Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Nest Egg Publications, Inc.

Richard Klin · Tuesday, July 6th, 2021

Nest Egg Publications, Inc.

The first half of his long drive to work was full of twists and turns. A few minutes on one road, a few minutes on another. He cleaved to these twists and turns, apprehensive that an unaware moment, one easy directional error, would send him into a winding, confusing labyrinth. Throughout this portion of the drive he remained in a state of low-level, constant alertness, taking careful note of his navigational touchstones: the large garden store with its row of potted plants, the gas station and convenience store, drive-through bank, Quaker meeting house.

At around the halfway point the twists and turns quickly evened out and the landscape—all at once and almost as if by command—underwent a dramatic shift. The terrain now became spectacular, abounding with verdant green fields, spacious manicured lawns, Colonial manor homes. On a corner stood a gleaming white Episcopal church. He took deliberate care to adhere to the posted speed limit, dutifully slowing down as he passed the prep school's stately expanse and then decelerating further, almost to a crawl, as the route curved sharply, with the car now parallel to the low-lying fence that protected the farmland from the road.

Here, at this same spot each and every morning, congregated a group of friendly cows, most of them absorbed in their morning activities, save one or two who would look over at him curiously, puzzled as to why this car was chugging by their domain.

Some minutes later, the road ascended steeply. A few mornings ago the fog had momentarily lifted to reveal a nun, in full habit, vigorously peddling her bicycle. The town, far below on the right, came into view. From this faraway vantage point, the town looked picturesque, charming; distortions that masked its hardscrabble grubbiness.

In the midst of this pastoral opulence, the town was an anomaly. Its homes and yards were tiny. Apartment houses of unpainted faux wood or faded siding appeared at regular intervals, some with laundry flapping on lines. An abandoned, jumbo concrete structure occupied an entire lot, chain-link fence and admonishing signage barring, in no uncertain terms, trespassing. The function of this mass of concrete was indecipherable; impossible to ascertain what its purpose had been or what was intended.

What was most notable about this town was that it was located around ten minutes from Connecticut. He found this, for some reason, intriguing. Although objectively, proximity to the Connecticut border was hardly exotic or even all that significant. Despite all that, it interested him

greatly.

The headquarters of Nest Egg Publications, Inc. loomed up on the right, a large, squat building painted in faded gaudy yellow, the color connoting a forced cheeriness. Rumor had it that the structure's previous incarnation had been a once-charming family domicile that had fallen into disrepair. Or a doll factory. He had heard that theory as well.

Nest Egg Publications, Inc. was where he was employed as the special projects editor. And mindful of the time—as he was every morning—the special projects editor pulled into the parking lot and hurried into the building.

The special projects editor, like all employees of Nest Egg Publications, was required to punch in upon entering and upon the workday's conclusion at five o'clock. And to punch out at the commencement of lunch hour and punch back in when reentering. He had been unaware that timecards were even in existence. At first, he had no small measure of difficulty in mastering the mechanics of proper timecard insertion, which was trickier than he remembered. This was a level of regimentation he had not experienced since his college job at an auto parts warehouse, a position he had eventually lost because of an inability to construct tight, efficiently wrapped skids of boxes.

A deep, oppressive overlay suffused the atmosphere of Nest Egg Publications, Inc. The timecards were zealously examined. Food was never to be consumed at one's desk or workstation. Personal phone calls were subject to draconian prohibitions, again on a level that the special projects editor had not experienced since his warehouse days. The restrictions extended to use of the internet, which was to be utilized for Nest Egg business and only for Nest Egg business, a policy that might have been instituted in the mid-1990s, when the Worldwide Web was a newfangled thing.

A ten-minute break was granted every morning, the entire office dutifully arising and, as one, silently filing out into the parking lot or small backyard, milling about, some of them smoking. At five o'clock the entire office again arose as a single entity and hurriedly exited the confines of Nest Egg Publications, Inc., emptying out the parking lot in a matter of minutes.

Nest Egg seemed, to the senior project editor, akin to winding up in a time warp. He occasionally doubted the company's very existence. It seemed entirely plausible that a conversation would ensue in which he would relate that he was working at Nest Egg Publications. A look of bewilderment and not a little shock would appear on the other person's face. "Why," this person would exclaim, "Nest Egg went out of business twenty years ago!"

Nest Egg's output was on the order of positive, can-do capitalism: Where the smart money was. Shrewd investing tips. Acing that job interview. Profiles of successful businessmen and entrepreneurs. Nest Egg had an entire go-to roster of academics, journalists, experts; their credentials dubious.

The special projects editor went about much of his day unsure as to the exact nature of his job duties. There were no delineated special projects. His time was spent compiling and writing supplemental material that added to Nest Egg's vast reservoir of blather, or researching topics that never seemed to make it into print.

It was difficult, at first, to discern what the bulk of the staff did. Nest Egg Publications, Inc., as he eventually discovered, was an ever-shifting, mostly female sales force that tried to unload their tried-and-true warhorses on small business schools, societies, institutions, and companies. He

became acquainted with some of these salespeople on a nodding basis, many of whom vanished after a month or so. The head of sales was an uncouth, beady-eyed man who absolutely, resolutely avoided making any eye contact whatsoever with the special projects editor.

The founder and owner of Nest Egg Publications, Inc. was Chip, an older, pink-faced man with an elaborately constructed comb-over. Chip would burst into the office at around ten o'clock every morning and devote himself to speaking loudly into the telephone, the door to his commodious office wide open so that his booming voice carried throughout much of the building. Most of the calls were devoted to drumming up new business ventures or shoring up the venerable relationships that had existed since Nest Egg's inception. Many calls, as well, were devoted to personal business: a wedding, major renovations to his back deck.

Chip's phone calls, the special projects editor came to realize, followed an almost identical format. His salutations, patter, seemingly spontaneous asides—all of these were repeated endlessly throughout the day, allowing for slight deviations, but always following the basic template. The only wild cards were Chip's jokes, of which he had an inexhaustible treasure trove. Many of these jokes were of the tasteless variety, such as his attempts at Chinese pidgin and wordplay that poked fun at Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's electrocution. Here, in his private domain, Chip would sequester himself, laughing heartily at his own witticisms, oftentimes repeating the punch line once or twice for added effect. All of this was juxtaposed against a mass of near-silent workers squirrelled away, trudging in and out for morning breaks and lunchtimes.

Chip's largesse physically manifested itself every Friday morning in the form of a large box of jelly doughnuts that appeared on the table by the receptionist's desk. The jelly doughnuts, though, remained mostly untouched, probably as a result of Nest Egg's unambiguous prohibition against consuming food at one's workstation. And there these jelly doughnuts sat, finally whisked away around four o'clock.

Nest Egg possessed an inhospitable little lunch area of a few utilitarian tables and a vintage microwave oven, detailed instructions taped to the wall and a reminder that this microwave was a privilege. Costly mishandling of it would have definite consequences.

Lunch, for the special projects editor, was more often than not a sandwich and soda obtained at the large deli across the street, the proprietors a friendly husband and wife from Peru, and then he would take his brown paper bag and perch himself on one of the town's many benches, finding a little clump of greenery or eating amid the deserted basketball court.

Strange-looking men and women ambled along the sidewalks, sometimes aimlessly milling around in groups of two or three. A screaming fight could be heard from one of the larger apartment houses; the next day two police cars, lights flashing, were positioned in front. Often the special projects editor detected the odor of grilling meat. This odor of grilling meat emanated, as it turned out, from the interior of the town's gas station.

An old, grizzled man could be observed striding purposefully throughout town. In contrast to the other denizens, this particular man moved about with a good deal of determination. The special projects editor was consuming his lunch amid the forlorn basketball court when he was startled to see this grizzled old man suddenly pop up at the entranceway and take a seat on the same bench, in close, discomforting proximity. There were only a handful of possibilities as to why this person had chosen to sit next to him. None of these possibilities were anything the special projects editor

wished to explore. Retaining as much dignity as could be salvaged under the circumstances, he scooped up his sandwich and soda and made a beeline for the exit. “Oh, am I bothering you?” the old man called out in what sounded like genuine surprise.

The special projects editor, one afternoon, chanced upon a large gathering of fifty or so bicyclists spread out over the sidewalk, all of them fitted with ultra-bright shirts of fluorescent yellows and reds and whites, a striking contrast to the town’s bland disrepair, the contrast increasing as the tones of French and Italian floated out from this gathering, inflecting the all-encompassing despondent stillness. This was the early stretch of an ambitious bike tour that would take the participants throughout the United States, a whole continental trek that had wound up here, of all places, across the street from the huge antiques shop that kept very irregular hours and that the special projects editor liked to imagine—contra any evidence or even remotest indication—was a front for some illicit activity. And within minutes the entire contingent had peeled off, the mass of bright, fluttering colors, the French and Italian, slowly fading off in the distance; Europe departing and then vanishing from sight altogether.

When the special projects editor was desirous of a change in lunchtime scenery, the only real alternative to a bench was the Parthenon restaurant. An added benefit was the Parthenon’s spacious, well-maintained bathroom. Nest Egg had, unconscionably, one and only one bathroom. At the Parthenon he could relieve his bladder at an unhurried, leisurely pace.

The Parthenon was overseen by an officious manager of indeterminate accent, his highfalutin manner dissolving into pure obsequiousness at the arrival, during this one particular lunch hour, of a bejeweled older woman. This woman—whoever she was—obviously occupied some important slot in the Parthenon hierarchy and the manager lovingly guided her to her own little table, inquiring as to her culinary preferences and laughing too loudly at her asides.

For the sake of the sheer novelty of dining in another state, he used up his precious allotted lunch hour by driving to Connecticut and using up even more of his sixty minutes searching for a suitable eatery, finally settling on a too-expensive southern barbecue restaurant. In the interests of time he was forced to gobble down mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and biscuits, all the while gulping down a large mason jar’s worth of sweet iced tea.

The easiest change of scenery was an uninspiring little park around a five-minute drive from Nest Egg. There he could take his lunch on one of the enormous logs that ran along the parking lot, observing the occasional goings-on of the town workers, their trucks entering and then exiting on the opposite side. Mothers and kids made sporadic appearances, utilizing the rusty swings and old metal slide, although what drew attention to a much greater degree was the stationary, imposing cement mixer, always parked under the same giant oak.

Although loathe to admit it, stopping off for ice cream on his ride home was the highlight of the day. Around twenty minutes into his trip was a tiny ice cream stand that had, at the most, five flavors. An abandoned, boarded-up house lay to its right and on its left was a small field. He was, almost always, the lone customer, served by the same girl each and every day. She seemed to be the sole employee, materializing out of nowhere and popping up at the front window. In time he began to converse with this girl. She was all set, she related, to join the army. Enlistment would soon follow and then it was just a matter of time.

Breezes rustled the tall grasses and trees that lay beyond the little ice cream stand. Not a car could

be heard. In moments like this he half-expected to see his ten-year-old self and his friends emerge from these woods, all of them on their bikes and peddling madly. Bound for wherever they saw fit to go at that particular moment.

Quite incongruously, a high-toned store devoted to all things equestrian was plopped smack-dab in the middle of the town. Curiosity and lack of other options drove the special projects editor to enter its environs, full of items and terms he had hitherto been unaware of nor cared to know. *Tack. Dressage*. Elaborate saddles graced the back wall. He had been on a horse perhaps once in his entire life, at a long-ago summer camp in which the horse had stayed put the entire time.

For the sake of procuring a tangible offering to his six-year-old daughter, the special projects editor purchased a large plastic figurine of a horse. His daughter displayed almost no interest in horses. Kittens and puppies, not horses, were her beat. There was simply nothing else to buy. The town lacked anything that would interest a six-year-old. The only other theoretical possibility was a Parthenon T-shirt, which would have had no appeal whatsoever and, besides, didn't come in a kid-sized version.

At first he had scoffed, in this day and age, at Nest Egg's draconian restrictions on personal email. The vehemence of these diktats gave him pause, however. And so he had taken to writing his daughter little daily missives. Knowing she was reading his cheery accounts as he was toiling away at some useless project was an unexpected comfort. It was a rediscovery of the forgotten pleasures of sending letters, which was almost a newfangled concept.

On a drizzly, cold day the special projects editor took the lunch that he had procured from the deli and drove the quick distance to the grubby little park. It had begun to rain in earnest and his was the only car in the parking lot. He was forced to remain inside his vehicle while he consumed his grilled cheese, side of potato salad, and ginger ale. The rain continued to pelt down. His car proved to be much more comfortable, in this situation, than he'd imagined.

He found himself actually drifting off in his warm car, dozing in the middle of this little park with the giant cement mixer that was lodged under a tree. He had envisioned such better things for himself. Such far, far better things, although when he tried to recollect the specifics of his earlier ambitions, he was absolutely unable to come up with anything in the way of anything tangible.

The dozing turned into full-fledged sleep. A dream began, one of startling vividness. He was in high school, comfortably ensconced on the bed in his large bedroom. The real-life rainfall here in the park was incorporated into his dream: Outside his bedroom it was also raining heavily. The dark blue of his bedroom walls buttressed the feeling of protection against the chilly, blustery weather.

A feeling of warmth, both physical and emotional, permeated the bedroom. The rain continued steadily, both in the park and in his dream, neither increasing nor abating. And he dreamed this dream, a dream of perfect, absolute contentment.

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