

Captain Syntax to the Rescue

By Art Stevens

It was the middle of the night. Someone had broken in the front door of the house and yelled: "This is the Grammar Squad. Come out with your hands up. Do not, repeat, do not go near a pen, pencil, computer, tablet or anything else you can write with. Your writing privileges are hereby rescinded effective immediately."

The next thing I knew I was surrounded by four goons who tied me up and blindfolded me. I was ushered into a waiting car. I heard the static of walkie talkies and someone saying "Got him. Get the interrogation room ready."

And that's how my experience with the Grammar Squad began.

I was dragged to the Grammar Squad headquarters with my wrists clasped in dangling participles. My eyes were covered with transitive verbs. I was ushered into the facility's waiting room and spent an anxiety-ridden two hours waiting to be told why I had been abducted in the middle of the night. Finally, my eyes were uncovered and I was taken to the notorious subjunctive clause interrogation center.

Captain Syntax reviewed the file in front of him. He took a long time to scan through it and the long silence caused my legs to twitch involuntarily. He barely noticed. Finally, he looked up at me.

He said: "On June 7 you left a hand written note on your kitchen table informing your wife that you would be out playing bocce. Do you recall this incident?"

Is that what this was all about? "Yes, that is true. Is it now a crime to leave a note for one's wife? Or is the crime playing bocce?" I shouted.

Captain Syntax reacted as though I had punched him in his solar plexus. He set his reading glasses on the table and stared at me. "Do you mean to tell me that you don't know why you're here? Haven't your rights been read to you?"

I twitched some more. "All I know is that when my wife read my note she fainted dead away and had to be revived by neighbors. Apparently, in my haste

to write the note I made some sort of an error. Why that error unnerved her as it did I'm not sure. I write her notes all the time."

Captain Syntax could no longer control his rage. "An error you call it. You have committed a crime against the English language that cries out for justice. You are a cold blooded murderer. With malice aforethought you have deliberately left off the dot on the letter "i." That's why you're here and you will pay the price for it."

Various thoughts passed through my brain. Yes, I've forgotten to take the garbage out. Guilty. Yes, I forgot to return a carton of milk to the fridge once. Guilty. But having my wrists bound and interrogated in something called the "subjunctive clause interrogation center"? I never came close to anything this bizarre. Was I having a nightmare?

"Murder? I've never murdered anyone in my life. I'm not that kind of person. I resolve matters through reason and discussion. I'm not violent. Are you sure you have the right person? If I didn't dot an i it's because I was in a hurry to play bocce."

Captain Syntax seemed to sympathize with my plight and began to lecture me as though I was a misbehaving pupil banished to the principal's office. "Do you realize that if the framers of our Declaration of Independence had forgotten to dot their i's, all of civilization would have been altered?"

"Supposing the i in 'when in the course of human events' hadn't been dotted? It could have mistakenly read 'when on the course of human events'. That would have changed the entire meaning of this vital American document and robbed generations of Americans of their freedom and liberty."

I was dazed. "I never thought about it that way."

"That's the problem with you language defilers. You never stop to think about the consequences. The reason your wife fainted when she saw your note is because the failure of dotting your i rendered an entirely different meaning. She thought you were telling her that you were going to rob a liquor store."

He then explained to me why different languages have their own sacred symbols which if left out of words would give them entirely different and undesirable meanings. He explained the German umlauts and the French accents.

It all made sense to me now. I realize that it was pure carelessness that caused me to forget to dot my i's. But then the door opened and two giant goons walked in.

Captain Syntax removed my bonds and looked me over solemnly. "Since this is your first known offense we will go easy on you. We will give you a light sentence this time but if you're ever caught not dotting i's again I can assure you that the English language will have its way with you."

"But where are these men taking me?" I stammered.

"To the probation facility where you will be placed in front of a blackboard. You will then dot 1,000 i's and cross 1,000 t's until their correct use in language is embedded in your mind. You will be released then. If you have learned your lesson you will never see me again."