

Wednesday is his stay-at-home day. His wife, Sherri, started working at the local Pet Supplies on Wednesdays and Saturdays, a recent development that has forced them to create a new weekly routine. He is now in charge of the grocery shopping on Wednesdays, as they always seem to run out of food by the middle of the week, and of picking the kids up at school and shuttling them to their various time-killing activities.

It's 9 am. Sherri took the kids to school on her way to work and he has the house to himself. He gets up early, even on his day off, but prefers to wait a few hours before breakfast. Eating unlocks his appetite, and he hates getting cravings mid-morning. He spent the early part of the morning steam cleaning the Triexta carpets in the dining room. He and Sherri have wool frieze carpeting in their bedroom, dusty blue, with Durabac jute backing, but he wanted something more neutral, and stain resistant, for the common areas. Nonetheless, you can't beat frieze for durability, no matter what people think about its outdated appearance. Their frieze carpet has a twist level of 9 turns per inch, and the sturdiest backing on the market. Most people don't realize that the backing counts just as much, if not more, than the quality of the weave and fibers.

He reaches up into the cupboard and takes out the tub of oats, which feels almost empty. And he's pretty sure the backup stock is depleted. For some reason, Sherri insists on buying only what they need for a couple of days at a time. He suspects that her aversion to buying in bulk simply comes down to the fact that she can't be bothered to plan out meals for an entire week. Well, they will start doing things his way now. Planning is the only efficient way to save money, and she would also find that if she put a little forethought into things, she wouldn't be running around like a chicken with her head cut off all the time.

He stirs his oatmeal, puts a pinch of salt in it. He likes his food plain and simple. "Austere", Sherri calls it. He knows she finds some of his habits depressing, but they don't seem to slow her down any. She tends to keep to herself and to her activities, to her church groups and volunteering. Nevertheless, she has always stood by him in all his decisions. He would never tell her this, but he does feel that it's because of him that she turned out so well. She had grown up in the kind of dysfunctional household that saw parents succumbing to fatigue and overachievement and giving in to their children's every whim. The dubious results of such an upbringing could be readily observed in her siblings' self-indulgent behavior.

He had gone to live with his grandparents when he was 8 years old. That's how he ended up in Clarksburg. His grandparents had come out here from the mountains for his granpa to go work at the marble factory, long since shriveled up and forgotten as children's interests migrated towards more mind-numbing entertainment vehicles. By the time he got there his granpa had retired, forced out due to lung problems. His constant wheezing and puffing made the other workers nervous. A couple of younger men had already quit out of fear of getting glass particles caught in their lungs and hemorrhaging to death.

He lived with his grandparents until he finished high school, then moved back in for a few years after his granpa died. A noble thing to do, everyone had said so at the time but, even now, the thought of it embarrassed him slightly. It just wasn't right, a grown man living with his grandmother. Things that would inevitably leak out to parents should be kept tightly closeted from the great elders, leaving you, in their eyes, in a perpetual state of innocence. He would lie deathly still in bed at night, sweating with the effort of not moving, fearful of arousing a mistaken dread in her that his fitfulness were due to existential worries, depression or, even worse, lack of sexual activity. He would never have brought a girl home with him of course. Even at 82 years old, the old woman could hear a pin drop on a rug.

It was during those two years of stifled existence that he plotted out his carpet business. Right out of high school, he got a job at the flooring store up in Morgantown. He started out cutting and installing wall-to-wall carpets, a task he rather enjoyed. You had one shot: if you cut it too small, too big, or slightly crooked you had a do-over on your hands. His inherent contempt for wastefulness guided the heavy-duty razor knife he held in a perfect 90-degree angle. Working for someone made him hot under the collar though. His boss was a grade-A asshole. A namby-pamby milquetoast who ironed his chinos himself and seemed to possess a never-ending stream of short-sleeved pastel shirts. Fancying himself some kind of color psychologist, he was convinced that the so-called "calming effect" of light pinks and greens eased the mind and made people more inclined to spend money. His sales skills left much to be desired though; maybe because of his sniveling manner, or maybe because of the sub-grade quality of the polyester carpets he peddled. They had a tendency to become anemic over time, their sad little fibers slowly coming undone until your living room looked like the floor of a beauty parlor.

So he decided to go into business for himself, selling fireproof rugs and carpeting. He had stumbled upon a most surprising niche. The local clientele's taste leaned towards the old fashioned; they shied away from contemporary trends in flooring, such as polished concrete, favoring the wall-to-wall carpeting of their childhood. Nonetheless, they had a very contemporary obsession with safety. Hence the slew of so-called fireproof carpets that had recently appeared on the market. PyroProtecto, Flameshield, Burn Barrier, silicone fire retardant sprays, the list went on and on. Never mind that wool carpets, which are naturally flame retardant, had been around for ages. People were ignorant about these things nowadays: they didn't know how to keep their linoleum countertops from cracking, how to oil their floorboards, how to keep their bathtubs from getting scratched and grimy.

Of course, not everyone can afford wall-to-wall wool carpeting. So he also offers them nylon, synthetic fibers and, to quell the fire fear in his most paranoid customers, fiberglass weave. Most importantly, he teaches people how to keep their flooring clean without selling them a bunch of expensive "care products". The proliferation of single-use products makes him sick. He feels a twinge of embarrassment when thinking of some of the useless gadgets Sherri brings home: pizza scissors, a burger press, some fake-almond smelling hardwood floor cleaner for the 20 or so square feet of their house that aren't covered in carpet.

He isn't taken in by two for one deals, blatantly obvious product placement or "miracle food" crazes. Which is why he had always preferred to do the shopping alone, without the kids tugging on his pant leg and whining after shiny packaging and cheesy smells. There was a time when he was afraid his children would turn into "unawares", his preferred term for his sloth-like surrounders. Thankfully, his kids were starting to take shape and to show some initiative.

His oldest, Taylor, has started up a gel-manicure business out of her bedroom. He isn't one to discourage entrepreneurship, far from it, but questions her choice of business, not to mention her customers. Girls from the trashiest families parading around his house like they own it. Even so, he's proud of Taylor: she's set up a real independent business, has her own supplier and all, so he sees no harm in expecting that she rent out a separate space for her grooming trade. His wife wasn't so thrilled about this little after school activity, always worrying about the IRS busting in for a few hundred undeclared dollars a month.

Fear, in his opinion, is not the appropriate emotion to have regarding the IRS. He has actively discouraged Taylor from filing a tax return, something she wouldn't do anyway unless he forced her to. He does not agree with the draconian and highly unfair tax rates for the self-employed, especially when it comes to minors. It discourages people from taking responsibility for themselves, pushing them into a lifetime of subservience and wage slavery.

He drinks his last drop of coffee and puts on his rubber gloves to do the breakfast dishes. He takes some time to scrub out the sink with vinegar before he heads upstairs to brush his teeth. It's past 10 am when he pulls up to the grocery store. Any sooner and he would get stuck in the morning wave of elderly shoppers pursuing, as slowly as possible, the daily activities that barely stave off loneliness and boredom. He has a list ready in his hand, which he hardly needs to look at. He knows exactly what's in the fridge at any given moment, down to the stray carrot and the last drops of milk. As he steers his cart over to the cereal aisle, he shakes his head to himself in disbelief

at the bumbling dumpiness of the other shoppers. Wandering around aimlessly, succumbing completely to the wiles of marketing strategies as old as time itself. He picks out four 42-ounce tubs of steel-cut oats. The store brand, not that overpriced Quaker crap. He exits the aisle, and stops to marvel at a display of the newest cereal on the market. An assaulting red box, with enough health claims to make you reel. He wonders how they can fit so many vitamins in a kernel of purple puffed corn that has more sugar in it than he consumes in a single day. Giant bees, waving bears, hyperactive rabbits. No wonder kids couldn't even sit through a round of cartoons nowadays without getting antsy.

He himself is not susceptible to catchy slogans or colorful labels. Enveloped in his own superiority, he watches as a frazzled-looking woman in a tracksuit stands on tiptoe to carefully pull down the uppermost box without toppling over the whole elaborate stack. For a few seconds he simply stands by, mesmerized, as he imagines the lower edge of the box

knocking into the one next to it, pulling down its neighbors, and the whole arrangement falling down on her head. He shakes himself out of it and leans in to help her, plucking a box out of a spot in the middle where it supports nothing but itself. The woman peers at him dubiously from beneath her bangs and thanks him. He smiles at her; a slightly condescending smile, but she doesn't seem to notice. Her hair rather reminds him of an old shag rug his grandmother used to have. Her faded blond strands, probably curly once, hang limply around her forehead, giving her the appearance of an unkempt sheepdog. She looks completely anesthetized. He wavers between making his disgust obvious and empathizing with her plight.