

—FREE TO GOOD HOME

by Lon Prater

You never know what you are going to come across at an estate sale. Somewhere amid the dusty china and fur covered bric-a-brac, I found a box with a few electronics in it. Even one of those handheld numbers people are using nowadays instead of paper for taking notes and putting their “to do” lists on.

I picked up the entire box, even though the cardboard had a foul musk and ammonia smell. Really pissed off the guy who was looking over my shoulder, greedy to snatch up the good stuff if I were so stupid as to pass it by. Sorry pal, not today. He settled for a carton of clawed up paperbacks and unopened mail instead.

I lugged the stinking, wilted cardboard box of electronics out to the front, where the family of the deceased sat smoking, flab spilling out over the sides of their lawn chairs. If he was anything like them, no wonder he was dead. A well-fed tabby crept underneath one of their lawn chairs and someone dealt it a swift kick that sent it sprawling. It made me think of that bumper sticker: CAN'T FIND YOUR CAT? CHECK UNDER MY TIRES!

The family members were gabbing about how odd the former resident had been acting, and how it felt weird to be having an estate sale on the same day the deceased had scheduled a yard sale. I consciously bit back from commenting that at least the classified ad hadn't gone to waste; ticked off sellers raise prices. I managed to talk them down to eight bucks for the box--a steal at twice the price--and headed home with a truck-bed full of bargains. Most of the day's loot was name brand stuff: easy to get listed on the auction websites, and quick to sell.

I estimated that when the auctions ended, I'd be about four hundred dollars ahead. Not too shabby for a Saturday morning drive.

The only thing I couldn't find any info on immediately was that handheld computer. There was no brand name on it. No model or serial number, either. Not even a battery cover. I had no idea how to charge it up.

I sat down on the recliner to fiddle with it.

It had four worn buttons, and a little stick that I thought was an antenna at first, but you were supposed to slide it all the way out and write on the screen with it. Earlier, I'd scanned the internet for all the major brands of Personal Digital Assistants, as I discovered they were called, and figured out it looked most like one of the older Palm Pilot models, but not exactly.

Olivia, this bookish blonde thing from work, told me once that she couldn't live without hers. She said it was hard to get used to writing each letter the special way

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you had to if you wanted the computer to recognize it. But once you learned how to do that, you were hooked.

I held the gray plastic case in my palm and stabbed the power button with one finger. I thought to myself, hey, I could use some organizing too; maybe I'll keep this one and give it a whirl.

The screen flickered into life. I read the tall black letters across the top of the screen: *WHAT DO YOU WANT?* I couldn't see any particular place to write letters and numbers, but there was plenty of empty screen below the line. I scribbled *Pizza* in cursive. Chuckled at my own humor.

At that point the doorbell rang. I set the new toy down and stretched both arms over my head as I strode to the door. To my amazement, there stood the pimply kid from Pappy's Pizza down the street, holding a large boxed pie in one hand. He gave me a funny look in response to the one I was probably giving him and pushed the pizza into my chest.

I stared stupidly at him for a minute before croaking, "How much?"

"You paid by credit card, Mr. Naylor."

"Oh." I didn't bother telling him that I hadn't ordered any pizza. Their mistake, my dinner.

The kid was probably expecting a tip, but I just pulled my door shut. I imagine he flipped me off through the closed door.

Screw it, I thought, I'll give him extra next time.

Forgetting my hunger, I set the pizza box on the tiny shelf that my apartment brochure quaintly calls a breakfast bar. I sat back down and stared my confusion at the organizer.

There was its question and my answer staring back at me, daring me to pretend there wasn't a connection. I'm no genius, and not particularly high-tech, but I knew for sure that there was no natural way this little gadget had ordered my pizza and paid for it.

I looked around for the cameras, thinking maybe this was a gag for one of those TV shows that like to make fools of everyday folk with oddball pranks. I even held my eye up to the little pane of black plastic at the very top of the device.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't going to be on television anytime soon. That was probably in everyone's best interest anyway. The last time I turned a head, no one had even heard of the Internet.

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So I sat back down and pushed the first button. Nothing happened. Same with the second. The third button made the screen flash and erased the word *Pizza*, leaving only that open ended question: *WHAT DO YOU WANT?*

The fourth button changed the entire screen. Now, in that same tall Wild Western font, the heading said: *TO DO*. Beneath it, in smaller letters a little box had popped up, trailing something I really didn't want to see, especially now that I was feeling a little less creeped out about the pizza.

GET A CAT.

Maybe it was left over from the previous owner.