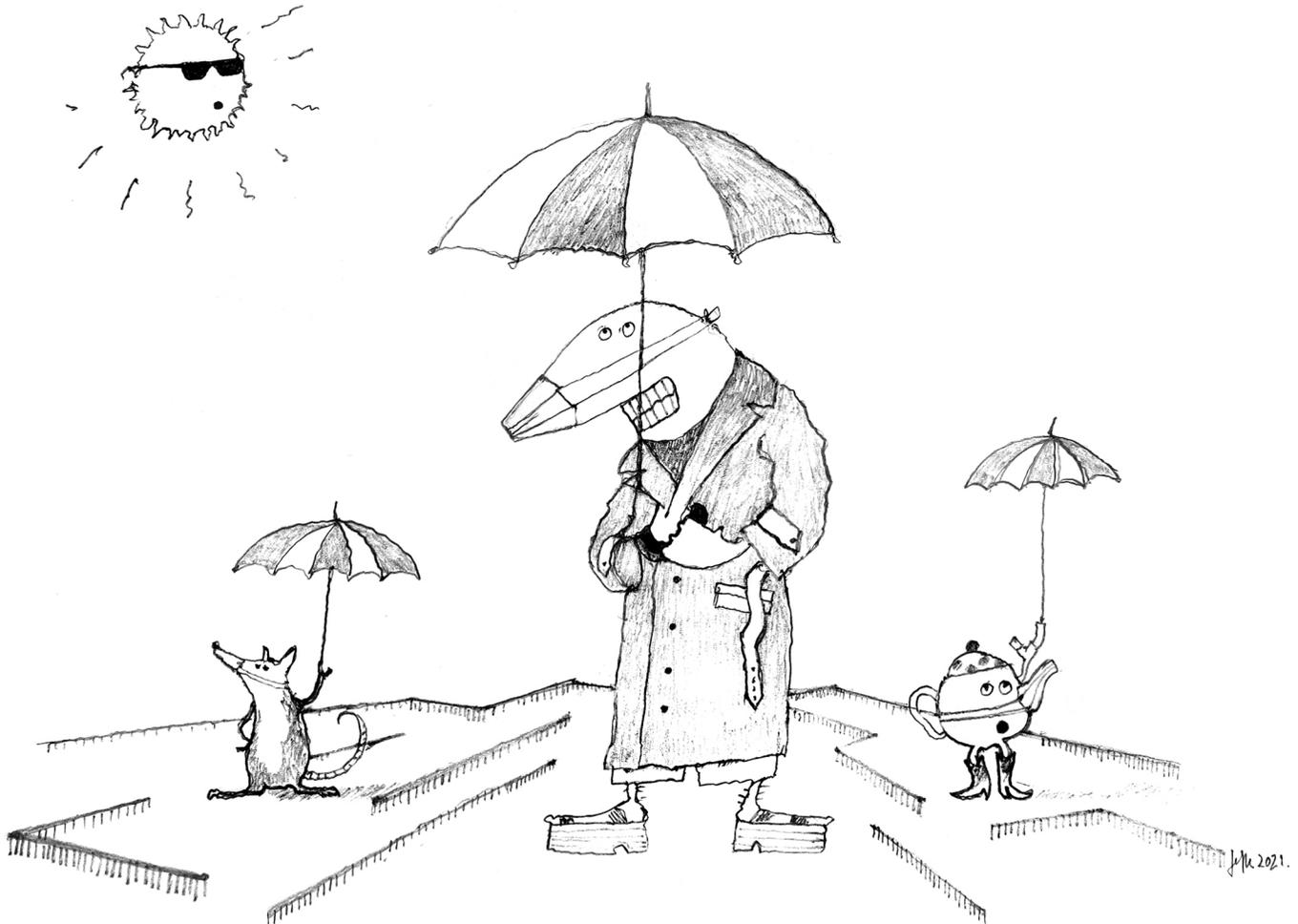


STICKY WICKET

Corona XLV – The Garden of Forking Paths

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs – www.peterjeffsart.com

I'd jump into the River Mersey, but it looks like rain.

I have done this, and maybe you have too: carried an umbrella to prevent it from raining. It isn't simply that you carry an umbrella *in case* it rains, or carry a jacket in event of a chill, but you (or I) do so to prevent it from happening. The logic goes like this: if I carry an umbrella, it might rain, but if I do not, it certainly will. The brilliant Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, referred to this as "weak magic." (I remember the 'umbrella to prevent rain' scenario in one of his short stories, but I don't remember which. We'll come to another example in a bit.)

It's pretty easy to see why we might think this way. I'll analyze this the way I think Borges would (although even in translation, he was a far better writer than I will ever be): take the set of all experiences of rain and divide them into 'had umbrella' and 'did not have umbrella' subsets. Now create another set of 'remembered

experiences' that overlaps (only partially) with the 'experience of rain' set and its subsets. The overlap will be far greater in the 'did not have umbrella' subset, since we are more likely to remember getting soaked. Ergo, if I bring an umbrella, it won't rain. Proof by Boolean algebra that magic exists.

In Borges's story *The Secret Miracle*, Jaromir Hladik is awaiting execution in 1943. I'll let Borges tell this bit of it: "he reflected that reality does not usually coincide with our anticipation of it; with a logic of his own he inferred that to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent its happening. Trusting in this weak magic, he invented, so that they would not happen, the most gruesome details." There's much more to the story (there always is with Borges) but we'll stop there – imagining the worst, so that it won't happen.

Now, more than one and a half years into this terrible pandemic (TP), I'm imagining the worst scenarios of the coming months, so that they won't happen. Weak magic, I know, but I can't help it.

And by this “logic of [my] own,” I try *not* to think of this TP simply going away in the coming months, because, of course, I want that to happen (so I won’t think of it – see?). Instead, I foresee wave after wave, as variants of concern morph into variants of destruction, emerging from those countries that have not been able to vaccinate their populace, and their surges are only now underway. Or, perhaps just as horribly, I foresee this never going away, as animal reservoirs become available to the virus, and mice carry the pandemic in our closets. In this scenario, we receive annual shots, but we never go unmasked in public again. “Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future,” said one very wise, green philosopher.

This last one, the ‘never unmasked’ scenario, is happening around me now. In the town where I live, positive rates are falling, and our mask mandate has been downgraded to “optional.” Like many of my friends, though, I wear a mask when I’m shopping for groceries or ‘tea,’ but unlike many of my friends, I’ve been going to the theater and to restaurants, and even once to the movies. (A real movie, on a huge screen with a fantastic sound system. Okay, we were the only ones in the theater, but still. And yes, always masked.) Yesterday I was speaking with Professor Ground Squirrel, who confessed that he hadn’t been to a restaurant since February of 2020 and did not think he would ever go to one again. And I heard from another great friend (not a scientist, I do have friends who are not scientists) who mentioned that he and his partner had gone into a venue where nobody was masked, and they left immediately. Then there are my friends Dolphin and Red Fox. Dolphin has been going on vacations and eating in restaurants since this all started, while Red Fox only leaves her house to go to her office and speculates that this may be her world for years to come. Each of us chooses their own story.

And so it goes. Here, in my country, people are packing sports events, and we have not seen outbreaks (which is pretty interesting, but don’t think of a bright future, because we don’t want it *not* to happen). Meanwhile, the UK is experiencing a surge, driven in part by infections among schoolchildren. China is in lockdown, again. Australia is opening up. Choose your story.

The ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ books were created by Edward Packard in 1976, and the large series (by several authors)

sold over 250 million copies between 1979 and 1998, mostly to 7–14-year-olds. I bought a few as well (even though I was much older than 14, even then). In these books, you read a few pages and were then faced with a few choices. Based on your decision, you were then directed to a different page, where that particular story continued. The various stories often intersected, sometimes looped back to a particular scenario, or dead-ended (generally, ended in death, so you had to start all over – unless you could find the spot where you made the wrong choice). They were fun. Sure, they were for kids, but that doesn’t make them not fun (I confess, I only managed to get through one of them). Of course, as soon as desktop computers became a common thing in the early 80s we had text games, which did the same thing. (Does anyone remember Zork? I do.)

But the seed of this idea originated much before 1976, from no other than Jorge Luis Borges. In a story he wrote in 1941, he imagines Ts’ui Pen, a distant ancestor of the protagonist, who quit his position as governor of Yunnan to complete two goals: one to construct a labyrinth “in which all men would lose their way,” and the second to write a novel. He died before completing either task, leaving only a “contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts” of his novel, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and no labyrinth was ever found. But in the story, it is revealed that these apparent drafts were both the novel and the labyrinth, wherein the reader is faced with all possible futures at each decision point in the novel. As with all of Borges’s metafiction, we are left to imagine the Garden of Forking Paths.

So, here I am, in the Garden, choosing my own adventure. Practicing weak magic and avoiding wishing for any emergence into the sun. “Oh. Woe is me. I’d jump into the River Mersey, but it looks like rain.” I did not say this first, Ringo did (except it wasn’t really Ringo, but his avatar in *Yellow Submarine*). And to tell you the truth, it is a very lovely day today. Warm and sunny, with a cornflower blue sky. But best not to think about it; I don’t want the clouds to come.

Maybe I’ll play Zork. “*There is a mailbox here. Open mailbox. There is a leaflet here. Take leaflet. Taken. Kill mailbox. You can’t kill the mailbox.*” Okay, maybe not.