

## Buyer's Remorse

By *Howie Flomberg*

We all make mistakes. My mother made a mistake that could have had unbelievable consequences; she bought an 11-year-old boy (me) a *chemistry set*.

Knowing my mother, some salesman in her office was selling them out of the trunk of his car. They probably fell off of the back of a truck in South Bronx. I can hear her thoughts – Howie likes science, I'll get it for him. If I can quote Wikipedia: "Several authors have noted that from the 1980's on, concerns about illegal drug production, terrorism and legal liability have led to chemistry sets becoming increasingly bland and unexciting."

This was pre-bland and pre-unexciting. The chemistry set came in a metal box that opened and stood by itself. Inside were about a dozen and a half small bottles of chemicals, a few test tubes, a test tube holder, a measuring spoon and an alcohol burner. As an example of the contents, two out of the three components for black powder (gun powder) were included. There was a book of "experiments" included. I quickly went through the included experiments and then hit the library. Luckily Google did not exist yet. Just for curiosity sakes, I googled Gunpowder the other day and got the instructions for making it in about two minutes. I had to spend an afternoon in the library to accomplish it back then.

Getting back to the contents. When I found out that I had two of them I started mixing in every possible chemical I could find in a search for self-immolation. I did manage to produce some spectacular displays. Luckily this was in the days before smoke detectors. My Grandfather lived with us. He was constantly surrounded by a haze of cigar smoke, so he didn't notice, until I discovered Iron Filings. Just a pinch of iron filings thrown into the flame of my gas-range produced a shower of sparks, cool, huh?

I lived with my mother and my grandfather in a small two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a six-floor walkup in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. My Grandfather was ancient. In retrospect he was as old as I am now. But I thought him ancient. He was born in Eastern Europe and immigrated to America as a young man. He never adjusted to this country. His English was halting. His primary language was Yiddish, a dialect of German spoken by the Jewish people in Europe. His contribution to the home was primarily his survivors' benefits from my Grandmother's Social Security. In his mind we lived with him. Grandpa delighted in telling my mother that I was a bum and headed for "no-good." I was determined to make his life as miserable as possible, though I never actually formed that thought.

Back to iron filings, whenever I was in the kitchen, my laboratory, if I saw him walking around, I would surreptitiously throw a pinch of iron filings on the stove. The shower of sparks turned his face whiter than his usual pallor. He would turn around and walk away muttering to himself in Yiddish. I did hear the words "No-Goodnik" and his favorite epithet "bum" frequently. My mother would walk into this madhouse to listen to my grandfather rave in Yiddish. She would then look at me. "Mom, I was making an experiment, I'm learning to be a scientist." Another fusillade of Yiddish was aimed at me.

The best way to learn a foreign language is to have your family curse you out in that language, thinking that you didn't understand.