

SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

Newspaper Columns

Mary Langton

authorHOUSE®

At Your Own Risk

Upon approaching a photocopy machine in a public library to make a few copies of a recipe, I saw near the machine a hand-lettered sign that gave me pause. It read, "Printing and copying are at your own risk."

Whoa. It had not occurred to me that making copies was dangerous. But it must be, or there would not be a sign, right? Not that photocopying was ever entirely without a potential complication: there was always the chance of leaving your original in the copy machine. You go to the trouble of putting a dime in the machine and making a copy, only to walk away with only the copy, leaving the original sitting on the glass under the lid.

But is that really a "risk"? Sure, it would be a bummer to leave your original behind, but you'd still have the copy, so you wouldn't leave empty-handed.

I tried to figure out what the sign was warning me about. Might the machine eat my coins without

providing copies in return? Could the gigantic machine fall on me when I pressed the “Print” button? Now that would be dangerous. A real risk of losing a limb. Might the glass shatter when I placed my recipe on it? How much does a piece of paper weigh, anyway? Was the warning—“Printing and copying are at your own risk”—a subtle hint that people should not photocopy and distribute recipes for delicious desserts that are high in sugar, fat, and calories?

It seems that danger lurks everywhere. Not long ago I ordered a cup of hot coffee at a coffee shop. These days, you have to specify that the coffee be hot; otherwise, you might be served cold coffee. This is a thing now, cold coffee. It goes by names such as iced coffee or cold brew. It is the kind of beverage that customers used to complain about: “Waitress! This coffee is cold!” But now cold coffee is the point.

I ordered hot coffee. It was handed to me in a cup that had the following message printed on it: “Caution! Coffee is hot.” Well, yes. Hot coffee is what I asked for. The message may as well have read, “Caution! You are holding in your hand exactly what you ordered. Consume at your own risk.”

There are ways to deal with hot coffee. In my grandfather’s day, hot beverages like tea and coffee were served in cups that were placed on saucers. Cups and saucers went together; where there was one, there was the other. Young people don’t know what a saucer is, because these days coffee is consumed out of enormous ceramic mugs, with no saucer in sight.

(Caution! Consume those vats of caffeine-loaded coffee at your own risk.)

When faced with a cup of hot coffee, Grandpa would pour some of the coffee into the saucer. The coffee would spread out on the saucer, allowing it to cool rapidly. Grandpa then raised the saucer to his lips and drank the coffee directly from the saucer. After doing that a time or two, the rest of the coffee—the coffee in the cup—was just the right temperature to drink. Grandpa also played the accordion, and had a twinkle in his eye. (Caution! Thinking about long-deceased grandparents can make you melancholy.)

Sometimes while driving I see a sign that reads, “Caution. Pedestrians crossing.” It’s always nice to have a heads-up, but perhaps it would make more sense to have a sign on the sidewalk, facing the pedestrians, that reads, “Caution. Cars coming.” After all, I’m the one wearing the armor of a one-and-a-half-ton vehicle.

One of the more interesting warnings is the one that is placed on a floor that has just been mopped. It reads, “Caution. Wet floor.” That’s not the interesting part. The interesting part is that, next to the words, there is a drawing of a person with legs in the air and arms splayed over his head. A person falling. Someone thought we needed help making the connection between a wet floor and a possible wipeout. And maybe we do.

I wouldn’t mind an illustration telling me what can go wrong at the copy machine.

A Dog's Diary

I warned Major.

I told him over and over again, "The White House is different. It's not just any house."

In response, Major said, "Oh, Champ, you're such a worrywart." Then he barked and chased his tail.

"I'm serious," I said. "You're not in Delaware anymore. You have to behave here. They have something called decorum. Plus, we're being watched and photographed all the time."

"Like the British royal family?" Major asked excitedly. "Cool!" He hopped around and panted and wagged his tail.

"No, not cool," I said. "Any little slip-up can be caught on camera. Then it will be all over the news."

"I'm not worried," Major said. "Everybody loves me, Champ. I'm cute! I'm America's favorite rescue dog!" He stood on his hind legs and pranced.

He thinks he's cute. I wanted to tell him that only puppies are cute. Puppies and Chihuahuas. But

German Shepards? I prefer to think we're handsome. Regal, even. Not cute. Please.

"Major, no one is going to cut you any slack here, believe me," I said. "You're going to have to toe the line. We're America's First Dogs. We have to behave like it. Set a good example."

I thought I could appeal to his pride with that First Dogs stuff. No dice.

"Hey, Champ! Watch this," he said. Then he ran like a maniac all over the South Lawn. When he returned to where I was sitting, he said, "I love this new backyard! So big!" Then he tore off again, headed for the Rose Garden.

"Hey, watch it!" I heard a man say. It was the gardener.

I bounded over, arriving just in time to see the poor man backing away from Major, holding a rake between himself and the dog. Major barked and lunged toward the man, thinking it was some kind of game. I went right up to Major and gave him a low, warning growl. The gardener beat it, heading into the White House and slamming the door behind him. We could hear him yell, "Stupid dog!"

"What's wrong with him, Champ?" Major wanted to know. He looked confused, and a little hurt, too.

"He was scared, Major," I explained. "Sometimes when you run at people full steam, and bark at them, they don't realize that you just want to play. Not everyone knows us like Mom and Dad do. And not everyone likes dogs."

“What?” Major was shocked. “Not like dogs? That’s impossible.” He ran off, yipping and howling.

I sighed. There was no getting through to that dog. It’s not entirely his fault, of course. He’s so young. At three years old, a dog is still a baby in a lot of ways. His judgment is not yet formed. I’m twelve. I’ve been around. I know what’s what. I’m also tired, so even if I were inclined to jump on people—and I’m not—I wouldn’t have the energy.

Then the inevitable happened. Major got too frisky with a security guard, and bit him. Not hard, no real damage, but let’s face it: there is no such thing as a good dog bite. So we were shipped home to Delaware. I say “we,” because I wasn’t about to let Major endure that embarrassment alone. Sure, he has his faults, but we’re still a team.

I lolled in the sun for a couple of weeks while Major got some training. It wasn’t too taxing, mostly a refresher course, with an emphasis on not jumping on people. And no biting. Mainly he found it boring but he went through the paces. He wanted to earn his way back to that South Lawn.

This morning he ran up to me, all excited. “Guess what, Champ?” he said. “We’re going back to the White House!”

“Good boy,” I said.