

My Greatest Possessions

By Dennis Payton Knight

As an aspiring bestselling author, I have daydreams of being interviewed on National Public Radio. She — it would have to be Terry Gross on “Fresh Air” — would ask questions about my Irish Catholic upbringing in Laramie and bewildering career choices, getting me open and talkative. Then she would come to the waterfall question, “What inspired you...”

But before she gets it asked, the phone is rung, the door is knocked, the dog has barked, or something else intrudes and I am returned to this folly known as the present. But just as well, because I likely would have had no reply other than a pathetically blank stare, not an interesting way to answer on the radio.

The question I get instead is, “What possessed you.” I’ve been asked that by parents, sisters, brothers, offspring, friends, teachers, bosses, firemen, traffic cops, cleaning ladies, and editors. I often ask it to myself in the mirror. I still can only return a vacant look, but at least I’m not on the radio.

“What possessed you to think you’re a plumber?” the man with the wrench asked as he sloshed into my bathroom. I ruminated silently behind my dumb facade: *the new faucet handle didn’t fit, and I figured that stem was in the way. If only I could have foreseen the eruption. And yes, if I had remembered the handy valve under the sink, I would have turned the water off first.*

“What possessed you to order twenty cases of those things?” The judge asked, a bit incredulously, after hearing my testimony. As a manager for a discount store in Boulder, I had received a merchandise offer from the home office suggesting black snakes for the 4th of July, the kind you light, spewing black ash to form a squirming snake. They were popular, profitable, and safe, the buyer’s letter said, and legal everywhere. Well, not quite everywhere, it hedged in the fine print I didn’t read. Something possessed me, and I took the risk.

Upon their delivery, I unpacked and arranged the colorfully boxed snakes on a prominent center aisle display, then left for a personal errand. When I returned, a humorless Boulder policeman was pacing at my layout with a citation. I took the ticket, packed the fireworks up, and sent them back, selling none. The judge seemed amused, maybe sympathetic, because I didn’t get the death penalty. He let me plead no contest, and I paid the fifty dollars.

What possessed me to leave a screwdriver in the engine compartment to be propelled deep into the radiator when I cranked the starter? What possessed me to put dish soap in the dish washer, swamping my apartment with suds? What possessed me to wash my new olive-green fatigues and white underwear together the night before the barracks inspection, leaving me with pink skivvies lined up in my locker for the Colonel’s exasperation?

What possessed me, what possessed me? Maybe I could write a book.