

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RB-7  
A Small d Disaster

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

After spending a very successful ten days in Florida Eileen and I were anxious to get home. We were welcomed at our door, as we always are when we are away for more than a day, by the crying of our cat, Mao.

Eileen unlocked the door and stepped inside while I fumbled with the luggage. Before I made it up the stairs Eileen cried out, "Dick, the water isn't working."

I let go of one suitcase and hurried up the metal stairs. Eileen had already disappeared into the back. She reappeared from the bathroom and informed me that not only wasn't any of the water working, but the heat wasn't working either.

"When I walked in," she said, "I tried to adjust the thermostat but nothing happened."

The thermostat, which we had left at 60, now read 48. Oh my god, I thought, the heat went off and all the pipes froze. Eileen regained my attention when she said, "Look at my plants, they're all dead, all of them."

I looked around the living room at the pitifully limp plants. Three years ago I had given Eileen a rubber plant. Its once firm leaves now hung like droopy beagle ears. Her favorite spider plant, suspended from the ceiling away from Mao's anxious bites, was now dead.

Before we could do anything else, we heard a knock on the door. We have slowly gotten to know our neighbors, but the face on the other side of the door was unfamiliar. "I'm Kay," she said, "and I live two doors up. Glad you're back, I wanted to tell you I turned off your water. A couple of days ago we saw water pouring out of your place. We looked in the window but we couldn't see any water on the floor. Howard, next door, said you'd be away for a couple of days so we shut off the water. Lucky we did, otherwise this place could have floated away."

I invited Kay in, realizing I had left her standing on the steps. Just as she left Fran Doherty, another neighbor, came over with our mail. He and his wife Evelyn had been nice enough to collect our mail and start our car so the battery wouldn't die. Fran was surprised and distressed by our dilemma which I quickly relayed to him. He gave me the name and number

of the fuel company that services our mobile home, and also the name of a plumber he trusts.

It was now 3:30 on a Saturday afternoon and we hoped something could be done before evening. I called Morton Fuel and they promised to send someone over. I then called the plumber Fran had suggested but he wasn't home. We pulled out the local directory and, starting from the top, called seven plumbers: six weren't home and one didn't work on Saturday. We finally got CC Smith's wife. Mrs. Smith told us her husband was out on a job, but would call as soon as he came back. We called a few other plumbers, nearly exhausting the local list, when CC Smith called. He said he would be right over.

While we waited for him and for the fuel man we discovered that some of the lights weren't working. We tried the fuses but they all seemed to be alright. Eileen suggested calling an electrician, but I didn't want a traffic jam in the house. Unfortunately I conveyed my frustrations as well as my feelings; luckily Eileen and I are quick to forgive each other's excesses in such situations.

CC Smith was at our door five minutes after we called. We showed him where we thought the trouble was-- under the sink. Two shelves under the sink were buckled from the weight of water which by now had disappeared. Although there was little water left, a twenty five pound bag of kitty litter had spread its soggy contents all over the shelf, and a supply of paper towels, napkins, and other kitchen sundries were soaked and ruined.

CC was quick to find a broken water connection and disappeared in his car to find a replacement. Before he had returned the man from Morton Fuel arrived. Eileen told him that some of our electricity wasn't working and I mentioned that even when I threw the reset switch on the furnace nothing happened. He said it sounded to him like a fuse had blown. He tested all the fuses, and again they all seemed to be working.

For the next half hour he fooled around with the furnace, taking this box and then that one apart. While he was working CC returned with the sink part. He reassembled the hose connection and I went outside to turn the water on. I turned it off again when Eileen and CC discovered that the main drain pipe was cracked. It was now after four and CC said he couldn't get another part till Monday. He left, pipe in hand, telling us we could use the water in the bathroom but we couldn't use the kitchen sink.

We were still left with the problems of a partial lack of electricity and, more important, no heat. The Morton man said that he couldn't figure it out, the problem had something to do with a faulty ground wire. If he bypassed the ground, he said, the furnace worked fine, but without the bypass there was no juice. Finally he told me I would need to get an electrician.

"Ok," I said, "but isn't there any way you can get us some heat, at least temporarily?"

He said maybe, and with that he fetched some wire from his truck. He attached one end to a ground in the fuse box, and then let about thirty feet of wire out and connected the other end with some wires in the furnace control box. Nothing happened.

"I don't understand it," he said, "it should've worked."

He said there was one more thing to check, and asked if we had a special emergency burner switch. I showed him where it was and he went about dismantling it. While he was taking some screws out he set his tools down and went back over to the furnace, and all of a sudden I heard the sound of the furnace going. He looked up with an amused look on his face and said, "I just realized that I had unplugged the furnace and that's why the bypass hadn't worked."

Soon after he left Eileen discovered that there was no flame on the stove, and no hot water. She called the gas man, Mr. Sidmore, who promised to send a man over. While we were waiting Eileen played with the stove and the gas went on. She called Mr. Sidmore back. He said he thought we had enough gas and told her the pilot light on the hot water heater had probably gone out.

Another neighbor, Howard Bourque, was in our living room and he agreed to help me relight the pilot. We went outside and read the directions on the tank. Although we could figure out how to turn on the pilot, we couldn't, in fact, find it. I could see it, but as much as I jammed my hand in the area I couldn't reach it with a match. I called Mr. Sidmore once more and told him about the trouble I was having. He said he usually used rolled-up newspaper. I was too tired and depressed to ask why the hell he hadn't said that in the first place, so I went back outside with a piece of rolled-up newspaper. This time the pilot light lit, and a half hour later we started getting some hot water.

Howard went home and Eileen and I were once again alone. We thought of sleeping at a friend's, but finally we decided against it. Instead we decided to go out to eat. We drove to a nearby delicatessen because as Eileen said, "At a time like this you need a good Jewish meal."

By the time we returned the house was warm. Things had looked pretty dismal, but somehow with full stomachs, we felt better. We turned on the TV and decided to forget about it all for the night. Just before we went to sleep I got out of bed to turn out the lights in the living room.

My feet, which were now bare, walked over the carpet, and the closer I got to the lamp the damper my feet felt. I quickly realized that although our neighbors hadn't seen any water in the coach and although we hadn't seen any either the carpet had been soaked. I thought about not saying anything to Eileen; the day had been tough enough, but finally I told her. She gave a little cry, jumped out of bed and ran her own feet over the carpet. We looked at each other but figured the wetness

would go away and besides there wasn't anything we could do about it.

When I woke up the next morning I went to the bathroom. I was both surprised and worried when I saw the toilet bowl was practically empty. I didn't think much of it until I relieved myself, flushed the bowl and saw some water slowly seep onto the floor. On closer inspection I discovered the bowl of the toilet had cracked. For some reason, however, the reserve tank hadn't. I crawled back in bed and told Eileen of this new development. We both sat there wondering what else could go wrong.

Early Monday morning CC Smith returned with some tubing. He put it in but the fit wasn't quite snug, and water dripped from the connection. With some cursing, straining, and several adjustments the pipe finally fit and the sink was ready for use.

Now all we had to worry about were the toilet and the electrical system. Eileen again suggested that I call an electrician. I'm not sure why I didn't want to but I didn't. I used the excuse that I wanted to get the toilet fixed before taking care of anything else. I figured I would try to fix it myself and save some money, so the first thing I did was go out and buy some epoxy. I epoxied the toilet the best I could and slowed the leak to a slow drip. I kept on epoxing more and more of the toilet and after two days the leak nearly stopped. But nearly stopped obviously wasn't good enough. I called a few bathroom supply stores about replacing the bowl. I found out I could only replace the bowl if I had a brand name toilet like Elgin, or Crane. If I did they could sell me a bowl for \$20 or \$25. However, if it wasn't a brand name toilet but what they called a mongrel- the product of a small operation- I would have to replace the whole thing and that would cost me about \$65. I knew if I had to replace the entire toilet that it would probably be a good idea to get a professional to put it in.

When I discovered that our toilet was in fact a mongrel my thoughts of saving a lot of money quickly disappeared. I called several plumbers to get some prices. The prices ranged from \$90 to \$130. I decided to do business with Steve LeBaron who quoted me a price of \$95 and also told me he handled electrical problems.

He showed up at about 6:00PM on Wednesday. He looked at the toilet and told me what I already knew, that although the reserve tank was still good, I would have to replace the entire toilet because it was a mongrel. "See," he said, "each major company makes its settings and holes slightly different so that you can't cross-match."

Although companies make it impossible to cross-match they all make their toilets in uniform twelve or fourteen inch styles so they are interchangeable as units.

Steve turned his attention to the electrical problem. He tested the fuses again, and then proceeded to dismantle the overhead light in the bedroom, the light switch in the bedroom, and the light switch in the bathroom, looking for a short in the circuit. Everything dismantled, he said he couldn't figure out what was wrong. He looked at me and said, "Mr. Balzer, don't worry, I work with an expert electrician, and when I have a problem that I can't handle I give him a call." Before I could say anything he was on the phone calling George Arvanitides, his friend.

George didn't have any time that night but promised to be at our house late the next afternoon. Steve took the top of our toilet to match colors, and promised to return on Friday to put the new toilet in.

The electrician didn't show up on Thursday. We figured we would ask Steve about it on Friday. Friday afternoon came and went and neither Steve nor the electrician showed up. I called Steve's house to find out what had happened. An operator broke into the ringing sound, and with a recorded voice said, "This phone is temporarily out of order; if you wish to find out why, stay on the line." I stayed on the line and another operator told me that the phone had been disconnected earlier in the day. Terrific, I thought, no electrician, and the plumber has skipped town with our toilet cover.

Early Saturday morning the bell rang. It was the electrician and his brother-in-law assistant. He apologized for not coming on Thursday, but said he was here now. I took him through the house, once again explaining the problem. He looked around, tested the fuses and then stopped in the hall and opened a socketless switch box which was in fact a juncture box with several live wires. He tested the wires; looked up and said, "This is where your problem is."

He explained that somewhere between this juncture box and the fuse box the main feed line had shorted and was dead. He said it would be impossible to trace the line under the coach and locate the short so instead he would disconnect the line from both ends and leave it as a dead line. What he planned to do, he said, was lead a new line from the fuse box under the coach to the juncture box.

Before starting he told me all this was extraordinarily rare. As he said, "In the eighteen years I've been an electrician, I've only run into this problem one other time."

Buddy, George's brother-in-law, was assigned the task of crawling under the coach and bringing the new line from the fuse box to the juncture box. Buddy wasn't very excited about going under the coach. A mobile home when settled is raised off its rubber wheels and placed on cement blocks, leaving about two feet of space between the floor of the coach and the ground. Buddy crawled in under the coach with a flashlight and a drill.

It didn't take Buddy long to get the wire and lead it underneath the coach. What took time was finding a place to

drill a hole. There are several other wires at the juncture box, and Buddy had to make sure not to drill into them. Through tapping, Buddy and George finally found a place for Buddy to drill. Finally the bit came through the floor board and George tied the new wire with the others in the juncture box. George reattached the fuse, and the heater and all the lights went on.

Buddy, who by now was cursing about being under the coach for so long, crawled out, cleaned the mud off himself, and all of us went into the kitchen for some coffee. George again told us how difficult it was to work in one of these mobile homes. "In a house," he said, "you have a good two or three inches between the wallpaneling and the outside wall to work in. In a mobile home you rarely have more than 1/4 or 1/2 inch and everything is jammed in."

Soon George and Buddy packed their gear up and left. Now we only had to worry about the toilet. That is, we thought we only had to worry about the toilet. Sunday afternoon all the lights that had been working from the beginning went off. The lights which had been repaired remained on. We tried unsuccessfully to get in touch with George.

Steve called Sunday night. He apologized for not coming earlier, and said he would be over on Monday. I told him we were worried and asked if everything was ok. "Not really," he said, "I've left my wife and she didn't pay the telephone bill so they turned it off."

Steve came Monday night, as he had promised and put in our new toilet. It took him longer than the 40 minutes he had predicted. When he finished we sat in the kitchen and talked for a while. I mentioned that our other lights had gone out. He asked if I had called George. When I told him I had, he told me not to worry about it George would get back to me.

I called George at least a half-a-dozen times in the next week before he sent Buddy to check out the problem. Buddy looked around but admitted he didn't know enough to fix what was wrong. Buddy promised that he would try to get George to come by the next day.

George did show up the following morning. He checked the outside fuse box and then pulled off the skirting panel and crawled under the trailer. He reappeared and said that somehow Buddy had accidentally kicked the connection loose under the trailer. Reattached, all the lights went on. There was, of course, no charge for this. We just had to spend an extra week without lights in the kitchen and living room. It had taken nearly two weeks for us to get our mobile home back in shape.

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Mobile home advertisements often stress maintenance-free living. Mobile homes are not maintenance-free. Not only do they have some of the same maintenance problems of conventional homes, they have some peculiar problems of their own which a new owner should be aware of.

We learned a lot about our mobile home from this unfortunate experience. It isn't enough to have someone collect the mail and start the car during a winter trip: it makes sense to have a neighbor check your coach daily.

As one repairman said, "You never know when something's going to go wrong. And buddy, when it does you're in for real headaches." Some of these "real headaches" are a result of the fact that the insulation in mobile homes is not what it is in conventional homes. In a mobile home the space between the interior wall and the outside is two or three inches while in a conventional house it averages between five and six inches. So if there is a malfunction in the heating system the heat loss is very quick, thus leaving the coach vulnerable to frozen or cracked pipes.

Our neighbors tell us that mobile homes tend to be very hot during the summer just as they tend to lose heat quickly, mobile homes tend to absorb it quickly.

Several people told us we were lucky not to have had any problems with our hot water heater. Most of our neighbors, we discovered, turn their heaters off when going on a trip of more than a few days. It seems that these heaters occasionally burst, and flood the coach.

We also learned of the headaches that mobile homes can make for repairmen. The electrician who fixed our wires said, as I mentioned earlier, that he had trouble working in mobile homes because of the relatively small space between the walls to work in. More importantly, he said that although the wiring in mobile homes meets code standards, it is never the same in any two types of homes. Each manufacturer wires his homes in a different way, thus creating problems for those trying to make repairs.

The electrician also told us that he was surprised to find the wiring of the furnace and fuse box connected to other wiring. He thought it was a bad idea, because if there was a problem in the other wiring it could cut off the heater.

Our toilet demonstrated another problem. Often mobile home manufacturers, in an attempt to save money, will buy large lots of bathroom fixtures from small companies. Although this may keep the initial price down, if you have to repair one of these fixtures you may have to replace the unit completely because you can't get parts for these "mongrels".

If we learned anything positive from this experience, it was the willingness of neighbors in this kind of community to help each other. Several of our neighbors mentioned that they would be more than willing to look in on our place if and when we went away. We had avoided this, not wishing to impose on anyone, but the offers sound genuine, and come next winter if we go away we will take advantage of them.

*Richard J. Buge*