

The Washington Post

SUNDAY

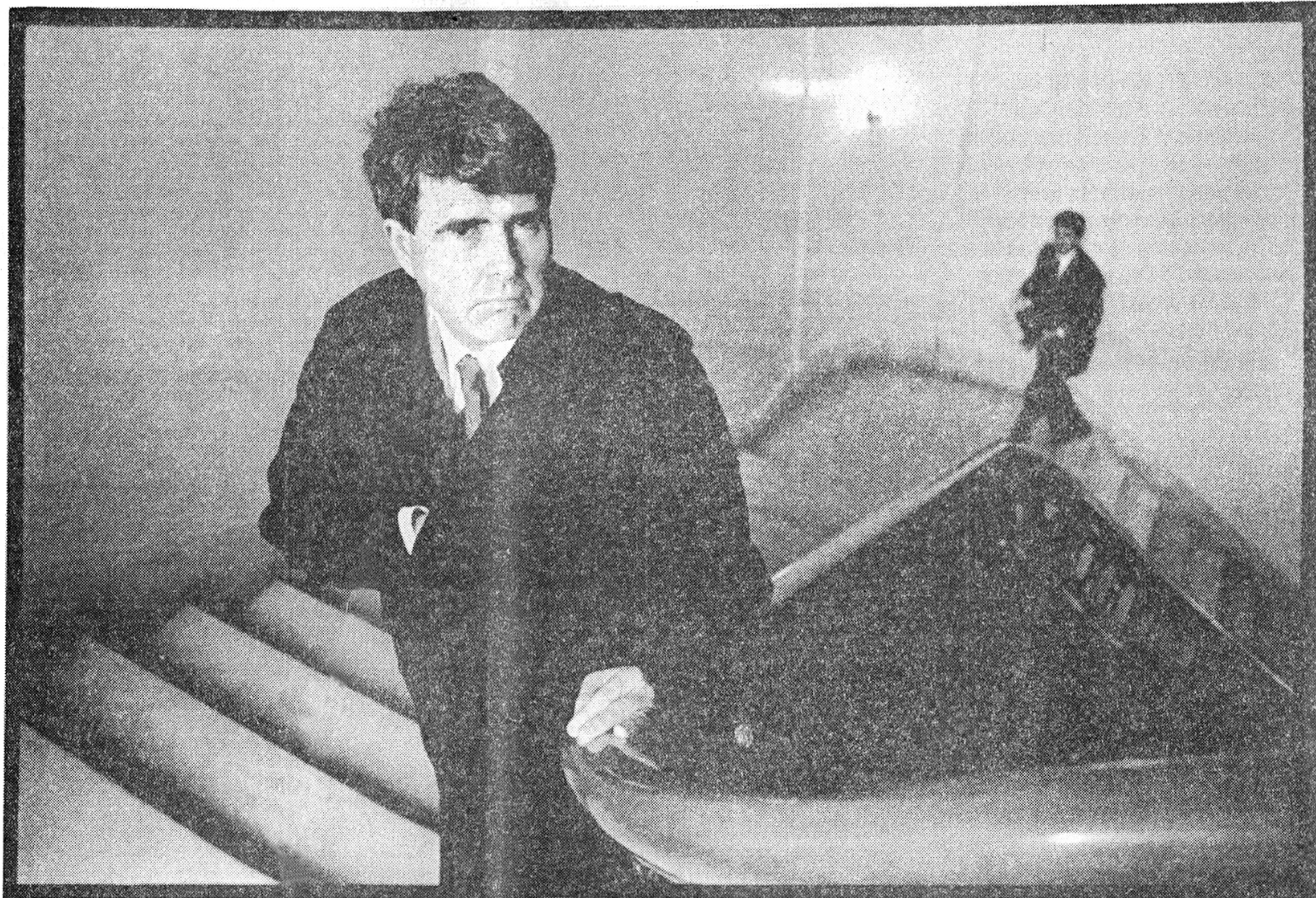
Style

Style Invitational
Famously
funny

2

Fashion
Scaling
new
heights

3



BY KEITH JENKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

(Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

By Frank Ahrens
Washington Post Staff Writer

There is a cockroach on the wallpaper just behind the right shoulder of Chuck Smith, Woodbridge. It sits so still, I think maybe it's dead.

But then it wiggles a feeler and I realize it is alive. If I had a feeler, it would be paralyzed.

For the past hour, I have been eating lunch with Chuck Smith. For the past hour, I have been terrifically bored and horribly disillusioned. *This* is Chuck Smith, Woodbridge? This is the undisputed all-time champion of the idiosyncratic humor contest called The Style Invitational, a man so irrepressibly clever that they once had a special contest to come up with a way to make him stop winning so much . . . and *he won*? That guy?

From this man, I have come looking for the Meaning of Humor.

Who better, I thought. After all, this is the man who, in response to the contest that solicited inappropriate celebrity spokesmen for commercial products, won first prize for this: "John Wayne Bobbitt for Microsoft."

Instead, I find myself fading in and out of semiconsciousness as Smith burbles on and on about his Humor Method in a putty-colored tone you'd expect from the civil servant that he is. Smith is a personnel manager for the Environmental Protection Agency, specifically Acting Branch Chief for the Headquarters Operations and Client Services Division. His conversational voice is precisely what you would expect of a person when he says, "Your application has been forwarded to Compliance."

Who *are* you, mister? And what have you done with Chuck Smith, Woodbridge?

I look at him and see his mouth moving yet I hear no words, only a faraway drone, like a weed whacker three doors down on a Satur-

Some stories are so powerful, they simply must be told. This is not one of them.

day morning. I fight to pull myself back in—I feel my head lurching around on my neck like one of those spring-necked, head-bobbing baseball dolls in your son's room. I may be drooling.

With a gigantic heave, I yank myself back into the conversation just in time to see him sketching on a napkin, illustrating a gag he wrote for a wastewater treatment magazine. It was the first joke he sold, he says. He was 40.

"I looked at a picture of this treatment pool and said, 'This looks like a swimming pool,' " he says, drawing a rectangle.

"Well, I did this down one side," he says, drawing a dotted line parallel with the long edge of the rectangle. "And I wrote 'Lap Lane.'"

This catches me so by surprise I laugh out loud. Sewage humor! Maybe *this* is Chuck Smith! I pay close attention to what comes next. But then it happens again. The neighbor restarts the weed whacker. The light dims. I fade out, focusing on the cockroach.

Suddenly, I am sad.

I think about cockroaches and about how you hear they're indestructible, about how they'd be the only living beings left after a nuclear war. About how persistent they are. As persistent even as Chuck Smith, Woodbridge, who sometimes sends 100 entries a week to the Style Invitational. Would *he* survive a nuclear war? Would his entries just keep issuing from some bunker buried under the West Virginia mountains, beeping the post-apocalyptic fax in the charred, empty Washington Post newsroom? Will he ever go away? I look at Smith, who now seems to be moving forward and backward against the wall behind him; I see what Jimmy Stewart saw in "Vertigo."

See CHUCK SMITH, F4, Col. 1



REPORT FROM WEEK 61.
in which we asked you to fill in the balloons for Marc Rosenthal's farewell cartoons.
There were 1,400 entries this week, submitted by 445 individuals. These were the winners:
♦Fourth Runner-Up: "I let the fish swim in and out of my nose." (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
♦Third Runner-Up: "A one-piranha suicide is going to take some time." (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
♦Second Runner-Up: "I still think this is too much ether, but tell the proctologist I'm ready now." (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
♦First Runner-Up: "Yippee! With my new Hackey-Cat toy, I'll make millions!" (Tom Gearty, Arlington)
♦And the winner of the escapable magician's leg shackles: "Dandruff shampoos are okay, but they miss the nose hairs." (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

The Gag Guy

CHUCK SMITH, From F1

What do I do? I have come to see the Wizard and instead find the little weasel behind the curtain, pressing the buttons.

Humor is dead.

Art is illusion.

Chuck Smith keeps talking.

The roach wiggles a feeler again.

Focused, I realize I have but one choice:

I must crush him.

No Excuse

What you have to understand, first of all, is that this story is ethically indefensible. Let's lay it down: It's about a guy—some nobody named Chuck Smith from Woodbridge, Va.—who is unworthy of public scrutiny except that he is the most successful entrant in a two-year-old reader participation contest sponsored by the section of the newspaper that is at this moment rubbing off on your fingers. So this story is, basically, a celebration of the wonderfulness of the section in which it appears.

Wait. It gets worse.

The creator and sole dictatorial judge of the contest is also the editor of this section. In an infantile conceit, this editor has chosen never to reveal his identity, but refers to himself in print only as The Czar. This same man is editing this very story. He is in total control of it. If, for example, I were to choose to disclose his name, which happens to be ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~, well, you can see for yourself what good that would do.

So this story serves primarily to validate a lone monomaniacal editor's ceaseless affirmation of what he thinks is funny. And the things he thinks are funny are, not coincidentally, precisely those things Chuck Smith thinks are funny, namely penises, poop (in all its manifestations) and Dr. Jack Kevorkian. That's it. This is The Style Invitational's brand of self-defecating humor.

There's more. It isn't pretty.

This story, in order to justify itself, in order to justify the enormous and inappropriate expenditure of space devoted to it, must masquerade as an Important Story. And therefore, it must pretend to explore vast cosmic themes, such as The Meaning of Humor. And last, it must be told floridly, with grotesque stylistic excess, employing words like *Sprachgefühl* so as to create the illusion that it is literature and not self-serving fluff.

Let us recapitulate.

This article is a fraud. It violates every formal or common-sense rule governing the avoidance of conflict of interest. You should not be reading it.

Washington Goes to Mr. Smith

I have left Interstate 95 South at the Lake Ridge exit in Prince William County and am driving to Chuck Smith's house, which is in Woodbridge. The roads are in deconstruction, and orange cones lead the way to Smith like landing lights to an airport.

In my tape deck is my beloved Beethoven, Symphony No. 6 ("Pastoral"). I am alone in my many reveries. Much time has passed between this snowy night and that first lunch with Smith. I grapple with the Demons of Art. I recall my dizzying abhorrence after that lunch—who *are* you, Chuck Smith? Could such a spirit possibly live in a suburb such as this? Impossible.

I pass Mobil station after Mobil station. I think of my old friend, Beckett. "Will he come today?" Will the Chuck Smith I hope for appear today?

I want him to be artistically eccentric, a mesmerizing presence, maybe even a little dangerous. Capt. Renault said this of Rick in "Casablanca": "He is the sort of man that, well, if I were a woman, I should be in love with him." That is whom I want. And yet, there was that lunch. I hated him after that lunch. I still hate him. Yet, after many telephone conversations, I address him, grudgingly, as "Chuck." There are those who might consider him likable, I accede. I am confused. I feel lost.

In fact, I am lost. Where are those directions?

Clues

The Chuck Smith family drives a brownish-gold Chrysler minivan with a Virginia Tech sticker in the rear window. There are cardinals on the mailbox at the end of the driveway, which leads to a modern two-story brick house, much like the 12 others rooted around this cul-de-sac like polyps in a colon. They are, uh, Colonials.

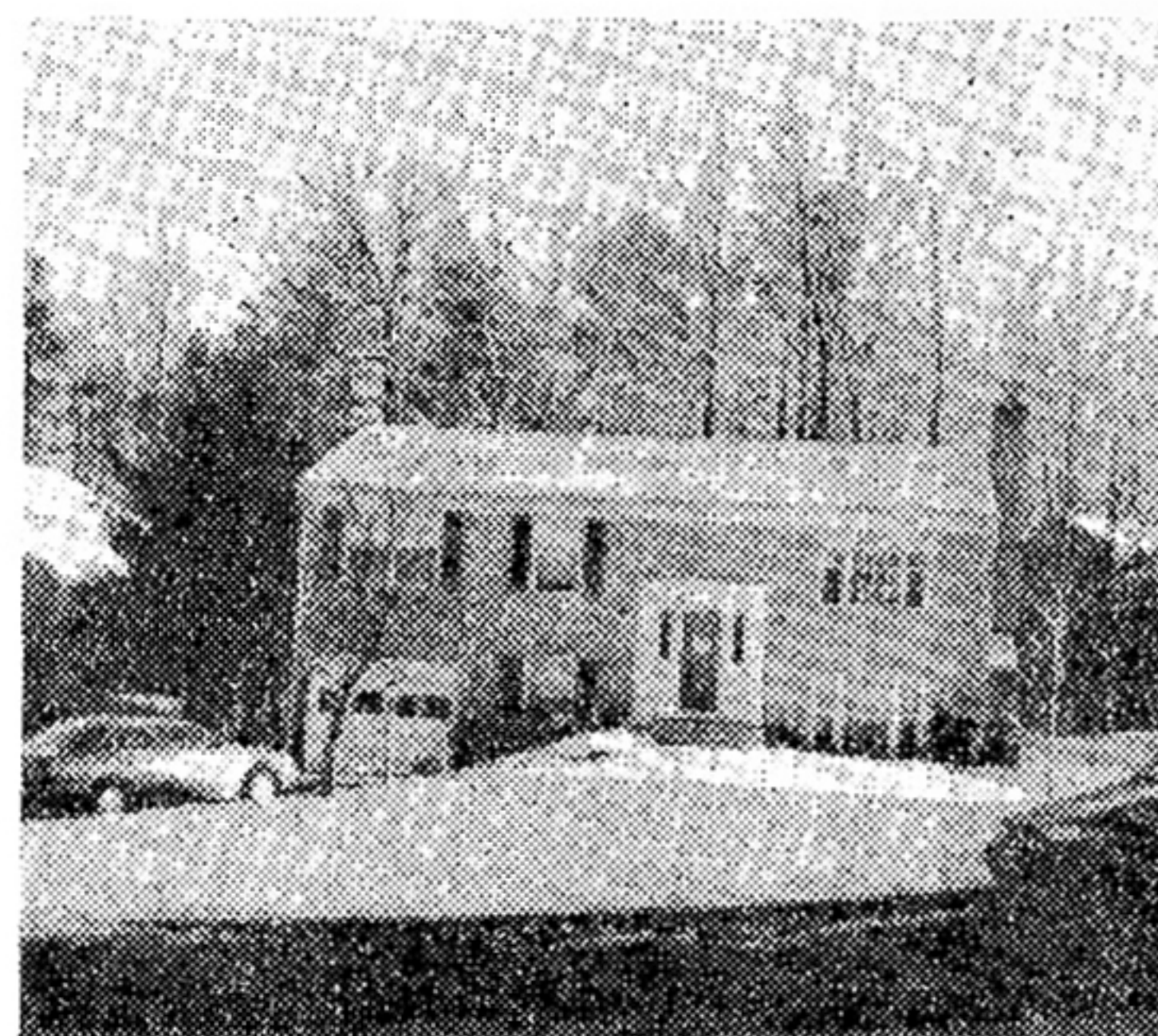
In a moment, Smith is at the door and offers a soft hand in a firm handshake. His daughter, Megan, 15, is in the basement and visible from the foyer. She smiles. A baby is asleep on her chest.

Aha! Teenage pregnancy! The tortured source of Smith's humor?

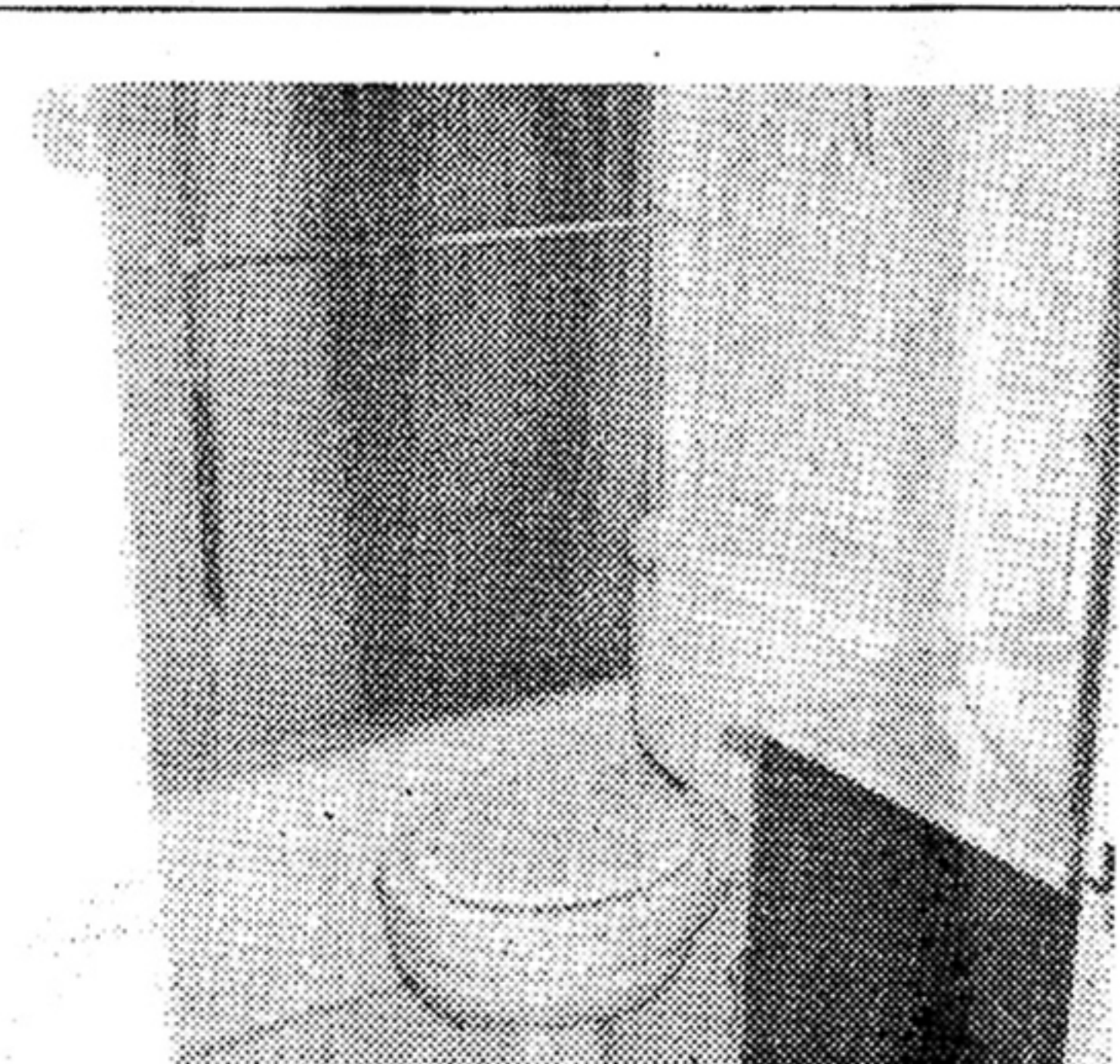
"She's baby-sitting," Smith says.

Oh.

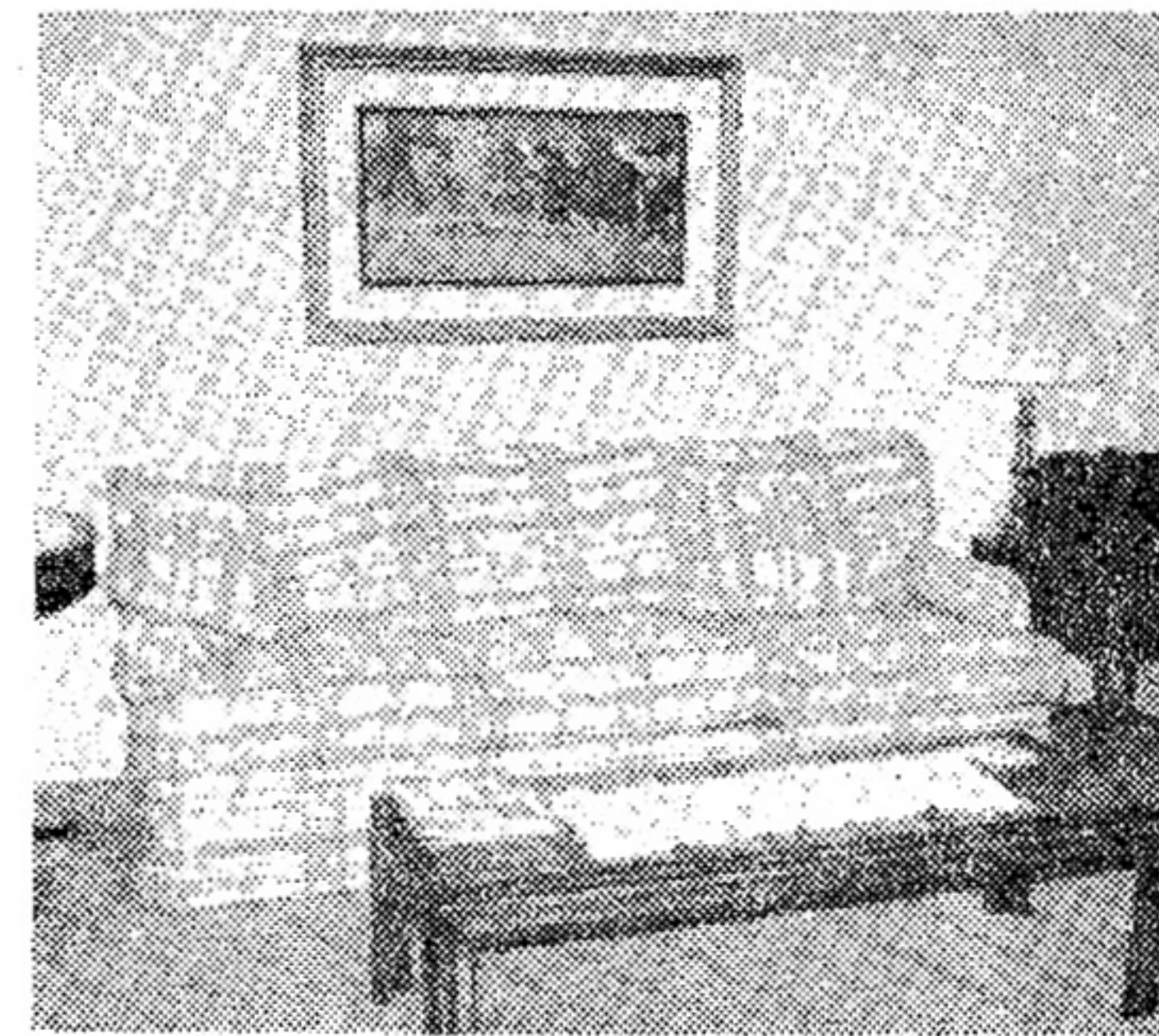
Upstairs, we settle into a large sofa, crossed with pastel colors and beige. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, Smith creeps quietly out of bed, being careful not to wake his wife of 21 years, Mary Lou, and repairs to this sofa, or sometimes the guest bedroom, lies down and composes the thousands of entries he has sent to the Style Invitational since he first entered in Week 6, which was April 1993. He rises at 5:30 each morn-



Chuck Smith's house.



Chuck Smith's bathroom.



Chuck Smith's couch.



Chuck Smith's wife.

PHOTOS BY JOHN C. GAROFALO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ing for the one-hour carpool commute to his cubbyhole office at the EPA.

As he sits here now, explaining himself to me, with hands flying animatedly, he crosses his legs, right ankle on left knee. His black dress pants ride up a little and his black dress socks down a little so that the narrow band of ultra-white, hairy shin that white-guy fathers have is exposed and even shines a little in the lamplight. Did the great wits of other ages have such a shin? Did Johnson? Did Wilde?

Do I look. I do not.

As far as you know.

Chuck Smith may be the walking demographic of Regular White Guy and it gnaws at me. He is 48. His furniture is suburban. He plays basketball with his buddies on Thursday nights. He has a chow-shepherd mix named Coqui. He has a slight paunch. His ears connect directly to his head, leaving him without even the character of earlobes.

Can this man who now sits before me, analyzing humor in a knowledgeable tradesman's way, be a great wit of this age? He defies the maxim of humor, that

dissecting a joke is like dissecting a frog—both die in the process.

Like a smart .290 hitter in baseball, he knows which pitches he can hit and which he can't. He didn't even bother to enter the Invitational requiring verse in double dactyls, a highbrow wordsmithian exercise, or the contest this week which sought Newt Gingrichisms. But contests that provide a setup and ask for a gag are the type he calls "meat."

And he has been a powerhouse.

In the exactly 100 weeks that the Style Invitational has appeared, Smith's entries have appeared 147 times, ac-

cording to a database set up by the contest's No. 2 winner, Elden Carnahan, Laurel, who lags far behind at 83, though he is gaining. By Carnahan's computer-assisted calculation, if he and Smith continue winning at their current pace, Carnahan won't overtake Smith until Dec. 29, 2002.

How far ahead of the pack is Smith? Perhaps an analogy would be instructive. Important explanatory journalism always relies on elegant analogies. If the Style Invitational were the Punic Wars, and Chuck Smith were the Phoenicians, he would *really* be kicking butt.

He has won outright several times—his favorite prize is a bust of Richard Nixon—and has finished in every other place as well, from second down through honorable mention, winning more than 50 Invitational T-shirts. Those T-shirts are coveted, a cult item. The Czar has rejected serious offers from the public to pay as much as \$50 apiece for them. Chuck gives them away to friends.

More than a year ago, Carnahan began hosting a breakfast for regular Style Invitational winners. Up to 20 gather once a month at various locations to find fellowship among their kind. Smith calls it "an Algonquin Round Table with whoopee cushions."

Carnahan acknowledges Smith is the reigning Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and George S. Kaufman all rolled into one.

"When new people come, they say, 'I've got to see him with my own eyes.' They want to make sure he actually exists," Carnahan says. "I often wonder what other people in the restaurant think of us," Carnahan says. "Those that are not of the body."

I recognize the allusion—it is to an old "Star Trek" episode about a mystic computer, called Landru, that runs the lives of a planet's brainwashed inhabitants.

Carnahan laughs. "That's right. Chuck's our Landru. He's not quite corporeal and we can't approach him."

The Secrets of Smith

Back on the sofa, Smith is moving fast now, talking about his laborious work habits. He writes jokes at lunch. Twenty or so at a time. He writes them on the weekends.

Writes jokes? All for the Invitational? Well...

Prepare for Chuck Smith's first Big Secret. It comes out reluctantly. For the last year or so he has been a ghostwriter for two famous nationally syndicated cartoonists. Famous cartoons. Run in The Post. Smith gets paid by the gag, like a day laborer, and not very much at that. Still, one strip used Chuck Smith jokes for 20-plus consecutive days.

Which two strips, Chuck?

Chuck tells me, but he doesn't want me to print the names. He is afraid the big-time cartoonists will be angry with him.

For reasons I do not fully understand, See CHUCK SMITH, F5, Col. 1

The Poop on Chuck Smith

CHUCK SMITH, From F4

this whole thing makes me unbearably melancholy.

But Chuck is going on giddily, in that putty-voice drone, explaining how his Humor Method works.

His standard procedure is this: Take the usual, then turn it upside down.

"You think of a joke, like, 'My dog ate my homework.' So you flip it and say 'My homework ate my dog.' Well, how could that be? Your homework would have to be living, you create something that's living. And the homework where you create something that's living is genetic engineering class."

Actually, I comprehend entirely. "I do that too, sometimes," I hear myself say. I shudder. Do I share something with Chuck Smith? All at once, I am confused and frightened.

Panicked, I ask to go to the loo.

Skip to the Loo

I am standing in Chuck Smith's bathroom, in Woodbridge.

This is the bathroom of the man who, challenged by the Style Invitational to come up with a "good-news/ bad-news scenario," answered: "Good news: You get an expensive designer bag. Bad news: It's a colostomy bag."

I look around desperately. This ought to be the sanctum sanctorum of creative toilet humor; it ought to be like stumbling into the workshop of Mr. Antonio Stradivari.

There is not one funny thing in Chuck Smith's bathroom.

Finally, it happens.

I yield.

He has beaten me. I burst forth in great, gulping sobs, which drain mountains of endless sorrow. So long have I pretended. So long have I clung to my own poseur's idea of what an Artist Ought to Be. Snobbishly, I told myself, a true artist could *never* live in this suburb. Could *never* look like Chuck Smith. *Must* have earlobes.

God, how wrong I was! Art does live here! I look at myself in the mirror and

Funny? You Should Ask

Just how spontaneously clever is Chuck Smith of Woodbridge? We decided to test him. Without warning, we phoned and asked him to respond to a series of questions. He could take no longer than 15 seconds for any answer. Below, the questions and his verbatim responses.

"Okay, ready?"

"Ready."

1. A man is walking down the street juggling urinal deodorant cakes. Why might he be doing this?

"In an attempt to heal the ozone layer."

2. Complete this line: "I can see clearly now..."

"... that I've properly placed the smoker's patch."

3. "Disney on Ice" is a good idea. What would be a bad idea for an ice show?

"Bobbitt on Ice."

4. Complete this line: "I never met a man I didn't..."

"Lick." (Pause.) "Um, that would have to be a quote from Linda Lovelace."

5. If a dog could speak, what's the first thing it would say?

"It hurts when I lift this leg."

wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, like Brad Pitt does.

Well, that's how it would've happened in a movie. Instead, I thought, "Hmmm. Go figure." But it was with feeling.

I flush away my past and prepare to face Chuck Smith with a fresh approach. I was not prepared for what I would hear next.

Wait, There's More!

The lines below are from a one-act play called "Lifetime Contract," written by Chuck Smith, Woodbridge. It is about an aging actress with six months to live who, for com-

plicated reasons, hires a talented but annoying young actor to play her long-lost son. It has been performed at theaters in Arlington and Reston and even had four appearances off-off-Broadway in New York. Like down an alley off-off-Broadway.

ROBERT: *I suspect that you haven't let too many people know you.*

NONA: *If people know you, they know where to hurt you the most.*

ROBERT: *I've come to know you and I haven't hurt you.*

NONA: *How much can one man hurt a dying woman?*

ROBERT: *How much can a dying woman hurt one man?*

NONA: *I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I'm glad that you've been here with me. Cynicism dies hard, but so do I. I'm not through yet. I have even tried to keep up my appearance. Do you notice anything different about me?*

ROBERT: *You put on some makeup! You look very nice.*

NONA: *A little color in my cheeks, even if it is artificial. I'm very good at artificial. The the-a-tuh, you know. I have to take care of my appearance. I have only once chance to make a good first impression on Death.*

I am realizing that the poop and penis gags are just one part of the increasingly complex Chuck Smith. The same man who, when asked by The Style Invitational to supply nicknames for celebrities, offered "John 'Magic Johnson' Bobbitt" also wrote "Lifetime Contract." By the end, Nona and Robert form a bond and, when Nona's death comes, Robert—an orphan—grieves for her as the mother he never knew.

The amazing part about all of this is that Chuck Smith didn't start writing until he was 40, with that sewage treatment lap-lane gag. A couple of years later, he showed up at a community theater audition and got a small part, he admits, because they

needed a guy who looked like him. He kept acting in community theater. Then he went to Central Casting on Pennsylvania Avenue SE. They wouldn't see him. Finally, he got a reference from a working actor and wormed his way in.

His new career as a movie extra began.

He was an extra in "In the Line of Fire." His is the arm that Clint Eastwood keeps shoving down in a crowd scene near a presidential motorcade. He made Clint laugh during a break.

His network acting debut was last year in the NBC drama series "Homicide," which is filmed in Baltimore. He is on camera for only a second. The stars are in the foreground in a coroner's office, discussing a murder victim. In the background, being wheeled from right to left, is Chuck Smith, playing a corpse.

It would be easy to describe his performance as "stiff."

And More

I am driving north on I-95, listening to Chuck Smith on my tape recorder. He is talking about his most recent one-act play, "Just Remember This," which will first be performed in July by Trinity Players, in the Northern Virginia Theater Alliance one-act festival. It concerns Alzheimer's disease. To research it, he read 10 books about the disease that drains away your mental faculties while graciously allowing you to watch.

The only characters in the play are an old man and the offstage voice of his grandson, Danny. One of the things Smith learned about Alzheimer's was that some patients retain active sexual drives though their mental state is deteriorating toward adolescence. In one scene, Danny discovers the soiled Kleenex his grandfather has been hiding from him, the way a sexually precocious

12-year-old might hide it from his father.

Another thing Smith learned is that Alzheimer's patients have occasional bouts of awareness. He wrote a line of dialogue for the old man, suddenly and temporarily lucid, that reads like this:

"Sometimes, I miss Danny more than I miss myself."

Chuck Smith wishes his dad, who lives in a retirement home in Toledo, could come to see one of his plays.

"I know he's proud of me, it'd just be nice for him to come."

I rewind the tape recorder to the part where he's talking about his creative process. His yeomanly approach of welding words together. I thought I remembered something else... ummmm... I rewind more... yes. Here it is:

"I read a book where someone said imagination is like lightning in the distance. Just suddenly, you see the landscape, the trees—just for a second. And I've had that kind of thing where an idea just comes to me."

I stop the tape recorder and put it on the passenger seat.

Chuck, I am the cockroach.