

40 Years in the Desert

Volume 9
Number 1

The Further Adventures of Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer

As always, I will start with contact details for the Saroff Brood™. **WE HAVE MOVED** to Baltimore, Maryland. Our address is 3702 Labyrinth Road, Baltimore, MD 21215, and our phone is (410)585-1508. Our emails are still¹ msaroff@pobox.com for me and sindara@pobox.com for Sharon². As always, my home page is still the same, it's <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/>.

I Got to Remember to Procrastinate

This is the issue that was supposed to go out in December 2001, but events delayed printing, so it's late. It's almost exactly as it was written a year ago, so think of it as a time capsule.

Well, How Did I Get Here

When I last wrote, I was working at Varo, LLC a manufacturer of power supplies in Garland, TX, and Sharon² was happily ensconced at Treetops International School, as their director of special education. We knew that we wanted to leave Texas, but we wanted Sharon² to get two years in at her job for her resume.

We wanted to leave because attitudes in Texas toward the least fortunate in society are medieval, and we want our children to develop a sense of social responsibility.

After changes at Sharon's² school, we looked to move at once. I found a job at Raytheon C³I Systems (formerly Allied Signal, formerly Bendix³), in Towson, MD working on an IFF⁴ system for the UK MoD (Ministry of Defence).

The job ended in December with the traditional year end sacrifice of contractors.

How We Really Got Here

I went up in June, and the rest of the family followed in late July. I found us a house, while Sharon² had to handle packing, kids, and work. She's a real trooper.

Our trip was a *Grapes of Wrath* experience, with both the kids and the cats⁵ in the car with us, though they all handled the trip well. After some whining, the cats went to

sleep, while Natalie and Charlie saw it as a grand Adventure.

When Texas Attacks

In April, I rear ended a car at low speed in bad weather, and because my

bumper went beneath his, bashed in my front grill. Though everything still worked, including the headlights⁶, the car was totaled. I got an '88 Accord with about the same mileage.

A few weeks later, my wife totaled her station wagon. Natalie distracted Sharon², and she totaled the car, which was replaced with a Honda Odyssey Minivan, which better suits our needs.⁷

It really seemed like Texas was trying to kill us before we left⁸.

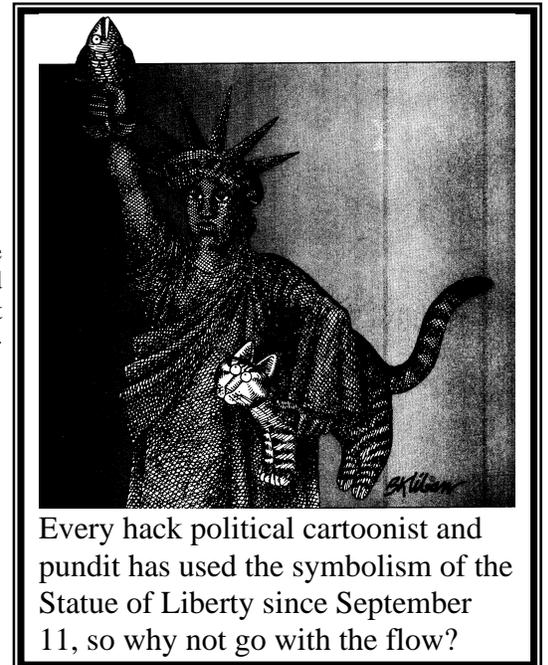
Weird stuff about Baltimore

Baltimore has some quaint nicknames, including *Charm City*¹⁰ and *Mobtown*¹².

Through October and November, Baltimore has been **warmer** than the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

More of my XGFs (**EX** Girl Friends) live in the Baltimore-Washington area than anywhere else¹³.

Baltimore has a huge Jewish community. You can't throw a dead cat¹⁵ without hitting a Shul or a Schtieble¹⁶ there. I find the community to be a bit restrictive, but



An election correction:

In the issues of December 16th 2000 to November 10th 2001, we may have given the impression that George Bush had been legally and duly elected president of the United States. We now understand that this may have been incorrect, and that the election result is still too close to call. The Economist apologizes for any inconvenience.

-- *The Economist print edition, Nov 15th 2001*

¹ At least as long as we pay \$20/year. Pobox.com is a mail and web page mirror service, so as I change ISPs, I go to the pobox.com web page, and change the final destination address and URL. It's well worth the money.

² Love of my life, light of the cosmos, **SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED**, my wife.

³ As I have said before, the money in defense contracting is **NOT** in making weapons, it's printing all the stationary, badges, etc. that have to be replaced after each merger.

⁴ Basically, it's a box that tells other boxes, "Don't shoot, I'm on your side".

⁵ Airlines won't ship pets in summer, so the cats were in a wire cage in the back of the minivan.

⁶ Well, the lights went on, but one pointed at Venus, and the other at Mars.

⁷ It also does not suck like a thousand Hoovers all going at once, which describes her previous car, a Buick Century Station Wagon.

⁸ No, I don't **really** believe that. That would make me a whacko, my parents are first cousins, X-Files wannabe, black helicopter, tinfoil hat wearing, stupid, dim-witted, thinks pro wrestling is real, lunatic.⁹

⁹ Sorry, I think that I just channeled the comedian Denis Leary.

¹⁰ I think that this name comes from a Baltimore boosting billboard campaign put in place by William Donald Schaefer, former Mayor of Baltimore, Governor, and current state comptroller of Maryland.¹¹

¹¹ Apparently, the British gave Baltimore the nickname of "A Nest of Pirates" during the War of 1812 as a reflection the city's seafaring entrepreneurial nature.

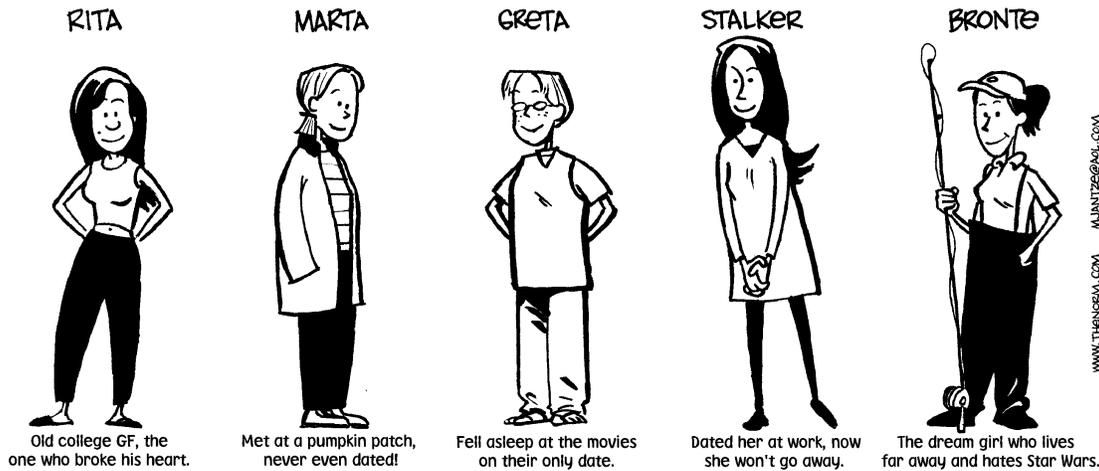
¹² This dates from the early 1800s, when Baltimore was notorious for street gangs.

¹³ No, I am **not** giving you a number. There are a number of reasons for this: I need to protect my XGF's Privacy, depending on how one counts, the number can vary significantly, and the number is embarrassingly small¹⁴.

¹⁴ Let's just say that if one were to review my wild oats sowing days, you would be hard pressed to make a bran muffin.

¹⁵ This is not experimentally verified. My wife does not want me throwing dead cats.

¹⁶ Shul is a synonym for Synagogue. Schtiebel is a term for a very small congregation that meets somewhere other than a synagogue, like someone's basement or a store front.



THE X-GF CONSPIRACY!
NORM'S NUMBER IS UP IN 2001... AND YOU CAN BE PART OF THE PLOT! SEND IN YOUR CHOICE RIGHT AWAY. THE TRUTH MAY BE OUT THERE!

send it to:
THE NORM'S X-GF FILES
BOX 266 LOUISVILLE CO 80027
OR MJANTZE@AOL.COM

WWW.THENORM.COM MJANTZE@AOL.COM
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the Jewish resources here are among the best in the country. There are schools, Talmud study groups, kosher restaurants, including **three** Chinese restaurants¹⁷, and kosher super markets.

And My Kids Beats Up On Me

I was watching the TV with Natalie sitting on my lap, when she head butted me with the back of her head, and split my lip. How much worse can it get during adolescence?¹⁸

Charles is more of a “head banger”, but he has rules. He gets up on my lap, makes eye contact, and **then** begins. Boys know that there are rules to this¹⁹. We play for a while, and the game is done. He plays this even more with Sharon² who does not really appreciate the games finer points.

Natalie and Charlie are adjusting well to the move. They go to Ner Tamid, a Modern Orthodox²⁰, Montessori preschool, and are doing quite well and learning useful things. Both are learning letters, counting, and Hebrew. Natalie is learning her brachas²¹ and reading words, while Charlie is learning shapes, colors, and pre-reading skills.

Natalie misses her old friends, but she has made new ones, and Charlie has thrived. His speech has progressed significantly since we came up here²², in large part because his ears have cleared up (he was allergic to something in Texas²³). He now seems to be ahead of Natalie’s speech at that age. He is not as talkative, but his language is more sophisticated.

I may have passed the **parental credibility horizon** with Natalie. This is where a parent tells a lie so big that the child begins to critically review what a parent says. After watching *Prince of Egypt* on TV, we gave the kids a bath, and Natalie wanted to bring her doll, Moses, into the bath, but I said that Moses would split the bathwater, and we wouldn’t be able to clean her.

Other milestones: Natalie has got her first stitches²⁴ when she



Kenneth Starr to Investigate Suspicious Turkey Pardon

tumbled off a “Big Wheel” tricycle, and cut her chin. She is now toilet trained²⁵. Both kids got their first haircuts in November.

With Friends Like These...

Received from a friend visiting Florida: one Hollerith²⁶ (computer punch) card saying, “Greetings from Florida”.

Gee, thanks loads.

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Luggage

In February, we flew to Seattle to see my new Niece, Eugenia Rachael, a strapping²⁷ little girl.

Unfortunately, we flew Northwest[®] Airlines, and so we transferred planes in Minneapolis. The airline mis-routed Charlie’s stroller, sending it through to Seattle. We were left with a baby **and** a car seat to lug to the gate. **We strapped him into our collapsible luggage rack** in his car seat.

We had a great time in Seattle, spending lots of time with the Saroff Brood II²⁸. My dad came up from Portland for a day, and we had breakfast and walked around the docks and looked at the boats. Natalie in particular had a blast.

We left the day before the earthquake²⁹. Steve and Margaret and “**Da Moose**” are all fine, with no significant quake damage.

On The Businessmen of America

At Varo, employees pooled lottery tickets, planning to use the winnings to buy the company back from its owners, who were inflicting the Death of a Thousand Cuts³⁰ on them to finance their buying binge. With lowlifes like Al “Chainsaw” Dunlap³² flourishing in corporate boardrooms, it’s not surprising that they think that the lottery gives better odds at responsible corporate management than corporate executives.

¹⁷ I would like to make particular note of *David Chu’s*, which is a very nice restaurant, and they have an appetizer, Szechwan Soft Wonton which is to die for.

¹⁸ Ok, let’s **not** go there.

¹⁹ This is why honking off a woman is so dangerous. **There are no rules** when you do a woman wrong.

²⁰ Modern Orthodox is a bit stricter in observance than Conservative. It varies from synagogue to synagogue. Any discussion of the finer theological points is not possible in the space available in *40 Years in the Desert*.

²¹ Blessings. These are done over food, wine, candles, etc.

²² It’s a mixed blessing trust me. Children learning to talk is almost more trouble than it is worth.

²³ I’m thinking that it was Black Mold, Fire Ants, Killer Bees, venomous snakes, or nasty mean-spirited and needlessly punitive public policy.

²⁴ Actually, she had her wound glued shut with medical Superglue[®].

²⁵ And there was **much** rejoicing.

²⁶ Named after Herman Hollerith, the engineer who developed the card to help the US Census bureau count the 1890 census.

²⁷ 9 lbs. 11 oz, 21 and 3/4" long and with a 14.5 cm crown at birth. **OUCH!!!!**

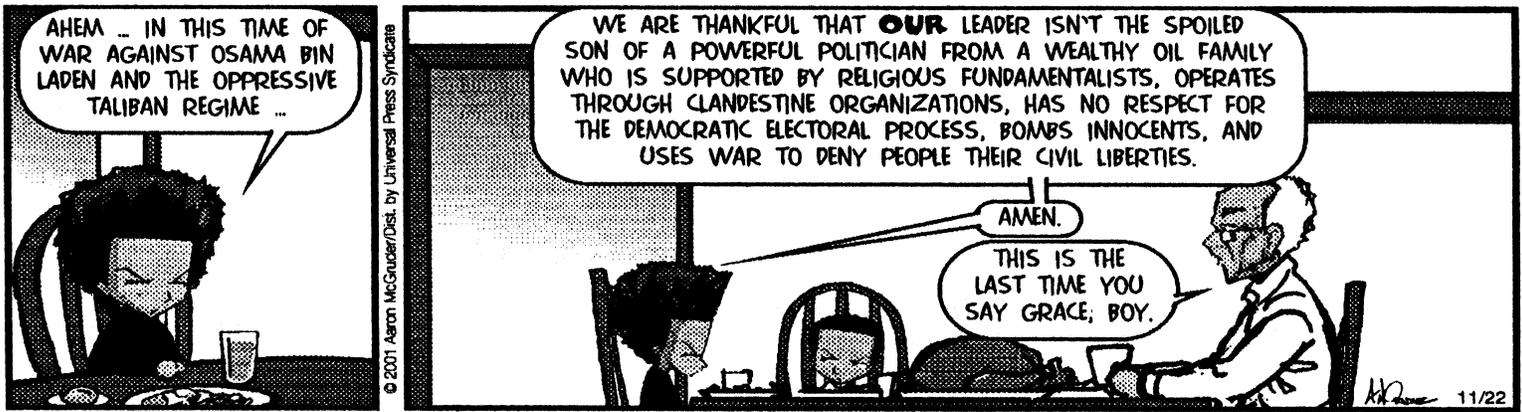
²⁸ Yep, you are now a brood, there is nothing that you can do about this.

²⁹ See, I leave town, and everything goes to hell.

³⁰ A particularly vile form of execution³¹ where the victim was stripped then bound in a kneeling or prone position tightly shrouded in netting. The small nodules of skin that stand out through the mesh are then sliced away with a knife.

³¹ Which means that Shrub³⁴ is almost certainly looking at the possibility of applying this punishment with an almost rapturous glee.

³² He was a “corporate turn around specialist”. His con was that he came in and made the cuts necessary to return to profitability. What he actually did was to lay off a bunch of people, cook the books to boost profit numbers for that year, and then sell the company when the stock price spiked. It would not have been quite so disgusting if he didn’t **display such unholy glee** upon seeing the pain he inflicted when he fired people.



Some people wrote their newspapers to complain about this. Am I missing something?³³

Another Truism of the Modern Workplace

IT is an axiomatic in today's workplace that if your boss isn't a raving lunatic, a complete incompetent, or a total ninny, then he will be fired, and replaced by one. This is what happened to Sharon² at Treetops.

The school later made the front page of the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, for financial irregularities, followed by the inevitable witch hunt for innocent people to blame, along with the aggressive dismissal of potential witnesses.

The charter school program in Texas is in crisis. 1/3 of the schools are being investigated for financial irregularities, and a two year freeze on new charter schools passed the Texas House.

This idea of giving public funds to politically connected flim flam artists and religious nuts was supported by Shrub³⁴, who now hopes to implement this nationwide³⁵.

This has worked out for the best. Sharon² now runs special education for the Beth Tfiloh high school, a well respected³⁶ Jewish school.

Bush wants to run the country like a business. Burn it down and collect the insurance.³⁷

It wouldn't be *40 Years in the Desert* without a rant³⁸, so on to the *Enron Administration*.

I understand the need for a unified voice in times of trouble, but I also understand the term **WAR PROFITEER**, which applies to the administration and the US state security apparatus.

Shrub³⁴ is determined to use the World Trade Center bombings to benefit his friends and supporters. The retroactive repeal of the Corporate Alternative Minimum Tax would give \$25 billion, to his corporate patrons, including **\$254 million to Enron**. About 1/3 of the benefits would go to fewer than 20 companies.

Patriotism means to stand by the country. It does not mean to stand by the president or any other public official save exactly to the degree in which he himself stands by the country. It is patriotic to support him insofar as he efficiently serves the country. It is unpatriotic not to oppose him to the exact extent that by inefficiency or otherwise he fails in his duty to stand by the country.
-- President Theodore Roosevelt, 1908

Furthermore, it encourages companies moving revenues off shore to avoid taxes, taking still more money out of our economy.

Then there is law enforcement, which has used the attacks to get approval for harebrained Orwellian schemes to eliminate judicial oversight due process. None of the changes proposed or passed would have prevented the bombings, all they really serve to do is to deflect criticism of the failures that led to the attacks. It's like closing the refrigerator door after the cow has left the barn.

You can then top that all off with a medieval, race baiting, apocalyptic whacko, **lost a senate race to a dead man**, nut as attorney general who defines any questions about his anti-constitutional methods as giving "Aid and comfort to terrorists".

I feel **so confident** in the future of our country right now.

One final note, if you fly a flag from your car to show your patriotism, **DON'T BUY A CHEAP MADE-IN-CHINA FLAG!** They get

ratty in two weeks, and they look like used tissues. When you flag starts to fray, you are supposed to **DISPOSE OF IT PROPERLY**³⁹. It is **not** patriotic to fly a flag that looks like a 5 year old cat toy.

Thanks to Michael Jantze

Mr. Jantze is the author of a comic strip called *The Norm*, and when I dropped him an email to see if it was OK to use his term XGF⁴⁰. Not only did he say that it was cool, he sent me a copy of one of his strips along with permission to publish. This was **way** cool.

Even cooler, he read *40 Years in the Desert*, and he thought I was funny. Needless to say, this guy is on my subscription list until the Sun is a cinder. **Write your newspaper and demand that they carry the strip.**

In case you are wondering, Norm ended up with Reine⁴¹, who was not an XGF, but his best friend since college.

My Health

At my checkup, my cholesterol was a surprisingly low 168,

³³ I really think that this guy may very well be our generation's Thomas Nast. But still, I can't understand why people would complain about giving thanks that we are not governed by Osama bin Laden.

³⁴ A Shrub is a little Bush. Molly Ivins coined this term to describe GW Bush.

³⁵ The best definition of insanity that I have ever heard is that it is the repetition of actions with the expectation of a different outcome.

³⁶ It's gotten a "Blue Ribbon" from the department of education.

³⁷ I can't take credit for this one. Someone on the net said it, but I am not sure who.

³⁸ See the archives at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/40> for more rants.

³⁹ According to the American Legion at http://www.legion.org/our_flag/of_faq_flag.htm#2, you can do so by burning, and most American Legion posts will have regular ceremonies where a flag can be disposed of.

⁴⁰ It's always nice to get permission, though I tend to assume that silence is assent.

⁴¹ Pronounced reNAY.

but my Triglicerides are high, as they have been since high school. I'm on Niacin supplements and have to avoid sweets⁴².

I've also largely gone off coffee. I've been cutting down recently, and went cold turkey on Thanksgiving. I have had 123456 789 cups of coffee since then, and I'm not appreciably less alert⁴³.

The Weirdness That is The Washington Redskins and Other Small Miracles

The Redskins lost their first 5 games, then won the next 5, followed by their 2nd loss to Dallas this year⁴⁴, and they came close to a playoff berth. I really expect to see Redskins owner Dan Snyder hit by a **meteor** next season⁸ (we should be so lucky).

The Saroff family have joined the "broadband revolution" and got DSL service⁴⁵. This is unusual because it was installed on time (by Covad, who by all reports are better than Verizon⁴⁶), and worked right out of the box, which is **highly** unusual.

Things That We Miss About Texas

Before you are left with the notion that Texas is simply a post-apocalyptic, desolate, morally bankrupt waste land with murders⁴⁷ of klepto-capitalists roving the streets looking for quarry to pay their taxes, build their sports arenas, and provide political cover for shady real estate deals, honesty forces me to admit that there are a **few** redeeming features to the state. We have some very dear friends there that we miss, and we liked Ansteorra, the SCA⁴⁸ kingdom of Texas and Oklahoma.

Bright Hills, the Baltimore SCA group, has a different culture. I also get a vague sense that something unpleasant⁴⁹ has happened recently, so people are playing things close to the chest.

It's time for a recipe

Unlike my last recipe⁵⁰, this is healthy and creates the illusion

This Spot
Left for
Mailing
Sticker



At My Mother-in-Law's Post Haircut

of cooking skills. It's key theme is that **GARLIC IS GOOD** (true enough to be a religion⁵¹). It's called Seafood Provençal, sea food sautéed in olive oil and garlic. It serves 4. You need the following:

¼ cup Olive oil

3 Tbsp. Garlic/minced or crushed (from a jar is easier)

1 Pound of Shrimp, Scallops, Crab, or Surimi (faux Crab⁵²)

2 Pounds of Vegetables (Broccoli, Bamboo Shoots, etc.)

Add the olive oil to a frying pan. Heat the oil for a few minutes, then add the garlic. Allow the garlic to cook, stirring occasionally, until it just begins to turn brown. With uncooked seafood, add and cook the seafood for 5 minutes, then add the vegetables, and cook for another 5 minutes. If you are using Surimi, which is pre cooked, add the vegetables when the garlic starts to turn color, cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, then add the Surimi and Cook the entire mixture for 2-3 more minutes.

Serve over rice or pasta. I recommend Linguini.

That's about it for now, but stay tuned for the further adventures of **Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer**.

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⁴² This is not too tough. I don't have much of a sweet tooth. My idea of a quick snack is putting a side of beef on two slices of bread

⁴³ Then again, I've never been known to have a cosmic consciousness. Blissful unawareness suits me just fine, thank you.

⁴⁴ This was on the same week that *Sports Illustrated* put them on their front cover. **The SI curse lives**. It's the only explanation of their losing twice to the lamest team in their division.

⁴⁵ Digital Subscriber Line. DSL sends digital data using high frequencies inaudible to the human ear, and it can handle voice and data on one line. All you need is to install a simple filter on your voice lines, and they work as they always did. I get my connectivity through Covad, but my ISP, who bills me, stores my email, etc. is Charm.net, who offers a Unix shell, which is what I use to send you the personalized emails about **40 years in the Desert**.

⁴⁶ See <http://www.verizonreallysucks.com/>, Verizon has the domain <http://www.verizonsucks.com/>, because they knew that some disgruntled customer would be driven to set up a gripe page about their customer service.

⁴⁷ You have a pack of wolves, a pod of whales, a school of fish, and a **murder** of crows. I've applied this term to groups of Texas businessmen because a crow's habits, eating carrion and thieving, describe their nature best.

⁴⁸ Society for Creative Anachronism, a medieval recreation group that we participate in.

⁴⁹ The sort of nasty petty politics that you always see in small groups. Something meaningless, like a conflict over a title, or a perceived slight, etc.

⁵⁰ The wonderfully artery clogging spaghetti and cheese, which is also the ultimate Saroff family comfort food.

⁵¹ Hmm...I could go the L. Ron Hubbard route and start a religion. It's certainly lucrative, and my disciples would not have to worry about vampires, or any meaningful social interactions outside the group. The "Cult of the Garlic Clove" is pretty much perfectly set up for creating a secretive whacko cult.

⁵² It's done with Surimi in my house, because you can get kosher Surimi, and putting Shrimp on my wife's dishes would result in my being disemboweled with a wooden spoon.

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