

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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A SUMMER JOB

by Howard Arons

When I graduated from high school in January of 1952, I had been accepted for the September year at Rice Institute. To get a preview of college-level work, I used the spring semester to take a few courses locally at Southern Methodist University. By June when the semester ended, I was ready for a summer of relaxation. My father had other ideas, insisting that I get a summer job. I expected to be a chemistry major, so one of Dallas's oil-service consulting laboratories looked like a perfect fit. I began visiting each lab, expecting a friendly reception. They were certainly friendly, but they wanted only experienced employees, not summer help. On my way home from my final rejection, I happened to drive past a nice-looking building with a large sign in front that said REPUBLIC INSURANCE COMPANY. I thought they might employ an army of clerks, perhaps with room for one more.

First thing the next morning, dressed in a suitably corporate suit and tie, I told the receptionist at Republic Insurance that I wanted to speak to someone about a summer job. I learned later that this direct approach was a real novelty for them, and it got me in to see someone right away. I had just finished my semester at SMU, and my interviewer turned out to be an SMU graduate, so things started well. Management had just decided to hire a summer replacement for vacationing clerks; I was first in line. After a brief chat about SMU football and the fire insurance business, I was offered a summer job as a file clerk starting the following week. I had my first real job with a real company.

The following Monday morning I reported for work and was introduced to Yvonne, a file clerk who would show me what the file clerks did. She was an ebullient young Texas-born lady, and she let me know right away that her name was "Wye-Von." My first lesson covered the hierarchy of people and jobs there at the head

office. She explained that the *underwriters* were at the top, because they decided which policies would be issued. Next were the *mappers*, who were underwriters-in-training. They marked the location of the insured property on huge books of highly detailed maps, carefully noting nearby hydrants and fire hazards. Lowest were the *file clerks*. Each new policy application written by an agent had been assigned a six-digit number and had begun a prolific paper generation process, because the insurance industry still documented everything on paper. The file clerks presided over that stream of paper, which passed through the management hierarchy. The file-clerk corps consisted entirely of young women, usually just starting their working life. The work was pure routine, but the workload was heavy. The job was in a clean, safe space, required only a high school diploma, and was an attractive way to enter the work force. As far as I could tell, the file clerks never thought of themselves as having a career, but simply a job. Their focus was on marriage and a family.

I sat next to Yvonne at the desk of a vacationing clerk. We file clerks were given requests for files by number. We had to find the file, either in the massive banks of file drawers or on someone's desk. We also received completed records for refiling. Once a week we searched for files "in the

machine room," which was treated as some sort of sanctified space. It turned out to be the location of an IBM card-sorting operation, still a real novelty in the insurance industry. The tiny group of operators, serving as the acolytes of the noisy, fast-moving card-handling machines, were a snooty bunch who considered themselves quite above mere file clerks.

The work was easy to master, and I soon fell into the office routine. As a male summer employee and a college student, I was an outsider among the file clerks. Still, I was included in the small talk "topic of the day." I couldn't contribute much, because those topics were seldom about work, politics, or world news, but purely social things like clothes, dating, weddings, and divorces. One morning, Yvonne was missing. When I asked another clerk if Yvonne was OK, she answered breezily, "Oh, she's OK. She just needed to go down to the courthouse and post bail for her husband. He got himself into another bar fight." Yvonne was back after lunch, lively as ever, and her only comment was "I wish that man would learn to hold his liquor." That was not the only time one of the clerks needed a half-day off "for courthouse business." In the Texas of 1952, such happenings weren't even part of office gossip.

As the summer vacation season came to an end, I was given a new job. There was a basement storage room for closed files, and it was full. The state mandated that insurance files be retained for years, so the old files were transferred to an archive off-site. My job was to spend my day in the basement, separating old files, assuring that they were in numerical order, and boxing them for pickup. What seemed at first to be a boring job became fascinating as I discovered that some of the files contained not only dry legalities, but extras like detailed credit reports or private investigators' reports. All those detailed inquiries had been triggered, as you might guess, by very large policies written on very small businesses. It didn't help if the policy had been requested by someone who had a history of claims. Cafés and dry cleaners also got special attention. There were some blatant cases of attempted fraud which usually showed up in the private investigators' reports. The detailed credit reports revealed that some applicants were simply not good businessmen. Their savings, and often their relatives' savings, were leaking away, and they were desperate to be made whole again by a lucky fire loss. Policies which had been refused were stamped in blurry red ink CANCELED FLAT. That phrase always fascinated me; it seemed like the final bang of a judge's gavel.

I had expected to finish my days at Republic Insurance in the quiet of the basement. That's why I was frequently surprised by a tap of high heels on the stairs as one of the clerks came down "to look for a file," "to see what I was up to down there," or just for a little friendly, flirtatious small talk. Yvonne, my guardian angel, explained the whole thing to me on my last day. It seemed she had been playing matchmaker, pointing out that I was a nice, single guy with a lot of earning potential. All those friendly visits and casual boy/girl flirtations were—after all—just shopping trips.

THE REAL SEAL

by Alice Warshaw

In kindergarten, my first love was Billy. We always sat together on the rug in front of the piano where our wonderful Miss Hollies conducted "Listening Time." We listened to stories, eagerly waiting for the next picture, and we sang songs. Most importantly, we learned about sharing, taking turns, and how to raise our hands to be called on before we spoke.

In those days, there were no apparent academics. We might sing the ABCs, but just for fun. No phonics. We might count things . . . just for fun. (Or so it seemed.) There were no symbols to

learn. All that would come in first grade.

We had two sandbox tables to which water was added from time to time. If we were really good listeners, we would go four-to-a-table to invent all kinds of fun things. Needless to say, there were castles and monsters. Lots of monsters.

One day after visiting the zoo, I made a chubby little seal with baby eyes, and a pointy nose, little flippers, and a forked tail. The other kids at the table insisted I should make “a real one,” meaning it should be bigger, more like a real baby seal.

This created for me what may have been my first ethical dilemma. I knew we should share the sand equally. If I made a “real seal” as they requested, that would not be sharing. I discussed the problem with Miss Hollies who conceded, that if the other kids really wanted to donate their sand for the seal, she would allow it. Eventually, everyone in the room was crowding around to see and enjoy the baby seal. That was heady stuff for me.

For several weeks after that, whenever I went to a sand table, everyone automatically pushed their wet sand toward me to get their Real Baby Seal fix. It would be cooed to, petted, and briefly admired, then gently reshaped into castles and monsters again.

THE EXTRA KINDERGARTENER

by Glenna Follmer

It was late August 1978, and as a newly credentialed teacher, I walked into the suburban school’s only kindergarten to see my classroom. I was now age 40; our three kids were aged eight, ten, and twelve. I’d be home by 4:30 pm (surely they could behave for an hour?). It felt like time to get out of my homemaker life—and cover our health insurance bills.

When I inspected the room, I saw that my predecessor had left lots of equipment and furniture. I had to find the janitor to take away the aging upright piano which smelled of moldy felts. Some teacher had absconded with our rug for circle time. The closet was bursting: colored paper; fat, flat crayons; and, oddly, three dozen left-handed scissors. Easels had to be cleaned of dried-on poster paint. Bulletin boards needed to be imagined and stapled up.

On a brighter note, the cubbies were cleared, ready for 45 name tags—23 morning kids and 22 afternoons were registered. I owned a reading corner with books on tape, heavy wooden blocks in a rolling bin, a doll house with broken furniture, and a puppet stage which doubled as a grocery store. Then there were old nightgowns, scarves, evening bags,

plus Indian headbands, boy's dress jackets and neckties in the dress-up box.

"But what's that wire cage over there?" I asked my principal. "Oh, that's for Pepper, the white-and-black rabbit Mrs. Y. isn't taking when she moves to first grade. You're not allergic, are you?" "Not that I know, but we never owned a rabbit."

"Well, Pepper's pretty harmless and stays in his cage over winter break. And Mr. R., our superintendent, lives two blocks away. When he's out for a walk, he'll stop to feed him." What a nice old-fashioned school, I thought. K-6th grades, only two floors, and a "super" who feeds pets!

When September came, I finally met Pepper, disarmingly fluffy, chubby, white as salt, and liberally spotted with black, especially around the eyes.

A charmer, he turned out to be the secret to a happier start-of-school week. Ten children came the first day, then seven more on day three, then the last six on Friday. Pepper was the inducement to get my most hesitant pupils to leave mom or sitter at the classroom door.

"Come on in, Josie. I like your Scoobie Do schoolbag. Can you see our classroom bunny way over there?"

Pepper looks a bit hungry. Would you give him this piece of lettuce?" Once Josie was inside, she'd stop crying, and I told the clustered moms (some also sniffing) to take a l-o-n-g coffee break. "I'll see you at 11:30!"

Those earliest weeks getting acclimated were exhausting. Forty-five names to master was the least of it. Lesson plans for the week ahead were due on Fridays. As a mom myself, I thought about how anxious parents can be. So I wrote notes home every evening. Some phone calls were necessary. One mom yelled at me, "Paulo needs to practice getting his jacket zipped? Well, really, that's your job!"

And for Pepper, it must have been a chaotic change of scene from his peaceful summer days. He liked it when a child reached into his cage to pet him, but he shivered when we were loud as we marched with instruments to patriotic music.

...

My kindergarteners came, relaxed after a few weeks, learned, and blossomed. Things went smoothly for nine years until one idea led to disaster. Mrs. Y suggested, "I used to let Pepper go visiting to a willing parent's home from Friday at 3:00 until Monday morning. A nice change for Pepper. Why not try it?"

Well, I would like a break from cleaning his newspapers and filling his water bottle. So, when Mia's mom volunteered her home for spring break, where he'd be with other pets (such as Mia's budgie, cat, and pet ferret) I agreed. But when Pepper was returned, I noticed him rubbing his ear. Then this became vigorous scratching as the days went on. Unnerved, I consulted the principal. "He's yours! Take him to a veterinarian and send in the bill."

Pepper was unhappy in my VW van in his travel cage, and he started shaking when we sat in the vet's waiting room, surrounded by very vocal dogs and cats. Dr. W. delivered the bad news that Pepper had gotten ear mites somewhere. "See how he's scratched down to the skin there? You can try taking him home on weekends and washing him with a prescribed topical soap. He's not happy now, but maybe we won't have to put him to sleep."

My heart sank. Oh, I very much hoped to keep Pepper going until June 8 when school was over. These five-year-olds were so innocent about life. I pictured having to have discussions on death, "putting animals down," and facing the grieving that would ensue if I couldn't keep him going for seven more weeks.

How he hated those baths in my deep laundry tub! Still, I added this to my

weekend tasks and took loving care of him. I was worried.

April finished, May's weekends came, and then before Memorial Day weekend, I returned for Pepper's checkup. Readers, I think you can guess what happened. Dr. W. checked Pepper and said he was really suffering—but the big decision was mine. I signed some papers, held his trembling plump body, and let him go into the back room with the vet. Then it was over—except for my tear-filled ride home with an empty travel box and my mind mulling over what to tell both classes on Tuesday.

I was relieved about the children's calm reaction as we talked at circle time. I said Pepper had been very sick, and now he had died. (Enough detail.) I sent home notes alerting the parents. Maybe a five-year-old's idea of death didn't include that death was permanent. Or perhaps, they realized summer vacation was calling—and that helped.

Pepper was missed—and I never looked for a "replacement" rabbit. Life for Pepper had not been just one sun-filled field. Yet, if there's an after-life for animals' spirits, I picture him in a quiet meadow, surrounded by happy, open-to-learning kids, who pull out of their pockets bits of lettuce, just for him.

**JOY ON THE LAND
JOY IN THE SEA**
by Steve Schnur

If our dogs could talk, they would take us aside and explain the importance of play. But dogs can't talk, so they show us.

Some years ago right outside the back door of my condo, there was a wide, sloping stretch of lawn, in winter a favorite neighborhood spot for sledding. Every day at dawn, my border collie, Spirit, and I would emerge through that same door for our first walk of the day. Spirit would often go right down that slope, on her back, wriggling right and left the whole way. Whether the grass wet with rain, or covered with snow or ice, I could be sure that Spirit would ride the hill from top to bottom.

Spirit celebrated every sunrise. She was surely thinking, "What fun can I have today?"

And what did I do, as Spirit went down that hill on her back? I just stood there . . . smiling. But I took real pleasure in her joy.

A familiar if imperfect rule says that a dog ages roughly seven years for every calendar year. That's one week per day! Spirit knew since puppyhood that no day should pass without some real joy.

My family spent part of each summer in Loveladies, New Jersey, on Long Beach Island. Without fail, Spirit and I would be on the beach every morning as the sun rose over the ocean, long before the lifeguards climbed to their stations. Spirit loved the beach. She loved to swim. She loved to run. She loved to dig, no matter that her tongue got completely covered with sand. Spirit would often run circles around me, with playful nips as she passed by. Was she inviting me to run with her and dig with her? I believe so.

But what did I do? I just stood there . . . smiling, taking great pleasure in Spirit's joy.

Just after sunrise on July 19, 2012, Spirit and I were, as usual, savoring the solitude and the morning freshness of the beach. Spirit was full of spirit. An unusually large pod of dolphins caught my eye, twenty or so, not far from shore. Dolphins are impossible to count accurately, surfacing for air and then disappearing repeatedly as they swim by. Suddenly, a dolphin leaped completely out of the water in a stunning arc. Within seconds, three more dolphins similarly leaped, in perfect formation, and then disappeared completely from view, not to be seen again.

Joy on the land! Joy in the sea!

And what did I do? I just stood there smiling, taking great pleasure in the dolphins' joy.

But why didn't I run in circles with Spirit on the beach? Why didn't I dig in the sand? Why didn't I jump in the water? Why didn't I wriggle all the way down the hill on my back? Because I'm not a dog? Because I'm not a dolphin? Because I'm not a kid anymore? Is this my time for vicarious pleasures? Or do other things give me as much joy at my advanced age?

My dearest friend often greets me saying, "Any joy today?" I can usually answer, "Yes! Of course! Much joy!"

A GIFT TO MY HEIRS by Lorna Stuart

Like most of you, I have acquired quite a few one-of-a-kind items over the years. Some—such as my stained mug that says "Doctors make good people better"—may be cheerfully thrown out when I die.

But I have some unique items: the vase I bought in the pottery on Skye, the Zuni fetish I found in New Mexico, some buttons made in Colombia of hummingbird feathers and brought back by my father, a Lladro woman physician statuette, an Inuit-carved

owl, and some others with special memories.

What happens when I leave Pennswood, probably feet first? I have found a solution that gives me some real peace of mind and might work for others.

I have taken a photograph of each special item, printed it out on a 4x6 index card, then added a few lines describing how and when I acquired it and why I considered it special. So when my sons start dividing and discarding and donating my "stuff," they'll know what they might want to value and keep. They might not want my china or crystal (their lives are different), but I would be enchanted to know they would adopt and love some of the things that I too loved.

THE METER by David Cuff

Ask the distance from Equator to Pole
And the geodesist will say
Around 6.2 thousand miles
But an even 10 thousand K

That 10K number's no accident
Instead, it reflects the French intent
That their new METER, above all,
Should be entirely natural

So in seventeen ninety-three
After meeting some resistance
They defined it as one/10-millionth
part
Of that earthly distance

*(Jim McClelland's thoughtful essay on Galileo, **Village Voices**, November 2021, reminded me of this bit of earth science.)*

A WORTHY BODY PART by John Wood

Prologue: It has been put forth that
In poesy and life
One ought to, if not honor,
Then celebrate the
vestments owned at birth.

When it comes
To celebrating body parts,
It is not the ear
Deserves prime space,
For ears, exposed,
Are mutable.
(The boxer knows in time
His ear a vegetable)
Nor does the face,
Revealed to sleet and rays,
Thus weathered in life's race,
Deserve first place.

Consider then the buttock,
Demurely burka wrapped,
Protected in a private space
From wind and sleet and prying eyes;

And little marred with time;
Then, when you sit for yearbook,
Or portrait on the mantle,
The less presuming buttock
Hides its face.

You may agree, then,
And let the devil take the hindmost,
The buttock is the part most worthy
Of eulogy and toast.

*(Rebuttal to John Means, **Village Voices**, November 2021.)*

THE SILENT K: A TRUE STORY by Lisa Taylor

One day, a good night,
no longer a nave,
and proud of his napsack
found a nife in the woods.
He fell to his nees
but neeling was hard.
Benighted he felt,
neeling there on the grass,
alone in the woods.
He suddenly new that a woman
who nit, a nack he admired,
(and her nickers below)
would nit him some neesocks
that could function as nee pads.
"I am nackered," the night said;
he cracked his poor nuckles,
nocked the nob on his head,
twisted the not in his hair

neaded his brow, and
ate leftover nockwurst.
He rose from his nees,
brushed dirt off his nife,
slung on his napsack,
and went to look for a wife
who would nit him the nee pads
fit for a night.
But then,
the night new
that he should bring her a nicknack
in hopes that she'd then
show him
her nickers below.
For our brave night
was merely a nave,
after all.



SAY SOMETHING

Poetry & Prose will be Wednesday,
April 20. See the *Bulletin* and Bul-
letin Boards for more information.
The Poet James Russell Lowell
said, “Blessed are they who have
nothing to say. And can be persuaded
to say it.”

If you, however, have something—
either poetry or prose—to say, please
take part in this delightful Pennswood
tradition.

Contact Anne Baber at 913-568-2339
or annebaber38@gmail.com to get
your name on the list of readers.

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