

ON TIDINESS

BY M.J. ANDERSEN

MY DAD is quite tidy. He puts the nail clipper away right after he uses it. He polishes his shoes. He has discovered that Windex cleans the chrome parts of the stove nicely, and that it works wonders on the toaster.

In fact, he has been known to clean up toasters during idle moments at other people's houses. (A scenario would be Dad enters kitchen, says, "Is there anything I can do to help?" Host says no. Dad casts eye on toaster, inquires, "Where do you keep your Windex?")

Another tidy guy is Al Aleixo, a reporter in the Journal's Pawtucket bureau. Early one morning Al used some kind of spray cleaner on all the phones, and they stood gleaming on our desks when the rest of us arrived. "Wow, look at these phones!" we said. When we started making our calls, we found that the phones did not work, and inquiries had to be made. But, as Dad would say, those phones sure cleaned up nice.

Tidiness has acquired a bad name in some quarters. It is taken as overconcern with unimportant details, evidence of a compulsive personality, even an attempt to make the untidy look bad.

The argument against tidiness runs, "You may clean the toaster all you like, but there are children starving in the country of C---, homeless people on the streets of Y---, and what have you done lately about the national debt?"

Who can answer this — particularly, now, in winter, when one senses fully how useless one is?

ONE SUMMER DAY a few years ago, I was on my way to cover some routine story for the paper when I came upon the signs of an accident on Route 95.

I prayed that the creeping traffic represented something less bad than it seemed to — selfishly, that I would not have to stop and deal with this. But as I got closer I could see that I would have no choice. I parked on the shoulder and began to walk.

It turned out that the accident had occurred only moments before, and there were not yet many official people around to take care of things. A drunken driver's car had bounced against the median, flown across

the road and struck a Chevy Blazer driven by a couple on their way home from the Cape. The results were strewn across four lanes.

Rather than trying to get past this, several people had stopped, and their cars were parked along the highway. Some had begun to direct traffic around the destruction; others waited to tell police what they had seen; still others, including two doctors, had gone to the injured.

A sizable stretch of the road seemed oddly consecrated; we were free to walk about on it. Before this, I had known Route 95 only as the insubstantial gray background to my musings. Now it was full-bodied, firm beneath my feet. The air was warm, and there was a breeze. I was conscious of being made of flesh, and my legs felt trembly.

HERE WAS a tennis shoe. Sanitary napkins were scattered about, and I stared dumbly at this savage invasion of privacy.

I was supposed to ask questions.

A gray-haired woman wearing a dress, neat as a pin, was standing beside the road. She told me it had all happened so quickly she wasn't quite sure what she had seen, but anyway, she had pulled over right away. "I got out and just ran," she said.

What help had she expected to give? I think she herself hardly knew. But many others had done likewise, she made a point of telling me.

Then she pointed to three suitcases standing neatly beside the road, arranged in order of size: her work. Maybe the couple that had been hit would live, and they would need their things later, she said. In the meantime she stood watch, like a friend who waits at the airport or station while you get your ticket, and who will not leave you until you are safely on your way.

There was so little she could do, she said, trying to explain the luggage. (Nor was there much medical workers could do; the couple died, although the other driver and his passenger lived.) I stood there with her a while longer before going on.

NEARLY EVERYONE else I saw or spoke with that day was shaken, angry and afraid, as was I. But this one woman was not, and I have remembered her ever since. I must even have written her name down, then finally lost or thrown out the notebook. I was sure then that I loved her, and I hoped to be like her someday. Against the fierceness of all we had seen, she had been an island of grace. And if tidying a corner is not the best that we can do for each other, it is no small thing either.

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