

A Patronizing Note for the Modern Reader Regarding Suspension of Disbelief

It was only about four years ago that I began writing this story, but this is long enough ago that “eBay” was not yet a household word – or one familiar to this author. Please indulge the existence of my characters in an eBay-ignorant world, despite your knowledge that in reality they could just go online and find out almost everything they want to know in minutes.

JC-E, March 2002

A Condescending Note for the Wodehouse Enthusiast Regarding the Name “Sippy”

Yes, I recently became aware that there is a Wodehouse character who goes by the nickname “Sippy”. But I did not, to the best of my knowledge, pilfer this from Plum – not specifically. Here’s what happened:

I toyed for a while – before the present story was conceived – with the idea of creating a character named Serendipity who was known to her friends as “Dippy”. An overtly Wodehousian strategy, generally speaking, but I wanted the specifics to be original. But I abandoned the “Dippy” idea as being too derogatory. Later on, while working on a musical project entitled Silly Image Pillowhead, I was storing the relevant files on my computer under the abbreviation SIP. I started thinking of the project as “Sippy”, and it soon occurred to me that this was an appealingly Wodehousian nickname for a character. But a nickname for what? Eureka! Serendipity still fit the bill. At the time, I had forgotten – if I ever knew – that there actually was a Sippy (though it was a “he”, and not a Serendipity) back there somewhere in Wodehouse’s collected works. Perhaps my subconscious had retained it. But I think my path to the name was independent of this. And by the time I stumbled on P.G.’s “Sippy” again, my character was immutably Sippy to me.

JC-E again, March 2002

All Wound Up With Sippy

by Jonathan Caws-Elwitt

If the *Mary Poppins* music box had not been so annoying, my friend Sippy Lippenbaum might still be wearing her smart herringbone suit to dinner parties. We might have seen her in it this very weekend. Then again, she might have spilled a champagne-beaujolais cocktail on it anyway, on just about any occasion lending itself to herringbone and beaujolais and spills -- of which, fortunately, there are many.

"Don't focus on the stain, focus on the dress," Sippy once said to me.

"Agreed -- depending upon where the stain is," I replied. "I've cautioned you against drinking champagne while lying down."

"If you've been advising me about things when you were lying down," she said with that miniscule upward adjustment of pitch which indicates that she is deliberately misconstruing something in the interest of general banter, "I'm afraid I probably haven't paid attention to the content, only the tone. Did you know that you make a sort of nice, horizontal gargle?"

I was not quite sure how to respond to this. Both "yes" and "no" would have seemed to constitute a digression from the thread, such as it was, of the conversation. So I smiled and let her continue, a prospect guaranteed by the momentum of someone like Sippy.

"Clever men are almost always garglers."

I smiled again. I had liked the previous sentence better. But, after all, that's what previous sentences are for, in the uneditable fabric of spontaneous conversation.

To return to the herringbone -- I am drawn by its soothing, mesmerizing vibrations -- its fate was unalterably decided by a tchotchke programmed to play one chorus of "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" over and over again -- first jauntily, then more and more haltingly, till its mechanical impetus reluctantly abated.

Very soon after Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke lit up the marquee with *Mary Poppins* -- so soon, in fact, that the musical spinoff market had not yet been upstaged by John Coltrane blowing "Chim Chim Cheree" back up the chimney and into the jazz stratosphere -- someone had decided to manufacture commemorative music boxes designed to look like slowly rotating rooftops surmounted by grinning Dicks Van Dyke and simpering Julies Andrews, one of each per roof.

When "Nana" Cavendish -- known more generally as Linnaea Cavendish, "Nana" being reserved for her two grandchildren (and those speaking to them about her in the third person) -- purchased one of the aforementioned music boxes, it had been an afterthought. "Wouldn't that be nice for the children?" she had asked herself on her way out of the bustling mid-1960's department store. Unfortunately, as it had been a rhetorical question, she had not paused to reflect on what the most accurate answer might be. Indeed, in less time than it takes to tell it, she was once again on her way, her shopping bag this time slightly heavier to the tune of one *Mary Poppins* music box.

"You realize you can't stop the stupid thing once you wind it up," was Jan Cavendish's third comment on the subject after it had been presented to the family by Nana. The preceding comments, in chronological order, had been "How thoughtful, Mom," and "Okay, kids, time to put it away now." The audience for each successive remark had been progressively more intimate; the third judgment was entertained only by the ears of Jan's husband.

"And I don't remember where my mom *did* put it away," Marigold Cavendish explained to Sippy some thirty years later.

"Well, I never assumed it would be easy." Sippy furrowed her brow as she looked around the clutter of the Cavendish home. Piles of papers, magazines, sports equipment, kitchen utensils, unopened corrugated parcels, bags full of recyclable bottles, vitamins from the drugstore, correspondence in shoeboxes and shoes in tote bags, jewelry, canned goods, linens, record albums, library books and automotive supplies flourished everywhere -- and this was just the powder room we were peeking into. "Where's the thrill in an easy quest, anyway? Give me a challenge, I say!" Sippy's voice reached a hearty crescendo as she tried to roll up her sleeves for effect -- finding with a quick, downward glance that they were, in fact, already rolled up. So, instead, she rolled them down and buttoned them, endeavoring to make it look like this preparation was crucial to the success of her mission.

Marigold reminded us that once she had finished watering the plants, we'd be on our own. Jan and Dave Cavendish were off sailing, though they had graciously left all their clutter behind for us to explore.

"Remind me again why this is important," I politely asked once Marigold had pulled out of the driveway.

"Oh, I never meant to imply that it was *important*," Sippy corrected amiably. "I just said I found the prospect of tracking down the music box to be *extremely compelling*, and that I wasn't particularly interested in doing much of anything else until I'd found it. Why -- do you wish we weren't doing it?"

"No, not at all. I just didn't want it to be important and for me not to know why, in case someone should ask me for an article they're writing or something. But I still don't think I've grasped the significance of this music box to whatever it is you're trying to accomplish."

Sippy is always in motion, but she never brushes aside a sincere request for an explanation -- even repeated requests for the same elaborate explanation, when the requester has had some trouble assimilating it.

"I'll start at the beginning." She always does. I think more people should start at the beginning like Sippy. Sometimes, when we're out for a leisurely restaurant meal and we're in a particularly relaxed mood, Sippy will start at the beginning three or four times over the wine alone, particularly if I encourage her.

"When someone at the office mentioned *Mary Poppins* the other day and Marigold chimed in -- if you will -- with her recollections of a family MP music box, something stirred deep within me. I remembered that I'd had this same music box when I was a kid. Unfortunately, I also remember it smashing to bits one day when I accidentally knocked it off the hall table. But what I especially loved about the music box -- because of course I couldn't stand to listen to the stupid thing -- was a 'secret compartment' in the bottom that had a little picture of Julie Andrews' face affixed inside it. Not that I was particularly a Julie Andrews fan; I just thought it was very cool that there was this hidden compartment under there with a picture in it that nobody else knew about. What can I say? I was seven years old."

"But you're a little older than that now," I pointed out.

"You said that last time."

"Sorry."

"No need to be. I'm not. But the point is, though I am still not particularly a Julie Andrews fan -- or even generally a Julie Andrews fan -- my colleague Francis is both."

"Right! Now I remember. Francis wants the music box with the secret compartment."

"'Craves' is more like it. Or rather, he *would* crave it, if he believed it existed. You see, he considers himself a thorough expert on all Julie paraphernalia. He says he knows all about these music boxes, and they *don't* have secret compartments, with or without pictures in them."

"Has he ever seen one?"

"The funny thing is, he hasn't. They're awfully rare now, I guess, and he's just seen them listed in collectible magazines and so forth. But they are not listed as containing secret compartments."

"And your own memory of this secret compartment"

"Is, according to Francis, the fantasy of a seven-year-old. He probably thinks it's some kind of pre-adolescent girl's latent sexual obsession, the beautiful grown-up woman's face cherished in the secret box on the underside. Actually, Francis has never said anything like that at all -- not to me, at any rate -- so I suppose I should take credit myself for that romanticized analysis, fictitious though it is. The truth, of course, is that my music box darn well *did* have a secret compartment with a picture of Julie Andrews in it, and I intend to prove it."

"But the collector magazines"

"Are obviously edited by people who are too stuffy to turn something upside-down and fidget with it. Some people just are, you know."

After hours of fruitless rummaging in the Cavendish place, we were about to leave in a mood of temporary discouragement. Suddenly, we heard a car in the driveway. A few moments later, Marigold's brother Lumen was stepping through the door, calling out a tentative "Hello?" to the as yet undisclosed visitors whose presence had been foretold by the strange car in the driveway. (I use the term "strange" advisedly; Sippy's little car is one of the few in town painted like a handsome paisley dressing gown.)

"Oh hi, Lumen, I didn't know you were in town," said Sippy nonchalantly.

"Uhh . . . *Sippy*, is it?" Lumen replied through a flicker of semi-recognition.

"Yes. Lumen remembers me from that big party Marigold threw last year," Sippy proudly explained. "You know, the one at which I had a mug of mulled wine and had a very enjoyable, but rather intense, reaction to it. Remember?"

"Indeed," I said. "That is, I missed the party itself, but I definitely remember the part after I picked you up."

"Just come on in, Lumen. Sorry about the mess. I guess nobody told you, huh?"

"Er -- about the mulled wine, you mean?"

"No no, about the *music box*."

"The music box -- of course." Lumen smiled agreeably.

"Oh, then you *do* know."

"No." Lumen awaited further explanation with the air of someone who is about to receive a birthday present.

I went into the kitchen to make some coffee while Sippy brought Lumen up to date. I was in this for the long haul, but at the moment I was a little restless. I turned on a small black-and-white television, and briefly watched an imported troupe of avant-garde comics engage in an incomprehensible routine involving a cardboard clock. I snapped them off.

As the coffee dripped, I gazed out the window at a small garden's worth of gregarious flowers. Ever since I'd known Sippy, each new day had greeted me like an eager puppy bounding onto the bed. I wondered what it was like to *be* Sippy. If one was oneself the source of such exuberance, did the entire rest of the world appear boring and sluggish? That couldn't be, I decided, for the exuberant ones seem somehow to derive endless stimulation from the rest of us, and from life in general.

As I returned to the living room, Lumen was trying, without much success, to bring Sippy around to the salient points of her story. She had somehow digressed into another anecdote about Marigold's notorious party.

". . . . and so I said, 'Marigold, darling, you've spilt red wine all over my cotton sun-dress, and everyone knows, dear, that it's *white* wine with cotton. Anyway, that's the last time I take a cha-cha lesson in a cramped kitchen.' Oh, I'm sorry, Lumen -- we were talking about the music box, weren't we?"

"I don't wish to seem rude," said Lumen. "But I am expecting company here this evening, and the house appears to need some" -- his polite smile waned for just an instant -- "tidying up."

"Well, we shall of course stay and help you clean up," said Sippy adroitly.

"Offer appreciated," said Lumen with a look of mild anxiety. "But, really, I don't think I can -- er, that is -- please, it's really not necessary." He was now courteously

holding the door open for us. "You are, of course, more than welcome to come back and search further for this accordion, or whatever it was. The house will be entirely empty next week -- we'll all be out of town -- and we'd be delighted to have you as our guests at that time."

We had somehow been ushered out the door during this display of deferred graciousness, and we found ourselves walking to the car.

"Well, I suppose we'd better check our calendars for next week," Sippy remarked.

"Why?" I asked.

She was genuinely puzzled by the question. "You heard him -- we're welcome to come back."

"Yes, but just because he said we're *welcome* to come back doesn't necessarily mean it's worth doing. He could just as easily have said, 'You're welcome to roll up the bedroom rug and stand upside down in a tray of shaving cream'"

"You think we really could?" Her eyes were alight, so I kissed her.

The next day Sippy asked me to meet her at home after I got through with my usual Sunday house-cleaning orgy. When I arrived, Sippy was chatting with her friend Aurora. The two women were in wet bathing suits and puffy towels, though I saw no evidence of a large body of water within the apartment. Aurora is the type of friend who walks in with a perfunctory knock and stretches out on your couch, so that if you're chatting at the dining room table you have to keep craning your neck to include her in the conversation.

"Well," Aurora was saying to Sippy, "You caused quite a sensation there on the beach today."

"Nonsense. I merely did what any other sensible beachgoer would have done under the circumstances."

"I hardly call playing the banjo while waterskiing in an unmatched plaid bikini strictly 'sensible'," Aurora answered.

"I never said what I *did* was sensible," Sippy pointed out calmly. "I said that a sensible beachgoer would have done it. Sensible people are capable of doing silly things, you know, and after all I'm on vacation this week," she added with impeccable logic.

"I still think you were showing off with your banjo, and distracting people in that eyesore of a bathing costume."

"Well, don't blame me. It's *your* bathing suit," Sippy retorted.

"No it isn't," insisted Aurora. "It's two separate pieces from two unrelated bathing suits."

"Well, if it will make you happy, I promise that next time we go to the beach I won't waterski while playing the banjo in an unmatched plaid bathing suit. Now, where did I put my neon tuba?"

"You know, I think you're a bit of an exhibitionist.," her friend observed. "Oh, hello Jeremy."

"Hi. Sippy dear, is there some reason you wanted me here other than to entertain me with Aurora's innuendoes regarding your seaside demeanor?"

"Jeremy, you're so sexy when you're acting all dry and deadpan. Don't you think so, Aurora?"

I couldn't tell whether the brief giggle Aurora gave by way of reply meant sincere assent to the proposition that I was sexy or innocent amusement at the idea that Sippy considered me to be sexy. I've received the definite impression that Aurora harbors an abstract fantasy of going to bed with me; but I tend to think the concept is built mostly out of curiosity, the way some people fantasize about driving through the Midwest -- once.

"Jeremy, tonight I'm going to do music box research in the microforms room at the public library downtown," Sippy continued. "So I sort of figured you'd like to come along?"

"Of course. With that in mind, is it okay if I turn on some classical music to get me in a microforms mood?" The suggestion was approved by all, so I flicked on the public radio station.

"Oh, I like this," said Sippy. "What is it?"

"I think it's Debussy," said Aurora.

"Oh, I bet you're right," said Sippy. "You know, I'm always finding holes in my musical knowledge, and I daresay Debussy is a big, Debussy-shaped hole."

Dinner was calling, in a hot, saucy voice. One of the charming things about Aurora is that when she invites herself over for supper, she insists on doing the cooking.

"You know," said Aurora between mouthfuls, "You guys had better hurry up and track down your exotic music box, before it becomes trendy and every pop culture historian on the block goes after them."

"She's got a good point, Sippy," I said. "I can just see Nickname writing a column about the *Mary Poppins* music box next week."

Star local author Nicholas "Nickname" Sobriquet was one of those nonfiction writers who had the unfortunate gift of turning a fascination with deserving ephemera into a repertoire of overblown, oversold prose in those national magazines whose editors -- and possibly even the readers, though no one's ever sure about that -- eat up this kind of thing. Sippy once observed that Sobriquet mixed metaphors the way the machine at Sears mixes paint. Professional critiquing aside, though, we liked Nickname personally and always enjoyed running into him at parties, restaurants, and "Over 30 Night" at the skating rink. He was a genial guy who gave the impression of having deliberately gone bald just to show you how pointy his head could be.

"Yeah, I'll have to send him off the trail next time I see him," said Sippy. "I'll tell him we're on the track of a rare set of Bob Cummings marbles. What do you think, does that sound plausible?" I shrugged noncommittally; but, like most of Sippy's questions, this one was rhetorical -- though both Aurora and I knew that this didn't mean she didn't value our input and generally love us to pieces. "He can write a groundbreaking essay on 'Bob Cummings Marbleobilia Rolls On' that will set the cafe tables spinning down the sidewalk."

"With similar articles soon appearing in print by all his colleagues," I added.

"Yeah, the publishing world is way too small," sighed Aurora, who was trying to break into it.

"That's why Oxford University Press includes a magnifying glass with their dictionaries," said Sippy.

As we cleared the table, Sippy grabbed me by the elbow. "Jeremy, would you look and see if I've got parsley stuck between my teeth?"

"Delighted," I said. "That's the most interesting offer I've had all day."

“Seriously . . . do I have parsley all over my teeth?”

“Not *all* over, no. Don’t worry.”

After about thirty-five squeaky minutes of microfilm research, Sippy muttered something that sounded like “Wf rgfble zz ybbrqlbm fflibbl myr!”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, I said, ‘Why isn’t it organized under year?’ Don’t mind me. I’m just talking to myself.”

“Well, say hello for me.”

"Aha!" said Sippy, quite aloud, after another ninety minutes. "The MP music boxes were manufactured by Songbox, Inc. of Dayton, Ohio."

"Aren't libraries wonderful," I said sincerely. I had been assigned the task of perusing microfilmed popular magazines of the era for ads for the music box, which had been fruitless but which had provided me with a lot of entertainment, as I enjoy looking at 1960's fashions. In addition, I was amused by one magazine's tendency to put the right caption under the wrong photo, not to mention its proclivity for plenty of other editorial oversights -- if one can even call them that in a publication that showed no sign of anything I would describe as editorial attention. Sippy, meanwhile, had taken the ultimately more productive route of slogging through a trade journal called *Hollywood Novelty Merchandise Quarterly*.

"So what does it say? Besides the manufacturer's name and location, I mean."

"Not much," Sippy frowned. "MUSICL BX, CERAM SHELL w/ MECHNSM, 3 1/2" DIAM. METAL BASE."

"Shnykens! Even Nickname writes better than that, usually."

"Yes, well of course it's just a catalogue-style listing. Though I secretly hoped it would say 'UNDERSDE COMPARTMT/PHOTO' or something." Suddenly Sippy smiled at me fondly. "Did you say 'Shnykens' just now?"

I shrugged modestly.

The momentary diversion behind her, Sippy continued. "I think the next step is to

visit that eccentric toy collector who's got the little shop downtown.”

“He's open Tuesday evenings,” I said.

“I'd better write that down,” said Sippy, “Or I'm likely to think it's Wednesday instead. Tuesday and Wednesday are both orange-sherbet color in my mind.”

Believe it or not, I knew this already. “Dinner first?” I asked.

“Of course. You choose the place, and I'll meet you.”

Sippy was getting ready to leave -- as were the library staff -- but I was now having trouble tearing myself away from my own microfilm, where my attention had wandered to a feature on North American fossil finds. “Did you know that the Columbian mammoth stood four meters tall in its stocking feet?” I said as the lights dimmed over our bank of film readers.

Upon arriving at the Pup & Pumpkin Pub on Tuesday night, I launched into an anecdote that I knew Sippy would appreciate. One of my weaknesses is that if I say something witty, I want my friends to know all about it, whether or not they happen to be there at the time. So if they're not, I grab a bit of spotlight and re-tell the story later. My feeling is that if I can't be as brilliant as Shaw and Wilde, I can at least emulate their healthy sense of self-celebration.

“Today I finally got that stuff of yours over to the cleaners,” I began. Sippy and I have a neat arrangement whereby I do some of the errands she finds it a strain to organize, and she, in turn, does salubrious things with my appliances and plumbing and other household objects I'd prefer not to touch. Sippy is possessed of the sort of selective energy that could launch her into refinishing a coffee table before you could say “This is not the table I meant,” but who would balk at driving this same table three blocks to the used furniture dealer who had offered to buy it.

“Why can't furniture just move itself?” Sippy would say. “I mean, these pieces all have *legs*, right? I think that anything that calls itself a 'dresser' ought to be able to get dressed and out of the house without my help.”

But I was telling you about telling Sippy my story. “So, the customer service person at the cleaner's was sorting through what I'd put on her counter.

“Let's see . . . one blazer and four skirts,” said the clerk.

“Yes,” I quipped, “It's an outfit for an octopus.” And the clerk chuckled.”

"But wait a minute," said Sippy, who always listens to my anecdotes with complete attention to detail. "Since an octopus is really just a head and eight *arms* with no legs or body at all, it would really just wear four blazers, and no skirts. Now if you'd said 'cuttlefish' . . ."

"Yes, but then the cleaner probably wouldn't have known what a cuttlefish was," I said with the suave assurance of someone who doesn't himself know what a cuttlefish is and is not about to lose a stranger's 9 a.m. chuckle to a technicality. "Anyway, they'll be ready Thursday."

"Thursday. Great. Thanks, Jeremy." Sippy had her calendar on the table, and I urged her to put it away as the waiter approached. The last time she'd had her calendar spread out in front of her as we ordered, she had absent-mindedly requested the third Sunday in October in place of a salad.

"Now, try to relax and enjoy your meal, though I know you're over-eager to continue the quest."

"Thanks, Jer, I will." She turned to the waiter. "I'll have two of your free-range eggs -- over-eager, please."

During the meal, Sippy was preoccupied, as she tends to be when obsessed with whatever she happens to be currently obsessed with. I am one of those people who are noisy about eating soup -- "When Jeremy Eats Soup, People Listen" is what they say -- and yet, on this occasion, I slurped to the bottom of the bowl without distracting Sippy once.

We were the only customers that night in Albert's Attic. But since Albert was perfectly content by himself among his toys, and delighted with a minimum of one visitor, he was overjoyed to receive the two of us.

"Come in, friends," he beckoned. "I hope you like Tony Bennett, because I'm listening to the 1958 long-player I just took in. But hey, if you don't like Tony Bennett we can listen to something else. Maybe you like rumba records? I like rumba records, except when the percussion is mic'd too high, of course. Say, why do you think all the orchestra LPs went stereophonic? Just because the technology was there? You're probably right, the record companies couldn't resist. Oh, help yourself to tea if you want. The cups are Fiestaware."

I always feel awkward interrupting a rollicking monologue, but Sippy was wise enough to know that if she waited for a gap in Albert's conversation, we'd never get

down to business.

"Albert, what do you know about the *Mary Poppins* music box?"

Albert looked genuinely perplexed. "What is this? Something in the air tonight? Like I told the last two, I have *never* had that thing in my shop. Don't think I've even seen one."

"Do you mean that you've had other people in here asking about it?" I stammered.

Albert's kind face dissolved into laughter. "Good one, eh? Nah, I was just kidding. Nobody ever asks about that. Sure, I know what it is. But I was serious when I said I'd never seen one. More tea?" Albert had not finished delighting in his little bit of mischief. "People *always* fall for that, when I get all befuddled-looking and remark how strange it is that they're the 'third one tonight'. I think it makes them feel like they're onto something mysterious and wonderful. And it's got to be three in a row, naturally -- three is *funnier* than four, and ever-so-slightly more plausible. Of course, I always tell them right away I'm just fooling. Hee hee, 'third one tonight' . . . I love it."

"Do you know who *might* have a the music box?" Sippy finally asked, after we had allowed him to revel sufficiently in his own puckishness.

"I can't think who in this town would have one for sale. Maybe a private collector might have it, but I don't know how you'd find out, short of running an ad in the paper. Of course, if you're really serious you can always take a trip to the MOMT in Rochester."

"The MOMT?" we said on cue and in unison.

"Sure -- the Museum of Odd Musical Toys. It's funny, I'm almost getting the impression that you've never been there." And the brochure he handed us showed that the MOMT was not something he had made up -- though I suppose, in this era of desktop publishing run rampant, he really might have done so if adequately motivated.

Sippy and I had plans for Friday night, and Saturday night there was to be an open-ended party at the home of our friends Quill and Cantata. This event was sure to require a certain amount of energy. I remember Sippy remarking at one of their previous parties that the living room was so crowded that some of the guests had to share a subjective reality.

I showed up at Sippy's place right after work on Friday. "Hi, Sippy," I called as I walked in the door. "It is I," I added just to be elegant.

"I am delighted to see you, darling," she said after we'd kissed hello. "But I must tell you that I would re-write your last line as 'It's me.' I've never warmed up to 'It is I.' One might as well say, 'I am It.' "

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, you *are* It," I answered. She responded to this by covering her eyes and beginning to count to fifty.

"Any entertaining stories to relate?" she asked as we settled onto the couch.

"Well, nothing worth retelling," I said. I am fortunate enough to work among some rather jocular people, and I always relish office humor because it is so much more entertaining than office *work*. But I've noticed that, like cheap ice cream, our nine-to-five hilarity sometimes doesn't survive the trip home. One hates to arrive in a T-shirt that says "You Had To Be There."

"If you can wait a few minutes, Jer, Aurora has offered to give me a special makeup job for tonight." I hadn't even known that Aurora was with us, but she now waved at me from around the corner of the apartmental "L".

"Fine," I said. "It's still a little early for dinner, and it's a turn-on watching you get made up." Aurora gave me a dirty look as Sippy blushed right where she had been about to apply the blush.

Aurora's makeup patter is an evening's worth of entertainment in itself. I think I enjoy this shtick even more than the one where she imitates a weather radio, complete with interference. (If this doesn't sound entertaining to you, I would advise you never to ask Aurora what it's doing outside.)

"Okay," she was instructing Sippy. "Pout your lips. Okay, now squint. Good. Now the Stan Laurel face . . . now Cary Grant in *Walk Don't Run*, now Jimmy Durante watching a baseball game" Aurora was "Show People", which as I understood it meant not only that she was unfailingly boisterous but also that she was buddies with all the other Show People, who had all been in all the same plays and all sleep together in one big bed at night.

Though my attention had not wandered, I had evidently begun -- unconsciously -- to whistle and tap my fingers on the glass coffee table, for suddenly Aurora said, "Hey, no offense, Jeremy, but would you mind doing that some other time -- like, for example, when I'm not here?"

"Sorry!" I said, surprised that I'd been doing it at all.

"I *like* his whistling," said Sippy kindly. "As regards the finger-tapping, I shall abstain from the voting."

But Aurora was once again absorbed in her work. "All right, hon, suck in your cheekbones like David Bowie." I needn't tell you that Aurora never calls Sippy "hon" except when she's doing her makeup.

After about ten minutes more of this, Aurora was finished, and Sippy looked like . . . well, she looked like Sippy with makeup. I'd known, of course, that she would not come out of the session looking like Jimmy Durante. Otherwise I would have intervened.

"Well, Jeremy, what do you think?" asked Sippy. I feigned sleep -- unconvincingly, a little game of ours. "Jeremy!"

"Huh? Oh, I'll have the fruit cup, and a side of garlic bread, please."

Aurora was collecting her things. "I've got to go," she explained. "My friends are supposed to be coming over at 7, and I don't want to miss their phone call saying they'll be late." An affectionate smile flashed at us, and then she was gone.

"Aurora moves fast," I commented.

"Yes," said Sippy. "She runs a country mile in a New York minute."

Sippy's coffee table (on which my unpopular finger-tapping had recently been staged) was currently strewn with the paraphernalia of her "Teach Yourself Italian" course. During her studies, I had found myself in the position of being offered, in good student Italian, an imaginary cup of coffee several times per evening, and I'd been waiting with interest to find out what I would get offered as the lessons became more advanced.

"Parenthetically," I began with the syntactical awkwardness that characterizes my complex relationship with my native tongue, "I remark that our friend Aurora is a delightful nut, fully worthy of the devotion you show her."

"Mmmm, I adore parentheses," said Sippy. "They're so cozy and intimate. One can really speak candidly when one is between closed parentheses."

Well, I know when I'm being seduced.

"I hope you like the stew," said Cantata. "I used Bermuda onions -- so named because their baggy, larger-than-life shape was once thought to be reminiscent of a human being wearing Bermuda shorts." Cantata was constantly extending her discourse with footnotes, having inherited a large quantity of them from a long line of verbose ancestors.

"Hello, Steve," I said as I spotted our friend Steve Evening. "How are you tonight?"

"Fine, just an ordinary day -- present company excepted. But I got off on the wrong foot this morning. I was nine-tenths of the way through the Puzzle when I found myself face to face with a word I'd never seen before, "potamogale" -- which, I soon learned, my dictionary declines to define by shrugging its thumb-indexed shoulders and saying merely 'see *otter shrew*'. Well, personally I found it unnecessary to see the otter shrew on this particular occasion, as I was rather tired of crosswords anyway."

"Doesn't sound like much help," I sympathized. "I don't suppose you brought the tiresome thing with you -- the puzzle, I mean, not the otter shrew. I have a kinky taste for finishing other people's crosswords. That's the main reason I enjoy plane travel."

"Yes, of course, I should have had the presence of mind to bring it along," said Evening. "Unfortunately, I had the absence of mind to leave it at home. Ah! Memory! . . . um . . . well, something in Latin." His dramatic apostrophe here deteriorated into an emphatic chomping of celery.

"Yes, it's a universal complaint," said Cantata.

"Oh, I hear those are *so* useful," said Sippy. "Just buy one complaint at the hardware store, and by changing the attachments you can complain about virtually anything around the house."

"Is there any special occasion for this party?" asked Sippy, even though we knew there usually wasn't.

"It *is* my nephew's birthday," offered Steve Evening.

"Ah," said Sippy. "That would, from your point of view, be what mathematicians call a 'second-order birthday', and genealogists a 'birthday once-removed'."

"Well," said Evening, "If they have a word for my inability to ever remember how

old he's turning in a particular year, I don't think I wish to know it." And he crunched a cracker.

There was a brief lull in the conversation. "I feel like it's my turn to make a witty comment, but none are forthcoming," I said apologetically. "If I wake up in the middle of the night with something scintillating to contribute . . . rest assured that I'll turn over and go back to sleep."

"I see you have your *MLA Style Guide* right next to your *Old Farmer's Almanac*," Sippy observed as she scanned Cantata's bookshelf. "That's what I'd call 'prepared for anything'."

"Well, at the very least I'm prepared for properly quoting an old farmer."

"I've always admired your book collection," Sippy continued. "Oh! There's *Chips Off the Old Benchley*. I like that so much I've worn out three pairs of glasses re-reading it. And I don't even wear glasses. And look at all these things about animals and rocks and so forth. Your interests seem to be so diverse, and constantly growing."

"Well, if a *professor* can't take an academic interest in just about everything that comes along, I'd like to know who can. But I think, in my case, it's partly an expression of a quest for identity. I keep exploring all the things I'm interested in, with the hope of finding the things I'm *really* interested in."

"Hmm." said Sippy. "Have you tried looking under the sofa cushions?"

"We don't have a sofa," said Cantata.

Sippy sighed. "I knew I wouldn't be any help," she said earnestly. "Identity crises aren't my bag. Very few things are my bag, really. It's actually more like a 'baggie' -- ziplocked, and not much gets into it."

"Well, Sippy," said Cantata indulgently, "I've tried to forge my own identity, as you evidently do yours. But I find it can be so hard to get the ingredients some days."

"Gee, I think of you as a Writer, Cantata," I said.

"Pass," she answered. "Every time I wax poetic, I slip on my own metaphors. I do enjoy scribbling a little, though." I had found that Cantata's "scribblings" were never of publishable quality -- they were too good.

“Well, but getting back to the issue of identity . . . I’m sure your Proust would have something to say on the subject.”

“Yeah, but I’m not wading through three thousand pages to find out what it is.”

"I just want you to know," Colline Hill was saying to Quill as I entered the kitchen, "That your parties are the only ones for which I'd miss a playoff game on TV."

"Oh, is this one of those playoff games that might turn out to be the last game of the playoffs, depending who wins?" Quill asked this with the polite but superficial curiosity of someone who will probably lose interest completely in the middle of the answer.

"No, this can't be the last game. Well, I mean it *could* be, if all the basketballs turned into pumpkins or something. Otherwise, no." Quill had already walked away -- gesturing apologetically -- to refill a bowl with Spanish peanuts; but I was audience enough for this sort of thing, so Colline did not feel like her scenario had been wasted.

"A colorful and elegant paradigm you've got there," I said.

"Thanks," said Colline. "I had a decorator. Really, I don't mean to bore everyone by talking about sports. I used to go to games all the time when I lived in a large city, and that kept me from blabbing sports outside the stadium. But this town just isn't Chicago, and"

“Good thing, too,” said Sippy, entering the room, “What with the time difference.”

Colline Hill's given name had been H el ene, she having been born in France of British parents. Upon coming to the U.S., she had adopted the homonymic nickname “Colline” as a sort of transatlantic private joke. But she was a favorite at the local sports bars despite this.

“Speaking of soccer,” said the irrepressible Colline, though we had not been, “Did either of you read that column today by Sylvie Silverman?”

“Sylvie Silverman?” I echoed.

“Well, her by-line says ‘Sylvia’, but in person we all call her ‘Sylvie’.”

“So what did Sylvia --“

“Enh -- *Sylvie*,” Colline corrected. Though she had Spanish peanuts cupped in one hand and a tonic water grasped in the other, she even managed a peremptory wag of the finger. (And if only I could recall which finger, I’d probably be in front of the bathroom mirror right now, outfitted with peanuts and tumbler, practicing the move.)

“What did *Sylvie* have to say?” Sippy persisted.

But we never learned what *Sylvie* had to say, as Colline had been distracted by the doorbell. “Oh! I think Frieda and Marc just got here. What’s their dog’s name?” Colline was, in fact, *not* the most exhausting person I knew. I have a beloved pen-pal named Dulsie Dearing, for example, whose signature alone enervates me. On the other hand, one can put a letter away in a drawer or something.

I ran into Quill as we both headed for the drinks table, I to down some water, he to give the bar his hostly attentions.

“I noticed Sippy throwing potato chips at your hair a little earlier this evening,” he said chattily.

“Yes. And frankly, I’m delighted that she considers me to be someone with enough hair left to throw potato chips at. By the way, Quill, I must say it’s very cuddly and charismatic of the two of this household to throw a party the same day you yourself have returned from a transcontinental business trip.” Quill had a job that involved making a business trip about once a year. I could probably name every city he’d been to since we’d known him, but I could never remember what the business actually was. “Did you have a good flight, at least?”

“Oh, not bad. But have you ever had that awkward experience on one of those red-eyes, where you wake up rumpled beside a similarly-bedraggled stranger and feel like you’ve just had a relationship with her?” Quill was trying to put ice cubes in my glass, and I was trying wordlessly -- and unsuccessfully -- to convey that I didn’t require any.

“Don’t worry, she probably felt queasy looking at you first thing in the morning, too,” I consoled. “Hopefully she got a good fare.”

“Indeed. Anyway, she smiled at my baggage later. Oh, golly! I hope there are no Freudians listening.”

“Well, I just heard someone in the bleachers ordering popcorn in a Viennese accent,” I quipped.

"And the vendor says, 'I'm sorry, all our popcorn has American accents.' " Sippy had joined us.

"We should probably leave soon, Sip," I said.

"Be sure to take some leftovers with you," said Quill.

"Of course. That's really why we came," I assured him. "Do you know that last time, you sent us home with one of your exquisite little pizzas, and I gobbled it up the next day at one sitting? Well, *I* was sitting. The pizza, as I recall, was reclining."

The Museum of Musical Toys was one of those institutions that's "in someone's house". In this case the someone was Sonora Jouet, a woman of about 60 who appeared to spend most of her life smiling.

"I could kind of, like, live here, y'know?" murmured Sippy as we took in the four cozy showrooms of music boxes and other novelties.

"Yes," I agreed. "I'm not really very interested in most of these *objets*, but there's just something so soothing and welcoming about the place." As if to prove my point, a sweet West Highland terrier scurried into the room we were in and swiftly leapt up into a pleasantly-upholstered armchair behind Sippy.

"Oh, Jeremy," said Sippy. "Sometimes I just feel so *me* with you."

I glowed. Whatever it was in me that brought out Sippy's sippyness to herself, it was nothing I could identify. To tell you the truth, I never really feel particularly "me" to myself; my own self-awareness is more along the lines of noticing that something familiar is occupying the space above and below my eye-line. But as for Sippy -- well, I could focus on her as on the kinetic beauty of some illuminated fountain.

"I love it when you feel so you," I answered, vaguely aware that to the Westy it probably sounded like Sippy and I were attempting to revive a Tin Pan Alley pop song.

"You know," I said, looking around again, "I had no idea the music box industry had boomed to such an overwhelming degree in the twentieth century."

"Yeah," Sippy agreed. "I mean, I'm not in the biz, but personally I would have cut that line of *I Love Lucy* music boxes right down to just the first seven or eight."

"Umm," I assented.

"Hey!" Sippy grabbed my arm, and the Westy barked once. "There it is!"

And there, as she had observed, "it" was indeed. The Poppins box, mint condition, still in its original packaging -- which featured what I considered to be unflattering head-and-shoulders of Andrews and Van Dyke, even by Hollywood standards. (The cartoon penguin looked all right.)

They don't really bother securing their glass cases at a place like the Museum of Musical Toys. I learned this by watching Sippy coolly slide the door of this particular case to one side, reach for the box before I could say "Do you really think you should?", carefully open the package so that it could be authentically resealed, and remove the music box for inspection.

"Shnykens!" Sippy reflected. "I can't believe it, but there it is. I mean, there it isn't. I mean, what we're looking for there, isn't there."

Well, I had gotten the gist, but before I could ask what the next step was, the answer became clear. The next step was to explain to Sonora Jouet -- who had just entered the room -- why we were taking her music boxes out of their packaging and turning them upside-down.

I had correctly identified Jouet as the easygoing type. There was just a little bit of the Lumen Cavendish around her eyes when she first took in the scene, but I think we can agree that this was understandable under the circumstances.

"Shnykens," Jouet said softly, to herself. "Er . . . usually we don't take the displays out of the displays."

Sippy explained our intentions. Jouet looked pleased at our quirky obsession.

"You might be interested to know," she offered, "That I am acquainted with the artist who designed that box."

As we left the MOMT, Sippy clutched the slip of paper that bore Jouet's immaculate, old-fashioned handwriting as if she were literally afraid to let it out of her sight. " 'Wallace Wadsworth, Chief Designer, Songbox, Inc., Dayton, Ohio.' How lucky that he's still there, after all these years."

"It's funny," I reflected. "We could have just gone there in the first place, and

probably tracked him down. But it feels so much more *legitimate* this way, to be pointed toward him, personally, by the likes of Albert and Sonora. I mean, they're very much in the spirit of all this nonsense -- and you know I use the word to convey approval."

Sippy squeezed my hand as a sign of agreement. "Yes, I feel like now we'll be entering Songbox, Inc. through the Front Door of Certified Frivolity."

I've often noticed how, when one is on vacation, the most mundane detail takes on a charming glow. A tree, a mailbox, a telephone booth . . . they all seem to hum with the vibrations of sunshine and recreation. The pathetic fallacy, I know, but that won't stop me from getting my money's worth. And so I was telling Sippy as we drove into Dayton.

"Yes," said Sippy. "On a vacation, nothing is taken for granted." She's always been so good at juicing out the essence of my lengthy observations this way.

Sooner than we had expected, we turned into the block that was home to Songbox, Inc. Parking was easy here, and we found ourselves standing in front of the building. I grabbed the door handle, intending to usher Sippy into this ordinary place that had, for the moment, a special importance to her.

"It's locked!" I suddenly felt like hammering my chubby little fists against the door.

But Sippy was smiling. She had seen someone approaching along the darkened corridor that was faintly visible through the locked glass doors.

It was too good to be true. The door was being opened by a sober-looking, middle-aged man in a lab coat. He didn't even say "May I help you?" -- he simply gave us a portentous, interrogative "Yyyessss?"

Such drama usually leaves me a little tongue-tied, but Sippy was glamorously glib. "Is this Songbox, Inc.? Where you make *Mary Poppins* music boxes and so forth?"

"*Mary Poppins* boxes? Well, yes, we did make that one. That was a long time ago! I mean . . . what do you . . . uh, who *are* you?" I had to give the guy credit -- this just about covered it.

More comfortable with a specific question than I'd been with "Yyyessss?", I jumped in here with the simple, unhelpful truth. "I'm Jeremy Haxley. I'm from out of town."

“Wallace Wadsworth.” He had to open the door further to extend his hand, and Sippy slipped in as she shook it. “Won’t you come in?” he said with a slight scowl, aware moments too late that he’d been outmaneuvered.

As we walked down the dim hallway toward the fluorescent glow of an active workplace, Sippy said, “Gee, I never imagined you folks would be wearing lab coats here.”

“Well,” said Wadsworth (and I thought I detected a hint of defensiveness in his voice), “Our mechanical design room *is* a laboratory -- a dry lab, of course.”

“Good, then you should find Jeremy most entertaining,” said Sippy. “He specializes in dry humor. He’s the driest person I know -- he has a dry cleaning machine in his bathroom where most people have showers.”

It was clear that Wadsworth wasn’t getting Sippy’s little joke, so I executed a conversational wave-through. “I’m sorry, Dr. Wadsworth. You were telling us about the *Mary Poppins* music box?”

“I was?” he replied.

“Oh, you *know*,” said Sippy. “You were going to tell us about how some of them had a special compartment on the bottom, with a picture of Julie Andrews concealed in it.” I was walking behind Sippy and Wadsworth, and she turned her head to wink at me.

We now entered the design room, and Wadsworth seemed to puff himself up with territorial pride. “I am afraid you are mistaken,” he began. “Both of you,” he clarified unnecessarily. “I can assure you that none of Music Box ZN46829C was manufactured with an image in the base. I supervised the production myself.” I might have been more impressed with this testimony had Dr. Wadsworth not had a liberal dose of dried tomato sauce embellishing the lapels of his lab coat.

It seemed that our quest had climaxed in anticlimax. But Wadsworth continued speaking.

“And no amount of nagging from *him* (he indicated another technician, his contemporary, working quietly in the back corner of the lab) was going to change my mind.”

“Who’s he?” Sippy snapped to attention, the presence of this new character in the drama seeming to give her hope, for no logical reason.

“This is Theo Knipf.”

Theo Knipf’s lab coat was stained with something I took, at a distance, for root beer. “And,” I observed as he approached us, “He’s holding a music box.”

“A special music box,” Knipf corrected, as he fidgeted with the thing.

“Jeremy! It’s got the picture on the bottom!” I had rarely seen Sippy so excited.

Wadsworth seemed more peeved than surprised. “Now, Theo, don’t tell me you snuck in here on a Sunday in 1964 and ran a batch of music boxes with Julie Andrews pictures after I’d *specifically* told you not to.”

“Actually, it was Labor Day,” Knipf replied nonchalantly. “Hey, remember how that was before we leased out half the building? I was on a different floor in those days,” he informed us.

“You were on a different floor, all right,” said Wadsworth. He shrugged, shook his head in a manner that satisfactorily approximated a “tsk tsk”, then excused himself and floated into the adjoining laboratory. Knipf, looking about eight years old, now wound the music box to capacity, and instantly I remembered how irritating I actually find music boxes. In the rush to cover my ears, my elbow caught a glass of some dark brown liquid unawares, and it was the work of a moment for the substance to mark Sippy’s smart herringbone suit as “lived-in”.

“I thought this was a ‘dry lab’,” I commented between handkerchief dabs.

“Oops,” said Knipf. “Root beer.” But Sippy was too mesmerized to care.

“How many did you make like this?” I asked, partly as a way of drowning out the toy with the sound of my own voice. “I mean, in addition to the one that Sippy has grabbed out of your hand and is currently fondling?”

“Your name is *Sippy*?” answered Knipf. “What’s that, short for something?”

“Serendipity,” she said.

Knipf smiled. “I never made more than a few dozen with the special compartment. Wadsworth was right to judge that they were too expensive to produce that way -- the old stuffed shirt. I’ve got most of them in storage in the basement here, though I always keep that one in my desk drawer as a souvenir of one of my wild moments. And I do distinctly remember sneaking one of them -- just one -- out onto the market with the normal stock.”

“Mine!” shrieked Sippy with glee.

“Oh, did you end up with that one?” Knipf was definitely pleased. “I’m always tickled to know that someone actually bought one of our little products. And you got the special one. Well, well.” Theo Knipf beamed at Serendipity Lippenbaum for another moment. Then he turned and walked back toward his work, whistling a bit of something that might have been Debussy.