B-movie saga of a half-white, half-Native American Vietnam veteran who believes in "turning the other cheek," but when the townsfolk from his old hometown routinely start beating up the Indian kids at a local school where his girlfriend teaches, it's all Billy can stand. His blood pressure hits the boiling point as he takes matters into his own hands with a vengeance, breaking a few heads along the way.

We took our seats and sat virtually a mile apart as the movie began. The two of us sat there quietly as the opening credits began to roll over the movie's theme song, *One Tin Soldier*. The movie was way too complex for me as it tried to convey a deep message. The only message I was receiving was, "get a bigger budget next time and add some special effects."

Eventually, the ice began to thaw and the two of us subconsciously began to slowly shift closer and closer. Before long, we were sitting together, leaning on each other's shoulder as we shared a mega fifty pound tub of popcorn and an industrial size Coke. It was turning out to be quite the night as we laughed at the some of the movie's sillier moments and joked about the people sitting around us.

It was a spectacular evening until during one quiet moment in the movie, we both stopped chatting and actually paid attention to the film. There, on the giant silver screen before us we saw - a rape scene! The movie had a *rape scene*! Oh, no! This can't be! What will she think of me? What kind of guy am I, taking her to a movie like this? What will her parents think? Ugh, I'd rather not think about that. I would rather take my chances with a pummeling from Knuckles Nesmith than what I imagined her parents would unleash on me. The gang would forever label me a pervert. And the worst part is that Denise would never speak to me again.

As the scene ended, I noticed that there was sobbing throughout the theater. All of the women in the theater were crying, most notably the girl right next to me. I glanced over at Denise out of the corner of my eye. Cripes, what do I do?

I stared straight ahead for a moment. Come on, Joe! Think! Isn't this where the knight in shining armor is supposed to put his arm around the damsel in distress and comfort her? I finally turned toward her, took a deep breath and cautiously asked, "Are you okay?"

She dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex. "Yes," she sniffed, "I'm okay."

"Okay then," I replied satisfied that all was well and went back to watching the movie. A devilish voice from within slapped me across the side of my head. "You naïve dope," it said. "This is where the guy is supposed to put his arm around his date and reassure her that everything is okay."

I thought about it for a moment, then the voice said to me, "Come on, big guy. You've seen it on TV a thousand times."

I waited for the good angel inside of me to show up and set me straight, but he never did. He must have been on a coffee break or agreed with everything the Devil had said.

I took a deep breath and ever so slowly, I slid my arm silently up to the top of our seats. It glided imperceptibly across the top of Denise's seatback with every intention of wrapping it around her. All the while I kept my eyes focused straight ahead on the movie, moving stealthily into position. Then suddenly, as my hand made it halfway around her back, the house lights came up. The movie was over. My arm quickly snapped back to my side but Denise caught the motion and looked at me with a puzzled look on her face.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

"Cramp," I said rubbing my arm. "Yep, cramp in the arm. Ha-ha.."

The two of us waded through the mounds of tissues on the floor and headed out the exit to our next stop, a small ice cream joint next door, *Howard Johnson's*. As we walked, we joked and laughed about the silliest things. We watched people walk past us and made up stories about what their "secret life" was like or what they did for a living.

We walked into the restaurant, plopped ourselves down in a booth next to a window, and started looking over the menu. Ordering up a couple of club sandwiches and Cokes, we continued to laugh the night away until it was time to go. My folks, God love them, were very punctual people and arrived right on time to pick us up. Damn them.

As we cruised back to Denise's house, my mom once again turned her head and stared at us in the back seat. The glare on my dad's face in the rearview mirror said it all: "What did you two do in the movie theater?"

In the blink of an eye, the evening was over, but what an amazing night it was. We stepped out of the car and I slowly walked her up the sidewalk to the front door. Denise put her hand on the doorknob but before opening it, she turned to me.

"I had a really great time, Joe," she said. "It was fun. Thank you."

"I really had a great time, too," I replied.

She started to open the door, paused and then turned back to face me. There was an awkward moment of silence before she finally leaned in close to my face. My heart raced. This is it! The big payoff! What a way to end my first date with my first kiss!

I waited, anticipating the soft, warm touch of her lips on mine, but instead of planting a wet one on me, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of dark colored paper. She placed it in the palm of my hand then whispered in my ear, "Fred wanted me to give this to you."

I looked at the paper. It was a five-dollar bill.

"I knew about the bet all along," she said as she pecked me on the cheek. "See you in school on Monday."

She stepped inside the house and closed the door on me and this short lived romance.

That was the first and last time that Denise and I went on a date. They say that a man and a woman can't be best friends after dating, but I disagree. Denise and I became closer friends than ever before were, and still are to this very day.

Sears

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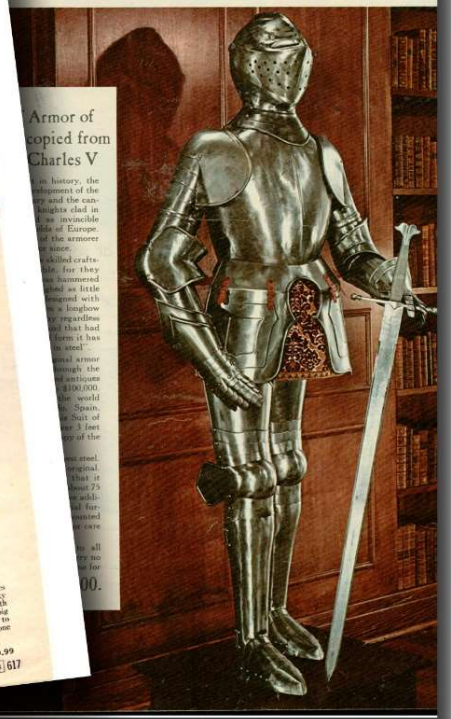
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A Wish Book Christmas

If there is one thing during the Christmas holidays that really makes me wince is when people say, “Christmas just isn’t what it used to be.”

That is the most obvious statement in the world, isn’t it? I mean, of course it isn’t like it used to be. That’s the way life is. It continually moves forward, morphing as the years go by. Every year that passes we see our traditions changing, our interests changing, our culture changing, and more noticeably, our technology changing. So, no, Christmas is not the same as it was even just a few years ago.

For those of you reading this who are late Baby Boomers like me, I truly believe that we grew up in the golden age of Christmas celebrations. I don’t mean that in a mean spirited way nor am I suggesting that the Christmas’ of the 1960s and early 1970s were better than anyone else’s. I just think that it was an amazing time to grow up. So many of the traditions, television shows, and toys that we take for granted today were created during that time period. So many, in fact, that they have become embedded in all of our Christmas psyche.

But you have to remember how different the times were back then and the conditions that were ripe for these holiday traditions to catch hold around the country. The kids of the 60s and 70s were truly united as one at Christmas time and no matter where you lived, from New York to California and every place in between, we were all united by two things, the first was television.

Unlike today where we have an unlimited number of channels to choose from - or as Bruce Springsteen opined, “57 channels and nothing on”, but now it’s more like 4,000 channels and nothing on – kids across the country only had a handful of options when it came to television viewing. Maybe you lived in the smallest town in America with only one or two static filled black and white channels, or maybe you lived in a major metropolitan area like I did where we had a whopping seven channels. Either way, it didn’t matter. You were still limited to your viewing options and inevitably, all across the country, all of us kids would be watching the same TV shows. It was an irrevocable bond that bound millions of us together.

That limitation had one major drawback – there were no reruns. Today, if you wanted to watch the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, you can be sure that it’s streaming somewhere online or running as a marathon over and over again on TBS in the middle of June. But back then, you had one shot to catch a show otherwise you would have to wait until the following year to see it and if you did miss it, you would be shunned like a leper on the playground at school.

In the middle of the school day, we would have recess where we would go outside and play some major welt inducing dodge ball, bust our knees falling from towering monkey bars

onto the hard playground pavement, or we would just hang out and talk. The latter was much like hanging around the proverbial watercooler in an office. We'd shoot the breeze and inevitably the conversation would turn to the TV shows from the previous night.

I clearly remember when the Rankin and Bass production, *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer*, first premiered on TV in 1964. It was an amazing show, something we had never seen before – perfect stop-motion animation, a gripping story of acceptance, and catchy tunes that stuck in your head like a spitball on a chalkboard. And the commercials were simply marketing genius. Right in the middle of the show, here comes a stop-motion Santa Claus riding down a snowy hillside on a *Norelco Triple Head* razor. It was just a commercial. A stinking commercial but it blended in so seamlessly to the show, that we just thought Santa had a new ride. It was creative, and it worked.

Rudolph was the talk of the playground the next day and whoa be the kid who missed it. They were mocked for missing the show and not being cool and hip. They would have to wait a full year to see what all of the fuss was about.

There were dozens of great shows that first debuted back in those days that are still loved to today: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Year without a Santa Claus*. Come on, admit it. You can't get the Heat Miser and Snow Miser songs out of your head when you hear them.

When you stop and think about it, 50 years ago, the holiday television watching season - and the Christmas shopping season, for that matter - didn't start until Thanksgiving afternoon. The reason for this was Macy's department store. It wasn't the calendar or Santa Claus that controlled when the Christmas season began, it was Macy's and their Thanksgiving Day Parade. Before the parade rolled, you wouldn't see a single Santa Claus ringing a bell on a street corner or festive holiday window displays in stores. There was no indication that Christmas was coming, but when the Macy's parade wrapped up with Santa riding atop the final float, it was like the store flipped a giant switch and told the world, "You may now go Christmas shopping." Just like that, everything jumped to life – suddenly, there were Santa Claus' in all of the department stores, Christmas decorations miraculously appeared and flickered to life around town, and the best holiday shows ever appeared on TV.

There was a second Christmas tradition that unified late Baby Boomers those many years ago and it came to us from another department store. It was a behemoth of a catalog that came in the mail and when we saw it hit the kitchen table, we knew Christmas was on the way and we needed to start writing our letters to Santa pronto. It was the *Sears Christmas Wish Book*. The book was over four inches thick with over 600 pages of color and black and white photos of every imaginable clothing item, gadget, and most importantly, toys that Sears carried.

The book wouldn't even have time to warm up from being outside in the cold winter air sitting in the mailbox before we'd grab it, sprawl out on our bellies on the living room floor, and go page by page gawking at all of the remarkable items the Wish Book had to offer. And you had to flip through every single page because you never knew where they would hide a gem. Amongst the ladies' girdles, for example, there may be an ad for a telescope. One year they

scattered Dennis the Menace cartoons throughout the book and you would have to go page by page so that you didn't miss a single panel.

As we settled in to start thumbing through the book, my mom would shout from the kitchen, "Don't EVEN think of writing in that book!"

The writers and editors of the Wish Book knew their stuff. They knew their market inside and out and it showed as you turned to the first page. Everyone I knew always received a pair of pajamas and slippers for Christmas. Every single year. So the marketing whizzes at Sears put those items right up front – wall to wall pajamas, robes, slippers, all of your basic sleep and lounge wear needs.

From there the book transitioned into leather goods like wallets, boots, briefcases, and then into women's lingerie. We were just little kids so we quickly breezed through that section. Ah, youthful innocence.

Then it was a full section of holiday treats. It had a complete line of cookies and popcorn in decorative tins, hard candy like pillow mints and multi-colored ribbon candy, rock hard fruitcakes, even bottles of fake whiskey labeled "Old Grand Gag."

The Wish Book was a real holiday treat year in and year out, but the one year that really stood out and left a lasting impression on me was the 1968 Wish Book. I really don't know why, but I do know that I was fascinated by a new section they added – "Old World" Christmas gifts. There were all sorts of hand carved wooden items for sale like hand carved wooden schooners with billowing cloth sails, hand carved ashtrays, and hand carved globes, even hand carved hands. No kidding.

The section also featured authentic reproductions (I'm not kidding, that's what it said) of Medieval armament like a 5-inch wide, 4-foot long stainless steel sword just like King Arthur's Excalibur. You could even buy a suit of armor. The ad read:

"In Medieval times, smithies would hammer out spectacular suits of armor that the King's knights would wear to vanquish threats to the throne or to save damsels in distress. But now, the fine craftsmen at Toledo Steel have handcrafted a 72" tall suit of armor that will amaze your friends when they walk into your home. If you could find an authentic suit of armor, it would cost \$100,000 (author's note – I really think it would cost much, much more than that!), but now you can own this beautiful suit for only \$1,600!"

Wow! What a bargain and a real conversation piece.

Finally, we would arrive at the toy section. This section always started with what we thought were the lamest toys ever created. For example, there were ventriloquist dummies, a real career choice. You could get a Jerry Mahoney or Charlie McCarthy dummy for only \$5.99.

There was the *Fun Box*. Apparently the company that created this toy had toys left over from previous years that no kid wanted to play with like jacks, dominos, and Chinese checkers. They just tossed them into a box and sold it as a collection of "classic games."

Sears had its own "box" – the *Super Box*, and that's all it was. For \$4.99 you could buy your kid a plain box. It might have an airplane or rocket ship painted on the side, but it was still

just a box. Times were much simpler then, friends. How much did that PlayStation cost you this year, Santa?

Finally, we moved into the really great toys like unicycles. I was so uncoordinated as a kid that I would fall down walking on flat ground, so a unicycle would be a stretch for me, but I really wanted one. Never got it, though.

And of course, there were dozens of bicycles for sale. A lot of kids I knew got new bikes for Christmas. Were you one of those? And did you live in an area where you would get ten feet of snow around the holidays? Then you were probably like me, taking the new bike out on the icy sidewalks to give it a test drive. Too bad they didn't make snow chains for bicycles.

Eventually, the toy section became segregated into two categories – boys and girls. Both sections were very stereotypical. Boys were supposed to play army, girls were supposed to play homemaker. The girls section always had pages of ironing boards, baby dolls, and kitchen play sets. None of the girls in my gang of friends – Denise, Donna, Martha, and Gianna – none of them ever wanted anything like that. They'd much rather have a microscope. Or maybe a rock tumbler, though I never fully understood rock tumblers. I always thought, why not just use your mom's clothes dryer? Same thing, isn't it? (Kids, do not try that at home!)

There was one game they all loved, though – *Mystery Date*. “Would your date be a dream? Or a dud?” Every time I saw that commercial on TV, I vowed to myself that I would never be a dud. I don't think I succeeded.

There were many other toys and games that came out of that period that are still enjoyed today: *Barrel of Monkeys*, *Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots*, *Battleship* (not Electronic Battleship but the original with actual pegs that you'd track your progress as you sunk your opponent's ships with and explosion sounds that you had to make yourself), and of course, *Twister*.

Twister was a game where you and your friends had to put your hands and feet on randomly selected color circles with all of you ending up getting tangled up with one another. This was a really fun game when you became teenagers.

The boy's section had some really neat toys but most of them were later recalled and put on the Child Safety Recall List and banned. Toys like the *Wham-o Air Blaster*. It looked like a handheld hair dryer but it had a trigger and a lever. Cock the lever, pull the trigger, and a cyclone of air blasted from the barrel. It was a hoot except that kids would cock the gun and point it at someone's ear, blowing out their ear drum.

There was the *Robot Commando*. I had one of these. It slung rock hard glass marbles putting welts on your pet cat, holes in plaster walls, broke vases, even put bruises on your sister's head, but I deny that ever happened.

And one that was targeted to both boys and girls, the best toy of them all – the *Thing Maker*. There were two versions of the *Thing Maker*: with one version you could make little plastic army soldiers. With the other, you could make rubber bugs, spiders, and snakes.

Basically the *Thing Maker* was a bare metal hot plate. Plug it into the wall and heat it up. Then take one of the thick aluminum molds, fill it with this stuff called “Plastic Goop,” and cook it on top of the hot plate. In a few minutes, voila! A new toy! Now, the instructions did say that

we were supposed to let the mold cool before removing it from the hot plate, but heck, we were kids and in a hurry. We just made a new toy. Just ignore those third degree burns.

Oh, the Sears Christmas Wish Book. A remarkable Christmas memory and tradition that has sadly gone by the wayside just like the store that created it. Even still, it's a memory that will live on forever. Here's to you, Wish Book. May you rest in peace.