

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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AT THE BRINK by **Richmond Shreve**

I would not have thought that my noble intention to clean and organize my studio would lead me to the brink of a life of crime. It began innocently enough as I stood in the doorway and contemplated the stacks of boxes and storage containers. The sight reminded me of the news articles one sees from time to time. They tell a grim tale of some elderly recluse who has perished on the way to his or her kitchen after toppling one of the many towers of old newspapers and magazines that crowded the path from the bedroom. Unable to escape, the unfortunate soul perishes under the accumulated clutter saved for reasons unknown.

Thus motivated, I set about to weed and organize my treasures. Boxes that had been stacked along the wall behind the recliner are opened and the contents sorted and shelved or trashed. Storage containers that had been hastily filled with stuff from our RV are opened revealing a cache of

pliers and screwdrivers, all of which duplicate better ones already in my massive machinist's toolbox. I confess, I can't bear throwing away something that is potentially useful, even if I already own its twin.

A few hours a day, many trips to the trash room of our complex, and much consolidation have opened up an impressive amount of space. In fact, there is now room for the tool chest, which had been relegated to the closet. I happily roll it into that more convenient location.

But there is far too much stuff in the top of the toolbox. In the closet, the accumulation of hammers, packages of screws, rolls of duct tape, bottles and tubes of glue and such prevented the lid from closing. This would not do in my newly tidy man-cave. To create space for these items, I set about reorganizing the drawers. It is a micro-reprise of the mega-effort to organize the studio as a whole. Sorting takes almost as long, impeded as it is by my hesitancy and indecision about where to put this or that so it

sits with similar items and can be found again when wanted. But at last, the top compartment is empty. With great satisfaction, I lower the hinged lid and hear the mechanism that deadbolts all of the drawers make its resolute “ker-chunk” sound. As the lid settles tightly in place a fraction of a second later, I hear a much more subtle “ker-snap” and realize that is the sound of the latch that locks the top and all the drawers.

In that instant, I recall placing all the keys together in the top right drawer. I tug at its handle—now securely locked. No amount of prying or jiggling will raise the top to free the drawer. I have mindlessly locked my only keys inside the steel chest, and it is well designed to prevent tampering.

My first impulse is to get my drill and drill out the lock. But that too is securely locked inside. And what if drilling doesn’t free the lock? Then I will have a steel toolbox that even a professional locksmith can’t open without damaging.

I could call a locksmith. But that would cost maybe a hundred bucks just to have him visit, the toolbox being far too heavy to haul to his shop. And, of course, there would be the humiliation of admitting that I had put all my keys into the drawer and then locked them inside.

YouTube! Yes, good idea. Surely, I am not the first idiot to lock up his keys. My Google search for “Unlock Craftsman toolbox with lost key” reveals several videos showing how to pick the lock. For twenty to forty dollars, I could buy the necessary tools on Amazon. Not cheap, but better than paying a locksmith.

The wait for Amazon to deliver my lock-pick set is haunted by self-deprecating thoughts. What if I lack the necessary touch? I could spend many frustrating hours fiddling vainly with the lock and in the end be forced to admit defeat. At that point, a call to the locksmith would be all the more humiliating. But the tool set comes with a clear plastic padlock for practice, and the guy in the YouTube video had in seconds opened a toolbox purchased at a flea market. I have good hands for mechanical stuff. I should be able to do this. But still

Four days of obsessing over the matter ends with the delivery of the Amazon order. I am as eager as an eight-year-old who has been awaiting the arrival of his Captain Midnight glow-in-the-dark secret decoder ring with hidden ballpoint pen for transcribing messages. I tear open the box, unwrap the tools, and arrange them on my table. Assorted picks of different shapes and sizes, ten in all; three differently shaped tension wrenches; a

pick gun; and a tidy little zipper bag to hold them all.

I decide to try the pick gun first. This device has a spring steel probe that snaps upward inside the lock, bouncing all the pins up against their springs. One uses the tension wrench to turn the cylinder as the key would turn it while maintaining a gentle pressure and repeatedly snapping the pick gun.

Click!

Maybe a bit more tension . . .

Click!

Maybe a little different angle . . .

Click!

The tension wrench moves a tiny bit. More pressure. The lock turns freely and the toolbox lid pops up. It's open! Yay!

Almost in disbelief, I try the drawers. They open. The keys are in the drawer as I recalled. I insert one, the lock turns. It is completely undamaged by the process.

This was way too easy. I think with smug satisfaction: *I must have the touch*. Rummaging through the drawers, I find a couple of old padlocks. I insert the tension wrench in

the Master #2 and select a pick with a rounded end and a couple of bumps along its edge. Inserting it, I feel the pins yield to the pressure of the tool. I wiggle it up and down as I draw it back. Presto, the shackle pops open.

I try the Yale padlock. The first pick doesn't work, so I select a different one with snake-like undulations in its working edge. Pushing it deep into the lock, with a flick of my wrist I withdraw it. Snap, and this lock yields as well.

The combination lock made for luggage is equally easy; its TSA keyway yields to open it without the combination. But the Master #40 padlock doesn't yield to any of the picks. I lean into the challenge. It reminds me of working those puzzles made of twisted steel wire. The interlocked links can be assembled and disassembled easily, but only if you position the pieces just right and in ways that are often counterintuitive. The lock remains defiantly secure.

I'm about to try the pick gun—but wait a minute. I've frittered away more than an hour fiddling with this lock. What is this new obsession? Hell, I have the keys for all of these locks. Yet the Master #40 lies there in my palm and taunts me: "Bet you can't, you can't open me"

And now, as I walk past locked doors, padlocked lockers, and secured enclosures of all sorts, the sight of their keyways summons up a devilishly mischievous thought: *I can open that.*

Chastened by the knowledge that it's a crime to try, or even to carry on one's person the necessary tools to meet that siren call, I pass on by . . . wondering.



RESPIRE
by Alice Warshaw

From my balcony I see, far beyond the leafless trees, a soccer net and yellow slide.

At 10:15 the Lilliputian shapes appear.

Colorful. By ones and twos they run, so far away they seem to glide across the ground; though some are still.

My door is shut against the chill. I can not hear the treasured music of their call but know it's there.

10:45: The lively dots give up their randomness, align themselves, and disappear.



HOUSEHOLD BATTLE
by Ann Maley

Okay, here's the one for today: why is it that brown sugar turns into construction-quality bricks and white sugar doesn't? This morning when my eyes opened, I found myself thinking of something I rarely give brain-space to: cream of wheat. That led, inevitably, when I got to the kitchen, to the confrontation with the brown sugar brick. Looking for a hammer in the toolbox in my hall closet, I briefly considered an electric skillsaw. Hey, you can't be a single homeowner for decades without acquiring SOME tools! I decided the saw might be overkill and endanger the cutting board, not to mention various parts of my body, so I just banged merrily away at the brown brick with an especially sturdy chopping knife.

That did dislodge chunks of brown sugar, so the report on the whole maneuver with the cream of wheat is that the too salty bits and the too sweet bits made every bite a surprise. I wish I could say "happy surprise," but I'm trying to be honest with you here. Hmm. Before I try this again I think I have to equip myself with a "brown sugar tool belt." Let's see: small drill, hammer, screw driver to use as wedge, possibly sandpaper. No, not sandpaper; I would probably end up sanding down my teeth.

As I was writing this, my sister called, and I read it to her. She said, basically, “You know, in this century there is a solution: you can now buy brown sugar in a plastic bag rather than a box, and if you roll it up tightly and put a rubber band around it, it doesn’t brick up.” Oh. Problem solved. Okay, so what should I do with my sugar brick? Oh, I know: I need a good doorstop right over here



LITTLE BO PEEP by John Means

*Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep,
And doesn't know where to find them.
Leave them alone,
And they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.*

We are told that Little Bo Peep is apparently unable to locate her sheep, but with no explanation as to how she misplaced them. Did they simply wander off? We know almost nothing about this Bo Peep person except that *Bo* is arguably the least euphonious name in the world of nursery rhymes.

Miss Peep is presently without sheep and “doesn’t know where to find them.” Well, of course she can’t find them! If she knew where they were, they wouldn’t be lost. Is little Bo

even looking for them? Apparently not. We are given no clue as to their whereabouts, but there may be more to this than meets the eye. The sheep may have escaped from a criminally negligent shepherdess.

“Leave them alone, and they’ll come home.” Such insufferable nonsense tells us all we need to know about Bo’s intelligence. If the sheep are lost and can’t be found, the Peep girl has no choice but to leave them alone—which is very likely what the sheep had in mind when they vacated the premises. “And they’ll come home” is nothing more than wishful thinking.

If and when they do return home, they will be “wagging their tails behind them.” Another all-too-obvious banality from a tale painfully lacking in rational thinking. The tails of most sheep are attached to their posteriors, so any tail-wagging will occur “behind them” unless, of course, they are walking backwards for some reason.

On its surface, this is the saga of a shepherd girl who, when confronted with a crisis, seems to believe that the best outcome will be achieved by doing nothing at all—i.e., “leave them alone.” However, the CIA has long suspected that *Little Bo Peep* is the sobriquet of the legendary Bolivian counterintelligence spy *Peep*, who seeks to penetrate the international

cartel of sheep-derived woolen products, thereby advancing Bolivia's objective of world domination.

Not for the first time, the CIA is barking up the wrong tree, confusing the Peep girl's vagabond herd of itinerant animals with the disreputable "Baa-Baa-Black-Sheep" gang, the true conspirators in the Bolivian wool cartel. The Agency offers seemingly incontrovertible evidence: to wit, that Bo Peep is intimately associated with Wyoming's second largest sheep-rendering plant: Peep Sheep-Dip Consolidated Industries. If they are still alive, Peep's sheep are quite unlikely to "come home" without a court order and police escort.



**DON'T SWEAT
THE SMALL STUFF**
by Norman Rubin

When I was a youngster, I heard many expressions: "Time flies." "Fact is stranger than fiction." "You can't judge a book by its cover." "All that glitters isn't gold." "Don't sweat the small stuff." Over the years, I have come to appreciate expressions like "Time flies," since it really does. Unfortunately, I have had several real-life experiences that made me question the wisdom and validity of this last expression regarding "the small stuff." On two occasions, I came close

to losing my life because of insects that are very small and are all around us.

The first experience came when I was only forty years old and was cutting the lawn in our backyard. All of a sudden, I felt something sharp cut into my ankle. I instinctively hit where the pain was coming from with my fist, took off my sneaker, and found a dying yellowjacket. Not thinking much of this, I put my sneaker back on and continued cutting the lawn. Suddenly, I broke into a sweat, started itching all over, and got dizzy. I ran into the house and reached for the bottle of Benadryl that we fortunately had on the mantle of the fireplace in our family room because one of our kids was having problems with exposure to the sun. I told my wife I was having a reaction to a yellowjacket sting. She promptly called our doctor, who told her to get me to the hospital ASAP and not to bother wasting time calling an ambulance. The last thing I recall was grabbing the wall and lowering myself to the floor as I passed out.

My wife, Judy, and our kids managed to get me into a chair with wheels, out the front door, and into the back of our Chevy station wagon. I don't recall the trip to St. Mary Hospital since I was in and out of consciousness. I do recall getting to the ER and two nuns reaching toward me and

putting something, most likely ammonia, under my nose. This quickly revived me as they removed me from the wagon and put me into a wheelchair.

I was immediately admitted; the doctor asked me what had happened and what I had done. I explained everything, including taking the ounce or two of Benadryl. He said there was nothing more to do, so he put me on a glucose IV for about an hour.

I was then sent home and was “out of it” for about 24 hours. I recovered but was afraid to go outside for about a month. The good news is that I started seeing an immunologist, who treated me with live yellow jacket venom to build up my immunity. After a year, I was declared immune but had to keep an Epi-pen with me. I was stung a few times after receiving the immunization treatment but never had another reaction.

The latest incident occurred 40 years later, either while Judy and I were at our cabin in the Poconos or in the community garden at Pennswood. About four days after getting back from our cabin, my temperature suddenly shot up to about 103. I took aspirin and Tylenol to bring it down, but after a few hours it climbed up again. I became dizzy and somewhat incoherent, so my wife called Resident Health. They immediately called

an ambulance, and I was brought to St. Mary Medical Center. They had no idea what had happened, but after leaving the ER and being transferred to a bed in a private room, I was immediately given an antibiotic IV. Within 24 hours, I had recovered to about 80 percent of normal. I was kept there for four days and discharged with a bottle of Doxycycline to take for six days. Later in the week, I was informed that I had been bitten by an infected tick and had had a severe reaction. It was a very close call.

When they say, “Don’t sweat the small stuff,” don’t believe them. It is the small stuff that will get us if we let our guard down.

MY SENIOR MOMENTS by **Elliot Kleiman**

I suppose many of us have senior moments. I do. Like not being able to recall someone’s name, or forgetting why I went to the basement or garage, or getting lost trying to find Walgreen’s. They are annoying but not particularly significant. In fact, they say that, if afterwards you remember what it was that you forgot, it’s not dementia. On the other hand, if you don’t remember afterwards, it could be the beginning of something serious.

Two recent senior moments stand out. In the first, I had gone to McCaffrey's supermarket in Newtown on a brief errand. When I returned, Dorothy asked me if I had my wallet. I felt my back pocket and discovered that my wallet wasn't there. Oh no! She told me that McCaffrey's had called and that my wallet was waiting for me at the store. As soon as she said that, I realized that I'd left my wallet at the checkout counter when I'd put it down to fish out coins from my pocket. It was very nice of them to call, but I felt so stupid. That was a senior moment in spades. I returned to McCaffrey's and got my wallet.

My next senior moment occurred three weeks later. It was a Saturday, and I was in New Jersey at a farm stand, looking in the trunk of my car for a plastic bag to use for the broccoli I was about to buy. I realized, to my chagrin, that my E-Z Reacher wasn't in the trunk where I always kept it. I've used that implement for many years to conveniently pick up litter without having to bend over. Where could it be? And then it came to me—I'd left it in the Newtown Friends School parking lot, where I'd parked the day before, prior to picking up litter along Route 413 between Pennswood and George School. I'd probably set the E-Z Reacher on the ground next to my car when I put the large bag of trash into the car, and I'd

“forgotten” (a frequent word in my life) to pick it up.

My mind whirled: would it still be there? There had been cars parked on both sides of mine. Might someone have turned it in or even taken it? I called the Friends School but got only a recorded message; Saturday was outside regular working hours. I knew that I could check with them on Monday, but I was pessimistic about recovering it. Should I start looking to purchase a new E-Z Reacher? After doing some other chores, I set out for Pennswood. It was already dark. I drove a bit faster than usual, anxious to get to the Friends School. And, to my relief, there was the E-Z Reacher, lying on the white line next to the parking space where my car had been. Whew! I was lucky again.

Both of my senior moments had been resolved, happily and without serious consequences. And even better, I'd remembered what I'd forgotten!

NO TRIANGLES!

by Jim McClellan

There are no triangles. There are things we call triangles and things that sorta look like triangles, but there are no triangles . . . in the whole universe, in fact.

Triangles are formed by the intersection of three straight lines. So, to start with, there are, incidentally, no lines in the real world either. Lines connect two points on a flat plane and so require two-dimensional space, but lines themselves have no breadth. Anything that might look like a line to us is actually a tiny, elongated rectangle.

Then, too, what we normally would call a line is actually a three-dimensional object with depth as well . . . think of a line drawn on a chalkboard or pixels on a screen. Adding to that, no lines are actually straight; they all wiggle a bit, and also no plane is actually flat, so in this world true lines can't exist and hence, again, there can be no triangles.

The three interior angles of triangles are supposed to add up to 180° , but if I handed you a purported triangle and a protractor and asked you to measure those angles, you would never arrive at that sum *exactly* or the same sum twice! (This is because of the inherent uncertainties of any physical measurement.)

Someone might suggest that the shadow of a triangular object could fit the bill, which is pretty good, but we come back to the fact that the edges of that shadow won't be straight, the interior angles won't add up to 180° , and the surface it's cast upon won't be flat. We might imagine that the things

we call triangles are themselves shadows of real triangles somewhere in an ideal world, as Plato said, but otherwise NO TRIANGLES! Please.

**THE SUBJECT
WAS POETRY**
by John Wood

Birth and death,
Those things, beautiful and bright,
That serve to slay
Those demons of the night,
Love and hate,
Each for the other a counterweight,
Earth and sky,
Field and stream,
Forest, where God's creatures hide,
Vast expanse of oceans wide,
Both windward and the leeward side,
A wheat-field where the soldiers died,
Teeming streets where life abides;
As well, unseen realms
Where the spirit thrives—
All this and more.
The whole of life the poem.
The poet just the scribe.

**THANKS TO THE
ROLLING STONES**
by David Cuff

We are grateful for John Means's brilliant explanation of antigravity levitation using two popular beliefs: that buttered bread always falls

battered-side down, and that a falling cat always lands on its feet.

It may be useful to examine another belief deeply ingrained in our culture: “A rolling stone gathers no moss.” Readers may be surprised to learn there are two diametrically opposed applications of this principle.

First: moss is undesirable. Persons constantly on the move are blessed by freedom from encumbrances such as old ideas and conventions, ties to people, and ideas that limit their pursuit of happiness.

Second: moss is desirable. Those who do not maintain roots will not accumulate property or wealth and will not enjoy connections to local institutions or rise to positions of responsibility.

It is said that, Covid aside, mobility is increasing in our society. More and more, we are people on the move. It seems to me, then, that North Americans gradually will evolve to become extremely happy vagabonds living on allowances from a benevolent government.

So, keep moving!

And invest in trailer parks and campgrounds.



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