

STICKY WICKET

Corona XXII – the escape

Mole



AND EVEN THOUGH THE GREAT MOLEDINI
COULD ESCAPE ANYTHING...
HE ALWAYS WORE A MASK!

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs – www.peterjeffsart.com

I had another Corona dream last night. I went into a restaurant and people were sitting at distanced tables; I was told to sit anywhere but there was no place I wanted to sit. Then it was a shop that sold hummingbirds and underwear (I guess it was a specialty shop), and I was trying to keep away from unmasked people. There was an oddly dancing security guard, leaping around, who wanted to know how I had gotten in there after the shop had closed, and I couldn't find my way out. I woke up laughing – I often wake up laughing. I told Red Fox about the dream, and she related one in which she was attacked by a shark and threw her mask at it to scare it away, but then spent the rest of the dream looking for a new mask. She says that Corona dreams are the anxiety dreams of 2020. We both hope that they aren't the anxiety dreams of 2021.

Joseph Kavalier grew up in Nazi-occupied Poland, where he idolized stories of Houdini and spent his childhood practicing to be an escape artist. And escape he did, in 1939, by hiding in a coffin, and made his way to New York, where he lived with his cousin

Sammy Klayman. Together, Sam and Joe wrote and illustrated the extremely popular *Amazing Midget Radio Comics*, featuring the fascist-fighting 'Escapist' based loosely on Houdini, the Scarlet Pimpernel' and Captain America. I think these comics would be enormously collectable (and valuable) now, if any of this were true but, of course, this is the story line of 'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay' by Michael Chabon. If you haven't read it, you should (it beats binging on old 'Friends' episodes).

I brought this up, in my usual distracted way, because I'm thinking about escape. We all want to escape. Escape from this dystopian pandemic, from masks and social distancing, from loneliness, from a world without human contact. Some escape by deciding that they are just not going to do it anymore. If you've been following along with these little musings, these Corona Files, you know that I think that *this is a really, really bad idea*.

A growing version of this bad idea is based on a perception that because in-person schools are opening, we can open up additional

things. As the climate in our hemisphere cools with the autumn months, more activities will move indoors (either in homes or in other venues) and, without knowing the extent to which such activities promote spread (or delaying such knowledge), this will reinforce the idea that we have, indeed, escaped this crisis. Add to this the noise from the highest levels of government (at least in my country, where facts have apparently ceased to exist), and we are heading back into exponential growth.

Nearly half a century ago, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman provided strong evidence of a heuristic process called *availability*. People make judgements about the likelihood of an event (such as a super-spreader) based on how easily an example comes to mind. When we do not participate in an activity that promotes virus transmission, we tend to avoid such activities but, based on the idea of availability, the more we experience such activities (as in, “I went to have dinner with friends and, as far as I know, none of us got the virus”) the more likely we are to participate in another. I’m seriously concerned that “my kid has been going to school and he’s doing fine” will be such an example that will promote judgements based on availability. And, as I said, this is a *really, really bad idea*.

I’m already seeing this in practice (and not only on news reports). I have a number of friends who tell me that they are having indoor dinner parties a couple of times a month or more, and they are not worried about it. I’ve asked about how they are doing this, and the answer is usually, “you know, a dinner party.” Look, I get it, but there is a way to do this with minimal risk. I’m going to a small dinner party this week and the plan is (a) we will interact outside, with social distancing; (b) our hosts are preparing food wearing gloves and masks, and packaging meals into clean, individual containers, with disposable utensils; (c) bottles will be disinfected, opened and served into clean glasses by our hosts; (d) everyone is welcome to bring their own food or drink if there is any concern.

The party is for my lab manager of twenty-two years, retiring this week, and we really want to do something, but as safely as possible (and there will only be a handful of us there). No, this is not an escape but it’s the best we can do.

Erik Weisz moved to America from Hungary when he was four years old, in 1878, and his parents changed his name to Ehrich Weiss. Five years later he was a champion cross-country runner and a trapeze artist, billing himself as ‘The King of Air’, when he was only nine. Eventually, he was to become a performer who is probably the best-known entertainer of the Twentieth Century. You may know him as Harry Houdini, the “man no earthly bond could hold.” While a magician and debunker of fraudulent spirit mediums, he was, of course, best remembered as an escape artist, performing incredible publicity stunts. These included escaping from a straitjacket while suspended upside-down from a crane on top of a skyscraper, escaping from bound trunks hurled into freezing rivers and even escaping from the belly of a 1500 pound ‘sea monster’ that had washed up near Boston. He could famously escape any handcuffs and any jail cell. And if you’ve seen the old movie where he was played by Tony Curtis, the seemingly impossible ‘water torture’ escape that supposedly killed him (this was not how he died) was a regular part of his act.

Harry Houdini could escape from anything – he was fearless. But during the influenza epidemic of 1918, Houdini wore a mask in public. There is a picture of him doing just that (you can find it online). That is how he escaped a potentially lethal infection. Find that picture. Show others. Let that be the easily remembered image that guides our judgements based on availability. Masks, social distancing, hand washing, disinfecting surfaces, testing, testing, testing and sequestering – these are how we escape.

Let’s continue to be careful out there.