

the rest of us. If you quit feeding a stray dog he'll eventually go away.

And of course we are all victims of the companies that sell our names and addresses to others. That's how we get all our catalogues and the telephone calls at the dinner table. Our names and numbers are being given out by so many companies that Aunt Lizzie could have herself a full-time job.

"Did I hear you ask permission?" Pow!

"You gave my name to whom?" Whack!

"You're charging me what?" Bam!

I'm lucky that I was raised in a family that showed me love and understanding and I feel rightly blessed by that. But there isn't a single departed relative I miss as much as Aunt Lizzie. Especially when we get the mail.

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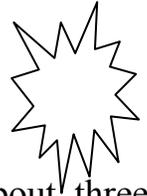
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#101 - BAM'EM LIZZIE, BAM'EM
by Ken Bradbury



Did I miss something? When I was about three years old I was running through Grandma's kitchen, burning up time while waiting for a Sunday dinner to begin. I rounded the intersection of Front Porch and Kitchen Table when my nose picked up the distinctive aroma of fresh strawberries. The smell brought me to a halt right in front of Aunt Lizzie who sat stemming the little red delights for Sunday dinner.

Being only three years old ... and about half wicked at the time ... I reached out and grabbed one of the strawberries. Aunt Lizzie looked down her nose, through her glasses and straight to where I was standing. I grabbed another and popped it into my mouth. Just as I was grabbing for the third berry, Aunt Lizzie's hand shot out and clamped mine in mid-air. "Did I hear you ask permission?" she said. Being uncommonly brave at the time ... or more likely, extremely stupid ... I reached out with the other hand and grabbed another strawberry.

Aunt Lizzie popped me so hard I not only dropped my final berry but nearly spit out the one still rolling around my mouth. As far as I can remember, I have asked permission ever since.

So what's happened to the rest of the world?

Some time ago, I was talking on the phone to my friend Louise when the receiver started beeping in my ear. I often hear strange sounds when talking to Louise but this is one I'd not encountered before. As the day

went on, two or three more conversations got beeped in mid-chat and I just assumed that something was wrong with the phone. The next day's mail to the family explained it all. The local phone company announced that, "We are proud and happy to inform you that Call Waiting and Call Forwarding services have been provided to you at no additional cost." Who on God's green earth do they think they're fooling?

As of today when you call me and I'm on the line, the signal you get will make you think I'm not home. It may be tomorrow before you call back. One thing for sure, I sure won't interrupt the party I'm talking to. To me, "I'll put you on hold," is translated as "Good-bye sucker."

How stupid can the phone company think we are? It's a pure money-making gimmick! "Call Forwarding?" Guess who makes the money when somebody can now reach you wherever you go? "Call Waiting!" Now the phone company won't lose a single dime to busy signals! The letter ended with, "All of these improvements have required our company to spend about \$1.2 million. This is indicative of our commitment to the future of the areas we serve." Well. First, it's only indicative of their commitment to make more money, and second, if they call that "service," then Heaven protect us from any future do-gooders. Unfortunately, Aunt Lizzie passed away or she'd go over and pop 'em.

We opened more mail. One came from a credit card company. Without our asking they sent us a brand new card. And I quote: "Enclosed is one of our new cards

for people we've identified as our PREFERRED customers!" (Yeh, us and 20 million others. It went on ...) "The enclosed little piece of plastic is your ticket to freedom!" (I think that Attila-the-Hun was the first to use that phrase when addressing the conquered peasants of France.) Well, to summarize, which this letter never tried to do, the jist of it was this: If we buy any plane tickets with the credit card, they will automatically charge us for flight insurance! Aunt Lizzie would have her work cut out for her. "Did I hear you ask permission?" Bam!!!

Ever eat out at a nice restaurant in a group of six or more? Do you know that restaurants no longer trust people in large groups? The tip is automatically added on to the bill. "Alone, we trust you. Where two or more are gathered around our menu, we assume that you'll stiff us." So much for the concept of tipping for good service. Bam 'em, Aunt Lizzie! Bam 'em!

My mom got a call from a tele-market-er from a national gasoline company. "For being one of our PREFERRED customers, we are offering you free life insurance for 30 days ..." (Then they threw in enough mumbo-jumbo to get your mind off the subject, followed very hurriedly by ...) "After thirty days unless you're dissatisfied we will automatically charge the insurance to your monthly bill." Dissatisfied! We'd have to die to find out whether it was any good! Did I hear you ask permission?

Bam! Bam! Bam!

You know ... any person alive who actually buys anything over the phone is making life miserable for