
MY PLANET

FINDING HUMOR IN THE ODDEST PLACES

MARY ROACH

Reader's
Digest

The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.
New York, NY / Montreal

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roach, Mary. My planet : exploring the world with family, friends, and dental floss / Mary Roach. pages cm ISBN 978-1-62145-079 (alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-62145-072-6 (epub) 1. American wit and humor. 2. United States--Social life and customs--Humor. I. Title. PN6165.R635 2013 818'.602--dc23 2012044977

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The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.

Adult Trade Publishing

44 South Broadway

White Plains, NY 10601

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Introduction

To describe iconic American author Mary Roach is to understand the most genius of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde complexes. Take science and imbue it with sarcasm. Create a social commentary and avoid sentimentality. Detail death and layer on wit. Are you chuckling while reading a story about a funeral? Then you're doing exactly what Roach intended. She lifted the gauze on mortality with *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, questioned life after death in *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, experimented with love and the lab for the sake of *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex*, and dove into disturbing aspects of space travel in *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*.

While her books focus on science and the supernatural, Roach's column in Reader's Digest zeroes in on the wonders of the everyday. When "My Planet" first appeared in our July 2002 issue, we knew that we had something special. As an institution that prides itself in handpicking moving stories that will make you smile and see the world a little bit differently, we were thrilled to add a writer with both abilities to our treasure trove of authors. Editors eagerly flipped to Roach's column after receiving their first-bound copies of the issue and readers, too, took notice. Three years after its debut, Roach's column was runner-up in the humor category of the National Press Club awards. Here you can read her entire collection in one laugh-out-loud volume.

What you can expect from Roach is a curious curation and condensation of life's little mishaps—many of which are filigreed with her humor. She details first dates, rants about marital differences, and dissects (as she is wont to do) the stellar process that is getting older (or, as Roach puts it, entering "the Age of Skirted Swimwear"). She breaks down her hypochondriac tendencies and divulges her uncanny desire to make lists for absolutely everything. In lieu of the latter, here are a few more things she'll tell you about: Accompanying spouses to container outlets ("These stores cast a spell on people"), theories on compromising ("Like any normal couple, we refused to accept each other's differences and did whatever we could to annoy the other person"), and the trials and tribulations of real estate ("The other day—true story—we saw a listing that said 'yard, complete with outhouse'"). Serving as the nucleus to these funny anecdotes is her husband, Ed, who makes appearances as both a funny adversary and a worthy teammate.

In a piece called "Best Cheap Fun!" Roach details free ways to get the most out of life. The list (of course it's a list) includes rooting for the Red Sox at Yankee Stadium and trying to sneak a bottle of water onto a plane, proving once again that humor is worth a potential black eye. Beyond that, Roach prompts us to find wonder in the smaller, simpler moments, leading us to a reader's paradise of which we'll never tire.

—The Editors of Reader's Digest

Soap Opera

It was our first date together. The man who was to become my husband, the man I call Ed, got up from the table within minutes of his arrival and excused himself to go wash his hands. I found this adorable. He was like a little raccoon, leaning over the stream to tidy himself before eating. At the same time I found it odd, as it typically would not occur to me to wash my own hands before a meal, unless I spent the afternoon coal mining, say, or running an offset printing press.

It was at this same dinner that I made the unfortunate decision to share my philosophy of bacterial towels, which holds that you needn't wash them very often because you're clean when you use them.

We both sensed something of a hygiene gap, and, not wanting to alarm one another, spent our first six months trying to hide our true selves. Ed didn't tell me how he'd replace the toilet seat whenever he moved into a new place, on the grounds that he "didn't know who'd been sitting on it." He said nothing when I used the Designated Countertop Sponge to wash the dishes and the Designated Dishwashing Sponge to clean the bathtub, an act I now know to be tantamount to a bioterror attack. For my part, when I dropped food on the floor I'd throw it away instead of picking it up and eating it, and I'd clean the spot where it landed, albeit with the wrong sponge.

As time went by, we reverted to our true selves and the Hygiene War commenced. More than anything else, it was a war of perception. Ed has crud vision, and I don't. I don't notice filth. Ed sees it everywhere. I am reasonably convinced that Ed can actually *see* bacteria. Like any normal couple, we refused to accept each other's differences and did whatever we could to annoy the other person. I flossed my teeth in bed and drank from the OJ container. Ed insisted on moving our vitamins out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, where the germs are apparently less savage. He confessed he didn't like me using his bathrobe because I'd wear it while sitting on the toilet.

"It's not like it goes in the water," I protested, though if you counted the sash as part of the robe, this wasn't strictly true.

"Doesn't matter," Ed said. Ed has a theory that anything that touches the toilet, even the top of the closed lid—which I pretty much use as a dressing table in the mornings—is unclean and subject to the sanitary laws of Leviticus.

Things came to a head one evening at a local eatery. When Ed returned to the table after washing his hands, I told him there was no rational reason to do that unless he was planning to handle his food and then leave it sitting out at room temperature for three or four hours before eating it. This reminded me of something I had recently learned in the course of my work, which was *not even raccoons wash up before eating*. Yes, according to wildlife expert David McCullough, of Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, raccoons are not washing, but merely handling their food. They do it even when there's no water around. "It's a tactile thing," he told me. "They have extremely sensitive hands, and one idea is that they are just fulfilling a need to feel food moving around in their paws."

I told this to Ed. He looked like he wanted to strangle me, and Professor McCullough too. I followed his gaze to the true source of his emotion: the restaurant's cook. The man had his right hand tucked in his left armpit and was absently massaging the flesh as he read our dinner order and prepared

contaminate Ed's halibut.

"Big deal," I said. "He's wearing a shirt. Maybe he has extremely sensitive hands and it fulfills need."

Ed called me insane. I called him abnormal. He was right, I was right. We decided we canceled each other out and that together we made one sane, normal entity, at least compared to, I don't know, raccoons. Then Ed did something very touching. He reached over and kissed my hand, which we both knew hadn't been washed since the night before.

To Do or Not to Do

There are three kinds of people in this world: 1) People who make lists, 2) People who don't make lists, and 3) People who carve tiny Nativity scenes out of pecan hulls. I'm sorry, there isn't really a third category; it's just that a workable list needs a minimum of three items, I feel. I am, as you might have guessed, a person who makes lists: daily To Do lists, long-term To Do lists, shopping lists, packing lists. I am married to a man whose idea of a list is a corner torn off a newspaper page, covered with words too hastily written to later decipher, and soon misplaced or dropped on the floor. Every now and then I'll discover one of Ed's lists in some forgotten corner of the house: *Rescrangen polfiter*, it will say. Pick up *grellion*. *Bregoo!* underlined twice.

It isn't entirely accurate to say that Ed has no formal To Do list. He does. It's just that it isn't Ed that makes it, it's me. It's easy enough, as the same 10 or 12 items, mostly involving home-repair projects abandoned midterm, have been on it for years. I once wrote it out for him and put it on the side of the fridge. When I glanced at it some months later, nothing had been crossed off, though he had added a few of his own: *Make violin*. *Cure diabetes*. *Split atom*.

I make lists to keep my anxiety level down. If I write down 15 things to be done, I lose that nagging sense that there are an overwhelming number of things to be done, all of which are on the brink of being forgotten. Ed, on the other hand, controls his anxiety precisely by forgetting them. If they're not there on some numbered piece of paper, they don't exist. So there's no reason why he shouldn't come directly home and turn on the game. People like me really gum up the works for people like Ed by calling them during the day to see if they've gotten around to any of the things on the To Do list we're secretly keeping for them.

Here's the sick thing: I don't really care whether Ed has done the things on this list. I just want to be able to cross them off. My friend Jeff best summed up the joy of crossing off: "No matter how unproductive my week has been, I have a sense of accomplishment." Jeff actually tried to convince me that the adjective *listless* derived from the literal definition "having no lists."

It is possible, I'll admit, to go overboard. Ed once caught me crossing an errand off my list—just for the satisfaction. I have a list of party guests in my desk drawer that dates from around 1997. Every so often I take it out and add the people we've met, cross off the couples that have moved away, and then put it back in my drawer. I long ago came to accept that we're never actually going to have this party; we're just going to keep updating the list—which, for people like me, is a party all by itself.

My husband is the first person I ever met who doesn't even make a shopping list. Ed prefers to go up and down all the aisles, figuring he'll see all the things we need. The problem is that he has no idea whether we actually need them that week, and so it is that we have six cans of water chestnuts and enough Tabasco sauce to sober up the population of Patoka, Indiana, on any given New Year's Day. It seems to be a male pride thing. "Men don't want to admit that they can't remember everything," says my friend Ron. It's the same reason, he says, that men carry their groceries in their arms: "We're too proud to use a cart." Ron finds shopping lists limiting. "Take M&M's," he says. "Those are never going to be on the list."

Ed agrees. He says the things on lists are always chores and downers. Ed wants a To Do list that says, 1) Giants game, 2) Nap, 3) Try new cheese-steak place. Meanwhile, the *polfiter* sits *unscranged*.

42 Minutes and Holding . . .

Thank you for calling VeriCom Customer Care. Your call is important to us, though not as important as it is to you. If you are calling from a touch-tone phone, press or say 1. If you are calling from a rotary-dial phone, please stay on the line while a customer-care representative makes mocking, derisive faces. Para asistencia en español, go to South America and try your call again.

Your call may be monitored and/or recorded for staff entertainment purposes. For security reasons, please enter the last four digits of your junior high school locker combination, followed by your mother's pet name for your father on evenings when she's had too much sherry.

To save us money and expedite the dismissal of customer-care representatives, our express automated-speech response system is now available. To use this system, press 1. To speak to a customer-care representative, call the Peterson County unemployment office. To hear these options again, hang up and call back.

Welcome to the express automated-speech response system. Please say your 67-digit personal account number, located on the upper lower left middle corner of the one page of your bill that has gone missing, followed by the pound sign. If you thought * was the pound sign, say Ding Dong.

I heard: 894375904279643850432759478847686350542356889448590824837698072459. If this is correct, say Yes. If this is not correct, it's your fault. You are mumbling, or have a funny accent.

For payment information, say Payment. If you have calls and charges you don't understand, say Pinhead. To hear these options again, say Attention Span of a Gnat. To hear the call of the long-toed stint, say kirrrrr-PIP! wacka wacka wacka!

Welcome to the automated payment information center. Our records show a payment of \$149 was posted on January 23, 2002, following a 12-day processing period, during which time Accounts Receivable Clerk June Smetak was unaccountably absent and consequently your payment was recorded six days after the due date. A late fee of as much as we can possibly charge without government intervention has been posted to your account. Accounts Receivable Clerk Smetak has been promoted. Whoever said life was fair?

To exit the express automated-speech response system, press or say 1. To enter your 67-digit personal account number again for no special reason, press or say 2.

Please wait, a customer-care representative will be with you shortly, or be short with you, or do something. Currently all of our representatives are busy helping dilute our profits. Calls will be answered in the order in which we feel like. Your expected wait time is 42 minutes. Your expected blood pressure is 210/130. You may hear clicks followed by silence. You may hear "Whole Lotta Love" done entirely in strings. You may hear yourself say regrettable things, which may be monitored and/or recorded.

For example, our records show that you used the phrase "gabbling nitwit" during your last call to customer care. This has been noted in your record and will be reflected in the quality of service you receive and the tone of voice of the customer-care representative, should you somehow manage to reach one.

I'm sorry, 0 is not a valid prompt, even if pushed furiously 11 times in rapid succession.

To use our express automated-speech response system, press 1. To hear our website address, press

To speak to someone about your anger-management problem, press 3.

Three is not a valid prompt. Thank you for calling.

The Way I Can't See It

This is a story of loss and denial. It begins in Colorado, on the freeway. I am looking for an exit called Drake Way. I notice I am hunched forward, squinting, barely going 40. All around me, drivers beam headlights into my car. At precisely the moment at which it is too late to veer out of the exit lane, I note that the sign above me does not say Drake Way; it says Homer P. Gravenstein Memorial Highway. This is not good.

I go to my optometrist, who hesitates to up my prescription. She says that with a stronger distance correction, I'm going to start having trouble with what she calls "close work." Apparently she has mistaken me for one of her patients who assemble microchips or tat antimacassars by firelight. I tell her she should go ahead and change the prescription because I don't do close work.

"Do you look things up in phone books?" she asks. "Use maps?" She means, Do I read small print? She means I'm going to have trouble with small print. That I'm suddenly, without warning, old and enfeebled. Nonsense, I insist.

She shrugs and gives me a pair of stronger lenses to try. Then she hands me a bottle of lens drops and points to the label and asks me to read it. This puzzles me, for any fool can see there's nothing written on that label, just tiny lines of decorative filigree. I study it harder. It is writing. "Do not use while operating heavy machinery?" I am guessing. "Now with more real fruit? Homer P. Gravenstein Memorial Highway?" I hang my head. It's time to read the handwriting on the wall, which I can more assuredly do—provided it is neatly spaced and billboard-sized. I am old and my eyesight is going. She says to cheer up, that I don't have to get bifocals, "just a pair of reading glasses." In my book, reading glasses are not cause for cheer. They are cause for depression, or regression, or diphtheria, I don't know exactly, because I can no longer read what's in my book.

There was a time when I wanted to wear half-glasses, the way young children want to have crutches or braces until the day they actually need them. Today I do not want to wear reading glasses, not at all. Reluctantly, I wander over to the local drugstore.

The packaging on the reading glasses shows kindly white-haired people in business suits. The eyeglass company has gone out of their way to dress the models like functioning adults, as though people who need reading glasses can still contribute to society, when everyone knows they just sit at home tatting and reading telephone books. I can't go through with it. There has to be another way.

At home, I do an Internet search for "presbyopia." This is a mistake. The websites that turn up have names like SeniorJournal or Friendly4Seniors.com. One site informs me that "presbyopia" comes from the Greek for "elder eye." I don't appreciate this, not one bit. I'm not elderly. I'm 43. Besides, I know some Greek (spanakopita, Onassis, that word you say when the appetizer ignites), and "presbyopia" doesn't sound like any of it. I believe someone made up this "elder eye" business by someone cruel and youthful, with four-point lettering on his business card. I look up the etymology of "presbyopia" in my dictionary, but alas, someone has replaced the words with lines of decorative filigree.

So here's what I'm going to do. I'm not getting bifocals or reading glasses. I'm going to leave my

contacts under-corrected and get a pair of distance glasses to wear on top of them, for driving. I figure I've got another five or six years before anyone calls me Elder Eyes. You could say I'm in denial. C you could write it on a piece of paper, and by God, I'll be able to read it.

Picture Imperfect

The satellite dish was Ed's idea. My husband wanted to be able to watch all 162 Giants games, and for that he said, he needs a special sports channel. I think what he needs is a special sports therapist, but satellite TV is cheaper, and I gave in. So now, in order for Ed to watch one channel, we'd be paying for 843. I had my work cut out for me.

I sat down with our new baguette-size remote, and pressed On. Right away, Ed began talking though the TV set sat mute. He explained there were now four separate button-pushes involved in turning on the TV. As he demonstrated, the TV came on. It was a Philippine station, and a man was speaking in Tagalog about his washing machine. "You go Satellite, TV, On, Satellite," Ed was saying. "Get it? For Off, it's Off, TV, Off." I got it the way I get Tagalog washing-machine ads. I muted Ed and called the help line.

"You shouldn't have to push all those buttons," said the Help woman.

I relayed this to Ed, but he didn't hear me, engrossed as he was in *Antiques Roadshow*. A man had lugged in an old museum case of taxidermied birds, no doubt to make room for his new giant remote and satellite receiver, and was showing it to a British chap with a pasted-on smile. "You've got a fantastic array of birds here, don't you?"

I turned back to my pal on the other end of the phone, who was telling me that I was going to have to *reprogram my remote*. This is like being told that in order to shave a few minutes off your walk to work, you were going to have to have your legs removed and sewn on in a new position, which, as happened, they were doing on the surgery channel at that moment.

Ed eventually found his sports channel. An Indianapolis 500 winner was philosophizing about his career, which racecar drivers maybe shouldn't do: "Sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes the bug."

"Now, to reprogram your remote, you take out the batteries and press the '1' button for 60 seconds," the Help woman—clearly the windshield here—was saying. "Then put the batteries back and hold down the 'TV' button at the same time as you enter the TV brand code, which you can look up in your manual." It was going to require six arms, minimum, which the surgeons of Channel 89 could no doubt arrange.

I became intrigued with a button labeled *Fetch*, no doubt the source of many a humorous exchange between remote-holding, sandwich-wanting husbands and their wives. The feature would allow Ed to input a keyword, such as "Giants," or "baseball," or "big, fat waste of time" and, with the press of a button (or 18 buttons), fetch channels that matched. Ed entered "Giants," and the TV reported that they were appearing on Channel 573. He pressed Fetch. The TV gamely fetched a blank channel.

As it turns out, we only get about 225 of 843 channels, the rest appearing as blank screens, requiring the viewer to scroll endlessly—effectively ruining the all-American channel-surfing experience.

I called the Help woman back, demanding to know how to get rid of the blank stations. She asked if I'd looked in my User's Guide. I didn't like where this was heading. If I wanted to read and exercise my comprehension skills, I wouldn't be watching television.

In no time at all, though, I was surfing gleefully. I had wanted to hate satellite TV, but it's so wonderfully, derangedly entertaining. Here was Barney Rubble ordering chopped pterodactyl liver. Here was the incredible Flat Hose, attaching easily to any faucet!

There was Gene Rayburn on the Game Show Channel, introducing a contestant with "a hobby opera and swimming," which one dearly hopes are not practiced simultaneously. I smiled to myself like the British chap from *Antiques Roadshow*. "You've got a fantastic array of channels here, don't you?"

Industrial Strength Shopping

When I first met my husband, I did not know about price clubs. I simply thought I was dating a man for whom it was very important never to run out of things. Ed owned entire shrink-wrapped bricks of canned tuna, though by all outward appearances he was not a man passionate about tuna fish. For as long as I'd known him, there was a 500-count box of latex gloves in the closet. He had eight orange plastic-handled pairs of scissors and six glue sticks. I began to think he had run a kindergarten out of his home and that when it was closed down—no doubt owing to parental discomfort over the rubber gloves—he was left with the classroom and lunch supplies.

Then one bold shining day, Ed took me by the hand and brought me to Costco. Initially I was aghast. Who were these poor people who could use up to 112 packets of Alka-Seltzer or a 2-pack of jumbo sized bottles of Immodium in a single lifetime? Then we hit the food aisles, and I understood who they were. They were the people eating 18-packs of Vienna sausages and 6-pound cans of garbanzo beans in a single lifetime. I began to see the place as a vast conspiracy of bigness, one colossal, insatiable purchase leading to another. Need a bigger refrigerator for your 30-pound salmon? Aisle 11. Need a 10-pound box of Arm & Hammer to freshen up that big refrigerator? Aisle 5. If you're buying 7 frankfurters, better get the gallon tub of French's.

"Two seventy-nine," said Ed, of the French's, looking rapt. "You can't afford not to buy the mustard." It's a sickness, and my husband is well beyond help.

Next to the entrancing mustard was a white plastic bucket of mayonnaise, looking like it had taken a wrong turn on the way to The Home Depot. The soy sauce came in a metal one-gallon can of the sort used to transport gas to your car when you've been running on empty, as you tend to do when your bank account has been drained dry by army-sized requisitions of cling peaches and Dimetapp. What happened to bottles you can actually fit into your kitchen? Is it worth saving \$1.71 if it means spooning condiments from industrial vats into more manageably sized bottles, thereby soiling countless shirts with spots that will not come out even with 406 applications of SHOUT?

Then there's the fact that Ed is one of those guys who likes to walk down all the aisles when the shop. At a place as vast as Costco, you don't enter into this lightly. You need good arch support and a map, possibly a donkey and canteen. To get out in under an hour, you'll need to break into a jog. Given you are about to buy snack foods totaling 350,000,000 calories, jogging's probably a good idea, but still and all . . .

"Perfect," said Ed when I pointed out how long it would take. He'd dropped off film at the Costco one-hour developers. "Go try on some glasses at Costco Optical," he said when I complained. "Check out the TVs. Sample a sausage." Gradually, I succumbed. Now we pretty much live at Costco. It's working out nicely, as our home is a warehouse for paper towels and mustard and giant flats of beverages.

My fondness for the place continued to blossom until one day the kindly man at Hector's, my neighborhood office supply store, complained about all the business he was losing to places like Costco and OfficeMax. Some weeks later, while stocking up on office supplies at Costco, I felt

twinge of guilt. It was a small twinge, and somewhat hard to detect what with the giddiness of finding printer cartridges for half the price I was paying at Hector's, but I was torn.

Then I saw something horrifying. I nudged Ed and pointed to a man cutting up sample-sized bites string cheese with a pair of scissors. Something about him looked familiar, though perhaps it was just the orange-handled scissors and the latex gloves. "Is that Hector?" I whispered to Ed. I wondered aloud whether all the people who owned the grocery stores and office supply shops driven out of business were now standing around in hairnets, working at Costco. Ed nodded thoughtfully and put a Mega-Bag of Fun-Sized candy bars in the cart, on the grounds that Halloween was just around the corner. (It was March.)

That night, sensing rebellion, Ed sat down with one of our three identical calculators (for those times when three family members need to work out complex math problems simultaneously) and totted up our annual savings due to Costco. On beer alone, it was over \$50. I tried to argue that you had to subtract the money spent on food items sitting uneaten for over two years, such as the two-foot by-one-foot carton of chicken teriyaki strips currently serving as a sort of display platform for ice cubes and Popsicles in our freezer. Ed countered that keeping a large, frozen object in the freezer made it more efficient and cut down on electric bills. There was no fighting it. Costco rules the universe (and is slightly bigger).

Meet the Parents

My mother had a saying: “Guests are like fish. After three days they begin to stink.” Here’s the thing about my mother, though. She never bought fresh fish. She bought Mrs. Paul’s frozen fish sticks, which she served us every Friday along with Tater Tots, leading me to think that good Catholics ate golden brown food on Fridays. Here’s the other thing about my mother. She never had guests. Only once in my childhood did someone from her or my father’s family stay overnight at our house. In my father’s case, it was because his family lived in England, and he’d lost touch with them. In my mother’s case, who knows. Possibly it was her cooking.

I’m guessing the fish line must have been something her own mother said.

I wouldn’t know, because I only met my grandmother once. When I was five, we took the train out to Walla Walla to visit my mother’s family for the first and last time. I can’t remember any interaction with Grandma, or even if that was what we called her. I remember that Uncle Al had a farm with a hayloft to play in, and ripe strawberries we could pick and eat until our bellies were bursting.

I know Uncle George had a red-haired daughter named Cacky, whom I adored, and that Aunt Louise scolded my brother and me for winding up the chains on the swing set and spinning ourselves dizzy. And that’s it: the sum total of my memories of my parents’ relatives. To this day, my family in Washington are strangers to me.

My husband’s mother also has a saying: “We love you. When are we going to see you again?” Ed’s family—his parents and his sister and her husband and little girl—come out to stay with us, or us with them, three or more times a year. When they come to town, they all pile into our home, and when we go to Florida, we all pile into theirs. Neither place has a guest room, but both have sofas and floor cushions and that’s enough. The first time we came to visit, Ed’s parents insisted on giving us their bed. His dad slept on the couch and his mom took the love seat. We thought the love seat was a pullout sofa bed, but in the morning we found her with her legs hanging over the arm. If anything could stink after three days, you’d think that would, but as always, Jeanne couldn’t bear to see us go.

Of course, I know what my mother meant. For the first three days of a visit, you are caught up in the joy and novelty of seeing one another. You’re busy catching up. It doesn’t bother you that you have no time to yourself, that you have to wait to use the shower and have to drink coffee that’s not made the way you like it. From day four onward, there’s a subtle shift. You’re running out of news to talk over and outings to pass the time and meals that everyone can happily eat. Patience begins to fray. By day six, something as trivial as a coffee table water ring can seem like grounds for a NATO tribunal. You begin to view your guests through the magnifying glasses of the put-upon host. A TV set turned for a few decibels higher than you like registers as “blaring.” Making a 13-cent long-distance call is perceived as “running up my phone bill!”

Ed’s family often stays six or seven days. By the last day, I admit I’m ready to have my home back to normal, to get dressed in the room where my clothes live. Six rooms aren’t enough for five guests, but I blame the apartment for my feelings, not the guests. I don’t want them to go after three days.

just want the building to get larger.

I've come to love Ed's relatives. I think of them as family in a way that I never thought of my own relatives in Walla Walla—that collection of names and faces on Christmas cards. And I couldn't have these feelings about Ed's family if they didn't come visit as often as they do, or if they stayed in a hotel and dropped by for meals. Family are people who live together—if only for a week at a time. They're people who drop towels on your bathroom floor, put your cups and glasses back in the wrong place and complain about your weather. You do it to them, they do it to you, and none of you would have it any other way.

She's Got Game

On any given night for the 14 or so months of the year corresponding to baseball season, our TV is likely to be tuned to a sports channel. In order to maintain some semblance of personal contact with my husband, Ed, during these months, I often sit beside him on the couch with a book. I don't mind the chatter of the sportscasters, for my brain processes sports talk in the same way it processes political announcements and the cell-phone conversations of strangers.

A man in a navy blazer will say, "No at-bats in that at-bat!" and his companion will chime in with, "It was right there, in the whack-me zone!" and it's as though they're not there.

Sometimes I find myself staring at the game anyway. I watch sports the way a dog will watch TV. I'm attracted by the motion and color, but no actual comprehension is taking place. Ed forgets that this is the case. He'll see me looking at the screen and assume I'm following the game and expect me to keep track of what happens while he goes to the kitchen for a refreshing beverage. Sometimes I'm able to bluff my way through it ("He had it right there in the whack-me zone, honey!"), but more often I am forced to confess that I have not grasped the significance of anything I have seen.

This is where it gets ugly. This is where Ed tries to turn his wife into—as the men in the blazers like to say—a serious student of the game. Plainly put, this cannot be done. You'd have more luck getting a pug to understand *Jeopardy!* Take, for instance, the Infield Fly Rule, which begins, in the breezy parlance of the Official Baseball Rules, like this: "The batter is out when it is declared, and the batter does not have to be caught. Because the batter is declared out, the runners are no longer forced to run but they can run if they wish, at the risk of being put out . . ."

"What?" Ed will ask. "What don't you get?" Apparently this language speaks to him in a way that does not speak to me. One night I decided to try putting it to work. It was seven o'clock and cutlery were growing cold. I cleared my throat. "The wife is declared put out when it is dinnertime and the game is still running. The husband's attention has to be caught and because the wife is put out, the husband may wish to run . . ."

Ed begged leniency on the grounds that it was "the top of the ninth." Here again, communication breaks down. For me, there can be no understanding of a sport where the "top" of an inning is the first half. "Think of ladders," I said, as Marvin Benard stepped up to the plate. "You start at the bottom and go to the top." But Ed wasn't listening.

Benard struck out, and Ed said hurtful things about him. This is my other qualm with pro sports. I feel bad for the players when they mess up. The ball Benard missed was going 90 m.p.h., and it was all crooked. If I were the umpire, I would have laid a hand on the man's shoulder and said, "Take your base, Marv. You were really close."

Last October my tolerance for Ed's devotion to sports, already threadbare, began to unravel. The baseball season was winding down, leading me to think that we could resume our normal adult activities, if only we had any. I came into the living room one Sunday to find Ed, a man who dismisses football as "a bore," engrossed in a Broncos game. He wore a guilty grin. "Third and long, sweetie!"

It was around that time that I came across a book about sports "addiction." It said that for many

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