

Mysteries complicate life

Quasars, slow pharmacists baffle columnist

This column is about mysteries. The first concerns a little vial of ampicillin which was prescribed to me because I had a clogged tear duct. (Incidentally, that solves the mystery of why I was the only one crying at a Walter Mondale speech.) The real mystery is this: Why does it take the pharmacist a half hour to put 12 little pills in one little vial?



Richard Cohen

I went to two drug stores. They all said it would take a half hour. This is amazing. If you go to a soda fountain and ask for a chocolate ice cream soda, the guy takes a glass, adds this and that, goes plop, plop, plop and presto — an ice cream soda. But if you go to a drugstore and ask for pills, the pharmacist pretends he has to mash it all with mortar and pestle — eye of snake and spleen of androgynous goat, and then take it all out by the light of the full moon. Why?

My second mystery concerns quasars. The newspapers said the new theory is that quasars are "on the edge of the universe." What are these people talking about? How could there be an edge to the universe? What's over the edge? It has to be more universe and if, as the article said, the universe keeps expanding it has to be expanding into something. If that's not the universe, then what in the world (a quaint expression in this context) is it?

My life is hard enough without stories like this. For some weeks now, I have been considering the

matter of a toaster with directions saying "Single slice here" — with a little arrow. How does the toaster know it's only got a single slice? All the electrical elements go on no matter what. I take no chances, though. I do not want a repairman to peer into the toaster, look up at me and say, "You toasted a single slice in the wrong section."

And tell me this. Tell me how come when you wake up in the morning you weigh less than you do when you went to bed? What are we doing in our sleep that would account for the loss of what sometimes seems like three pounds? Am I sleepwalking to the bathroom without knowing it? Am I going for long, nocturnal walks? Clearly, something here has to be explained — either that or the way to really lose weight is to stay in bed for about a week. That should produce a loss of about 21 pounds.

As long as we are the subjects of weight, let me introduce another mystery. The side of all cereal boxes lists the calorie content per half ounce. Usually, it's 110. Kellogg's Special K is 110 and Corn Flakes is 110 and so is Raisin Bran and Honey and Nut (ugh!). The box also lists the total amount of calories if half a pint of milk is added. Here's the mystery. For Corn Flakes and Special K it's 180. For Honey and Nut and Raisin Bran, it's 190. Where does the extra 10 calories come from?

As you might have guessed, people who read the side of cereal boxes also read newspaper weather charts. Washingtonians do this for the same reason poor people like to read about the rich — to see how the more fortunate live. But no matter what my reason, I have noticed that on a

given day there will be a little symbol next to some city, say Dallas, saying NA. This means not answering, or something like that, to which I say, "Well, why not?" Is everything all right in Dallas? Has someone checked to see if maybe the poor weatherman is slumped at his desk, a knife in his back?

My last mystery concerns socks. Everyone knows they move about on their own, get lost, take walks, move from drawer to drawer and embrace socks of a different color — misockegenation. A friend thought he had a system to stop all that. He threw out all his socks and replaced them with ones that were either black or brown — that's it. Lately, though, he has been opening his drawer to find socks that are of different colors — socks he has not bought. With his wife nodding, he says there is no explanation for this. I say there is.

This is how the universe expands.

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