

## **Cricket keep leaping to mind ... and elsewhere**

A Party of One, By Margo Oxendine

HOT SPRINGS — I cringe to have to write this, but I had a Cricket Cappuccino this morning.

It was certainly not my intention to do so.

I have had a plague of crickets in the house for the past month. I find the little buggers everywhere, but especially in the kitchen and bathrooms. That tells me they must be getting in through the drains.

I don't care how they're getting in, but I wish they'd get the heck out!

They're difficult to kill. Most of the time, they leap away just as my foot is coming down to smash them. I may have written this before, but the other night, I went in to brush my teeth, and there was one in the sink. I sprayed it with bleach. That ought to kill anything, right? Well, no. At least, not in a timely fashion. (A timely fashion for me is instantaneously).

I find crickets on the kitchen floor. I even find them on the kitchen counter.

Just yesterday, I spotted one while making my coffee. He hopped under the microwave before I could grab something to spray him with. I will grab the first thing I can find to spray bugs. Bleach, Windex, even some Resolve carpet cleaner, leftover from the Brownie days. I have spritzed bugs with hairspray, for heaven's sakes. If it doesn't kill them, at least it makes them sticky.

After my close encounter with the microwave cricket yesterday, I was especially vigilant this morning. Well, as vigilant as I can be before I've had my coffee.

No crickets in sight.

Every night when I wash the dishes, I set up the espresso machine so all I have to do is turn it on in the morning. That is sometimes all I can manage. I have made coffee without first putting in the darn coffee. I have wondered why no coffee comes out, only to discover I forgot to put the water in the pot. So, I set it all up ahead of time, including putting the little metal carafe under the spout.

So, this morning, I made my delicious cup of cappuccino. I came in here and began to drink it. But suddenly, a rather solid object slurped out of the cup and clung to my lip.

What?

The back of my mind knew what it was before the message got to me. I spat the thing out and, sure enough, it was a cricket drowned in coffee. At least he was dead. But still. More than an hour later, I can still feel that awful thing clinging to my lip.

I'm guessing it hopped into the empty carafe, and then died what I hope was a painful death when the hot coffee dripped into the carafe. And it surely must have died or been dead when I steamed the milk in the cup.

I am reminded of an incident in San Francisco. My companion and I were bickering about something before he left for work. I was mad at him. Nonetheless, I made his coffee. I poured it into his travel cup and was glad to send him on his way.

When I went to wash out the coffee pot, there, curled up and very dead at the bottom, was a slug. I chuckled about it all day, but never said a word. Gives new meaning to "taking a slug of coffee!"

We'd had a big slug problem in San Francisco. It was a real slugfest in the kitchen, and on the porch. I couldn't leave out the cat food, because whenever I'd check it, there were slugs chowing down in the bowl.

Some were not too large. Others were huge, unwieldy, blimp-like things. They were awful.

At least, one could buy some slug poison. But I feared for the cat. So I learned to live with them.

I have a lot of hornet and wasp spray. A few cans of flying insect spray. Some ant spray. I use them liberally. But, no one thinks to make cricket spray. I sure wish they did.

I'm sure crickets perform some sort of "service," but I don't care what it is: I do not want them in my home!

I guess I'll just keep the spray bleach handy, and hope for the best.

## **Apple Blossom Festival one huge, fun, non-stop party**

Party of One, By Margo Oxendine

WINCHESTER – I had, quite simply, the time of my life.

Last weekend, I made an arduous 200- mile trek to Winchester. I really didn't want to go because of the drive; I haven't driven further than Covington in more than two years.

But the Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester beckoned, and I made the journey. I took Route 11 because I hate Interstate 81, and it took me five hours. And once I arrived in Winchester, there were so many side roads and intersecting arteries, I had no idea where I was, or how to get where I was going.

I finally looked up and said, "Lord, please lead me where I need to go." And within three minutes, I was on the right road!

Oh, I can't tell you what a sterling, memorable, whirl of a fun time I had the whole weekend. Once at the hotel, I found I did not have to drive even a mile. I had escorts! Or, I rode in a plush little bus with other "celebrities," and a police escort. Two sheriff's cars led the way — blue lights and sirens screaming — and two followed the bus. Traffic pulled over; red lights blazed as we sped right through them! It was a hoot. I asked if they might perhaps lead me back out of town afterward, but Sheriff Lenny said no.

My extravaganza began early Friday morning, when I spoke to 300 ladies of the horticultural society. They were lovely in their pink and green finery, some with hats worthy of a royal wedding. They welcomed me. They praised my columns. They bought my book. They laughed in all the right places when I spoke. They served me lunch!

The next morning, I was surprised to see a photo of myself and a story about my talk in the Northern Virginia Daily newspaper. How ironic!

After the luncheon, my escorts — a fun and helpful couple named Hope and Steve — and I went to the coronation of the festival queen. It was full of pomp and circumstance, attended by hundreds. The queen, Mia, is the daughter of football great Tony Dorsett. (I think he played for the Dallas Cowboys?) We were treated to a trio of Patsy Cline songs (remember, she was from Winchester) by Kara Britz, who's also from Winchester, a backup singer for Blake Shelton, and part of the band on "The Voice." She is a great singer, and a fun person to be around: A hometown girl who made it big, but didn't let it get to her head.

Speaking of getting a "big head," there was Terry Bradshaw. Oh, how I looked forward to meeting a man who seems on TV as if he is a fun-time guy. Well. He didn't want to be around the rest of us, to the point of finding a room he could barricade himself into instead of joining the rest of us for a private lunch.

At one brunch party at a fabulous private home, I went inside to use the loo. When I tried to return to the porch to get back to the food and mimosas, there was a burly guy in a bulletproof vest blocking my way.

"You can't come out here," he said. "Use the side porch."

There was Bradshaw, hunkered in the corner of the porch, receiving only those guests the rest of his security team deemed worthy. Meanwhile, I had to wander alone through someone's lush, treasure-filled home to find the side porch.

Later though, when it came time to head out to the cars for the parade, out came Bradshaw, like the good-time guy he purports to be. Humph!

One celebrity who was fun and approachable was Miss Virginia, Tatum Sheppard. How she made it through the often-grueling very long day — 11 hours we were at it on Friday — clad in very high heels, a long, sparkly gown and a tiara stuck to her hair with about two dozen pins, I will never know. Then again, she is young, as well as beautiful.

I just remembered a rather funny thing I spotted before the parade: A queen or a princess in a huge, frilly pink gown, trying to navigate herself into a Port-a-Potty. Poor thing. I don't know if she made it but wouldn't want to be in her situation.

On Friday, the gang of celebs were driven through Winchester in decorated cars and trucks and such, for the Firefighters' Parade. A crowd estimated at 100,000 lined every one of the 15 or 20 blocks of the parade. They were packed on porches, hanging out second-story windows, waving and hollering.

I figured no one would know who I was. I rode in a vintage Mustang convertible, waving mightily. And the crowd waved and hollered back! "Hey, Margo!" "We love your columns!" "Keep writing!" It was truly life-affirming, and I adored every second of it.

I hollered back, "I love Winchester!" "I love readers!" It was almost too much fun and excitement. My arms hurt from waving, and my voice was hoarse from shouting. But I was elated.

When I commented to my escort, "Gee, there are so many people," she answered, "Oh, wait until you see it tomorrow — even more people."

I could not imagine how "even more people" could fit anywhere along the route. Some front yards were so full of revelers — all dressed in pink and/or green, the official festival colors — you could not have wedged another person in there!

The crowd was Black and white, old and young, drunk and sober. But they all were sure happy to be there. The festival was on hiatus for two years because of the pandemic, and this was everyone's first time back on the streets.

There were a lot of sports figures, well known to all except myself. The celebrity sportsters included the venerable Julius "Dr. J" Erving. He has the biggest feet I have ever seen — they must be at least a size 17. He was quiet, but nice. There was Tony Dorsett, an NFL great, and father of Queen Mia Dorsett. I think he played for the Dallas Cowboys. (But what do I know?)

There was Fred Smoot, who played for the Redskins and the Vikings (I looked him up). There was a personable guy named Jeff Hammond, a NASCAR honcho with several talk shows.

My favorite was Emmy-award winning actor Dean Cain. How handsome! And what a nice, approachable guy. We shared more than a few laughs. He even winked at me — twice!

Saturday brought more of the same, only, well, even more. We started with brunch at the private home, in the spacious, manicured backyard (if I ever go back, I can find the side porch!). Then, we climbed back on the bus for another noisy police escort to downtown Winchester.

I must say, I've never been to Winchester, but I'd go back — if someone else were driving. What a lovely town, full of restaurants and theaters and museums — and very friendly people.

We stopped for a delicious catered lunch both Friday and Saturday. No one can say the people of Winchester didn't feed us enough. And it was all good. Friday night, we had visited another large, private home for a party, which featured what has been chosen "the best pizza in Virginia."

Here's an example of how helpful the people are: I was beyond weary after the long, sun- and cheer-filled day. And I left my purse at the pizza party house. I didn't realize it until we were back at the Hilton. I was upset. And two parade organizers — another lovely couple — volunteered, "We'll go get it for you!"

Thankfully, the police escort hadn't yet left the hotel grounds, so, there was actually a police escort back to the house so this couple could collect my forgotten purse. Keep in mind, it was now at least 11 p.m., and this couple had to lead some sort of breakfast, starting at 7 a.m. God bless William and Rhonda — they did it with a smile on their faces.

The "big" parade on Saturday was something akin to the Macy's Thanksgiving parade, on a scale that probably wasn't much smaller. I rode in a different Mustang convertible that day, driven by a woman who is a nurse, lifeguard, Girl Scout leader and force to be reckoned with — Liz. She had made me a "throne" of pink and green satin, and I was to ride up on the top of the trunk area. I gave my perch a wary eye.

"If you need to hang on, grab these bars," Liz said.

I remained wary.

I clambered to my high, backless perch and tried waving. It just might work, I thought. But I could only wave with one hand. People were crowded onto both sides of the streets. They were hollering my name as we drove by; I waved first to one side, then to the other.

When we got back to the hotel, though, and I tried to get down from my "throne," I fell into the back seat floor, flat on my back.

Thank heavens for such an accomplished nurse/driver as Liz. She pulled me from one end, while Steve pushed from the other. My hips got stuck between the seats.

"We're gonna need the Jaws of Life to get me out!" I cried. "Or we can wait until I lose 30 pounds!"

It wasn't necessary, thanks to Liz and Steve.

It was 3:30 before I was back at the Hilton after all the Saturday hoopla. And I dreaded what came next: The 200-mile drive home.

My usual day includes sleeping until I wake up naturally, wandering into my home office in my pajamas, writing, then reading until I doze off, then a walk in the woods. I do not remember

when I last had back-to-back, hours-long days. I was wiped out, so decided I'd just check back into my hotel for another night.

Well, no. What fool thinks she'll find a hotel room anywhere in Winchester on the Saturday night of the festival? I'm that fool, and I was sadly disappointed. I had no choice but to drive.

My first stop was Starbucks for the biggest coffee they could provide. And then, I gritted my teeth, gripped the steering wheel, and hit the huge, scary interstate. The only way I found it was because Hope and Steve led me. I stayed in the "slow" lane, where big trucks and small cars were only going 80 mph. I focused. No radio, no looking at scenery.

When I finally made it to exit 220, toward Route 39, I exhaled a huge sigh of relief.

I've never been so thrilled to drive through Craigsville, Goshen and Millboro in my life!

But I couldn't stop myself from waving at other cars.

## **Snake on the porch an unsettling sight**

A Party of One, By Margo Oxendine

HEALING SPRINGS – There are sometimes even an independent woman living alone needs a man around the house.

I desperately needed one Saturday morning.

I woke up and stumbled into the bathroom. There was something very strange and out of order going on in the bathroom window to the porch. Something big. And black. And twisted around itself.

At first, I mistook it for a piece of driftwood. I have several driftwood mementos on my porch. But they do not move around on their own.

I stood at the window and examined the thing, as closely as possible. At least, it was on the outside of the screen. It finally hit me that it must be a snake. A big, black snake curled around itself.

Was it dead? I hoped so but knew I couldn't be that lucky. Was it sleeping? Probably, I guess, if snakes sleep.

I went outside on the porch for a closer – but not too close – look. Yep. It was a big black snake, coiled on the windowsill.

What to do? Whom to call? Could anyone help me?

I ran through the list of men I know. Every so often, I need a man to help me with something. I do not like to call on them too often. And it's not as if any of these fellows call me when they have a problem. No one ever calls and says, "I need a story. Fast!"

I was about to call the sheriff's office and ask them to dispatch a fearless deputy over here to deal with the snake.

That actually happened a couple years ago, when I happily came home, only to discover a snake in my dining room. I was stopped in my tracks, literally. Sweat began to pour out of every pore. My gosh – what was I to do? The phone was on the other side of the snake. Could I get to it? I'd have to.

Back then, Bath still had an animal control officer. That was who I needed. And fast.

Sure enough, a perky Sharrie Woodzell showed up with all the tools she needed – a grabby thing and a big bucket with a lid. She made quick work of the snake, and even took him for a little ride downtown to the dump. God bless her! It took me the rest of the day to calm down.

Now, I was working myself into a dither again. There's no more animal control officer that I know of; I'd have to hope for that fearless deputy. And later, see myself in the sheriff's report. Maybe I could call one of my deputy pals at home? On a holiday weekend?

Suddenly, I thought of a different, better solution: My capable neighbor just over the hill, Denny, who keeps his lawn immaculate, and I'm sure has encountered snakes without fear in his heart.

It was 9 o'clock in the morning. Would he and his wife be awake? (I sure was!) I waited until 9:15 and called. The neighbor/husband was up! He said he'd be glad to come help! God bless him!

He showed up with the exact tools he needed: A long grabby thing, and a shovel. He calmly grabbed the snake, who was simply sleeping (not dead), wrestled him onto the shovel and hustled him out the door. I helped. I held the door open.

The dear man carried the snake in the shovel over to far edge of the yard and let it loose in the woods. I was elated! Now, I only hope the big, black snake stays in his new environment, and isn't attracted to my porch again. But I will keep a sharp eye out for him. And a phone in my hand.