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Fairly functional farm family fights for facts

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—One problem with having two writers in one family is the tug of war between contradictory versions of shared history. Who owns a family story? Who has first dibs on telling it? Who knows it most objectively?

Who would you trust to get the facts—a kid who was first in her class at the country's top-ranked graduate journalism program or a guy with a few gray hairs on his head—and none of any other color?

Our 24-year-old daughter, Molly, grew up on a Virginia cattle farm and now works for Bloomberg News in Manhattan where she raises headlines and grazes stocks.

She gives the rural indenture of her youth mixed reviews. She was not keen on moving 60 steers from field to field by herself when she was seven. And she still believes that a large octopus lives at the bottom of our swimming pond, because some kind soul was teaching her to resist allowing the power of suggestion to control her behavior. I still don't understand why she objected to spending her summers picking rocks out of the back pasture.

Molly, the writer, now considers her rural childhood a burden to bear as well as one to bare.

Her latest blog at www.mollyseltzer.com recounts one of the many times when I -- the alpha male in our three-person family -- protected home and hearth against rogue nature.

The hook for her story is her apartment's clogged bathroom sink in Astoria, Queens. Unspoken in her account is the reason her sink is stopped up, which is that she routinely dumps 30 pounds of hair into it every morning while preparing for work. I know this, because I opened every drain she closed for almost two decades.

I'm not digressing. I am simply raising the issue of contributory negligence.

Molly's tale makes fun of the water system of her childhood—and our present. Since this system cannot defend itself, I will set the record straight.

Our farmhouse water comes from a spring on the far side of Wimer Mountain Road. It feeds by gravity into a holding tank in our cellar from which it is pumped through the house. When the tank is full, the water is diverted into a

spring house where large milk cans were once cooled in a deep well. From there, an overflow pipe carries the excess into the back pasture and Key Run, a tributary of the Potomac River. Key Run's major contribution to the mighty Potomac is rocks, of which we have a breeding population of no geological significance.

The engineering of our pre-Native-American plumbing system is relevant to understanding Molly's story. Why? Because if you are both small and determined, you can enter the outlet pipe at Key Run and slither against the flowing water into the spring house and then through a one-inch pipe back to where the incoming spring water Y-s off into the cellar's holding tank. I've never done this myself, because I'm not much of a risk-taker.

Reporters are expected to assemble a column from reliable sources, which does not include Molly's mother, Melissa, who has been grinding this particular axe of a story into a feminist dagger for years.

Molly was at summer camp when these events occurred. Her version begins:

...one year -- I imagine in early June, when the grass was still cool in the mornings and the snakes hadn't yet come down the mountains -- my mother noticed that our water tasted funny. [We do not live in an herpetarium. Snakes do not visit our front yard. Bears, are not snakes.] She mentioned it to my father [Our Hero—you'll see.] who flagrantly brushed aside [her] comment, along with others like 'We should get a lock for the front door' and 'I'm not sure spinach quiche is supposed to have mandarin oranges in it.'

For the record, we have locks on all our doors. We also have keys to these locks, all of which are found on a large ring that I've stored in a convenient place that no longer seems to be technologically accessible on my aging memory card. Home security, however, is maintained by two Yellow Labs who are so notoriously hostile to burglars that, like highly trained karate experts, I've had to register their paws with the authorities.

And for the same record I should add that anything that overwhelms the flavor of cooked spinach -- like mandarin oranges, cheap barbeque sauce or chocolate syrup -- should not be dismissed for culinarily incorrectness.

To understand why I did not jump when Melissa said the water tasted off, it's necessary to recall the Hans Christian Andersen story, "The Princess and the Pea."

A picky young Prince did not want to marry a commoner for reasons never disclosed. It came conveniently to pass on a dark and stormy night that a rain-drenched lass knocked on the Prince's town gate seeking shelter and claiming

to be a princess.

His Mom, the reigning Queen, decided to test her story. The Queen offered her a bed for the night—a stack of 20 mattresses and 20 featherbeds. At the bottom of the pile on the wood bedstead, the Queen slipped a single pea—presumably uncooked. The Queen and the Prince reasoned that no one but a princess would be sensitive enough to feel this pea.

The next morning, the castle was filled with the wench's wails. "I have hardly closed my eyes the whole night! Heaven knows what was in the bed. [It wasn't the Prince, according to Andersen.] I seemed to be lying upon some hard thing, and my whole body is black and blue this morning."

The Queen Mom knew a real pain in the princess when she heard one. The Prince was thrilled, because he knew that physical sensitivity of this magnitude could only come from carefully controlled inbreeding, also linked to the insanity that's so valued by Europe's royals. So instead of sending her on her way with a limp handshake and a bag of leftover mutton scraps, the dude married her!

The Queen quickly developed a jealous hatred of her daughter-in-law who insisted on changing the castle's window treatments, substituting curtains for iron bars. This prompted the Queen to reinsert the pea beneath the marital bed. The Prince never felt anything since he was the Queen's get from the castle's assistant night-soil collector.

For the rest of his life, the Prince awakened to his wife's griping about their bed. This pleased him, because he took it as confirmation of her high-class genetics. But he found it necessary to plug his ears with liquid paraffin. When his Janey-Complainy wife asked where he got it, he replied, "Honey, it's none of your beeswax."

The Prince thought their life together was full and rich. The Princess, on the other hand, soon realized that she had married an idiot who insisted on waxing his waning brains.

Two weeks after the marriage ceremony, she secretly took up with the son of the assistant night-soil collector, a rising deputy associate assistant branch chief in the same department. She bore a dozen sons, all of whom worked in the field of soil supplements. They, like their father and grandfather, inherited a nose that could only smell roses.

In this context, can I really be faulted for thinking that Melissa was feeling nothing more than a pea under her mattress when she said our water smelled fishy and tasted worse?

Molly continues:

A few weeks later, she [Mom] found the water tasted more strongly. Not bad, exactly, just off. Again, a pooh-poo from the peanut gallery. [As the largest and only peanut in our local gallery, I am obliged to pooh-poo all observations that involve work on my part.] A few weeks more, and my father...asks my mother if the water seems funny.

What really happened is this. Every day for two months, Melissa shouted out her morning water analysis. Each finding reinforced her original declaration that some unknown something was at work. She also began blaming me for dwindling water pressure.

Finally, the power of her repeated suggestion worked its spell on me. I won't say that the water actually tasted funny, but let's say I came around to the position that it was no longer a laughing matter.

Now here is this story's nub. I did what alpha males are expected to do when home and hearth are threatened. I seized the bull by the horns (a particularly stupid thing to do with a real bull).

"I," I announced, "will call a plumber." And that's just what I did.

As I explained the complexities of our archeologically significant water arrangement, the plumber turned a shut-off valve and disconnected a fitting at the tank.

Out slid a single, small and somewhat-bloated salamander, no more than 10" long. This specimen, the plumber and I determined, had moved beyond being endangered some weeks earlier, perhaps two months if you believe Melissa.

In Molly's second-hand account, her father is a doofus who pays no attention to the sensible warnings of his wife who has the taste buds of a five-star French chef. This is revisionist history. I paid plenty of attention. I listened sympathetically. I patted her with empathy. And when push came to shove, I solved the problem.

After all, who conceptualized a solution by summoning the plumber? Who held the light while he adjusted his wrench? Who was the first in the family to say, "Oh yuck!" Who disposed of the salamander in an environmentally and culturally sensitive way? And who paid the plumber's bill in the high six figures?

All of which proves, if father doesn't know best any more, he still knows how to dial a telephone.

And finally: The one advantage that old journalists have over those coming up is that we always get our fax write.

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