

## Read It, Late July 2017

Today is Thursday, August 3rd, 2017.

### News

Elanor is back home, and doing well. She's on a somewhat daunting regimen of different medications, delivered orally, in little eyedroppers. The regimen is complicated because some of them are supposed to be given every eight hours, but some can't be given together. So she gets medications every four hours, and we are a little bit sleep-deprived. These are specially compounded pediatric formulations that are not available at your average pharmacy, and our insurer will only cover one of them if we buy it mail-order from the single source they approve. So we actually need to get Elanor's medication from three different sources. We will be very glad if some of these can be dropped from her regimen. That will probably happen after another month or two.

It has been some time since I posted an update on what I've been reading, so it's time.

My reading has unfortunately been a bit scattered. I have been trying to figure out what I might have to give up in order to free up time for recording projects, and unfortunately my reading might be on the list. In the past, like around 2006, I was able to record audiobooks like my version of *The Boats of the Glenn Carrig* by William Hope Hodgson. Unfortunately, to find quiet time for recording, I had to stay up very late, often doing my best recording between 1 and 3 a.m. I was a decade younger then and I had a shorter commute and fewer children. I don't think I can do that now. I might be able to record first thing in the morning, before anyone else is up and making noise. I'll have to experiment. My voice (and brain) just may not be in working order that early. But I need to figure out something, if I'm going to work on any recording projects at all.

This also applies to the songwriting contests. I'd love to participate in those again, although blocking out time to work on songs was enormously difficult for me, and for my family. I'm hoping that by January 2018 I'll have gotten back to playing guitar regularly and have a recording space set up and working, although I have to admit that there are a lot of things standing in the way right now.

Now that Elanor seems to be almost back to her old baby self and we are a bit

less worried about her, we have been trying to turn our attention back to the Saginaw house. My parents contributed an enormous amount of work towards getting the house packed up and ready for sale, but there is more to do. There are several more carloads of loose things to sort, pack, and move, and a small truckload of furniture waiting. We've been pulling things out to have hauled away — scrap wood, disintegrating porch furniture, parts of a chicken coop project that never worked out. We arranged to have a landscaping company haul this junk. Once again we've run up against the same kind of problem we always had in Saginaw. People just won't show up to do the job they've agreed to do. So we have to do more followup and try again. I can't take any more days off during my work weeks — I have no days left to take. And Grace has her hands full. So we continue to wonder just how we are going to get everything done.

## Driving

Last Saturday, I drove to the house in my car and Grace came later with the kids in her car. She ran over a small piece of plastic debris, a couple of inches across, probably left on the road after a fender-bender. This piece of plastic somehow tore right through one of the Tahoe's tires — resulting in an instant flat, not just a small leak. Fortunately she had just gotten off the freeway, so wasn't moving at high speed. If this happened at freeway speed, it could have been a rollover crash with Grace and six children all in the car. There was nothing wrong with the tires — they were only two years old, quality tires, recently rotated, and recently checked for inflation.

This is not our first breakdown on the road — when Grace was pregnant with Pippin, we had an awful day in which we got a flat, Grace's water broke, I cut my scalp open trying to change a tire (don't ask), we got the spare on, then the spare went flat — that was memorably bad. It all worked out eventually (Pippin will be eight this fall). But this flat is sobering and it has spooked us a little. It's a reminder that despite our best efforts, a combination of crumbling infrastructure and bad luck could put an abrupt end to our plans. I think about this a lot — perhaps too much — during my daily commute on I-94. Enough that I'm planning to put a dashcam in the car, in the hopes that it might catch the cause of any accident I may be involved in.

Anyway, we got everyone home safe on the spare, but in the confusion, we left one of Elanor's medications in the house. Grace spent hours Saturday night and Sunday morning calling around, to see if we could get a refill of her specially compounded pediatric formulation. She was getting nowhere with this and by Sunday noon, Elanor had missed two doses. While Grace continued to try to find a drug dealer, I finally just jumped in my car and made yet another round trip to Saginaw, driving 3 hours and 40 minutes on bad roads under construction to go pick up a damned bottle of medicine.

While I was driving, driving, driving, driving, and driving some more, Grace did finally manage to arrange to get a couple of emergency doses from the children's

hospital pharmacy, so Elanor got her medicine.

One can have deep and abiding concern about carbon emissions and anthropogenic global warming, but if your infant daughter's heart is at risk, you'll put Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago* in your car's CD player, pound a coffee, and burn another tank of gas. There's some kind of lesson in that, too.

### ***For Emma, Forever Ago* by Bon Iver**

*For Emma* is an amazing album. I've always heard about certain albums that inspired people to become musicians. Brian Eno famously said, of *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, that while it didn't sell very many copies early on, "everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band."

I can't trace my interest in playing and recording to one single point of inspiration like that, but a few, including Jonathan Coulton's work, which convinced me that a geek like me really could take my long-standing interest in guitar, bass, and Chapman Stick — I played casually for many years and was well beyond the beginner stages, although I didn't really know it — and become a performing, recording singer/songwriter.

I had never quite been able to make the leap from playing guitar and singing to playing guitar to accompany my own singing to perform a real song from beginning to end, before I started working on songs like Coulton's "Skullcrusher Mountain," and gradually it came together — I could sing, although not beautifully, and accompany myself. My guitar-playing is still far better than my singing, but I've worked on it. And the songwriting contests gave my efforts some shape that forced me to compose and record songs in a compressed time frame. The results have been mixed, but the stuff that came out well has been good enough to convince me that I should keep working on it.

*For Emma* is a strange album. Justin Vernon recorded the basic tracks in a hunting cabin in Wisconsin, in isolation. His recording setup was relatively primitive, and you can hear a great deal of room reflections and stray noise. From a technical, recording quality point of view, the album is terrible. There is some fascinating material written about the recording. Amanda Lewis wrote an essay called "Microphone Practice on Bon Iver's 'Skinny Love'" and you can read it here: <http://arpjournal.com/microphone-practice-on-bon-iver%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99Cskinny-love%E2%80%9D-2/>

Lewis writes:

He recorded all but a few of the vocal and horn tracks which appear on FEFA using only a single Shure SM57 dynamic (moving coil) microphone, a Pro-Tools "Mbox" digital-audio interface, and a laptop computer loaded with the Pro Tools "Mpowered" DAW that comes bundled with the purchase of every new "Mbox" interface (ibid). Though all of his tracking choices ultimately influence FEFA's overall sonic character, Vernon's unconventional use of a single dynamic

microphone to transduce all of his vocal and acoustic guitar tracks is of particular importance.

There's a longer version of her paper available as a PDF file here: <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/viewFile/20212/23314>

But aside from the academic analysis, how does it *sound*? The answer is “strange and beautiful, and occasionally stunning.” One of my favorite moments starts about four minutes into “The Wolves (Act I and II).” While the guitars drone, a sort of crashing chaos of drums starts, and you hear Vernon start piling on falsetto vocals, forming a big chord, and the chaotic drums start to sound like the wheels of a speeding train, with the layered falsetto vocals forming the mournful sound of a train whistle sounding out across a lonely snow-covered landscape late on a winter's night. Then the tracks cut out, and we hear a disjointed, misaligned, gradual rebuilding of the vocal to a brief coda.

The tracks on “For Emma” often include the noises you “aren't supposed” to record and are “supposed” to ruthlessly edit out — pick scrapes, squeaking chairs, the taps of a hand or arm on the guitar's hollow top while Vernon keeps time, buzzing strings, distortion, a siren passing outside, and a lot of hiss and noise from a cheap preamplifier. The drums are indifferently recorded, with little clarity. Vocal and guitar tracks often don't quite line up, popping in and out with a careless feel.

I've recorded some of my songs in a small attic room, with wood-paneled walls and a hardwood floor — literally inside a wooden box, and it sounded that way. At the time, I hated the sound of the room, and eventually was pleased when I could put up enough foam and acoustic panels to absorb most of the room reflections. Should I have instead tried to *use* the sound of the room? It wasn't what I needed for some songs, but maybe for some songs? It's certainly something to think about.

On some of my songs, I spent a lot of time using Logic's Flex Time feature to adjust vocal phrases so that they align as closely as I can make them align. Was I misguided? I don't think so. That was for a different kind of song — a song that started out with a click track, and got a drum track, and bass track, and because most of it is aligned to a strict beat, when tracks don't align, they stand out like a sore thumb. I know from experience that recording multi-tracked parts on a song that has a rubato, or flowing and changing, beat is hard. Vernon's amateur-*sounding* recording technique on this album really is harder to achieve than it might sound at first listen. But I can also feel it inspiring me, pushing me to be a little less of a technocrat and perfectionist, and a bit more of an experimentalist.

I could go back and re-record my earliest attempts. Vernon could have gone back and re-recorded the songs on “For Emma” in a pristine studio environment. The result would be a lot cleaner, a lot clearer, and more radio-friendly. But I think for either of us to do this would be a mistake. Vernon knew full well that it is far better for a musician to keep playing, to perform, to experiment, and

to move forward, feeling his or her uncertain way towards his next moment of inspiration, than to try to re-create an old one.

## Hodgson, Again

One fringe benefit of having almost all my books packed in boxes in the basement is that if I want to go pick out something to read, I have to do it consciously and deliberately. I'll look it up in the database, figure out the box number, and find it. If it is buried deep in the tall, deep wall of boxes, I might just decide to do without it for a time.

I took the trouble to un-bury the box containing William Hope Hodgson's collected fiction and over the last couple of evenings I've been reading my children some of his Carnacki stories. I thought I'd try "The House Among the Laurels" because I remembered it as being spooky and gross but, eventually revealing the haunting as a man-made, rather than supernatural, phenomenon.

These books are out of copyright and so you can get a taste of Hodgson's writing; here's the Project Gutenberg version: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10832/10832-h/10832-h.htm>

I expected that the kids might be bored by the slow build of the story and the somewhat archaic language, but I was wrong. They loved it. It seems I'm constantly under-estimating what my children will enjoy hearing. In my reading, I was also amused to pick up on some subtleties that I didn't notice before. Here's a little gag about Catholics and Protestants:

...both he and Dennis the landlord of the inn, tried their best to persuade him not to go. For his 'sowl's sake,' Irish Dennis begged him to do no such thing; and because of his 'life's sake,' the Scotchman was equally in earnest.

The kids loved the scary bits:

The men were all standing now, holding their clubs, and crowded together. And no one said a word. Wentworth told me he felt positively ill with fright. I know the feeling. Then, suddenly, something splashed on to the back of his left hand. He lifted it, and looked. It was covered with a great splash of red that dripped from his fingers. An old Irishman near to him, saw it, and croaked out in a quavering voice: — 'The bhlood-dhrip!' When the old man called out, they all looked, and in the same instant others felt it upon them. There were frightened cries of: — 'The bhlood-dhrip! The bhlood-dhrip!' And then, about a dozen candles went out simultaneously, and the hall was suddenly dark. The dog let out a great, mournful howl, and there was a horrible little silence, with everyone standing rigid. Then the tension broke, and there was a mad rush for the main door. They wrenched it open, and tumbled out into the dark; but something slammed it with a crash after them, and shut the dog in;

for Wentworth heard it howling as they raced down the drive. Yet no one had the pluck to go back to let it out, which does not surprise me.

I can't really do the Irish accent justice, but I give it a try.

Hodgson reveals that he really can't do math, when he describes the construction of a defensive magic circle:

I got my tape measure then, and measured out a circle thirty-three feet in diameter, and immediately chalked it out. The police and Wentworth were tremendously interested, and I took the opportunity to warn them that this was no piece of silly mumming on my part; but done with a definite intention of erecting a barrier between us and any ab-human thing that the night might show to us. I warned them that, as they valued their lives, and more than their lives it might be, no one must on any account whatsoever pass beyond the limits of the barrier that I was making.

After I had drawn the circle, I took a bunch of the garlic, and smudged it right 'round the chalk circle, a little outside of it. When this was complete, I called for candles from my stock of material. I set the police to lighting them, and as they were lit, I took them, and sealed them down on the floor, just within the chalk circle, five inches apart. As each candle measured approximately one inch in diameter, it took sixty-six candles to complete the circle; and I need hardly say that every number and measurement has a significance.

The circumference of a circle is pi times the diameter, so if the diameter is 33 feet, the circumference is about 104 feet, or about 1,244 inches. Candles an inch in diameter spaced five inches apart have their centers spaced six inches apart. It would take about 206 candles, not 66, to complete the circle.

When I read the original description, I didn't come up with those precise numbers, but I have enough of a sense for numbers to know that his numbers were way off. How far off? Well, to arrange 66 candles in a circle with a diameter of 33 feet, they'd have to be spaced about 18 inches apart, not 6, so that their centers were spaced about 19 inches apart, so Hodgson got the center-to-center spacing between candles wrong by a factor of three.

It's pretty clear that Hodgson probably meant to describe a circle "thirty-three feet in circumference." Of course I believe the error must have been Hodgson's, not Carnacki's.

Last night I decided to read another Carnacki story, "The Thing Invisible." This one was not quite as exciting, since Carnacki's description of his night spent in vigil in the ancient chapel is over-long:

"An hour passed, of absolute silence. The time I knew by the far-off, faint chime of a clock that had been erected over the stables. I

was beastly cold, for the whole place is without any kind of heating pipes or furnace, as I had noticed during my search, so that the temperature was sufficiently uncomfortable to suit my frame of mind. I felt like a kind of human periwinkle encased in boilerplate and frozen with cold and funk. And, you know, somehow the dark about me seemed to press coldly against my face. I cannot say whether any of you have ever had the feeling, but if you have, you will know just how disgustingly unnerving it is. And then, all at once, I had a horrible sense that something was moving in the place. It was not that I could hear anything but I had a kind of intuitive knowledge that something had stirred in the darkness. Can you imagine how I felt?

“Suddenly my courage went. I put up my mailed arms over my face. I wanted to protect it. I had got a sudden sickening feeling that something was hovering over me in the dark. Talk about fright! I could have shouted if I had not been afraid of the noise.... And then, abruptly, I heard something. Away up the aisle, there sounded a dull clang of metal, as it might be the tread of a mailed heel upon the stone of the aisle. I sat immovable. I was fighting with all my strength to get back my courage. I could not take my arms down from over my face, but I knew that I was getting hold of the gritty part of me again. And suddenly I made a mighty effort and lowered my arms. I held my face up in the darkness. And, I tell you, I respect myself for the act, because I thought truly at that moment that I was going to die. But I think, just then, by the slow revulsion of feeling which had assisted my effort, I was less sick, in that instant, at the thought of having to die, than at the knowledge of the utter weak cowardice that had so unexpectedly shaken me all to bits, for a time.

“Do I make myself clear? You understand, I feel sure, that the sense of respect, which I spoke of, is not really unhealthy egotism; because, you see, I am not blind to the state of mind which helped me. I mean that if I had uncovered my face by a sheer effort of will, unhelped by any revulsion of feeling, I should have done a thing much more worthy of mention. But, even as it was, there were elements in the act, worthy of respect. You follow me, don't you?

“And, you know, nothing touched me, after all! So that, in a little while, I had got back a bit to my normal, and felt steady enough to go through with the business without any more funk.

Here the shifts in meanings (“funk” has a much different meaning now) renders this passage odd and slightly silly; Carnacki spends a lot of words narrating how he felt during his “dark night of the soul.” The deliberate self-deprecating humor of Carnacki wearing armor with his night-shirt over it (“I felt like a kind of human periwinkle encased in boilerplate and frozen with cold and funk”) gets

buried a bit under his repetitive self-indulgent descriptions of how “disgusting” he felt. But there is in all this, still, the sketch of a very vivid, human, and quite funny, narrator character. Reading it again, I kept thinking how good it could be as a radio drama.

And in fact Big Finish Productions, best known for Doctor Who radio dramas, has produced six Carnacki stories, available for \$18.00:

<https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/carnacki—the-ghost-finder-1416>

I have not listened to them yet, but the trailer sounds very promising, and it makes me want to get back to my own recording projects.

One of the stories, “The Gateway of the Monster,” is available free of charge:

<https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/carnacki-the-ghost-finder-the-gateway-of-the-monster-1465>

Although you will need to create an account to download it. I have listened to this one, and it is quite well-done, although I think an adaptation into a full-cast production, rather than a simple reading with music might also be very effective.

### ***My Struggle* Book 5 by Karl Ove Knausgaard**

My big reading news this time is that I’ve finished book 5 of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*. This brings me completely up to date, until book 6 is released in translation next year.

If you’ve started *My Struggle* and are having trouble with it, I want to offer some encouragement — it gets better, or rather “easier to read.” I still admire book 1, but books 3 and 4 are more linear and flow with fewer interruptions. Book 3 is about Knausgaard’s childhood years. This book in particular contains many passages that are simply gorgeous. Things get darker in books 4 and 5. Young Knausgaard in these books has a serious problem with alcohol, like his father. This isn’t news, because he wrote about his drinking back in book 3. He describes going out to a discotheque and finishing four or five bottles of wine in an evening. That’s an astounding amount of alcohol. What gets darker, though, is that he’s starting to act out while drunk, committing petty property crimes, and becoming violent.

Knausgaard is about my age. Although he grew up in Norway, our childhoods were in some ways very similar, and I identify with him quite a lot, especially his sensitivity, intellect, depressive moods, and difficulties in social situations. We loved many of the same bands. I never became a big drinker, fortunately.

Despite our differences, apparently our minds are similar enough that in completing the last few books, in which he faces at age 25 several crises about his identity and vocation, I felt myself falling into disturbing emotional and mental states — reading Knausgaard’s compelling account of his life, I found myself *running his*

*program*, to an extent, holding the 25-year-old Knausgaard’s consciousness in mine as a sort of parallel awareness.

I started to feel his bouts of nihilism, and his self-destructive impulses; as I read about him working through his imposter syndrome, in which he felt like an inept failure at his writing, I also started to become obsessed with a sense of failure about my writing. As he worked through his sense of incompetence as a musician, I also started to feel incompetent as a musician. I’m twice the age he was in the time of his life he describes, but I haven’t really completely *resolved* some of the contradictions in my life: I’m a software engineer, but I always wanted and hoped to do more writing for a living, and have for a number of years tried to work on side projects involving music and audio production, often to be frustrated because my daily responsibilities to my family and jobs take precedence.

The troubling part was that for several weeks, I wasn’t really aware of *why* I was starting to obsess so much about my choice of vocation, my sense of failure, my difficult relationship with my father, and other things Knausgaard wrestles with. But it became clear as I got to the end of book 5 and these obsessions lifted, and I started to feel more like myself again — while, perhaps, still carrying a fragment of Knausgaard’s world view and personality.

I don’t know exactly what this means about Knausgaard, or about me. I think it means that my identity isn’t, and perhaps never has been, quite as rigid and impermeable as I might hope. I do have a tendency I’ve been aware of, since childhood. to take on other people’s “programs” as my own, absorbing bits of their personalities and belief structures. I suppose this could be called “gullibility” in some contexts, but I’d prefer to think of it as a form of susceptibility that I maintain, deliberately, in order to stay empathic. But I think it also says a lot about Knausgaard, and how convincing and compelling his story is, that I went into it so deeply. I wonder if other readers have felt themselves having the same response.

I don’t mean to imply that the books are, perhaps, as dark as I’ve made them out to be. Knausgaard himself starts to experience, at the end of book 5, success in his career, with the publication of his first novel. His life seems to stabilize, and become something he can live more comfortably in, as mine has. But it’s still a fairly pessimistic story. It also struck me, again and again, how even an autobiographical novel running to thousands of pages could elide and gloss over so much of his life, but that’s exactly what it does. I’m sure with his writing ability and remarkable memory, Knausgaard could have many more engaging pages. So I am looking forward to book six, which is rumored to run over a thousand pages.

## More Reading

I’ve been doing more reading. I’m still reading *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to the kids, but I’m getting a little tired of reading these books aloud

as they become longer and longer. The chapters are now so long that I can't complete on chapter a night; I think they would take well over an hour to read, and that is a strain both on my voice and on the kids' attention span. Honestly, I don't think I'm going to try to read the rest of these out loud. I've maintained since first reading the whole series that Rowling needed to make much better use of an editor in the later books.

I'm also still somewhere in the midst of *I Shall Wear Midnight* by Terry Pratchett, and I need to get back to that one.

I've been reading the kids more stories from *The Complete Cosmicomics* by Italo Calvino. These remain some of my absolute favorite short stories. Some of them are a bit difficult for children due to their degree of abstraction. For example, the story "A Sign in Space" is at a surface level about the narrator Qfwfq and his attempt to leave a marker in space so that he could mark off rotations of the galaxy. But it quickly turns into an extended metaphor about reading and the search for meaning and symbols in texts, as Qfwfq's world piles up with *things* that may, or may not be, signs signifying other things. I feel that they "get" these stories on some level, but might get more out of them when they are older. They definitely get Calvino's humorous account of the development of the universe, as in "Games Without End," when Qfwfq played marbles with hydrogen atoms and complained that he would rather play with shiny, new atoms than old, dirty ones. The kids know enough about chemistry and physics to laugh hard at that.

A while back I finished reading Ted White's *Secret of the Marauder Satellite* by Ted White. In a previous post I wrote about how this book was significant to me as a child, in part because it was about an adolescent boy named Paul who gets to work in a space station. The story ends quite well. Paul is a little whiny, but the conclusion of the book gets fairly serious as the importance of what Paul has discovered becomes clear. It's dated and sexist in the sense that roles for young women are in extremely short supply, but I think the story is interesting enough that it's worth overlooking the fact that it won't pass the Bechdel test.

Upon the recommendation of a friend, I read *Essentialism* by Greg McKeown. I read this in the form of an unabridged CD audiobook, read by the author. My friend recommended it when I wrote to him of my frustration with the sheer numbers of nearly-random *things* that we had to sort through to finish moving. I wrote back after finishing it:

I finished listening to *Essentialism* and found some useful advice in it. The author's voice is generally appealing, and I appreciated his anecdotes about failing to properly prioritize. That is often me. It was occasionally strangely loaded with half-baked parallels, like casting Gandhi as "essentially" the same as a Stanford Business School graduate, and equating studying Dickens in your spare time with studying the Koran (both *sola scriptura*, I suppose?)

The author also seems to think that his audience is mostly just

like him. So for example he gives an example of the executive who physically exhausts himself with international travel to the point of organ failure, and his solution is to get real about his limitations and spend a couple of years recovering with his family in the south of France. Maybe it's meant to be aspirational — if you pare your life down to the essentials, you too can be a millionaire — but I am still scratching my head a bit at his tone-deafness towards any potential audience not in, or a graduate of, business school. No essentialism for the working class?

One of the Amazon reviewers wrote “this is a book about business, not about life. It's not about downsizing, minimalism, downshifting, stepping back from capitalism and consumerism etc, it's just about how to work more productively — something that doesn't really interest me... it might be applicable to high earners in the tech industry, but its usefulness for a lowly wage slave or, say, a housewife, is hard to see. I LOVE the idea of talking back to your boss the way he suggests — try that on a zero-hours contract or if you work in fast food service or on a minimum wage! It's quite entertainingly and wittily written, but I also found the constant focus on tech celebs very wearing, as if I should care what any of these people think.”

I think that is a valid criticism, although despite constantly mentioning people that work for Twitter, or Uber, or whatever, it isn't *so* specific to business in general that I couldn't think about how to apply it to other personal projects. It's got me thinking about what I really need to give up in order to work on my creative projects.

There is more I'd like to write about. I have a backlog of audio files that I want to listen to, containing sketches of reviews. This summer there is a sort of slow-motion film festival in which our local theater is showing Studio Ghibli films, one per month. I took the kids to see *My Neighbor Totoro*, which is perhaps my favorite animated films, and indeed one of my favorite films of any kind. I have thoughts about it, but they will have to wait. In July Grace took the kids to see *Kiki's Delivery Service*, a coming-of-age story that is *her* favorite film. In August they are showing *Castle in the Sky*, in September *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, in October *Spirited Away*, and in November *Howl's Moving Castle*. We have all of these on DVD or Blu-Ray, but there really is nothing like seeing them on a big screen. I've seen several of them on the big screen, but the one I really want to see in the theater is *Nausicaä*. I am constantly baffled and dismayed to find that these films aren't better known in America.

### **And... Shaving (Really)**

I have a small observation, or perhaps a “life hack” or “pro tip.” I've always had some difficulty settling on a good way to shave. For a few years, before I grew a beard, I used electric shavers. My favorite was the Braun Micron Vario

3, a beautifully designed device. At some point I started using Gillette products for shaving instead, for my neck and cheeks. I probably started with the Sensor, and later started using the Mach 3. I've always had trouble with cutting myself, when using blades, especially on my neck. I had just become accustomed to scrapes and nicks.

At some point Gillette products just became *too damned expensive*. In most drugstores now a 10-pack of Mach 3 Turbo refills goes for \$30.

I'd started reading the "wicked\_edge" sub-Reddit [[https://www.reddit.com/r/wicked\\_edge/](https://www.reddit.com/r/wicked_edge/)]([https://www.reddit.com/r/wicked\\_edge/](https://www.reddit.com/r/wicked_edge/)). It sounded like a traditional double-edged blade was, well, quite tricky to use correctly, and might be even more likely to hack up my face than the blades I'd used for years. So I hesitated.

The breaking point for me was when I tried a Harry's product instead. Target stores have started carrying Harry's shaving products, so I tried a set. They are quite a bit cheaper than the Gillette products, but the 5-blade Harry's shaving heads *really* hacked my neck to bits, despite my best efforts at skin prep. I had terrible razor burn that lasted for days. I had to take a couple of weeks off to let my neck heal up before I was willing to try again.

Fed up with these expensive multi-blade disposable shaver heads, I bought a razor from Van Der Hagen, just a stainless steel safety razor and a set of blades and some soap in a tube.

This is a pretty basic razor and pretty basic blades and I'm sure there are better ones available, but it works great. I've shaved my neck with it a dozen times. I adjusted very quickly to the required light touch. I now shave with the grain and then against it, and get a pretty smooth, although not baby-bottom-smooth, shave.

Pretty smooth is good enough for me, if it doesn't leave my neck red and bloody. In fact I haven't drawn blood, even a tiny bit, even once. And my neck is far less irritated after shaving. I haven't even changed blades yet, although I think the first one is getting a bit dull.

Double-edged razor blades cost considerably less than replacement blades for the Gillette products, and when they are too dull to use, I have to only a very small blade to dispose of, not an assembly of plastic and metal.

I don't expect to ever use a Gillette product again, unless by chance I wind up buying their double-edged blade. I should have learned to use a razor like this one years ago.

*Paul R. Potts  
Pittsfield Township, Michigan  
July 21st - August 3rd, 2017*

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