

The back page

In the early sixties (I think) there was a film called 'The Knack', with Rita Tushingham and Ray Brooks. The particular knack referred to in the title was that of pulling birds, as I believe you young people call it, and I seem to recall that Brooks didn't have it. It occurred to me recently that life is just one long series of knacks that you either possess or you don't. Not a very original or earth-shaking observation perhaps, but I'm beginning to realise that the secret of growing old gracefully is to be grateful for the abilities you do have, and to accept that there are some things that you were just not meant to do. I don't mean that you shouldn't try to acquire new skills, just that you need to learn to recognise when you are wasting your time. Take water coolers, to give just one very trivial example. We have a lot of these in our nice new hospital, which is fortunate, because in the summer the temperature in some of the rooms in the radiology department tops thirty degrees (yes, I *did* say it was a new building – just don't ask). Anyway, there are people on God's earth, I've seen them, who are able to walk up to one of these things, bend down, and with a deft flick of the wrist detach a single plastic cup from the bottom of the stack in the tube on the side of the cooler. Every time I try, I end up with a mini stack of three or four cups in my hand, and four or five others rolling around my feet. I used to get cross about this; after all, it shouldn't be difficult. I tried everything, but in the end, it was much easier just to accept that I could either drink from the nest of three cups and dribble water down the front of my shirt (you try it, then) or carefully replace two of them back into the top of the stack. Wind surfing is another of these forbidden fruits, as far as I'm concerned. I did try once, when I was in Cyprus with the RAF many years ago. I was just about to give up when I actually managed to remain upright on the board and make some progress. Just as I realised that I was heading for Beirut with no way of steering, gravity fortunately intervened yet again. I swam back to the beach, dragging the board behind me, and over a few beers decided that, as far as wind surfing was concerned, enough was enough.

It's the same with DIY. In these pages several years ago I went on at some length about my ineptitude with a toolkit. My wife came to terms with my inadequacy much sooner than I did, but in the end I realised that she was right, and that I would be happier and live longer if I swallowed my pride and got a man in to do those little jobs around the house that most other men accomplish unaided. But now, to add insult to injury, I realise that I am about to be deprived of the pleasure of glorying in the few man-type jobs that I *have* mastered. Look at tappets, for example. Number one son is pretty hot on car repairs, and assumes, usually correctly, that his father is a complete non-starter when it comes to dealing with anything under the bonnet. Recently, when he was servicing his car in the drive, and waxing more than usually lyrical concerning my lack of knowledge of things mechanical, I thought I would stop him in his tracks by offering to give him a hand.

'Would you like me to check the tappets while you're doing the exhaust?', I asked, casually.

Now adjusting tappets is the only job on a car that I ever mastered, apart from changing the oil and water and all those other little things that even women (whoops! – sorry) can do. In the early years of our marriage, I would listen knowledgeably to the engine on my Ford Popular and later the Vauxhall Viva, and say to the wife (who, it seemed to me, was never quite as impressed as she ought to have been) 'there's a bit of tappet rattle there, I'll have to see to that at the weekend'. Anyway, the boy

emerged from under the car, fixed me with a pitying glance, and informed me that, although he had heard of tappets, it was unlikely that he would ever find himself in the unfortunate position of having to adjust them, since manually adjusted tappets had been consigned to the dustbin of history, along with kipper ties and Cossack hairspray.

I should be used to it, I suppose. All my younger colleagues in radiology are possessed of skills that I can only wonder at – not only can they steer catheters into vessels that for me exist only as dimly-remembered diagrams in anatomy textbooks, they can also make sense of the myriad images thrown out by our MR scanners, differentiating at a glance between T1, T2 and fat-suppressed sequences. In fact, that's probably as good a definition of radiological old age as any – it's when most of the papers at scientific meetings relate to an imaging technique that hadn't been invented when you took up the specialty. Until recently, though, I had one trump card to play. I was the only radiologist in the department still able (and/or willing) to do a proper lymphangiogram, an arcane procedure which had been largely but not completely replaced by sexy new technology. Every few years though, a patient would turn up for whom nothing but a lymphangiogram would do, and someone would remember that I was still around, and get me out of my cupboard. Slightly smugly, I would demonstrate the intricate surgical technique to the current batch of trainees, who would look on with expressions of what I took at the time to be awe, but which could conceivably have been bored condescension. However, it has recently been borne in on me that there is little point demonstrating a technique that the juniors are never going to actually perform. What's more, even relics like me, who can still be bothered to spend an hour or more performing the procedure, are hardly likely to be much good at interpreting the resulting images if we only do one every four or five years.

So that's it then. My only *pièce de résistance* (or was it a *tour de force*?) goes down the pan, along with hand-smocking and precision tool grinding and all the other skills no longer valued in the electronic age. Which rather begs the question, in my darker moments, of just what *do* I have left to offer that sets me apart from my fellows? I can waggle my ears, it's true, and what's more, I can waggle them independently. Not many people can do that, but it's not something I often get the chance to demonstrate; you need to be a bit drunk really, and even then it doesn't quite compare with running your own dot com enterprise or having a disease named after you.

And talking of diseases, I think I should probably get off this computer now, before I catch something. I read in a recent BMJ that there have been outbreaks of syphilis in Manchester, Brighton and San Francisco, and that one of these clusters 'involved men who had made contact in an internet chat room'. How about *that* for a computer virus?*

Bob Bury

* *Yes, pedantic reader, I do know that the spirochaete isn't a virus, thank you.*