

BUYER BEWARE:

A DIALOGUE OF ALL AND NOTHING

by Michael Stephen Lopato

Nick: Alice, don't you think it's insulting that there's a warning label on your coffee?
"Caution! Hot!"

Alice: Well I don't need it. But I guess someone out there does.

Nick: But don't most people learn that coffee is hot before they even learn to spell "coffee"?

Alice: Oh, Nick. You're far too idealistic. After all, there was a woman who won millions of dollars from McDonald's for spilling coffee between her legs—while driving!

Nick: Yes, yes. But I just wish our world was a bit more civilized—that people took responsibility for their actions.

Alice: Me too. But there's only one problem.

Nick: What's that?

Alice: We live in the year 2015.

Nick: Yes. And people now know more than ever. We have the internet, news sources blaring warnings daily, PSA's, warning labels—

Alice: Yet people still seem to need to be reminded that certain things around them are dangerous.

Nick: Well, do you think the woman who sued McDonald's deserves the money?

Alice: Well, it depends. If she knew that the drink was hot, absolutely not. But, at least theoretically speaking, if she somehow legitimately did not expect it to be hot, I suppose McDonald's ought to at least help her to pay some of her medical bills.

Nick: I certainly don't. It's almost as if our culture subsidizes stupidity. You just have to find something that no one else has thought of yet.

Alice: Honestly, I think that's a bad case. It's not always stupidity. What about plastics with formaldehyde? In California, they're required to be labeled—but elsewhere, little junior is sitting on the lawn chair, breathing-in rat poison.

Nick: Again, though, that's something that people can look up.

Alice: But do they? Really?

Nick: That's irrelevant. The information is there. The company that sells the chairs isn't stopping anyone from doing some research.

Alice: But would the company put that information there if they weren't legally required to do so?

Nick: Absolutely. After all, the same companies leave the warnings on the chairs when they sell them in other states—and often voluntarily recall their products when they go awry. Car companies recall lemons; toy companies recall toys if they determine that there is lead in the plastics they used. It's just a part of good business; if they didn't, people would quit buying their products.

Alice: What about chairs that aren't sold in California?

Nick: I think you're missing my point. There's an option for every concern you may have. If you're concerned about formaldehyde, you could always buy a *different* chair. Buy a metal one, and I guarantee you won't need to worry about that.

Alice: But what about the people who don't even *realize* that plastic chairs may contain formaldehyde? Or those who don't even know what formaldehyde is? Who's going to tell them? All I'm saying is that companies should be held liable when they sell something potentially dangerous without explicitly warning their customers.

Nick: But then there would be warning labels on everything! People wouldn't even be able to sort through them all. And then you'd have the people who can legitimately claim that they can't even read the labels.

Life involves risks, Alice; that's just the way it is. You can avoid specific risks that scare you, like formaldehyde or carbon monoxide, but you can't avoid all of them. Sometimes you'll forget. Sometimes you'll need to choose between one risk and another. Sometimes you just won't care.

Alice: I'm not saying that we *can* avoid them all. But we can give people a fighting chance.

Nick: They won't have *any* chance when they can't tell the difference between the important ones and the minor ones. Things without warning labels will outsell things with labels, even if they aren't dangerous. People will have less choices—less freedom. To at least some extent, they'll lose the ability to discover what works for them in their own lives and to decide what risks are worth the effort to avoid. After all, an individual who knows his own situation knows that better than anyone else.

Alice: But people are still free to make choices—even *with* warning labels; I can still buy a coffee, even though I risk burning myself, or a beer, even though I risk accidents and liver disease.

Nick: That's too concrete, though. The problem here lies not in the individual case but in the pattern of thought. When a social norm associates potential danger with a warning, people will see things without warnings as safe; they won't think first. And no matter how hard we try, we're going to miss warnings. After all, we haven't learned about all risks.

Alice: I still think that we ought to warn people about the ones we *do* know; that's better than nothing.

Nick: It's not. Warning labels on some dangerous things but not others is itself a dangerous combination. Alcohol causes liver disease, accidents, and a number of other issues; we know that from extensive warnings. Because alcohol has warnings and diet soda doesn't, people think, "it's probably better to have a diet Coke with dinner than a beer." But I'm not sure that's necessarily true. The aspartame in diet soda causes fibromyalgia, memory loss, and, interestingly enough, weight gain—specifically, the *worst type* of weight gain, right on the stomach, where it increases the risk of heart attacks. It's a *blatant lie* to call something that causes weight gain "diet". Yet there are a lot of people that think nothing of it—or worse, think it *actually improves* their health. Why? Warnings about alcohol and non-diet soda are everywhere; the only warning on diet soda is "contains phenylalanine", and who the hell knows what that means? Removing all warnings would force people to think.

Alice: But, Nick, people *do* think. Sometimes, it just isn't practical for people to do a research paper on everything they put in their mouth. That's why they rely on the advice of experts. The FDA researches food and makes decisions *based on science*. They warn people of everything that they can prove is dangerous. And they ban things that are particularly bad. They've even established a pretty reasonable set of guidelines for healthy eating with the USDA.

Nick: But then why do more than a half million Americans get heart attacks every year?

Alice: People aren't perfect; but we're better off than we'd be without it.

Nick: Damn—Shakeshack has long lines...

Yes, I'll take a number one with a small fries and a beer.

It can't be any worse than some of the things without labels—especially for someone with high blood pressure.

Alice: And I'd like a number two. Super-sized please...

With what drink? Oh. Diet Coke please.

It's gotta be better than some of the things that deserve warnings.