

Friday 24 March 2023

Dear Everyone

A rabbit walks into a wine bar and asks for a white wine spritzer, settles down with their book and just as they'd got to a key moment of the story, just at the point where Vronsky's horse falls in front of Anna, the bar tender says, "Not seen you in here before."

The rabbit explains that they're doing work on the consultant surgeon's cottage, next to Willow Haven, and behind the old Ox and Mandarin pub, replastering the downstairs.

"It's all a bit untidy," says the rabbit.

The bar tender had been chatting to the consultant surgeon earlier in the week, just as the new pension arrangements were announced. The consultant surgeon is looking to sell up and retire. Would they go back to work with this new pensions incentive, enquired the bar tender?

"Not on your Nelly!", they said. "Just need to get to August, and then its vegetable gardening and travel."

"Queen Anne, isn't it?" says the bar tender to the rabbit.

"It looks like it, but it's much earlier. Glad it's not listed, that would really be a nuisance," explained the rabbit dusting off the last vestiges of plaster dust from their fur.

"Big job?"

"Not really. About a couple of weeks work, assuming the original lath work doesn't collapse completely. The cornices are tricky, but nothing I haven't seen before," says the rabbit.

The next day, the rabbit returns, and the bar tender and the rabbit continue their chats about plastering, working in the gig economy, trying to find staff to work in hospitality, being sold into contracting out of SERPS in the mid '80s and, in the rabbit's case, relying on word of mouth for the next job. This goes on for the next few days.

Later in the week, the circus comes to town, and in the middle of the day, hot and sweaty, the circus manager puffs into the wine bar and gasps for an orange juice and soda to quench a raging thirst.

"Mighty work that is," says the circus manager. The bar tender gives a quizzical look.

"Hauling up all that canvas. Masses of it. Weighs a tonne these big tops, and when it's wet, cor blimey! Impossible work."

The bar tender thinks of his friend the rabbit, and how precarious the rabbit's life seems to be, not knowing where the next job is coming from.

The bar tender coughs to get the circus manager's attention.

"You'll never guess, we've got a talking rabbit comes in here every evening. Smart, too. Talks about anything. Politics, historic buildings, the plight of the NHS, a regular chatter box. Well read, and as erudite as you'd wish to find. A brilliant act for your circus," the bartender explains.

The circus manager says that they don't really do animal acts any more, but, well, this rabbit sounds something special.

"When you next see the rabbit, send them over to the big canvas tent. You can't miss us."

That evening, the rabbit hops up onto the bar stool, brushes off the plaster dust, and orders the white wine spritzer as has become custom.

The bar tender coughs for the rabbit's attention.

"You might have noticed, the circus is in town."

"Yep, can't miss it. Damn great canvas tent in the big field over the way," replies the rabbit.

"Well, I hope you don't mind, but I mentioned you to the circus manager, and they say they'd be very interested in meeting you with a view to giving you a job."

"What would a circus need a plasterer for?" says the rabbit.

This week, after long hours bouncing emails around as has become the majority task of the modern knowledge economy, in what Neil Vallely has dubbed futilitarianism, I settle into quiz shows. I like *Mastermind* and *University Challenge* on the telly, and *Counter Point* on the radio. I don't mind if I don't know the answers. A lot of the joy is in the discovery of new facts for their own sake, and the pleasure in seeing people revel in a specialist subject, or simply being really good at making the links in complicated questions and finding answers by dint of deduction. Like study at its very best, cross reading and indulging in learning for its sheer pleasure. Unless we're really lucky, it's a joy most of us left behind at university.

The language of school is interesting. Children love a quiz, and parents lose their minds when the idea of a test appears over the horizon. As if the world might end. Laurie Taylor on *Thinking Allowed* talks about the shift in language from the noun 'Parent', to the relative newness of the idea of 'Parenting', that pesky gerund that has moved care and love to being proactive management of the next generation's individualised competitive economic productivity. You can listen to the programme here. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001h422>

Returning to the rabbit's employment options, Simon Kuper, writing in the FT last weekend, draws our attention to the French and their debates over ways of thinking about retirement and pensions, and linking them to what we do for a living. Those lucky enough to have interesting well-paid jobs, tend to start work later in life, post university, and should, therefore, carry on longer, and those cleaning toilets or changing bed sheets in care homes for hours at a time, tend to be in the rat race younger and should then retire sooner. Might be an idea worth pursuing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5vo6Vbzpmo>

Best wishes.

Simon