

MEDICINE CABINET

Paul Hetzler

1. Always Follow Directions

It's the second time this week that a client has been attacked because they strayed off the marked trail for a better picture of the swallows' cliff-face nesting ground. Seems there is no end to people who think they're too good for the rules, and I say they get what they deserve. Sweat stings my eyes as I trudge along the jungle trail with the backpack power-blower.

Mr. Brant, a fifty-something day-trader with a distinct air of entitlement, is somewhere under the eight-foot-tall bird mass, and it's my job to uncover him before he suffocates. Leith, one of our trail guides, yanks the starter cord on the three-horse engine for me, and the trusty Tanaka engine roars to life. I grip the output wand in both hands, playing the five-hundred cubic-metre-per-second blast back and forth in practiced arcs, just like we do in drills, gently peeling away layer upon layer of birds which cover our stupid client.

The sky darkens as Venezuelan cliff swallows disperse by the thousands, possibly more than three thousand in this pile, and take to the air. After five minutes I'm down to the innermost layer of swallows, the specialized guard birds who undoubtedly were the first to raise the alarm and attack. Guard-birds are three times the mass of an average swallow, and strike predators in the head to either repel them or knock them down. I ramp up the throttle to dislodge these larger creatures, and finally they, too, take wing. Off to the sides are several dead Venezuelan cliff

swallows who themselves suffocated, sacrificing their lives to protect their communal nesting grounds in one of the world's most impressive displays of cooperative defensive behavior.

With the idiot Mr. Brant free of birds, I shut down the engine. Before I can even take it off my back, Leith and Sara, the team leader, are by his side to check vital signs. His colour is good, and I relax a little. He's going to be fine. God knows we don't need an Incident Report and another mark against our insurance.

"I think he'll be OK if we just back off and give him some air," I suggest.

Sara shakes her head gravely and reaches for her radio to call in the Medivac helicopter.

"You know the rule #1 of Avian Adventure Outfitters," she says. "'If Swallowed, Seek Medical Attention Immediately.'"

2. Old-Fashioned Calamine Lotion

The Right Reverend Cotton Mather Wool, named for a silver-tongued Puritan preacher whose exuberant campaign of genocide against the peaceful Narragansetts opened up a significant chunk of New England for settlement by God's chosen, was proud of his namesake. He knew it was unlikely he'd encounter anyone in America who knew of the original Cotton Mather's passion for burning babies and women alive. And being named after a Puritan, how could you go wrong?

Rev. Wool wore a smug smile as he polished the brass nameplate on the wall outside his office, a nameplate announcing to the world, or to the tiny portion thereof which somehow found its way to, or past, his office, that he was the Solemn Premier Benedictor, Fourth Order Prefectory, Calvinist Church of the Reformed Christ, North American Branch. He had worked his Right Reverend ass off to get that post.

Down at the ground-floor lobby, a wan young man leaned against the heavy oak door until it yielded, stepped in from the bright sunshine, letting the door thud behind him. He blinked in the cool and musty semi-darkness until his eyes adjusted, and he could make out the form of a white-haired Curate dozing behind the reception desk.

“Excuse me?” said the young man in a timid voice.

The Curate startled, then coughed. “Yes, yes, how may I help you, my son?”

“I’m here about the Part-Time Seasonal Internship with the Administrative Secretary to the Solemn Premier Benedictor, Fourth Order Prefectory of the Calvinist Church of the Reformed Christ, North American Branch.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” wheezed the Curate. “Take the stairs behind me to the second floor, turn left, room two-ninety. Apply with Cotton Wool.”

3. Out of Reach

“As you know, the World Summit on the Mars Rover Viral Pandemic had to be moved here to the Arctic where our isolation has spared us, at least thus far, from infection. I’m told even the United Nations headquarters has been breached by grade-school children. Word has it they’ve eaten every adult who was left in the building. Tragic.

Welcome, then, distinguished guests, all of you gathered here, as well as those watching from around the world via satellite link. Welcome to Iqaluit, Nunavut.” And with that, the old Inuit chief sat down.

The floor of the Iqaluit Community Center vibrated to the thrum of two diesel generators parked outside which were needed to power the broadcast equipment and the Center, and as a result the podium migrated toward the audience whenever it was vacated. As UN Secretary General António Guterres approached the podium, it approached him and he met it halfway, pushed it back to the front and held tight.

“I see a lot of somber faces,” he began. “There is not a person here who hasn’t been touched by this tragedy, and I am truly sorry for your losses.” He cast his eyes downward for a moment and paused. “Recent breakthroughs, however, offer us some hope. What we have long suspected has now been confirmed: hormone production at the onset of puberty *is* what protects older humans from the Martian virus which ravages our children’s nervous systems and turns them into ferocious cannibals.”

“This morning we’ll be hearing about new *in utero* hormone treatments. If they work, humans will have immunity from birth.” The room erupted into applause, and Mr. Guterres smiled briefly. “There may be some unwanted effects of course, bearded babies and that sort of thing, but it’s our best hope for survival as a species.”

“Later today we’ll convene a panel on new lightweight leg armour which can be pressed from natural fibers such as hemp or bamboo. This should make it affordable for most everyone, greatly reducing leg injuries from small children.

Finally, this evening we’ll get an update on the projected timeline for this cure. It could be just around the corner. But until then, ladies and gentlemen, remember” He paused for emphasis. “Keep Out of Reach of Children.”

4. Word for Word

Mary laughed. “You should check out the instructions on this shampoo bottle,” she said.

“Shampoo bottle,” came a voice from the corner, a voice with tone and inflection identical to Mary’s. It was from her nephew Derek, who she was watching for the day. For the past two hours the eight-year-old had been rocking in the corner of her living room while sorting buttons.

Leslie, Mary’s wife, leaned against her from behind, hooking her chin over Mary’s left shoulder. She read the line on the label that Mary pointed to, then cocked her head. “I don’t understand. What’s so funny?”

“So funny,” echoed Derek.

Leslie frowned. “Does he have to do that?”

“Have to do that.” Derek did a flawless impression of Leslie.

Mary reached back and turned, maneuvering herself next to Leslie. She tousled Leslie’s hair.

“Shh,” she said. “You know he can’t help it.”

“Help it.” Derek said.

Leslie rolled her eyes, then slid a hand over Mary's butt, giving her right cheek a playful squeeze. "OK fine, so explain away, Mary Contrary."

"Mary Contrary."

"It says, 'Lather, Rinse, Repeat.' If you follow it literally you'd use a whole bottle every time."

"Every time," emphasized the boy.

"I see your point, just doesn't seem all that funny," said Leslie.

"That funny."

Leslie gritted her teeth and looked at Mary, who took Leslie's face in her hands and kissed her forehead. Leslie relaxed her jaw and smiled. "I guess it should end with, 'If necessary, repeat.'"

"Repeat," began Derek. "Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, ..."