

Transitions 3

"WHAT THE H . . L DO YOU MEAN THEY ACCEPTED OUR OFFER" Kate and I screamed at Shiela simultaneously.

Uncharacteristic of us (well, Kate at least) you might think. But, if you remember back to TRANSITIONS TWO, we had an offer on a house in Acton which we had been told was going to be rejected. This resulted in our looking for another place, and finding one that we liked better. As a result, hearing that the first offer had been accepted was an unpleasant surprise.

"But you said they wouldn't pay for all the structural problems, that they were going to tell us to take a walk" we moaned.

"Yes, but then I told them that you seemed to like the house you were looking at and probably weren't interested in their property any more regardless of whether they met the terms or not."

"But what about our thousand dollar good-will deposit?"

"Well, they might insist on keeping that."

"Yeah, because you practically advertised that we were going to blow them off and they could make a fast thousand dollars by accepting!"

"True, but then you must remember... I don't work for you. I work for them."

No, only kidding. Even Shiela wouldn't say that. Think it maybe... but in actuality, she did help us get our deposit back (which amazed me... I would have given it up, feeling like we had backed out of the deal, but the owners turned it over without a qualm).

The only negative to the entire thing (besides the stress) was that we would have to wait nine weeks to move in. And the orange carpeting and other "decorating" features of the previous owners, who had taken lessons in aesthetics by Cyndi Lauper.

But other things were conspiring to keep that nine weeks flying by. I had already been working several weeks at State Street, and still hadn't recovered from the culture shock. I remember my first day, walking into the lab.

"Hello, everyone" I said cheerfully, then laughingly added "and for God's sake, you didn't have to get all dressed up just because you're getting a new supervisor."

The programmers looked down in confusion at their two or three piece suites and silk Giorgio ties. "What do you mean, get all dressed up?"

"The suits, you didn't have to wear suits" I replied, the smile freezing on my lips.

"We always wear suites. This is a bank" came the deadpan reply.

"Oh."

But, as time went on, I realized that other than the suits there wasn't much difference between the Bank and JPL, unless you counted my beeper and cellular telephone and twelve hour workdays and much, much larger salary and dealing with numbers like \$64,000,000,000 dollars (Dave: "Ha! You have a comma where a decimal should be!" Programmer: "No I don't. Look, there are three zeros after it, not two." Dave: "But that says sixty four **BILLION** dollars." Programmer: "Yep." Dave: "Oh."). Actually, as it turns out, State Street is the custodian for \$1,400,000,000,000 worth of funds. If you strung that much money in one dollar bills end to end, you could circle the globe one hundred and sixty times, except that you would die of old age

or massive boredom first. This is a frightening concept to me. I would prefer to think of thousand dollar bills in a pile a hundred feet wide and sixty feet deep with a high dive you could jump off of and go *swishing* down into... but never mind. The point here is culture shock.

There was the stringent, careful control exercised over the software itself to get use to. I mean, when a minor computer error can result in the loss of more money than the federal reserve can print in a year, you've got to expect a certain amount of overhead in verifying everything will work properly.

"All right" I said to the programmers, "how about showing me the paperwork from your last design review."

"Paperwork? Design Review?" they replied in confusion.

"You do design reviews before you write the code and check it into the Configuration Management System, don't you?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"Configuration Management? You mean, like, keeping track of the software? We don't do that here. We hack it out."

"You hack it out? At a bank? You must spend a heck of a lot of time testing, then!"

"Testing? Testing is boring. If we make a mistake, one of those accounting dweebs will come whine about it. Then we call it a feature and they go away."

Which just goes to show you can dress a programmer up in a suit, but you can't stop them from using phrases like "dweeb."

Kate, in the meantime, started work for MITRE on a "black" project. Black projects are projects that are so secret that you aren't allowed to know about them even if you happen to be working on one. ("I would like you to write a mathematical model to simulate a ballistic projectile and a sub orbital laser with heat sensors trying to scorch it." "Why?" "For a new Nintendo game we are designing." "Oh." "Here, use these top secret specs on the Russian SS-10 'Boogersnookem' ICBM to model the ballistic projectile, and if you could add some neat map graphics of Moscow when it takes off, that would be great.")

When she first started working there, and her clearance wasn't in yet, she had to be escorted to the **bathroom** ("I'm sorry, Ma'am, but this toilet paper is classified top ultra mega super secret. Since you've seen it, I'll have to shoot you).

But MITRE is, after all, a government funded institution, like Los Alamos Labs, which recently admitted (according to the Wall Street Journal) that they have been sending memos to dead people, unaware that these people had terminated life, and one would have assumed employment as well, several years before. Dead people, according to a multi-million dollar government study by another government funded research lab, "demonstrate a marked drop in productivity, scoring worse than every other category of worker except those employed by the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles." So paying a guard to monitor people going to the bathroom is just standard *modus operandi* (Latin for "enable high government officials to go to the opera") for these types of places.

But we digress. The nine weeks slipped by quickly, days a blur of trying to get accustomed to the new jobs, nights a blur of trying to keep Brianna happy in our little rat-hole of an apartment. We had Rob Hendrie, an old RPI friend, over for dinner once. Kate and I had dinner in Cambridge at a French restaurant that was billed by the Zagat survey as "one of the last places left to have a quiet meal" and which turned out to be crowded, noisy, and sans parking lot (but the food was very good). Other than that, the nine weeks consisted mostly of the basic necessities of life.

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That changed when we moved to the house, mostly in that our definition of the basic necessities of life no longer include brushing our teeth or making the bed.

No, a tiny joke there. We moved in on the 18th of June, a Friday. Kate and I had arranged to have the day off which worked out except for my boss scheduling a presentation to the ITD division manager on the same day a week before the move. "Pete, I told you we were moving into the new house that day!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Sorry Dave, I forgot. You can miss it if you don't mind giving the impression that you really don't give much of a damn about letting our division manager know what your team is doing, something I'm sure will only be given minor consideration when pay raise time comes around. But other than that, it isn't a problem to blow off Dave Sexton. Except that he is kind of vengeful. But I wouldn't worry about it. Too much, that is. At least I wouldn't break into a cold sweat and be totally incapable of sleeping most nights of the week..."

"ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! I GET THE POINT!"

So I took the morning off, signing closing papers and the rest of the administrative details associated with spending enough money to purchase a small island, like say Japan. Then I drove in, leaving Kate to deal with the four Gorillas in army boots who arrived to unload our furniture. As I walked out the door, Kate was attempting to work with them.

"Where do dis box go?" asked one, holding a box upside down with "living room" clearly printed on the side.

"The living room" replied Kate.

"Livin room? Were dat?"

"This way" answered Kate, pointing.

"Closet? You want inda closet?"

"No, in the living room. That's past the closet, on the right."

"Right? Onda right? Which ways dat?"

I wandered out of earshot as I headed down the front walk.

That Saturday, Kate's mom, Janet, arrived for a ten day visit. With Janet's help, we began to unpack.

Moving into a large house is a lot of effort... more so than I realized. Above and beyond the fact that you have to move stuff up and down stairways vaguely reminiscent of the Empire State Building and over larger distances (all of which may seem like whining until you realize we had over 300 boxes and 12,000 pounds of stuff delivered... that makes even a few hundred feet take a while!), there is also the decision making. Where as before there was the office (the sun room), now there is the office, the library (really more of a fifth bedroom but it has built in shelves), the storage room, and the family room. Likewise from the children's room, we have Will's Room, Brie's Room, and the spare bedroom. The end result is that you have to think about everything you unpack and decide on a case by case basis where things go, decisions being made simultaneously by several adults working together as a smoothly flowing team and therefore spending more time shuffling items back and forth than actually getting things out of boxes. That was between the fits of yelling and spitting at one another, of course.

Fortunately, we had more help on the way. Janet's husband Bill was supposed to arrive Wednesday night on a bus from Buffalo. He had been attending a conference in Canada, and

had a friend drive him to the bus station there. Except Wednesday we found out that Janet had talked with him, and it was Thursday, not Wednesday. So Thursday I drove home a little early, then left for the bus station in Worchester where Bill was to arrive. The forty five minute drive went uneventfully. I arrived a few minutes ahead of the bus, sat back and waited impatiently, ruefully realizing that by the time I returned home I would have spent more than half a day in the car. The bus finally pulled in. Except... no Bill. I made the bus driver let me on board to check the seats, under the assumption that he might have fallen asleep and not realized he had arrived. Then under the seats, just in case he had polished off a bottle of tequila. No such luck. After calling back home and telling Kate about what had happened, and finding no messages from Bill had been received, I headed back.

"Mom," said Kate as I came in, "we should check on Bill. What is the telephone number of his hotel?"

"I... don't know" replied Janet.

"You don't have it written down? Well, what is the name of the hotel?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't know where Bill is staying?"

"Canada, I think."

"Right. Do you have a number for the conference?"

"Ummmmmm... no."

Kate sighed. "Well, perhaps we should begin calling police stations at random places in Canada."

As it turned out, a night of long distance phone calls turned out to be for naught. Bill was supposed to arrive on Friday, at 8:30 pm. Just a miscommunication. Fortunately, Janet learned from this experience, and when she came by herself for another visit while Bill was at another conference she could now authoritatively state that Bill was in Brazil somewhere, which was after all much smaller geographically than Canada.

Regardless of these minor inconveniences, we did get quite a bit of unpacking done that week. It would have to last a while. This is due to the parenting equivalent of the economics law "NAIRU," or Non-Accelerating Interest Rate of Unemployment. According to this law, you need a certain level of unemployment (six percent in the U.S.) to prevent an accelerating interest rate and massive inflation. Likewise, with children, there is the Non-Actual Insanity Rate of Unaccomplishment. According to this law, you must have a certain level of not getting anything done (ninety six percent) to prevent going insane from the whining of your children. This is compounded by the New England version of NAIRU, or "Nature Actually Is out to Ravage U."

For instance, take this last weekend. There I was, trimming some large hemlocks in front of the house. I was sawing away at a low branch, cutting at an angle so the tip of the saw plunged into the ground, not realizing that the tip of the saw was jabbing into a yellow jacket nest on the other side of the tree. Brie, who was on that side, started yelling, not really panic-stricken, but definitely not happy. She was playing near one of the trees I had cut down, and Kate and I both thought she had stuck herself on a branch. "It's OK, sweetie" Kate, who was standing outside with Will in tow, said just about the time when Brie's yelling went up an octave. At roughly the same moment, I realized that there was a swarm of insects buzzing about. It took a few more seconds for the pieces to connect, then I yelled to Kate and backed out of the area cautiously. When we were away from the spot and Brie was still heading for total panic, I finally spotted the insect that was stinging her, sticking straight out with its abdomen stuck to her underarm like

it was glued on at the point. I swatted it, held her until Kate could get some hydrocortisone lotion on it. That night, I went out and nuked the nest with wasp and hornet poison. While I have enormous respect for all of the infinite variety of creatures that populate our planet earth, I had our children to think of, and so I gleefully watched the little SOBs shrivel up and die under the intense, deadly spray. But the end result of the entire experience was that I accomplished only about a tenth of the things I had planned on doing that day.

The next day, Brie seemed fine, the swelling from the stings completely gone, and I began thinking about what I would work on that morning. I was looking her over with Kate, scratching absently at my arms... suddenly, I thought about what I was doing, looked more carefully at my arms, saw the angry red blotches covering the skin. After looking in one of our health reference books, I found out we have poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac all growing in the small area I was working in earlier the day before. It took two weeks for it to clear up.

And speaking of poison ivy, let me tell you about Brie's birthday party. Not that they have anything at all in common, but I was having a tough time coming up with a transition into this new subject, and it seemed like this would work. We had Brie's second birthday party on July 19th, inviting my brother Bill and his family, my mother, and a mom and child from down the street that we share Brie's daycare with. The only really funny thing was that we had arranged to have balloons delivered by a guy dressed up as Donald Duck. Well, he wandered in, all the adults crying "Brie, look who's here!" and "Boy, it's Donald, aren't you lucky." Brie and her cousin Dani (my brother's daughter) took one look and immediately went into hysterics. Brie buried her face in Kate's shirt and would peek out, let out a little shriek, and bury her face again until "Donald" had left. Dani just screamed and cried until he walked out the door. After the flurry of activity, the sudden quiet when the man did leave was a startling contrast. Then Andy, my brother's son, said "Dad, is Mickey going to visit? Is Mickey coming?" and Dani started going "Bye! Bye!" and waving at the door. Kids... they're funny, weird, brain damaged little creatures.

Kate and I had an opportunity to go to a wine tasting dinner at a restaurant called "Le Bellecour." It was wild, actually. The vineyard was Lebanese, amazing enough in and of itself. But the owner and wine maker, Serge Hochar, was the real star of the show. Even with his somewhat broken English, he projected such a lust for life that you couldn't help but like him. It reminded me greatly of the movie "Green Card." His stories were highly amusing as well. We started with a '61 vintage that Kate and I agreed tasted like bat urine. Serge stood up, swirled his glass, tasted carefully. "A bad, truly bad, ummm... word is remarkable, yes? A remarkable bad wine. [I will translate into English from this point on] Yes, it was this wine that caused me to be fired as head vintner of Chateau Musar vineyards for several months." Kate and I settled back. This wasn't what we were expecting, but it sounded like an interesting story. "You see, my father was getting ready to retire at the end of 1960, so he turned the vineyard over to me. I, however, felt that we had lost something by trying to duplicate the techniques used in France and America, techniques admittedly arrived at through hundreds of years of experimenting. But I wanted to try something different, something unique. When my father found out how different it was, he fired me. But it was too late, and the wine for that year was ruined." We continued with the tastings, going through a few more 60's vintages and early 70's vintages while he continued to speak. "But my father did retire shortly thereafter, and as his only son, I was in a position to demand to be allowed to do things my way if I were to run the vineyard. The result was many, many years of bad wine." He pointed out the flaws in each of the vintages as we tasted them, and they were generally not very good wines. Finally, we hit the late seventies, where there was a remarkable improvement in the taste (and the vintner confirmed that he had finally come into his own as a wine maker, copying the techniques of American vineyards mostly, but

with a few special twists that made his wine unique in the world). Either that, or Kate and I were already trashed from all the previous tastings. It was a very enjoyable evening.

We took Brie and Will to a butterfly atrium. It was small, but really interesting, with hundreds (maybe thousands) of butterflies, brilliant wings covering every hue of the color spectrum, flitting here and there like small pieces of brightly colored mylar dancing in an invisible breeze. There were the caterpillars as well, some fatter than my thumb and several inches long. Ugly critters, actually. The funny thing was that they were native to New England, found in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. I'd certainly never seen anything like them before!

On August 21st, we headed to the beach in Rhode Island where my father had proposed to my mother with my mother, brother Bill, and his family to commemorate the anniversary of my father's death. We wandered out on the stone jetty sticking out into the bay and threw flowers on the water. Andy, Bill's four year old son, was asking what we were doing in his curious little boy voice and Bill said "this is a special place for remembering Granddad. When we throw flowers in the water here, they float up to heaven so that your Granddad knows we are thinking about him." It was touching. We ate lunch at a little restaurant dad used to haunt and went out on the beach for a few hours. Brie, as usual, wanted nothing to do with it, but I hauled her out into shallow water, let her run back in to shore screaming and crying, hauled her out again. After four or five times she realized the water and waves weren't going to hurt her, and then she couldn't get enough, giggling and laughing every time a small wave hit her. She became totally unglued when we left, of course, screaming and crying that she wanted to go back into the water. Sometimes it seems like doing anything special for your kids is a mistake... they get you coming and going. But it was worth it to see the joy on Brie's face while she was playing in the water.

We had a visit by Eric, Cathy, Ryan and Evan Haines. It was the most fun I can remember having in a long time. We just stayed at the house, but Eric in his typical fashion had so many stories about the odd things going on in the world, and... I don't know, there's just a synergy to being with Eric that makes everything ten times as interesting and amusing as it is normally. The visit was much too short.

Kate's sister and her sister's boyfriend came out over Labor Day to visit for a long weekend. The four of us met Kate and Anne's cousin, Liz, and her husband, Bob, at Ajour'dui in the Four Seasons hotel, one of the finest restaurants in Boston, and had a dinner that lasted well into the night, paying for it the next day when the kids got us up at quarter past five. But it was a grand time. We also went to the New England Aquarium, where Brie amused us all by constantly going "Wow! big fish! big fish! Wow!," or when she saw a lobster "Yucky! Yucky bug! Bug! Big yucky bug! Yucky!" Pretty funny.

And that is pretty much all the excitement in our lives. Hope things are going well for you. Keep in touch!

Bye the way - we sent the wrong zip code to most of you in the last form letter. Our correct address is

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