



Newsday, Inc., syndication brochure for Erma Bombeck's "At Wit's End" column. Newsday was Erma's first syndicate.

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Meet the funniest woman in captivity...

Quiet, Erma Bombeck is working, she writes funny things . . . She looks like



mean like Crazy Guggenheim . . . Why doesn't she write? She hasn't moved

for five minutes . . . She says she's at her wit's end . . . What's for dinner? . . .

she's going to cry . . . She will, if you don't shush . . . She's not funny to me, I

An editor told us to syndicate her.

The Journal Herald
Dayton 1, Ohio

Glenn Thompson
Editor

January 15, 1965

Dear Tom,

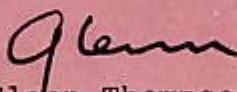
My employers ought to shoot me for writing this letter.

If you syndicate the girl whose columns I enclose, as you must do, it will eventually rob the column of some of the local flavor which I shall insist that she put into it if you do not syndicate her and it will also mean that she passes out of my hands to a large extent. Nevertheless you must syndicate her.

As you can see, she is great. She's happily married, has three kids and lives in the suburbs but, of the millions who share the frustrations of such a state of affairs, she is the one who can tell about it with brilliance and good humor.

Her address is 162 Cushwa Drive, Dayton, Ohio 45459, and if I didn't have a god-damn Presbyterian conscience and if it didn't tell me that such a talent as hers absolutely must have an audience to match it, I would still tear this damn letter up.

Cordially,


Glenn Thompson

Mr. Thomas B. Dorsey
Newsday
550 Stewart Avenue
Garden City, New York

So we did -- QUICK!



**-- So
here's**

ERMA BOMBRECK!



She lives in Centerville, Ohio, near Dayton, A housing development. She's a college graduate, wife of an assistant high school principal, mother of three children, 6, 9 and 11. They once had a dog, now they have guppies, two turtles and a chameleon. The kids go to school.

Typical suburban housewife, except—

Well, she claims she hasn't lost her identity. Putting on the kids' muddy boots is okay with her, she says.

And something is always striking her funny. Women's magazines. Television. Things she reads in the newspaper. Strange American customs, myths. Mostly what strikes her funny is her family—and herself.

She started writing a humor column for the Dayton Journal Herald in January 1965. Some of them are reprinted here. It's our privilege now to offer this fresh comic discovery to you.

"AT WIT'S END"

By Erma Bombeck—3 columns a week—about 450 words—ILLUSTRATED!

At Wit's End *Just Like Natives*

By Erma Bombeck



So many people (two) have recently expressed to me their curiosity as to how the Catholics are making out in their updating of the Mass.

Surprisingly enough, we have taken to speaking English like natives. We genuflect in English, respond to the priest in English and threaten our children in English. ("Shape up and pray or ship out!")

If there is one weakness, it lies in the singing of hymns. I predict it will take a century of pitch pipes and years of special breeding to turn out a generation of hymn singers, but it will happen. Considering that in the past Catholics only opened their mouths in church to cough, they're not doing too badly.

There are four standard hymns to start with. At a cue throughout the Mass, one person will start us off and we're in the running, usually without benefit of accompaniment. My section is usually filled with the following varieties of hymn singers:

- (a) Children with sinus problems.
- (b) Tone-deaf men who know five songs: "Happy Birthday," "Silent Night," "Auld Lang Syne," "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow" and "The Star Spangled Banner."



- (c) "Bluebirds." "Bluebirds" has long been a label given by grade-school music teachers to kids who can't carry a note in a basket. They try. They sing loud. But it always sounds as if they're singing another song.

Sometimes I get the feeling if it weren't for a few Protestant converts and a row full of nuns, we'd all be excommunicated on points. At the next Sodality meeting,

I am going to recommend we purchase a record of the great Mormon choir of Utah, play it at our Mass and have the congregation pantomime it!

So much for the hymns.

The key words for all the responses and active participation are "Pay Attention." I certainly don't want to imply we're a religion of wool-gatherers and mind-wanderers, but what woman can say she never sat in church and planned her dinner or watched a child empty the contents of Mama's purse out into the pew.

Well, there just isn't time for all that nonsense anymore. We're too busy flipping through pages and cards, bobbing up and down, kneeling, singing and responding all over the place.

I personally became engrossed for just a minute in the small child in front of me who was staring me in the eyeball and sticking a pencil up her nose when my hymn came out, "Praise Be The Nose." I assure you that won't happen again!

The Ecumenical council will convene again in September. Naturally their work is not finished. There are many problems to be ironed out. Not the least is how to keep the holy water in the sponge just inside the front door from evaporating.

Also, the problem that plagues us all. How do you find your seat when your entire row goes to Communion with you? I don't need to stress the frustration of wandering up and down the aisle looking for a familiar floor tile and wondering why the rat fink in the black raincoat who sat next to you couldn't have stayed for the entire service.

• • •

And the parking lot problems! It's true irony how we are always blocked by a car driven by a woman who stays after Mass to discuss her mixed marriage with the priest.

If there is time in Rome, the council might even make some progress on our bingo problem. If we played the game in Latin . . . who would know?

At Wit's End
**Alas, Those
Fat Knees!**

By Erma Bombeck



Women with fat knees, unite!

I have waited for as long as I dare for some local, civic-minded woman to organize a protest against the shorter hemlines.

Now, I must do it myself. First, the membership, KTABOC (Knees That Are Better Off Covered) is open primarily to women who have added 15 or 20 pounds since their marriage which, unfortunately, has settled just above the knees. However, it will welcome women with knees that look like door knobs or car handles and sets of knees that bow out like divining rods. (We'll add more categories as we check them in.)

Next, we must set up a constitution that will have stable hemlines as its goal. Hemlines that will insure us against drafts while getting into automobiles, bending over drinking fountains and riding to the top of escalators.



Finally, the pledge. "I _____ refuse to support hemlines above the knees, in the name of Motherhood and the Flag. I solemnly swear to go to any lengths (not exceeding 1½ inches above the knee bone) to keep good taste where it belongs . . . over the knees."

Next will come the letters of protest.

Hopefully, we will all get to our pens and papers and flood the fashion centers with terse, clever little notes pointing out that they have gone too far, and how would men like it if they woke up some day and discovered their hairy legs were in fashion right up to their knees!

I also recommend a personal appeal to male dress designers. (Let me go, I cry a lot.) Their world of women is obviously limited to the skinny girls with legs the size of art pencils. Using pictures taken at the beach last summer will make my point.

Of course, we'll have to demonstrate at Third and Main. This gets a rise out of newspapers and television cameras, which will put our cause before the nation. A placard committee can letter signs that read, "Skirts Si! Knees No!" or "Bring Down Our Skirts." (Delete that last slogan. We can do better than that.)

We'll meet monthly to discuss our progress. I'll line up speakers from time to time, like a doctor who could relate stories of how short skirts have chilled women into respiratory diseases or how stepping onto a curb has caused a woman to lose her balance and break her hip. We might even engage a psychologist who could tell of traumatic experiences of women who have spent an entire evening holding a handbag over their knees or coiling up behind sofa cushions. We'll work this out later.

The important thing is that we get organized. I think it safe to assume that we'll get a lot of criticism from the all-male knee watchers group, but don't let that worry you. Keep foremost in your mind that if some action is not taken soon, the short skirts will meet the plunging necklines and we'll all get arrested for taking our coats off.



At Wit's End

Bye Bye, Togetherness

By Erma Bombeck

Next to in-laws who "live in" and a budget that won't budge, there is nothing that will put a dent in a marriage like a vacation trip by auto.

There is something about packing five people in a car with nothing to do but tolerate each other that leads to roughhousing, name-calling, eye-gouging and eventually assuming a glassy-eyed foetal position near the spare tire.

I have noted carefully on past excursions that everyone has had his own antagonistic topic which he or she pursues.

The children, for example, will invariably ramble on for miles about the last rest room they visited, describing in intricate detail the messages on the walls. They will also amuse themselves by the hour playing auto roulette. This is a precious game of trampling, jostling and hurling of bodies to see which one gets a seat nearest the windows.

Husbands are bugged on the topic of car performance. There is scarcely a moment after the car has stopped that he isn't figuring gas and oil mileage and carefully recording it on a graphic chart (which I will later wrap a melted popsicle in and discard.) Another area which he enjoys digesting is the road map bit. Secure with a glove compartment full of maps (many of them listing only the original 13 colonies) he will ask me to trace the route while he drives.

On various occasions, he has accused me of moving the Mississippi River over two states and withholding information about detours and bridge washouts just to see him cry.

My particular forte is sermons on discipline. I have been known to go across an entire state, ignoring national monuments, freaks of nature, postcard countryside, faces carved in mountains and herds of wild buffalo, while my long-playing

mouth recites misdeameanors the kids made when they were on pabulum. My sermon on "All right now, group, which one of you turned on the car heater," extended over three states.



Sometimes I am permitted to drive, but only under the following conditions: (1) city traffic at 5 p.m. when the population is 250,000 or over, (2) unmarked dirt roads at midnight, (3) highways under construction with detour signs that have blown over, (4) in a tornado on an eight-lane highway where the minimum speed is 65 mph.

Another vacation-by-auto pitfall is getting the driver of the car to stop for food. Rationalizing that even at the "500" they have occasional pit stops, our driver invariably feeds us on promises of what lies 200 miles ahead at Futility City. (I suspect he nips at candy bars.)

With bloated stomach and sharp teeth from gnawing on our safety belts, we hit Futility only to discover one filling station, a hound dog and a brightly lighted stand where they peddle big snow cones. The hound dog looks interesting.

We've tried car bingo, group singing and any other organized madness you can think of. And I really do love vacations . . . the peace of no telephones, no schedules, no routines, no demands. It's just all that togetherness in between.



At Wit's End

The 38th Parallel

By Erma Bombeck

Women's fight for independence has gotten them into voting booths, sports arenas, smokers and YMCA lobbies.

Now they need a piece of legislation to get them out of the living room at parties and into the kitchen where the men and the controversial debates are going on.

It has long bugged me that my entire evening at a party has been spent with chatter on how to lose weight eating cabbage (you burp your way to a size 9) to where you can buy jockey shorts for Ken dolls. Meanwhile, back at the refrigerator, the men are talking about what the local tax dollar is worth, the plight of Mississippi and the deadbeats in the UN.

I suspect, however, that women bring a lot of this discrimination on themselves. At a gathering, recently, a man across the room made a reference to Taylor in Vietnam and my woman companion asked excitedly, "Is Burton there with her?"

On another occasion, when anthropologist Margaret Mead's name came up, someone suggested it sounded familiar and wasn't she a foot doctor? (I recommended her to three of my friends.)

For the greater part of an evening in suburban Dayton women line up on the sofa like pigeons on the courthouse roof . . . quoting Dr. Spock . . . cursing Debbie Drake's unbelievable prone position. Only after the meaty problems have been solved in the kitchen are women called upon to entertain the entire assemblage.

"Come on, dear" urges a husband, "do your impersonation of Snaggle-puss."

"Is he a negotiator in the Congo?" asks a newcomer.

"No," says the woman, biting her lips in humiliation, "he's a cat on the 5 o'clock cartoons. (Continuing brightly) I don't have to go around imitating cats, you know. I can talk about fair housing, dirty books in Dayton, why funeral homes shouldn't give green stamps . . . anything really."

"DO SNAGGLE-PUSS," screams the room.

From there on, someone demonstrates the "frug" and the "swim"; another mimics Walter Huston singing "September Song," with a big finish by a pert redhead who does Ben Blue doing Russian co-sack heads.

• • •

Somehow, we never get back to what happened to the Republicans who knew in their hearts Goldwater was right but suffered a Johnson attack at the polls.

The 38th parallel between men's and women's conversations is imaginary, of course. But it will take a long time and a lot of education and understanding to bridge the gap.



Women will have to learn to talk less and enjoy it more. Men will have to employ all the understanding of women's logic and reasoning they've got.

Don't expect miracles. At the beginning of their new-found "kitchen privileges," don't be surprised if women settle Russia's UN dues by having them stage a bake sale in the UN lobby. They'll probably settle the Cuban situation with a block party to promote understanding among one another.

And somewhere along the line, women will suggest organizing a car pool. This doesn't serve ANY purpose, but it does keep women off the streets and gives them something to do.

In the meantime . . . Snaggle-puss, anyone?

At Wit's End

Out Of The Nest . . .

By Erma Bombeck



I won't kid you. This is a hokey column on how a mother feels when she boots her last offspring out of the nest and into school.

It's a time of mixed emotions that run the gamut from giddiness to depression. One minute, it's, "You slam that door once more, fella, and I'll MAIL you to school in August." The next, you're throwing yourself under the wheels of the school bus and demanding, "Let my 'baby' off that bus. He's the 40-pound redhead in the third seat."



Actually, you have to be a mother (and a little schizophrenic) to understand these reactions.

I suspect most of it stems from the promises we made to ourselves while sloshing over diaper pails and shaking boiling hot milk over our wrists at 2 a.m. feedings. "Just wait," (inaudible grumbles) "just four and a half more years to go and I can go back to bed, grow my own orchids, have lunch downtown, write another 'Peyton Place', go on a diet, comb my hair, learn to water ski and find my identity." (I don't know what that means either, but the slick magazines keep saying I've lost it.)

Throughout measles, fractures, tensions, traumas and Dr. Spock, the promises are still there like a dessert to be hungered for. When it is within reach, anticipation gives way to modern women's favorite emotion: guilt!

What am I doing? Sending this baby off to learn calculus before the cord is healed. How can I think of myself when

he's harboring all these insecurities? How does the State of Ohio know my son is ready for the first grade? They look at him and what do they see? A 1958 birth certificate and a record of immunizations.

I look at him and I see a smile . . . like halloween. I see two little short legs that won't get him a drink of water without a stool under them. I see two pudgy hands that can't work together to cut up a piece of meat. I see a shock of red hair that doesn't come up to his father's belt buckle. I see a little boy who never went to the rest room all during kindergarten because he didn't want to admit he couldn't tell B-O-Y-S from G-I-R-L-S on the doors.

Then there's a little concern that keeps gnawing away that I should have prepared him more. I puffed away all that time on Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, Dr. Seuss and all those fantasies. I should've dealt with the basic realities like tolerance, forgiveness, compassion and honesty. For from this day on, his world can only widen. An existence that began in a crib, grew to a house and extends over a two-block bicycle ride will now go even beyond that. I will share him with another woman . . . other adults . . . other children . . . other opinions . . . other points of view. I am no longer leading. I am standing behind him ready to guide from a new position.

There is a mad desire to pin a note on him to make sure he's understood. "Dear Miss Worsted . . . or Miss Chalkboard or whatever: I submit to your tender, loving care my son who's a little shy and a lot stubborn. Who can't cope yet with zippers that stick or buttons on sweaters that don't come out even. One who makes his 5's sideways but who works seriously and in earnest. He exists on catsup, peanut butter, chocolate ice cream and love. I may sue you for alienation of affection, but for the moment, God Bless You."

Yesterday, they sent their largest bus for my son who looked unbelievably small.

However, he returned that day in a much smaller bus . . . or maybe my son just grew a lot.



At Wit's End

Antiques While You Wait

By Erma Bombeck

When my husband and I appear at an antique show there is a scurrying of feet while one dealer whispers to another, "Stick a geranium in that slop jar, Irving, here comes a couple of live ones."

This is partly our fault. We stand there open-mouthed and bug-eyed, clutching green cash like we just hit town long enough to buy the fertilizer. On at least one occasion, I have rushed over to a large hulk of metal and shrieked, "Is this a 1900 milk separator?" "No," someone replies patiently, "That's a 1962 drinking fountain."

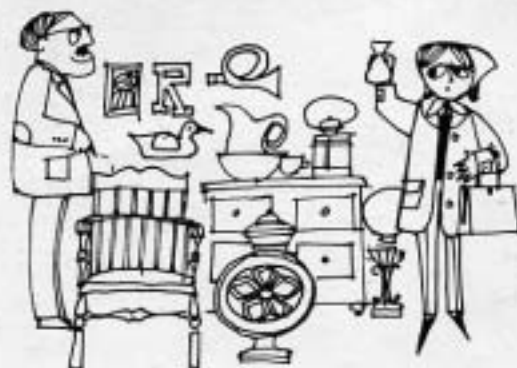
We have maintained a rule of thumb. If you can sleep on it, plant flowers in it, frame it, play it, eat it, stuff it with magazines, records or blankets, ring it or open a conversation with it, we'll buy it.

Then we have an open category of things we're going to do something with some day. This takes in a cast iron angel with a broken foot, a hand-driven child's washing machine, a Civil War grave marker and a collection of "Go With Willkie" campaign buttons.

Our children, unfortunately, do not share our enthusiasm for old things (including us). Their first experience was a traumatic one and had to do with a dear little 1809 collapsible locker. It attacked the baby when he tried to sit in it and he's avoided it like a penicillin shot ever since.

The pump organ that was to bring togetherness to our brood (I was going to pop corn while we stood around and sang "Beautiful Dreamer" and everything) has only brought disharmony. The children's music teacher complains, "They'll learn to play if their little legs just hold out." (Rubbish! Those kids are developing leg muscles like a fullback.)

Frankly, it's next to impossible to instill respect in small children for antique furniture. Cries of "Get your feet off that distressed table!" or "Don't sit on that wood box, it could go any minute" leaves them confused and mumbling, "She's got to be kidding."



Another find that hasn't worked out is the zither my husband bought three years ago. "Don't you want your father to be the first in his block to play the zither?" we queried. They looked at each other and shrugged.

At roadside shops on Sundays, they make snide remarks about "all this junk" and end up buying a bag of hoarhound candy which they immediately discover they hate and spit out in my hand.

No matter, I will go on sewing my heirloom quilts on hot summer days and collecting old hat pins. They're lethal looking, but they're marvelous for releasing the lock on the bathroom door when someone gets locked in.

How the kids will divide all those Willkie buttons when they grow up is their problem.



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