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Mike Kremzar Budget

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Performance Review: Competency in Husbandry

Last April, in his paper, “The House Guest,” Kris Gillis kept us on edge with his tale of waking to find a stranger in house, and the actions to expel the interloper. I took heart that it ended well—that the man of the house (and the woman, too) had come through; another house was safe. But I wondered, what I might have done. That paper, and the 70-year covenant in Mike Kremzar’s ‘Man of the House’ story, guide my purpose tonight.

To be clear, while my wife is a modern, professional woman, I am the man of the house. For 30 years I’ve handled everything thrown my way. I was lucky to have a great model—my father—whose broad skillset harmonized house and home so well that nothing ever seemed broken or out of order. The place just seemed to hum. He never pushed or demanded. In fact, he never “instructed.” Instead, when I helped him with a task, he narrated his actions aloud, explained it as he went along. At first, I mistakenly thought he was just keeping himself on track. In reality, he was drawing me in—mentoring me long before I ever paid attention; He was an excellent teacher.

No one can do it all, but thanks to him, I do most of it. Plumbing, electric, carpentry, tuck point brick? I’m your man. Buzzing flies, hornets, yellow jackets, bumble bees? No problem. Crawling ants, centipedes, spiders, snakes? Quickly dispatched! Birds, bats, and emus? Trees, shrubs, and lawncare? All in my wheelhouse.

I do hire out work— mostly when it involves mystery...or the use of dark magic—things like HVAC systems, refrigerators, or anything with a gasoline engine. My father avoided those things, too. As Dirty Harry Callahan said, “A man’s got to know his limitations.”

Some 20 years ago, after a productive Saturday—which surely included a half-dozen things mentioned above—my wife and I went out for dinner. The only parking spot at the busy restaurant was a tight one at the front door. As I stopped just past it, she said to “just drive on,” she could walk. I slipped it into reverse, backed into the spot in one fluid motion, and shifted into Park. She was dumbfounded.

“I can’t believe... how did you do that?” she said. “I’d have driven around the block. You amaze me!”

I didn’t even look up.

“The little things are easy,” I said.

“Hold on,” she said. “Don’t sell it short.”

She rattled off a list of my exploits—none of which would impress anyone in this room—all of which she would have hired out. She waxed poetic about the lawn; Tuesday night’s dinner; a toilet handle that did not need a jiggle; faucets that didn’t leak; doors that didn’t squeak; and floors that didn’t creak. With a hint of wonder, she said, “It’s hard to put into words. You’re... just competent.”

(PAUSE)

Now, I don’t know about your HR department, but in my mine, “just competent” falls a notch below “outstanding,” two notches below “exceptional” and one sick day away from “needs improvement.” (PAUSE)

“Wow,” I said. “Competent. ...Thank you?”

Our giggles led to a volley of gentle barbs, then hard laughter that brought tears before we settled down.

“Listen,” she said. “I mean it. You’re just competent at everything. Can’t you see how remarkable that is? My dad couldn’t screw in a light bulb. I’ve never known anyone who could do what you do—who was so... broadly competent.”

In the depth of her serious tone, I saw the height of her compliment, and I’ve come to embrace the idea that a “wide competence” is no modest achievement. In fact, it may be an ideal goal in husbandry. Ask my wife—good enough is good. Anything more “exceeds expectations.” Of course, if I had any aims as a young man, striving to domestic competency was not a conscious one. Do the math on my 30 competent years and you’ll see 30 more unaccounted for. God knows my first “man of the house” charge gave me little confidence.

I was 13 the first time my folks left me alone for a weekend. Dad gave same rote speech I’d heard on their evenings out, adding only, “Lock up everything before you go to bed.” We never locked the house back then, but I quickly nodded.

That first night, I survived a few bumps in the house. The next day came and went without trouble. I locked the doors again the second night and hit the sack, settling in to the sound of the window fan. Before we had central air-conditioning, that giant fan drew cool, evening air through the house and across our beds. Its white-noise drone always hastened sleep and that night was no different, but about 2:00am, a noise woke me.

A second sound made clear that it came from outside. Looking through the window fan, I saw nothing—but through its drone I recognized the clattering of the aluminum furniture on our front porch. Someone was trying to get in the living room window, and it was down to me to handle it. (PAUSE)

Call the police? No good—I'd have to walk through the living room to reach the phone. I had to act fast, so I took the last resort option first. I slipped into my folk's bedroom and retrieved Dad's Hi-Standard target pistol from his dresser, grabbed the clip from his nightstand drawer, slipped it into the gun, and yanked back the carriage. As it crack-slammed a round into the chamber, I felt that nervous tingle one smartly feels when any gun is loaded.

At the top of the stairs, I heard nothing, so, knees shaking, I moved to the landing and heard a voice—so faint as to still be on the porch. My eyes in tune with the dark, I scaredy-peeked through the banister. The room was clear, so I moved down five steps. Bolting for the telephone crossed my mind, but the squeak of the old window's pulleys stopped me. I pulled down the gun's safety lever. ~~My heart raced.~~ (PAUSE)

Now, because I'd been eager to go hunting years before, Dad had drilled me on gun safety. Hunting's magic faded quickly for me after tracking too many flailing rabbits in need of a second or third shot to be dispatched. But the safety points were automatic that night.

Outside the open window, the porch furniture rustled again, then a hand pulled back the billowing curtains. My adrenalin spiked (a boost I didn't need). I settled into a firing squat, and raised the gun. A leg came through the window. *Aim center-chest*, I thought, but the curtain billowed out and blocked the target. (PAUSE)

Now, long before the Castle Doctrine expanded to the UDF parking lot, and long before the NRA became obsessed with the 2nd Amendment, the guidance on shooting an intruder was simple—just make sure he falls inside the house. Shoot a man at the threshold and you better drag him all the way in before calling the police. One leg inside wasn't enough and, without a clear shot, I hesitated. The leg in the window paused, too, and gave me time to think. (PAUSE)

In my home-alone fear, I had made a poor choice. My armed response was calculated—and its course led directly to my intent to kill a human being. Make no mistake, if properly trained, you don't shoot to wound someone—or slow them down—you shoot to kill, and you only do that when facing an equal threat. Before I could diffuse anything, a head and full torso swung through the window and leaned in, as if to pull the other leg inside.

Let him take the damn television, I thought. Let him have some Hummel figurines; God knows we have plenty to spare.

I relaxed my shaky finger to the trigger guard and took a breath. My cool, superhero actions suddenly felt more like a Barney Fife moment. But then—in the deepest, most commanding Captain America voice I could muster—I spoke out.

Very slowly, I said, “D-D-Don't move, mother-fucker, or I'll b-b-blow your b-b-brains out.”

(PAUSE)

To my shock, the guy did exactly as I commanded—he didn't move. He just froze, straddling the window. I was relieved—my “mighty shield” of words had prevailed. I had him exactly where I wanted. I had the upper hand and—in the eternity of that powerful moment it occurred to me—I had no bloody idea what to do next. **(PAUSE)**

I'd heard a voice earlier—was there another one on the porch? As my Barney Fife knees wobbled, without a sound, the frozen man and his leg seemed to be lifted out the window.

The adrenaline coursing my heart and knees shot straight to my feet as I charged the door to give chase. For the first time, all fear was gone. Hell...I wasn't Barney Fife; I was Captain America. **(PAUSE)** I was Captain America *with a damn gun*. Burglars, furniture, and potted geraniums scattered across the porch as I flipped up the light switches, cursed even more profane

threats, and flew through the front door, where—to my complete shock—I was instantly blinded.

(PAUSE)

The 250 watt light bulb in the lamppost was too much, too fast, for my eyes to adjust. If the leg (and the man attached to it) were there, I was too blind to see them. I gave the shrubbery a sideways glance and lobbed a few more colorful words into the dark. If they weren't gone, they were as good as gone. I retreated to the door and flipped on the gun's safety. The threat had passed.

I turned off the lights, and kept watch in the dark on the porch steps in my underwear—gun in hand—for an hour until I calmed down and went to bed, feeling pretty good about things. I had made a mistake, or three, but all was well. Alone with Dad the next day, I proudly told him everything. He was glad I was safe, but he didn't praise me.

"You did *almost* good enough," he said. "You just gotta pay attention—even to the *little things*."

Almost? I thought. *The house was intact. I had successfully just defended the realm.*

Almost? I gave him a blank look. (PAUSE)

"Next time," he said. "Maybe you'll lock that damn window."

Of course, I took to locking everything after that. More importantly, I started to pay attention. He made it look so easy. for the first time, I began to see countless little things he did to make the house hum. Big things—like the screened-in back porch, concrete patio, new garage roof, adding a full bathroom in the basement—they were plain to see. But I had long reckoned that sticky windows, wonky cabinets, leaky faucets, and squeaky doors magically fixed

themselves when they didn't stick, wonk, squeak, or leak anymore. Unless we'd been part the effort to handle those little things, we seldom noticed—and he could not have cared less.

Over the next ten years—my journeyman years, if you will—I followed his lead, doing things on my own. When I once hinted for a bigger “thank-you” for something I'd done without being asked, he quickly humbled me.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” he said. “Did you want a medal? Or can you make do with a Gold Star?” Another lesson in husbandry—expect no praise for paying attention—for doing what's expected.

While my career evaluations always bounced between “outstanding” and “exceptional,” it took years of husbandry to rate “competent” at home—to actually *see the little things* and quickly *tend to them* before they get big—before they grow discordant on the harmony. Before they interrupt that... hum. Besides... the little things are easy.

I'm not an “exceptional” man of the house. I don't “stand out.” Few of us do. But if we *pay attention*, and if we're *just competent* enough, the place will simply hum—like the drone of a window fan. The rest house will feel it—and may never notice.

Take it as high praise.