

Over the Back Fence
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Approx 680 words

How to waste a morning
By Alva Wood

“Ollie,” says Florence Armitage the other morning, as she’s leaving for a medical appointment in River City, “don’t waste the whole morning doing the newspaper Sudoku puzzle. Make yourself useful!”

“What do you want me to do?” Ollie asks, hoping it doesn’t include cleaning toilets.

“There’s a pile of bills on the end of the counter,” says Florence. “Write out some cheques and mail them.”

Ollie decides he needs a mug of coffee to fortify himself. The pot Florence made earlier is getting cold. He pours a mug full and pops it into the microwave.

He’s still wearing bedroom slippers. He shuffles into the bedroom to get his chequebook out of the drawer in his bedside table.

The camellia on their dresser is looking a little wilted. He tests the soil with a finger. Too dry. He gets Florence’s watering can. He starts around the house, watering the camellia, the spider plant, the dracena...

The jade tree has some little red dots crawling around on it. He wonders if they’re spider mites. He pulls the indoor gardening book off the shelf.

A slip of paper falls out.

Ollie realizes it’s for a call he should have made more than a month ago, about his credit card. He dials the number. A recorded voice instructs him to punch in his 16-digit credit card code.

He hasn’t got his wallet. He left it on their breakfast table.

It’s right beside the morning paper. Florence has already started the Sudoku puzzle. Ollie glances at it, and realizes he can add in a 6 that Florence missed.

The pencil tip is broken. Ollie takes the pencil to Florence’s desk, to sharpen it. He sees a couple of letters that need stamps. He peels the stamps off their backing, absent-mindedly licks them, and then finds they won’t stick.

While he’s waiting for the stamps to dry, he rescues his coffee mug from the microwave. It’s cold again. He puts it back in.

He sits down at the table to write his cheques. He doesn’t have a pen. He shuffles back to Florence’s writing desk for a pen.

The microwave beeps.

Ollie takes the steaming mug out of the microwave. He sets it on the counter while he gets the milk jug out of the fridge.

The cat rubs against his legs. He pours some milk into the cat’s bowl. He sets the milk jug on the counter and puts his coffee away in the fridge.

As he starts writing cheques, he wonders if there’s enough money in the account to cover the cheques. He realizes he hasn’t kept the running balance up to date.

He gets a calculator. He starts punching in numbers. The screen stays blank.

He’s sure he has some spare batteries in the garage. But if he’s going outside to the garage, he probably should take the garbage with him. He pulls the bag out from under the sink and wraps a twist tie around it.

In the front hall, he pulls on his boots. He tugs the laces tight. One of the laces snaps.

He hobbles with one boot on and one boot off to the laundry room for a new pair of laces.

The laces come in an impenetrable plastic pack. Ollie fights with it for several minutes. He gives up and clumps back to the kitchen for the kitchen shears.

As he passes the breakfast table, he sees a possible 9 on the Sudoku puzzle.

Florence finds him sitting at the table still with one boot on, one boot off, finishing off the puzzle.

“Ollie?” she says. “There’s a bag of garbage in the front hall, a pair of shoelaces and the milk jug out on the kitchen counter. The phone is off the hook and beeping, and my watering can is leaving a ring on the coffee table.”

She opens the fridge to put the milk away. “And your coffee mug is inside the fridge,” she continues.

“Did you write those cheques?” she asks.

Ollie shakes his head helplessly.

“Honestly,” she demands, “what do you do with yourself all morning when I’m not here?”