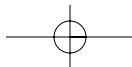
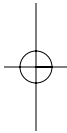
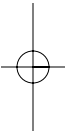


OOPS!

I Forgot My Wife



OOPS!

I Forgot My Wife

A STORY OF COMMITMENT AS MARRIAGE
AND SELF-CENTEREDNESS COLLIDE

Doyle Roth



P. O. Box 64260, Colorado Springs, CO 80962

Oops! I Forgot My Wife

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Have you ever tried to do two things at once? That's what I've just been doing. I've been busy sitting in my recliner while at the same time staring at my dusty computer keyboard. You see, I'm caught between Monday Night Football and writing this "acknowledgments" page. I'll get back to you after the football game.

OK, I'm back. What I was thinking about was how in the world this book ever came into existence. Frankly, I've never written anything longer than a hunting supply list. What in the world made me think I should write a book? (It would be laughable except that writing this book has probably reduced my life expectancy by ten years.) You see, I'm a rancher, not a writer. While I do some public speaking, my heart is really in working with people individually.

Before it ever dawned on me to write a book, my young friend Michael Murphy asked a very stirring question. "How is an old guy like you going to pass on to others your insights about mentoring and relationships?" That question resulted in this book. As the idea took shape, many of my friends and colleagues were very supportive of the idea. For instance, my lifetime friend, Alex Strauch, already a well-known author, gave me excellent counsel right from the start. "Are you *crazy*?" he counseled. I should have listened because my first two drafts landed in the trash alongside last month's magazines and newspapers.

Then it happened. I began to understand my communication style and how to transfer ideas to the printed page without forfeiting my identity in the process. (Two wonderful friends—Dr. Craig VanSchooneveld and Barney Visser—were determined to preserve this in my writing.) I wanted to write in a style consistent with how I relate to people in counseling—more personal than formal, yet very direct. A combination of relationship, story, and teaching. The email format was "just what the doctor ordered."

After forty years of marriage and thirty years of marriage counseling, determining the subject of the book was easy. What was tough was deciding which theme to emphasize: *men are terrific* or *people are*

self-centered. Of course, my lovely wife Nancy disagreed with the first one and was partial to the second in hopes that my spending time thinking about it would be beneficial to our own marriage. We finally compromised by taking a little from both and emphasizing *the self-centeredness of men*. For some reason it hasn't been that hard to come up with illustrations of how male self-centeredness impacts marriage.

I must tell you something up front. Even though Nancy, our children, and their families make veiled appearances in some of my illustrations, I love them dearly. They have all been a tremendous source of encouragement during this project. We've laughed, cried, and disagreed through almost every email. It's embarrassing to say this, but they have all lived this "self-centeredness of men" story by living with the author of this book.

What's been amazing to me is how God has raised up the necessary people to finish this project when I was running out of gas. A miracle in itself was the way Paul Santhouse showed up and put the finishing touches to the text. He is a fantastic brother in Christ and I thank him for his perseverance. I'm also thankful for Eric Anderson's design skills, Dan Pegoda's wonderful art work, and the editorial genius of Stephen Sorenson and Shannon Wingrove. Thanks to all of you for your labor of love. You've all worked very hard! Why not take the next six months off?

There you have it. The message, the process, the people, and now the book in hand. *Enjoy!*

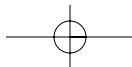
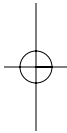
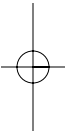
INTRODUCTION

This is a story. A work of fiction. A tale.

But it's also true. True to life and true to marriage. Not that you could actually email any of the characters, but that you will see many of their same attitudes and experiences reflected in the "normal" marriages of your city, neighborhood, and church. You will even recognize some of what you read from firsthand experience, because when we peak into the lives of others, we often see ourselves. Stories about human nature are always true.

This story goes beyond human nature, however. It also features perseverance, redemption, renewal, and the value of confrontation. When friends and mentors stay committed through ugly times and deep disappointment, hope is unleashed. And when troubled couples find hope, miracles are not far behind.

So get ready to read someone else's mail (email, actually). It reveals the story of how Gerry, Sue, and Carter stood with their friends through the midst of a storm. And beyond.



PROLOGUE

FROM: Gerry

TO: The Reader

SUBJECT: How it all got started

I remember the exact moment I realized my wife and I were headed for divorce. It came to me during one of our shouting matches. I had just thrown out an accusation guaranteed to cut her to the quick—a handy trick I’d used many times to move us from gridlock to resolution. Normally she’d stop dead in her tracks, get teary-eyed, and start back-pedaling. From there I could usually get us onto the same page and moving to the more important things of life (like, “What’s for dinner?”).

But this time it didn’t work that way. When I hurled my accusation, she actually smiled at me (unpleasantly) and muttered, “Whatever.” Though at one level I sensed the match was over, I still tried making my point from different angles, but none of them took. In fact, she didn’t even let me finish. Right in the middle of my last attempt, she left the room—not in tears or in a rage, but disinterested. As if she couldn’t be bothered to continue. That’s when it struck me. She didn’t care. Not about me, not about the argument, and not about our marriage. She was done.

My hunch turned out to be correct. She even had an escape plan in place, and if it weren’t for the intervention of a close friend I’d be single right now.

Now, I say “a close friend,” but it didn’t start out that way. Up to that point, Carter was a bit of an enigma to me. A successful businessman, he was also a rancher with an enormous spread of land southwest of town. He could talk stocks and investments with the best of us, but then he’d always throw in some crazy comment about having to go spread manure and head for his truck. He had a way of dismissing us

12 : PROLOGUE

younger guys with colorful putdowns and questions about our manliness. Jokingly, he'd refer to us young bucks as sissies, slackers, slugs, or varmints of one kind or another, yet there's not a single one of us he didn't intentionally pursue with friendly intent. Over time I came to see how deeply he cared about us and wanted to see us grow into men. (He was also clear about what a man is supposed to be. "A man," he'd say, "stands for something. A man is more concerned about a stain on his character than a stain on his pants. A man cares more about keeping his integrity above reproach than about keeping his SUV spotless. A man opens the car door for his wife, and at all times treats her with honor and respect.") To be honest, he made being a man something I wanted very much for myself.

One weekend, when a bunch of us were hunting together, he abruptly turned to me and asked how my wife, Sue, was doing. Aside from being totally unprepared for such a question during a hunting trip, I was hesitant to let him know. "She's great," I said, then changed the subject. He didn't let it rest, however. The next morning at breakfast, he asked again. I told him things could be better, but we'd be OK. By the look on his leathery, unshaven face, I knew that he knew I was full of bull.

I'd always wondered how he got to be an elder at our church. His rough and gruff manner didn't strike me as typical of a churchman, yet behind his crusty appearance there was definite warmth. That morning over the campfire things began to make sense. Although he thoroughly understood the demands of business and never made me feel guilty about my "workaholic" tendencies, he was unapologetically straightforward about the self-serving way most men approach life. He shared stories from his life and marriage and didn't try to make things sound perfect and wonderful. At some point that weekend, I realized he was an authentic Christian, and I decided I trusted him.

The night Sue walked away from our argument, she also left the house "to go visit a friend." To be honest, it was pretty ugly. I told her not to hurry back, which I thought would finally trigger those tears of remorse I'd been looking for, but she only returned an emotionless, "Don't worry, I won't," and drove off. I slammed the door for effect, but something in my mind was going, *uh-oh*. This time seemed different. She is so disinterested. She doesn't love me anymore. The more

PROLOGUE : 13

I considered it, the more convinced I became. After a couple hours of brooding, I admitted to myself that we'd crossed a serious line in our relationship. I'd always fought to win, and now winning wasn't the issue. I didn't have a clue what to do.

That's when I thought of Carter. Not that I wanted counseling. Sue and I had already tried that several times, and it only made things worse. We'd sit in somebody's office explaining what each other did that made us hurt or angry, then we'd go home and fight about what we said. I'm sure the counselors were moved by our situation and genuinely tried to help, but I was too stubborn to give any ground. Somehow I couldn't picture Carter letting Sue and me get away with that. After staring at his number in our church directory for several minutes, I picked up the phone.

True to form, Carter greeted me with, "Hello, Slacker," and told me to get my "sorry rear end" down to his office the next day, preferably together with Sue. Fortunately, Sue agreed to come (more out of respect for Carter than for my sake). Right away I knew this session would be different. From the moment we walked in the door, Carter's loving but no-nonsense approach hit us right between the eyes. He used the Bible to explain what was going on in our hearts, and he used ranch and animal analogies to help us see what we were doing to each other. Even now I can't help but view cows with a subtle kinship, not to mention horses, turkeys, pigs, goats, elk, deer, fence posts, barbed wire, manure spreaders, and a host of other things I'd never heard of before. (I now understand why Jesus used so many parables in His teaching.)

Initially Sue was taken aback by Carter's blunt statements and willingness to confront, and his illustrations were certainly not easy for my male ego to swallow. More than once I decided not to come back. (Imagine being compared to a pig, a posthole digger, or a pile of manure. One time he referred to me as a fence staple—sharp, crooked, and bent toward myself.) I can still see his boots on the desk and the mud on his jeans. It's one thing to resist the "opinions" of a professional, but who can resist the observations of a cowboy? When somebody is willing to put truth in your face, it has a way of defining reality. Gradually I came to see my behavior as unacceptable and my childish tantrums as outright sin. I was an abusive husband—not to mention proud, arrogant, insecure, and totally self-focused—and Carter didn't mince words. But he

14 : PROLOGUE

also didn't lord it over me. He'd had his share of failures and freely told us about them. His marriage had been on the rocks at one point, and the journey back from that experience left him with a humility I could not resist. Sometimes a spade has to be called a spade, and I'm grateful he had the courage and gentleness to do it well. His belief in Sue and me helped us rediscover our belief in ourselves, and the years since then have been better than I'd ever imagined they could be. Which brings me to the present.

For some time after our meetings with Carter, Sue and I made it a point to invite him and his wife, Minnie, over every now and then to meet our friends. Whether it was their age, experience, or earthy humor, they always fit in well and seemed to spark probing conversations. At one of those get-togethers, Sue's good friend from work, Stacy, started asking lots of questions about Jesus Christ. She and her fiancé, Mitch, became regular fixtures whenever Carter and Minnie came around, and they even had Carter do their premarital counseling.

About six months later, my job took me several hours north to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and a few months after that Mitch and Stacy also moved there. However, as things steadily improved for Sue and me, we began to feel concern for Mitch and Stacy. We saw them less frequently, and when we did get together with them, Sue and I always felt troubled afterward. Consequently, we weren't surprised when the doorbell rang late one Thursday night.

I've decided to share their story with you because it meant a lot to me, and to many of the guys at my church. Once again, Carter played a significant role, only this time he met us in our own homes—via email. In many ways I actually think email was exactly what Mitch needed. For one thing, it's much easier to get personal “impersonally” via the computer than sitting face-to-face in somebody's office with your spouse. It also gave Mitch time to reread each message after calming down from his initial reactions. (Carter is nothing if not “to the point.”) All I know is that we saw miraculous things happen in all of our marriages, and Stacy gave me permission to share the whole story with you. So, here goes. . . .

*EMAIL 1***FROM:** Gerry**TO:** Carter**SUBJECT:** Meltdown at the "Not-So-OK Corral"

Hey Carter!

Remember me? How are you doing, my friend? It's been ages since we talked. I trust you and Minnie are more in love than ever. Sue and I will never forget your kindness to us, and you'll be happy to know we're still thriving together.

Better grab yourself a cold drink—this email's a doozy. I'll call you soon so we can catch up, but I wanted to send you a heads-up first.

Something we've long feared has finally happened. Last night about 12:30 AM our doorbell rang. Groggily, I climbed out of bed and stumbled to the front door. Looking through the peephole, I saw three distorted figures standing on my porch. As best I could tell, it was a woman with two little children, all holding hands. A certain anxiety crept into my chest, and when I opened the door my fears were realized. There stood my best friend's wife, Stacy, with their two kids, Tanya and Rusty.

I figured something terrible must have happened. The children had blankets tucked under their arms, and Rusty was hugging his bear and sucking his thumb. Tears were running down Stacy's cheeks. Mascara was smeared across both sides of her face, and her hair was a disaster. Frankly, they looked like refugees. So where was Mitch?

Disoriented, I just stood there looking at them. As Tanya began to sob, Sue appeared from behind me and had the common sense to invite them into the house. She took charge of the situation and put the little ones to bed in our guest bedroom. She seemed to know at once

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what was going on. As I watched the two women hug each other, it dawned on me. Mitch was up to something.

I'm sorry to break this news to you because I know how much you love Mitch and Stacy. You've been close to them and have prayed for them for years. We both knew Mitch needed a spiritual overhaul and figured God would do it in His time. Well, I think that time has arrived.

Carter, you know I'm no marriage counselor. It hasn't been that long since *we* were in your office getting counseling. Sue and I are certainly doing better, but I wasn't prepared for this morning's encounter. As we sat down at the kitchen table about 1:00 AM with warm cups of tea, Stacy began venting unbelievable anger, bitterness, hostility, and frustration toward Mitch. They apparently had a huge disagreement earlier last evening, which heated up again later on to the extent that Stacy went into another room. When she came back, Mitch was sound asleep. His I-don't-give-a-rip attitude pushed her over the edge. She couldn't stand another minute in the house with a snoring husband who didn't seem to care that his wife was dying inside. So she gathered up the children, put them and her broken heart into the car, and headed for our house. Listening to all this, I wondered if Mitch was having a good night's rest.

As Stacy cried, pounded her fist on the table, and expressed how deeply she was hurting, I remembered how badly I had hurt Sue during our marital trouble. Mitch's complete disregard for Stacy, combined with his careless treatment of her, was breaking her heart, and it made me more upset than I can tell you. (Why is it so much easier to see the pain in somebody else's wife than in your own?) Stacy was in a state of emotional and marital meltdown. Her family was breaking apart, her children were in our spare bedroom, and her husband was sound asleep as if he hadn't a care in the world. As I listened to Stacy cry, I wondered what Mitch was going to think when he woke up in his big empty house.

Carter, it was really helpful for me to have gone through our counseling sessions with you. I kept trying to think of what you would say, but finally realized you wouldn't say much of anything. This was the

I FORGOT MY WIFE : 17

time to listen, not talk. I think Stacy just needed to get everything out. Sue seemed to understand this. She kept asking questions and encouraging Stacy to explain how she felt.

Let me tell you something, Carter. This is one angry woman we've got here. I jotted down some things she said about Mitch because they rang a bell with me, too. As you think about them, remember we're not talking about the same Mitch you knew several years ago. We're now dealing with Mr. Successful Businessman. He's still a tad shy of six feet tall, but he's probably up to 190 pounds (too much fast food). His hair has gone from brown to partly cloudy and his new goatee almost makes him look sophisticated. Sue says he has dropped from an eight to a six on the handsomeness scale, but that's still four points lower than he thinks of himself. He seems awfully concerned with how he looks. Designer duds, oxford shirts (heavy starch), and \$200 loafers. No manure under his heels! Only the best ties and eyeglasses, and a spotless white hardhat for his job-site visits—not so much to protect his head as to keep his hair from getting messed in the endless Wyoming wind. (OK, I confess I'm not feeling too fond of Mitch at the moment.)

Anyway, here are some of the "high points" from Stacy's ocean of fury:

1. Mitch is nothing but an image manager. He's extremely concerned about what others think. Dress right, act right, fool everybody. Stacy is terrified that talking to us will set him off because of how it will tarnish his lovely image. According to Mitch, only weak people go for counseling.
2. He has also become a Jekyll and Hyde. Who he is at home is totally different from who he is everywhere else. At home he's unbearable to live with, but to everyone else he's Mr. Wonderful. Kind of like the guy who yells at his family all the way to church and then becomes Mr. Smiles when he steps out of the car.
3. Mitch is an even worse workaholic than I was. He enjoys what he does and makes a great salary, but he's so stingy with his

18 : OOPS!

time and money that the family doesn't benefit from it. He comes home to refresh himself, be waited on hand and foot, pat the kids on the head, take on some calories, have sex, and continue with his self-centered life. Stacy says he would rather take a promotion with a divorce than decline the promotion and keep his family.

4. Speaking of which, he's totally disinterested in the needs of his family. He sees his home life as merely an intermission in what's most important to him—his work. In a sense, he leaves his energy, creativity, personality, humor, patience, and love at the office. His total lack of involvement in his family make him pretty irrelevant and boring.
5. He is disconnected from his children. He understands that they need discipline, but never takes the time or initiative to get involved with them or deal with them gently. All he does is yell and order them around. He can't seem to understand what it's doing to the kids.
6. Mitch needs to be the center of attention. Stacy says she and the kids have to focus on his needs at all times. She would like to invite friends over, but he gets frustrated when her attention is diverted from his needs. When he's home, it's all about him.
7. She says he's a "marital cripple." He is completely clueless about how to have a good family. As you know, his parents are divorced, so it's not like he has ever had a healthy model. Still, Stacy says he's not even trying.
8. He's abusive to Stacy. This was the real shocker for me. He apparently orders her around as if she's an animal and emotionally beats her down whenever she tries to communicate how she feels. He puts her down with sarcastic, insensitive, and hurtful jesting. Did I ever do this? What kind of man gets his jollies by hurting his wife, anyway? He even does it in public, which is humiliating to her. After listening to Stacy for so long, I now think my best friend is a total control freak. However, I think he's about to be put on notice that his controlling days are over. Believe me, Carter, this woman has had it!

I FORGOT MY WIFE : 19

I can't tell you how many times she used the word "self" to describe him. Over and over and over. According to Stacy, he's a self-centered, self-serving, self-absorbed, self-righteous, self-willed, self-defensive, self-justifying, self-sufficient, self-deceived, self-loving, self-exalting, self-satisfied, and self-consumed man. (Did you get all that? Would you like me to repeat it? Me neither!)

Granted, Stacy is really upset, but if even half of what she said is true I think we've got a menace on our hands.

It was 5:30 AM before Stacy started to wind down. All of a sudden she stopped talking and said she needed to rest. I could only think of how sad it was that this marriage was ending. There's no way this lady is going back into that situation unless something miraculous takes place. Her belly is plum full of a man who is soundly sleeping just three miles away in the comfort of his empty house. Little does he know that the biggest nightmare of his life will be starting as soon as he wakes up, like a bomb going off in his pajamas. All I can think to do is wait for his call when he opens his eyes to nobody. Do you think he'll shave and put on some cologne first?

Actually, that's why I'm emailing you. I know he'll be calling soon, and I think I'll direct him your way for some of that famous-recipe counseling you dish out. He knows what a huge difference you made in my marriage, so I'm guessing he'll take my advice and contact you. *If* he'll admit there's a problem, that is. Of course, the empty house should serve as a nagging reminder, don't you think?

Don't mince words with him, Carter. I think your two-by-four-between-the-eyes approach is the best thing for all of us guys. It sure knocked me back to reality. Your having the guts to tell me my behavior was unacceptable really got my attention. I needed to hear that from somebody I respected. None of us enjoys hearing stuff like that, but it paves the way to better things. I know you can't take him to lunch from a hundred miles away, but give him the best you've got via phone and email (preferably email). I think you can make a difference for those two. They sure need it right now.

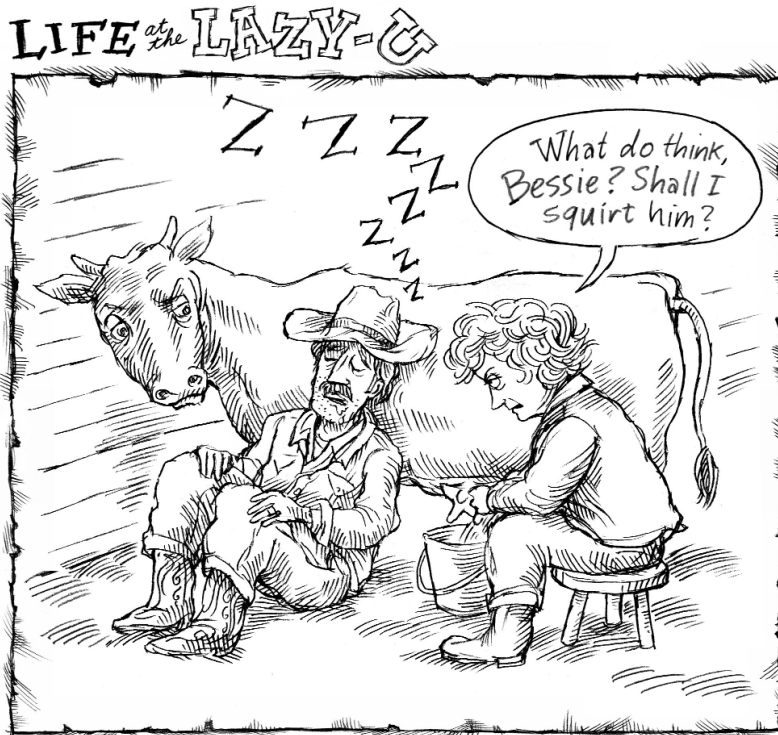
By the way, I remember how you always loved that *Life at the Lazy-U* comic. Well, I've been meaning to send this one for weeks.

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Have you seen it yet? Based on what's about to happen to Mitch, I think it's pretty timely.

Uh oh! The phone is ringing. I have to go, but I expect you'll be hearing from Mitch in a very short time. Brace yourself.

Love to you and Minnie,
Gerry



*EMAIL 2***FROM:** Mitch**TO:** Carter**SUBJECT:** What's new?

Hey you old rip, how the heck are ya? Every since I moved up here, I've missed seeing you. I assume Minnie is doing well. What a sweet-heart she is. I still can't figure how such a beautiful woman ended up married to such a strange character. I sure miss our weekly racquetball game and steaks at your ranch. We always had such great parties. Let's do it again!

I know you don't understand why I moved to Wyoming, but I could make a lot more money up here. We bought a really nice house outside Cheyenne and even updated the old pickup. I wanted something a little nicer for the family so I bought a fancy Z28. It's a ragtop no less! We kept Stacy's old clunker, though, because it does much better with car seats and spilled milk shakes (which happens all the time). Rest assured the Z is spotless.

Well, it's 9:00 Thursday morning, and I finally decided to take a day off from work. It's about time I caught up on some household chores Stacy's been after me to do. She's a great woman, but she sure knows how to put the pressure on when something's not to her liking. I guess all marriages have little disagreements here and there. We had a small one last night. Frankly, it was no big deal, but Stacy must have decided she needed to visit with Sue (Gerry's wife) about it. Dealing with these emotional females must really frustrate you as a marriage counselor. The smallest disagreements make them go ballistic. You know what I mean, don't you? I just talked to her on the phone a little while ago, and she said she wasn't feeling the best. Apparently she has a bad headache from not sleeping well last night. That probably explains her lousy attitude. One thing for sure—she still sounded

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pretty angry. I hope Sue helps her work through whatever's rankling her. Anyway, she said she'd be home later this morning so I'll figure out what her problem is when she arrives. Hope she makes it by 10:00 so I can get down to the club for a good workout before lunch. I'll have lunch with Stacy and the kids, then see if they want a quick ride in the convertible. Without the milk shakes, that is!

Hey Carter, I've got some great jokes for the next time we talk. The guys I work with are hilarious—I don't know where they come up with this stuff. Sure breaks up the seriousness of office life.

Hang on a minute—the phone's ringing. Maybe it's Stacy.

Well, I'm back again. It was my mom. I told her about Stacy heading over to Sue's to discuss our argument, and she couldn't believe it. To be honest, I can't believe it either. She ought to be talking with me, not with everybody else in town. Hopefully she'll get all this complaining out of her system soon because I'm getting real tired of it.

Sounds like she's opening the garage door. I'll get back to this email as soon as I check in with her.

Sorry for all the interruptions, Carter. It's only 10:35 and Stacy has already come and gone. She was here for fifteen minutes, then she slammed the door and left! Said she had to run back to Sue's house. Apparently she only came home to pick up some clothes for the kids and didn't want to stick around for lunch. That's too bad. It would have been nice to have a couple hours without the kids—know what I mean?

Actually, now that I think about it, this whole thing is pretty weird. She didn't look a bit good and didn't want to talk about it. I tried to tell her I'd be done with my workout around 11:30 and that we could discuss last night over lunch, but she just kept gathering up clothes and toys for the kids. I even told her about some of the friends I've made at the gym, but she didn't show the slightest interest. Maybe this is her "time of the month." You know what that's like for us husbands, right? I told her to be back in time to fix supper, but I think that was a mistake because she immediately started crying and drove off. I hope Sue will encourage her to get more exercise because she sure needs to lighten up a little bit. Sheesh.

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I guess since Stacy doesn't want to be here for lunch, I'll meet a couple guys from work and slam some fast food. Maybe I can talk them into eighteen holes this afternoon, provided I can get Stacy to bring the kids over at 5:00 instead of 4:00. (She said she wants them to see me. I don't get that. First she hauls them to Gerry's house and then arranges to bring them back "to see me." What's wrong with this picture? Women . . .)

Well Carter, it's now 4:00. I didn't have a chance to send this earlier because my buddy Stu called about our golf game. Since we couldn't get a tee time, I went over to the club instead. It's probably just as well because Stacy came by with the kids about fifteen minutes ago and she would have been mad as a hornet if I'd not been here. She said she couldn't wait until 5:00 because she had errands to run. Then she tells me she's not coming back until 6:30 so "could I please fix the kids some supper." Can you believe this? She swoops in and drops the kids without any consideration for my time, then orders me to fix supper for everybody. Good thing there are leftovers in the fridge I can nuke without too much trouble, no thanks to her. I can't believe this. How am I supposed to get her list of chores done? She sure is acting weird today.

OK, the kids are *finally* playing in the backyard. I've got the game going on the TV. It's actually pretty nice to have some peace and quiet for a change. Hey, have I told you about our backyard? It's huge. We got the biggest lot in the neighborhood and landscaped it to the hilt. I sure hope you and Minnie can come up for a visit before the snow flies. We'll have a killer barbecue! (By the way, the snow flies pretty early up here, so we'd better get something on the calendar.)

What a day. I know, this is gonna be the strangest email you've ever received. Kind of like a running documentary. Actually, I have to run now because a guy from the office just called and wants to meet me at the pub for an hour. Said he has to bring me up to speed on how the day went. Wait till he hears how *my* day went. Anyway, I think I'll send this now and get back to you after I "fix supper." Actually, the neighbor said she'd watch my kids while I'm out, so I'm going to see if she'll feed them supper, too. Hope so.

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OK, gotta run. Please say hello to Minnie for me. I've got some things to ask you, but I'll wait till later and email you again. I'll also try to find those jokes. Sorry for this crazy email! Take care.

Mitch

P.S. I didn't have time to do the chores. Oh well, I'm sure Stacy will understand. After all, she's the one who's always telling me how hard it is to watch the kids all the time!

*EMAIL 3***FROM:** Gerry**TO:** Carter**SUBJECT:** Flying dishes

Hey Carter,

I left you a short voicemail message, but you and Minnie must be out for the evening. Have you heard anything from Mitch? Things are heating up, and I'm wondering if you should give him a call.

Stacy went over there after supper to pick up more clothes and things, and while she was there Mitch kept confronting her about what she was doing. At some point he must have grabbed her wrist or something because she screamed at him, jerked her wrist out of his hand, and in the process knocked over a lamp. I don't know exactly what she said, but according to Stacy he lost his temper, chased her into the kitchen, and started throwing dishes. He must have scared her pretty good because she ran to the phone and dialed 911, which prompted Mitch to shove her aside and rip the phone cord out of the wall.

When she finally got back to our house the kids were still crying hysterically. I waited for Mitch to show up (praying furiously I'd know what to do when he got here), but he never came. I feel sick that I let her go over there alone, but I had no idea he'd do that kind of stuff. Beside, he's my best friend. What am I supposed to do? Tell you what, Carter. Even in the worst days of our marriage troubles, I never got to the point of physical violence. This has me real nervous, Carter. Please pray for us.

OK, Sue just came in and read my email. Lest I get too high and mighty here, she reminded me of a few times I backed her against the wall when we used to argue, so I guess I was also pretty aggressive.

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Amazing how easy it is to forget the bad old days. (At least for me! Sue apparently hasn't forgotten . . .)

Talk soon (I hope),
Gerry

*EMAIL 4***FROM:** Mitch**TO:** Carter**SUBJECT:** Not the best day of my life

Hi Carter,

I was hoping there'd be some of your cowboy wisdom waiting for me when I logged on tonight. I could sure use your advice right now. I think Stacy has gone off the deep end. You and Minnie must be off gallivanting or something.

You wouldn't believe what happened this evening. When I got back from meeting my buddy for dinner (the neighbor fed the kids), Stacy was here filling a suitcase with clothes and personal things. I couldn't believe it and asked her what she thought she was doing. I mean, what would you do if you came home from one of your meetings and found Minnie in the bedroom loading a suitcase? What was I supposed to do? Help her pack? She started crying and wouldn't say anything, which really ticks me off. Every woman in the country uses that trick to get out of having to defend whatever they feel like doing. I told her I wasn't buying that crying routine and I demanded an immediate explanation for what this whole stupid thing was all about.

Carter, I was blown away. She told me she wasn't happy in the marriage and was leaving. It didn't register with me at first until she said she'd be staying over at Gerry and Sue's until she could find an apartment. I guess hearing the word "apartment" brought me to my senses. I have to confess I got kind of angry. But who wouldn't be angry to find his wife skipping out? It must have scared her when I raised my voice a little because she went running into the kitchen. Unfortunately, when I followed her in there I knocked some of my lunch dishes off the counter and they made a huge crash. Before I

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knew it she was calling the police. Now, the last thing we need around here is the police making a big deal of everything, so I told her to hang up immediately. When she didn't, I unplugged the phone and went into the other room to cool down. Since the kids were both crying I figured I'd let her calm them down before we got to the bottom of this, but she snuck them out of the house and drove away without even apologizing or saying goodbye.

What's wrong with her, Carter? She has no right to treat me this way after all I've done for her. There's not a single one of my friends' wives who has it as good as Stacy. I can't believe what a spoiled brat she's turned into.

And get this. A few minutes after she left, the doorbell rang. I figured she took the kids for a little drive to get them quieted down and was now coming back to apologize. I mean, how could she even think of leaving me? I provide her with everything she wants! I bring home the bacon, put her in a better house than any of her friends have, and provide total security. And what about the kids? They need me. I'm their father, for crying out loud. So I go to the door prepared to set the record straight once and for all. I decided to tell her she was never, ever to do this again to our family. Enough is enough. Does that make sense? The only thing is, when I opened the door—it was the police! How frustrating. The only thing they said was, "Is there a problem here?" I told them the problem just left with my two kids.

Carter, my wife and kids are gone. What am I supposed to do? Drive over to Gerry's and tell them to come home? I tell you what, it'll be a cold day you know where before I go sniveling after Stacy in front of my friends. If that's what she expects of me, she's crazier than I thought.

Well Tex, I've been sitting here for the past several hours waiting for her to call and apologize. It feels like I'm sitting in a mortuary. How mean can a woman get to do something like this to her husband? Does she understand how this feels? I walk around the house and all I can see is the time I've sacrificed at work to make this place nice for her and the kids. She doesn't realize what it takes for me to put this rather large roof over her head. Carter, do you think you could talk

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some sense into her? Does she actually think she'll be satisfied living in an apartment with two little kids? It's so like her. She never gives an ounce of thought to what she's doing. Sorry, I need to answer the phone. Caller ID says it's Stacy. I'll keep you posted.

Hey, get a load of this. It's 11:00 at night and I've just finished a forty-five minute conversation with a woman I don't even know anymore who is supposed to be "my wife." She's telling me she wants a "controlled separation" for at least two months. What the heck is that? Have you ever heard of such a stupid thing? Here's the deal. She said she's willing to work on our marriage provided I get personal counseling at the same time. She said a bunch of stuff about anger management and called me a control freak. If you ask me, she's been watching too much daytime TV. She also wants us both to get marriage counseling together. She will "consider" getting back together after a "controlled separation" *if* she sees significant changes in my attitude and in our relationship. In the meantime, I'm not supposed to put any pressure on her to return home. (Can you believe this?) She says we can do things together as a family—like going out for dinner or taking the kids to the park—but she will call the shots and set the pace for how much we do. Hello? Hello? She seems to have forgotten that I'm not the problem here! She's the problem! Has she already forgotten that she's the one who left? As far as I'm concerned, she can just find an apartment and when she gets her life figured out she can ask to come back. Nuts with a "controlled separation." If she wants a divorce, she can go for it. In the meantime, I've got an early morning tee time, so I'm going to bed.

Please send me some of your sage advice, old buddy. Did you ever have this much trouble with Minnie? I'd bet not. You found yourself a classy one. Wish I could say the same.

Mitch

P.S. I'm thinking she's the one who needs some "personal counseling," wouldn't you say?

*EMAIL 5***FROM:** Mitch**TO:** Carter**SUBJECT:** I forgot to ask you this

I just finished watching TV. An unbelievable talk show was on, and you know what I saw? Some nut-case woman ranting and raving about her husband. She sounded exactly like Stacy. You know something, Carter? I think Stacy's been watching way too much TV lately.

Anyway, I can't sleep, so I decided to sit down at the computer. I watched my clock go all the way from 11:30 PM to 3:17 AM. Carter, I've never felt so pathetic. My whole life is swirling around in my mind like a herd of antelope. Frankly, I can't believe my marriage has come to this. What does Stacy expect of me? I thought everything was going along fine, and now I'm facing a "controlled separation." What about the kids? Has anyone stopped to think about them? And what am I supposed to do about the laundry, the meals, the yard, our sex life (yeah, right). All I know is that my marriage is in the tank. What am I supposed to do? I know this is going to damage our reputation in the community and at my company if people find out. I wonder what the neighbors think? How can she do this to me?

Maybe I should do some counseling to make her happy again, but with who? Actually, this is what I wanted to ask you earlier today (or yesterday, or whenever that was). I hate to impose upon you and our friendship, but somebody needs to help me make some sense of this. I'm not asking for counseling, really. (You know I think counseling is for sissies.) I'm sure I could figure out what to do with Stacy if she would cooperate, but I don't know how to get her to listen. Suddenly she won't let me say anything. If she were home, we could take our time working this out, but now that she's gone time seems to be on her side and working against me. To be honest, tonight it feels like

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there's no hope for putting this mess back together. I guess we'll have to see what happens.

It's now almost 6:00 in the morning. I think I'll call the starter at the golf course and cancel my tee time. I don't think I could even see the ball, let alone hit it. I'm completely worn out and the day is just beginning. Guess if I hurry I can still shower, grab some breakfast, and make it to the office on time. Before I go, I'd like to ask what your thoughts are about this whole confusing mess. Do you think we need counseling, or is that just an excuse for her to bail out of our marriage? Gerry told me yesterday I should talk to you about it all. Can you give me some reasons why I should come to you for counseling?

Talk about a couple of nutty emails—these are surely the weirdest I've ever sent. Maybe it'll give you some insight into what kind of help Stacy needs. It sure beats me.

Hope to hear from you soon,
Mitch

P.S. Get this—just as I was getting ready to send this email the phone rang. Stacy wanted to know where I left the checkbook. Isn't that just like a woman? They break your heart and then run off with all your hard-earned money. A long separation is sounding better all the time.

*EMAIL 6***FROM:** Carter**TO:** Mitch**SUBJECT:** What on earth is going on in Wyoming?

Well, my friend, there's no need for me to ask what's new by you. During the past thirty-seven hours, I've received two emails and two phone messages from Gerry, a long phone call from your lovely wife, and a series of rather informative emails from you. It took me quite a while just to process everything I heard and read. Please be assured of our constant prayers for you and Stacy as well as the children.

Let me start off by telling you I can certainly sympathize with you and Stacy, having once experienced the meltdown of my own marriage. I feel so sorry for your children who are caught in the tension of your fighting. And poor Gerry! I can sure understand the stress he's feeling as he tries to decide when to listen and when to talk. I know he and Sue care a great deal for both of you, and I'm thankful they're right there alongside you. I wish I could be there as well. But for now we'll have to make the best of these lousy emails. (I couldn't reach you at any of your phone numbers.)

Actually, I've discovered emails aren't so bad for this sort of thing. They give you time to process information, which is important for old geezers like me. With emails I can read them over and over, whereas phone calls are finished the second you hang up. I'm of the age now where I always forget nine-tenths of what is said as soon as it's said. (Don't laugh—it'll happen to you someday!) Besides, if you get angry at one of my emails and delete it, I can always send you another copy!

Before I continue, how do you like Wyoming? I couldn't believe you gave up pine trees for sagebrush, elk for jackrabbits, deer for antelope, and bears for badgers. I understand from Gerry that you live in a small residential area on the edge of Cheyenne. According to the cen-

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sus report, your moving up there gave Wyoming its anticipated population increase for the year. How does it feel to live in the middle of a cow town where all they talk about is the latest price of beef, whose horse is the fastest, whose tractor has the best air conditioning, whose hay is the tallest, and whose manure is the deepest? It feels like just yesterday you were still here in Colorado. Time flies while you're making mistakes! Wyoming instead of Colorado? Mitch? (You know I'm just razzing you. Minnie and I love you and just want it all to work out.)

The move must have been stressful. Anytime you move a family, the stress piles up like unread magazines. Of course, as you know, stress piles up whether you're moving or not. The informative email I received from Gerry yesterday made it sound like everything is piling up. So the marriage is pretty iffy, huh? I was glad to also get a phone call from Stacy, who was reaching out for help instead of wringing your neck and heading south with a guy twice the man you are at half your belt size. That woman must love you, or she'd have left years ago.

Gerry, Sue, and even Stacy seem to think I might be able to break through your thick skull with a series of emails. Frankly, nothing makes me happier than to come alongside those I love and give them a hand, but the question is, *are you really looking for help?* I wasn't so sure from your emails. Sometimes other people care more about our marriages than we do. For instance, my mom sure cares a lot about mine. You know something, Mitch? I care about your marriage, but I'm not going to force any "counseling" your way unless you're interested in it. We all believe in you and know you'll do everything you can to straighten out this mess. Since Gerry and I have gone through his marriage problems together, he thought we might as well all pitch in and go through yours together. But it's your call. What about it, you slacker? Everyone would love to help if you're interested. As for my part, I'll shoot off emails every now and again between racquetball and ranch work. Maybe some barnyard theology from an old "rip" might just give you and Stacy something to think about.

By the way, Minnie says hello! She also says if you don't straighten up she's going to head up there and give you the talking-to of your life. Believe me, you'd better straighten up now while you're ahead.

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Mitch, I don't know how such a lousy fisherman ended up with such a great catch as Stacy, but I think the time has come for you to decide whether you want to pull out the net, ask for help, and land the woman of your dreams, or whether you're going to play "catch and release" with your whole family. The ball is in your court!

Shoot me an email and let me know what you think. And meanwhile, try not to throw any more dishes. That could get expensive. If you have to throw something, use cow pies. No sharp edges.

Write back soon. I'm anxious about you and your family.

Carter

P.S. In case you're too busy to keep up with the really important things of life, I've attached one of my favorite comics, *Life at the Lazy-U*. Does it remind you of anybody? Nah, I didn't think so.

