

I have never cut off the waxy mattress tags that say "only to be removed by the purchaser," nor have I spattered myself with horrendous dye while forcing a plastic garment button through a can opener (for the record, I suggested that the operation should happen *outside*, not in the kitchen sink). But upon returning from the library last Friday morning, I found myself playing the part of amateur locksmith/MacGyver/Willy Wonka as I banged my head against the great glass elevator of a locked DVD case.

Locking discs must have been an epiphany for libraries, unless one considers the terrible condition of most publicly-traded media items. A library DVD is the equivalent of shag carpet (great at first inspection; not so hot under scrutiny) and thus it was with mounting frustration that I needled a bobby pin into the little lock opening and pried against the malleable plastic until the pin split like a wishbone. I staggered back against the wall with the force.

No bobby pins, then. Although I was tempted to unearth a meat tenderizer from our kitchen drawer and just give the case a few good whacks, that seemed too primeval for a modern, fully-grown adult--and it would be doing my library a great discredit. They do send me charmingly formal letters whenever I have items ready for pickup and they let me choose a card with dog pictures on it, so I figured I should stay in their benevolent graces. What's *not* right is their little locky, finger-trap device to keep DVDs safe, a device that managed to defeat a bobby pin, a house key, and four fingernails.

Because freeing this movie would require nothing less than Herculean effort--with some Oedipal agony thrown in--I rummaged around for a screwdriver and prepared to coordinate my mental and physical strength. How I left my library without a sprung case, I don't know. Actually, I do, and it's a testament to the inconvenient bridge between entertainment center and learning hub that most libraries today strive to be. Whenever I place my checkout materials in front of the librarian, with a soft little "*thumpf*" that alerts every baby to begin wailing like a smoke alarm, there's an uneasy pause as I scramble for my library card and an uneasier pause as the librarian scrutinizes my haul.

"Find everything you needed?" she intones drily, giving a sidelong glance to the Mountaineering for Dummies book underneath her wrist. I am not a mountaineer. Only a dummy.

"Yes, I think so," I swallow, and feign a posture that communicates to other patrons I know that I'm talking out loud and am proud of it.

"Good." Her eyebrows go up at Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? They go up even further at the cover of Zerkalo, and by the time I'm done, it's all just eyebrow eyebrow and I slink off into anonymity once more.

To bypass this ritual (which is only slightly less humiliating than being watched by a horde of ushers as you wander the aisles of an unfamiliar theatre) I got the grandiose idea of using the self checkout and pragmatically unlocking my own DVD cases without any punitive glances. Pity that my pride should interfere. I didn't read the instructions and

headed homewards with an entire stack of locked discs, which is why at 4 p.m. I was using a flathead screwdriver to wrest the small plastic piece open. All I wanted to do was watch BBC's Planet Earth. No matter that I knew I was going to cry at the aerial panorama of an elephant wandering to its forsaken death. I just wanted the case open and the disc playing.

Finally, with a tremendous sound like a slap and a bruising pressure at the tips of my fingers, I felt the case crack neatly apart, the product of nearly a half hour of effort. This type of inveiglement takes persistence, and I'm no Harold Hill with solutions for every Trouble, so it was a small satisfaction. But no sooner had I swiped the vaguely greasy disc across my jacket, then there was a sturdy knock at my apartment door, possibly my landlord or the Fedex man or an overeager acquaintance or--I opened the door and saw two men dressed in neatly tailored tan suits.

"Hello," said one of them. "We were notified that you had unpackaged one of our branch's DVDs without a proper device, bypassing security."

"Yes," said the other. "You bypassed our systems, which is why we're here." He seemed a little more naive than this partner, and reached down to adjust his cuffs.

"We'll need your card number, please," said the first.

"I don't think I know it offhand," I said, with a hint of annoyance permeating my tone. "Most people don't. It's difficult enough to remember email passwords these days."

"Email," the first snorted. "Hey, let me ask you, do you know what the capital of Syria is?"

"Of course...Damascus."

"What about the prime minister of Japan? And New York's approximate monetary toll from Hurricane Sandy?"

I wasn't sure if he was being serious. "Well--Yoshihiko Noda. And the answer is about \$33 billion, though I don't know where it'll all come from..."

The first man twitched. He exhaled loudly, then pressed his lips together, looking at the second man, while I wondered if it would be rude to start backing away.

"So it's not that you don't know about the world. You're perfectly informed. You just don't know what's actually happening right in front of you."

I said I could concede that. A pause. "Do I need to pay a fine or something?"

"No, no," the second man said. "Have a nice day. These things must be as they will."

The two of them turned and walked towards the elevator. I watched them go, then quietly shut the door and picked up the Planet Earth DVD from the counter, reevaluating its significance. It's due next week. I don't think I'll be using the self checkout.