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Grownups do cleanups

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—This thought occurred to me as I bent at the waist to pick up a large, hostile rock in the middle of a newly bulldozed woods road: Adults do cleanup.

For the last couple of days I've been following a New Holland dozer around my forested patch of Devil's Backbone as it cut roads between the trees.

This slope above 3,000 feet was once the bottom of a salt sea and is rocky with limestone cobble and occasional outcrops of shale. To put a road through limestone ball bearings ranging in size from dictionaries to refrigerators, the dozer has to dig out the surface rocks to find enough soil to create a smooth road surface.

Inevitably, grapefruit-size stones and the occasional 75-pounder evade the dozer's blade. My job as Mr. Caboose is to gather these fugitives and pitch them over the downhill side where they will do no damage to feet, hoofs and tires.

Rock picking is stoop labor, but not the stoopest. It's not like working continuously bent over. I don't know how people do that.

I also assign myself the job of trimming exposed tree roots, tidying erosion-control swags and kicking dirt in holes before grass-seeding the exposed ground.

When I'm done, the woods will be safer, more secure against fire and more usable.

This cleanup is a mess of my own making.

Self-made messes are of two types: those that appear as byproducts of efforts to improve our circumstances, and those that arise from our own failures, bad judgment, greed or ignorance. I've had experience with both and much prefer the first by a wide margin.

Some people after adolescence accept responsibility for cleaning up messes of their own making without being forced to do so. Welcome to Grownupville!

Our courts, however, appear to be filled with individuals and businesses desperately trying to avoid making this passage. They believe that it's better to wiggle out of a self-inflicted mess or get someone else to fix it. Unfortunately, neither of these attractive options was available to me.

It's harder, of course, to take responsibility for cleaning up a mess that someone else makes for you. When, for example, our Yellow Lab, Sophie, kills a groundhog, it's my job by right of gender to dispose of the remains in a sensitive and dignified way, which I do by throwing the carcass over the fence for the vultures.

A number of candidates for the White House are on my beam.

Tossing the economy over the nearest fence was not an option Obama had on taking over from Bush in January, 2009. Obama's punted a number of problems into the future, but regardless of whether you like his approaches or not, he's made a grownup-type effort to clean up major parts of the mortgage mess, the Wall Street self-inflicted mess, the Iraq war mess and the health-care mess. He didn't let them rot in the sun like dead groundhogs, and he didn't throw them over the back fence where he could pretend they weren't there.

If, of course, you believe that everything the federal government does is evil, confiscatory and intended to hurt the American people, then you may want to secede and set up a near-powerless central government. The messes, of course, will not disappear, whether you kill the beast or just escape its lair.

Late on Tuesday afternoon, the big dozer blew a hose on a bench cut almost a mile from the

nearest paved road. Its hydraulic system had to be repaired where ten tons of steel had stopped dead.

And so at 9 p.m., William, Jimmy and I were crawling around with flashlights in the guts of the dozer with grease up to our shoulders looking for the leak, which, as we expected, was in its most hard-to-see and inaccessible cranny. If my longest arm had been two feet longer and contained three more universal joints, it might have been able to get a box wrench on the nut holding the hose fitting.

Still, this was a mess of our own making, so we understood that it was ours to clean up.

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