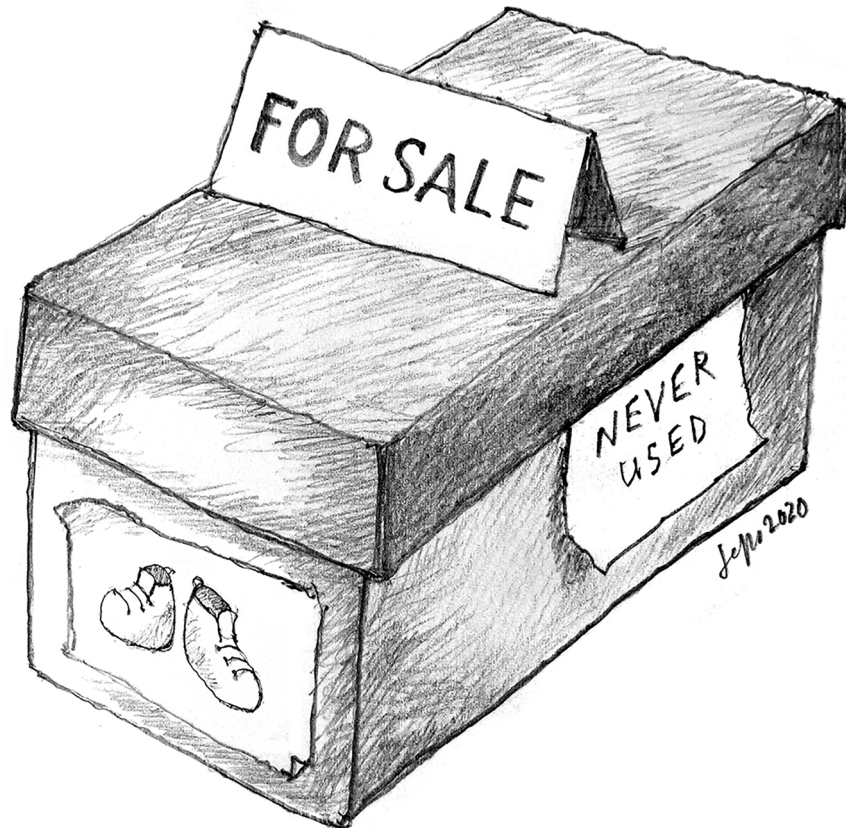


STICKY WICKET

Corona XXV – six-word story

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Brrrr. Cold and rainy day; all of a sudden, it's not summer anymore. Okay, it hasn't been for quite some time, but it *felt* like summer yesterday. But not today. Actually, I have no idea what time of day, month, year it is, because everything is still bad out there (but good in here, thank you), and the time just blurs together. I remember weekends, when we actually *did* stuff, and work days (when I also did stuff), but online, it's just the e-world. I'm sure it's snowing somewhere. And warm and sunny somewhere. Here? Gray, gray, gray. I hope you're staying safe.

As usual, I'm taking a lot of words to say not very much ("What's new, Mole?"). Which has gotten me to thinking about a story I heard about Ernest Hemmingway. More of a legend, really. It takes place in the 1920s in New York City, in the Algonquin Hotel 'Round Table', a fabled place where famous authors, critics, songwriters, and wits gathered. The membership included Robert Benchley, Irving Berlin, George S. Kaufmann, and Dorothy Parker, among others. (Dorothy Parker once wrote, "One martini, two at the most, three and I'm under the table, four and I'm under my host." It's a better toast than, 'cheers,' isn't it?). One day, so the story goes, Hemmingway visited, and they challenged him to write a novel with only six words, which they deemed impossible. Taking up the bet (which was apparently for ten dollars, each, quite a lot of money in those days), he quickly wrote the following on a paper napkin: "For

sale. Baby shoes. Never worn." They each paid him ten dollars. How could they not?

Like I said, it's a legend. In one version, it takes place in Luchow's, a restaurant (in which I once dined when I was very young, about four years old; it is long gone, but I still remember what I ate). Anyway, there is no evidence that any of it is actually true (the Hemmingway story, not my meal at Luchow's). The Quote Investigator (an invaluable site) notes that an article appeared in 1906, in a newspaper claiming to have seen an advertisement stating "For sale, baby carriage; never been used. Apply at this office." Another similar one appeared in another paper in 1910, and then again in 1917 and 1921. Hemmingway was a newspaperman, it is not unlikely he knew about one or more of these stories, if indeed, he ever wrote a 'borrowed' version. The Hemmingway anecdote did not see print until 1991, in a book by a literary agent, who claimed he had heard it in 1974. Such is the stuff of urban legends. You know, like the story of the woman who bought a small, hairless dog that turned out to be a rat (or, if you prefer, the urban legend about the poodle in the microwave, but let's not go there).

I don't really care if Hemmingway really wrote this (I'm pretty sure you don't either). For Sale. Baby shoes. Never worn. It is a moving, evocative, terrible, wonderful novel. In six words. Maybe that's all that counts.

So, I've been thinking about six-word stories that might sum up where we are, now, during this Terrible Pandemic. In my own country, the one where just *yesterday*, we had one third of all the new infections *in the entire world*, it might be: "Masks save Lives. Don't wear one." Sigh. It just makes me sad. But hey, it's a gray, rainy day.

But no, that isn't the six-word story I want to tell. I want to tell the whole story of what is happening, not only the mask fiasco. So, I've settled on a different one. I'm not Hemmingway ("Really, Mole?" Oh, ha-ha-ha. Yes, really), but at least for me, I think this sums it up.

The coronavirus was unexpected. Every day.

Do I have to explain it? Okay, I will anyway. Sure, we did not expect this pandemic. And apparently, we in this country do not expect it today, all these months later. People in the news media seem genuinely surprised as the infection rages. When I turn on the TV (which I'm doing more than usual these days), there is always a breathless announcement of today's infections. Or this week's toll on human life. It isn't just here; the virus is surging in many countries in Europe (after a pretty good summer). Australia is still in Level Four lockdown (but they are going to get this thing – good onya, mates). China is doing extensive testing and tracing to control it, and doing it well (taking full advantage of the tools in place to trace dissidents, but hey, I am in no position to criticize). But most of all, I just don't honestly expect to get it. Every day. Until I do get it, of course (but I'll continue to do everything I can to not).

I do have a point. (I know, I know: "You have a *point*, Mole?"). There is something called the 'The Unexpected Hanging,' an interesting and well-discussed logical paradox. (I think that's what it's called. It's something like that). It goes like this. A man is sentenced to death by a judge, who tells him that he will be hanged within seven days, but in an act of mercy, adds that the condemned man will not expect to be hanged on the day

it occurs. The prisoner reasons as follows. "I cannot be hanged on the last day, because if six days pass, I will expect that the execution will occur on day seven, and that will violate the judge's orders. But then I cannot be hanged on day six either, because if five days pass, I will expect it on that day, and again, that cannot be. By logical extension, I cannot be hanged on *any* day. And so, according to this irrefutable logic, I am safe." Two days later, his cell door opens, and he is completely surprised by the utterly unexpected hanging.

I must point out that I am completely opposed to corporal punishment, but logicians love this kind of stuff. Actually, I don't think this is the most paradoxical paradox I have heard, and with a little thought, even I can find the logical fallacy. But still, I think it applies pretty well to the paradox of this pandemic, and why it continues to be so unexpected.

Captain Kirk blew up a civilization-controlling computer by presenting a paradox ("I am Landru, I am Lannnnndruuu..."). Mr. Spock fried a pair of twin androids by saying, "I love you, but I hate you." ("But we are identical," they say, to which he replied, "That is why I love you, but I hate you." Androids down and out).

But the Pandemic Paradox is real. Until we solve it, until we *expect it every day*, we aren't going to beat it. Like you, I can't wait for the vaccine. But it's still a long ways off, and we have a long way to go. There's a lot we can do now. If we just remember to expect it. Hey, I warned you, it's a gray, rainy day. What do you want for nothing? A good six-word story? (or, if you are a Blues Brothers fan, 'Rubber biscuit?').

Oh, and the dinner I had in Luchow's at the tender age of four? Venison, and it was very yummy. Which by the way, happens to be another six-word story. Stay safe out there.