

THE MASQUE OF THE HOME-SCHOOLED HANDYMAN

WBAI is fundraising (as usual) this morning. If you donate \$30 to this non-commercial radio station, you receive, as a premium, a WBAI mask. I have no idea what a WBAI mask has printed on it (*Financially Desperate for 60 Years; Why Should Today Be Different?*), but it makes me think of the line from Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" about the pestilence: *All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."*

I *hope* security is within, as I remain inside, making minor repairs on our new house. This has often involved considerable work for the UPS and FedEx deliverers who stagger up the walk to bring me 20-pound boxes of cement mix, asphalt filler, and, on one memorable day, a six-foot box containing a 9-pound steel tamper with a 48-inch hardwood handle.

Lynn, Nellie, and I have now lived in this house exactly one year, and it amuses me to think of how many things I've actually made worse in my attempts to be a home-schooled handyman. I remember, years ago, when I attempted to install a towel rack in my sister's bathroom on Main Street. I worked all afternoon, and when I was finished, the towel rack was still on the floor, and I had gouged two softball-sized holes in her plaster wall. I asked her neighbor Aldo if he could give me a hand. He surveyed the lacerated wall in silence — and he finally said, "Don't quit your day job."

In a similar manner, I recently attempted to remove two outdoor speakers screwed into the back of my house. I never used them; I thought they looked lousy; so I laboriously unscrewed them and repainted the wood yellow where the mounting brackets had been. All that remained was to get rid of the wiring: a thick green wire and thick black wire. Easy, I thought: color-coded — the left and right speaker. I confidently snipped the wires. Nothing exploded and turned off, so I congratulated myself until the next day, when I found myself in the basement with Victor, the masked owner of Metro Irrigation, who was puzzled as to why my entire sprinkler system had suddenly died. "Did you do anything different recently?"

"Well...I cut a few speaker wires yesterday."

"You *cut some wires*...."

It turned out that the black wire had eight leads within it, and I had destroyed the entire sprinkler system. At least Victor didn't tell me to quit my day job. Instead, he said, "Don't cut anymore wires" and charged me \$440 to fix it.

I recently filled my old aluminum bucket with water and Quikcrete fast-hardening cement — to fix some cracks in the front steps — and by the time I was finally ready to begin, I was the proud owner of a 20-pound bucket filled with an immovable block of hardened cement.

I attempted to sanitize and change the filters on the house's reverse osmosis system. I watched seven YouTube videos. Three hours later, I had broken a plastic wrench, cut

open my hand, and, finally, thrown the entire system, including the tank, into the garbage. But let's not forget my semi-successful forays into removing a satellite dish, instituting deer-repellent measures with grated bars of Irish Spring soap or, best of all, relocating a dozen overly-aggressive squirrels to the backyard of the Edison Senior Center — where, hopefully, they are currently learning shuffleboard.

This squirrel relocation project is due to the newest preoccupation of Lynn and me — the bird feeder where the squirrels steal food from the wren and finch parents who eat ravenously. Baby birds cry fretfully in the flowered birdhouses outside our back porch, as their parents travel endlessly to the feeder and return to offer regurgitated food.

Lynn has been spending the rest of her day happily planting flowers while purchasing Chinese beauty products online: jars of Instant Age Rewind Effaceur Correcteur Multiusage. I'd like to imagine what's actually in these jars from the Gansu province, but I'm busy right now studying some wires in the hallway....