

The Chinese Stole My Homework

While I was wondering if it was Billy the Meter Reader I'd heard when a noise came from the dining room, I just happened to look up from my rocker on the front porch and spy Willard jump down the front stairs of his home down the road and head my way. His 87 year old body was building up a head of steam as he came closer to my house. In moments he was hauling up to the porch, pulling himself up the two steps and landing in my presence.

"What the heck is the matter, Willard," I said.

"The Chinese stole my homework."

"Now, Willard, they may have hacked our government's computers, but why would they bother with yours?"

"Industrial espionage, invention secrets."

"You think they stole your idea for The Worm Machine?"

"Among other unique and valuable ideas, yes."

"Willard, I can't see a few Chinese guys half way round the world coming into work in the morning and deciding to steal the plans for your Automatic Dog Waste Scooper."

"When I work the kinks out," he said, "stores like Walmart will beat a path to my door for them."

"Yes," I said. "When you can stop it from firing dog poops in unintended directions. Like the one that flew through Mrs. Dillon's bedroom window."

"It just needs a few fine adjustments," he said feebly.

"And anyway, how do you know it's the Chinese?" I asked. "It could be Icelanders for all we know."

"Icelanders," Willard repeated, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "Of course. It's easy to confuse Icelanders and the Chinese," he said.

"It is?"

"And aren't the countries right next door to each other?"

"No, Willard, they are not."

"Well, they took my one page plan for a Self Shoveling Snow Shovel and replaced it with a Chinese Restaurant Menu."

I laughed with a little sarcasm. "Willard, are you thinking that's an old Iclander's trick?"

"Now that I think of it," he said, "I'll just bet that's an old Iclander trick."

"What is this world coming to?" I asked.

"When Icelanders parade around like the Chinese," he said, "and hack into computers and leave a menu featuring Sweet and Sour Pork" Willard stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong, Willard."

“Tweren’t neither the Icelanders or the Chinese, I’ll bet,” he said.

“Tweren’t?”

“No. It was Billy.”

“Willard, I’ve never known a real person who said ‘tweren’t.’

“Billy the Meter Reader did it.” Willard said. “That’s what he must have been doing with my laptop out on my back porch this morning.”

“Speaking of Billy,” I said, “he may be here in the dining room.”

Now, Billy wasn’t really a meter reader. He was a nice boy whose mother took pretty good care of him but let the kid wander around the neighborhood until way past his 50th birthday. He seldom spoke. That is to say he was not at ease holding any meaningful conversation. He’d show up in your house from time to time, when you least expected him. You’d be watching the football game by yourself on a Saturday afternoon and suddenly he’d let out a loud cheer from your wife’s chair a few feet away. When he came for breakfast, he’d be waiting for you in the kitchen when you got up. One Thanksgiving when the family came from out of town for dinner, Billy showed up and quietly mixed in with the crowd. An in-law asked me who he was. With a straight face I replied I didn’t know and that he came with the house and lived in the cellar. He was either the tax collector’s son or the meter reader. The second name stuck.

Billy seldom spoke, and some believed his IQ hovered down in the seventies. But that was surely wrong. He was a self taught computer whiz and possessed more ability than most of our neighbors.

Billy’s eyes lit up the time I asked him if he had ever wanted to work for a living, to hold a job and do something fun or exciting.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Oh, yes.”

“What is it you’d like to do, Billy?”

”Be a telephone salesman,.” he said.

I paused before I spoke.

“So why not start preparing now?”

“Yes,” he said. “You mean I should learn to talk.”

“Only if you think it would help in the telephone sales business, Billy.”

Willard knew all of this, of course, and he should have first suspected Billy before accusing the Chinese and especially the Icelanders. I began to suspect Willard had a secret resentment against Icelanders and so I asked him if it could be true.

“Sure,” he said, “Iceland was always a gas stop when we were ferrying military aircraft across the Atlantic back in the Sixties.”

“Willard, you ferried aircraft across the ocean?” I’m not sure I always believed Willard’s stories.

“And sometimes,” he said, “Iceland would close up early for one of their national celebrations and we’d have to land and wait an extra day for fuel. I often missed my Saturday night bowling commitment.”

“You didn’t actually fly the aircraft, Willard, did you?”

“I wasn’t even part of the crew,” he said. “I worked for the oil company and rode along to verify the fuel was not the problem if the plane crashed.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I said. I’m pretty sure I seldom believed Willard’s stories.

“Every time more than two engines iced up and quit and we began to fall out of the sky towards the great North Atlantic, I was supposed to run around and read all the instruments. Then get a radio message off before we crashed.”

“How many times did that happen, Willard?” I absolutely never believed Willard’s crazy stories.

“Hardly ever,” he said. “If it happened once I wouldn’t be here.”

“I want to go to Iceland to find a wife,” said Billy, who had somehow appeared in my wife’s favorite rattan rocker at the other end of the porch. I just knew Billy was somewhere around here.

“Why do you want an Icelander?” I asked. I’m not sure I always believed Billy either.

He looked at me and smiled. “They have the worlds best scores for solving quadratic equations.” I’ll have to look that up on the Internet.

“That’s important in a wife,” I said. “My missus needs a trigonometry refresher.”

Billy gave up the idea of a career in telephone sales and instead applied for a job as a real meter reader with the local power company. But he discovered it would be a lonely occupation. These days readers sit in their trucks and tune in the meters on a radio, which automatically uploads the data to the power company’s central computers. Billy had envisioned the job as hanging around the homes of electric customers, like he does in our neighborhood. No doubt he would have been arrested before he collected his first paycheck.

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