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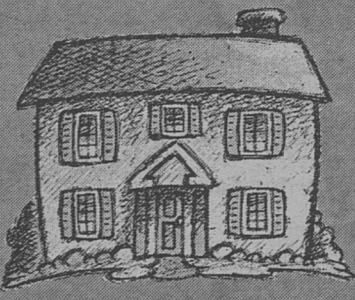

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Ma Vie En Jade

by Jade Wolfe



Beyond The Outer Packaging

Have you ever found yourself stranded somewhere and opened up the kitchen cupboards searching for food...only to find the labels are missing off of the food packages or cans? My first 'unlabeled can adventure' was on a rainy afternoon in a half-lit upstairs closet sitting on the floor with my friend Scott. We had broken into his uncle's leftover C-rations from his military tour of duty. We both kept hoping for canned desserts. And, after sharing some cold 'pressed' pork and what we surmised to be biscuits, we were rewarded with cherry cobbler. Scott was nine and I was ten. His Grandmother was our next-door neighbor. Every summer he and I spent almost every day together. Scott could build almost anything with Legos. He introduced me to the world of 'Star Trek' and together we had many imaginary flights on the 'Enterprise'. Neither one of us bothered with gender assigned ranking during these adventures. It never came up.

The other neighborhood kids didn't like playing with Scott. He was different. His body was larger than his age might have indicated and he was legally blind. It was too bad that I was the only local child who got to know him. Scott was an incredible person. It didn't matter to him that I liked to climb trees and read books. And it didn't matter to me that Scott looked different than other boys his age and read Braille books. When he graduated from the state school for the blind I was honored to attend the graduation ceremony with his Mom and Grandmother. Looking around the auditorium that afternoon it was clear that I was in the minority, not my friend Scott. It made me smile for him and all the other graduates. Here was a place where my skills were lacking. I couldn't read Braille, pick out matching socks by touch or build complex structures using tiny pieces of plastic (with my sight or without it). In fact, that day when the two of us had opened up the unlabeled cans, we had experienced a leveled playing field. There were no labels for me to read. There were no labels for Scott to not see. It was kind of fun not knowing what we were going to discover. The per-

spective factor was in our favor that day. Not having a pre-disposed acceptance criteria allowed us to have fun with the unknown.

Labels do matter sometimes. Certain brands of grocery items are preferable to others. The first time I brought home generic peanut butter from the store, my spouse ever so patiently explained the merits of her favorite brand of pb. The sincerity and length of this oration could have put any 60 second ad to shame. In all fairness, both of us purchase more generic than not save for those particular items where 'brand' makes a difference. But, most of us have a few items for which a brand label determines choice.

If only we could think of ourselves as so much peanut butter or bottled water, human labels might be easier to accept. Labels have been over extended in usage. The excuses of limited time, requirements of a chosen belief system or any school of thought cannot overcome the damaging results when labels do the individual work for us. The judgments assigned us depend on what labels 'appear' to belong to us. Life is so much more complicated for a human than a jar of peanut butter, isn't it? Can we approach each day, every new person or known friend with the adventurous pleasure of two children opening up unlabeled C-rations?

As adults, we become deluded into believing that our lives are too complicated. Overwhelming as daily occurrences can be, we might wish to strive for 'childlike' openness. And the most essential step is to first be open with ourselves. Some of the deadliest constraints I deal with, are self-imposed. Choices are ultimately mine, no matter what the situation is...be it my attitude about an upcoming drive in mid-day traffic or attempting a new, unfamiliar activity.

Complexity has never been an adequate excuse for life being reduced to so many categories. While I cannot always claim a high level of achievement in maintaining the adventurous attitude Scott and I shared in childhood, the effort to try does not ever stray far from my consciousness.

The whole addiction to labels and categories has

always seemed ass backward to me. Labels are defining tools as are categories. It is a healthy part of self-discovery to understand how you define and identify your self. No one denies their individuality. Yet often, we find it more comfortable to be identified in categories. Too often these self-definitions become the controlling factors for us. Being of a certain persuasion counts so much more than unique positioning. Whether it be lifestyle, religion, education, economic status, geographic location, race, gender or age...for many people, being able to 'assign you' a category is imperative. There are general benefits for us if we obey the boundaries of our labels. Vote according to the accepted attitudes of your religious affiliation. Attend the 'right kind' of college. Only socialize with politically astute individuals. Mistrust anyone who works in an office or doesn't know how to fix their own car. Thus there will be more time to enjoy other pursuits, leaving responsibility for decisions up to implied prejudices. And if anyone who falls in my category of 'not approved for interaction' wants my attention, the onus is on them. They will need to put out an effort 'proving' themselves to me beyond their assigned 'label'.

You know this drill. Attend a party or casual dinner and how many times will you hear "so, what do you do?". Working a room is a lot easier skill to attain using labels as basic guidelines. Depending on the 'need of the moment', this cuts down on a great deal of 'wear and tear' on you. Just glance 'round the room, weed out the wrong gender, body type, age and immediately you have saved minutes on useless conversations of introductions with people you will likely reject anyway. Of course there are always those pesky individuals who mess up this efficient system. You have probably experienced these miscreants. A portly middle-aged male dressed in plaids and stripes, who in reality would have been the perfect pool partner for you. What a dirty trick. No one who looks like