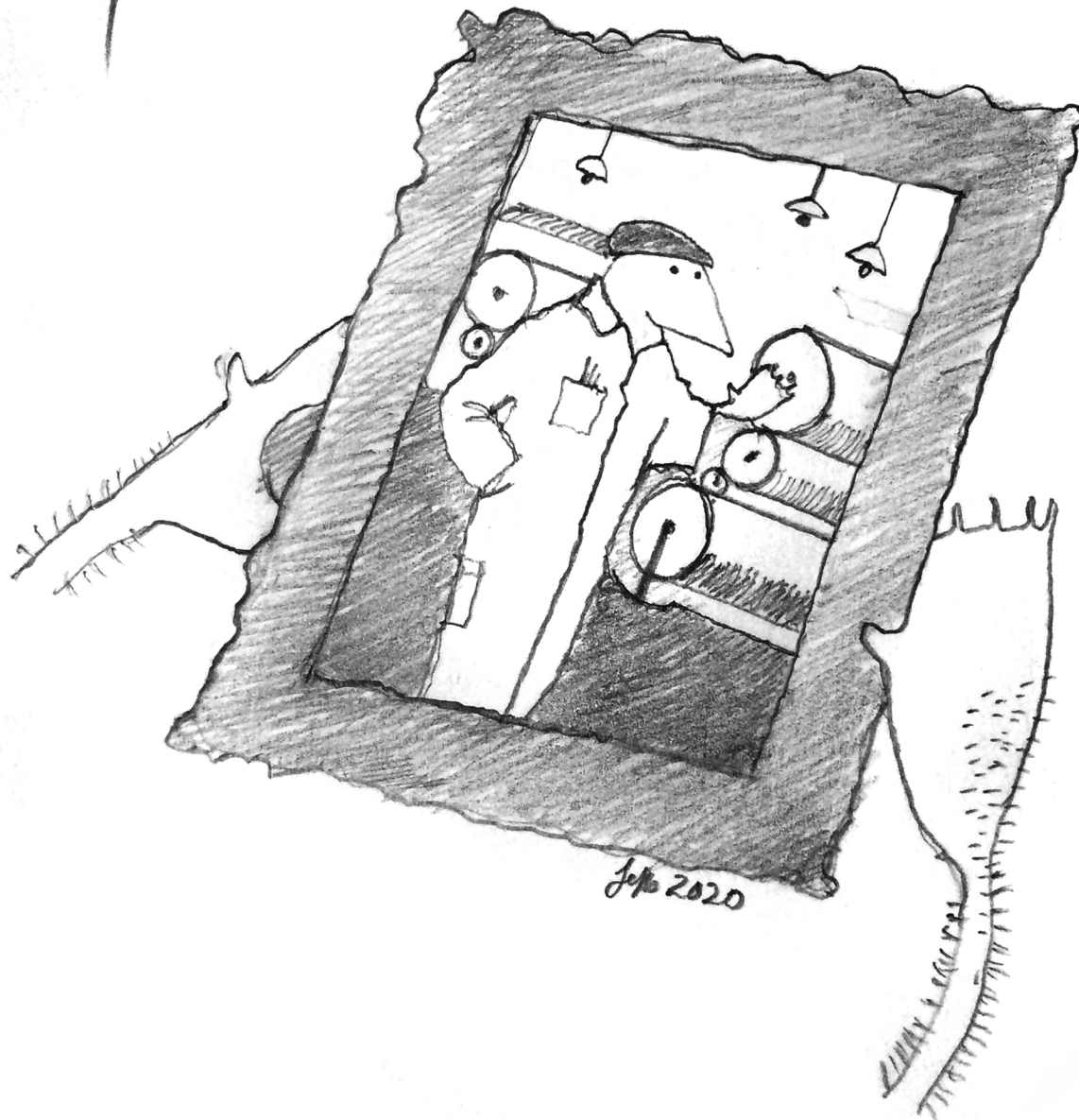


STICKY WICKET

The view from 95

Mole

I SURE AM ONE LUCKY MOLE!
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DAD!!!



Don't let it bring you down...you will come around. – Neil Young

Bad day. Okay, the sun is shining and warm (the light is in my eyes), birds are singing in the trees (lousy sky-rat vermin), and I've had a

nice breakfast (I'm already hungry). Yeh, I'm in a crummy mood. It seems as though we're never going to get out from under the pandemic (I have to stop watching the news). Also I can't figure out what's going on with one of our phenotypes, I have to think about a grant I need to write for subsequent rejection, and I have a stack of

papers from other people to review (which I won't do right now, because I'm in such a crummy mood – you'll thank me later). Oh, and I still have to do mandatory training (ick), do a couple of progress reports (double ick), and I've only started on this review chapter I'm writing, which I don't want to do (ick, ick, ick).

Unless you are reading this because you just saw it lying around (and maybe like the cartoon) on your friend's coffee table (hopefully you are social distancing, right?), you, like me, are a biomedical research scientist (BRS). And, as a BRS, you know that there are a lot of castles burning (thanks, Neil) that make us miserable. Not just the stuff that we're obligated to do, but the almost daily frustrations that come with making discoveries. Experiments that don't work. Or worse, experiments that *do* work, but don't make sense. Of course, we know that the latter may well give way to really exciting new findings, but we have to figure them out first, and it can be, umm, frustrating. Some days (like today), I want to throw my toys around, kick and scream, and have a good, long sulk. I can do that, since I'm stuck at home anyway.

So, I want to talk about my dad, who just turned 95. Really. (I mean, really he is 95, but I also want to talk about him).

My dad is retired (obviously), but for most of my life, my dad had a printing company. Actually, a form of high-end printing called engraving, but when I would tell people that, they thought that he carved names onto bowling trophies (he didn't). Every day he would get up very early, take the train to his small company, change his sports jacket for coveralls and go into the plant, fix the presses and check the work. At the same time every day, he would take off the coveralls, put on his jacket, get on the train, and be home in time for dinner. He never worked on weekends. We didn't have much money (really, the opposite), but we got by okay, and I grew up in a little house in the forest in a very small town.

Long, long ago (actually, in the last century), I was struggling with my decision to go to graduate school to study biology. All of my professors who I admired warned me not to do this. They warned me that it can be a hard, frustrating life, and I had so many other options for safer, rewarding careers that would not involve writing animal protocols. Despite my passion for research (something I had always wanted to do), I listened to them. Hence, my struggle. I knew I was being naïve (although I had no idea how naïve) and I let the deadline for grad school applications approach without filling out the forms.

During the holiday break in my senior year, I talked to my dad about it. I wasn't prepared for what he told me. He had been in the military during WWII, after which he was able to enroll in a very prominent university under the GI Bill. I knew that, and I knew that

he had studied English and eventually went to law school (and became a lawyer for a while). But what he told me, I hadn't known. "Did you think I *wanted* to go to law school?" he asked. "I wanted to be a forest ranger." "Really?" I replied, "Why didn't you do it?" "Because," he said, "in those days they didn't have programs in forestry; everyone told me I wasn't being 'serious,' and I took their advice." He went on, "And when I graduated, I said, *now* I want to be a forest ranger. But everyone told me that with my degree and grades, I should go to law school."

I know that he did that, but I hadn't known why. And I knew he didn't like his 'chosen' profession, and when I was very young, he moved us to another city, and he went into business as an engraver/printer. "But you really liked engraving, right?" I asked.

My dad sighed. "Look, I provide for you and your sister. I do my job. I take pride in doing it well, and having happy customers. But is it what I would like? No. It's a job." And here is where he gave me a bit of advice that I want to pass on. "You have a chance to choose a profession that you actually love. Very, very few of us get such a chance. If it doesn't work out, you'll get a regular job, but at least you tried. I never got that chance."

My mom is 90, and both she and my dad live on their own, and they are weathering this terrible storm. More stoically, even happily, than most I know. Their friends visit (they sit outside and they talk through the door), groceries are delivered (and then carefully wiped down with gloves on), staying healthy with great care. And when I call them every day, my mom says, "We're hanging in." They survived the Great Depression, they survived WWII, and they've seen a lot. They see this as something else to survive, and they will simply not let it ruin their day.

If you, like me, are doing biomedical research because it's what you *want* to do, then maybe this is a bit of perspective we really need. We actually get to have a job that most of us not only *like*, but actually love. If you don't, then maybe it is time to find a job that is less stressful, has more regular hours, and lets you spend more time with your hobbies and family. But stop *whining*. Okay, you can whine (I do), but I remember that this is my choice, to take the ecstatic good with the frustrating bad. I actually get to do something I love.

So, it's a really nice day. The sun is shining and warm (I think I'll sit outside and do some reading, and maybe get started on that review chapter), birds are singing in the trees (there's a pretty one over there), and I've had a nice breakfast (yum). And we're going to beat this pandemic. I wonder if that cool experiment we're going to do when all this is over is going to work? I'm a pretty lucky guy.

Happy birthday, Dad!