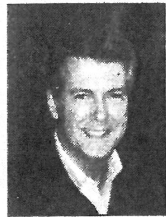


MIKE PEMBERTON: VOICES

A high-stakes game of 'our house/my room' poker



"And for God's sake ... Clean your room!"

It can be a battle cry or a plea, a conversation starter or killer, the opening ante or the last card played in high-stakes

parent/child "it's our house/my room" poker. Sure, I know there are families where kids' rooms are well-kept, but I have never lived in such a house.

I could Google the topic to find statistics and studies to determine if there is a correlation between neatness, character, academic achievement and all-round "great kid" status. But in this election year where we were inundated with polls and prognostications, I have no desire to research another flashpoint issue in which an expert shrugs his shoulders and says: "At the end of the day, it's anybody's guess."

No, this is one topic where we can rely upon anecdotal experience to yield unreliable results.

My oldest brother, Scott, was a hall of fame slob, the color of his carpet unknown until he left for the University of Illinois and the debris field

cleared. He was also his high school class valedictorian, varsity basketball player and trumpeter in the band. After he graduated from college and got his own apartment, I was stunned when he scolded me for putting a beer bottle on his coffee table without a coaster.

My other brother, Tim, was a Boy Scout and National Merit Scholar who vacuumed his carpet and made his bed every morning without Mom asking. In my book, and Scott's, Tim was a traitor.

I do not recall whether my sisters' — Amy and Holly — rooms were orderly. But that being the case, they must have been acceptable.

I was not a tidy kid. But I was child No. 4 and Mom was running low on energy by the time I reached my teens, closing the door with a groan more often than engaging me in debate.

One day, however, she reached a breaking point and rolled in the big gun: Dad.

Now, in general, Dad displayed little interest in housekeeping. He kept the TV room and the area around his easy chair organized. Lucky Strikes and stainless-steel Zippo lighter

About Voices

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squared against a chrome ashtray, TV remote or, in the prehistoric days of my early childhood, one of his five kids within range to change channels. That was about it.

But he lived in Mom's house and she had spoken, so the order thundered forth: "Clean your room!"

Skeptical of my return minutes later, we marched upstairs for inspection. Seeing the bed made and floor rubble-free, Dad strode toward the closet.

"Dad," I blurted.

Dirty clothes, empty boxes, stinky sneakers and a basketball spilled

down upon him.

"Nice try," he said. "Now clean your room."

Like his uncle Scott, our son Michael has morphed into a respectable housekeeper. I spent a week with him this summer at his apartment and was amazed by stacks of washed dishes, folded towels and clean sheets.

Our daughter, Anissa, has not reached this point. Mainly because she has never met a hanger, hook or organizer she liked.

Upon entering the house, her shoes go one way, purse another, jacket a third. Car keys have been located under seat cushions, on bathroom shelves and beneath her bed. Dirty clothes are abandoned in the laundry room, languishing until dresser drawers and closets are bare.

Recently, we moved Anissa into her dorm room to begin her sophomore year. Excited, she flipped off her Birkenstock sandals and went to work. Later, we prepared to run her and her roommate, Stephi, to Target for supplies.

"Where's my Birkenstock?" Anissa said, slipping on her right sandal.

We all stared at her bare left foot.

"Where'd you take them off?" I

foolishly asked.

My wife, Yolanda, sighed. Anissa shrugged, her palms up.

We shifted suitcases and boxes, propped up the futon, checked under both beds. Nothing.

"Well," Anissa said, "this is a new one, even for me."

Stephi, filled with the fearlessness of youth, attacked the futon like she was wrestling an alligator. She flipped it to the floor, peeled back the fitted sheet and shook it until it coughed up a Birkenstock.

"I knew it had to be here," Stephi said, eyes shining.

Hours later, as we drove home, a picture of Anissa's made bed and well-organized desk glowed from the screen of Yolanda's Android.

"How long do you think it'll stay that way?" she said, gazing wistfully at the photo, saving it in her gallery.

"It's anybody's guess," I said.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, *"Transcendental Basketball Blues,"* was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.