

Lords of procrastination

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S one of my favourite male behaviour stories and it drives my girlfriends wild with delight each time I tell it. As we sit around over coffee moaning about what recent handy-man job our husbands and lovers have promised to do for us and how many days, months or years have gone by since the initial promise, I always tell this one.

When my partner and I first moved into our last apartment, the tradesman doing odd jobs said we needed shelving in our garage area. The garage was on a slanted hill and would flood easily during heavy rain, ruining our boxes of beloved books, photos and personal effects.

"\$500," he said. "I'll go and buy the wood, cut it to size and install it for that price."

"Great," said I. "Do it."

Unfortunately on that day my husband was down in the garage getting something. It can be very dangerous for females to enlist the help of a tradesman when their males are about.

Like the competitive war-dance of the Amazonian jungle ape, chests start puffing out, bottoms turn bright red inside trousers.

And over he came, my husband, teeth bared, looking like Lord of the Jungle, or maybe a male walrus about to head-butt another walrus who had wandered on to his patch of sand.

"No need for that," bellowed this deep, masculine voice, about 12 octaves lower than I've ever heard him speak, except when he is talking to the motor mechanic.

"I can do the job," he barked, waving away the tradesman, who simply shrugged and retreated. For \$500 it wasn't worth one of those feudal blood-baths that leaves male animals maimed and bloodied while their females sniff around in shock.

American linguist and behaviourist Deborah Tannen describes this behaviour in her book *You Just Don't Understand* as jostling for status, which she claims is at the heart of most male interactions. Unlike women who engage in "trouble-talk" to show their frailties and create empathy with others, men will do and say anything to gain the upper-hand in any dynamic.

Six months later, the job hadn't been done. The female creature has to be very tactful when handling the delicate matter of male procrastination, alluding to her mate's lack of effort by praising his prowess in other areas:

"You've been working so hard, you have earned so much money, you have been an incredible lover, and a perfect, special husband and father. Due to this it has been hard for you to get down to the garage, but would you imagine you may do the job before the winter rains come?"

"Don't worry," said the male walrus, puffing his chest out again. "I have been enormously busy [fending off attacks by male predators wielding screwdrivers]. But this weekend ..."

A year later the tradesman came to fix a leaky tap and again informed me that if it rained hard enough we'd be in trouble. I went upstairs to my husband who was sunning himself on the deck. "Darling, can the tradesman put some shelving up now?" I asked, most respectfully.

"Funny you mention it," he said in his most regal voice. "As you know, I've been researching the matter for quite a while, and I've finally found some ready-made industrial bookcases for only \$350. I'm picking them up this week."

"Okay," I sighed, not reminding him that the tradesman had suggested this alternative 12 months before.

The bookcases never arrived. Three years after my husband battled the tradesman for dominance over the garage and won, it flooded. I came home one night to find my possessions floating in water. My books, poetry, treasures ruined.

My husband and I wandered about for two hours in the wet, mushy water, trying to salvage anything we could, while I cried, cursed, and threw soggy books at him.

But like a wily animal in a television documentary, Lord of the Jungle took on the appearance of a wounded beast -- head hung low, defeated, ravaged and almost dead -- to avoid further attack by the vicious predator.

Most women I know are equally miffed by male procrastination, particularly from men who spend inordinate amounts of time watching home-renovations programs on TV, pretending they are the ones banging the nail -- like women who read magazines to feel thin.

My favourite fix-it story is from a girlfriend who asked her boyfriend to take their picture frames in for repair. Though a relatively simple job, it required him getting hold of a van for a few hours.

After months of assuring her that why they weren't ready for pick-up was because: glass was being imported; a special solvent was needed for the frames; wood had to be ordered in; she found the broken frames stuffed under her bed, hidden behind her shoes.

When confronted on this sorry situation, the boyfriend shrugged and said simply: "I haven't gotten round to doing it yet."

"But you've been lying to me," said the exasperated female.

"Yeah. Well I didn't want to get in trouble," said the male, aged 36.

I have observed that the female of the species will also procrastinate. I once stayed home for a year, planning each night to do my tax returns.

But females tend to beat up on themselves for their inadequacies, engaging in trouble-talk about the bad state of their bodies and health. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

Males however, in their need to save face -- largely with themselves -- will constantly deny their failings, which means things don't get done and, worse, men never let anyone else show them up.

Today Lord of the Jungle is chatting with a tradesman about something that needs to be screwed together in our new home. I can't hear what he is saying but from his tone I know he's proudly volunteering for something he's never going to do.

I'm heading down the stairs. I'm heading down with purpose. My bum has turned red in my trousers and my chest is puffed out. Time for female apes to take control of the jungle. As I flash my teeth, the two males recoil in horror, and I know that this time, one way or another, screws will turn.

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