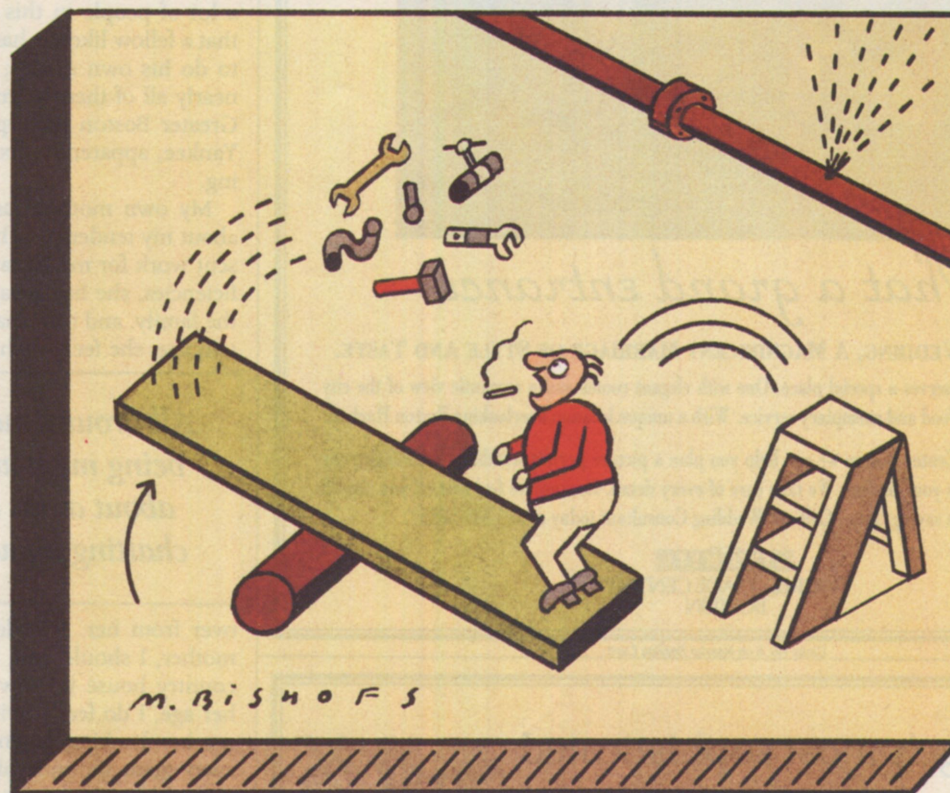


The Fixer



**Some men have the skills to tackle any repair.
Others have the sense not to try.**

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

AS A RULE, I don't like to deal with household problems that involve plumbing—or electricity, carpentry, car repair, painting, furnaces, disposals, picture hanging, or gasoline. Or children, come to think of it. But the drain in my bathroom sink was gummed up, and it seemed like such an easy thing to fix that my natural plumbing phobia, large as it is, was eclipsed by my even greater embarrassment over calling in the plumber for such a small job. So I got out my handyman's toolbox and went to work, and within minutes I had managed to create such a large problem that I could call the plumber without any hesitation whatsoever. I congratulated myself on a job well done.

Married women have recently taken to complaining that they need a wife to handle all those tedious domestic duties they don't have the time or energy for. Well, I need a husband, some nice lunk who is good with a monkey wrench.

Mr. Fix-it I am not. I like to think it's a genetic flaw, since

that absolves me of any personal responsibility. My dad was a splendid fellow in many ways, but he was also a real klutz. He couldn't even turn on the stereo. I can still picture him kneeling in front of the turntable, trying to see which knob to twist to make the needle hop off its armrest and play "Oklahoma!" for him. He did the sensible thing, and hired a courthouse custodian to come in after work to be the man around the house.

That's what I'd like, to hire somebody. We don't break enough stuff to require the services of a full-time Real Man, but a part-timer would be great. I'm tempted to hire my brother-in-law to be my husband, since he's always showing me up in the can-do department with his tremendous supply of manly know-how. He's the kind of guy who changes his own oil and builds an addition to his house in his spare time. But alas, he lives in Oregon, and I'd prefer my husband to live closer by.



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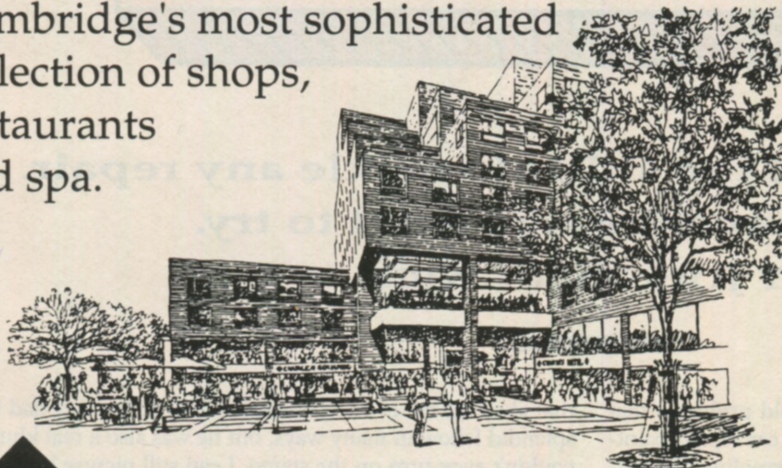
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Social Relations

Perhaps I should advertise, but something has always held me back—something that goes beyond the large sum of money that such a paragon would cost, were I able to find him. I can't take the dark, disapproving looks I get from virtually everyone whenever I mention this little ambition of mine. Amazingly, there are a lot of people in this world who believe that a fellow like me has a moral obligation to do his own chores; and unfortunately, nearly all of them seem to live here in the Greater Boston metropolitan area. A real Yankee, apparently, fixes his own plumbing.

My own mother has been on my case about my tendency to hire others to do my scut work for me. Because of my dad's deficiencies, she has always been the man in the family, and now that she is, well, a certain age, she feels it's high time that I take

*All around me I see men
being men: knowing all
about amps and volts,
chatting about lug nuts.*

over from her. I no longer live with my mother, I should add, but we still share a country house in New Hampshire. Given her age, I do feel a twinge of guilt when I see her hacking down trees and hauling away great mounds of brush. But then I think, why do I have to take her place? Why can't my sister do that?

I have tried to educate my mother about the benefits of employing seasoned professionals who bring expertise plus their own insurance policies to the job. Why have me fix a broken window when she could have Bob Vila do it? I have also played on her patriotism, pointing out that a service economy like ours depends on hiring other people to pull weeds for you. I have even lectured her on the paradox of thrift. The economy is never going to get going if we don't all do our part to spread around the moola-boola. My arguments are terrific, but they have no effect on a WASP of the old school like my mother. She wants me to suffer, not somebody else. She thinks it's good for me.

But my mom is not the only one to feel this way, I know; she is merely the one who bends my ear the hardest on the topic. All around me, I see men being men, knowing the difference between amps and volts, chatting about lug nuts. Perhaps they think that in mastering such details, they master the universe. They symbolically link arms with Daniel Boone, Teddy Roosevelt, Richard Byrd, Neil Armstrong,

Social Relations

and the other indisputably great men of yore. Even Waspy Governor William Weld knows which end of the rifle to hold when knocking down a wild boar. There's something about these guys' swaggering confidence that makes me tremble, and not just with envy. The most salient aspect of such manly pursuits is their danger. Who but a Real Man would ever willingly mess with electricity or hold a chain saw? How dumb do you have to be?

AS FAR AS I CAN TELL, IT WAS RALPH Waldo Emerson who got this do-it-yourself kick going for New Englanders with his essay on self-reliance, not that he was the most masculine piece of work ever to grace our planet. In a way, his 1840 essay provided the rationale for Thoreau's celebrated move to Walden Pond on Independence Day five years lat-

Even Henry David Thoreau regularly snuck over to his parents' house for a home-cooked meal.

er, which might be considered the beginning of the region's self-help cult. (Cult as opposed to necessity, which it had been for the early settlers, who had to do everything themselves because there wasn't anybody else around.) But even Thoreau didn't live a hermit's existence: he regularly snuck over to his parents' house in Concord center for a home-cooked meal.

And nowhere does Emerson advocate wiring your own home. If anything, he is for an intellectual self-reliance that runs counter to any physical one involving a cult of manliness. He would have us chuck such silly conventions about how men are supposed to behave. "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," he declares. "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." Exactly.

I should have had the courage of my convictions the other day when I saw that a kitchen drawer was falling apart. After my experience with the sink, I should have handled the matter in my own way—by reaching for the yellow pages. But no, I conformed to the popular wisdom and glumly fetched my hammer. A few taps and I was done. To my surprise, the drawer held together fine, but somehow I had succeeded in nailing the whole thing shut. And in trying to pry it free, I yanked loose one side of its front plate, thereby turning the drawer into a kind of tiny cupboard. As I marveled at my handiwork, I realized this was not something easily done. Hey, maybe I'm good at this after all. □

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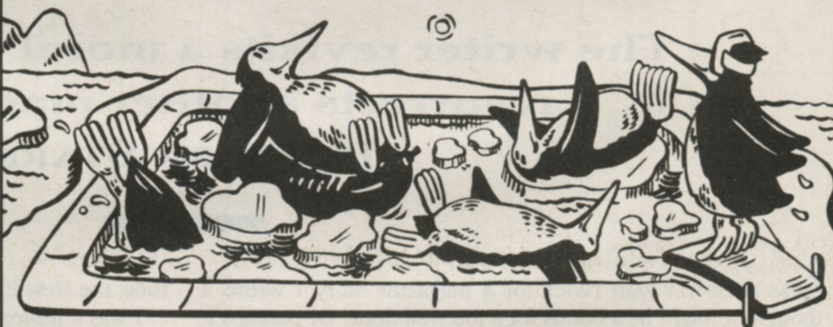
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