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I think it's high time I gave my loyal reader(s) a tantalizing peek at the little cobweb-draped corner of *;login:* in which I lurk. Approved eye protection is advised. Three months before every issue hits the mail room/Web site, Rik sends out to his columnists the overall theme and expected content of that upcoming issue, in the overly optimistic hope that we will tailor our columns accordingly. Every author has her or his own way of dealing with deadlines; of coming up with devastatingly clever and technically on-target copy; in short, of doing that voodoo that we do so... um...well. Sharing my own process with you, rather than, say, writing an actual column, might enable me to discharge this issue's obligation without thinking too much: a welcome break from my usual routine. Oh, who am I kidding? "Without thinking too much" nails my modus operandi with uncanny accuracy.

Proceeding apace, let us examine the soft underbelly of yon columnist. Lint there is and in abundance, but we shall hold our breath and step over that damp and unsightly goo, for what we really hope to discover here are the arcane mental gymnastics that somehow lead to words being put to paper. Usually the theme or principal topic Rik gives us (us as in we columnists, not you the reader and I, unless you're another columnist, in which case you may as well stop reading this now and play Angry Birds) to work from is a term I've either never heard of or heretofore vaguely believed to be connected with a rare tropical skin condition.

This leads to a flurry of Internet-facilitated self-education, at the conclusion of which I have decided that I can't possibly learn enough about whatever it is to squeeze out a thousand-word column in time. (Not that cutting and pasting from Web sites hasn't crossed my mind: a lot of what passes for factual material in cyberspace is pretty funny in and of itself. But the next link up in the plagiarism chain might get all cross.) So I fall back on a literary technique that has served me well for over 20 years: making stuff up.

I occasionally consider writing an actual technical article, rather than this travesty, but I did a fair amount of technical authoring eight or ten years ago and managed hopelessly to confuse an entire generation of potential IT professionals who now have little recourse but to appear on reality shows or attend law school. I'm not too clear on the details, but I believe as a result several nations have passed statutes limiting the distribution of technically oriented publications with my name anywhere in the table of contents. Fortunately, these same countries have mysteriously reverted to an abacus-based computational infrastructure and thus have no real use for *;login:* except, perhaps, as kindling. No harm, no foul.

There is most likely not an old Norse aphorism that translates roughly (a little sandpaper might well do wonders here) to “word fame is word fame,” apropos of the proposition that there is no such thing as bad publicity. I have friends who are inordinately fond of repeating this. Sometimes they repeat it so often I have to leave the room and get chicken enchiladas mole from a nearby (or, if they’re really getting on my nerves, not so nearby) Mexican restaurant. You can’t have chicken enchiladas mole without a margarita, and you can’t have just one of those. At this juncture the day is effectively shot and there is nothing for it but to go home and crawl into bed.

Let’s just presume, for the sake of getting on with it, that I have somehow achieved a meager understanding of the esoteric topic du jour. The next step in my column-generation protocol is doing research to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, some of which are so large they can be seen from the International Space Station. In the olden days this involved heading down to the library, cajoling my way past the staff who remember what happened the last time I was there, and spending an afternoon locating and reading books that have nothing whatever to do with the subject at hand. Now, thanks to our society’s maniacal obsession with providing access to Wikipedia to every last person on the planet (except those with abacuses...abaci? abacera? whatever), I can just open up a half-dozen browser windows and let the irrelevant, unverified information flow over me like bad movie dialogue. I often lose track of both time and purpose during these forays, a condition I call “cyber-spatial disorientation.”

It usually requires about three hours (six, if I have the Xbox fired up as well) of clicking on links and reading about Android exploits, dark matter, Islay scotch, Mayan ruins, unexplained phenomena, and video game previews before I’ve collected enough background information to feel well prepared to write. At this point I take a nap.

Awake and refreshed, I wander back over and sit in front of the keyboard for a while, trying to remember what I was doing earlier. Then it’s time to invoke the browser windows and hit the Interwebs again, avoiding anything that contains the words “Republican,” “Democrat,” “Deficit,” “Congress,” “Bailout,” “Sanctions,” “Occupy,” or “Licorice” (I hate licorice). Most of the remaining Web sites are devoted to dead celebrities, but I’ve forgotten what the topic was anyway, so this has almost no impact on operations.

Along about now the cat will saunter in and rub against my legs, pretending to be affectionate in an attempt to con me into getting up and making the long trek into the kitchen to produce another sacrificial offering of the same indeterminate slurry of grain and meat by-products she haughtily refused to ingest yesterday. When I fail to take the demanded action, she leaves in a feline huff, having during her brief tenure deposited fine, dander-laden hairs in each and every interstitial space on my keyboard.

By this point the deadline is looming. By looming, I mean tracking it no longer requires a calendar, but, rather, an egg-timer. I stare at the ceiling for inspiration. This gives me a nosebleed, which wastes another good half-hour while I staunch it and clean up the attendant mess. Finally, I can conjure no further distractions and reluctantly put fingers to keys. I start typing, aiming in the general direction of this issue’s theme. Sometimes I manage to get in a few sentences that have a modicum of relevancy, but more often I miss that mark by a wide margin.

Eventually, by dint of sheer perseverance (or is it perversion? I always get those two confused), I cobble together a sufficient number of words arranged in such a way that they can be mistaken by the incautious observer for a column, if one ignores the total lack of cohesion. The result looks a lot like...

This.

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