

A decorative blue floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns surrounds the central text.

# **Triffid Tales**

## **1998-2021**

**Alan Robson**

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**For Robin, for always**

# Introduction

For the last three decades or so I've been writing a monthly book review column. Many of these columns also contained anecdotes about what had been going on in my life during the month. A lot of these anecdotes are available in six ebooks called, rather unimaginatively, *Triffid Tales N* where *N* is a number between 1 and 6. The ebook that you are reading now contains all those earlier triffid tales (though I have slightly revised a few of them to bring them up to date) together with a lot of new material which would have been in *Triffid Tales 7* if I had carried on with the tradition. For those who care about such things, the new material starts with:

[Alan Mixes Water And Electricity And Survives](#)

Just click on the link to go straight there.

As the title implies, this book includes all the triffid anecdotes that I wrote between 1998 and 2021. So it's quite a hefty tome. If it was printed and bound, it would be far too unwieldy -- you'd never be able to read it in bed without suffering terminal arm strain, and that would never do. But ebooks have the advantage that, no matter how large they are, they never make your e-reading device any heavier.

This ebook, and many others like it, can be downloaded for free from my website.

<http://tyke.net.nz/books>

Happy Reading

Alan Robson  
December 2021

# In the Wet

Into every life a little dihydrogen monoxide must fall - but I seem to have had more than my fair share this month...

It started one Sunday morning when a huge fountain erupted without warning just outside my garden fence. It was about 15 feet tall and obviously under enormous pressure. I watched horrified, as hundreds (possibly thousands) of gallons of water poured all over my garden and ran off into the street below, carrying some of my garden with it. I rang the council. There was nobody there except a rather casual Sunday operator. "We've got an emergency further down the road," she said. "We didn't have any choice. We had to open a valve to relieve the pressure."

"But I'm worried that all this water might be undermining my house, damaging the foundations."

"Oh no," she laughed. "Not a little drop of water like that."

As she spoke, the fountain lengthened by a good 10 feet as the pressure increased yet again, my fence buckled slightly under the strain and small rocks bounced in the jet stream. "Call back on Monday," said the operator and rang off.

On Monday morning I rang the council. The person I spoke to was most sympathetic. "I'll transfer you to so-and-so. It's his department."

So-and-so was sympathetic, but unhelpful. "It isn't my responsibility. I'll transfer you to such-and-such."

Such-and-such wasn't interested. "I'll put you through to thingy."

Thingy was out and had voice mail turned on. I left a message but nobody rang back so the next day I tried

again. A completely different set of voices expressed an enormous desire to help and transferred me between several departments since they themselves, they explained earnestly, had no responsibilities in this area. Eventually I got a phone that just rang endlessly. After 10 minutes of listening to this I hung up and tried again.

A brand new round of the *Pass the Robson* game ensued with a whole new set of voices, none of whom had anything to do with water (or indeed any other council function that I could discern) but all of whom were unfailingly polite and sympathetic. They all assured me that of course the council would take responsibility for any damage caused, but it wasn't their department, they didn't know why I'd been put through to them, they weren't sure who I should talk to but perhaps so-and-such might know. Would I like to be transferred?

Yes I would like to be transferred. I got cut off instead.

I decided to have a cup of coffee before trying to outwit the council again and I wandered off down the corridor towards the office coffee machine. I was surprised to find water dripping out of the ceiling, half a dozen tiles were missing from the ceiling, strategic buckets were in place and an air conditioning engineer was saying firmly "It isn't the air conditioning. Not my responsibility."

As it happened, he was right. A washing machine in one of the flats above the office had got blocked and overflowed, flooding the flat and voiding itself all over our ceiling. But I couldn't help regarding it as an omen.

Back to the telephone, and a whole new set of sympathetic council staff. I was expecting another game of telephone tag, but this time, rather to my surprise, I got hold of a no-nonsense engineer who summed up the situation in a flash. "Yes," he said, "that sounds as though there could have been some serious damage. I'm not surprised you are worried, I would be too. I'll get an insurance assessor out there today and we'll see what his

report says." He took my details and rang off. Half an hour later the phone rang and the insurance assessor wanted to make an appointment to come round.

"Do you really need me to be there?" I asked. "All the damage, if there is any, is external. You won't need to get inside the house. Why do I have to be there?"

"Well, I suppose so," he said reluctantly. "But have you got a dog? Can't be having it with dogs. Not going on a property alone if there's dogs."

"No dogs," I reassured him. "Only two cats who will insist that you stroke them and look at their bottoms."

"I like cats," he said.

The insurance assessor found lots of surface damage which had obviously been caused by a flood of semi-biblical proportions. However there was a lip around the foundations and that appeared to have diverted the bulk of the water around the house and across the garden rather than letting it underneath and so the foundations seemed unharmed. Indeed, he claimed they were in surprisingly good condition for a house as old as mine.

"The garden is saturated," he said. "But it should be OK once it has had a chance to dry out."

As these words left his lips, it started to rain...

Once I read a short story in which a man had the power to make it stop raining. Whenever it started he would say "Rain, rain go away. Come again another day." And the rain would go. The dénouement of the story was that one day all the rain he'd wished away for so long came back - all on the same day. That day has now arrived in New Zealand. Those few drops of rain that appeared just as the insurance assessor spoke have continued unabated. Some of New Zealand's heaviest ever rainfall has been recorded over the last few weeks and large areas of the country have been flooded. Since I got a head start over everybody else in the street, my garden is now mostly liquid.



A notice arrived from the council. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 1998 the water supply would be cut off from 9.30am to 12.30pm for repairs to be made to the pipes. Huge bulldozers appeared and dumped half the road on the grass verge outside my house (I no longer have a grass verge. Good - it doesn't have to be mowed). Miles of bright orange pipes vanished underground to the accompaniment of much foul language as it was discovered that these were metric pipes and those *in situ* were imperial and the two could not be joined together.

And still it rained, converting the bulldozed trenches into a foul quagmire. Men in yellow ponchos accumulated. I didn't count, but I had the distinct impression that far more of them jumped down into the trenches than ever came out again. Mysterious blue mechanisms were stacked higgledy piggledy in next door's garden.

At the appointed time I turned on a tap. Compressed air at enormous pressure hissed from the outlet, closely followed by enormous gobbets of mud.

The coffee had an interesting taste for the next few days and I will draw a veil over the state of my underwear after it was washed.

I have a friend who is an excitable speaker. As she becomes more enthusiastic in her conversation she has a tendency to spray spittle. Recently she managed the enormously impressive feat of spitting *behind* my glasses.

Given my current relationship to the liquid world, I wasn't surprised.

# Transport

The bus came roaring around the corner and screeched to a juddering halt. The Oriental driver welcomed us aboard and Sally bought two rides. Then we shot off down the street. I was somewhat bemused to notice that the oncoming traffic appeared to be suffering Lorentz-Fitzgerald contractions and all the red traffic lights were Doppler shifted to green so we didn't have to stop anywhere. We shrieked around a corner.

"Driver," said Sally, in a worried tone, "shouldn't you have gone straight on to Owairaka there?"

"No worry!" said the driver, reassuringly. "Go to depot. Bus is broken."

I wondered about his definition of broken as we hurtled through the depot gates and shrieked to a stop in a cloud of rubber and tarmac vapour. The driver pressed buttons on his radio.

"I are here," he announced proudly.

"What?" The radio sounded peevish. "Why have you come here? Your replacement bus is waiting for you at Owairaka."

"But I are here." The driver sounded bewildered.

"All right, all right," said the radio. "I'll tell him to bring the bus back. You go and choose another one."

The driver closed down his ticket dispenser and took it off to another bus. We saw him poking around inside for a while and then he came back.

"OK. We go now."

We all trooped over to the other bus and the driver strapped himself in and started the engine. The bus rose on its suspension and then settled down again. The driver looked pensive and switched the engine off. Then he

returned to the original bus. Soon he was back with a thermos flask and a brown paper bag which he packed carefully away. He started the engine up again and we bounced thoughtfully on the suspension for a while until he switched the engine off and hurried back to the original bus again. This time he returned with a rabbit's foot which he hung carefully over a convenient switch.

Vroom, vroom. Time to go.

We crept sedately out of the depot at an arthritic crawl. No doubt about it; this bus wasn't broken.

I have an ambivalent relationship with transport mechanisms. My favourite airline has recently introduced electronic ticketing. No paper is required, you merely front up to desk, say, "Lo! Here am I." And they give you a boarding pass. Well that's the theory.

"Never heard of you," said the lady behind the desk.

"???????" I said.

"Honest," she said. "You aren't on the list. What was the name again?"

"Here's my confirmation fax"

She poked keys on the keyboard and frowned at the screen. It frowned back. "Ah yes," she said. "Here you are. Your ticket was cancelled."

"!!!!!!!" I said. I could guess what had happened. I'd been booked on a flight the following week, but the course I was due to teach had been postponed and the flight had to be cancelled (I checked - yes it had been cancelled). Obviously a key had slipped and this week's flight had been cancelled as well. What to do?

"Help," I hinted.

"The plane's full," she explained. "No seats left. We've actually sold eight more seats than there are on the plane. Heaven knows what we'll do if the people all turn up."

"I've got lots of plastic cards," I offered. Real life isn't like TV, she didn't offer to let me rub her tits; but she did disgorge an incredibly expensive ticket. I bet I was the only

passenger on the plane who paid full price. I wondered about the eight people (nine now, since I'd jumped the queue) who couldn't get on. What were they feeling about the situation?

Once I broke Europe.

I was in a train heading for Rotterdam, but the Transport Gods were determined not to let me arrive there. There is a rail bridge across the Maas leading into the Europort. Cargo ships ply their trade up and down the river. When they reach the rail bridge the trains are stopped and the bridge is raised to let them through. But on this day the bridge was down and a Captain, driving his ship up the Maas, misjudged the room available to him. Convinced that he could get through, he crashed into the rail bridge, breaking much of it (and much of his boat as well). Now nothing could get across, and that included me.

The Europort is the busiest port in Europe. Trains leave it almost every minute, and others arrive. Sooner or later they connect with every major rail system on the continent. Except on that day (and for about a fortnight afterwards). The congestion spread outwards in concentric circles over most of the continent. If I hadn't wanted to go to Rotterdam it would never have happened.

It isn't everybody who can say that they broke Europe.

# The Eyes Have It

When I was about 12 years old the world began to take on a strangely blurred appearance. I would wait at bus stops with my friends and I was constantly amazed that they could read the route number on the front of the bus long before I could even see the bus itself. (It's arrival in front of me at the bus stop never failed to surprise me. Where could it have come from?).

Teachers wrote things on the blackboard, but all I could see were mushy white ovals that communicated no messages to me. I mentioned these odd phenomena to my father.

"Sit nearer the front of the class," he thundered. Being himself possessed of perfect vision, he could not conceive that any son of his could possibly have flawed eyesight.

That summer there was an important cricket match between my school and the school next door. It being generally agreed that I was useless at cricket, I was placed out of harm's way in an obscure corner of the field, miles away from the action and left to commune with nature. Eventually I became aware of semi-hysterical shrieking from the assembled multitudes at the other end of the field.

"Catch it! Catch it!"

Catch what? For the life of me I couldn't see anything to catch. Then a vague blur moved into my field of vision and for a brief moment, fame and undying glory were potentially mine. All I had to do was catch it.

The moment was all too brief and the potential remained unrealised. The object was moving far too fast and I saw it far too late to do anything constructive about it. With unerring accuracy it hit me on the nose and the world got even more blurred than normal as my eyes filled up with

involuntary tears. I didn't know a nose had so much blood in it.

I moved progressively closer to the front of the class (thus labelling myself a creep to my classmates). Eventually I was right at the front, nose not quite jammed into the chalk dust. The messages remained enigmatic.

"You're imagining things," roared my father. "You just want glasses because your friends have them and you think it is all the fashion."

My marks deteriorated and I understood less and less (that's why they call them lessons, I suppose (sorry Lewis)). Eventually, against his better judgement, my father was persuaded to take me to have my eyes tested and it was revealed that I was severely short sighted.

"You made up all the answers you gave the optician," my father insisted. "There's nothing wrong with your eyes."

Once my father got an idea into his head, nothing short of dynamite would ever remove it. To his dying day he never believed that I needed glasses, though eventually he came to accept it.

"New glasses?"

"Yes."

"They suit you."

The world that revealed itself to me once the glasses were perched on my nose was a miracle of clarity. I remember being surprised to find that things had edges. I'd never seen edges before - to me objects just faded away into vagueness at their boundaries and it was a revelation to find that in reality they were sharply defined. And while intellectually I had always known that roads had another side (after all, just like the chicken, I crossed the road on occasion), I was astonished to find that I could actually see it in all its glory long before I got there. I began to realise just how circumscribed my world had actually been.

My eyes gradually deteriorated all through my teenage years, finally stabilising in my early twenties. My

prescription remained unchanged and I got into the habit of visiting the optician only when the frames fell apart (not an unusual occurrence with the cheap British frames – my New Zealand optician was quite scathing of them).

However for the last year or so I have found it progressively more difficult to read the date on my watch or absorb the detail of tiny footnotes in technical manuals. (The only useful information in technical manuals is to be found in footnotes. By and large, the main pages contain nothing of interest or significance).

I find myself constantly taking my glasses off to read things that are close to me (my long distance vision remains stable and my glasses are still essential for that). More and more I find myself in sympathy with my grandfather's often expressed grumble that the print in newspapers is much smaller than it used to be. Another eye test would appear to be required. Fortunately there is an optician directly across the road from the office...

"First I want to measure the distance between your eyes," said the nice lady as she brandished a ruler. Feeling distinctly more neanderthalic as the ruler got closer, I submitted to the indignity. She nodded and wrote something down. I had confirmed her worst fears.

"Now look through here. Can you see the letters?"

"Yes."

"Tell me which is clearer. Here's lens one. Here's lens two."

"Well actually it was clearest when you took lens one away and before you put lens two in."

"Ha, ha." She sounded somewhat grim. Perhaps I was doing it wrong. I resolved to try harder.

"Now we'll test your close reading vision. Just hold this card comfortably then move it slowly away from you and tell me when it starts to go out of focus."

I tried; I really did. But when she made another note and said, "Ah, I see your arms aren't quite long enough," I knew

that all hope was dead.

Then we had the glaucoma test. The early onset of glaucoma is detected by a rise in pressure inside the eyeball. They have two ways of testing for this. One shoots a jet of compressed air into the eyeball. Obviously it makes you blink, but the machine measures the deformation of the eyeball just before the blink and deduces the internal pressure from the amount of distortion. It's all over in the blink of an eye (ahem!).

The other, and much more unpleasant way, involves dripping vivid yellow goo into the eye. This is a local anaesthetic. Once the eyeball is numbed, a machine pushes a probe against the surface. Again the internal pressure is measured. The test itself takes next to no time, but for the next hour or so you weep copious fluorescent tears and people laugh at you. (But you look impressively cool under the UV lights in a night-club).

I was pleased to see that this time I was getting the puff of air. Blink! Blink! All done.

Apparently the slight deterioration in my vision is quite normal. If I want, I can have a prescription for reading glasses, but frankly there seems little point. The optician says that taking my glasses off to read is perfectly OK and putting on another pair just so my eyeballs don't feel naked is probably overkill.

So now my only problem is trying to remember where I put my glasses last time I took them off to read a footnote or check the date. And believe me, that's a real problem.



# Bodily Functions

On November 5<sup>th</sup> I usually lock the cat flap and keep the cats indoors so that they don't get inadvertently blown to smithereens. Normally they don't mind, but on this particular November 5<sup>th</sup>, Ginger was somewhat restless, scratching at the cat flap and whining occasionally. I put it down to general cussedness - after all, everybody knows that whenever a door is locked, the cat, by definition, is on the wrong side of it. Eventually she gave up and grumpily snoozed a while. Occasionally she woke, and paced up and down.

At last it all appeared to get too much for her and the real reason for her restlessness quickly became apparent. She marched decisively off to the back of the house, climbed into the green bowl we soak the tea towels in prior to washing them (fortunately it was empty at the time) and took an enormous crap.

She seemed quite nonplussed at the lack of scratchable things to cover it with and peered pathetically over the rim. She was quickly rescued and the bowl was hurriedly cleaned and disinfected. She climbed up onto the toilet, perched precariously on the rim, put her head down and her tail up and took a celebratory drink. All was well in her world again.

Animals have a natural and quite uninhibited approach to the mysterious workings of their bodies. Humans have a much more peculiar attitude about the whole business. The astronomer Tycho Brahe (he of the silver nose) is popularly supposed to have died of an exploded bladder because he refused to leave the dinner table to relieve himself as long as his host was still present. I can't claim to have gone that far, though once, for a bet, I did go for a month without

taking a dump. It's a good job I have brown eyes. Nobody could tell I was full of shit...

When I was a child, I led a sheltered existence and much was mysterious to me. I had no idea that other people went to the toilet; I thought I was the only person in the world who did that. Wasn't it generous of my parents to have a whole room fitted out just for me? I don't recall ever spotting them using it at all. Either I was a singularly unobservant child, or they only used it when I was asleep. I suspect that both these facts are true.

Consequently I was most ill-prepared for the hurly burly of school life when I was finally packed off there aged about five. I vividly recall bursting for a pee on my first day but being completely unable to ask where the toilets were because I was sure that nobody would have the faintest idea what I was talking about. The inevitable result ensued and I still recall the humiliation of being dried off and told off simultaneously. It was an inauspicious start to an academic career...

As I grew older I began to suspect that I might not be completely solid inside. Up until this point, if I'd considered it at all, I'd just assumed that I looked rather like a leg of lamb all the way through. However the fact that stuff leaked out at regular intervals began to suggest that something might be going on in there.

I started to ask increasingly awkward and embarrassing questions of my (rather strait-laced) parents. Then one Christmas I was given a toy called "The Visible Man". The box it came in contained plastic models of all the human organs and a clear perspex body to fit them in. When fully assembled, you had a naked man with a transparent skin and you could turn him round and see where all the interesting little bits fitted together. It was absolutely fascinating. And, it would appear, it was me.

The back of the box advertised a companion toy "The Visible Woman". I asked for one for my birthday but my

parents seemed strangely diffident and I never got one, much to my disappointment.

Now that I knew I had tubes and interesting chunky bits inside I began to wonder if perhaps other people did as well. Prior to this I'd tended to regard other people as somehow not quite real. I vaguely felt that when I wasn't around they probably turned themselves off and hung themselves up in a wardrobe somewhere (any child without siblings is a natural solipsist). But the evidence of "The Visible Man" suggested that perhaps there were one or two other freaks of nature like me in the world. I kept an open mind, and gradually it filled up as the evidence accumulated...

When I was a student I would spend the summer holidays working in the pathology laboratory of the local hospital (a vampire's ideal job). I soon got quite blasé about blood. I used to measure haemoglobin levels and erythrocyte sedimentation rates. Sometimes, as a special treat, I was allowed to make and stain the slides. At first I layered the blood too thickly (a common mistake, I'm told). But after a bit of practice I managed to get it right. The insides of the body and the biological functions they followed gave up some of their secrets.

Unlike the permanent employees, I wasn't allowed to stick needles and scalpels into people and take the blood myself. All I was allowed to do was put it into machines and on to slides when it arrived in the lab. I was quite peeved about this; I rather fancied the idea of sticking sharp, pointed objects into people, but apparently it was AGAINST THE RULES.

The closest I ever got was from the other side when I acted as a crash test dummy for a very new and very nervous lab technician who was being trained up to stick things into real people. She'd practised on a model and now it was time to try it on a living body. I was a student and therefore expendable. Would I volunteer? Well, why not?

Her first task was to take a smear from my thumb for microscopic examination. This involved sticking a small, needle-like scalpel into my thumb and squeezing a tiny drop of blood out onto a slide. The scalpel was unwrapped from its sterile package and she clasped my thumb in one hand and the scalpel in the other. She brought the scalpel down gently onto my thumb and it bounced off again. We both peered closely at the thumb. No blood. Try again - harder this time.

WALLOP!

The scalpel sunk about quarter of an inch into the ball of my thumb (I half expected to see it sticking out of the other side). She let go and it vibrated gently back and forth then came to rest. Dumbfounded, we both looked at it for a moment and then we screamed in unison. To this day I don't know who screamed the loudest.

Once a technician went collecting samples in the geriatric ward. Draw the blood into a syringe and squirt it into a test tube with an anti-coagulant in the bottom. Shake well, don't stir; just like a martini. She stuck her needle into an old lady's arm and as she started to draw blood the lady died.

There was no connection between the two events; it was just a rather grim coincidence. It wasn't funny, but we laughed about it for days...

Shortly after I started working in my first permanent job, I was sent on a first aid course and I saw many gruesome sights as the teacher (a doctor) tried to accustom the class to the many ways a body can be injured. "You can be sick afterwards," he used to say. "While it's going on, somebody needs you. You aren't allowed to be sick. So I want you to know what you are likely to see." He played us films and showed us slides. And he took us on a visit to a hospital so that we'd smell the injuries as well. That was the worst part.

Now I really did have objective evidence that people didn't look like a leg of lamb all the way through. "The

Visible Man" had been completely truthful in everything he'd said to me all those years ago.

I learned how to bandage wounds and splint broken bones. I learned how to make a ring bandage to protect wounds with glass in them so as not to drive the glass further in (and once I used that knowledge in real life when my neighbour walked through his ranch slider and bled all over the shag pile carpet). I learned how to put a patient in the recovery position (and when not to). I learned a method of treating burns that completely contradicted one I'd been taught several years previously. As knowledge advances, sometimes treatments change.

I learned how to treat someone who has fallen off a building and impaled themselves on a fence. "Don't do anything," was the doctor's advice. "Ring for an ambulance and then hold their hand and talk to them until the ambulance arrives. The paramedics won't do anything either except saw through the fence. They'll take the patient to the hospital with the fence still stuck through him. Do you know why?"

The class thought hard about that one. "It needs very special and delicate surgery?"

"Don't be daft," he said. "They want to give the patient something to hang on to when the ambulance goes round the corner too fast."

# Journey

I arrived at Auckland airport on Sunday afternoon to discover that it was a wall to wall mass of seething inhumanity. No planes had been able to get in or out of Wellington for the last two days and everybody's patience was wearing thin.

"I have to get to Wellington today," shrieked a lady overcome with stress. "How dare you cancel my flight? It is absolutely vital that I get to Wellington. You MUST schedule a flight."

Her voice rose in both frequency and volume. Dogs began to howl and rude words etched themselves into the glass doors of the terminal. The man behind the counter patiently explained for the five thousandth time that Air New Zealand was not in charge of the weather and there was nothing he or anybody else could do. His body language made it plain that he was secretly nursing an ambition to punch her lights out. But he restrained himself.

I decided to go over to the Ansett Golden Wing Lounge. Maybe the staff there would be less fraught...

"No," the nice Ansett lady behind the desk said to me, "I don't think there is any chance at all of getting you to Wellington today and it will probably be quite late on Monday before we can re-schedule you."

My first day back at work after the Christmas holidays was not turning out to be an overwhelming success. However even as we spoke and while I was glumly contemplating my future, an announcement came over the tannoy:

"If there is anyone who would like a lift to Wellington and can help with the driving, would they please come to the service desk in the Golden Wing Lounge."

Since that was exactly where I was standing, I determined to take advantage of the offer. To think was to act. I wasted no time.

"ME!!!", I volunteered.

And so it was done. It turned out that Natalie had an urgent appointment in Wellington and, like me, couldn't wait until Monday. So she had cut the gordian knot and rented a car, the cost of which she was charging back to her firm on the theory that they would rather pay a little money up front now and make a success of her project than be miserable skinflints and watch the project fail. It sounded good to me.

"How much would you like me to contribute to the cost?" I asked. She waved her hand vaguely in the air. "Nothing," she said. "The company is paying. Don't worry about it."

It sounded even better. Later, after the adventure was over, I told all this to my boss and pointed out that my journey to Wellington hadn't cost the company a cent. Being Glaswegian, he found this enormously satisfying and immediately began contemplating nefarious schemes to close Wellington airport every time I was due to fly...

And so the journey to Wellington began. A short way out of Auckland, the sky was ominously dark and soon the rain came down like stair rods. We drove past a golf course and I was astonished to see the sprinkler system in action. The grass looked quite bemused at this double dose of pleasure.

With wipers going at full speed, we weaved along State Highway 1. A disturbing number of white crosses decorated the roadside, and it wasn't long before I understood why. Far too many times I watched moronic drivers in high powered cars zooming down the right hand lane, overtaking everything in sight and occasionally nipping back into the left lane when the oncoming traffic got too close for comfort. We saw no accidents, and nobody died, but that was a miracle of rare design in itself. A slight misjudgement, a moment of inattention and I could easily have seen at least twenty accidents on that journey and who knows how

many deaths. Driving standards in New Zealand have always been appallingly bad, but they seem to have got even worse in recent years.

The weather was most odd. Shortly before Taupo we drove into a band of sunshine. In front of us and behind us the black clouds decorated the sky, and the border between the dark and the light was the straightest line I have ever seen in a natural phenomenon. Usually nature abhors straight lines (rather like New Zealand road engineers who, I am certain, get paid by the corner).

I have always been convinced that if it is raining somewhere then obviously there must be some other place where it is not raining. If you can find the border between these two areas, then there must be a place where you can stand with one side of your body getting rained on and the other staying dry. However I've never been able to find such a place - the border always seems to be too fuzzy. But this time I found it; the border between the dark rain clouds and the sunshine was almost geometrically straight. I was tempted to stop the car and just stand there enjoying the oddity, but if I did that some idiot would probably crash into me, so I carried on driving.

Feeling peckish, we decided to stop in Taupo for a nibble. "Where's a good place to eat in Taupo?" mused Natalie. I had no answer. The last time I was in Taupo was midnight eight years ago, and nothing had been open so I'd had a picnic by the lake with the remnants of my lunch. "Oh look," said Natalie, "there's a parking space. Let's pull over and then we'll decide."

The car was duly parked. And there, right in front of us was a Kebab house. This was obviously a sign from God, and so we dined on Kebabs...

The journey to Wellington continued. No visitor to the country would ever have known that New Zealand had mountains. They were all sulking behind very low cloud and the land was flat and barren as far as the eye could see



which was almost three feet. Macho drivers kept showing off their big dicks by racing past at 150 kph, but we left them to it.

Just south of Taupo I had the enormous pleasure of watching my phone switch between cells (I'd never seen the phenomenon before since phones must be turned off on an aeroplane). The signal vanished completely for about 3 seconds and then the "roam" light flickered briefly, went out for another couple of seconds as the signal vanished again, and then came on strongly. I assume from this that the cell boundaries are nowhere near as fixed (or as close to each other) as all the diagrams imply. I also wonder how people living in the dead zone between the cells manage? Perhaps there is a law against them having a cell phone.

We contemplated stopping in Taihape to purchase a gumboot, but neither of us had enough room in our suitcases. For the first time ever, I really did see a bull on the outskirts of Bulls and as always I winced when I saw the spelling on the signpost to Feilding (and I winced again just now as I typed it).

Wellington was black and gloomy, dank and cold. We arrived about 10.00pm and I checked into my hotel. A quick visit to the office to do some last minute things and then to bed...

On Monday I hopped out of bed and into the shower. Nothing but freezing cold water emerged. I could tell straight away that my week was going to continue in the same manner in which it had begun. A plumber was called and on Tuesday, and for the rest of the week, I got exactly 45 seconds of hot water in my shower before it turned freezing cold again. On Wednesday I was awoken at 4.00am as large and enthusiastic council workmen emptied trash bins with enormous gusto and on Thursday I was awoken by a phone call at 2.00am. It was a wrong number.

Friday dawned clear and clean. After my normal 45 second hot shower followed by a cold one for as long as I

could stand it, I checked out of the hotel and went to the office. That evening I took a taxi to Wellington airport, wondering if I would be able to get home.

The flight was utterly uneventful.

# Milo and the Burglars

Over the years my cat Milo has taken to climbing on top of me when I lie half asleep in bed. He makes himself comfortable and then begins to purr very loudly and dribble to excess. I have become quite accustomed to this - indeed I almost welcome it; and these days I find it very hard to get to sleep without ten and a half kilograms of noisy fur slobbering in my earhole. One night recently we had all assumed our customary positions and were drifting lazily away when there was an enormous **CRASH!** followed immediately by the strident tones of a burglar alarm shrieking its head off. Sally reached the window before me because she didn't have to remove ten and a half kilograms of cat and pour the saliva out of her ear first. Consequently she was rewarded by the sight of three youths racing in panic away from the dairy across the road. By the time I arrived the excitement was over, though the alarm continued to shriek. We rang the dairy owner.

It would appear that the burglarious youths had attempted to smash one of the glass panels of the door with what looked like a paving slab or a lump of concrete, thereby making two mistakes with one action. Firstly they failed to appreciate that the glass was reinforced, and instead of shattering and allowing them entrance it merely took on the appearance of crazy paving and sullenly barred their way. Their second mistake was being unaware that the alarm was configured to respond not only to movement but also to vibration and so it immediately went into panic mode as the concrete rebounded from the glass and the shockwaves spread outwards. Indeed, so sensitive to vibrations is the alarm that on occasion it has mistaken the sounds of over-enthusiastic early morning council rubbish

bin emptiers for an army of marauding vandals and woken up the entire neighbourhood with its caterwauling. Mind you, who am I to claim it was mistaken?

The safety glass had bowed inwards from the concrete blow and it was blocking the mechanism of the sliding door. The dairy owner had to smash chunks of it aside - no mean feat. Eventually the alarm was silenced and all was made safe with plywood and nails. We returned to bed and soon the only sound to be heard was the rumble of a contented cat and the occasional splash as the level of the saliva lake in my ear rose another notch. Goldfish swam lazily hither and yon, frogs went *ribbitt* and a family of swans took up residence behind the third hair from the left and sealed and waterproofed their nest with wax. Sometimes my dreams verge on the bizarre...

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!** on my front door. "**POLICE!**" yelled a dark blue voice. Pausing only to empty my ear into a nearby bucket, I struggled into a dressing gown and let the policeman in. He seemed to think I had rung the police to report the attempted burglary and he wanted to take a statement. At the time I wasn't sure where he had got that idea from (being half asleep I wasn't thinking too coherently) but later I realised that he was confusing our telephone call to the dairy owner with the official report made by the dairy owner and by the security company that monitors his alarm.

I didn't think he would be very interested in the lake levels of my inner ear and such proved to be the case (though Milo the Cat sucked up to him shamelessly and got a good stroking to as a result thereby increasing his dribble count to a stratospheric value - he always was a pushover for anything in uniform). I handed the conversation over to Sally who was the only one who had seen anything of note. Her description of the youths was vague - which was hardly surprising given that she only saw them for a split second through a fog of sleep. The policeman was most

understanding. He apologised for waking us, stroked Milo one last time and splashed away towards his car.

Excuse me, I need to change my trousers. Milo's been asleep on my lap for the last hour and I'm a bit damp in the general direction of my thighs...

# Head Games

Lately I have been much concerned with the size and shape and general well-being of my head. I am slowly becoming convinced that I might be possessed of certain cranial abnormalities. Those who know me well have professed this belief for years, of course, but until now I have always denied it. However, to my chagrin, the evidence is starting to appear quite overwhelming.

Doubt first set in when I noticed people walking around with their glasses perched on the top of their head. It looked quite stylish and chic and since I often have to remove my glasses for close work I quickly developed the habit of placing them sexily on my skull. However this proved to be less than successful because within a very short space of time they would invariably fall off, generally landing in the urinal as I glanced down.

Such accidents do not make you look cool to the assembled multitudes relieving themselves in the same trough. The subsequent dampness in the hair and behind the ears after retrieving the glasses is also less than pleasant. So these days I have a poofy ribbon tied to my glasses instead and when I take them off they dangle securely on my chest instead of perching precariously on my head. When I eat my lunch, crumbs and excess gravy drop on to my glasses instead of on to my trousers, which saves me a small fortune in dry cleaning bills. However when I put my glasses back on again I can no longer see through them, which adds an interesting dimension to the drive home after work. On the other hand, when I suffer an attack of the midnight munchies all I have to do is suck the lenses - a definite plus, I think.

After a while it began to dawn on me that I never saw any of these headily-bespectacled people actually wearing their glasses properly across their eyes. So I took comfort in the supposition that they were simply making a fashion statement and must have attached their glasses to their bonce with superglue and duct tape. Nothing else could possibly explain how the spectacles stayed so firmly in place. But nevertheless the first doubts about my cranial structure began to surface...

Then I bought a walkman.

These days walkmans (walkmen?) come with unobtrusive earphones that plug directly into the earhole. I had long observed the gliterati walking around with them casually inserted, fully wired for sound. It looked excessively elegant and I was consumed with envy. The design of the earphones is such that a small stem poking out of the speaker is supposed to sit snugly in a gap between several fleshy structures in the outer ear, thereby holding the speaker firmly wedged up against the eardrum, thus ensuring that the maximum possible volume pours into the interior of the skull, guaranteeing terminal deafness within moments.

I carefully inserted sprocket flange (a) into earlobe area (b), cranked up the volume and began to walk. After two steps, both earplugs fell out. Plonk!

It was only then that I noticed a significant detail - many of these ambient musicologists had cranial glasses as well as walkmans, a fact I had failed to appreciate at the time of my first observations. Could it be that they had superglue and duct tape in their ears as well as on their head? No other conclusion seemed possible for no matter how hard I tried, I was utterly unable to keep the earphones in place. My current record stands at eight (very softly, softly) paces. My doubts concerning my cranial well being increased...

Then I bought a hat.

I have long lusted after an Akubra - that Australian hat with the large curly brim that keeps the sun off both the

neck and the face. It has a leather strap wrapped around the crown for decoration and the crown itself has small holes in it to aid in ventilating the head. All in all it is a masterpiece of design and recently, in Melbourne, I found a shop that sold nothing but hats, and nearly all the hats were Akubras. Who could resist?

"How big is your head?" queried the man behind the counter. I had to confess that I had no idea, never having had occasion to measure it. He cast an expert eye over me. "We'll get there by a process of elimination," he decided. "Try this one."

The world went dark as something about the size and shape of a small apartment building plunged over my head and enveloped my lower portions, utterly obscuring my vision.

"Hmmm. Looks a little large," observed a distant whisper. "Try this one."

The apartment building vanished, only to be replaced by a quarter acre suburban bungalow. Again, the world vanished.

"Not quite there yet. Have a go with this one."

This one was merely tent-like, but still so vast that an entire aboriginal tribe could have held a corroboree and gone walkabout inside it. Indeed, I think I spotted one of their camp fires in the far distance - but I might have been hallucinating because of excessive exposure to sensory deprivation.

"We may have a problem here." The voice was now sounding distinctly worried.

I tried on an example of every single hat size in the entire shop. Only one fitted me. It was the very last one I tried and it was the smallest hat he had. It was a little dusty; nobody had ever got down to that size before. The shopkeeper didn't say a word, but I knew what he was thinking: "This man has a most amazingly small head..."



Vanity suggests that it isn't me, of course. The real explanation is that Australians all have enormously big heads. Or perhaps they hold their hats on with duct tape and superglue. No other explanation would seem to fit the facts. Unless of course there really is something odd about my head...

No! No! Perish the thought! Please pass me the superglue! And the duct tape! And the gerbil!

# How to Recognise a Student

I keep hordes of wolves away from my door by teaching people how to use their computers to the best advantage. I've just finished teaching a web site development class. I told the class the story of Cinderella, we discussed the curious relationship that Humpty Dumpty has with words, and I quoted several stanzas from The Hunting of the Snark. Trust me - all these were relevant to the subject at hand. We also studied many mysterious computer topics not unconnected with web pages. A fine time was had by both teacher and students and much knowledge was exchanged, to the great benefit and enjoyment of all.

To be fair, the vast majority of courses are as enjoyable and successful as this one was. But sometimes there are exceptions.

Often it begins when the student arrives at reception.

"Hello, I'm here for the course." The definite article in this sentence is always a dead give-away that trouble lies ahead.

"Which course are you on?"

"Errr." A look of panic begins to spread over the student's face and there is much hunting through pockets, bags and briefcases. Somewhere there must be a copy of the official welcome fax that gives details of the course being attended?

The receptionist tries another approach. "What is your name?"

The student's panic increases. Oh God! All the hard questions are coming first!

Once I was privileged to hear the following dialogue:

"Which course are you here for?"

"Building Blocks!" This was stated firmly and proudly. A hurried hunt through the courses scheduled for that day revealed only one that might apply.

"Would that be Microsoft Word Building Skills?"

"Yes, that's right." The student nodded happily. "Building Blocks!"

The next major initiative test comes when the student first encounters the coffee machine. This is a fearsome beast, much given to the making of odd grinding noises as it ponders the current refreshment requirements. A liquid crystal display requests the prospective imbiber to "Select Beverage". A column of buttons provides a wide menu of choice.

Most students do actually manage to place a cup beneath the spout and press the button corresponding to their refreshment of choice (though failure in these early stages is not entirely unknown). The liquid crystal display then changes and exhorts the customer to "Please Wait". There are grinds and groans; liquid gushes and the machine vibrates in a demented manner. The general impression is that it is about to take off and blast a hole in the ceiling on its way into low Earth orbit. The student begins to quiver with anxiety.

There is a brief moment of silence as the machine takes a deep breath and girds its loins for a final stupendous excretory effort. The student often takes this as a signal that it has finished its task. Despite the fact that the display still says "Please Wait", the student snatches the cup away, stares in bewilderment at the thick sludge it contains and watches helplessly as vast quantities of savoury liquid pour into the waste tray. The display then changes and says "Select Beverage" again and the machine sits smugly, waiting for its next victim.

Some students never manage to muster the requisite skills for taming the coffee machine, and they spend the

entire course in a state of acute caffeine deprivation. They have far too much blood in their coffee stream as a result, and so they learn very little and get poor evaluations from their instructor. Perhaps we need to run a coffee machine operating system course?

Once settled in the classroom, students often exhibit many more odd behavioural traits.

There is the student who nods thoughtfully at regular intervals and takes copious notes. Often a second or even a third notepad is requested. Important points are underlined and highlighted. If you examine these notes after the student has left for the day, it is usually found that every single word you said has been written down verbatim - including the jokes. Ominously, the punch lines are all underlined and highlighted. At this point in the proceedings you generally begin to regret informing the class that the only sure-fire guaranteed way to solve network congestion problems is to sacrifice a live goat on top of the DHCP server.

I am convinced that many students have had an operation to remove their sense of humour gland.

I have long since given up telling my classes that once a month they should back up their entire system onto a printer. If trouble ensues and it is necessary to restore some files, all you have to do is feed the relevant sheets of paper through a scanner. So many people have taken this outrageous statement seriously, that I have become severely depressed and have had to retire it.

The more studious and serious-minded class members will treat the instructor as the source of all knowledge. They will take advantage of the opportunities the course gives them to regale you with questions of monumental complexity (and self-contradiction) regarding scenarios so extremely unlikely that several ice ages will come and go in the nether regions of Hell before they come to pass. Often the student will become lost inside a twisty maze of

subordinate clauses and the question will gradually glide to a puzzled full stop. (Equally often, the general tenor of the question will reveal that the student has utterly failed to understand anything you have said for the last three days).

Faced with this situation, the experienced instructor will simply lie and make up an answer on the spot. Any answer at all will do (preferably one that involves subjects well outside the scope of the course, in order to minimise the chances of the student ever trying to implement it). As long as the answer is given with a straight face and enormous authority, the student will happily accept it.

Then we come to the lab exercises and the student is required to manipulate a mouse and caress a keyboard. This too is a great separator of sheep from goats. The tongue protrudes a quarter of an inch from the left corner of the mouth, a deep frown of concentration furrows the forehead, and a single finger hovers tentatively over the keyboard as letters are searched for. Eventually an approximate match is found and the finger stabs wildly. Damn! Where's the backspace key? The hunt starts again.

Programming courses are particularly susceptible to odd student syndrome. Every so often help is requested to debug some program or other that the student is working on. Woe betide the instructor who falls for this one.

"Just bring the program in, we'll take a look at it."

The next day the student turns up with a briefcase stuffed to bursting point with a printout of a 500,000 line monstrosity that gives every appearance of having been written by a left-handed warthog in the middle of a very bad acid trip. (They never think to bring the program on a diskette so that we can actually run it to see where it breaks).

Structure? Logic? We don't need no steenking structure! Logic is strictly for the birds. You begin to realise why the student has so far failed to complete any of the programming assignments in the class, and you resolve to

make sure that the student never finds out your email address.

Perhaps worst of all is the student who thinks (if that is the word I'm groping for; I don't believe it is) in watertight (some might say thought-tight) compartments. Such people are constantly amazed to find that the things they studied in chapter three have some relevance to the subject of chapter four. Applying them again in chapter five is utterly beyond their comprehension.

Such a blinkered, straight-down-the-middle-of-the-road reaction to a technical problem often implies that the student is really searching for the philosopher's stone of computing. They just KNOW that there is one simple answer to life, the universe and every computer problem. A cookbook, a recipe list, one simple series of steps leading to computing nirvana. They bitterly resent that I don't tell them what it is. Why do I have to torture them with arcane concepts and force them to type bizarre things and click on buttons with the frightening caption Advanced on them?

I once explained to a class that there is indeed a single, simple secret known only to the initiated. But to become initiated, you have to dance naked around a bonfire of computer manuals at midnight, and sacrifice a nerd (not a geek - if you use a geek, it won't work). Predictably, several people appeared to take me seriously. They wrote it down.

All students who attend courses are asked to fill in a background form detailing their experience and expectations. When the students actually fill one in, they can indeed be quite revealing. I always make sure to read them carefully so as to ensure that the prospective students meet the prerequisites. However some always slip through the net.

"Why do I have to understand arithmetic? I don't need to know how to calculate a percentage. I just want to learn how to use Excel!"

"Why do I have to know how to type? I just want to learn how to use Microsoft Word!"

Even worse are the students who do not fill in a background form because they are incapable of doing so. One instructor recently had the dubious pleasure of teaching a student whose grasp of written and spoken English was so poor that he could neither speak nor write his own name. He could not fill in the course sign in sheet, and he was unable to understand the lunch menu and therefore could not order lunch. Bets were taken as to whether or not he would starve to death before the week was out. Quite what he managed to get from the course itself remains moot.

Sometimes though the background forms are less than useful. Once I read a form that contained no information other than the student's name and the course name; and recently one form had as an answer to the question "Course being attended?", the big, bold, black word NONE.

I should be so lucky.

# Diatribes On Language

Words are the tools we use to communicate ideas. Without words it is not possible to live outside your skull and interact with the other (hopefully word-using) people around you. Anybody who has visited a country whose language they do not speak is well aware of the feelings of isolation and frustration that are caused by an inability to speak (and an inability to read if the written form is markedly different from your own).

However even when people are supposedly speaking the same language we still often find that the words that are used can convey meanings that are quite different from those intended. George Bernard Shaw once remarked that the Americans and the English were two nations separated by a common language.

Sometimes it is a matter of accent (or, less commonly, dialect). The average New Zealander's utter inability to pronounce any vowels on the left of the sound spectrum often makes them incomprehensible to other English speakers. "What have pigs got to do with hanging out the washing?" my mother once asked me in bewilderment after having been involved in a charming (but from her point of view increasingly surrealistic) discussion about the merits of various different kinds of clothes pegs.

The effect seems to get worse the further south you travel - I know somebody from Invercargill who (on a good day) can say "o" and "u". On a bad day only "u" can be articulated. Perhaps if I ever visit the Chatham Islands I will find that they gave up vowels years ago and now communicate only with consonants.

More seriously, the communication gap can also be widened when perfectly familiar words are used in ways that



fail to match their meaning. I came across just such a phenomenon recently when I sat through a Microsoft training course. The training material kept using the word "enumerate" in a context that I found very puzzling. The word means "to count" (though more subtle actions may also be implied). However the training course used it in a sense that seemed to suggest the action of looking in turn at a collection of things and doing something unrelated to counting on the basis of what you found. In other words to "iterate" through the collection. Once I figured this out, I simply assumed that in American English "enumerate" had a different meaning than it had in English English and thought no more about it.

Later, after the course, I looked the word up in both an American and an English dictionary - the definition was the same in both! Enumerate simply does not mean what the Microsoft training material claims that it does. By bending the meaning for their own purpose until it broke, they not only failed to communicate with me, they actually completely mislead me, which is worse. Only Humpty Dumpty can get away with forcing a word to mean what he wants it to mean. Microsoft are nowhere near that powerful (yet). All they succeed in doing is muddying the waters.

The written word is a communication tool that tends to require an even greater precision than the spoken word. When we speak we can often get away with solecisms that would be unacceptable if written down. For example, many people say **asterix** when they would (of necessity) *write* **asterisk** (I attribute this laziness of speech to the enormous popularity of the eponymous comic book character).

A more recent phenomenon is the elision of contractions such as "should've" into the phrase "should of". In terms of pronunciation it is not hard to determine why this has happened (try saying the two phrases out loud). However a far more worrying trend is that the latter phrase is now starting to appear quite regularly in printed material (I have

seen it in several novels recently). This is simply not acceptable. If you wish to avoid contractions (as many people do) then spell the words out in full ("should have"); don't try and mangle it into something that it isn't.

The increasing popularity of word processing software and spelling checking programs means that few people these days make spelling mistakes (unless they abuse the program, or are too lazy to invoke it in the first place or they fall into the homonym trap - see later). However there exist, as yet, no grammar checkers worthy of the name. The only ones I've come across seem to do little except make delphic pronouncements concerning the passive voice; something that I find less than helpful.

As a consequence of this, many modern written communications tend to come littered with errors of the "should've / should of" variety and again, meaning and precision are sacrificed at the altar of utility.

Four techniques form the basis of our written language, and if any of these techniques are misused we progressively lose clarity of expression, and meaning vanishes before our very eyes. The techniques are spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric - and I'm going to talk about all four of them and try to demonstrate exactly what I mean.

Straight out of the box, a spelling checker will tell you about the words you have misspelled, and you can instruct it to fix them with a fair degree of confidence. However after a few months of carelessly hitting the "Add" button and putting the misspelled words into your custom dictionary you start to let the misspellings trickle through. Some of these mistakes are caused by accident and some by the honestly held but mistaken belief that the computer is wrong and you are right. I am appalled, for example, at the number of people who seem to think "alot" is the correct way to spell "a lot" and who have therefore added it to their dictionary. However no spelling checker will warn you about words that are spelled differently but sound the same.

Homonyms are not synonyms and English has rather too many for comfort. Consider the following paragraph:

There is only one way to discuss weather the whether is fine. Your on you're own if you think they're are others. If you think their might be rain you should ask someone if you could borrow there umbrella, or perhaps where an overcoat. If someone asks wear you got it, be discrete. If you are scene at the seen of an umbrella burglary, refuse to talk on principal. Carrying a discreet number of umbrellas is not a crime unless your school principle says so.

It passes my spelling checker with nary a murmur, but every single use of :

there / their / they're,  
our / you're  
weather / whether  
discrete / discreet  
principle / principal  
seen / scene  
where / wear

is completely wrong. I really don't know how many homonyms English has; I think it might be an open ended list.

Punctuation symbols are used to divide sets of words into meaningful blocks. They indicate breathing pauses and the word stress; the end of one idea and the start of another. Read your words out loud - you'll soon see where the punctuation has to go as you breathe.

Most punctuation is actually pretty robust and can be mis-used without detracting too much from the sense. Misplaced or omitted commas just add awkwardness and a vague sense of disquiet. The use of the semi-colon is becoming a dying art. However the full stop is not so forgiving. Omitting it (or putting it in the wrong place) can

completely destroy the sense. Let's try the above paragraph again:

Their is only one way to discuss weather the whether is fine your on you're own if you think they're are others if you think their might be rain you should ask someone if you could borrow there umbrella or perhaps where an overcoat if someone asks wear you got it be discrete if you are scene at the seen of an umbrella burglary refuse to talk on principal carrying a discreet number of umbrellas is not a crime unless your school principle says so

Without full stops, that already difficult paragraph degenerates into virtual incomprehensibility. Even worse. Are the full. Stops that are placed. At the end of things that. Are not sentences. The jerky effect that causes is most disconcerting and again meaning tends to vanish.

Perhaps the most abused punctuation symbol is the apostrophe. There are those who claim it is an archaic irrelevance and they would like to get rid of it completely. However removing the apostrophe from our written language would greatly increase our homonym list - how would you distinguish, for example, between "were" and "we're" without it?

The apostrophe indicates missing letters in contractions ("should've") or the possessive ("Alan's book"). A case can be made that even when used as a possessive it **really** indicates missing letters. An older form of the language would have written "Alan his book". Confusion arises when the word is *already* a possessive (as in "its book" which does not require an apostrophe) or a homonym with missing letters as in "it's a book" (i.e. "it **is** a book").

Putting a full stop at the end of a sentence presupposes that you know what a sentence is. The structure of a language (its grammar) defines this sort of thing and in English it can be a slippery beast indeed. Unlike many

languages, English is almost completely uninflected. Where other languages change the ending of a word to indicate its function in a sentence, English depends on the position of the word to define its function.

There are remnants of an older, inflected language in modern English. Consider the sentence "He saw him". You can't turn it round - "Him saw he" is nonsense; "him" is not allowed in the position reserved for the subject of the sentence and "he" is not allowed in the position reserved for the object. The feminine form is even more startling - "She saw her" and "Her saw she". Mostly it doesn't matter though. "The sheep saw the sheep" can swap around quite happily.

In the first two examples the words are inflected in the sense that the spelling of the word defines what job it does (subject or object). However nobody would ever inflect a sheep and staring at the spelling of the word in isolation tells us nothing at all about its function in the sentence. The old joke that capitalism is the exploitation of man by man and communism is the reverse doesn't work in an inflected language, but English has no problems with it.

The structure of an English sentence is superficially much simpler than the structure of (say) a German or Russian sentence since we don't have to bother with word endings. However this seeming simplicity conceals a great subtlety and constructing a valid English sentence is not always easy without some pre-knowledge of the rules since the words themselves give no hints.

Even assuming that all of this works properly, we are still left with the style of the writing, the rhetorical tricks that dress up the prose in an attempt to get the message across. The way you say something can profoundly affect the way the message is received. If I said "Hey! Titface! Pass the sodding salt!" You would be less inclined to oblige than if I'd said "Could you pass the salt, please?". Such stylistic tricks

are called rhetoric and Aristotle wrote a whole book about it (called, not unnaturally, **Rhetoric**).

The tricks are common coin and most of us use them without thinking, and without knowing their names. A metaphor allows us to draw a relationship between two things that are similar to a common (unstated) third. To say that a robin is the herald of spring means that a robin is to spring as a herald is to the message he brings his prince. No literal relationship is intended. A simile, on the other hand, would imply a literal relationship and we could then say that a robin is like a herald of spring (which is nonsense, since there is no such thing as a *real* herald of spring, but never mind). Almost invariably a simile reveals itself by involving words such as "like" or "as if". Usually a metaphor is abstract and a simile is concrete (which explains why the abstract simile I used above doesn't work properly). Aristotle remarked rather drily that a simile is a metaphor with an explanation.

A synecdoche (lovely word – I have no idea at all how to pronounce it) is a usage whereby a part stands in for the whole. For example using the word sail to mean a ship or describing a computer system as a box.

Metonymy uses a name associated with an object instead of the object itself. Thus we might say "New Zealand has decided to send troops to Iraq" when we really mean that the *government* of New Zealand made that decision. Metonymy should not be confused with antonomasia where the surname of a person is used as a generic term – quisling or macadam or hoover or boycott, although the latter is rather odd, being a verb as opposed to the more usual noun.

With hyperbole we have an exaggeration for effect ("If I've told you once I've told you a million times..."). Litotes gives the same effect by use of the negative and often comes across as a dry or amusing understatement ("I am not unused to saying this...").

The list of rhetorical devices that we employ for effect is again probably endless and highly elaborate classifications of them have been the delight of rhetoricians and grammarians over the centuries. An enormous list of hair-splitting definitions was published by Quintilian in a book called **Institutio Oratorio** in the first century AD and the list was rendered into English equivalents by one George Puttenham in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I bet most authors would be overjoyed to have their books remembered and used for as long as Quintilian's was!

Spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric are legitimate subjects of study and generations of British schoolchildren have learned to hate them. I studied them quite intensively for 5 years under the bucket category of **English Language**. The lessons learned so painfully are probably the most useful I have ever acquired and scarcely a day goes by that I don't use them.

We are talking about communication and clarity of expression. It is simply not possible to communicate effectively if the communication channel is corrupt. The language is flexible and will take a lot of abuse before it finally gives up – but the greater the degree of corruption, the more the rules are mistreated, the harder it becomes to extract any meaning from the text. Just consider how much meaning was destroyed in my umbrella paragraph by only two simple abuses of the system.

Rules are made to be broken and language is an ever-evolving thing (God forbid that it should ever stagnate). But you simply cannot break the rules meaningfully if you don't know what the rules are in the first place; that's a given. Many people today do not know what the rules are because nobody has ever thought to tell them. The study of spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric has largely vanished from our educational system. People who produce illiterate prose (and therefore fail to communicate) are generally not

stupid, they are merely ignorant. And ignorance is correctable.

I have broken many of the rules of English in the writing of this article. Perhaps you would like to play a game and see how many violations you can find. I did it deliberately to enhance the effect I was trying to achieve and in every single case I knew what rule I was breaking and why I was breaking it. Today that is an increasingly uncommon skill.

We have to learn the rules of all our daily activities. We can't drive a car until we know the rules of driving, we can't use a computer system until we know the rules of clicking a mouse, we can't buy a round in the pub until we know the rules of money. Nobody demands or expects perfect knowledge of these things; just enough to get by. Is it too much to expect a similar working knowledge of your own language? I don't think so.



# Snap, Crackle, Pop.

Several sheets of paper blew in the wind and wrapped themselves around the fence. They looked most untidy and I determined to remove them. To think is to act. I strode across the grass. My left foot trod awkwardly into a hole in the lawn and twisted underneath me. I fell to the ground; my foot bearing the whole weight of my body at a most awkward angle. Something inside went CRACK and an excruciating pain shot up my leg.

"Expletive deleted!" I shrieked at the sky, and clutched my ankle.

Slowly and painfully I crawled on hands and knees back into the house. Vague memories of first aid lessons surfaced in my brain. Ice! Cool my ankle down and prevent swelling. I raided the freezer and sat for an hour or so with a packet of frozen sweetcorn pressed to the bottom of my leg. It was almost more uncomfortable than the pain had been. Water dripped onto the carpet and saturated my sock.

I poked experimentally at my ankle. Big mistake. When the world stopped twirling, around me I put the sweetcorn back. Maybe it would help...

After a time I attempted to stand. Success! I could even put my whole weight onto my left foot. More first aid lessons reappeared in my head – the ends of broken bones rasping together make a most distinctive noise. It is called crepitation. I listened carefully. No crepitation. Perhaps the ankle was just badly sprained.

From the corner where it lives I retrieved my walking stick; the one with the secret compartment for hiding brandy in. Unfortunately there was no brandy. Oh well, you can't have everything. With its support I limped around for a

time. Things got back on to more of an even keel. I sat for a while with a book.

As the day progressed, the pain in my ankle increased. I kept expecting that it would even off, but it didn't. It just went up and up, there seemed to be no top to the scale, just an ever-increasing agony which became more unbearable by the minute. Nauseating pain travelled up the whole of my leg. It was centred on the ankle, but it throbbed sickeningly all the way up to my thigh. The ankle itself began to swell again. By now I'd run out of sweetcorn (it was completely defrosted) and I began to contemplate the dubious virtues of a packet of peas; but the ankle was swelling up like a football and I started to feel that it might possibly be beyond even the power of frozen peas to affect a cure. It was time to give up. I rang some friends and asked them to drive me to the emergency clinic.

The doctor poked my ankle. "Does that hurt?"

I climbed down off the ceiling and he said, "I see it does."

"I can actually put my whole weight on it," I said. "I think it's only badly sprained."

"If I was a betting man," said the doctor, "I'd put \$20 on that. There's no crepitation. But I'm not letting you out of here without an X-ray."

The nice lady in Radiology said, "It costs \$15, you know."

I nodded wearily and handed the money over. She gave me a receipt and took me through. My leg was placed at various awkward angles and mysterious machinery hummed ominously. I limped back to the waiting room and about five minutes later the nice lady reappeared.

"Well," she said, "you've definitely broken it." She frowned at me. "You really shouldn't be walking on it, you know."

I shrugged and she gave me an envelope with the plates in it. "Here - take these back to the doctor." I limped away...

"You lost your bet," I told the doctor. He looked surprised.

"Really? Let me see." He examined the X-ray plates closely. "Oh yes, there it is. See that dark line?" He indicated a shadow on the plate. I nodded. "That's the break - just at the bottom of the fibula, where it joins the ankle. Hmmm - a bit higher up and you'd have to go into hospital to have a plate screwed on. But I think you'll be OK with a plaster cast and a set of crutches."

A nurse took me into the plaster room and I lay on a trolley.

"How tight are your jeans?" she asked.

I demonstrated.

"They'll have to come off," she pronounced. "Now - how do you want to handle this? Do you want to go home in your underwear or do you want to send one of your friends back to pick up a pair of shorts or something?"

I professed myself quite happy to go home in my underwear, but I was eventually persuaded to send my friend Martin off for shorts on the grounds that I didn't really want to frighten the impressionable or induce an inferiority complex in those who were currently quite self assured. Martin was given instructions on working the burglar alarm and descriptions of where the shorts were to be found and off he went. I passed the time chatting to the nurse.

"You can't have a shower for six weeks," she informed me. "The plaster we are putting on now is not a walking plaster. You mustn't put any weight on it at all or it will crack and we'll have to start all over again. In a week or so, when the swelling has died down, we'll change it for a fibreglass one. You can walk on that. But meanwhile you'll be on crutches, I'm afraid." Like all medical people, she appeared to take a gloomy pleasure in telling me the bad news.

Presently Martin returned bearing a pair of black shorts and a pair of vivid Day-Glo shorts that could only be squinted at even with the protection of sunglasses. "Which would you like?" he queried.

I wimped out and took the black ones.

The nurse soaked some plaster-of-paris impregnated bandages and wrapped them around my foot and ankle and half way up my leg. She finished the job by covering the cast with a crepe bandage that she fastened in place with a patented gadget. Then she covered the patented gadget with a strip of sellotape, and it was done. "I'll go and fetch your crutches," she declared.

Martin wandered over and stared at the X-ray plates which were pinned against a viewing screen on the wall. He spotted the break straight away. "That dark line doesn't belong there," he said authoritatively. "That must be it."

"That's right," I said.

He examined the X-ray closely. "Nice cartilage," he said. "See that gap there between the bones? That's cartilage. Nice resilient surface, that. Wish mine was that nice." He relapsed into gloom, contemplating his lack of cartilage.

The nurse bustled back and I was fitted to my crutches, then I manoeuvred my way out to the reception desk where vast amounts of money were extracted from my shivering wallet. Clumsy in my crutches, I clomped one-leggedly towards the door, wishing for a parrot for my shoulder. I had an overwhelming urge to yell "Avast me hearties! Yo, ho ho and a bottle of rum," to the beleaguered hordes in the waiting room as I departed, but I resisted the temptation.

Martin took me home.

Over the next few days, the crutches lost what little charm they had once had. Walking on crutches involves persuading your body to perform a series of semi-controlled forward falls caught (if you are lucky) on the crutches themselves. Blisters soon developed on my hands and my shoulders and upper arms began to ache. But more importantly, I discovered just how many things you can't do when both your arms are gripping crutches and neither is free to manipulate the world at large.

You can't take a pee in the conventional way and you can't wash your hands afterwards (not that you really need

to).

You can't pick up the corpses of birds and rats left as presents for you by grateful cats, and neither can you chase the gifts that are still alive. The score is currently two and a half cadavers and a live thrush with no tail but with a completely undamaged arsehole. You can't clean up bird poop either.

You can't clean your teeth. You can't chop things up in order to cook them. You can't go upstairs to play with your computers and most importantly, you can't pick up the cats bowls in order to feed them (not that they need it, given their depredations on the local wild life). It would appear that some ingenuity would be required.

Blisters and aching muscles just had to be put up with, but all the other problems proved solvable. Strategically placed chairs allowed all the day to day functions to be performed. Once I was sitting down, both hands were free again. After that, the only major obstacle to progress was the depressing (and hazardous) realisation that every time I tried to walk through a doorway my black cat Milo was sitting in it, and every time I approached one of the strategic chairs, my black cat Milo was asleep on it. He got a little annoyed at being constantly crutched out of doorways and turfed off the nice comfortable new places to get his head down.

Going upstairs to play with my computers was a problem of a slightly different order. Eventually it was solved by pulling myself up backwards, bouncing my bottom on every step. The first time I tried this I was watched by a very puzzled Ginger cat who finally decided it must be a game. She came up to join in.

After a week of stumbling I was starting to get used to my plastered ankle and I was coping quite well with the vicissitudes of life on crutches. I'd only tripped over Milo fifty three times and somehow I'd managed to avoid sitting on Ginger as I went upstairs. But all good things must come to

an end, and so I returned to the fracture clinic to find out what fate awaited me.

"Just hop up on the table," said the jolly nurse, "and I'll take the plaster off."

The table was at about chest height and I couldn't for the life of me see how to get up onto it when I only had one leg. The nurse took pity on me.

"Kneel on this chair with your injured leg, stand up on it with your uninjured one, swing round on your foot and then down on to the table." She demonstrated these actions with a grace and fluidity that made it more than apparent that she had done it many times before. I followed suit, somewhat more slowly and clumsily, but eventually I was on the table.

"Make yourself comfy. I'll be back in a minute. I've just got another one to remove first." She equipped herself with goggles, earmuffs and a circular saw and trotted off to another cubicle. Presently there came the sound of a hundred dentists' drills as someone's plaster was extracted. I began to wonder what was in store for me.

She came back into the cubicle and stripped off all her protective gear. "That was a tricky one," she remarked. "Now let's have a look at you." Mine, it seemed, wasn't nearly so tricky. She simply took a large pair of shears to it. Soon the cast fell away.

"My goodness me!" she exclaimed. "That's colourful!"

I looked down at my newly nude leg. Most of my foot, all of my ankle and part of my lower leg shone purple, red, blue, and yellow in the most extensive bruising I have ever seen in my life. The ankle was still grotesquely swollen, giving the entire leg an oddly lop-sided aspect. This together with the rainbow patterning made the whole organ appear decidedly surreal.

"I'll go and fetch the doctor now," said the nurse. "You just relax and enjoy the view. Pretty as a picture that bruising is - best I've seen all month!". She bustled off.

Presently the doctor appeared, clutching my original X-ray plates. This was a different doctor to the one I had seen previously; this one was a fracture specialist. He frowned thoughtfully at my bruises.

"Well," he said, "it looks like you've actually done a lot more damage to the soft tissues than you have to the bone. There's been an awful lot of bleeding into the immediate area around the ankle. The fracture itself is quite minor and it should heal up nicely, but the tissue damage really is very extensive." He poked a particularly succulent blue bit.

"Ouch!" I hinted.

"Can you stand on it?" he asked. "Walk a few paces?"

On the face of it, it seemed like a mad request. Of course I couldn't walk on it - it's broken, for goodness sake! But I remembered that even before I was encased in my cast I had actually been able to put my whole weight on to it. No crepitation. Thus encouraged, I clambered clumsily down from the table and stood on my own two feet for the first time in a week. It felt most odd - I'd become so used to the plaster that I felt naked and unprotected without it. I tried a couple of steps. It worked!

"We'll just put an elastic bandage on it," decided the doctor. "Take it slow and steady and you should be fine. Come back again in two weeks and we'll see how you are getting on."

He turned on his heel and left. Meanwhile the jolly nurse was unwrapping an elastic bandage which she layered on to my leg with a special gadget. "You haven't got a device like this," she said, "so what you will have to do is treat the bandage like a sock. Put it on and take it off in the same way you would with a sock."

I returned home and indulged myself in an orgy of hedonistic luxury. I took a standing up pee, I had a shower, I cleaned up a corpse.

Life was good. It is the sum total of all the little things that make up the pleasure in life and I hadn't realised how

much I missed those little things until they weren't there any more.

I still couldn't walk properly without support and I limped to the shops with my walking stick. "Chuff, chuff...me old war wound playing up, don't you know...chuff chuff... remember it well, up to me neck in muck and bullets..."

Over the next few days the bruising started to fade to a much less startling shade and even the swelling started to go down. Getting out of bed in the morning remained agony - the ankle stiffened up overnight and even moving it (let alone walking on it) remained problematical until it loosened up again. This generally took twenty minutes or so of limping (I still needed crutches for this bit; "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"). After that it became bearable and I could attend to the usual morning tasks. Showers remained difficult - one slip on the soap would probably snap the leg in two and clambering in and out of the bath was a scary balancing act. But I managed it. One day at a time.

Wish me luck for future recovery. Break a leg...



# Warrantable Risks

Only the names have been changed, for all the usual reasons.

It was time to have the car serviced and get it a warrant of fitness. So I hied me hence to Peter the One Man Band, who owns a garage and gives massages on the side. I have never availed myself of the massages, but several of the ladies at the office consider him to be quite hunky and go all coy when questioned. I have no idea what this might mean. But the thought of a massage given by fingers that have spent their day immersed in sump oil and grease seems less than attractive to me. And the fingernails! Oh my dears, the fingernails...

The service was no problem, but the warrant proved somewhat difficult. Normally Peter takes the cars entrusted to his care up to a testing station on the other side of town. However this requires him to persuade his father to look after the garage while he's out; and today dad was busy doing other things. So Peter did what he hates to do - he took the car across the road to his bosom enemy Mike.

Mike is about six foot eight in every measurable dimension and gives the distinct impression that, if he really felt like it, he could pick the car up and carry it under his arm into the testing bay. However he would never do this, because he hates cars with a deep and utter loathing and would dearly love to exterminate them entirely. Peter has virtually ceased to ask Mike for warrants because Mike, as a matter of course, fails about 90% of the cars brought to him.

Naturally my car failed. The driver's seat was too loose.

I couldn't move it at all. Peter couldn't budge it. Mike the Massive Mechanic could jiggle it half an inch or so if he really, really tried hard. Obviously it was far too loose.

Search though he might, Peter couldn't find a single adjustment toggle. Nothing to twist, nothing to tighten, nothing to turn. The seat had all electrical adjustments. Lots of switches and buttons to move it hither and yon in the interests of driving comfort, but nary a screw or bolt. It appeared to be welded firmly to the frame.

But Mike said it was too loose, so of course it was.

I began to contemplate the horrors of a thousand dollar replacement seat merely on the say-so of a pathological automobophobic mesomorph. It was not to be borne.

"Tomorrow you must call your dad in to mind the shop," I said. "Take it to the usual place. Make it so!"

And thus it was made, and the car passed with flying colours. The proper testing station couldn't force the seat to move either.

# Telephones

I picked up the telephone and was greeted with total silence; not even the distant conch-shell sound of the sea. When the telephone is out of order, the phone book informed me, simply ring Faults and report it.

Normally such a Wittgensteinian oxymoron would leave me quivering (how can you phone when the phone is out of order), but fortunately today's technology cuts such Gordian knots with ease. I reached for my yuppiephone.

Ring, ring.

"Hello, Faults, how can I help you?"

I gave the details and the nice man clattered on a keyboard for a while. There was a long silence.

"Yes," he said cheerfully. "There's definitely a Fault. I'll send an engineer round."

An engineer duly appeared and vanished into a junction box halfway down the road. Soon he emerged in triumph. "I found a broken wire!" he announced ringingly, "but there is still an abnormally high resistance on the line. I need to check your sockets."

Who could resist such flattery? I let him into the house, and he checked my sockets. I've got three, and he examined them all closely.

The one upstairs contained no surprises other than slightly corroded terminals. It was soon replaced. However the one in the bedroom proved to contain more than its fair share of wires, several of which had a piece of paper sellotaped to them. Something was scribbled on the paper and the engineer frowned at it.

"Do you actually use the phone in the garage?" he asked.

"?" I said.

"These wires," he explained, pointing at the piece of paper. "They go through to the phone in the garage. We really ought to put in a separate socket if you want to use it – it isn't a good idea to wire it into the same socket as the bedroom phone."

"I haven't got a garage," I told him. "I've never had a garage. This house has been garageless since 1937, when it was built."

"Odd," he mused, and cut the wires off and threw them away, solving the problem in a snip. I wonder what was in the mind of the person who originally connected that socket? I don't suppose I'll ever know. I'm also quite curious as to what exactly is at the other end of those mysterious wires. Perhaps they lead into another dimension (one where I actually do have a garage phone). Had the engineer connected them up, perhaps I could have made trans-dimensional phone calls to my doppelganger. Perhaps I read too much science fiction.

The socket in the hall proved to be the most mysterious of all. "I wonder what those are?" mused the engineer as he poked at a tangle of wires that he didn't seem to know what to do with. "I've never seen cables like that before. Doesn't look like anything to do with the phone."

I professed myself equally puzzled, but what do I know? They looked just like all the other wires to me. The engineer scratched his head. "Looks like bell wire," he mused.

Pennies dropped with a sudden clatter. "Come with me," I said and I took him into the back of the house, through the kitchen and showed him a bell screwed to the wall. "When I first moved in, this rang with the phone, presumably so that you could hear it all through the house – you tend not to hear the phone ringing when you are at the other end of nowhere. But about five years ago, it just stopped ringing. I assumed it was clogged up with grease from the kitchen and had given up the ghost. I'd forgotten all about it."

"Aha!" he said triumphantly. "That explains the odd resistance I found in the junction box outside." He descended into a stupor for a while and then made magic spells with resistors and capacitors. "Let's try now."

He dialled a magic number. The bell in the back of the house rang. The phone in the hall rang, and so did the phone in the bedroom. The phone upstairs remained stubbornly silent. Four bells, only three ringing. Damn.

More magic games with resistors. All three sockets were replaced. Wires were poked, heads were scratched, swear words were sworn.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

Three bells out of four, but a different three this time. Progress of a sort, I suppose. The sequence was repeated. No matter what he did, only three bells rang, but we managed to get every permutation of three out of four. Four out of four we just couldn't manage. The engineer descended into a brown study. This was an insult to his engineering virility, and he wasn't going to let it defeat him. He'd never be able to hold his head up in public. Imagine what the lads would say!

All three sockets were replaced again, and different grades of resistors installed. At last, success!! Four out of four!

"I'm going now." Wisely he knew when enough was enough; quit while you are ahead.

So now, for the first time in five years, I have all four bells again. Whether or not I still have an anomalous resistance I have no idea. But I do know that ever since the magic man played with my sockets I have a much faster and much more reliable connection to the internet.

Q, as they say, ED.

# Scunthorpe

by

**Alan Robson and Kathleen Bergner**

Every so often, newspapers such as the Grauniad run a survey designed to find their readers' opinions as to the funniest/silliest/most horrible town in Britain. Almost invariably, the winner is Scunthorpe, a town whose name simply cannot be pronounced without provoking gales of laughter or retches of reminiscence (though Wigan runs it a close second).

So perhaps it is fortunate that the Duke of Wellington was not the Duke of Scunthorpe, otherwise the capital of New Zealand would be a laughing stock the world over and we would all be wearing Scunthorpe boots. Both Billy Connolly and Jon Clarke would have to sing "If it wasn't for your scunties..." - a phrasing that is less than lyrical.

Perhaps we should also be grateful to the Earl of Sandwich as well. Imagine eating scunthorpes for lunch! Particularly when well-wrapped in greaseproof paper. Or consider that in the cocktail hour you might have to drink scunthorpes instead of manhattans. Would the scunthorpe be shaken or stirred, I wonder?

If the Battle of Balaclava had been in Lincolnshire instead of the Crimea then maybe we'd have to pull a scunthorpe over our head when we wanted to rob a bank. Or if the Earl of Cardigan had been less wise in his choice of parents, perhaps we'd change into a comfortable scunthorpe when we got home from work.

Can you imagine a suit made of scunthorpe tweed? Would you put scunthorpe cheese on your crackers or eat a scunthorpe bun?

When you come home of an evening, would you say hello to the scunthorpe, tickle it under the chin, make a scunthorpe for tea, settle down in front of the scunthorpe to watch a scunthorpe, have a cup of scunthorpe and then (feeling tired) climb into your scunthorpe, switch on your electric scunthorpe, kiss the scunthorpe good night and settle down for a good scunthorpe (snoring occasionally, the while).

Scunthorpe me! Didn't we get off lightly?

# Tagine

Four people in New Zealand own a tagine. Laurie, the editor of Phoenixine is one, I am another and I have no idea who the other two people might be.

It all began when I went to have dinner with Laurie and Annette and Kath as is my occasional wont. "I've got a new gadget," said Laurie, exuding pride from every pore. "Tonight I will cook you a tagine dinner."

I was puzzled, but polite. "Wha'?"

A tagine, Laurie explained, is a Moroccan cooking device. Apparently the originals are completely ceramic and are used in a fire, but his, manufactured in Europe, had a cast-iron base thus making it easier to use on the top of the stove. The meal to be cooked is prepared in the normal manner in the cast-iron base, then the heat is turned down to very low and a funnel shaped ceramic top is placed over the base. The dish simmers very slowly for a couple of hours. The steam condenses inside the ceramic funnel and runs back down into the dish. All the goodness is trapped inside, nothing evaporates and the long slow cooking produces an incredibly tender and flavourful meal.

All this was explained as Laurie chopped and sautéed and simmered. Beer was consumed and much praised. Cats were stroked, books were discussed, geeky tales of computer one-upmanship were swapped. Several aeons came and went. At last the meal was ready. The tagine base was brought to the table. Chicken breasts swam in a savoury sauce.

"Help yourself."

I helped myself, and took a bite.

Instant orgasm! Seldom has anything quite so breathtakingly delicious slithered down my throat. When the



moans of pleasure finally subsided, I had reached a decision. I needed a tagine of my own.

Across the road from our office in Auckland is a kitchen shop rejoicing in the name of **Milly's**. I went in and looked around. They had lots of sexy kitchen stuff, but no tagine. I enquired at the counter.

"I'm looking for a tagine," I said. "It's a ..."

"Ooohh! I know what that is," said the bouncy lady. "We had one of those in a few weeks ago. It looked fascinating. I was tempted to buy it myself."

"Can you get another one?"

"I'll ring the agents and ask." She picked up the phone and held a long, muttered conversation. Eventually she came back to me. "They imported four on spec about six months ago," she said. "They've got one left. It's \$250. Do you want it?"

The price rocked me a little, but memories of Laurie's cooking stiffened my resolve. "Yes please."

The lady went back to the phone, and the deal was done. Delivery would take about four days. She gave me a docket.

"I'm away on business for the next couple of weeks," I explained. "Can you hang on to it for me when it arrives, and I'll pick it up when I get back?"

"No problem," she reassured me, little realising how wrong she was...

Two weeks later I went back to **Milly's**.

"I've come for my tagine."

Blank looks all round. Tagine? Everybody had forgotten me and my order. I produced the docket with the details. Oh yes. That. Someone went to look in the delivery room. No tagine. There was much scratching of heads. Where could it be?

"Why don't you ring the agents again?" I suggested. Faces brightened. What a good idea. The phone was produced, a number was dialled and another long, muttered conversation was held. The lady came back looking solemn.

"They've sent it off to a craft show," she said. "They are trying to encourage orders so that they can import some more. You can't have it for another two weeks."

I began to get annoyed. "Two weeks ago," I pointed out, "they confirmed the order and said I could have it in four days. It is MY tagine. What right have they to whisk it off to a craft show to try and drum up business without asking me first? I am distinctly unimpressed with their business ethics and their customer relations."

Again the phone was invoked.

"They are very sorry, and they apologise," said the lady. "They really do want it for the show. Without it they will find it difficult to take orders, so they probably won't bother importing any more since it took so long to sell the last batch."

"That's not my problem," I said.

"They say you can have it now," she continued, "since it was promised to you. But if you'll let them keep it for two weeks, you can have a 15% discount."

"I'll have it now, please," I said. "They have annoyed and inconvenienced me with their actions. So I'll pay full price and have it straight away, just to be awkward"

She look flabbergasted, but the next day I had my tagine, the last of the original four.

And oh! the food! Next time you come for dinner, I'll do you this wonderful Jamaican Lamb dish I've found. You'll love it, I promise. But don't go looking to buy a tagine of your own. There aren't any, and it's all my fault...

# Alan and the Exploding Woman

The lady in the back row of my class appeared to be suffering from just about every terminal disease going (at least, all the noisy ones). She coughed, sneezed, wheezed and occasionally raced out of the room (presumably to vomit). I wasn't at all surprised that NASA had lost contact with the Mars lander earlier that same day. This woman could infect across interplanetary distances. My chances of surviving the week unscathed appeared slim.

She wore a very short dress, exposing enormously muscular legs that terminated in the general area of the feet with a gigantic pair of shit-kicking boots of the type much favoured by skinheads about to embark on serious aggro. The floor vibrated as she thundered out of the room, the overall effect being not unlike that of an earthquake. I nervously checked out convenient door frames to stand in.

Teaching this class had an interesting effect on my lecturing rhythms for I found I had to time my sentences so that they fitted nicely between the coughs and sneezes. Generally I managed to squeeze in about four words between paroxysms and I began to develop a distinctly minimalist style of speech. The essentially random nature of her periodic explosions also required much repetition from me as my last sentence vanished beneath waves of white noise. At some point in her life it would appear that she'd had 500 watt amplifiers surgically embedded in her throat. Students three classrooms away complained.

During the course of each day she sucked slyly on a bottle of violently pink medicine (could it be, perchance, the infamous Lily the Pink's patent remedy?). In addition she

kept popping the occasional pill. Her eyes became progressively more glazed and sometimes they crossed. A violent cough followed by a discreet spit generally straightened them out again, but the effect was only temporary.

She was, of course, the only student to have any difficulty with the lab exercises. She was constantly calling me across to ask for help and I would patiently squat beside her thinking germicidal thoughts as I debugged her latest listing. Perhaps the bugs were falling straight out of her nose into her programs (if they were, perhaps they wouldn't infect me on the way).

At the end of every day, when the students had all gone home, I would pick up the saturated, snotty, phlegm-infested tissues that she positioned very carefully in neat piles on top of her computer, and throw them into the bin.

Amazingly, I have as yet developed no evil symptoms of my own. But there is still time...

# Spelling

I live in Maioro street. M - A - I - O - R - O

Six letters and two of them are the same! How hard can it be? Well, very actually.

On several occasions I have had cause to ring a certain taxi company. The conversation generally goes something like this:

Nice Lady: Pick up address please?

Me: Maioro Street.

Nice Lady: Spell that, please.

Me: M - A - I <long pause> O - R - O

Nice Lady: M - A - R - I - R - A

Me: No, no. M - A - I <even longer pause> O - R - O

Nice Lady: M - A - O

Me (interrupting): M - A - I

Nice Lady: M - A - I

Me: O - R - O

Nice Lady: R - O - R

Me: O - R - O

Nice Lady: M - A - R - O - R - I

Me: Never mind. I'll ring another taxi company.

It would appear that the letters MAIORO are singularly difficult for the average earhole, eyeball and tongue to come to grips with. This was proven beyond reasonable doubt when I went to vote the other week.

"Name please?" asked the returning officer.

I told him and he looked me up in his book. There I was, properly printed and (wonder of wonders) both my name and my address were properly spelt.

"Ah," said the returning officer, pointing his pen at my address. "Midori Street?"

# Bonce

Teaching is not normally regarded as a hazardous profession and the wearing of hard hats in the classroom is seldom compulsory. I feel that this may perhaps be an oversight on the part of the authorities in charge of the rules.

There I was, in full pontificate mode in front of the class, waving my arms about and discoursing eloquently on this and that, when I noticed a look of (as it were) existential dread begin to creep over the faces of those few students who were still awake.

"Look out!" one of them called.

"?" I thought to myself.

WALLOP! The whiteboard fell off the wall and landed on my head. I staggered forwards under the weight of it, and several people rushed to my aid. Some supported the board and moved it out of the way; some supported me and led me to a chair. All were most concerned.

"Are you all right?"

This question has always struck me as an extremely odd one. There you are, at the scene of a major catastrophe. The victim is bleeding all over the landscape and several major body parts are scattered around. You rush over to help.

"Are you all right?"

Do you really expect to receive the reply, "Yes, perfect, never felt better in my life. Bundle of fluffy ducks. I think I'll just toddle off down the road to the pub and throw a party to celebrate the occasion."

I sat in my chair and trembled. Shock was the general diagnosis.

"Put up his blood sugar levels, calm him down, speak soothingly and check for signs of concussion."

Before I knew it, a cup of tea, a plate of biscuits and a packet of panadol appeared in front of me. My pupils were examined to see if they reacted to light and if they both remained the same size. Fingers were waved. Would my eyeballs track? All appeared to be in order.

I nibbled a biscuit and swallowed a couple of panadol with my tea as I took stock of the situation. The back of my head hurt, though there was no bump and no bleeding. As I raised my hand to poke my head I became conscious of a flapping effect. Further investigation revealed that the sleeve of my jacket was torn and large swathes of fabric were hanging free. The corner of the whiteboard, impelled by a fairly massive momentum (whiteboards are HEAVY) had ripped its way down my arm without, fortunately, gouging into the flesh beneath.

I contemplated the possible effects of that sharp corner on my body or my head and shuddered anew. The potential for massive injury was too awful to contemplate. I calmed myself with a biscuit and began to realise just how lucky I had been. Had I been standing two inches to the right and one pace back I would now be sprawled unconscious and bleeding on the floor. Perhaps my flesh rather than the fabric of my jacket would be hanging in flaps. Perhaps my skull would be caved in like an eggshell, leaking brains and body fluids onto the carpet. They'd never get the stains out...

I spent the rest of the day in a curiously disembodied state. Nothing felt quite real and I have absolutely no idea what I said to the students as the class progressed. I leaned the whiteboard up against the wall and continued to write and draw on it. The next day a man arrived and fixed it to the wall with screws so long that I began to wonder if they would poke out into the next room. No way would this whiteboard ever fall off again. Not unless the whole wall fell out with it. Mind you, Wellington is in an earthquake zone...

"There," said the man in tones of deepest satisfaction, thumping it hard. "Solid as a rock." He left and I turned to the class to continue the lesson.

Ten minutes later the projector exploded.



# Geography

I dialled a phone number. Ring, ring.

"Hello?"

"Are you free for lunch?"

"Yes," said Maree. "Come and meet me at my place of shirk."

"Where's that?" I enquired.

"125 Queen Street. Just go into the foyer. There are comfy seats beneath a three dimensional mural. Wait for me there."

I sauntered down Queen Street looking at numbers. An ornate old building with a legend carved into the stonework proclaimed itself to be at one and the same time the Bank of New Zealand and number 125. The building was just a façade, kept for the sake of its attractiveness. The bank was long gone and as I entered I became aware of the bustle of people as they hurried between the shops which now occupied the entire available foyer space.

I looked carefully. No mural. There were several wooden benches, but they didn't fit the description "comfy" at all. I sat on one. No - it wasn't comfortable. This must be the wrong place.

I spied an escalator and rode it up. On the next floor were more wooden benches as uncomfortable as the first. No mural. Where was I to sit? How was Maree to find me in all this hustle and bustle? Panic set in and I took the lift to the 24<sup>th</sup> floor (as one does).

"Yes sir?" enquired the receptionist.

"Can you tell Maree that Alan Robson is here, please?"

"Certainly Sir. Please take a seat."

The seat was distinctly comfy and there were things on the wall. Had I perchance misheard the directions? Did I

blink and miss the sentence "Take the lift to the 24<sup>th</sup> floor". I didn't think I'd missed it, but you never know.

Soon Maree arrived. "This isn't the downstairs foyer," she said icily.

"I got lost," I explained. "And confused. I couldn't find the comfy chairs and the mural."

Maree looked puzzled. "How can you possibly miss it?"

"Show me where it is," I requested humbly. We took the lift down 24 floors but since it was now lunchtime we took the pretty route and examined all twenty four floors one after the other in enormous detail as the lift filled up with hungry office workers. Maree took me out into the street (via the shops) and then pointed out an entrance with "125" on it in big bold, black numbers. We entered. There in front of me was a mural and comfy seats, just as described.

"See!" she said. I saw.

"That's not the door I came in through," I pointed out. "My door didn't lead here."

Maree began to look exasperated. "Show me!" she thundered. Meekly I took her up the street to the old Bank of New Zealand building with the number "125" on the door.

"I went in there," I said. "Did I do wrong?"

"In all my time going up and down this street," said Maree firmly, "I've never seen that door before. Nobody has ever seen that door before. Everybody, without exception, has always gone through the door with "125" on it in big bold, black numbers - the door that leads into the foyer with the mural and the comfy chairs. Half the population of Auckland has visited me at work at one time or another and every single one of them has been able to find the foyer, the mural and the comfy chairs with no trouble at all. Only you, in the entire history of the universe have ever managed to find a DIFFERENT door with "125" on it that leads somewhere else. How do you DO this?" She stamped her foot in exasperation.

I hung my head in shame, and my hat fell off.  
Geography? Don't talk to me about geography.

# Squashy

When in Wellington, I stay in an hotel with a lift that has direct access to the street. In order to protect the guests from nightly assaults by maniacal hordes of ravaging Wellingtonians, the lift has a security mechanism. A small keypad somewhat akin to that found on ATMs, and serving much the same purpose sits just above the panel of floor access buttons. In order to reach the residential floors the potential liftee is obliged to enter a four digit secret code number into the keypad. Should this be done correctly, a cheerful chirrup announces that the required floor may be selected within ten seconds. Failure to choose a floor within that time necessitates starting the whole procedure again. Should the secret number be keyed incorrectly, a sullen silence results and the floor access buttons remain stubbornly inactive.

All this is explained carefully and patiently by the check-in staff to each new guest, and then the guest is handed a card with the code number printed on it.

The guest strides confidently towards the lift, card clutched in hand. However confidence erodes the closer they get to the lift and once they are actually inside it, mild panic often ensues. Many times I have stood in silent amusement at the back of the lift and watched people struggle with the arcane and mystical mechanisms required to induce it to ascend.

I have seen people simply walk in and ignore the keypad completely. They just hit their floor number and wait with gradually increasing puzzlement as absolutely nothing happens.

I have seen people punch their code number into the floor selection buttons and their floor number into the

keypad. Again the lift remains immobile.

I have seen people so overcome with delight at their skill in entering the secret number into the keypad that they completely forget to select a floor number. Sudden realisation usually dawns as no lift movement is detected, but by then it is too late and the secret number must be entered again.

I have seen people who cannot find the necessary numbers on the keypad. These people are typists of the "hunt and peck" variety and despite the fact that the keypad has its digits arranged in numeric order their finger still hovers uncertainly and stabs semi-randomly. The lift haughtily rejects their pathetic efforts.

At least sixty percent of my ascents and descents find me giving impromptu tutorials in lift manipulation.

The hotel is always full of intense business people with cellphones that ring loudly during breakfast. Wheeler dealers deal and wheel between the cornflakes and the toast. These are the important people, the movers and shakers, an inspiration to us all. Fortunately the breakfast room is on a floor that does not require a secret keypad number to reach; they can always manage to get there so as to impress each other in the morning. If the breakfast floor was a guarded floor, not only would these pillars of industry starve to death, but the wheels of industry would probably cease to turn.

But I don't care. I've got a squashy...

The other day I stared into the mirror and realised that I looked as if I had come off second best in a quarrel with a Van Der Graaf generator. My hair was having a bad hair day. It was time to have it seen to.

A nice lady showed me to the torture chair and cocooned me with towels and sheets.

"What can I do for you today?"

I explained that I would like the Einsteinian fright-wig on my bonce brought back into some semblance of control. She

poked it dubiously.

"Would you like your beard trimmed as well?"

"No thank you," I said. "No offence, but people without beards shouldn't trim beards."

She nodded understandingly and took me over to the basins for a shampoo. There is nothing quite so sensuously pleasurable as having shampoo massaged into your scalp by someone who knows just how to do it. Strong yet gentle fingers, warm water to rinse the suds away, a final scalp massage and then quickly back to the trimming chair before you fall asleep beneath the ministrations. I love it!

She snipped and snipped, manoeuvring my head backwards and forwards, chatting freely the while. She told me her life story and I told her mine. Slowly the exuberant mass of curls came back under control. My head was smooth and sleek.

But now my beard, which previously had seemed somewhat thin and anaemic in comparison with my hirsute scalp had begun to look particularly shaggy.

"Are you sure I can't trim your beard?" There was a wistful note in her voice. She was obviously very eager to continue. By now we were fast friends, having shared so many intimacies.

"OK," I said. "But please don't turn it into designer stubble. I don't like that."

"I promise," she said, clicking her scissors in anticipation.

She did a marvellous job, shaping the beard precisely, and skilfully removing the slightly lop-sided appearance that my own more amateur trimming efforts had caused it to assume. I was very pleased.

And then she made me an offer no person has ever made me before. It fair took my breath away, so it did.

"Would you like me to trim your eyebrows?"

"No thanks," I said. "I've got a squashy."

A squashy is a New Zealand bush hat designed to survive hard usage. It can be squashed up into a small, tight bundle,

squeezed into a bag, carried from one end of the country to the other and when removed from the bag will resume its proper shape with no wrinkle or distortion. It is the ultimate fashion accessory and no Robson can afford to be without one. The label in my squashy proclaims:

SQUASHY SUEDE  
WATERPROOF  
Kiwi Classic Hats  
NEW ZEALAND  
Original  
Authentic

There is a picture of a kiwi, a koru and a flax plant. And the words:

Made in Australia

# Memories of Melbourne

Melbourne. Sunshine dropping sheets of molten gold over the city. Humidity so high that you can swim to work in your own sweat. The headache-thumping whine of a million angry mosquitoes as the cars race around the track in Albert Park. This is Melbourne during Grand Prix week. They send me there every year; it's horrible.

I stamped my foot like a petulant child. "Don't wanna go! Not gunnoo!"

They bribed me with Luxury. "The usual hotel is booked out and so at the end of the week we have booked you into a hotel in Brighton. It's right by the sea in one of Melbourne's most luxurious and exclusive suburbs. You'll love it!"

"OK."

We all filed on to the aeroplane and took our seats. The driver put the gear stick into neutral and vroom vroomed the engines for a while. Then there was a hydraulic whine as the flaps rose, closely followed by a horrible graunching as the driver jiggled them about a bit. Soon there was an announcement:

"As you can probably tell from the noise, we are having some trouble with the flaps. I've called the engineers out to have a look. I don't think it will take very long. Just a few minutes."

A yellow mechanism drove out and sat under the wing for a while. Then it went away again. I saw no evidence of engineers; obviously they were invisible. We all waited patiently while they hit things with invisible hammers and tightened screws with invisible screwdrivers. Eventually the onboard voiceover said: "Well the engineers are happy now, and if they are happy, so am I."



It seems to be a universal rule that no Air New Zealand plane will ever take off on time (I have flown a lot with Air New Zealand and never once has the plane met its announced schedule), but this one was now more than an hour late, and that's excessive even for them. We rumbled down the runway and lumbered into the air.

Soon it was time for the in-flight service. As usual, I had managed to sit in the seat that was served last. Not only that, I was mortified to find that the trolley in the opposite aisle was racing up and down like greased lightning whereas the one in my aisle appeared to be propelled by arthritic snails. Geological aeons came and went before finally a packet of cassava chips (guaranteed cholesterol free) and a can of beer were casually slapped down in front of me.

To pass the time, I continued a research project that I began several years ago into the causes of turbulence. So far the statistical evidence suggests that it has two major causes. The serving of food and drink is one cause. The other is going to the toilet. There is something distressingly disconcerting about feeling the whole aeroplane shudder immediately after indulging yourself in a fart.

We began our descent into Melbourne airport and I was quite upset to hear the flaps make the same unhealthy graunching noises that they had made when they were tested on the ground at Auckland. I began to wonder just what the invisible engineers in the yellow mechanism had done to them. Had the repair worked? We landed without incident, but I'd love to know how narrow the escape really was...

As we taxied towards the gate the voiceover said: "Please remain in your seats when we reach the gate. The quarantine inspectors need to come aboard."

Funny, I thought. Are they going to spray us? It has been a long time since I've seen the quarantine people walk up and down the aisles spraying insecticide on the passengers

in case any of the people in the seats are fruit flies in disguise. I thought they did it automatically through the air conditioning nowadays. Oh well. Maybe the spraying device was connected to the flaps and was consequently out of order. We came slowly to a full stop at the gate.

"Remember," said the voice, "please remain seated for the quarantine inspectors."

The seat belt sign went off with a musical ping. Immediately a businessman two seats in front of me got up to remove his laptop computer from the overhead locker. An aeroplane full of eyes glared at him. "Sit down!" He sat down.

We waited.

The doors opened and two large policemen and a policewoman strode fiercely to the back of the plane, every eye upon them. I could see them remonstrating with someone. Then they disappeared, presumably through the rear door. Finally we were allowed to disembark. The policemen were now standing in the gate and I overheard one of them saying to his mate, "I told him to stop being a silly bugger and not to do it again."

As I walked away from the gate, I glanced through a window. There were yellow mechanisms beneath the wings of the plane. The invisible engineers were out in force again...

My boarding pass said that I was allowed to enter Australia through the express lane for priority processing. I have never seen any evidence whatsoever of an express lane on any of my visits to Australia and this trip was no exception. All the passengers were filtered through the same check in desks irrespective of what it said on their boarding cards. The queue snaked on forever. Eventually I reached an immigration official. He was labelled "Frank Kilroy". He glared at me with eyes made malignant by a long, hot, tiring day and a million recalcitrant passengers.

"Passport."

I handed it over silently. I just KNEW that if I made any smart-arse remarks about Frank Kilroy being here, proctologically inclined gentlemen with an infinite supply of rubber gloves would be summoned to converse with me. I restrained myself, but I think I ruptured something in the effort.

He waved me through, looking mildly disgruntled. Welcome to Melbourne.

The first three days were spent at the usual company hotel, and very pleasant it was too. On the second day it grew a cute little red racing car in the foyer and petrolheads could be heard murmuring "Vroom, vroom", softly as they passed. Impatiently I drank beer in the bar and ate meals in the restaurant. Soon it would be Thursday and the barely hinted-at sybaritic luxuries of the hotel in Brighton would be mine to indulge in. The days crawled past.

Thursday dawned hot and humid (of course). A taxi was summoned. Brighton beckoned...

The hotel in Brighton turned out to be a combination motel and conference centre. As I walked down the corridor towards my room it was pleasantly cool, the distant hum of air conditioning units a soothing presence. I unlocked the door of my room and entered it. I became aware that behind the scenes all might not be well...

The room was humid and stuffy. I broke into a sweat as soon as I got in. The air conditioning unit on the wall had been gimmicked and the dial wouldn't turn itself below 25 degrees, but that didn't matter because it didn't appear to be working anyway. Not a trickle of air came out of the vents.

The bathroom contained three small and threadbare bath towels. There were no hand towels or face cloths. Two minuscule cakes of soap were provided, but there was no shampoo, no shower gel, no sewing kit. The shower had two temperatures - hot and off. I explained this to the lady at the reception desk. Her eyes widened with pretended concern,

"Would you like me to tell Bill the engineer?"

"Yes please."

Bill proved to be just as invisible as the Air New Zealand engineers, but much less efficient. He failed to make any useful repairs to the room. I returned to the reception desk.

"Do you have a street map, please?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Well, I don't really know until I see a street map. I'm not even very sure where I am at the moment."

The eyes widened again and the voice dripped condescending honey sweetness as she said slowly and distinctly, "You're in Brighton, dear. Brighton is in Melbourne."

After a sweaty nights sleep, it was time to make my way back to the office. The instructions in my hotel booklet told me to dial 800 to order a taxi. I dialled and nothing happened. I dialled again with the same result. I went down to reception. This time a man was on the desk. I explained my problem with the phone.

He sniffed. "Oh yes," he said. "That's right. Everybody's got mobile phones these days so we don't bother turning on the room phones unless people specifically request it."

"It doesn't say anything about that in the book in the room."

He looked down his angular nose. "All our regular clients know about it."

"Can you call me a taxi please?"

"Well just this once, but that's not my job you know."

I began to wonder if everyone in the hotel had been to sarcasm and rudeness school. I went into breakfast while I waited for my taxi. As I entered the restaurant, a group of gossiping waiters turned their backs on me in order to continue their conversation.

The fruit was tinned, the coffee was lukewarm and so was the milk I poured on my cereal. I went out to my taxi...

Later that evening, after a racing car noisy day at the office, I returned to my private sauna bedroom. I decided to go for an explore (anything rather than lie and sweat into the sheets which seemed to be my only other alternative). Brighton really is a luxury suburb. Expensive houses jostle cheek by jowl and nestle snugly in immaculately manicured gardens with stately palm trees to give them shade. Languid ladies relax on the beach which stretches in smooth yellow swathes as far as the eye can see. And at irregular intervals the Brighton Boxes stand and stare.

The Boxes are simply that - small single-roomed wooden sheds, many quite ramshackle for they seem to date from the early years of the twentieth century. They are simply changing rooms as used by stately Edwardian ladies to don stately Edwardian bathing costumes.

Possession of a Brighton Box is the ultimate status symbol in this supremely status conscious suburb. On the rare occasions when they appear on the market they change hands for fantastic sums. One recently sold for \$120,000. Can you imagine paying that sort of money for a one-roomed shed with no electricity, no running water, no facilities of any kind?

Box proud owners try to decorate them as best they can. I saw one painted as a Union Jack and another had a most lifelike drawing of a seagull perching upon it. However I'm not sure it compensated for the cost.

I returned to my room and dressed in my scruffiest clothes then I went and sat in a prominent place in the cool corridor and read my book. Passing staff glared because I was making the corridor untidy, but I just smiled sweetly back at them. Soon it would be Saturday and time to go home.

The plane back to Auckland was barely ten minutes late taking off. It must have had a downhill wind because it made up the lost time (and more beside) and we landed about twenty minutes early. My boarding pass was marked

"Express Lane In", and unlike Australia, New Zealand always seems to have one working. The formalities were over in less than ten seconds. A taxi was waiting and we drove off into the night.

It was good to be home.

# Enigmatic Variations

I've just spent my hols in Western Australia, which is an enigmatic place.

The plane landed without incident at Perth and we all lined up to leave. As I walked past the stewardess at the gate one of the engineers on the bridge asked her, "Have you got any willies?", thus setting the scene for much puzzlement over the ensuing weeks.

Our plane was nearly an hour early and so we had to wait at the airport for Robin's family who were due to meet us at the scheduled arrival time. Unfortunately her father was in charge of the meeting arrangements and so we knew that the family wouldn't be there until the exact moment of (scheduled) touch down. Had her mother been in charge, the family would have been there at least two hours before the scheduled arrival time, just in case. Robin's mother shares all my neuroses and we get on famously as a result. Unsympathetic souls pull our legs unmercifully, but we don't care.

While we waited, I basked in the heat. Even though the sun had gone down, the night air was still very hot. Eventually the family arrived. Mother, father, brother, nephew, niece and Herbert, an iBook laptop computer who accompanies Robin's niece Alex wherever she goes. When Herbert is turned on he says, "I am smelly and nobody loves me." in a variety of heart-rending voices.

The next day dawned hot and sunny. The temperature rose to about 29 degrees and I dressed in shorts, a short sleeved shirt and sandals with bare feet. All the natives dressed in woolly sweaters, fur lined overcoats and boots because they were cold. We played tourist and drove hither and yon.

The area depends for its existence upon bore water drawn from deep beneath the ground. The water stains everything red. Concrete pillars, footpaths, even the trees all look rusty. A few years ago a cyclone in the North agitated the sea to such an extent that the swell stirred up the sand and also the red earth beneath it. For several days, the seas around Perth were incarnadined as though blood were leaking from a giant's corpse. Australia is red all the way down inside.

The sun beat down pitilessly from a clear blue sky. A hotel advertised a heated swimming pool as an attraction, but for the life of me I could not see why they bothered. We drove past a CALM (Conservation and Land Management) bush reserve with a barbed wire fence around it, presumably to stop the feral trees from escaping and rampaging around the countryside beating up foreign flowers and demanding pollen with menaces. The foliage was brown and desiccated, though later we learned that there had been unseasonably heavy rains in January and as far as the locals were concerned, everything was green and flourishing. I began to understand why the average Australian, visiting New Zealand for the first time, invariably says, "Gosh! How *green* everything is!"

The next day we checked the weather forecast. Warm and sunny. We took a train to Fremantle. A sign at the station said:

**Crossing the line is prohibited. Please use the maze.**

The maze turned out to be a fence with two offset gaps on each side of the rail line thus forcing the pedestrian to zig-zag through them and check for oncoming trains along the way. After such a dramatic sign, I had been expecting something on the order of Hampton Court maze with security guards on hand to rescue the poor unfortunates who were unable to solve it by rigorously following the left hand rule, and I was quite disappointed. However the rail



system had not finished with me yet. Just outside Fremantle station I spotted a sign which enigmatically proclaimed:

### **End of Train Ordering Territory**

I have absolutely no idea to what it referred. Even more entertainingly, a small station in the middle of a park a few minutes walking distance from the main station sported a notice which told all who were interested that:

### **Passenger Trains Do Not Stop At This Station**

Since the station was in a park and since it had no facilities whatsoever apart from a platform, I don't imagine freight trains would want to stop there either. Which raises the interesting question as to just what other kinds of train exist and when, and for what purpose, do they stop at this station? I remain unenlightened.

The Western Australian authorities seem fond of odd notices. On one of our trips to the middle of absolutely nowhere, with sand and scrub stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, we drove past a fenced off area indistinguishable in its aridity from everything else in sight. A large notice proclaimed it to be a Naval Base. From this I deduce that Western Australia has a land based navy that sails sand yachts on regular patrols around the desert to discourage pirate frigates from hijacking tourist buses.

When in Fremantle, one must dine and drink coffee at Ginos and then, suitably refreshed, visit the Fremantle Prison. So that's what we did.

The prison advertises itself as Western Australia's Premier Cultural Heritage Site, which must say something about culture in Western Australia, though I am not sure what. Given that Fremantle also boasts an annual Sardine Festival, the mind can do nothing but boggle.

The prison was built in the 1850s by the convicts themselves (a strange irony) and was in continuous use until 1991. The cells were 7 feet long and 4 feet wide; barely

wide enough to stretch your arms out and just long enough to sling a hammock. Cat swinging was completely out of the question.

Prisoners were locked up in their cells overnight but spent their days working on the chain gang building the prison itself and later (when that was finished) working on the infrastructure of the city. At the turn of the century, with this labour largely completed, the chain gangs were discontinued and the inmates were locked in their cells for up to 14 hours a day. The authorities decided that incarceration in such a tiny space was far too inhumane. Consequently the connecting wall between pairs of cells was knocked down and one of the doors was welded shut, thus doubling the size of each cell and halving the prison's capacity at a stroke.

When the prison was refurbished prior to opening it to the public it was discovered that one of the prisoners had spent his evenings drawing beautiful pictures on the walls of his cell. Since this was against the rules, every morning he would gaze his fill and then camouflage his work by smearing his breakfast porridge over the pictures. The next night he would decorate another section of wall. His pictures remained hidden for almost a century, which says much about the quality of the porridge, not to mention the efficiency of the cell inspections. I wonder how many more secrets lie forgotten in the other cells, perhaps concealed behind an old fried egg or hidden in a leathery slice of toast.

When the pictures were finally discovered, the porridge was carefully removed oat by oat and the pictures are now preserved behind perspex. They are truly exquisite.

There is a rather beautiful chapel in the prison and on the wall behind the altar the ten commandments are displayed. The sixth has been subtly altered. It reads: *Thou shalt not commit murder*. At the time the chapel was built, the gallows was still in regular use and the injunction *Thou shalt not kill* was considered more than a little hypocritical.

The chapel is the only place in the prison without bars on the windows. These days it is a very popular venue for weddings.

The next day we checked the weather forecast. Warm and sunny. We went to Joondalup via Wanneroo (which has a notice warning you that a **Round-A-Bout** is imminent). On the way, we passed two shopping centres, one called **Joondalup Gate** and one called **Gateway to Joondalup**. Neither of these is in Joondalup. Joondalup has its own shopping centre called **Lakeside** in the heart of the town.

There is a park on Joondalup Lake where the cockatoos will perch on your arms and allow you to feed them. In the evening after the sun goes down, kangaroos come out of the bush to crop the grass and mosquitoes come out of the lake to crop the tourists.

The kangaroos all knew we were there, but they paid us little attention. If we got too close they would slowly bound away. Two adolescents held a boxing match. I have never been so close to wild animals before. It was a magical moment that I treasure.

The next day we checked the weather forecast. Warm and sunny. We went to Innaloo where we did all the appropriately punny things. I went to the loo Innaloo. I went to a shop Innaloo and I ate Innaloo. The "oo" suffix means "by water" in one of the aboriginal languages. Another aboriginal language uses the "up" suffix in a similar context, hence the preponderance of names such as Joondalup, Karrinyup, Wanneroo and Innaloo.

The next day we checked the weather forecast. Warm and sunny. We went into Perth itself to visit the Mint. In there you can put your hand through a hole of carefully judged dimensions in a perspex cabinet and try to pick up a gold bar about the size and shape of a brick. The weight is tremendous and I half expected my wrist to shatter and my hand to drop off beneath the strain. It is at times like this

that you realise just how ridiculous are the movies that show bank robbers casually carrying bars of gold around.

A special display of gold pouring is put on each day for the tourists. The gold is melted in a crucible in a furnace. After about 15 minutes of fierce heat, the demonstrator dons a protective apron and goggles and then removes the crucible from the furnace with a pair of large tongs. The crucible glows so brightly that you can read by its light. He pours the molten metal into a mould and it flows like liquid fire. The mould is doused in water and within a very few seconds the gold has cooled and can be picked up by hand. The demonstrator picked it up and rubbed it lasciviously against his cheek, but he didn't offer to pass it around the crowd, much to our disappointment, and the relief of the security guard who was standing behind us monitoring the proceedings very carefully indeed.

The gold pouring demonstration takes place several times a day. They always use the same gold ingot. That particular lump of gold has been melted and moulded in excess of 10,000 times.

Every time the gold is melted, a minuscule amount is lost due to evaporation. The demonstration area was the site of the original furnaces. This area was decommissioned when the old furnaces were replaced with more modern equipment in a new area of the building. One of the original furnaces remained for the edification of the tourists and the area around the old furnaces was cleaned and the sweepings and demolition material were re-smelted. Umpteen hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gold was recovered; the detritus of many, many years. The area around the tourist furnace was not processed and nobody knows how much gold remains there.

I have never seen a city where the streets are paved with gold, but I have seen a room where the walls are impregnated with it...

There is a strict dress code for the furnace workers in the mint. Jeans are *de rigueur*. Trousers with turn ups are not allowed in any of the working areas. Gold particles could accumulate in the cuffs and over time a reasonable fortune could be collected inadvertently (or sometimes perhaps, advertently). It took the authorities quite a while to wake up to this one and the dress code in the early years had no such specification. Nobody knows how much gold was lost this way.

Directly across the road from the Perth Mint is a pawnbroker's shop run by Mr B. P. Atwill (Licensed Second Hand Dealer). I can't help wondering who his main customers are...

The next day we checked the weather forecast. But it wasn't going to be warm and sunny. On April 27<sup>th</sup> we had winter. It rained stair rods and the sky was solid cloud. The dry ground soaked up the water greedily and the sea tossed and turned with an enormous swell. A few hardy surfers braved the weather and were rewarded with some quite exciting waves for their pains.

April 28<sup>th</sup> was winter again and now, between rainstorms, the bush looked quite green. I can't tell you what happened after that, for we flew home on that day. The in flight movie had subtitles in Japanese, though I did not spot a single oriental face among the passengers.

# Three Feet Six Inches (Slimline)

I have friends who live in Crofton Downs, the first station out of Wellington on the Johnsonville line; a line which is famed in story and song. Railway aficionados come from all over the world to travel upon it, attracted by the narrowness and quaintness of the rolling stock and the superabundance of its geography. These things are not unconnected.

Wellington and Johnsonville are only a short distance apart as the crow flies. You can drive between them in about ten minutes, for the road can go over and around any geography that it doesn't like (and since New Zealand road engineers are paid by the corner, it does quite a bit of that). The railway doesn't have that option. Unruly geography has either to be removed or gone straight through.

The area is oversupplied with some quite vicious terrain. Immensely dense mountains cluster close to each other for comfort. The engineers who built the line had to grind seven extremely long tunnels through the more recalcitrant outcrops. Five of these tunnels lie between Wellington and Crofton Downs - and that's only the first stop on the line! It probably has more tunnels per kilometre than any other railway in the world. The difficulty of this huge engineering feat, coupled with the sheer density of the stone meant that the tunnels had to be very thin and consequently the line has acquired what amounts to its own private rolling stock, for no other equipment owned by the railway will fit the tunnels. The people in charge have scoured the world to find replacement rolling stock, but it hasn't been easy. Everything that runs on the Johnsonville line has been bought second hand from obscure railroad companies in

obscure (generally Eastern European) countries and it is all somewhere between thirty five and fifty years old. Heaven knows exactly where and when and by whom the ragbag mixture of stuff was originally manufactured. I'm sure it was designed by people long since dead and built in workshops that long ago vanished from the Earth. So you can't get spare parts any more. If anything breaks, you make a new one yourself or you do without.

The carriages are rusty; their upholstery is worn and torn. They rattle and they rock and they roll; they squeak and they squirm and sometimes they break. And so does the Johnsonville line itself...

I turned up at Wellington station and purchased a ticket to Crofton Downs. As I walked towards the platform an announcement informed me that the trains were running approximately fifteen minutes late because of engineering difficulties. I leaned against a convenient wall by a convenient light and read my book. Slowly the crowds built up as the Thursday evening commuters arrived, impatient to get home.

Eventually the train pulled wearily into the platform. A huge surge of people congregated around the slowly opening carriage doors. But one carriage remained stubbornly closed. A stentorian voice echoed down the platform:

"Excuse me everybody!" A lady dressed in a TransMetro uniform and wearing a vivid Day-Glo yellow jacket on top of it came striding down the platform. The lights reflecting off her jacket and her immaculately coiffured blonde hair made her look like a miniature mobile sunburst.

"We aren't using that carriage today," she said. "I'm sorry - but can you all squeeze yourself into the remaining carriages. I know it will be a bit cosy, but I'm sure you'll manage."

We all squeezed in. I was lucky - I got a seat. Not everyone was that fortunate. The train pulled slowly out of

the station and rattled and wheezed its way along the tracks. Another great attraction of the Johnsonville line is the constant vibration that judders up and down your body; a strangely erotic experience that sometimes results in embarrassingly obvious consequences.

"Let me explain what's happening." The brightly dressed lady was back again. "I'm sorry about the carriage, but every time we open and close the doors, huge great sparks fly out of them as the electric current short circuits through something. So we don't think they are safe, and we decided not to use them."

There was much nodding in agreement at this. Nobody wanted to be turned into Kentucky Fried Commuter by free flowing electricity.

"But we've got another more serious problem," she said. "The points at Wadestown have broken, and so we have to operate them manually, and that's causing long delays. So we'd like to ask you to be patient with us, and we'll get you home just as soon as we can."

For most of the distance between Wellington and Johnsonville there is only one track. Again, this is a constraint forced upon it by the evil geography through which it winds. In one or two of the marginally less severely constricted areas a loop of track provides a passing place, and as long as the points are correctly set, a train can wait there while the train going in the opposite direction goes past, and then, with the points switched again, it can re-join the main line and continue its journey. Thus the line can be served by both an inward and an outward bound train at the same time, to the great convenience of all. Wadestown is one of these passing places.

We arrived at Wadestown and pulled on to the passing loop. Through the window I could see the train waiting to pass us in the other direction. Time passed, but the train didn't. We waited and waited and waited some more...



The bright lady reappeared in our carriage. "I'm sorry about the delay," she said. "We've got some big, strong, competent men on the job now and they are moving the points by hand. They reckon it will take them about fifteen minutes."

She paused reflectively and then murmured, "Of course when I did it on the inbound journey it only took me two minutes. But I'm just a woman."

She got a round of applause and grinned at us. We continued to wait.

My phone rang. Ring, ring (I can't abide the ones that play tunes).

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Laurie here. Where are you?"

"I'm stuck in the train at the moment, but I should be arriving shortly. Where are you?"

"Oh, I'm still in town. I heard there was trouble on the line and so I thought I'd take a taxi. I was just ringing to see if you wanted to share it - but since you are already on the train I don't suppose that's really possible..."

"No, not really. Not unless you've got a winch to haul me up the embankment."

"Oh well - I'll see you when you arrive. I'll probably get there before you."

He chuckled a dirty chuckle and rang off.

We continued to wait for the big, strong competent men to shift the points. Eventually they must have managed it for with a hiss and a gurgle the other train moved off into the night. We waited a little longer while the points were adjusted again and then we lurched away. A few minutes later we pulled into Crofton Downs station and I disembarked. Ahead of me a dark, vaguely familiar shape walked purposefully up the street. I followed discreetly, wondering if I should dash up and tap it on the shoulder. I decided against it, being fearful of engendering righteous wrath should I be mistaken in the identity.

The figure turned into the driveway of the house I was heading for. Now I was sure. "Annette." I yelled. She turned around.

"Oh, hello. Where did you come from?"

"I was on the train. You must have been in a carriage ahead of me. Fun journey, wasn't it?"

"Yes, great."

I explained about Laurie.

"Oh, let's go and see if he's in yet."

We went inside. No Laurie, and we began to glow with pleasure at having beaten him home. He'd been so sure that he'd get there before us. Just as we finished congratulating ourselves, he arrived.

"Hello," he said. "Been here long?"

We explained.

"I'd have been here sooner", he said, competitive to the last, "but it took the taxi driver quite a while to find his change. I'm sure I'd have beaten you otherwise."

# The Unkindest Cut Of All

I am half the man I used to be, for on Friday July 14<sup>th</sup> 2000 I had a vasectomy.

Several of my friends have been there before me so I had some idea of what I was letting myself in for. Laurie sings alto in a choir (this is rare – altos are usually female, men generally find it too difficult to hit the high registers). As he was taken in to the theatre for his operation he was amused to hear the concert programme playing soothing music in the background: Tchaikovsky's **Nutcracker Suite**. He made himself comfortable on the trolley and the surgeon remarked (in what was probably his standard reassuring joke at this point), "Don't worry, you won't be singing soprano after the operation."

Laurie smiled enigmatically. "But I already do," he protested. "Please don't take that away as well!"

He claims that the surprised look on the surgeon's face more than made up for the wisps of smoke that rose from his groin as the ends of his severed tubes were cauterised.

It's hard driving a car with your legs crossed, but somehow I managed it and I pulled in to the hospital car park with plenty of time to spare. The receptionist took my details and tied a plastic ribbon round my wrist. It had my name and my surgeon's name printed on it, just in case either of us forgot who we were. Then I waited, legs crossed of course, for the nurse. Robin held my hand and told me I was very brave, but I didn't uncross my legs.

"You can still change your mind, you know," she said.

"No I can't," I replied. "It's far too late for that – I've booked a sick day from the office. If I cancel it now, I shudder to think what the paperwork will be like..."

Eventually the nurse came and took me away into a changing room.

"Take your clothes off and hang them in this locker," she said. "You can keep your underwear on. Put on this sexy nightdress and this dressing gown and pin the key of your locker to the dressing gown. Here are some high fashion paper shoes for your feet and here is a slinky shower cap for your head. When you're ready go to the waiting room across the corridor and I'll meet you there. You'll find it easier to take your trousers off if you uncross your legs."

She bustled off and left me to it. I followed her instructions (it IS easier to take your trousers off with your legs uncrossed; I wonder how she knew?). I put on my paper slippers and hobbled to the waiting room.

The nurse met me there and took off me to her consulting chamber where she sat me on a chair. She checked all my particulars again and strapped a red plastic bracelet to my wrist. This one listed my drug allergies.

She picked up a gadget that positively bristled with dials and gauges and flashing lights. "I need to take your temperature," she said.

Obligingly I opened my mouth, but it did me no good for she thrust the gadget into my ear. After a few seconds it beeped and she took it out again, squinted at one of its myriad displays and wrote down a figure. "Now I need to take your pulse."

I held out my hand, expecting an intimate though gentle caress as she fingered my wrist and consulted her watch. However all that happened was that she clipped a high-tech clothes peg to my finger. After about ten seconds a series of LEDs lit up and she unclipped it and again wrote down a figure. "Now I need to take your blood pressure."

By now I was wise, and I just sat there wondering what kind of space age device would appear. But she fooled me by trundling up a perfectly ordinary (and very well used) sphygmomanometer. She wrapped the cuff around my

upper arm and pumped madly away. The cuff squeezed tight and then relaxed as she released the pressure. Again she wrote down a figure. "Well that's all nice and normal," she said. "Just go and sit in the waiting room again and I'll tell the surgeon you are ready."

I went and sat down and crossed my legs again. The moment, it seemed, had now arrived...

The surgeon and I walked down to the operating theatre together. It wasn't far. The room was brilliantly lit and much larger than I expected. The trolley in the centre looked quite forlorn. Over in the far corner sat a nurse, so hugely enveloped in surgical gown, cap and mask that she resembled nothing so much as a pile of green linen with eyes. "Hello, Alan," she said cheerfully, and waved a fabric arm at me.

"Just climb up on the trolley," said the surgeon. "You'll find it easier to climb up if you uncross your legs." Astonishingly, he was correct!

The nurse tucked my right arm under a sheet so it wouldn't get cold and clipped another high-tech clothes peg to my finger. My left arm lay out across a board attached to the trolley. The surgeon asked me to make a fist a few times so that he could find a vein and then he stuck a needle into me. The other end of the needle was attached to a drip that fed a sedative into my arm. After a few seconds, I completely lost touch with the world; a most eerie sensation.

I never lost consciousness. I was perfectly well aware that things were happening. They just didn't seem very important. They were a long way away and no concern of mine. I knew that a local anaesthetic was being injected into my scrotal regions and that sharp scalpels were slicing vitally important bits of me away. But I simply didn't care; I was far too relaxed and happy.

At some stage in the proceedings it occurred to me that I had spent the whole of my life up to this point as an eight

bit binary byte. But now that my most significant bit had been flipped to zero, I was doomed to spend the rest of my life as plain ascii text.

I was rather proud of this insight. It proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that I was an irremediable geek. But it also proved that even though the world had gone away I was still capable of coherent thought. Always assuming that the thought I'd just had was coherent of course; a debateable point at best.

These musings were interrupted by a loud ripping noise as the surgeon pulled off his rubber gloves. "That's it," he said, "all done."

"Gosh, that was fast," I burbled.

"Yes. Once I get going I don't hang about." He seemed quite proud of himself. "You can cross your legs again, if you want to."

They wheeled me out of the theatre into a recovery area where they attached me to a machine that went *ping!* Annoyingly it was behind me so I couldn't examine it. Every so often it got curious about my blood pressure and a cuff around my right arm would inflate without warning. It took me by surprise every time.

A nurse came and squinted at something on the machine. "Your lungs aren't working properly yet after the anaesthetic," she said. "Take lots of deep breaths."

I tried, but I kept forgetting (I felt fine - as far as I was concerned everything was working normally). The nurse came back and told me off a few times. "Deep breaths," she said fiercely. "You'll breathe a lot better if you uncross your legs!"

She was wrong!

Eventually they judged that I was sufficiently *compos mentis* to have company and Robin was brought in to supervise me drinking a cup of tea. The nurse unclipped my locker key from my dressing gown and bustled off, returning a short time later with my clothes. She pondered the

machine that went *ping!* for a moment and then disconnected me. "You can get dressed now."

Robin and I walked out of the recovery area and back to reception where I was given a prescription for a pain killer and an enormous bill. Robin drove me home, stopping at a chemist along the way to fill the prescription.

I wasn't at all sure why I needed the painkillers. I was feeling no pain at all. But as the local anaesthetic wore off I began to realise what the pills were for. Interestingly the pain was not in the region of the operation. I had two small cuts on my scrotum where the surgeon had gone in to tie off the tubes. These were now stitched up and although they were bleeding slightly, they didn't hurt at all. The pain was deep inside at the pit of my stomach, and it was a steady, sickening ache.

The bleeding stopped after a day or so and the pain gradually went away. By the end of the following week I was pretty much back to normal, though occasionally a sudden movement would put some stress on the stitches and there would be a short, sharp, jabbing needle of pain that invariably made me jump. But even that eventually stopped and I haven't crossed my legs for at least two days.

However that in itself has proved to be dangerous. Milo, my ten and a half kilogram cat, likes nothing better than jumping up on to my lap to get stroked. In the days that my lap has been newly exposed he has several times launched himself with the unerring aim of a stealth missile straight on to my stitches. As I scream, he purrs loudly, kneading my wounds ecstatically with both front paws and dribbling with delight...

Now all I have to do is wait for the final all clear. Apparently the body builds up a reservoir of live sperm and it takes time for these to dissipate. I have to go for tests in October to see if I'm firing blanks yet. If not, the tests have to continue until I get two negative results in a row. One particularly potent friend of mine kept producing positive

results for so long that the doctors were seriously considering opening him up again to see if the tubes had grown back together (this can happen, though it is extremely rare). Apparently the second operation, should it become necessary, is free. Quite an inducement, I'd have thought! Fortunately he finally managed to empty his tank and the second operation never took place.

Rumour has it that it takes 16 ejaculations to drain the tank completely. In order not to lose count, a friend put a bowl containing 32 mints by the side of the bed. After each ejaculation, he and his partner would both eat a mint. When the bowl was empty he trotted off for his confirmatory test. It worked for him, perhaps it will work for me.

Meanwhile, if you see me looking tired and drawn, please be sympathetic and understanding. I've been bonking my brains out. Doctor's orders, you know...



# Early Warning Systems

If I have a fault (which I do not) it is that I am always early for appointments.

It all began on the day that I was born. I was four weeks premature, and the psychological scars that circumstance gave me remain unhealed even today.

As a child I attended a small primary school at the other end of the village. It rejoiced in the name Withinfields County Junior Mixed, but to us it was just school. Because many of the children lived in the village, we mostly went home for lunch. Those of us who lived at the far end of the village (as I did) had a special dispensation to catch an early bus at 12 noon (the next one left at 12.15 and it was generally agreed that it was too late to get us home, fed, and back to school by 1.00pm). However it was not unknown for the teacher to get so carried away by whatever she was teaching that she lost track of time, and so we would sometimes miss the bus. I hated it when that happened.

One day, feeling hungry, and feeling anxious about missing the vital bus I raised my hand.

"Please can I go and catch the 12-o'clock bus now?"

The other children in the class began to snigger, but I ignored them. I had a bus to catch.

The teacher looked puzzled. "But it's only 11.30," she said. "The bus doesn't come for another half an hour."

"I can wait at the bus stop," I said.

The whole class erupted into hysterics at this remark. Even the teacher appeared to be having a hard time controlling her giggles. "No, Alan," she remarked patiently, "I don't think that's a good idea."

I subsided, but remained bewildered. I simply couldn't understand why I couldn't go and wait for the bus and I had no idea why the rest of the children were laughing so hard at me. It all made perfect sense from my point of view.

As I look back on the incident forty years later, I still fail to understand the attitude of the teacher and the other children. My request to go and wait for the bus still makes perfect sense to me (though others appear not to agree). I felt then and I feel now that you should always be early for everything in life. After all, when you are early, you can wait. When you are *very* early you can read a book while waiting (an advantage in itself). When you are late you are in the poo and the situation simply cannot be rescued. Surely this is self evident?

Apparently not.

I spent my honeymoon in Fiji. I lived in Wellington at the time and the honeymoon therefore involved a trip on the overnight train to Auckland, from where we would catch the plane to Fiji. As the afternoon progressed, I became steadily more nervous.

"Shall I call the taxi?"

"Not yet." My wife shook her head. "The train doesn't go for ages."

My stomach began to knot with tension. There was only one train. If we missed it we wouldn't get a second chance. The honeymoon would be over before it began. I made a cup of coffee. I plucked a book at random from the shelves and opened it. It was upside down, but I didn't notice immediately.

"Can I call the taxi now?"

"No."

I tried to read my book, but the words made no sense.

"Now?"

"Oh all right. If you really must. But it's cold and draughty on that station platform. We've got plenty of time, you know."

I rang the taxi and we waited for it to come. And waited. And waited some more. I rang the taxi company again. "He's on his way..."

We waited.

I rang again. "He won't be long..."

We waited.

The taxi arrived an hour and a half after I'd first rung. The driver ambled into town at least 10kph below the speed limit. I could have walked faster. My palms were clammy with nervous sweat and excess hydrochloric acid production in my stomach was eating holes in my feet. Geological aeons later we finally arrived at the station and got on the train.

Thirty seconds after we boarded, it pulled away from the platform on its long journey to Auckland.

"See? I told you we had plenty of time!"

It was our first and fiercest marital disagreement.

The habit of being early has carried over into my working life. I commute between Auckland and Wellington at regular intervals. In order to make life more pleasant I carry a card which allows me entry to lounges of unbridled luxury wherein free food and drink is poured into my unresisting body and dusky maidens indulge my every whim. Thus I have even more motive than usual for arriving early and so I do. But sometimes I turn up excessively early even by my standards.

"Hello. I've got an electronic ticket for the 4.30pm flight to Wellington."

"Hello sir," said the helpful lady at the check in desk.

"Would you like me transfer you to the previous flight? It will be boarding in about an hour."

"No thank you. I'll stick with the 4.30 flight please."

She checked me in with a puzzled look and a muffled giggle, and as I made my way to the lounge she made spot-the-loony faces to her colleague on the next desk.

Sometimes the effects of being early rebound upon me. Recently I concluded my business in Wellington by lunchtime and so I made my way out to the airport intent on catching the first flight home.

"Hello. I'm booked on the 6.30pm flight to Auckland. Is there any chance of rebooking me on to an earlier flight?"

"Let me see." The lady did arcane things with her computer terminal. "Yes that's fine sir." She handed me a boarding pass for the 1.30pm flight. I had about half an hour to wait. Just enough time for an interlude of orgasmic delight. I made my way to the luxury lounge and rang home then I rang the taxi company and arranged to be met at Auckland airport at 2.30pm. I settled down to pour vile fluids into and out of my body. Then an announcement came over the speaker system.

"We regret that flight 726 to Auckland has been delayed. We expect to make a boarding call at approximately 1.45. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause."

Oh well, it was only a quarter of an hour delay. I placed an order for another batch of dusky maidens. Then they delayed the flight again by another fifteen minutes. Cursing, I rang home and after that I rang the taxi company again to warn them about the delay. I called for caviar, champagne, fresh monkey brains still warm in the skull, and a clean spoon.

"We regret to announce that flight 726, the 1.30pm flight to Auckland is now scheduled for departure at 3.30pm. Could any passengers in the lounge who wish to transfer to the 3.00pm flight please come to the reception desk."

I got there first, and changed my ticket yet again. I rang home, rang the taxi company (who were sick of my voice by now) and drank a bottle of Chateau D'Yquem and ate quail eggs in aspic. Then I called for a cask of Amontillado, and muttering "For the love of God, Montresor," I staggered to my plane as the boarding call was made. When I passed the

departures display screen, I noticed that my original 1.30pm flight had now been completely cancelled.

I sat myself in seat 17G and stared gloomily out of the window. It was almost 3.00pm. Had I caught the early plane I'd originally planned for, I'd have been home by now. Time passed.

"Sorry for the delay in taking off," came the pilot's voice over the tannoy. "We're just doing the final paperwork and then we'll be taxiing to our take-off position."

Ten minutes later we pulled away from the airbridge and trundled slowly towards the runway. Then we stopped, engines idling. The pilot spoke again.

"Sorry ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, but Air Traffic Control have requested a small delay. It shouldn't be too much longer..."

We finally took off nearly 45 minutes late and we must have had an uphill wind because we didn't make up any time at all on the journey to Auckland. We were so late arriving that all the airport gates were already occupied by well-disciplined aircraft that were sticking rigidly to their schedules, and so we taxied to an obscure corner of the airport, disembarked via the portable stairs and then walked for miles towards the dimly visible airport buildings on the horizon. There we walked through a maze of little twisty passages, all alike, with strategically placed airport staff to indicate the correct route when the choices got too confusing. Eventually I emerged through a door I'd never noticed before to find myself immediately behind my taxi driver who was staring hopefully at the stairs down which travellers from Wellington usually appeared.

"Hello," I said.

He jumped in shock. "Oh, hello sir."

We collected my bags and set off for the taxi. "Where to sir?"

I gave him my address.

"Where's that, sir?" I could tell that I was having one of those days and it wasn't over yet. I gave him directions to my house, he nodded thoughtfully, and we set off into the slowest moving traffic jam I've ever seen.

"Sorry about this sir..." By now it was a familiar refrain.

I eventually arrived home only about two hours before I would have done had I caught my original 6.30pm flight. Sometimes the excessively early bird gets the worm with the hangover from last night's party.

# Living In A Kafka Novel

This year New Zealand changed the way it handles the collection of income tax from salaried employees. Previously we had to fill in an IR5 tax form every year. This was never a very onerous task and over the years the form became progressively simpler to complete, mainly because the tax authorities stopped allowing us to claim rebates for anything. Each year I dutifully filled it in, claimed for my income protection insurance policy (the only thing left to me to claim), calculated my tax and applied for a refund of several hundred dollars. It became an annual ritual.

One year my boss made a terrible error in her PAYE calculations and it turned out that I owed the tax people nearly \$800. But apart from that single glitch, I generally got a refund or at the very least broke even.

But this year everything changed. There were no forms to fill in at all. The IRD insisted that their magnificent new computer system and new reporting guidelines for businesses meant that they would have enough information on file to process employees taxes internally. All we had to do was sit back and wait and the refunds would roll in automatically.

I should have known it wouldn't be quite that simple...

The tax year ended on March 31<sup>st</sup>. Round about the middle of June I received a document from the IRD which summarised my income to the end of the tax year. It was, I was gratified to note, completely accurate. They'd even included the \$30 I earned from writing a book review for a local newspaper, and they had noted the \$7.50 withholding tax deducted from the \$30. Included in the same envelope was a small and simple form to fill in to claim any rebates I might be entitled to. I examined the form carefully. I could

claim for donations to charity, and I could claim for childcare and domestic home help, but nowhere could I claim for income protection insurance. I rang the IRD and explained my position.

"Ah," they said. "Yes - income protection insurance. We didn't think of that. Ummm. Ring back in August and ask for an assessment form."

"Why do I have to wait until August? And what's an assessment form?"

"We won't have the data fully processed until August. An assessment form is a sort of replacement IR5."

"But I thought we'd done away with IR5 forms this year?"

"Oh we have. Except for special cases."

So now I was a special case. I decided to follow the advice and ring back in August. Two months passed and August arrived. I rang the tax department and explained the position.

"Oh that's easy," said the man. "Have you got your details to hand? I can do it now on my computer. You don't have to fill in any forms at all. I can't understand why they told you to do that. What's your IRD number?"

I told him and he looked me up.

"Oh dear," he said. "Oh dearie, dearie me..."

"?" I asked.

"You received a payment of \$30 which has \$7.50 withholding tax on it."

"That's right." I explained about the book review.

"Well because of that \$30 payment and the fact that the tax was levied as a withholding tax, you are classified as a self employed person and therefore you have to fill out an IR3 form."

"But I'm not self employed," I said. "Look at my income assessment. All my umpteen thousand dollars of income last year came from my salary. Except for that \$30."

"Sorry," said the man. "Those are the rules. You earned \$30 last year as a self employed person. So you must fill in



an IR3. I'll arrange to have one sent to you. You can claim your income protection insurance on the IR3," he added enticingly.

The IR3 arrived towards the end of August. The accompanying small print informed me that IR3 forms must be filed by the 7<sup>th</sup> of July. It would appear that I was in trouble again...

An IR3 is a form of enormous complexity. Among many other things, it required me to estimate my self-employed income for the next twelve months and to pay provisional tax on that estimated income. The explanatory booklet that comes with the form lists all the dire penalties that will be applied to your shivering carcass if your estimated income (and hence your provisional tax) turns out to be significantly lower than the actuality. The penalties start with ritual disembowelling for a first offence and culminate with eternal damnation and a thousand lines for subsequent offences. I estimated my income at zero, thus making my provisional tax zero as well - there's no way I'm going through this rigmarole again next year. If the newspaper wants another book review, they can write it themselves!

Several other questions required me to provide details of various arcane financial items of which I had never heard and whose detailed explanations in the accompanying booklet might as well have been written in Martian for all the sense they made. On the theory that I'd never heard of them and therefore probably didn't have them, I filled in zero for all of these as well.

Then came the great moment. I wrote down my claim for my income protection insurance. To this I added zero a few times (strangely, the total remained unchanged) and then for good measure I subtracted zero a few times as well. This too had surprisingly little effect on the final amount. I multiplied the figure by a magic number supplied by the IRD and the result suggested that they owed me a rebate of

\$1,755.17. Gleefully I posted my form and sat back and waited for the money to appear.

Nothing happened. I waited a little longer and it happened again. So I rang the IRD again...

When you call the IRD the phone rings forever. Eventually a robot voice informs you that you are in a priority queue, your call is very important, and if you will just hang on, someone will deal with you very soon. A recent newspaper report suggests that the vast majority of callers ring off before anyone answers them. However a phone call is much better than a letter. I know from personal experience that the tax department NEVER, EVER under any circumstances answers letters or even acknowledges their receipt. So I waited in the priority queue for nearly three hours before a human voice finally said, "Hello?"

I explained.

"Ah yes, here's your file. Hmmmm. There's a fault on it. We can't pay you until I authorise it by typing an incantation."

"Why is that?"

"Oh we don't agree with your calculation. You got the figures in Question 11 wrong, so we only owe you \$716.79"

"Well if I got it wrong, but you KNOW that I got it wrong because you know what the right answer is, why don't you just correct the figures automatically and send me the \$716.79?"

"No we can't do that. We have to wait until you contact us, and then we'll explain and then we can authorise it."

"But you never acknowledge letters and contacting you on the phone is almost impossible, so if I gave up because I couldn't get through, does it mean that you'd never pay me the money you owe me? You'd keep it forever, just because I got a figure wrong in Question 11?"

"Yes, that's right." He sounded smug.

"But if you refuse to pay me money that you owe me, isn't that theft? After all if I refused to pay you money that I

owe you, you'd have me in court in two shakes of an accountant's quill."

"That's different."

"Oh, of course. I should have realised. Now - what's Question 11?"

"That's the one where you have to calculate your ACC contributions as a percentage of your overall income. You estimated your ACC contributions as zero, and that's not right."

"But surely my employer paid the ACC contributions during the PAYE year?"

"Oh yes, but we discounted those payments because you are self employed so you have to calculate the payments yourself and then we credit your calculations against the money we received as ACC contributions from your employer."

"But I'm not self employed!"

"Yes you are. You filled in an IR3."

"Only because of a \$30 payment I received as a freelance."

"Yes, that's right - you are self employed outside your regular employment."

It seemed that we were no further forward. I let my mind boggle for a while at the silliness of it.

"Well - can you authorise the payment anyway?" I asked hopefully.

"Oh yes, that's easy. Now that we've discussed it."

There was a pause and I heard the clatter of keys on a keyboard.

"There, that's done," he said. "You should receive your rebate in about five days."

He was spot on. Five days later I received my \$716.79.

Now just think about my taxing tale for a minute. For the sake of a \$30 payment which attracted \$7.50 withholding tax, the IRD held three quite lengthy telephone calls with me and made me fill in a very complicated form. A clerk

processed that very complicated form and transferred its figures to my records in the IRD computer, correcting my invalid Question 11 along the way. The collection of the \$7.50 tax probably cost them several hundred dollars in administration alone. Let's assume they spent \$300 to collect my \$7.50 tax. That's a cost of \$40 per tax dollar collected. This is not a productive ratio. If the same ratio applies to a significant fraction of this year's PAYE taxpayers (and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that it does) then the IRD must have made a significant loss this year. No wonder this country has debts that are slowly grinding it into oblivion. New Zealand must be the only country in the world whose tax department consistently fails to make a profit!

# Heartache

Several months ago, during a routine medical check, it was revealed that my cholesterol levels were abnormally high. I was measured at 9.0. The average is about 4.5 (that's expressed in mmol/L. Some countries report results in mg/dl - to convert, divide by 0.02586). I was so far over to the right hand side of the bell curve that I was single-handedly increasing the national average. I got three stars on the report that came back from the path lab. Something, it was made clear to me, would have to be done.

I reported the test results to a friend who thought she had high cholesterol until she heard my Olympic record breaking figures.

"Gosh," she said, impressed. "You're the only person I've ever met with solid lard circulating in their veins. Did it clog up the syringe when they took the blood sample?"

I had to confess that there had been no such effect. The blood was still liquid with a distinct absence of lumpy bits. Mind you, the rainbow effect as the sunlight glinted off the layer of oil on the surface tended to give the game away. I think I might be a national resource. They can attach my circulatory system to the inlet valves of the Marsden Point oil refinery. New Zealand will never have to import crude oil again; we can be completely self sufficient. Perhaps I'll get a medal.

A daily pill was prescribed and a strict low fat diet. Much of the savour left my dining table and I began to live on chicken and fish, cooked in sauces based on fruit juice and cornflour. Surprisingly these turned out to be tastier than you might think and mealtimes perked up a bit. I investigated interesting things to do with vegetables. I ate breakfast cereal that claimed to be 99% fat free and I

anointed it with non-fat milk. I drank my tea and coffee black (this was no hardship – I've always done that). I stopped spreading grease on my bread. The only taste on my toast was a thin layer of jam, the only lubrication in my sandwiches was pickle, the only fillings fat-free ham, salad and fruit. When I went away on business I lived exclusively on raw fish from Japanese restaurants. I grew a dorsal fin and had to strongly resist the urge to swim home rather than fly.

Exercise (*yuck!*) was highly recommended and so I bought a second hand exercycle. The advert was irresistible ("late model, low kilometres"). I pedalled every day. Not surprisingly, I lost weight.

But I didn't lose any cholesterol.

Initially the levels dropped slightly. But then they climbed up again as my liver, appalled at the lower levels it was finding, began manufacturing cholesterol at ever increasing rates and pumping it into my blood. My body, it appeared, was determined to die of a heart attack, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do to stop it.

An appointment was made to see a cardiologist and an ECG examination was scheduled so that we could all find out how much damage had already been done. I was instructed to bring shorts and running shoes for they intended to put me on a treadmill and measure all the different ways my body didn't cope with the pressure.

Fully equipped, I turned up at the appointed time.

The lady in charge of the ECG equipment told me to get changed. "Bare chest, shorts and running shoes, please."

When I was ready, she took my blood pressure. It was normal. Then she produced a razor. "I have to shave your chest, so that we can get a good contact for the electrodes."

"OK," I said.

"I'll try and keep the pattern symmetrical," she said, "so that nobody will laugh at you when you take your shirt off in public."

I brightened up a bit. This began to have possibilities. "Can you write your name instead?" I asked. She gave me The Look - you know, the one that means they are beginning to have serious doubts about your sanity. I was starting to enjoy myself.

"Now we have the sandpaper." She scrubbed vigorously at the freshly shaved areas then she dabbed an electrically conductive adhesive on the patches of bare skin. I began to feel like a plank of wood that had been planed square, sanded smooth and smeared with glue. Perhaps I'd end up as part of a coffee table. These ambitions died as she attached electrodes to the adhesive. She hung wires on the electrodes.

"Oops," she said.

"What's happened?"

"I stuck one too many electrodes on you," she said. "I thought they looked a bit unsymmetrical." She pulled the extra one off and threw it away and then she rearranged the wires, frowned and rearranged them again. The wires came together in a belt which hung loosely round my waist. A single, rather fat cable led from the belt to a machine that stood by the treadmill. A screen showed the peaks and troughs of several graphs that marched implacably across it from right to left in response to mysterious electrical activity inside my body. In the top right hand corner of the screen was a glowing green number.

"That's your pulse rate," explained the technician. We stared at it. It was normal.

There was a keyboard attached to the machine and she typed a few commands on it. The graphs changed shape slightly as the scale altered. "I'll go and tell the doctor you are ready," she said. "He has to give you the once over before we put you on the treadmill. We don't want you dropping dead on us."

The cardiologist came in and listened to me with a stethoscope. He read my notes and said, "Hmmm. You've

been referred to me by your GP."

"Yes"

We discussed my complete lack of any symptom other than the high cholesterol itself. "I feel remarkably well, in fact. That's what makes the whole thing so ridiculous," I complained peevishly. "It wouldn't be so bad if I felt ill, but I don't."

"I've never had a patient who complained about not feeling ill," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if it's a new syndrome?"

"It's probably all my GP's fault," I explained. "I think she must have put the cholesterol in there when I wasn't looking"

He agreed with me that it was a distinct possibility

He turned to the keyboard and played with it for a while. A window opened on the screen and displayed mysterious figures and the graphs ceased their stately progress. Something went *beep*. "I think I've broken it," he said. "Damn computers. I hate them."

The technician glanced across. "Press Escape," she said.

He looked puzzled. "What?"

I decided to intervene. "Top left hand corner of the keyboard," I said. "It's a key with the letters ESC on it."

He found it and pressed it and the machine started working again. "Thank you," he said, greatly impressed.

"How do you know so much about computers?"

"It's what I do for a living."

The technician stood me on the treadmill and attached a blood pressure cuff to my left arm. "The test will last for 12 minutes," she explained. "Every three minutes the speed will increase. I'll be taking your blood pressure at each increase. We're going to get your heart rate up to 144 and then work you hard for a little while. If you feel faint or get chest pains, tell me and we'll stop immediately."

The treadmill began to move and I started to walk.



"Relax," said the technician in soothing tones. "Stop being so tense. You've got a poor technique. Don't grip the handlebar. I don't want to see any white knuckles." In the top right hand corner of the screen, my pulse rate began to increase. The ECG machine began to excrete paper as it made a permanent record of the graphs that marched in such a stately fashion across its screen.

"Three minutes," said the technician. The blood pressure cuff gripped my arm briefly and the treadmill got faster. The belt around my waist that all the wires led to felt loose. I wondered if it would fall off. I hoped not. I'd hate to have to start this all over again.

"Six minutes." Again my blood pressure was taken and the treadmill increased its speed. I was starting to feel it now. My legs were aching and I was beginning to pant. My pulse rate was up to 140. As I watched it reached the magic figure of 144. "Oh good," I thought. "Maybe we can ease off now." No such luck.

"Nine minutes." This time the speed increase seemed out of all proportion to the previous ones and I really had to hurry so as not to fall over. My body was leaning at a 45 degree angle as it fought against the treadmill that was trying to make it fall over in a heap. Try as I might, I couldn't get vertical. Looking in the mirror on the wall, I could see that I had turned distinctly pink. I was panting quite hard now and my pulse was racing at 168. The technician was looking anxious.

"Are you feeling OK? Any chest pains? If it gets too much, just say and I'll stop immediately."

"I'm OK," I said, in between gasps. "Let's keep going." My thighs were on fire and I was sucking air deep into my chest. Apart from a hammering heart that was giving the distinct impression that it wanted to leap out of my chest and go for trip to the seaside where it could eat fish and chips, drink beer and attempt to pick up women, I felt great.

I watched my pulse hit 183 just as the technician said, "Twelve minutes." The treadmill decelerated and soon came to a complete stop. I hung on to the bar and panted and listened to the rapid thumping inside my chest. "Come and lie down for a moment," said the technician.

She led me to a trolley and I stretched out and looked at the ceiling while she removed the electrodes. There were several cartoons stuck to the ceiling. In one, a sorry looking man lay on a bed. He was covered from head to foot with enormous zig-zag surgical scars crudely sewn together with huge Frankensteinian stitches. A doctor was saying, "You'll be pleased to hear that the exploratory surgery found nothing wrong."

Another showed an enormously fat man swimming in the sea. Two sharks circled below him and one was saying to the other, "I was tempted, but I thought he might contain too much cholesterol."

Once everything had calmed down and I was slightly less pink, I got dressed. The technician took the huge roll of paper that the machine had regurgitated off to the cardiologist. After a time, he summoned me to his office.

He said, "Regrettably..."

(Oh shit!)

"...your ECG is completely normal. I can't find any evidence of damage at all." He looked glum at the thought of all the money I wasn't going to pay him.

We examined a chart that correlated my age (ancient), blood pressure (normal), whether or not I smoked (no), and whether or not I had diabetes (no). It seemed I had a 5% to 10% chance of a cardiac related event (heart attack or stroke) over the next 5 years. The longer I continued with a high cholesterol level, the greater the chances of fatty deposits blocking the arteries to the heart, and the higher the likelihood of such an event. I had been lucky so far. This probably wouldn't continue.

Given the nature of my new diet, and the fact that I've always eaten a fairly low fat diet anyway, it seems likely that I have a genetic predisposition to high cholesterol. It is a completely symptomless disease, apart from the rather extreme symptom of the heart attack that appears one day out of the blue and kills you. However some people with astronomically high cholesterol start to deposit fat in unlikely areas of the body and often they will have a white fatty circle around the iris of the eye. My father had such circles around his eyes. I remember noticing them as a child and thinking how odd they looked. At the moment my body seems quite tolerant of its high cholesterol and that too is probably genetic. But I can't continue to rely on it for protection.

The doctor and I decided that I was a prime candidate for one of the new statin drugs. These, he explained to me, would cut through my cholesterol like a hot knife through butter (apt analogy there, I thought). I will have to take the drug every day for the rest of my life.

In the short term (i.e. the next few months) I probably don't have much to worry about. In the long term I should be able eventually to reduce my chances of a cardiac related illness to something more reasonable. The future looks hopeful, as long as I continue to eat sensibly and generally take care of myself.

"What I suggest you do now," said the doctor, "is go and have a celebratory lunch. Perhaps a cheese and cream sandwich. Deep fried, of course."

As I left, he shook my hand. "I hope this handshake guarantees that a large part of your computer expertise will rub off on me," he said.

"Oh yes. But you have to WANT to change..."

# **The Hunting of the Mark - An Agony in Multiply Chosen Fits**

I make my living teaching people about the mysteries of computers. I show them how to sacrifice goats on the network servers so as to get the best performance. I demonstrate that if you frighten a computer into obedience it will tell all its friends on the network about how big and bad you are, and those other computers will all behave themselves as well. Sometimes my students believe me when I tell them these things...

Microsoft have recently changed the rules of teaching. As of January 2001, all Microsoft trainers must have what they call a premier certification in order to be able to continue teaching the Microsoft courses. A premier certification means you have followed an approved course of study and passed exams in the major and minor arcana. Few if any Microsoft trainers run courses in all the subjects that make up a single premier certification. We each have our own smaller areas of expertise - the field is too large and nobody can be an expert on everything. Nevertheless, we must still venture in to those areas. Rules are rules.

So, gritting my teeth, I embarked on a course of study designed to award me a Microsoft Certified Solution Developer certificate, or MCSD for short. Recently I passed the last exam and got the certificate.

Two days after passing the exam I received an email from Microsoft congratulating me on becoming an MCSD. The day after that I received another email from Microsoft congratulating me on becoming an MCSD. The following day

I received a third email from Microsoft congratulating me on becoming an MCSD. I began to feel quite overwhelmed by all the attention.

Then the rot set in. The following day I received a Microsoft email that warned me (in no uncertain terms) that if I didn't get my premier certification by the end of the year I was no longer eligible to teach their courses. It urged me (in the politest possible way) to get my finger out.

One department within the monolith was obviously not communicating with the other and their knickers were right royally twisted as a result.

I've been taking exams, on and off, since I was eleven years old. My generation of English children was one that had to take the dreaded 11-plus; an exam that marked you for life, for if you didn't pass it you were considered to be one of life's failures. You were sent to a secondary modern school and you studied woodwork and metalwork until you left to get a dead end job. If you passed the exam you went to a grammar school where you studied latin and science and maths and eventually you went to university and became a captain of industry. It wasn't a very fair system and the exam has long since been abolished. But that's the way it worked back then.

The exam itself was largely an IQ test, though there were papers in English comprehension and grammar and papers in arithmetic as well. For a whole year before the exam proper we did nothing but practice IQ tests in the classroom. The experts will tell you that practising for an IQ test does no good. They would have you believe that intelligence is a fixed quantity and you cannot affect the absolute value at all by practising for the test. This is bullshit of the smelliest, most diarrhoeal variety. Over the course of the academic year, every single person in our class managed to raise their IQ by measurable amounts as we got used to the way the tests worked and as we got our heads around the sometimes rather twisted thinking that the questions

required of us. If we'd managed one more year of study, I think we might all have reached genius level. As it was, we were merely very, very bright.

Many years later, when I was considerably out of practice, I applied to join the intellectually elite world of Mensa. The entry requirement is to have an IQ of 140 or greater. I took their test and my IQ turned out to be 138. If I'd studied for it in the same way I'd studied for the 11-plus, I think I'd have turned the scale around 150. But sour grapes set in and I never bothered trying again.

Grammar school was fun. But it was hard work, geared all the time towards the General Certificate of Education Ordinary level exams (GCE O-Levels) that we took at age sixteen and the advanced level exams (A-Levels) that were taken at age eighteen by those who stayed on into the sixth form. The O-levels covered an enormous range of subjects to a quite extraordinary depth. One day might find me writing an erudite essay on Dickens, followed by page after page of squiggles as I explored the oddities of the differential calculus. Perhaps I would be required to translate a Latin text or write an essay in French, balance a chemical equation or dissect a grasshopper. I studied nine subjects to O-level (the average was seven) and I passed them all.

After the generalisations of the O-levels, we were required to specialise for the A-Levels and the subjects were studied in much greater depth than before. I joined the science stream and studied maths, physics and chemistry. However to keep my hand in, I also took something called "General Studies" which was a hodge podge of art, science, history, philosophy, politics; you name it. I'd leave the rarefied world of thermodynamics or organic synthesis or celestial mechanics and read Camus and Sartre, discuss renaissance art and trade union history. I also learned to sew and to cook (the girls were taught woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing - in many ways my school was a very enlightened one for its time).

My A-level exams opened up new worlds of discourse. Prior to this, exams had merely required me to regurgitate accepted wisdom on topics we had studied in class and the questions were straight down the middle of the road. However my A-levels began to push the envelope. I had to apply my knowledge in new situations and demonstrate understanding rather than rote learning. I had to develop opinions and justify them. I had to explore implications. There was a certain exhilaration in that and while the exams were tough, they were also fun and enormously satisfying intellectually.

At university I specialised in chemistry. For three years I did nothing but study chemistry (with side tracks into physics and maths and a brief flirtation with German. Virtually every chemistry research paper of any merit from the first quarter of the twentieth century originated in Germany). The pressure was extreme.

Intellectually the subject was incredibly stimulating. When I first came across quantum physics I spent an entire year on an unbelievable intellectual high. Who needs drink or drugs or sex when you can turn yourself on like that? So many puzzling things suddenly fell into place. So many mysteries revealed and so many more subtle ones introduced. Quantum physics is, shall we say, less than complete. I never reached such a peak again, but I never forgot the excitement. I was in love with ideas, with the pursuit of intellectual challenges for their own sake. Ideas were important simply because, like Everest, they were there.

One of our maths lecturers was a visiting American. We found him hilarious. He called the subject "math" and he called an exam a "quiz". He gave us "scores". He "graded" us for our work during the "semester". None of us had a clue what he was talking about.

He gave us the first multi-choice exam that any of us had ever seen (at least since the 11-plus. IQ tests, by their very

nature, are always multi-choice). We hated it and almost all of us failed. Our lecturer told us we had "flunked" it. Again, we had absolutely no idea what he meant. Out of a group of about 50 students, I think only ten passed. I was not one of them. Our lecturer was quite shocked and surprised; he'd had high hopes for us.

I think it was lack of familiarity with the format that defeated us. We were used to wider areas of discourse, broader strokes of the pen, greater intellectual freedom. We needed the right to explore an idea and examine it under ranges of conditions. The concentration of minutiae required for this exam was foreign to us. We couldn't cope with the rigidity of thinking, the walls around the ideas, the lack of an opportunity to argue our case. Who says there is only one right answer? And why on earth do we have to agree with our teachers?

The level of detail floored us. Detail had never mattered before. In his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell quoted Samuel Johnson as saying:

Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we

know where we can find information upon it.

To us that seemed self evident. You can find the detail whenever you need it, so it isn't in the least bit important. What mattered to us were ideas, principles, the broad picture, the structure. It was hard to descend to the mundane level that these "quizzes" demanded. (It was also annoying that no credit was given for partial answers. It was all black and white; right and wrong. Yin and yang. Excessive attention to detail does that to you).

At the end of the year, our lecturer went back to America and multi-choice exams vanished from our lives, much to our relief. We returned to the more open ended, discursive questions that we were used to. I started to pass my maths exams again and in the fullness of time I obtained an honours degree in chemistry.



Twenty five years after I left university, multi-choice questions re-entered my life when I began to struggle with the Microsoft exams.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with multi-choice questions. The Open University in England uses them almost exclusively. However their exams are carefully thought out, and carefully phrased. The "correct" answer cannot be chosen from the list until a huge amount of work has been done researching the question. Depth of understanding is required (and must be demonstrated). However this is the exception - most multi-choice exams are badly thought out, and ambiguously phrased. As a teacher, I am constantly amazed at the number of different ways my students find to misinterpret my questions. No matter carefully I phrase them, no matter how clear I think I have been, there always seems to be room for manoeuvre, for misunderstanding. For a multi-choice exam to be fair, crystal clarity of expression is required but is all too seldom achieved. Their sole merit is that they are easy to mark - but that is a benefit to the examiner, not the examinee. Surely that is the wrong way round?

Once, in conversation with a Microsoftie, I learned that in many countries (particularly Asian ones) candidates are given an extra hour in the exam because English is not their native language.

"Wait a minute," I said. "The exams are actually written in American, not English. And American is not my native language. Can I have an extra hour too, please?"

It went down like a lead balloon. You can't make jokes about Microsoft to a Microsoftie. When the Microsofties have the operation that implants the chips in their skulls, the surgeons always take care to remove the sense of humour gland as well.

It wasn't entirely a joke though. Just as I failed to understand the bizarre vocabulary of my American maths lecturer all those years ago, so now do I often fail to

understand the excessively baroque phrasing of many of the exam questions that are presented to me. A colleague complained that he felt he had to be telepathic. It was the only way he would ever be able to figure out what was in the examiner's mind. Exams like these can only be passed with luck. Knowledge helps, but is of secondary importance. That too seems to me to be a reversal of the true priority.

# The Flaw Beneath My Feet

The first sign that a cat has peed or pooped on your carpet is the scratching noise she makes as she frantically tries to cover what she has done by piling the rest of the carpet on top of it.

When you go to investigate the disturbing sound, you find that urine soaked carpet squishes interestingly beneath bare feet. If the carpet is sufficiently saturated, small squirts will gush between the toes as you walk. However it is not advisable to walk over faeces. They disintegrate distressingly and lodge beneath the toe nails.

After a few weeks of this, I began to resign myself to coming home each day to a house redolent with the odours of well matured cat urine mingled with feline faecal fragrances. Visitors would sniff appreciatively.

"Been cooking curry again, Alan?"

The incontinent cat in question is Ginger. She is fourteen years old and she has always been perfectly house trained in the past. Furthermore, she has a cat door which means that she can come and go as she pleases (it just doesn't please her to come and go any more). For both of these reasons, I decided that a trip to the vet was called for in case these were the first symptoms of something more serious. The vet was non-committal.

"Behavioural problems like these are often more psychological than physical," he said. "Cats will only pee and poo where they feel secure. Perhaps she has had a bad fright outside. Have any new cats moved into the neighbourhood? Is she being bullied?"

"No," I said. "Quite the reverse. I've seen her chase a German Shepherd dog off the property. There used to be a

rottweiler called Fluffy who lived two doors down. It was scared stiff of her."

"Well," said the vet, "all I can suggest is that you try to discourage her by putting food down where she is doing it. Cats are very fastidious creatures. They won't pee or poo near their food supply."

"That's a good idea. It might start costing a fortune in cat biscuits though; her brother is bound to pig out on whatever he finds lying around."

Ginger's brother Milo is a cat with only one binary brain cell. When it is on he eats; when it is off he sleeps. Extra sources of food would merely turn his brain cell on a bit more often than usual.

"One trick I read about," said the vet, "was someone who cured their cat of this habit by putting a food bowl down in every spot the cat used. And in the bowl was a single, solitary cat biscuit superglued to the bottom!"

Oh! The frustration!

We bought some more food bowls and put some biscuits and water beneath the stairs. Both cats enjoyed this and we would lie in bed at night soothed by intermittent crunching sounds and the occasional slurp. Ginger never peed there again. She did it round the corner, out of sight of the food.

A hurried clean up, another bowl of biscuits. She peed all over the carpet in front of the right hand stereo speaker. I curbed my felinocidal tendencies. Wreaking grievous bodily harm on the cat is at best a temporary palliative. I made a mental note to refrain from asking visitors to check out the balance of my stereo. It wasn't a good idea to squat down near the speaker. It brought the carpet too close to the nostrils.

Perhaps the internet would provide some help. I felt rather odd typing "carpet cat urine" into google.com. There were a depressingly large number of hits. I was obviously not alone in the world. One document spoke of the delights of a house filled with *eau de pussy* which is quite a clever

multi-lingual pun. But one and all they agreed that there was no cure. When cats pee on carpets it is forever.

"So what's under the carpet?" asked Robin, thinking outside the square. "Why can't we just take it up and live on bare boards? It's a horrible carpet anyway."

Cautious investigation revealed that the carpet was stapled to a wooden floor. Lifting the edges showed nicely polished planks of unidentifiable wood. There was, of course, no guarantee that this continued all the way across the floor. Many misdemeanours could be concealed beneath the vast expanses of carpet covering the rest of the room and the hallway.

"Let's do it over Christmas," said Robin.

So we did.

Christmas Day and Boxing Day are holidays and by mutual agreement carpet lifting is illegal. The next day, however, we girded our loins and began.

"Let's start over here," said Robin. "There isn't much furniture. We'll just move it over to the other half of the room, do this half and then move everything from the other half of the room over here and do the other half."

"Why not move everything out the room into the bedroom and then do the room as a whole?" I suggested.

Robin didn't think much of that idea.

"You are wrong!" she explained convincingly.

I couldn't argue with the logic and so we began in the front half of the lounge. We ripped up the carpet. Clouds of dust arose and covered us from head to toe. We rolled up the carpet and the underlay and carried it into the laundry out of the way. Stretching half way across the lounge were beautifully varnished, though very dirty, wooden planks. We brushed up the worst of the dust. Much of the detritus consisted of an inordinately large number of insect parts - mandibles, legs etc. All the chitin-covered, inedible sections. I knew my cats had caught a lot of insects over the years, but only now was I starting to realise just how many!

On hands and knees, I crawled across the floor armed only with a pair of pincers. I pulled out hundreds of staples. In some sections the person with the staple gun had gone completely berserk and there were staples every quarter of an inch or so. Then we washed and scrubbed the boards. They positively glowed. It was a satisfying moment.

Then we moved all the furniture from the still carpeted section of the room over on to the boards we had just finished and repeated the exercise.

For many years, a mysterious lump in the carpet had puzzled me. This was now revealed to be an unsanded, unvarnished piece of tatty wood about three feet long and an inch wide nailed, for no readily apparent reason, to the middle of the floor. Removing the wood revealed the only piece of floor in poor condition. There was no varnish on the planks and several half inch diameter holes gave a lovely view beneath the house. Either Avondale has very large borer to go with its very large spiders, or some long-forgotten project had once required half inch holes. Being an SF fan, I am reluctant to discard the idea of woodworms that can chew out half inch holes. Doubtless the cats will soon hunt one down and bring it home for me to admire.

We covered this manky bit with a rug so that nobody will know it is there and retired to bed tired, dusty but very pleased with the beautiful floor in the lounge. Tomorrow the hallway!

The next day we arose achingly from our bed and admired the floor in the lounge as we breakfasted. Then we attacked the hall. It has several unique characteristics that distinguish it from the lounge. It is much narrower and therefore smellier and the stairs that come down from the upper storey proved to have been installed on top of the carpet which presented us with a very knotty problem. Robin spent several very fiddly hours with a very sharp knife trimming the immovable carpet chunks to the shape of the stairs.

I repeated my staple removing marathon. Along the way I trod on one I'd missed and bled copiously over the bare boards. I suppose these kinds of things always require a libation to the gods.

I also had to purchase brass carpet trim and use it to tidy the edges of the carpet in all the rooms that lead off from the hall. I cut my finger on one of these and made another blood sacrifice.

By now it was very late in the day. The hall has a much smaller surface area than the lounge but it took us the same amount of time to clear and it was much harder work. Tired but happy we went to bed.

The following day was a day of rest. We ached all over. Indeed I am convinced that not only was I aching in places I didn't know I had, I was also aching in places I hadn't got at all! But it was worth it. The floor looks beautiful. It isn't perfect; there are areas that need attention. However as Robin rightly says, everybody's wooden floor has places that need attention. Almost by definition they are imperfect, for it doesn't take much to scratch and gouge.

In the twilight the wooden floor glows golden brown and warm. Why would anyone have wanted to cover such beauty with carpet?

# Alan And The Vein Attempt

Many years ago my father had to go into hospital for an operation. During this he had a massive allergic reaction to an anaesthetic called scoline. For a time it was touch and go. Because I was my father's son, it was decreed that I should be tested to see if I had inherited the allergy. I donated the usual armful of blood and it vanished into the nether regions of the medical laboratory. A week later the verdict was delivered.

"We don't know."

My test results were inconclusive and the only way of finding out for sure appeared to be to feed me the drug and see if I died. While it would certainly settle the question, it was an experiment I was less than keen to undertake and so nothing more was said or done. For the next ten years I contented myself with informing any doctors with whom I came into contact that I was probably allergic to scoline and could they avoid using it please? It seemed to work.

And then one day, quite out of the blue, my GP said, "They've got a new test for scoline allergy. Shall we try it out?"

And thus began an adventure...

Since the test is a new one and since it is very rarely asked for anyway, it doesn't appear on the standard list printed on the medical laboratory form. So my doctor had to write out by hand the details of what she wanted done. It turned out that there were three separate tests required. There's a medical laboratory collection point just up the road from my office, so I went there the next day and presented the form. The nice nurse frowned at it.

"I wonder what it says?" she mused. She adjusted the angle so that the sunshine coming in through the window



illuminated it more clearly, and she squinted hard. But it did no good. My doctor's squiggles remained illegible.

The nurse phoned my doctor's surgery and explained her predicament. I could feel the blushes travelling down the telephone lines. I'll swear the handset turned red. The nurse printed the details carefully and legibly on the form and sniffed audibly. She hung up the phone.

"They ought to send all the doctors back to school," she muttered. "Teach them to write properly. My three year old daughter writes more clearly than most doctors, and she uses an unsharpened crayon and hasn't been taught her alphabet yet."

She looked closely at what she had written on the form. "I wonder what these tests are?" she mused. "I wonder what kind of blood sample I have to take, what tubes to store it in? Hmmm..."

She bustled about with various reference books and master lists of tests correlated with columns of data about exactly what kind of chemical needed to be mixed with the blood in order to present it properly to the master technicians for them to perform their arcane rites and rituals upon it. She found two of the tests documented, but could find no trace of the third anywhere. "One hep, one plain," she muttered. "But what on earth do they need in order to test your dibucaine number?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I've never heard of a dibucaine number."

She returned to the phone and rang the testing centre itself. She engaged in a muttered dialogue with the person at the other end. There were long silences as various reference works were consulted at both ends. Eventually she rang off.

"They've never heard of a dibucaine number test either," she said. "They're going to ask the chief pathologist when he comes in. Do you want a cup of coffee while we wait?"

I had a cup of coffee, and then another and we chatted about this and that. Every so often she'd break off the conversation to go and take blood from a new customer. These were all straightforward bread and butter stuff - liver enzymes, ESR, cholesterol. She emptied their arms of blood with brisk efficiency and squirted it into the appropriate tubes.

Eventually the chief pathologist rang back and the nurse went into a huddle with the telephone. She came back to me smiling.

"Right," she said. "One hep, two plain."

She sat me down in the chair and tied a pressure strap around my upper arm. "Just clench your fist for me, please," she requested.

I clenched my fist. "Oooh! What lovely veins you've got," she said, which has to be one of the oddest compliments I have ever received. She collected the blood and prepared the tubes. One hep, two plain; it sounded like a knitting pattern.

The blood was sent to the appropriate testing centre and a week later they delivered their verdict on my scoline allergy.

"We don't know."

My doctor was hopping mad.

"What do they mean they don't know?" she raved. "They only did two of the tests anyway. They completely omitted the dibucaine number. And that's the most important one."

She rang the laboratory and tore them off a strip. Paint flaked from the walls. "Why didn't you do the dibucaine number test?"

She listened closely to the reply. "You didn't notice it on the form," she said flatly. She looked at me. "They didn't notice it written down on the form," she explained to me. She raised her eyes eloquently to heaven as she hung up the phone.

"Reading lessons," she said. "They all need reading lessons. My three year old daughter reads better than they do at that place. And she can only read her own secret squiggles that she draws with an unsharpened crayon because she hasn't been taught her alphabet yet."

She fixed me with a gimlet glare. "I'm sorry Alan," she said, "but you are going to have to have the test done again."

She filled out the medical laboratory form for me. She wrote the tests down very carefully and slowly and legibly. Then she numbered them; one, two, three. On the last line of the form she printed **THREE TESTS IN TOTAL**. She looked closely at it for a moment then she inserted a couple of exclamation marks and underlined it for good measure. "Now let's see them ignore the dibucaine number test," she muttered triumphantly.

I took the form and went to give blood again. It was a different nurse this time. "Gosh," she said, somewhat predictably, "I've never taken samples for these tests before. I wonder what tubes they need?"

"One hep, two plain," I told her. "Purl one". She was not convinced and hustled off to her reference books. This was followed by the usual phone call to the chief pathologist and the usual long wait. She offered me coffee and conversation.

"Have you got a three year old daughter?" I enquired.

"As a matter of fact, I have," she said. "A most unusually talented child..."

Eventually it was decided that the tests did indeed require one hep and two plain and she took the blood from my arm. It disappeared off to the medical laboratory and a week later they delivered their final, definitive verdict on my scoline allergy.

"We don't know."

My doctor glared fiercely at the dibucaine number result. "It doesn't prove anything one way or the other," she admitted. "You're right on the borderline."

Since three separate tests have now come back with inconclusive results we decided that enough was enough and we will err on the side of caution. The next time you see me I will be wearing a nifty piece of jewellery on my wrist. The Medic-Alert bracelet will be engraved with the words *scoline allergy* and on my file it says *not to be given scoline as an anaesthetic*.

My next door neighbour's three year old daughter thinks it's neat.

# Tales of a Travelling Man

This all started with what I thought at the time was an incredible piece of good luck. I really should have known better.

I was booked to fly on the 6.30pm flight from Wellington to Auckland. However I finished my business in Wellington remarkably early and so I headed straight out to the airport. I arrived there about 12.45pm and approached the man at the check in desk.

"Is there any chance of an earlier flight?"

He clattered on his keyboard for a while and stared gloomily at the result on the screen. "Well the 1.30pm flight is full," he said. "But I can get you on the 3.00pm one. Will that be OK?"

"Perfect," I said. "Let's do it." And so it was done.

He printed out my boarding pass and attached baggage tags to my luggage. "Is it OK to check the bags in now?" I asked. "The 1.30 flight hasn't gone yet."

"Oh yes," he reassured me. "There's a separate trolley for each flight and yours will go on the 3.00pm trolley. We won't send it on the 1.30 flight because it is a security risk to send unaccompanied baggage on the flight and it's against regulations. After all - it could be a bomb!"

I saw the wisdom of this. "OK, thanks for that."

He attached priority stickers to the bags and I watched them vanish down the conveyor belt. I went up to the lounge and indulged in all manner of hedonistic luxuries until, jaded and exhausted, I was called to board my 3.00pm flight to Auckland.

The flight was uneventful, and after it landed I trotted off to the baggage claim area. I watched the bags circle round on the conveyor. Mine were noticeably absent. I consoled

myself with the thought that perhaps the priority sticker had come off and since they were first on, they were bound to be last off. I waited a while longer and watched the bags circulate. It was almost hypnotic. After about 40 minutes there was only one bag remaining and it wasn't mine. There is **always** one lonely bag remaining after everyone collects their luggage. It never belongs to anyone. I think the baggage handlers use it to seed the conveyor belt.

The baggage enquiry office is just to the left of the conveyor. The door was locked. I banged frantically on it for a while but nobody came. I went over to the check in desk and managed to catch the eye of one of the staff. I explained my predicament.

She was deeply sympathetic. "I'm not allowed to leave the desk," she said. "But I'll phone my manager." She phoned. Nobody answered. She chewed her lip. "I'll try somebody else." She dialled another number. Nobody answered. "I'll call the airport manager." She dialled again. Still nobody answered. She cast her eyes around wildly, searching for inspiration. "Oh," she said. "There's my manager." She pointed to a distinguished looking gentleman who had just appeared from behind a screen. She waved and whistled and he gave her a horrified look and vanished behind his screen again.

I went back and kicked the door of the baggage enquiry office. It was still locked, but a man with a badge noticed me banging on it and materialised by my side.

"Can I help you sir?" he enquired snootily. I explained again what had happened. "Let's take a look in the baggage collection section, shall we?" he said.

We went through into the area where the luggage is unloaded on to the conveyor. My bags were lying forgotten in a corner. "There they are!" I cried and hurried to collect them.

"Oh THOSE bags," said the man. "I remember those. They came on the 1.30 flight and nobody claimed them, so

we left them here."

I pointed to the flight number on the baggage label. "That's not the flight number of the 1.30 plane is it?" I asked.

"Er, no. No it isn't."

"So my bags were loaded on the wrong plane, they travelled all the way here unaccompanied, thereby breaking every security regulation in the book?"

"Er, yes. If you want to put it like that."

"How do you know there wasn't a bomb in the bags?" I demanded. "How do you know that the passenger who checked them in wasn't a terrorist intent on mayhem? Do you realise that if you continue to ignore your own security regulations, sooner or later you will end up with a lot of dead people? Why do you make it so easy for the bad guys? Are you deliberately asking to have your planes bombed?"

"Oh, that kind of thing never happens in New Zealand." He looked smug, and terribly complacent.

I took my bags and left him to it. You can't talk to people who have nothing but empty space in their skull. Anyway, after that incident, nothing else could possibly go wrong...

A day and a half later I was back at the airport to catch a plane to Rotorua. I was booked on the 4.30pm flight. I generally arrive early for my flights so that I can indulge in enormous libertine excesses in the luxury lounge. I got to the airport at about 3.00pm. I looked at the departures board.

Yes, there it was. Rotorua; 4.30pm. As I watched, the board twitched, shuddered and refreshed itself. Now it said: Rotorua; 4.30pm. Cancelled.

Cancelled? I went to the check in desk.

"Engineering requirements, sir. The flight has been cancelled and you have been rebooked on the 6.30pm flight. Sorry for the inconvenience."

I have never heard a man sound less sorry. The luxury lounge with its free food, drink, sex, drugs and even rock

and roll couldn't quite make up for this. Fortunately I had lots of good books to read. I arrived very late in Rotorua, a raddled, dissipated shadow of my former self, decadent fluids dripping from every pore. The thermal areas steamed, the geysers geysed, the mud pools went *glup* in unison as they played complicated baroque music. Nothing worse could happen to me now...

I took a taxi to my hotel. We drove past the Rotorua golf course. Most golf courses have sandy bunkers. Not the Rotorua golf course. It has fenced off areas that bubble and steam. Golf balls that land in them simply melt. It adds a whole new meaning to the word hazard.

I was staying in a very luxurious hotel. Every room had a private spa. Such opulence! I could soak my weary body in hot perfumed foam. I could sip champagne and dream erotic dreams of well endowed dusky maidens shaking their charms to the rhythms of haunting music played in a minor key. Wow!

I turned on the tap. Freezing cold water gushed into the spa. It was so cold I could almost see ice cubes forming as it flowed. I waited but it didn't get any warmer. I went down to the reception desk.

"I think there's something wrong with the water supply to my room. There isn't any hot water in the spa."

"Ah yes," said the nice lady behind the desk. "That's right. It's the whole hotel actually. We haven't any hot water at all."

"The whole hotel?"

"Yes, that's right. There was a new geyser erupted in the park last week and it's taken all the heat from our bore. We've got someone working on it, but at the moment, the whole hotel is cold."

Glumly I retired to bed. The next morning I began the day with a cold shower and made my shivering way to work where I discovered that of the five people attending my course, three had just been made redundant and one was



expecting to be made redundant at any moment. An atmosphere of deep gloom prevailed and they didn't laugh at any of my jokes.

Fortunately when I got back to the hotel I found that the hot water was back on. I filled the spa and settled back to soak. Scarcely had I relaxed, however, when what seemed to be every mosquito in Rotorua flew through the open window and committed dramatic kamikaze suicide by diving into the spa pool with me. I peeled the thick crust of insects from the top of the water, spat out a few lumpy bits, and closed the window. But the mood was spoiled. Never mind. Nothing else could possibly go wrong...

On Friday afternoon, I got to Rotorua airport in plenty of time to catch the 5.25pm flight home to Auckland. I went up to the check in desk and made myself known.

"I'm sorry sir," said the lady. "We've had terrible weather conditions all day and the flight is delayed by three hours."

I must have looked as if I was going to cry because she leaned close and whispered "I'll tell you what. Leave it with me and I'll have words with the other airline and see if I can transfer you to their flight."

My heart leaped. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all. She duly had her word, and the lady at the rival airline check in counter consulted her computer. "There's one free seat," she announced.

The plane was tiny. A dozen passengers in all. The entire crew consisted of simply a pilot and copilot, both of whom looked barely old enough to be weaned. The in-flight catering was a ham sandwich in a red paper bag that was lying on the seat. A voice from the seat behind me said: "I recognise the toothmarks in this sandwich - it's the one I didn't eat on the flight up this morning."

I had a wonderful view of one of the engines through the cabin window. There was a rivet missing from the engine cowling and when the propeller wound its way up to full

speed the section with the missing rivet raised up slightly as if it was about to tear off.

We took off into thick cloud and driving rain. The wind threw the little plane violently all over the sky and the engine cowling flapped back and forth. The entire journey to Auckland was flown with zero visibility; we never left the cloud cover. Every so often the captain made an announcement over the PA system but I have no idea what he said because the volume was turned down so low that all I could hear was a faint "scritch, scritch" as he spoke.

Eventually we bounced down onto the tarmac at Auckland. I was home; it was over. Nothing else could go wrong now...

A day and a half later I arrived at Auckland airport to catch the 3.30pm flight to Wellington. I went straight to the counter to check in.

"I'm sorry sir, but the 3.30pm flight has been cancelled."

"Cancelled?"

"Yes, sir. Bad weather at Norfolk Island."

"Norfolk Island?" I was bewildered. "What's Norfolk Island got to do with it?"

"The plane flies from Norfolk Island to Wellington and then from Wellington to Auckland where it becomes the 3.30 flight back to Wellington. But it can't take off from Norfolk Island so the flight is cancelled. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Would you like me to re-book you on the 4.30 flight?"

"Yes please."

After that, nothing else could possibly go wr

# Roads

I have long been a fan of **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy** and therefore when I found out that Transit New Zealand were extending the Auckland motorway system across the bottom of my street, I double-checked the position of my towel and began to watch for yellow bulldozers.

There was a knock on my door.

"Hello," said one of the people standing there. "We are from Transit New Zealand and we need to purchase 5.18 metres of your front garden in order to widen the road."

"Just a minute," I said and fetched a tape measure.

"Are you aware," I pointed out, "that my entire front garden comprises only 5.2 metres of somewhat crabby grass? After you take your lump away, I'll be able to mow my lawn with nail clippers."

"Ah, yes," they said. "That is true. But think of the benefits! You will have an unparalleled opportunity to observe the world as it races past at 70 kph mere inches from your window. You will be able to see the New Zealand hoon in his natural state protected only by a thin sheet of glass."

"I feel that this is less than desirable," I said.

"How about we buy the whole house instead?" asked the other one.

"OK."

In order to agree on a fair purchase price for the house, I had to get a valuer's report. They too commissioned a valuer and the final price would be based on both reports. The valuers came and measured and inspected. They poked the walls, sucked their breath through clenched teeth, shook

their heads (each had two), made copious notes, and charged me \$300.

"Before I make my report," said one, "is there anything you want to tell me that I don't know about?" I was somewhat taken aback.

"What don't you know?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"Do you know anything about Java programming?"

"No."

"Java is a write once run anywhere programming language that compiles to p-codes rather than native object code," I began.

"I think I'd better be going now," he said. "I've got everything I need. I'll have the report ready in about a week."

Each valuer gave an estimate of a fair price for the house. Unfortunately the two estimates were \$20,000 apart. It must be easy to be a valuer. All you need is a built in random number generator.

Transit New Zealand put them together in a locked room and refused to let them out until they compromised. After several days of conflict, one raised his estimate by \$13,000 and one lowered his by \$7,000. The final result was in my favour, but it still wasn't as much as I would have liked. The alternative, however, was even worse. I accepted the offer.

I intend to move to Wellington where I will live in a quiet street in a quiet suburb a long way away from any hint of a motorway. Doubtless my house will then fall victim to a passing earthquake instead.

# Trash

Every week I bundle up my rubbish and place it carefully in a big green plastic wheelie bin. The bin is positioned precisely on a special spot on the pavement and in the small hours of the next morning I am awoken from blissful slumber as a roaring behemoth of the night picks up the bin and empties the contents into its grinding maw. This is the way the world has always been, but it is not the way the world will be in the future.

Everyone in Auckland is talking about rubbish. Commuters from Waiheke Island have come out from behind their morning papers to discuss it on the ferry. Buses full of complete strangers hum with conversation as the merits of recycling are debated.

All over the city, residents are waking to find that a new wheelie bin has entered their lives. This one is smaller than that previously used, and it has a pretty red lid. The council, in their wisdom, have decided that the older, larger bins are aesthetically unpleasing (for they are green all over) and, more importantly, they are far too big thereby encouraging people to produce too much waste. Auckland, they claim, is drowning in rubbish. The new, sleek, slimline, half-size bins with the pretty red lids will address this problem directly by forcing people cut down on their rubbish production.

No more the secret midnight thrill of heaving your extra trash into somebody else's wheelie bin. Now theirs too will be crammed full of their own junk. Recycle it, compost it, is the encouraging cry. This is all well and good, but much of the rubbish I generate is neither biodegradable nor recyclable for it is the wrong grade of plastic and won't be collected. Bugger.

All Auckland houses can now use up to three recycling bins. Previously only one was allowed. These cute blue bins are enormously popular. People use them to equip the family picnic in the park. Fishermen find them wonderful, for they have a hole in the bottom making it particularly easy to drain their daily catch. Sometimes people use them for holding goods to be recycled. How unimaginative.

It is instructive to wander the street and make deductions about the lifestyles of the inhabitants from the contents of the recycling bins and the cardboard boxes and papers that are dumped beside the bins for the Paper Tiger to collect. This household lives on pizza and coke, that one on beer. This house has cats, that one dogs, the other one small children. These people have just bought an expensive sound system, those have taken delivery of a computer. Burglars walk the streets taking notes and have been seen, on occasion, to run away with wheelie bins and paper piles in order to go through them at their leisure hunting for credit card numbers and bank account details. People are often very careless with their discards. It may be rubbish to you, but it is treasure to someone else.

One new red-topped wheelie bin is allowed per title holder. At first glance it sounds quite sensible, but it does lead to some anomalies. A very large, luxurious multi-bedroomed hotel in the city is owned by a single person. This enormous building must therefore now dispose of the rubbish generated by its staff and its hundreds of guests in a single 120-litre wheelie bin. Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a much smaller, much less luxurious hotel has, through some curious quirk of corporate ownership, 389 names on its title deed. Its manager is now faced with the problem of finding storage space for the 389 wheelie bins that were delivered last week. Perhaps he needs another, larger bin in which he can toss the surplus red-topped bins – a meta-rubbish bin as it were.

Court cases are pending against Auckland City Council because of the new, small wheelie bin policy. A lady from Epsom believes that the introduction of the bins is a breach of the Human Rights Act and she has lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. "It struck me as so unfair," she is quoted as saying. "There are six units next door and each will have the same size bin as we have for a family of five!" She claims that the uniform reduction in bin size across the board will put unfair pressure on larger households. A council spokesman does not agree with her.

"We have 'waste doctors' who will be able to assist those who have any difficulty."

Waste doctors?

"Put two aspirin in the rubbish bin twice a day for a week. If it doesn't get better come back and see me again and we'll arrange for a trasectomy operation."

It has been suggested that the rubbish collection vehicles be fitted with video cameras. Each bin will be videotaped as it is emptied. Anyone found disposing of inappropriate rubbish will be visited at dead of night by the rubbish police. The waste doctors will prepare psychiatric reports and the rubbish criminals will have to attend waste management workshops. Repeat offences will carry a mandatory sentence of biodegradation.

Each bin is delivered with a leaflet sellotaped to it which says in big, bold, friendly letters that the new bin cannot be used until the week beginning July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Despite this, for the three weeks prior to July 2<sup>nd</sup>, red lidded wheelie bins full of rubbish have lined the streets. When the rubbish was not collected, aggrieved residents inundated the Council with complaints. A man on the radio said through gritted teeth:

"We are very pleased that people are embracing the new collection system so enthusiastically, but we would encourage them to restrain their enthusiasm until after July 2<sup>nd</sup>."

He didn't say that the rubbish police had been informed, but the implication was clear.

The delivery of the bins to each city household has not been without its problems. A monster road train (multiply articulated vehicle) shuffles and roars down the street. Every so often, men hop off and wheel the bins to the front of each house. This is generally the most exciting (and noisiest) thing that happens on the street all day. Those who are at home to witness it usually pop out and join in the fun. Impromptu street parties eventuate. Cups of tea and gossip are swapped.

One such party was astonished to observe one of the bin delivery men steal a pedigree dog from the house to which he was delivering his bin. The dog, not unnaturally, objected to being stolen and added his voice to the general din. The street party, and the bin man's colleagues, were collectively gobsmacked.

The man himself was quite astonished when a police car turned up. Who could have seen him? How had they found out?

"Just taking it for a walk, Officer."

He must have left his gorm at home that morning...



# Milo and the Lump

For the last six months, Milo the Cat has had a lump in his side about the size and shape of an acorn. When it first appeared I took him to the vet.

"It's a lump," diagnosed the vet proudly.

"What kind of a lump?" I asked.

He stuck a hypodermic syringe into it and pulled the plunger. Nothing happened. "Well," he said, "it isn't an abscess. If it was an abscess it would have been full of lovely custardy pus. But there's no pus. It isn't an abscess."

He poked it with his finger. "It might be an acorn," he said doubtfully, "though I've never heard of it happening before."

"So what can we do about it?" I asked.

"Keep an eye on it," he said. "It doesn't seem to be bothering him at the moment. If it changes size, or begins to distress him, or starts to grow into an oak tree, bring him back and we'll operate."

The lump stayed static for a while. It didn't seem to be affecting Milo at all. He didn't mind if you stroked it and poked it, but he got a bit upset if you squeezed it. Mind you, he gets a bit upset if you squeeze any part of him, not just his lump. Most people do. He was a little lop-sided to the touch, but nothing too drastic and he continued to Hoover up his food like there was no tomorrow. All seemed well in his world, so I stopped worrying.

After a time, the lump grew slightly larger and he was, perhaps, slightly more sensitive about it. Whether this was vanity or whether it was actually painful was a little hard to tell.

And then one day, quite suddenly, everything changed.

I picked Milo up and turned him upside down (so that the dribble went back inside him instead of all over me) and I

tickled his tummy as is my wont. He purred and wriggled with pleasure, as is his. My fingers passed lightly over the lump and it felt different, quite rough (it had been smooth before) and even though I touched it very lightly, he made his displeasure known. Milo is the most placid of cats. He never gets upset about anything and so I knew that there was something seriously wrong. I looked closely at the lump. It was scabby, as if it had been bleeding recently and there was an ugly looking dark slit in it that seemed to vanish into the depths of his body.

I put him down on the floor and he began to lick the lump and then to chew at it. Blood began flow and it dripped on to the floor and also into Milo's mouth as he desperately massaged his lump.

He paused and sat there for a moment with a thoughtful look on his face. He licked his lips and pondered the taste. Hmm. Nice! He went back for seconds. And then for dessert. It became obvious that much of the blood in his body was going to end up on the floor or in his tummy. Despite the fact that it was quite late, I rang the vet.

Fortunately there was still someone at the surgery. I explained the situation.

"Bring him round here straight away!"

No sooner said than done. I got the cage out and Milo went and hid under a chair. I moved the chair, picked Milo up and dropped him into the cage. Ginger looked on in horror! What was I doing with her brother? Then she ran outside in case I did the same thing to her. I put the cage in the car and drove off to the vet. Ginger peeked out from under the house and watched me go.

The trauma of being incarcerated was too much for Milo. He cried pathetically all the way to the vet (as is also his wont) and completely forgot to take reviving sips from the wound in his side.

Milo and I arrived at the vets to find him in the middle of a computer crisis. His system had crashed earlier that day

and he was currently unable to issue invoices or receipts or to record the treatments he had given that day. He was surrounded with scraps of paper covered with indecipherable notes all of which would have to be transcribed once he managed to fix the computer. A badly bleeding cat was a welcome relief.

"Hmmm. Quite a lump. Definitely not an acorn. I was wrong about that. Not surprising really. It looks like a cyst and it's breaking through the skin and bleeding round the edges. I'll give him a painkiller and an antibiotic and I'll operate on Monday. You can pick him up on Monday evening."

"OK".

"Just as well, really," mused the vet. "I can't give you a bill at the moment. Much better to keep him here until Monday when I will be able to give you a bill."

He picked Milo up and plonked him in a cage. Milo stared in horror. What was happening? As I left the room without him he wailed piteously. I felt terrible.

When I got home, Ginger was very suspicious indeed. Where was her brother? She stalked around looking for him and seemed a little upset not to find him. However it soon became clear that there were distinct advantages to not having him around. Like most cats, Ginger prefers to take her meals in small doses. She is a snacker, returning again and again to her bowl during the day and taking dainty mouthfuls. This simply cannot be done when Milo is there because he immediately sucks up every scrap of food in sight (Ginger's food as well as his own) and then asks for more. For the next few days Ginger was in cat heaven. She could snack properly for the first time in her life. She made the most of it, eating her meals in small, ladylike portions at genteelly spaced intervals throughout most of the day. She began to express her approval. Why hadn't I got rid of Milo years ago?

As I drove to the vet on Monday evening I felt quite apprehensive. Milo is nearly fifteen years old and the operation was not a minor one. Would he survive it? Also I was worried about the lump. What would the vet find when he opened Milo up?

I smiled at the nurse. "I've come for Milo."

"Ah yes - I'll just go and fetch him." An enormous feeling of relief washed over me. Obviously it had all been routine.

"He's been talking to me all day," said the nurse. "He came out of the anaesthetic really fast, and every time I walk past his cage he calls to me and we have a long conversation."

She brought Milo out and he chirruped hello, obviously pleased to see me. There was a huge naked patch on his side where he had been shaved for the operation and an enormous wound with eight crude stitches in it.

"It was quite a straightforward operation," said the nurse, "and the lump wasn't malignant. We didn't even bother to send it to the lab."

"How do I look after him for the next few days?" I asked.

"These are antibiotics," she said, giving me some hideous blue pills. "Half a tablet twice a day for the next five days. Don't let him chew at the wound. Don't give him much to eat tonight, he might vomit after the anaesthetic. Bring him back in a fortnight to have the stitches taken off. That will be \$177."

Milo howled all the way home. He really doesn't like car journeys and he makes sure that I know about it. I spoke soothingly to him and, when traffic lights permitted, I stroked the pathetic paw that he stretched through the bars of the travelling cage, but it made no difference. He was miserable, and he wanted the world to know. I got home and I lifted him gently out of his cage.

Ginger went straight to his wound and sniffed it. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. She didn't approve, and she departed in high dudgeon. There was some food left in

Ginger's bowl; she was saving it for later. Milo inhaled the food in nothing flat.

"Where's the rest of it then?" Milo's expression was eloquent. But I was hard-hearted and didn't put any more food out. He sniffed around the bowl for a while and then curled up and went philosophically to sleep. Ginger returned and went for a snack. There was nothing left.

"What did you want to bring him back home for?" she said, and went outside to find a rat to eat.

# Alan Buys a New Toy

Buying a new computer is turning into an almost annual event in the Robson home. I now own five times as many computers as there are people living in the house (I calculated that statistic on one of the more powerful of the computers). Even the cats have two each, and only last week Milo passed his final exam for his MCSE certification. Ginger hasn't passed any exams yet; she keeps eating the mice.

It's scary how much computing power is just floating around the average home these days. Perhaps soon all the common household objects that we take for granted will be more powerful than my (rather ancient) laptop. Even now they give it a good run for its money. My current washing machine can run rings around the 286 desktop I have sitting in the corner of the room. I use the tumble dryer for solving partial differential equations and the fridge for calculating orbital trajectories. I think the fridge is getting bored with having so little to do - it keeps sending me emails complaining that it hasn't got enough beer, the yoghurt is mouldy and the cleaning woman's been at the gin again.

I'm seriously thinking of upgrading the old laptop to a digital camera. Don't laugh - the new generation of digital cameras really do have more memory, more storage space and a faster processor than the laptop I bought only five years ago. Scary thought!

But none of the computers in the house have enough grunt to allow me to play the new game I just bought (even the washing machine isn't quite powerful enough for that) - hence the decision to let another box into my life.

I went to see Helen, who works at PC Town in Mount Albert, and who knows about these things.

"Sell me a new computer," I hinted.

A gleam of techno-lust entered her eye. There is nothing she likes doing more than building a computer to some outrageous specification and then selling it to somebody.

"How much memory do you want?"

"Errr, ummm 128Mb will probably do," I guessed wildly, doubling the amount in the computer I bought last time.

"RAM is really cheap," she said. "How about 256Mb?"

"OK"

"It's really, really, really cheap," she said. "How about 512Mb? Go on - you know you want to. How fast do you want it? Gigahertz processors are very cheap just at present."

"Er, righto."

"Do you want a CD writer? They're a bargain price at the moment."

"Do I?"

"Yes," she decided. "AMD or Intel CPU?"

I shrugged helplessly and Helen launched into long comparison of the two which left me none the wiser. "You want an AMD," she explained. "They're much better. And cheaper."

"I agree," I agreed.

"The standard disk is 30Gb - but you can upgrade to 40Gb for only another \$40. "

I was punch drunk, and simmering with the beginnings of a technological orgasm. "Gimme the disk," I whispered.

"Three-D video," I murmured. "Network card," I groaned.

"Modem," I shrieked as the climax hit.

"Really cheap at the moment," Helen said, making notes. She added up all the bits and pieces and quoted a price so reasonable that I almost bought two of everything. But I restrained myself.

"Yes, yes! Oh, yes!"

"Pick it up tomorrow evening," said Helen.

The next evening, on my way home from work, I went round to PC Town. The computer was waiting for me, neatly wrapped up. I took it home, plugged it in and stayed up until the wee small hours.

It had a spiffy blue front (though the rest of the case was the usual boring beige) and it came equipped with far too much memory, far too much disk, a frighteningly fast processor and lots of ancillary gadgets. It was wonderful.

Shortly after midnight, I discovered that when I put a music CD in the drive absolutely no sound emerged from either the speakers or the sub-woofer. (I am unclear as to exactly what function a sub-woofer performs, but Helen assured me that I needed one). Also, around 2.45am I realised that I was toasty warm instead of shivering in the early morning chill. That was when I discovered that the computer appeared to be pumping out rather a lot of therms.

I gave Helen adequate time to wake up, breakfast herself and get to work. Then I rang her. First I explained about the lack of music from the speakers, not to mention the sub-woofer.

"Ah," she said as light dawned. They must have forgotten the sound cable from the CD drive. Bring it down to the shop. I'll put one in."

Then I mentioned the heat.

"OK - I'll check that out as well."

When I arrived at the shop, she stripped the machine, put in the missing cable, attached an extra fan and reassembled it. She gave me lots of detailed information about temperature thresholds and urged me to make sure that the machine was adequately ventilated.

"The temperature will go up a bit when you play the 3D games," she said. That sounded reasonable.

I was home within the hour. The extra fan kicked in and I listened to beautiful music at normal temperature and



played my games. Occasionally, as the mood took me, I barked at the sub-woofer, but it never barked back.

Over the next few days, Helen researched the heat problem for me and also investigated a small voltage abnormality which the diagnostic software reported. She even took the trouble to return the machine to the suppliers of the motherboard where they tested out the bits and pieces and pronounced them all to be within acceptable tolerance levels. Having gathered the evidence, she rang me and reassured me that all was well - as indeed it has subsequently proved to be. Now that's what I call service above and beyond the norm.

This infomercial was brought to you by the letters P and C and the keyword Town. You should use them lots.

# Don't Bank On It

I have sold my house and I am therefore temporarily rich. One of the big advantages of not owning a house is that you do not have to pay rates on it. Up to now, I've been paying the rates by direct debit - it seemed the easiest thing to do. Auckland City Council simply took whatever they needed, whenever they needed it without bothering me, and everyone was happy. However since I am of a suspicious nature, I decided to cancel Auckland City Council's direct debit authority once the house was sold, so that even if they wanted to, they would no longer be able to collect money from me. I preferred to do it that way - I didn't fancy having them take money they were not entitled to (by mistake of course) because then I'd have to spend ages arguing with them about getting it back. Given how slowly the wheels of bureaucracy grind, that could take forever and would probably require an infinite number of forms to be filled in. So I decided that I would simply not allow transactions like this to happen in the first place.

Making that decision was my first mistake.

I wrote a letter to the Bank of New Zealand. That was my second mistake.

"Please cancel the direct debit authority for Auckland City Council," said the letter.

I received no acknowledgement (nobody ever replies to letters), so I sent them a secure email via their internet banking site. This time I got a reply confirming that the authority had been cancelled.

And so it was done.

About ten days later I received an irate letter from Sky Television. They had gone to my bank to collect their payment, as they have been doing every month for a

decade or so, only to be told that their charges were refused. The bank could not pay them.

Well these things happen. There are always hiccups. I wrote a cheque for the outstanding amount and thought no more about it.

Two weeks after that my payment to my ISP was refused, closely followed by payments to my insurance company and the power company. I began to panic - what was going on? I contacted the Bank of New Zealand again.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

"Hello. I am a robot telephone answering machine, specially designed by the Bank of New Zealand to frustrate you. Please select a random number from the following list of extraordinarily vague choices..."

After choosing the appropriate options from the voice mail messages (and a few inappropriate ones as well), I was placed on hold and remarkably unsoothing muzak was played into my earhole. Every so often the robot came back on the line and informed me how important my call was. As a result of all this, by the time a human being arrived on the scene my already seething temper had become positively volcanic.

"Several direct debit payments have been refused recently. Can you please check up on this and tell me why?"

"Of course sir - just a moment."

Clatter, clatter, clatter, click, click as keyboards were keyed and mice were moused.

"You haven't got any direct debit authorities sir."

"What! That's ridiculous. What about all these companies that are trying to get their money through direct debits? What's happened to them all?"

"There are no direct debit authorities on your accounts sir. Probably the application forms haven't been processed yet. You do realise that you often have to wait a few days before the direct debits are activated after the forms have been filled in?"

"No - these aren't new ones," I explained. "They've been in place for quite some time."

"No, that's not right," said the Bank of New Zealand person. "There aren't any direct debit authorities on your account, so they must still be working their way through the system."

"Don't be silly," I said. "I've been paying my insurance premiums by direct debit for twenty years. Look at my transactions for the last couple of months - you'll see heaps of direct debits."

Clatter, clatter, clatter, click, click.

"Oh yes, there they are. Obviously you must have cancelled them."

Light began to dawn.

"No," I said. "I issued instructions for one direct debit authority to be cancelled. I think you must have cancelled all of them by mistake."

"Oh no sir, that can't possibly happen. You must have asked us to cancel them. There are no direct debit authorities on your account so you must have cancelled them all."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I've got the letter here." I read it to him.

"I'll look into it sir, and ring you back."

Click. Huuummm.

I hung up the phone and waited.

Much to my surprise, the Bank of New Zealand person did eventually ring back. I was impressed; this is rare in my experience.

"The direct debits were all cancelled on the 17<sup>th</sup>," he said, "which was the day after the date on your letter. So it does look as though something has gone wrong with the system and they accidentally cancelled all of them instead of just the one you requested."

"Can you reinstate them, please?"

"No, the banking rules won't let me do that. You have to go back to all the organisations that need a direct debit authority. You ask them for a direct debit form and when you get it you fill it in and send it back to them so that they can lodge it with us."

"So you stuffed up, but I have to do all the work to fix your mistakes?"

"Well," he said, sounding a little embarrassed, "yes - if you put it like that."

"Names," I said grimly. "Give me names and phone numbers and email addresses for the people involved in all this. Give me the names of their managers and the names of **their managers.**"

He was reluctant - but I got my list. I was given the name and email address of my personal banker and the name and email address of the Area Customer Services Manager. Up to that point, I hadn't known that I had a personal banker - it had never occurred to the Bank of New Zealand that I might find this information interesting and useful, so they had never got round to telling me about it.

I sent details of my case to the Area Customer Services Manager. The email practically melted the screen as I read it back. I felt it was satisfactory and I pressed the **Send** button.

Over the course of the next few days I received grovelling telephone calls and emails apologising for the error, but no practical help at all. I still had to do the rounds of the people I owed money to and try to sort out the mess myself. Also the chickens were coming home to roost now, and I was being charged late payment fees - so I was doubly out of pocket through no fault of my own. Grimly I reported this to the Area Customer Services Manager of the Bank of New Zealand and demanded action.

I received a letter from the Area Customer Services Manager. It apologised profusely for the financial embarrassment I was going through. All procedures had

been tightened to ensure that this kind of thing could never happen again. All the staff involved were being given counselling (counselling!! Dear God, what is the world coming to?). I didn't believe a word of it - I'm sure that they did absolutely nothing; they just said they'd done it in order to make me feel good.

The letter went on to say that in view of the fact that the error was clearly the bank's, they had decided to waive my bank fees for the month and to pay me 50% of the value of the cancelled direct debit payments as compensation for their blunder. Also included with the letter were letters to all the companies involved explaining that the error had been made by the bank and asking that any late payment fees be billed to the bank rather than to me. I was requested to forward these letters to the relevant companies should it prove necessary. There were no stamps included with the letters. Postage charges were obviously my responsibility.

It is now just over a month since the direct debit fiasco happened and I think I've finally got all the authorities reinstated (these things take a frustratingly long time). Needless to say, the new authorities are not with the Bank of New Zealand. I don't trust the Bank of New Zealand to get anything right and I am now in the process of transferring my financial affairs to a different bank, one that will hopefully prove to be a little more trustworthy.

I no longer find it surprising that the Bank of New Zealand teetered on the verge of bankruptcy a few years ago. I always wondered how a bank managed to lose money. Now I know. They only employ incompetents.

# Alan Buys A House

When buying a house, it is necessary to make contact with those who are willing to sell. This generally involves talking to a real estate agent.

That's a problem in itself. Why are these people called real estate agents? Are there perhaps some artificial ones somewhere? Or (more likely, I feel) could there be those who only sell artificial estate as opposed to the ones who restrict themselves just to the real kind?

Of course, rather than being real, they might be imaginary instead. Imaginary estate agents always call themselves i (as in "Hello, i'm AI"). If a male and female imaginary estate agent get together (and the i's square up) the result is a completely negative estate agent - sometimes known colloquially as a rastafarian because of their habit of referring to themselves as i and i. Should you attempt to place your property on the market with a negative estate agent, they will shake their heads sadly and say:

"Not much call for this kind of dwelling nowadays, squire." Or maybe:

"That's a nasty bit of woodworm over there. Don't go a bomb on the death watch beetle ticking in the corner either." Or perhaps:

"When did you last paint this tip then?" And of course the coup de grace:

"You don't seriously expect to sell it for such a grossly inflated price do you?"

If a negative estate agent encounters a real (or positive) estate agent they will annihilate each other with a great flash of light. This is extraordinarily dangerous to all the cats in the area, for besides giving off large quantities of

photons, this reaction also emits the deadly mew neutrinos...

Feeling decidedly puzzled and more than a little light headed after all these esoteric speculations, I contacted all the real estate agents in Wellington (the artificial and imaginary ones had no listing in the phone book). I met some interesting people, all of them definitely real.

One had been born about twenty miles away from my own birthplace in Yorkshire. He still had a broad North of England twang to his voice, and within ten minutes of meeting him, my own accent was back in all its glory. As we drove around looking at houses we "eeh-ba-gum-trubble-at-mill"-ed to each other, swapped nostalgic stories about the old home county, and congratulated ourselves on how carefully (and properly) we both pronounced the integer that lies between zero and two.

Another agent was a lady with a soft, liquid voice that sent goose bumps running up and down my spine.

"You have a most wonderful voice," I said.

"Thank you," she said, quite sincerely. And then, with a perfectly straight face, she continued, "When I was making a career decision, I was torn between real estate and working on a telephone sex line."

"You made the wrong decision," I said firmly, and we were fast friends.

I explained my requirements to each and every estate agent.

"I want a five bedroom house in the Northern suburbs. I don't want to do any building or renovation and I don't want to spend more than about \$200,000."

One and all they sucked air through their teeth, shook their heads sadly and, being negative estate agents, said: "No squire, can't do you anything like that. Nothing like that on the books. Bad time of year, you see. Properties just aren't moving at the moment. Nothing available. Oh dear me, no."



I pointed out some adverts I had culled from the weekly property magazine. All of them met my exact specifications.

"What about these?"

"Oh, yes - they might do at a pinch. I'd forgotten about those..."

That was when I began to learn the realities of the language called real-estate-agentese. For it turned out that the agents had been far more honest in their conversation with me than they had been in their adverts; there really was virtually nothing along the lines I was looking for. All the glowing descriptions in the adverts were perfectly true as far as they went; but they didn't mention the off putting aspects. And who can blame them really?

The quiet cul-de-sac had a motorway at the bottom of the hill and you could sit in the lounge and be soothed by the rhythmic rumble rising upwards twenty-four hours a day (extra on Saturdays).

The all day sun did indeed get the sun all day long. This was because the house was right on the top of the tallest mountain in the area. Nothing obscured the sun. And the wind from the Antarctic didn't have anything in its way either - except the house, of course.

"This is a nice house," said the agent. And it was. Almost perfect, in fact.

"Doesn't the fault line go through somewhere round about here?" I asked.

"Ah, yes," said the agent. He cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Actually it does. I think the fault line goes right through the middle of the lounge. That's why the house is such a bargain at the price."

Every night for three interminable weeks I was escorted around drearily unsuitable properties. Dank, damp, dingy, dismal houses appeared to be excessively common in the Northern suburbs. And only a generous soul would have described them as spacious. The ceilings were so low that they brushed against the top of my head, and the five

bedroom count had been obtained by dividing a series of very tiny bedrooms into even tinier ones. There was absolutely no possibility of me being able to indulge in my favourite pastime of cat swinging.

Sad wood-burning heaters sagged miserably against dirty walls.

"I think the certificate has expired," said the agent cheerfully. "But that doesn't really matter."

I was shown kitchens covered in fat. Cockroaches scuttled madly in slow motion as they struggled to get traction or sank out of sight into the grease traps where presumably they drowned.

Threadbare lounge carpets exuded urinary odours and thirty year old wallpaper clung desperately to the walls, peeling gently in the corners of the room where nobody would notice except me.

I was shown house after unsuitable house by one particular agent who justified himself by pointing out all the little jobs that needed doing to bring the premises up to scratch. Putting in a staircase, knocking down a wall, extending the lounge. Very cheap, very quick, very easy.

"All I need is a room to store 6,000 books," I said, "and another one to put 10 computers in. These houses are too small."

One and all, the estate agents looked at me as if I was a raving eccentric. "Are you sure you don't want to buy commercial premises? Is it really a house you are after?"

There was nothing for it. I'd have to visit the open homes...

"Please take your shoes off. An Asian family lives here and they don't allow shoes in the house."

I took my shoes off but I really don't know why it was required for the house was so filthy that, had I worn them, I think my shoes would have been dirtier when I left than when I arrived. A grotesquely stained toilet bowl lurked in the bathroom beside the mouldy shower stall. Nameless

blemishes disfigured the carpet. Each room had a gigantic hole in the wall in which lived an ancient, crumbling night storage heater. Someone had recently painted the window frames (perhaps to disguise the rotten wood). They were no great shakes with a paintbrush, and seem never to have heard of masking tape for half the glass was also covered in smeary white paint.

Another house perched on a sheer hillside and was only reached by climbing up a never ending staircase. Once the prospective visitors had recovered their breath, special treats were in store. There were indeed five bedrooms, just as I had requested. None of the rooms had wallpaper - the plaster on the walls was in very good condition and the rooms had been decorated by simply painting the plaster. One room was bright green. The next was bright orange. Then there was the bright blue room and the bright yellow room, and I won't even mention the vivid fire-engine red room. I began to wish I'd remembered to pack my sunglasses.

Only the rear wall of the house stood solidly on the earth. The rest of it stuck insouciantly out into thin air supported only by massive piles driven deep into the bedrock. There was lots and lots of nothing underneath each and every room. I could easily imagine the weight of my library collapsing the floorboards, scattering books the length and breadth of the mountain for the edification of the possums. No - bright and cheerful though it was, this place would never do.

A poky looking little house turned out to be almost ideal. Rather like Dr. Who's Tardis it was significantly larger inside than it was outside. The rooms appeared to go on forever and there were lots of them. I was seriously tempted by this house, but it had three enormous drawbacks. It was a semi-detached house and I didn't like the idea of sharing a wall with my neighbours. What if they were too noisy for me? What if I was too noisy for them? Another problem was the

tiny little garden with no privacy whatsoever – every square inch was overlooked by another house. No nude sunbathing in this garden! The third problem was a very smarmy estate agent who was just too greasy to bear. I made my excuses and left.

The next house sat glumly in its grounds, in a small depression surrounded by a wall that appeared to be there solely and simply to hold a minor mountain in check and prevent it from following its natural inclination to fall over and flatten everything in its path – including, of course, the house I was looking at. It was an OK house, nothing exciting. The size was adequate, the state of the rooms was liveable with. However the wall that ran around the garden had a huge crack running top to bottom. It bulged under the weight of an enormous mass of soil and rock that pressed eagerly up against the other side. "Oh that's nothing", said the agent. "Perfectly safe and secure." He thumped it hard and I'll swear it shivered and shook.

The house that I finally bought was the last on the list. I was fed up by now and almost didn't bother with it. But my friends who were driving me around insisted and so we went for a look...

I got a shock as soon as I saw it. It was immaculate – white and shining in the sun. A brick barbecue stood in the front garden and a well loved vegetable garden sat smugly just outside the fence. The vegetables marched in mathematically perfect rows and the soil was freshly raked and hoed.

Inside the house were a myriad spacious, sparkling rooms nicely decorated and all as clean as an operating theatre. The architecture was somewhat eccentric. The place appeared to have been owned by a person whose hobby was building extensions. Every time he stumbled into a wall, he knocked it down and built a room. It seemed to go on forever. The kitchen was pathetic – it only had one power

point and no working surfaces at all (obviously nobody in the house cooked) – but that could be fixed.

There was a bus stop just outside the fence and a Brethren Church right next door. Transport all laid on and quiet neighbours to boot. Perfect!

I made an offer. One of the Brethren made an identical offer. Bugger!

I increased my offer. So did they, but my final offer was \$1000 more than theirs. I won!! God was obviously on my side that day.

My offer was dependant on a builder's report. So the next order of business was to arrange for this to be done. I have a friend who has a friend who is a qualified architect and a building inspector.

"He did the report on our house," said Laurie, "and did a superb job. He lives just up the road. Let's go and see him."

We walked up the road a bit. "It's just down these steps," said Laurie. "He designed the whole house himself. That's why we didn't ask him to design our new kitchen. But he does good building reports."

A deal was struck and two days later the building report arrived. The architect did a thorough job (and he even included a photograph with the report because he has just bought a new digital camera and he likes to play with it). The report found nothing wrong (just a few niggles such as only one power point in the kitchen). I ticked the box and the offer went unconditional.

So I've got a house. I'll be spending Christmas in Wellington.

### **Acknowledgements:**

My mate Ian pointed out the possibility of imaginary estate agents and some of the possible consequences of their (non-) existence. He's also toying with the idea of quantum reversibility in realtor land: an estate agent is its

own anti-estate-agent. That would explain why every house they take on is a dog, whereas every house they sell is a palace. But estate agents have no brains.

# Greatness

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them. I missed out on all three opportunities, damnit. But on at least two occasions I came ever so close...

Algebra was a great revelation to me. Arithmetic had always seemed so limiting in that it solved only specific problems. I didn't want specificity (I realise now) I wanted generality.

I vaguely knew that when I left my village primary school and went to the big school I'd be learning about more complex things. But I couldn't imagine how "sums" could ever be significantly different from what we were doing. The best I could come up with was that we'd be using larger and larger numbers, a prospect that failed to thrill me. I had trouble with my 9 times table. I wasn't looking forward to struggling with my 999 times table or greater. But my speculations all proved to be a failure of the imagination.

The magic age of eleven came and went and there I was at the big school and my timetable had weird words in it that I'd never come across before. Chemistry, biology and physics (I'd only heard of "science" before; I didn't realise it divided up). Latin, French and German. They were languages; I was happy with that concept. Arithmetic, geometry and algebra. Gosh. Sums really were different!

Arithmetic remained as specific and as boring as it had ever been though we learned some new ideas. Roots and powers were thrilling for a moment but the magic quickly died in the tedium of (pre-calculator) calculation. Geometry was difficult for though it was undoubtedly elegant it also seemed somewhat arbitrary (it would be many, many years

before I found out just how insightful and profound that vague feeling really was).

But algebra was the queen of studies. It was a breath of fresh air and revelation upon magical revelation poured into my awakening mind. It was arithmetic without numbers, it solved the general case. It was everything I'd been looking for all my intellectual life. The drudgery of calculation vanished and there was only the pure, white light of the **idea**.

Little did I know what pitfalls awaited me. Little did I know how much remained to be learned. About ten years later the intellectual shutters came down with a mighty crash and I ran headlong into them and severely injured both my pride and my nose for knowledge. Tensors were my stumbling block. To this day I don't understand them. But at age twelve, that was a long way in my future. I was in love with algebra.

I tried to explain it all to my grandmother; a long-suffering lady who put up with an awful lot from her only grandchild. She was completely bewildered (they hadn't had algebra when she was a girl, she explained to me. It hadn't been invented yet. You didn't need algebra to sneak up on a dinosaur). She listened patiently as I raved on about quadratic equations. I wrote one down with arbitrary coefficients and then explained to her how to solve it. I went through all the steps and much to my surprise I got completely stuck. The results I was deriving made no sense to me.

And that was the first time I hovered on the brink of greatness, but I turned away from it and the opportunity vanished like smoke in the wind.

There were two very big and very important ideas buried in my failure to solve the equation I'd written down. The first was that there existed a class of problem that the techniques I was learning couldn't cope with. The second, and much more important, was that there existed a class of



numbers of which I was previously unaware. I couldn't solve my equation because solving it involved deriving the square root of a negative number. Negative numbers didn't bother me, but the roots of negative numbers did.

In order to solve my problem, it was necessary for me to deduce the rules of complex numbers. The equation **was solvable in those terms. But rather than attempting to explore the territory opening up beneath my feet, I simply assumed I'd made a mistake somewhere and took it no further. The door to greatness slammed shut.**

My grandmother was very understanding and distracted my disappointment with a treat of some kind.

There was nothing new in the idea of complex numbers of course. Mathematicians had known of them for centuries and the field had been thoroughly explored. But that's not the point. The point is that I'd never heard of them. If I could have deduced their existence and their properties for myself (repeating, albeit unknowingly, the work of the great mathematicians of the past) then I truly would have exhibited genius. I came so close.

Twenty years after I had shown off my inability to solve quadratic equations to my grandmother, the opportunity for greatness knocked again. This time I was working with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Our task was to build a database of environmentally significant chemicals. (As an aside, a few years after all this, a dioxin manufacturing plant at Seveso in Italy exploded and caused enormous environmental damage. Information from the UNEP database helped enormously with the clean up effort. I remain quite proud of my association with UNEP).

In order to build the database, we accepted input from all the member states, encouraging them to ransack their archives for potentially useful data. Soon the information was flowing in from a wide variety of sources. This was in the very early days of computers (they were still rare and

expensive beasts that occupied large air conditioned rooms) and not all the data we received was in computer readable form. Transcribing the "manual" data was relatively straightforward (though it remained a semi-skilled and labour-intensive intellectual exercise). However the thing that really caused us problems was the computer readable data we received for it arrived in a wide variety of (often mutually incompatible) formats. Reconciling all this and getting it into a shape that made it adequate for OUR database format (obviously greatly superior to theirs) was an enormously complex and difficult task.

I suspect that our efforts represented one of the very first large scale exercises in processing enormous quantities of incompatible data from multiple heterogeneous sources. Certainly there were no generally accepted solutions to this problem and we were forced to invent our own. We succeeded - and I wrote a paper about the solution, for it seemed to me that others might have similar problems and maybe a similar solution might help. The paper was published in a computer research journal of enormous obscurity and as far as I know, nobody read it (it's the only paper I published for which I received no requests for reprints).

Today, with the proliferation of computers and the ever-increasing necessity for those computers to exchange and share data with one another, the problem has reappeared and all the difficulties that we had to address back in the 1970s have again come to the fore. Two or three years ago, a general solution was found, a solution that can easily be applied to any and every such problem of data exchange (and a lot of other related problems as well). This solution is called XML.

Don't worry if you haven't heard about it (though I promise you, if you are involved in the computer field, XML is in your future). The point is that XML is a beautifully

elegant and, as is so often the case with breakthrough ideas, beautifully simple solution to the problem.

And I didn't invent it.

You may have noticed that I haven't given you a reference to the paper I wrote about my problems with the UNEP database. There's a reason for that. Reading it today is an embarrassing exercise (for me at least). Time and again I can see my younger self flirting with the ideas that eventually formed the backbone of XML and completely failing to spot their significance. It was a failure of imagination exactly akin to the one I exhibited with my quadratic equation only this time there really was a genuinely original idea waiting to be discovered. And I had absolutely no idea at all that it was there.

I wonder if there's anything else I've missed in the intervening years?

# Don't Dilly Dally On The Way

The cats were a little astonished to get an extra specially nice breakfast that morning. Luxury food from a luxury tin. But their motto is: never look a gift meal in the can opener. They hoovered it up and collapsed immediately into contented sleep. Snores reverberated and they didn't even stir when a strange man knocked at the door. This was Graham who runs a cattery and cat transportation service and he was going to look after Milo and Ginger for the next two weeks until we were ready to move them into their new house in Wellington.

Graham brought a travelling cage with him and he put it on the floor. Milo roused himself sufficiently to sniff curiously at it. Ginger slumbered on. Both cats, however, woke with a sudden sharp shock when they were unceremoniously picked up and dropped in the cage and the door was slammed shut on them.

"What's happening? Waaaahhhh!!!"

With heart-rending wails on their part and ours, the cats were carried off into durance vile. Though Graham insisted that he ran a holiday camp and they would love it, we continued to think of it as a jail sentence.

The following day, the packers arrived from the removal company. When getting quotes from the various removal firms, I'd been mindful to point out that there were approximately 6000 books that needed packing carefully into boxes. This (I learned later) caused enormous consternation at the company that I eventually chose for the job. It seems that not long before my request came in, they had moved another person who also had about 6000 books.

He was, however, even more anal about his collection than I am and insisted that all the packers wear white gloves, and that every individual book be carefully packaged in bubble wrap. No sooner had they finished catering to this raving loony than my job specification landed on their desk.

"Oh No! Not again!"

The packers were quite relieved to find that all I wanted was to have the books placed neatly in boxes with no other special treatment required. That would be a doddle in comparison to what had gone before.

Three packing ladies, fired with enthusiasm, knocked on the door and introduced themselves.

"Can I do the books?" asked one of them, shyly.

"Of course."

She gave a squeak of delight and vanished into the library, never to be seen again. At regular intervals beautifully packed boxes emerged and were added to the pile. Meanwhile the other two busied themselves with the rest of the rooms.

"Have you got a radio?"

A radio was produced. They tuned it to a rap station, turned the volume up to distortion levels (hard to tell, I agree) and commenced packing. Robin kept up a constant supply of coffee and tea and over the course of the next three days my entire house vanished into 307 boxes. The packers were superbly efficient and didn't miss a thing. I was hugely impressed.

I'd been careful in my organisation of the house. I was mindful of apocryphal tales of packers who wrapped the kitchen scraps and packed the milk, sending both off into storage for eighteen progressively smellier months. I was determined that there would be no nasty surprises when I unpacked at the other end.

The plan was that once the house was completely packed (we allowed three days for that), the van would be summoned on Friday to uplift the boxes for delivery to the

new house in Wellington the following Monday. Robin and I would drive down to Wellington over the weekend in order to be there to greet the van when it arrived on Monday morning.

Friday was my last day at work. I was taking the following week off in order to do the moving thing. I came home that night expecting to find an empty house. What I found was a house with 307 boxes in it. The van was running late. It would arrive about 6.00pm.

When it turned up at 7.30pm it proved to contain a load belonging to somebody else which was also destined for Wellington. The delay had been caused by the fact that nobody could be found with a key to this person's house. I remain uncertain about how they eventually got in and obtained their load.

I expressed some concern as to whether my 307 boxes would fit into what space remained in the van.

"No worries, mate."

Four hours later they called head office to ask for a second van.

"I'm not sure when we'll be able to deliver these last few boxes to you. We'll have to wait until there's another van going down to Wellington. But it shouldn't be much more than a week or so. We'll let you know."

The boxes that went into the unplanned for, last-minute van were mostly my computers. Sadly I watched both vans drive away. I was absolutely certain I'd never see the part load in the second van again and I shed a silent tear for my toys. I'm a natural worrier and a pathological pessimist. That way I never get disappointed and I am constantly surprised and delighted when things work out well.

Of course it didn't help that for about 10 days prior to all this I'd had a severe dose of an unbelievably virulent lurgi. That particular Friday I had a temperature four degrees (Centigrade) above normal and a headache so severe it was merging on a migraine. I'd eaten nothing at all of any

significance for a week. I was living on aspirin and bottled water. My resistance was low.

Robin and I staggered off to spend what remained of the night at a friend's place. We arose bright and early next day for the trip to Wellington. I was still feverish and headachy and the thought of food was nauseating. I forced down a slice of toast, but it was a struggle. We got in the car and I began to drive south towards the capital city. It was raining.

That Saturday, New Zealand had one of its heaviest rainfalls since records began. Everybody in the entire country (except Robin and me) took one look at the weather and went back to bed. I've never seen the road between Auckland and Wellington so empty. Of course, the rain was pounding down so hard that I couldn't see very much of the road at all. Nevertheless, the bits that I could see remained, for the most part, vacant.

We stopped for lunch in Taihape. I was too ill to be interested in food but Robin was hungry and demanded to eat. For miles I had been soothing her with the promise of the exotic delights to be had in Taihape. Robin always needs to know where her next meal is coming from. Once the food plan is in place, she is perfectly content. It is not unknown for her to pause in the middle of devouring lunch to ask where and when dinner will be served. Once this has been explained to her satisfaction, she happily resumes eating.

In Taihape one must lunch at *Brown Sugar*, so we did. It serves the most delicious home-made tomato soup on the planet. Even though I was training seriously for the Anorexia Olympics, I simply couldn't resist it. Every mouthful was orgasmic. You could use it for raising the dead. I asked for the recipe. The chef smiled slyly and tapped the side of his nose. We resumed our soggy journey to Wellington none the wiser.

Despite the rain making the driving conditions very treacherous, the almost complete lack of traffic on the road meant that we reached Wellington in record time. We were

planning on staying with friends until we had unpacked sufficient boxes to make the house habitable. I parked the car at their house and went straight to bed. I'd driven the last hundred miles with a pounding headache and I was seeing double. I hate to think what my temperature was; I was too scared to measure it.

Somewhat to my surprise, the van arrived on Monday as arranged. The driver was one of the happiest men I've ever met. On the journey down he'd bought a lotto ticket in Taupo and won \$700 with it. He seemed to regard Robin and me as his good luck charms.

Robin stood by the van and ticked boxes off the manifest as they were unloaded and I told the men where to put them, based on what was written on the boxes. Mostly, of course, they said "books" and we made a large pile of those in the basement. In retrospect, I think I made a mistake there. As I write these words, we have unpacked everything except the pile of boxes in the basement and we are still missing a few things - some recipe books, a few CDs and records, my slippers, that sort of thing. Without a doubt they are in a box somewhere in the basement pile just filling up the odd space in a box of books. Almost certainly this fact is recorded in the legend written on the box itself, but I missed it the first time round (blame the fever) and the boxes got jumbled up with all the rest. I have no inclination to shift the whole pile one by one looking for the special boxes. That task will have to wait until the shelves are built and the boxes are unpacked. Doubtless the missing items will then be found.

Once the van was unpacked, Robin and I began the onerous task of making the house fit to live in. I had to keep going for a lie down (my headache and fever were showing no signs of abating) and that slowed the process quite a lot. However we quickly became experts at opening boxes and distributing their contents. We could live in the house after a couple of days and by the end of a fortnight the job was



largely complete (except for the books, of course. But they are a special case). I have some friends who moved into their new house four years ago. They still haven't unpacked the majority of their boxes and are continuing to live routine lives using only the emergency things they unpacked from their first box. Many people seem to work this way - when the cashier at the local supermarket discovered that we'd just moved in, she told us all about the boxes she hadn't unpacked from ten years ago yet. I feel quite proud of the fact that Robin and I had everything except the books unpacked and put away within two weeks.

Of course there is a down side to all this efficiency. We have had to make instant decisions about where things go and since we are not yet used to the new places where things live we are constantly asking each other:

"Where did we put the so-and-so?"

To which the answer is generally, "I don't know.", and so a search party has to be mounted.

I have also found that I have developed a tendency to put things down casually and then forget where I put them, since the casual putting down places in the new house are quite different from the casual putting down places that I was used to in the old house. I have lost my glasses at least half a dozen times. My car keys also have a distressing tendency to vanish.

At one point during the week we contacted the removal company to ask about the second, unplanned part load. The Wellington office claimed never to have heard of us or the load (which was pretty much what I had expected). However, to be fair, the man sounded very embarrassed at being placed in that situation and he promised to ring back as soon as he had tracked the load down. I was sceptical, but he kept his promise.

"We'll deliver it tomorrow afternoon," he said when he rang back.

Sure enough, the load arrived as promised. This time Robin and I swapped roles - I checked the boxes off the truck and Robin told the men where to put them. So now we had all 307 boxes and the house was complete. It was time to introduce the cats to their new home.

I rang Graham the cattery man.

"Gosh," he said, "what enormous fangs Milo has. Lots of sabre-tooth tiger in his ancestry I think."

"That's why he dribbles," I explained. "He can't close his mouth properly because of the fangs."

"Lovely cats," said Graham. "I've really enjoyed having them here. They've been no trouble at all."

He told me the arrangements. The cats would be flown down (he gave me the flight details) and I had to pick them up at the freight depot at the airport.

I drove out to the airport at the appointed time. My first major difficulty was finding the freight depot. After asking various people and stopping at several places that weren't the freight depot I eventually found it shivering in the wop-wops miles away from any other airport building. I explained that I was waiting for my cats. The man glanced casually at a monitor.

"Oh yes, the flight's just landed. They should be here in about twenty minutes or so."

The arrangement was that I would transfer the cats from their travelling cage (which belonged to Graham) to their own cage and the travelling cage would be sent back on the next flight. I was not expecting any difficulties with this. When animals travel, they are generally tranquillised and are quite dopey when they arrive. However much to my surprise, Milo and Ginger were bright and active. They hadn't been tranquillised at all! (I have a friend who insists that tranquillising animals for the journey is more for the sake of the nerves of the owner than for the benefit of the animal).

Anyway, I put them in their cage and drove them to their new home. I was expecting them to cry and moan as we drove (this is their normal habit). But they were now obviously seasoned travellers, having been in an aeroplane, and a mere car journey was nothing at all. Indeed they seemed quite impatient.

"Can't you go any faster?"

I got them home and decanted them into their new house. This frightened them a lot for it was all new. There were familiar things around the place (we'd made certain to have the furniture and their toys quite prominently displayed), but it didn't seem to help. Their eyes went round as saucers as they explored.

Their exploration techniques were quite different. Ginger applied the left hand maze rule very strictly and she circled the house (in and out of every cupboard) hugging the wall as closely as she could and taking every left turn that she found until she ran out of them.

Milo started with the food bowl and took a revivifying snack and then set off in a straight line. Once he'd explored as far as he could in that direction (no turns allowed) he came back to the food bowl for another mouthful and then set off again in a new direction.

Both techniques seemed very effective and they soon had the place sussed out. There is an old wives tale that says you must butter their paws to get them completely settled in. I've done it before with other cats with a fair degree of success and I had purchased some butter for exactly that purpose for use on these two.

As soon as Milo felt the butter on his paws he shook himself violently, and great clumps of butter shot out and stuck to the TV set and the stereo. Ginger ignored the butter completely and simply put greasy paw prints all over the furniture. So much for that idea.

After a couple of days the cats showed signs of wanting to go out. Milo had settled in very quickly and was quite

happy by now so I had no qualms about letting him out for an explore. Ginger was still very skittish and scared so I was dubious. Milo had a quick look round the garden and came back. Ginger vanished.

Hours passed. I remembered folk tales of cats thumbing lifts on motorways and stowing away on Korean fishing boats in a desperate attempt to get back to the house they'd been forcibly removed from. I kept picturing her alone and frightened and lost. I kept picturing her dead.

Nine hours later, when Robin and I were both nervous wrecks, she wandered casually back.

"Where's my tea, then?"

Having punished us sufficiently, she was now prepared to forgive us. I have no idea where she had been for nine hours, but when she came back she was much calmer, much less skittish than she had been before. From that point on she seemed completely settled in.

We got a cat door installed so that they could come and go as they pleased. Ginger got the idea immediately but Milo (as always) was much slower on the uptake. We tried pushing him through it. He hated it - given half a chance he would brace himself firmly with one foot on each side of the cat door thereby turning himself into a completely immovable furry object with the cat door being the utterly irresistible force that was (of course) keeping him inside against his will. After six days of this we were exhausted. But we had made some progress, albeit not very much. Milo began to use the cat door to come into the house from the outside. However absolutely nothing would persuade him to use it to leave the house. He insisted on going out through a people door.

Today, nearly two weeks after the cat door was first installed, he finally used it to go outside for the very first time. I remain dubious as to whether the lesson will stick. Even in the old house, he regarded the cat door as an enormous intellectual challenge (he would stare at it for

hours before finally figuring out what he had to do this time). Here in the new house with lots of other novel things to learn about as well, I suspect it might all be too much for his poor little unicellular brain. He has exactly enough brain power to cope with being a cat (eating, sleeping, purring when stroked) and he hasn't any brain cells left over for storing information about new-fangled things like cat doors.

On balance, it's great to be living in Wellington again. I've missed the place.

# **You CAN Get the Wood, You Know**

I live in a house with 12 rooms (including the toilet) and 57 cupboards. This design is more than mildly eccentric and I can't help wondering what the fetishist who lived here before me kept in all his cupboards. Perhaps he had one can of Heinz produce in each – a different can for every cupboard of course. But not a baked bean remains; there is no trace of spaghetti, scarcely even a spoonful of soup.

Over the last few days I have been contributing to this eccentricity of design. Floor to ceiling shelves have appeared in one of the rooms and in the fullness of time, 6000 books will grace them. Fortunately the floor is solid concrete and the shelves are firmly fixed to the walls and ceiling beams. I think they will cope well with the strain of supporting all those books.

It all started just before Christmas when I went looking for a carpenter; preferably a local one. I let my fingers go for a walk through the yellow pages for a time while I read a book. When they came back from their trip, they reported no success. They were somewhat exhausted after their unaccustomed exercise and had to rest for a while to get their breath back.

Once my fingers were back to normal, I pondered another plan of attack. There had to be a carpenter somewhere in the suburb. As I cogitated, my letter box filled up with junk mail among which was the local freebie newspaper – well, several of them in fact. It seems to be my unalterable fate to choose houses that sit smugly where several boundaries fuzzily merge and since nobody can decide exactly where one ends and another begins, I always

get every freebie newspaper going and my letterbox groans under the weight of the accumulated junk mail. On rare occasions, I actually find a letter in my letterbox, but these occurrences are few and far between.

Normally all my junk mail gets thrown away without being looked at, but this time I decided to browse through the newspapers in search of carpenters. I perused the small ads which, one and all, were set in much larger type than the rest of the paper and which were obviously its primary *raison d'être*.

There, in the centre of the page, in eye-catching gothic type was an advert for a carpenter. No job too small; special offer - 20% discount on labour in January and February. Ring this number. So I did.

Since it was Christmas Eve when I rang, I was unperturbed to find that the carpenter was on holiday. The answerphone message explained this, but begged me to leave a message anyway, so I left one and rather to my surprise my call was returned later on the same day. I felt this was an extremely good omen. Far too often businesses ignore such cold calls. When you do finally get through to them, by dint of much phoning at eccentric hours, you say:

"Behold, here I am. I have lots of money that I am eager to give you."

And they say, "Sorry squire. Rushed off me feet. I don't want any more money."

I have recently had variations of this conversation with untold lawn mowing companies, and a myriad or two house cleaning outfits. None of them wanted my money and all refused point blank to take on my business. I find this attitude impossible to understand. Why are they actively turning down work?

"I want a library," I explained to the carpenter. "I've just moved into the area and I have quite a lot of books that require shelving. I've got a room put aside for it so I

wondered if you could come round and measure up and give me a quote."

"Oh yes, I can do that. But it won't be until the new year now. How about the 11<sup>th</sup>?"

And so it was agreed and in due time he arrived to measure. We paced the room and I explained my requirements. We measured the room, we measured several books in order to figure out how far apart to space the shelves and to decide how deep they should be. Numbers were scribbled on the backs of envelopes and then crossed out and amended as sizes and shapes were argued about and mutually agreed. He appeared quite taken aback by both the oddity of the job and the enormous quantity of wood involved. He had obviously never seen or done anything like it before.

"All those boxes," he said, pointing at the quivering pile in the basement, "they're all full of books?"

"Yes."

"That's a lot of books," he said.

"Yes."

"I'll take these figures away and work them up into a quote," he said. A couple of days later he rang back with a firm offer. It was just a little bit over \$3000.

"That's a lot of wood," I said.

"Yes."

Towards the end of the month the carpenter turned up to begin putting up the shelves. Unfortunately the company from whom he had ordered the wood failed to deliver it so he hung around for a while twiddling his thumbs and drinking coffee then he went away again. The next day the wood was delivered and he began work. However it very quickly became clear that that only a fraction of the wood that he had ordered had actually arrived. They had delivered all the shelves but only about a quarter of the uprights. He rang and complained.



"Oh sorry. We'll send the balance round tomorrow."

The next day the wood delivery man turned up with more wood than I'd even seen in one place before. Close examination of the paperwork revealed that this wasn't the balance of the order, it was the entirety of the original order. Again.

The wood man professed himself willing to take the whole lot back, an offer with which we were less than thrilled, but he refused point blank to split it and take back only the unrequired portion. We now had not quite twice as much wood as we needed for my library and the carpenter was spitting tacks, of which he had a more than adequate supply.

"Can't trust anybody," he said. "If you want a job done properly you have to do it yourself. How do these morons remain in business? They can't even manage to fulfil a simple order without stuffing it up completely! Hah!"

He sawed a plank in half and banged nails into it with unnecessary violence.

"Take that, you bastard!"

Over the next few days my library began to take shape as the shelves slowly grew. As a job, I suspect that the carpenter found it rather boring since it was very repetitive work. When you've seen one bookshelf you've seen them all. Nonetheless he exhibited enormous enthusiasm, for it seemed that the final purpose to which the shelves would be put had really taken hold of his imagination.

"I've never built a library before," he confessed. "I'd love to see it again when all the books are up on the shelves; just so I know what it looks like."

"Of course," I said, flattered that he was taking so much interest. "Come round for coffee when its done. I'll give you a ring. Mind you - it won't be for a few weeks. It takes a long time to unpack and arrange books on the shelves."

"I can imagine," he said. "Do you have them in any particular order?"

"Alphabetic by author," I said. "If you don't do that, you can never find anything when you've as many books as this."

He nodded, impressed. "Yes, that must be a problem."

I gave him a basement key so that he could come and go as he pleased. The room filled up with sawdust as he cut and sanded and every so often he brought in an industrial size vacuum cleaner and sucked it all up. We would lie in bed early on weekend mornings soothed by the rhythmic banging of nails, the occasional cries of "Ouch!" and the restful rumble of huge power tools wreaking havoc on the seemingly endless supply of wood.

And then one day it was done.

He has done a superb job. Every inch of available space (and a few inches of unavailable space) has been filled with shelves. The geography of the room and the geometry of oblong bits of wood that intersect each other means that some of the shelves are a little awkwardly placed, but I had expected this, and it didn't worry me.

"You've done a brilliant job," I said. "It's magnificent!"

He beamed. "Don't forget to let me know when you've got the books up."

"You'll be the first to know," I promised.

I still have far more wood than I know what to do with left in my garage, but the carpenter has promised to take it away and use it in other jobs. After all, if he doesn't do that he will make a thumping loss on this job since the wood people are refusing to take it back (humph!) and I have paid only for the quoted volume that he needed to complete the library.

And now, at long last, I can unpack my books. Only then, I think, will I feel truly at home.

# Hairy

A couple of mornings ago I said goodbye to Robin and trotted off to work as normal. Once she'd seen me safely out of the door, she wandered into the bathroom for her morning ablute. Staring idly into the mirror, she was horrified to discover a long black hair poking out of her nose.

Could it be the tail of a brain eating alien from Mars? She couldn't think of any other explanation. After all, the hairs she grew naturally were not at all black and even though I do still have some black hairs nestling among the grey, she had no memory of me shoving my head up her right nostril as I kissed her goodbye. On balance, a brain eating alien seemed highly likely. She'd been feeling a little absent minded of late. If an alien had been eating her brain, that feeling could be explained perfectly rationally as a literal absence of her mind.

She pulled tentatively at the hair and, much to her relief, it proved not to be attached to any vital nasal structures. It slid out easily. There was no trace of any brain matter adhering to the hidden end. Furthermore the hair was long and straight. There was absolutely no way that I could have put it into her nasal passage for my black hairs are curly and crinkly and go *sproing* when pulled.

The only possible conclusion was that Milo the Black Cat had been extra intimate during the night. Lately he has taken to sleeping on Robin's pillow, just above her head. He purrs loudly at the enormous pleasure this position affords him and dribbles copiously all over the pillow and all over Robin. Every so often he gets overcome with love and affection and he leans forward and licks the end of her nose. It is, she claims, a sensation rather akin to being rubbed

down with wet sandpaper. But she has learned to sleep through it and these days she hardly notices at all.

But now it seems that he has discovered another hobby to while away the long hours of the night when neither of us is available to feed him. Now he is stuffing fur up Robin's nostrils. Perhaps he is making a nest for himself and one night soon, when Robin is fast asleep and the alien brain eater from Mars has completely emptied her head, he will crawl up her nose and settle down for a snooze in the snug fur lined cavity of her skull.

# School Days

Most religious instruction lessons at school were quite dull affairs during which we had many opportunities to practice falling asleep with our eyes wide open. Mr Brearley, the teacher, did his best but even though he had an appearance and personality that consisted mainly of idiosyncrasies, he seldom managed to inject much flavour or interest into the subject. I suspect he might have found it as boring as we did.

He had a huge mole on his cheek from which sprouted a couple of long grey hairs. In moments of stress or elation he would clap one hand to his cheek and suck in a hissing breath. He had a broad Yorkshire accent.

One of the boys, Brian Teal by name, was the class clown and he could always be relied upon to add mirth to almost any situation. He was a marvellously eccentric boy. He would run home every lunchtime so that he could go to the toilet (he found the school toilets too disgusting to use). By noon each day he was generally to be found with his legs crossed, bouncing up and down in his seat. Sometimes a teacher would construe this as eagerness to answer a question. But Brian had other things on his mind and seldom obliged with anything coherent. He was a great fan of the Beach Boys and in between classes he was often to be found playing the drums on his desk top and trying very, very hard to sing four simultaneous falsetto harmonies, with mixed success.

On this particular day, in this particular religious instruction class, Mr Brearley was rambling on about Jesus' ministry and how it might have been perceived by the society of the time. Jesus really was quite radical in his thinking, quite scandalous in his teachings.

The hand slapped the cheek, the breath was sucked in with a mighty squelch and then expelled with a sigh as Mr Brearley said:

"...and Jesus lowered himself to speak to fallen women!"

As he said that phrase, every eye in the classroom moved to Brian Teal, who was sitting at his desk behind a pillar, concealed from Mr Brearley's direct view. Brian pantomimed staring down a sheer cliff and waving hello to the people at the bottom.

The class erupted into hysterics. Mr Brearley looked puzzled for a moment and then slapped his hand back to his cheek again. The Yorkshire accent became particularly prominent as the stress got to him.

"Is it that choomp Teal, be'ind t'pillar?"

\* \* \* \*

Games periods were loathed by the less sportily inclined among us. Many of us had a fundamental lack of eye-hand co-ordination skills and any excuse was taken to avoid the humiliation of being the last one chosen for a team. Peter forged a note from his mother to the games master. It read:

Please excuse Peter from games because I have a cold.

And at the bottom was the scribbled signature:

Peter's Mum

Others were less inventive. Steven simply never turned up for games. Every games period would find him hiding in the school cellars smoking cigarettes. At the end of the year, most of us got the usual phrases written on our reports by the games master.

Could do better.

Lacks enthusiasm.

On Steven's report the games master wrote: Who is this boy?

Some excuses were more legitimate. One term Malcolm was properly excused games and he elected to do

woodwork instead.

The woodwork class was supervised by Mr Gallagher. He taught us to make mortise and tenon joints, and dovetail joints. He taught us to plane a plank of wood square. He taught us to saw in a straight line (the only one of these skills that I retain to this day). I built a small bookshelf, a stool and a coffee table in his classes. All were sturdy constructions, all were useful and all were used. This pleased Mr Gallagher.

Malcolm elected to build a coffee table. He measured and marked, cut and planed.

Mr Gallagher checked his work every so often.

"The edge is not square. Look - you can see daylight when I hold my set square against it. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more.

"It still isn't square. It has to be square. You can't make a table if it isn't square. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more. Over the course of a ten week term, he planed and planed and planed some more. At the start of the term, the planks he was planing measured eight inches across. By the end of the term, they were two inches across, still not square, and suitable only for building furniture in a doll's house.

The next term Malcolm voluntarily went back to playing rugby. It didn't demand a square field or a square ball and he felt much more at home with the irregularity.

\* \* \* \*

The school had its own swimming pool which was quite a novelty for those times. Most schools in the district hired out the pool in town and ferried their pupils to and from the swimming lessons in coaches. A curious construction of concrete slabs rose from the side of the pool at the deep end. From these you could dive or belly flop into the water, depending upon your skill level. Set up in one corner was a

small trampoline (we called it a trampet) upon which the braver people would bounce up and down, going higher and higher with each bounce. Once the height and momentum was deemed sufficient the bouncer would alter the angle and project his body out into space, entering the water with a huge splash and a shriek of enormous triumph or, depending upon the angle of projection, enormous pain.

The boys changing rooms were on one side of the pool and the girls changing rooms were on the other side. A narrow corridor went from each changing room via a disinfectant foot bath to the pool. The sexes were strictly segregated and any lessons that involved use of the swimming pool were carefully timed so as to be exclusively mono-gendered. Mostly it worked.

After a games period, many of the boys had developed the custom of showering and then having a swim. This was particularly their practice if the games period was the last in the day for then they could take their time over their swim and just mess around in the pool for ages. Nobody ever bothered wearing swimming costumes for these impromptu events. We'd seen each other naked so often in the changing rooms over the years that nobody really cared very much at all. There was nothing worth looking at.

One Wednesday, after a particularly strenuous rugby game, the pool area was full of shrieking, naked young men racing around the pool, throwing each other in, diving from the steps, generally having a fine old time. One boy, Andrew, was bouncing up and down on the trampet, taking no part in any of the things going on around him. Bounce, bounce, bounce, lost in a trance, deep in a world of his own. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to us, the girls were just coming back from a particularly strenuous game of lacrosse.

"How about a swim?" someone suggested.

"Oooh, yes!"



They all changed into their togs ('cos that's what girls do) and padded off to the pool where they stood open mouthed with astonishment at the sight that greeted them.

Almost without exception, the boys stared for one horrified moment at the girls who were staring at them and then, one and all, covered their groins with their hands and jumped into the concealing safety of the pool.

Only Andrew, utterly lost in his trance, failed to notice the girls arrival as he went bounce, bounce, bounce on the trampet and with each and every bounce his little willy waved hello.

\* \* \* \*

Thirty five years ago I left school to go to university. I moved away from my home town and hardly ever went back again save for flying visits. I lost touch with almost everybody and school days were relegated to the dusty recesses of my memory. I had left it all behind. I moved to the other side of the world and eventually even the few friends that I had managed to keep in touch with drifted away and we stopped writing. Distance lends disenchantment.

And then the internet changed the world and somebody started a web site called Friends Reunited where you could register yourself under your old school and see lists of other people who had also registered themselves. You could all get in touch again.

Unfortunately Friends Reunited no longer exists. But because of its brief existence, I am currently exchanging emails with eight people that I was at school with, catching up on the gossip of decades; finding out who's married, who's divorced, who's dead (sadly there are several). The memories come rushing back.

# **The Natural History Of The Triffid**

## **A Life in Science Fiction**

Guest of Honour speech at Con With The Wind

New Zealand's 23rd Annual SF Convention

June 2002

I was born in the industrial North of England, in Halifax in the West Riding of Yorkshire where the dark satanic mills held sway. They really were dark; they really were satanic. My early childhood memories seem now to be mostly monochrome rather than colour because black and white were the predominating shades.

I lived in a village called Southowram which was on a hill above the town and as you looked down into the valley you could see a black layer of smoke covering the town; the result of the belchings and exhalations of heavy industry. The River Calder ran near the town, but all you could ever see of it was a huge cloud of detergent foam, the run off and effluent from the wool mills. Nothing lived in the river, nothing grew on the hillsides save only sparse scraggy grass and stunted bushes.

On Mondays, when my mother did the weekly wash, she would always scan the sky, looking anxiously for signs of rain. As soon as there was even a hint of a shower, she would be out in the garden frantically unpegging the washing from the line and bringing it inside. The air was so dirty that every single drop of rain coagulated around a

particle of soot and my mother knew that if it rained on the washing she would have to wash it all over again for the clothes would all be covered with long black streaks. Some childhood lessons never leave you and today I am still utterly horrified by the casual New Zealand attitude that says "she'll be right" as they watch a hideous downpour saturate the washing on the line.

"Don't worry - it will soon dry out again."

I simply cannot get used to the extremely weird idea that rain can be clean.

\* \* \* \*

The village was called Southowram. The suffix "Owram" (I was told at school) was Anglo-Saxon for "on the top of a hill" - so Southowram was the village on the top of the hill to the south of the town. North of the town was another hill and it boasted a village called Northowram; the village on the top of the hill to the north of the town. Fortunately there were no hills to the East or West of the town...

This unimaginative naming scheme stood me in very good stead when I came to New Zealand which has the aptly named North Island to the North and the even more aptly named South Island to the South. In the north of the North Island there's a cape called North Cape. To the West and the East, New Zealand also has both a West Cape and an East Cape. It was clear to me that the European names of the various geographical features had all been assigned by a Yorkshireman - as indeed they had. James Cook came from Whitby, which is a small suburb to the North of Wellington, so he didn't have to travel very far to start naming things.

Whitby is on the Yorkshire coast - Yorkshire is the largest county in England; its coastline extends half way round the world and finishes just to the North of Wellington. When I was a little boy, the idea of the seaside was very foreign to

me. I only saw it once a year when we went on holiday to Bridlington or Scarborough or Whitby.

There is a story that when a sailor wishes to retire from the sea he will put an oar over his shoulder and walk inland until he finds people who say:

"What's that funny shaped bit of wood over your shoulder?"

Then he knows that he has come as far as he can from the sea, and he can safely put down his oar and live out his life in peace.

Halifax is the place where people ask that question. It really is about as far from the sea as you can get in England. If you go any further inland you start approaching the sea on the opposite coast.

And this is all very odd, because Halifax has one of the largest fresh fish markets in the country. Albion Street, which runs through the centre of town, is lined with market stalls each of which groans under the weight of the fish for sale. As a child I always found this puzzling. How did they get the fish to market so quickly? How did it stay fresh on its journey so far inland? Now I am an adult and a science fiction fan and I understand these things much better - it is obvious that all the coastal towns in Yorkshire are equipped with matter transmitters and every day they broadcast the fish fresh from the sea and send it to market at the speed of light. And they have been doing that for hundreds of years, for the fish market is very, very old.

Behind the fish market is a more traditional kind of market. However this too has its oddities for it is a permanent market, open every day. It lives in its own dedicated building and is a positive rabbit warren of stalls. At the centre is a beautiful old clock in a small tower and surrounding the clock is a greengrocers stall known to one and all as "Under The Clock".

In my childhood (and probably today as well for all I know), several of the market stalls sold books and comics

and one of them had a box labelled **American Magazines** which was full of a raggie-taggle jumble of sometimes very tatty pulp magazines.

I spent hours rummaging through the untidy tumble in that box, for many of the magazines were SF magazines. It was here that I found my first ever copies of **Astounding** and **Galaxy** and **F & SF** and **Venture** and many, many others. Apparently they were returns and rejects and the tail end of print runs and they were used by the ton as ballast in transatlantic cargo ships.

I can only assume that the same matter transmitter beams that sent the fish to the market were also used to send the magazines from the coastal ports to the book stall for the stock changed quite rapidly. However there was no rhyme nor reason to it – after all the magazines were just shovelled at random into the holds of the ships – and I soon developed a curious love/hate relationship with them.

I loved the magazines for they were a major window into the SF world that was becoming more and more important to me as I grew older, but I hated them as well, for they would insist on publishing the most wonderful novels as serials and far too frequently one or more instalments (generally the last) never turned up at all. This was enormously frustrating. In later years I found many of these serials in book form as full-blown novels so I finally got to find out how they ended, but at the time it was hugely annoying. I've never quite got over that feeling and even today I tend to avoid the magazines completely and I just wait (with varying degrees of impatience) until the stories I am interested in appear in a book. Thus are the habits of a lifetime formed.

\* \* \* \*

There was history all around me as I grew up. The whole area is very, very old. The village of Southowram is on

Beacon Hill, so named because it was one of the chain of beacons that announced the defeat of the Spanish Armada across the length and breadth of the country in 1588. I went up to the very top of Beacon Hill once and there, set in concrete, were the rusted remains of the hearth on which the beacon had burned. I was struck by a sense of history, of immense age. Nearly 400 years ago, someone else had stood where I was standing now and had sent the message on through the night. The sense of history, the sense of place, the sense of roots firmly anchored deep in time was shiveringly real. It was an epiphany and I was deeply moved by it.

Of course it was all a load of old nonsense. I found out later that the beacon chain had been re-lit in 1945 to celebrate VE day, the end of World War II in Europe. What I was looking at was only about 15 years old. No trace of the original beacon remained. It had probably been no more than a simple bonfire anyway.

In **The Man In the High Castle**, Philip K. Dick speculates about the quality of historicity, about how an artefact can possess that deep sense of history, of time passing, of important events happening around it. Such an artefact is worth much money to the right buyer. But another artefact, a modern copy of the first but indistinguishable from it by any scientific test is worth nothing at all. How can you tell which is which? Is the sense of history an intrinsic property of the artefact or is it generated from within the beholder, based on the story he is told about it? And would that historicity be present if they were told the same story about the modern copy?

In the book, Ray Calvin makes this point to a girl he is seeing. He shows her two seemingly identical cigarette lighters, one of which he claims is worth "maybe forty or fifty thousand dollars on the collector's market because of its historicity."

She said, "what is 'historicity'?"

"When a thing has history in it. Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing .... You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence', no 'aura' around it."

Calvin goes on to explain:

"if a gun goes through a famous battle, like the Meuse-Argonne, and it's the same as if it hadn't, unless you know. It's in here." He tapped his head. "In the mind, not the gun".

I know exactly what he meant by that and I had a little *frisson* of recognition the first time I read that passage. Standing there on Beacon Hill I had experienced a beacon of the mind, not one of reality. But the feeling was still the same, still as intense; there was still the sense of awe, the sense of wonder. To that extent it truly was real, whatever "real" may mean. Dick poked away at that question all his life long and while he found some hilarious illustrations of it, I'm not sure he ever found a definition. I sometimes think that only science fiction can legitimately explore questions like that, in terms of drama anyway. Without SF the ideas turn into philosophy, but I never liked that in isolation - it always felt dull. I see no reason why philosophy can't be explored through art; that extra dimension brings it more sharply into focus for me. I think I need a framework to hang the ideas on. Perhaps that's rather a large edifice to erect on the foundation of a few scraps of rusty metal that I looked at briefly when I was 10 years old. But it is all inextricably bound up together in my head. I can't separate the strands - it was a formative moment and it is one of the reasons why SF has always felt so right to me, like a place where I belonged.

\* \* \* \*

Even in 1588, Southowram was old. Nearly five hundred years before the beacon fires were lit, in the year 1068, King William, known as the Conqueror, sent his troops to put down the Northern Rebellion. They put it down particularly viciously; burning the buildings, killing the inhabitants. The description of the area in the Domesday Book says simply, "It is Waste".

But even in 1068 the village was old. The land has been occupied since Neolithic times, if not before, and I would be willing to bet that many of the people who live there today are genetically descended from those Neolithic inhabitants. I don't think the tests have been done in Southowram but they have been done in many other villages in England and the thesis has been shown to be true.

We don't move around much in Yorkshire. When I was a child, a journey to Leeds (a large town about 30 miles away) was a huge expedition that required careful planning for days beforehand. We were all of us homebodies. I'm sure that many of the children that I grew up with still live in the village and some of them will be living in houses they inherited from their parents. Some of those houses have belonged to the same family for many generations. There are still houses in the village that have blocked up windows so that the inhabitants didn't have to pay the window tax back in the eighteenth century. I walked past those houses every day on my way to school.

\* \* \* \*

As a child I belonged to three libraries. There was the village library, its larger counterpart in Halifax, and also I managed to catch the tail end of the private library phenomenon as well. Once, it seems, many large businesses ran their own private libraries as a sideline. You paid an annual fee to borrow the books. One such business was **Boots the Chemist** and my parents were members



and so was I. The main pharmaceutical business took place on the ground floor of a very imposing building. The library itself was on the first floor. There were stairs up to the library, but mostly we went up and down by lift. It was an ancient, creaking lift with wrought iron gates rather than doors. It is the only one I have ever travelled in with its own private lift attendant. He was an ancient, creaking man dressed in brown overalls. You got in the lift and he crashed the gates closed and then pulled on a lever. Slowly, ever so slowly, the lift ascended and you could see the cables and the descending counterweights through the grille of the gate. It was indescribably thrilling. The library was almost an anti-climax after the ride in the lift. The Boots Library closed down in the 1960s but by then I was at secondary school and so I had the very large school library to choose from as well. So even after the Boots Library closed down, I still had three libraries to explore.

From the age of 5 or so I began to plough steadily through about 12 books a week from all my libraries. I slowed down a little as study and work began to occupy more of my time and these days I get through about 12 books a month instead and I've been doing it month in, month out for the whole of my life. So a conservative estimate suggests that so far I've read about 15,000 books. Mostly I buy them now instead of borrowing them. I find that I simply can't bear to part with them when the time comes to give them back...

If we assume that from age 5 to age 21 I read 12 hardback books a week from the library, and if we further assume an average thickness of 1 inch (books were slimmer then) then if we laid the books in a row, they would occupy about 0.2 miles. My reading from age 21 to date has slowed a little and contains a higher proportion of paperbacks. On the other hand the books are a lot thicker nowadays. Taking all these factors into consideration, a simple calculation suggests that we can add another 0.2 miles to the row of

books. So in my life to date I have read not quite half a mile of books. That's not very many really...

If my present rate of reading continues unabated, I'm going to need almost 20 feet of bookshelves a year to accommodate all the books that I buy. I'm not sure where the space is going to come from.

\* \* \* \*

By the time I was 7 I'd been right through the children's library at least twice and I begged the librarian for an adult ticket. The Boots Library and the main library in Halifax were uncooperative, so all I could do there was get my parents to take out books for me on their tickets. This was a mixed blessing - sometimes I just couldn't get on with the books that they chose for me. But sometimes they opened up whole new worlds; for it was during this period that my mother brought home **The Day of the Triffids** for me and I read it in a sitting and the science fiction virus entered my veins. The years since then have only served to prove that there is no cure for the disease. When you get infected as early as I was infected, the disease has you for life. It's all my mother's fault - though I guess John Wyndham has to shoulder a lot of the blame as well. I re-read **The Day of the Triffids** at least once a year throughout my teens.

Meanwhile, in the village library, I was making progress in my quest for an adult ticket. You see, the librarian knew my grandmother and he was, quite rightly, scared to death of her.

My grandmother knew everything about everybody in the village. Not a fly farted without my grandmother witnessing it or being told about it by one of her numerous spies. It paid to stay on her right side. If you upset her, she'd *tell* people things about you.

In her youth she had been a schoolteacher and she thoroughly approved of anything that encouraged children

to read. If I wanted an adult library ticket, then she felt that I should have one and she made her opinions known. I got my ticket – but there were strings attached. If the librarian felt I was borrowing a book that was not suitable, I had to put it back on the shelves. It proved to be not too onerous a condition. Not once in all the years that followed did the librarian ever exercise his right of veto.

\* \* \* \*

I had another epiphany in that library shortly after I first wandered into its adult section.

I remember the scene vividly. There were shelves full of books with the spines facing outwards. Most were gaudily coloured and the titles and authors were in many different fonts, all designed to be eye-catching, all designed to make you want to pick up the book. But there in the middle of one shelf was a book with a plain white cover and the lettering on the spine was in small blue letters, much faded by the sun which shone through the windows on the far side of the room. I squinted to read the title and author. **A Princess of Mars** by **Edgar Rice Burroughs**. I'd never heard of him, but there was a magic word in the title.

Mars.

I was mad keen on astronomy – remember this was in the late 1950s and it wasn't all that long since Sputnik 1 had gone beeping across the skies dragging revolution in its wake and there wasn't a child in the country who wasn't space-obsessed. Mars? I couldn't resist it.

I plucked the book from the shelf and was immediately rewarded for there on the front cover, in total contrast to the plain white spine, was a gaudy picture in primary colours of a four-armed green monster wielding a sword.

It immediately became clear to me that this was unlikely to be a serious scientific work – but who cared? It had a green monster. I never could resist a green monster. I took

the book home with me and read it in a sitting. For the first time in my life (but not the last) I roamed the dead sea bottoms of Barsoom with John Carter and I fell in love with the incomparable Dejah Thoris. Even Tars Tarkas, the green monster on the cover turned out to be one of the good guys (though his status was ambiguous to begin with) and over time I fell a little in love with him as well.

\* \* \* \*

One year I won a school prize. The prizes were always books, but we were allowed to choose our own. After it was chosen, the school would have the school crest stamped on the front boards in gold ink and a book plate was stuck in it which gave details of to whom and for what the prize was awarded. The bookplate was signed by the headmaster.

I chose **The Complete Short Stories of H. G. Wells**. I still have the book on my shelves today. Reading it convinced me that science fiction was a perfectly respectable literary form. Virtually every story in the book was SF. In those wonderful, gripping stories, Wells defined almost every single theme that modern science fiction has spent nearly a century exploring, with no sign yet of stagnation setting in. Practically single-handedly Wells not only invented the genre almost out of whole cloth, but he gave it intellectual respectability and stature as well. It was only later that the American pulp magazines sent it off into the ghetto of genre fiction, an artificial heritage that it has yet to shake off. Perhaps that history explains why the British literati have always been more sympathetic to science fiction than their American cousins.

\* \* \* \*

When I was thirteen years old, I managed to gross out two entire rugby teams. This is no mean feat, rugby teams

being made up of notoriously insensitive souls. But nonetheless I did it.

It was Wednesday afternoon and we had a double games period. The psychotic games master raced up and down the field blowing his whistle, waving his arms and shouting incomprehensible things as we all chased after the ostrich-egg shaped ball. I did my usual trick of hiding in the far corner and running in the opposite direction if the ball ever looked like coming anywhere near me. Everyone ignored me – they all knew I was useless.

Somehow I miscalculated and to my horror I found myself in possession of the ball. The very earth vibrated beneath me as hordes of hairy, muddy fanatics descended on me. I collapsed to the ground under the weight of the frantic mob and as I fell I heard a loud

*SNAP* as of dry branches breaking and something *moved* deep inside my left arm. I felt it shift unnaturally into a whole new position and I felt the flesh move aside as something slid through it. I screamed, though there was no pain at all, only that terrible feeling of unnatural shape and movement.

"I've broken my arm," I shrieked. "I've broken my arm!"

People began to climb off me.

"Don't be stupid," said the games master. Then he saw my arm. "Oh," he said. "You really have broken it."

I looked at it for the first time. It bent normally at the elbow and then half way between my elbow and my wrist it bent again at ninety degrees, as if a new joint had been inserted there. But there was no joint of course, just broken bones forced massively out of alignment.

Strangely it didn't hurt a bit.

Many of the rugby players turned mildly green at the sight and much of their enthusiasm for the game seemed to dissipate. They showed a distinct reluctance to look at my arm and I can't say I blamed them. I wasn't overly keen on looking at it either.

The games master immobilised my arm by strapping it to my body with a belt and then he pulled his jumper over me to help hold everything in place and to stop me catching or banging my arm on anything and perhaps bending it even further out of shape. He carried me to his car and drove me to the hospital (which was actually just down the road from the school). Somebody must have informed my parents, for soon they turned up.

My arm began to hurt. I can't even begin to describe how much it hurt. A nurse gave me my first ever morphine injection. The feeling of well-being that flowed through my whole body was indescribably wonderful. The pain went away. I was at peace with the world. (I can easily understand how people get addicted to drugs).

I lay on the trolley in casualty waiting to go to the operating theatre to have my arm set. I quickly got bored – my arm didn't hurt any more and I had nothing to do. My mother soon realised what the trouble was and so she gave me her library book to read. It was **Hothouse** by Brian W. Aldiss. I held it awkwardly in one hand and turned the pages with my thumb. It held me absolutely enthralled and soon I was lost in the jungle with the tummy-belly men and I shivered with fear as the morel took over the mind of the hero. I thoroughly enjoyed the sex scenes too. I suspect my mother had not really wanted me to read the book because of those sex scenes (after all, why hadn't she told me that she had it in her handbag before now?). But being in hospital over-rode all other concerns in her mind and so she let me read it.

By the time I was wheeled up to theatre, I'd finished the book and turned into a Brian Aldiss worshipper. Over the years I've come to admire Aldiss more and more. I think he is probably the most talented SF writer ever to come out of the UK. Others such as Brunner, Clarke and Wyndham, while undeniably brilliant, have never exhibited the broad range of ability that Aldiss has. He seems to be able to write

everything: space opera, pornography, farce, criticism, poetry – anything and everything is grist to his mill.

But every time I re-read **Hothouse** I feel slightly queasy and I have to put it down again. I can't for the life of me think why...

They put my arm in plaster for six weeks and I was excused games. I was excused games for several weeks after the plaster came off as well in order to get the arm accustomed to being out in the open again. When the plaster was finally removed the arm was thin and shrivelled and very weak. Even today, after almost 40 years, it is still a little thinner than my other arm. And sometimes, particularly when I carry heavy weights or when the weather is damp I get an ache deep inside my arm between the elbow and the wrist, at the place where the bones broke in two.

So there I was, excused games for a whole term. Yippee!! I spent all the games periods in the school library. There was so much to read! And one of the books in the school library was called **The Hobbit** and it was by J. R. R. Tolkien. Oh wow! Talk about formative experiences! Annoyingly, the school library didn't have its sequel **The Lord of the Rings**. But one of my other libraries did. I am so jealous now of that young teenager that was me. For he was reading **The Lord of the Rings** for the very first time, an experience I'd love to live through again. Perhaps I'll re-read it for the first time again when I'm 95 and Alzheimer's has me firmly in its grip. Something to look forward to, I think.

All too soon my arm healed up and school life went back to normal. A year later, almost to the day, I ran up to a vaulting horse in the gymnasium, leaped enthusiastically over it and fell awkwardly on the other side. I broke my wrist this time.

"You will stop before you get to his neck, won't you?" asked my mother.

"I'll try," said the games master.

Meanwhile I got another term in the school library.

\* \* \* \*

Once I was into my teens, there was no problem with getting a full adult library card and I began to read omnivorously from all of my libraries. It wasn't all science fiction, though there were a lot of SF influences guiding my choice of reading. Kafka was an early favourite, and I raced through all of Huxley on the strength of **Brave New World** and all of Orwell (including the journalism) on the basis of **1984**. Style influenced me as well. After reading the opening sentence of Joyce's **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** I just *had* to read the rest of the book. It turned out to be less than thrilling and I soon bogged down in the theological arguments, but what wonderfully hypnotic opening lines.

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo

I also bogged down in **Ulysses** (which has to be a big contender in the world's most boring book competition), though like everybody else I enjoyed the dirty bits at the end. I gave up after half a page of **Finnegan's Wake**. I much prefer Brian Aldiss' homage to that book in **Barefoot in the Head**.

\* \* \* \*

There was something appealing about C. S. Forrester's **Hornblower** novels. There seems to be a high correlation between the reading of SF and the reading of Hornblower stories. Other people have mentioned the correspondence as well. Perhaps there are close similarities between the descriptions of life in the closed societies on board a ship of



the line and also on board a space ship. After all, many SF writers have transposed that close correspondence almost letter for letter. It isn't stretching too much of a point to call Niven and Pournelle's **The Mote in God's Eye** *Hornblower in Space*.

One day, in a hurry, I picked E. M. Forster's **A Passage to India** off the shelf under the mistaken impression that I was taking home a Hornblower novel. After all, the title sounded like a Hornblower title and the vagaries of the alphabet filed Forster right next to Forrester. I found the book dull, as it would have to be of course if you were expecting blood and thunder Napoleonic conflict. I've disliked Forster's books ever since.

Many years later I read an autobiographical article by Harry Harrison and I was amused to discover that he had made exactly the same mistake that I did and for exactly the same reasons. However unlike me, Harrison loved his serendipitous discovery of Forster and has continued to read and re-read his books ever since.

Forster did actually write a quite famous science fiction story called **The Machine Stops**. I've come across it several times over the years in one anthology or another. The machine that stops is a sort of super computer. Most of the world's population depend upon it for almost every part of their lives - they never go out, they never communicate with anyone else except via the computer. It delivers their food, their drink and the air that they breathe. Once it stops they are utterly helpless and soon begin to die out. The parallels with the modern internet and internet junkies are obvious. I think that's pretty good going for a story written in 1909.

\* \* \* \*

My mother was the secretary to the Mayor of Halifax. Part of her job was to cumulate the monthly statistics of the

town into a report that would be presented to a council meeting. After I left home at 18 to go to university in Nottingham she told me with a perfectly straight face that the number of books borrowed from the Halifax Library had nose dived and the council were seriously worried by the trend. Obviously it was all my fault. To this day I have no idea whether or not she was pulling my leg.

After I left the university I continued to live in Nottingham and I've scarcely been back to Halifax since. Until I came to New Zealand in 1981, Nottingham was my home.

At first it seemed as if nothing much had changed from my time in Halifax. There was a very similar industrial environment and a very similar sense of history and deeply buried roots.

Nottingham is an old coal mining area and the landscape is scarred and blackened with the refuse of the pits. The River Trent runs through the town and it is as filthy and polluted as the River Calder of my youth. When I first read Terry Pratchett's descriptions of the River Ankh that flows through Ankh-Morepork, I recognised it as the Trent. If you fell in the Trent you'd bounce off the scum that encrusts its surface. And if by some chance you broke through, you'd probably be poisoned to death long before you drowned.

Actually you could probably say that about every major British river of the time. But the Calder and the Trent were the ones I had the most experience of. Britain was (and probably still is) a very polluted environment.

Shortly after I arrived in New Zealand I visited Christchurch. The river Avon runs through the centre of the town. People punt on it. The ladies wear long dresses and the gentlemen wear straw hats. Ducks swim on the water. The river is so clear and fresh that you can see right down to the river bed. You can count the individual stones that line it. I was absolutely overwhelmed by this. So clean! I'd never seen a river bed in my life before. I fell in love with

New Zealand at that moment and the love affair continues to this day.

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Like Halifax, Nottingham is old almost beyond belief. The most obvious manifestation of this of course is the legend of Robin Hood. Interestingly Nottingham doesn't do much with the story - you'd almost think they were a little ashamed of him. However there is a statue of Robin Hood just below Nottingham Castle. There he stands proudly, his bow fully drawn, about to shoot an arrow into the air, to fall to earth, he knows not where...

Unfortunately the arrow is detachable and every so often it is, of course, detached. Generally by drunken students. The council heaves a deep sigh and the arrow eventually gets replaced from a secret stock. Apparently the original sculptor was well aware of the proclivities of students and had prudently provided the council with a number of spare arrows.

Towards the end of my time in Nottingham the council announced that it had run out of arrows. From now on, Robin would have an empty bow.

Consternation!

I'm not sure how the problem was eventually solved, but solved it must have been. Several years after I left the town I returned for a brief holiday. Robin again had an arrow on his bow, ready to shoot. Perhaps somebody had an attack of conscience and returned some of the stock.

When he was alive I'm sure that Robin Hood must have quaffed many a pint of ale at a pub called **The Trip To Jerusalem** which claims to be the oldest pub in England. It dates from the twelfth century and beer is still being served today in the original premises; for the pub is housed in a cave carved deeply into the sandstone below Nottingham castle. The ceilings are high and give every indication of not

having been cleaned since the pub first opened 900 years ago. Wise drinkers place their beer mats over their glasses rather than the other way round in order to prevent the detritus of centuries falling into the beer.

To the North West of Nottingham is the imaginatively named, but seemingly quite out place, village of Eastwood, where I lived for a time. I suppose that Eastwood must be to the East of something or somewhere significant, but I have no idea what or where that might be.

Eastwood was the birthplace of D. H. Lawrence, the scandalous author of **Lady Chatterly's Lover**. He was cordially hated by the entire village, for many of its inhabitants recognised defamatory images of themselves in his books. My landlady had been to school with Lawrence and refused to allow his name to be spoken in her house.

Almost directly North of the city was a village called, for no readily discernible reason, Arnold. I bought a house there, mainly because the words "I live in Arnold" put mad, science fictional pictures into my head. When driving to and from work I would often pretend that I had been miniaturised and injected into the bloodstream of a man called Arnold North and I was driving through his veins towards his heart where I would carefully destroy a vicious tumour. I think I must have recently read Asimov's *Fantastic Voyage*.

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There was a signpost on the Nottingham Ring Road that pointed down towards the general direction of the horizon. It said:

Birmingham  
53 miles

If you drove for a mile towards Birmingham, you came across another sign pointing in the same direction and urging you to continue your journey. It said:

Birmingham  
54 miles

If you were brave enough to continue further, Birmingham started behaving normally and got closer again. But it was obvious to me that there was a spatial anomaly built into that one brief mile of the Nottingham Ring Road. Probably it was related to the matter transmitter beam that brought the fish and the magazines to the Halifax market. Perhaps if I drove through it too frequently I would trigger a space warp and find myself instantly transported to an alien environment.

Probably Birmingham.

\* \* \* \*

I met a man called Peter Wilde who lived in a three storey house called **Tepid Welly** which was a partial anagram of his name. He had more science fiction books than I did, which is why he lived in a house with three storeys. I indulged myself in an orgy of borrowing and reading. We used to go drinking a lot together. Guinness mostly.

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that after three pints of Guinness everything sounds like a good idea.

"Lesh shtart a shcience fiction club!"

"OK"

Thus was born the Nottingham Science Fiction Club. But I must admit that there were motivating factors other than Guinness. Sex had a lot to do with it too.

There was a woman who I fancied something rotten. Most conversations with her were impeded by the drool dripping off my chin and my total inability to pronounce any words

more complicated than "..er". However I knew that she was vaguely interested in SF. What a conversational opening that would be!

"Would you be interested in joining a new science fiction club?"

Such style! Such subtlety! Such grace! So many syllables! She wasn't fooled for a minute; but it turned out not to matter.

After the Nottingham group formed I had an in (as it were) to the joys of organised science fiction and I began to hear about things called conventions. Several of us went along to one. I drove us all there in my trusty, rusty Volkswagen beetle (Alexander by name). I remember little about the convention apart from the Guinness, much of which was drunk at breakfast time to the great consternation of the hotel staff. However on the last day I eased up a little since I was to drive us all home. But my friend Howard did not ease up at all...

He slumped zombie-like in the passenger seat, his skin colour matching the upholstery perfectly. After I'd driven a hundred miles he said, "I can't feel my arms. Are they still there?"

I glanced over to him. "Yes," I reassured him. "They're still attached at the shoulders."

A hundred miles later he said, "Good."

\* \* \* \*

I've been going to conventions for more than thirty years. I've attended conventions, both large and small, in five countries. I've been closely involved in formal and informal science fiction organisations. I've made many close friendships with people who share my eccentric obsessions. And I've had a ball doing it.

Along the way I've read half a mile of science fiction books. That was a ball as well. Science fiction has given me

numerous insights into life, the universe and everything. It has taken me all the way from simple visceral excitement through to abstruse philosophical speculation via the borders of scientific research. It has given me, and it continues to give me, intense intellectual thrills, a spine tingling sense of wonder and gosh wow epiphanies.

I have one ambition left.

I want to make it to a mile of books before I die.

So now I must say goodbye to you - I've got some books to read.

# Paradise Revisited

I was off on my travels again; this time to Fiji, one of my favourite places, the land where the Spanish concept of *manana* is considered far too hasty a philosophy.

The instructions said: "Pick up your ticket from the Air Pacific office at Auckland airport." I looked, but I couldn't find an Air Pacific office anywhere.

I went to the airport Help Desk. "Where's the Air Pacific office, please?"

"There isn't one," said the Lady behind the desk. "United handles all Air Pacific bookings."

"Oh. OK - where's the United Airlines office then?"

"Just next door," she said. "They're closed."

I checked. The lights were off, the grille was down. Nobody home. The Help Desk Lady flipped through a book of words searching for alternatives. She was determined to Help me. As she turned the pages, a diagram caught my eye.

"Oh look," I said, pointing. "Air Pacific."

"Oh yes," said the Help Desk Lady, bewildered. "They have got an office here. I never knew that before."

We examined the page together and mapped out a route to the Air Pacific office. I followed it - down the corridor, up the stairs, turn left. There was a door with Air Pacific written upon it in large, friendly letters. The door was locked. I pounded upon it. Nobody home.

I went back to the Help Desk Lady and reported my lack of success. "Oh, how embarrassing," she said. "However I'm sure there will be somebody there soon."

The queue at the check in counter grew. People with Air Pacific tickets presented them and were duly checked in and assigned seats. They strolled off, flourishing their boarding



passes proudly. An idea occurred to me – perhaps I should ask a check-in person about my ticket. I joined the queue.

"Sorry," said the check-in person. "I work for Qantas. You'll have to wait for the Air Pacific people. Goodness knows where they are. I got called in at the last minute because nobody had turned up to check this flight in."

I trudged back to the Help Desk Lady. As I got there, the United Airlines office opened.

"Are you the Air Pacific agents?" I asked the Lady at the counter.

"Yes."

"I need to pick up a ticket."

"The office is down the corridor, up the stairs and turn left."

"I went there. It's locked. There's nobody in."

She picked up the phone and dialled. Nobody answered.

"They haven't arrived yet," she said. "Try again later."

People streamed past me, Air Pacific tickets clutched in their hands. They didn't know how lucky they were. The United Airlines Lady picked up the phone and dialled again. It rang, and rang and rang and rang. Finally the ringing woke someone. Annoyed, they answered the phone in order to shut it up.

"Hello, Sarah," said the United Airlines Lady. "Have you got a ticket for Mr Robson?"

She listened to a long explanation. "They'll bring it down soon," she said to me.

As I waited, vast hordes of people checked themselves in to fly to Fiji. I was very jealous, and mildly worried that the aeroplane might run out of seats. There were an awful lot of people...

Eventually Sarah appeared with an envelope. "Mr Robson?"

"Yes."

She gave me the envelope. I extracted my ticket and checked in. At last! I was going to Fiji.

The flight was uneventful and we landed at Nadi on time. I presented myself at the immigration desk with my passport and completed immigration form. The form had a spelling mistake on it - in the customs declaration section, the word "tobacco" was spelt "tabacco". I decided not to comment on it in case they took umbrage.

The immigration officer was a trappist monk who was taking a correspondence course in telepathy.

"Hello," I said, proffering my documents.

He glared at me and picked the papers up. He typed some incantations into his computer and frowned at the screen. He stamped my passport and scribbled on it. He glared at me again (he hated me) and then gave me my passport back.

"Thank you."

He said not a word. As I walked away, I could feel him remembering me so that he could hate me all over again when he got home.

I was staying at the Hotel Tokatoka which proudly proclaims itself to be both a hotel and a resort. This means that there is a large swimming pool with a restaurant and bar by the side of it. Swimmers can actually swim right up to the bar, order a drink and swim away with it to drink elsewhere. In the centre of the pool is a stage equipped with large amplifiers and every night the entertainment blasts out keeping weary travellers such as myself awake, and frightening the geckoes who live on the walls. (Every room in every hotel in Fiji has geckoes that run busily up and down the walls and across the ceilings. They live off mosquitoes and creepy-crawlies. Every tourist in Fiji loves the geckoes who live on the walls).

My bathroom had a full complement of small scurrying insects that were obviously unpalatable, for the geckoes who live on the walls ignored them completely. The insects looked terribly busy but remarkably inefficient as they scurried backwards and forwards repeatedly covering the

same ground. I sprayed them with water but it made no difference – they just altered their scurrying path slightly. So I sprayed them with the insect repellent I'd brought with me. Repulsed, they went away. Faint shrieks from next door suggested they had found a new home. I wished they'd gone and inflicted the death of a thousand itches on the band in the centre of the pool. The water would have been no barrier at all. But such was not to be. I went to bed and fell asleep to the soothing rhythms of **Twist and Shout** played at a thousand decibels.

On my second night in Fiji, the entertainment changed for the better. This time it was provided by a cultural group from the Cook Islands. The band pounded the drums with a percussive intensity that was impossible to resist. All over the pool area people jogged in time. One small boy accompanied the band by beating on the table (and very good he was too). Eventually his parents stopped him from doing it and he spent the rest of the evening playing the drums silently in mid air.

Then the dancing girls came on. Each had long flowing hair intertwined with garlands of flowers. They wore grass skirts with belts of leaves resting snugly on their hips. They shimmied and shook to the rhythm of the drums, bouncing their bottoms to a drumming that suddenly seemed strangely erotic. Then the drumming intensified as the warriors arrived. They stamped their feet and screamed a challenge. They shook their weapons at us and the drums pounded out a never-ending, heart-racing, increasingly frenetic rhythm that rose and rose and rose to a crashing crescendo.

It was, quite simply, superb.

I quickly discovered that ordering a meal from the hotel restaurant or a drink from the hotel bar was an exercise in applied bureaucracy which involved much scribbling on pre-printed forms of monumental complexity.

The order is taken and solemnly written down. The exact date and time of the order is recorded to the minute in triplicate on a form with interleaved carbons.

"What is your room number, sir?"

"I'll pay cash."

A look of panic – I've just broken the system. "I must have your room number, sir."

"Room 40".

This is recorded with great precision (probably to four decimal places, judging by the amount of time it takes to write the number down) and then the word "cash" is circled. The order is ferried off to the kitchen or the bar (whichever is the most appropriate) and sooner or later – generally later – the order arrives at my table. After I have eaten and/or drunk and it is time to pay, the fun starts again.

The first problem is finding my bill. There is much panic as all the myriad pieces of paper surrounding the till are examined minutely one by one; some of them are examined two or three times. None of them are mine. There follows much head scratching and discussion and all the pieces of paper are examined again. Triumph! One of them, generally the last one, proves to be mine. Obviously someone had sneaked it into the pile when none of us were looking. A calculator is produced, the total is checked twice and then written down. Again, the exact date and time is recorded (to the minute, naturally). I hand over some money and another panic ensues as it is discovered that the till is empty. Everyone rushes around madly and empties their pockets of loose change. They hunt frantically in drawers and cupboards, looking for the till float. Eventually it is found in the cutlery drawer. I am given my change together with the yellow bottom copy of the form complete with smudgy carbon hieroglyphs. I throw it away. The other two copies are carefully filed and presumably will later have their details transcribed into permanent ledgers, probably leather bound. In five hundred years time, long after I am dead,

archivists of the future will experience indescribable intellectual thrills when they learn that I ordered a continental breakfast at 6:47am on July 16<sup>th</sup> 2002 and then paid \$14.00 for it at 7:18am on the same day.

I was in Fiji to run a training course for Air Pacific. Every day I walked from my hotel to the airport where the training was to take place. It was about a ten minute stroll, but since the sun pounded down even in the early morning it was always an enormous relief to arrive in the air conditioned office.

Every morning I said, "Bula!" to the office staff and every morning they said, "Bula!" back to me.

The course attendees were all working on Fiji time and therefore I knew that the training would always start at least half an hour late. I used the extra time to check my email. However even the electrons in the wires were working on Fiji time. They all took a rest in the resistors and hung around the capacitors drinking kava with their friends and swapping lies. My internet connection was very s-l-o-w.

On Thursday I learned that there was an industrial dispute simmering. By that evening, tempers were rising. As I left, the manager said, "They're probably going to go on strike. Your flight home might be cancelled."

On Friday morning I said, "Bula!" to faces I didn't recognise. Everyone was on strike and the office was manned by an emergency skeleton staff of non-union members.

"Bula!" they said cheerfully back to me.

The manager told me that Air Pacific was desperately trying to hire planes from Qantas and Air New Zealand to handle their stranded passengers. "So you should be able to get home," he said. "But it might be a good idea to ring the flight people and confirm it."

All day as I ran my course I was conscious of a meeting going on in a room across the corridor. A government

minister was meeting the strike leaders to discuss the situation. Quite apart from the economic consequences of the strike, the government was finding it politically embarrassing as well for they were hosting an international conference. The ACP (the initials stand for African, Caribbean and Pacific) is a loose UN-like confederation of nations. The delegates to the Fiji conference included many presidents and prime ministers. A strike of the national airline would not only leave the delegates stranded, it would leave the Fiji government with a lot of egg on its collective face; a situation they were anxious to avoid. Hence the minister, the meeting and the tired faces, for all involved had been talking throughout most of the night.

That evening I walked back to the hotel and rang the Air Pacific reservations office.

"I'd like advice on what to do about my flight on Sunday, in view of the strike."

"Strike?" said the Air Pacific Lady. "What strike? Nobody's told me about any strike."

Since I'd just left the almost deserted office where the ministerial meeting was still in progress, I was dubious about the accuracy of her information.

I turned on the television to see the news. The very first story was about the strike. I went down to the hotel desk to see if they had any information. They had a fax from Air Pacific. All Friday's flights were cancelled and the passengers had been re-booked on Air New Zealand and Qantas flights that had been diverted from their normal routes to make an unscheduled stop to pick up the extra people.

The next day being Saturday, I played tourist and went for an island cruise on the *Seaspray*, an 83 foot long two-masted sailing ship built in 1928 in Scotland. Her paint was flaking a little, but she was basically sound and very pretty indeed. The crew welcomed us on board.

"The bar will stay open all day. We have wine, champagne and Fiji beer. Help yourself whenever you like. Don't worry about the ship sinking. You'll all be fine - remember, the more you drink, the better you float!"

As we sailed out to the islands, the crew played guitar and sang to the tune of "Waltzing Matilda":

Once a jolly Fiji man  
Sat by the kava bowl...

We spent most of the day on Mordriki island where Tom Hanks filmed **Castaway**. It's a small, uninhabited island in the middle of nowhere. All you can hear is the gentle sound of the shining blue sea. The sun bounces off each wavelet and they shimmer and sparkle like liquid diamonds as they hiss gently towards the shore. I sat on a rock and read a book. It was indescribably peaceful, indescribably beautiful. The *Seaspray* lay at anchor in the bay, sails furled. The beach was golden, the palm trees were full of coconuts.

When we got back on board the ship, one of the crew said: "The bar is open! You've come back from Mordriki Island. If you can't remember the name, just think 'More Drinking!!' It's easy!"

I arrived back at my hotel quite late in the evening. I rang Air Pacific, but nobody answered the phone. Presumably they were on strike. I went and asked at the hotel desk. The lady behind the counter showed me the fax they had received from Air Pacific the previous day.

"No, I said. This fax give details of yesterday's flights. My flight is tomorrow."

She rang a secret number and talked for about five minutes.

"Check in at 5.00am," she said. "Your flight will take off as scheduled at 7.00am."

I was astounded, and I didn't believe a word of it. However, having no choice in the matter, I reported to the airport next morning at the ungodly hour of 5.00am. To my

astonishment, the check in desk was open. A large notice said:

Electronic or electrical devices can be used to conceal bombs.

if you are carrying electronic or electrical devices in your luggage

you must declare them at the check in counter. If you do not declare them

and they are found in a spot check the airline may refuse to carry your baggage.

I presented my passport and ticket to the lady behind the check in counter.

"I've got a hair dryer, a beard trimmer, a Palm Pilot and a mobile phone," I said.

She was dubious.

"And an electric toothbrush," I added.

"I think they might be all right," she said. "Don't use your mobile phone during the flight."

"Of course not," I said, shocked. The very idea!

She looked as if she didn't believe me. She checked me in and gave me my luggage receipt. I put my hand baggage through the X-Ray machine and went through the metal detector. It was turned up to an insanely high level of sensitivity and it screamed like a banshee when I walked through. I was descended upon by a beefy guard who waved his wand over me. It beeped warningly on my watch, my rings, my belt buckle, the zipper in my trousers, the gold chain around my neck and my medic-alert bracelet, none of which have ever given me a moment's trouble at any other airport. He scrutinised all of them (except for the zipper in my trousers, of course) and then reluctantly waved me through.

I picked up my bag, but before I could walk off with it, another security person demanded to see inside it. She emptied the bag out and then picked each item up one by



one and examined it suspiciously. My can of insect repellent was scrutinised closely. She took the top off and tried a practice squirt to make sure that it wasn't a bomb. My pen was dismantled completely in case it had a bomb inside. She scribbled with it on a piece of scrap paper to prove that it would write. She examined every key on my key ring and turned on both my mobile phone and my Palm Pilot to see if they would explode. She seemed vaguely disappointed when they didn't. She flipped through the pages in my book in case I had a bomb cunningly concealed in its hollowed out pages. She jammed everything back into my bag and rather bad temperedly let me go.

I consoled myself by spending lots of money in the duty free shop.

That was Fiji this time.

Bula!

# Borering

The stench in the back room had become quite unbearable. Opinion was divided as to which cat was peeing and pooing in the room. Was it one of ours, or was it next door's cat? Undeniably next door's cat has been sneaking in and stealing the food we put out for our cats; we've caught it in the act of eating several times. But we've never actually caught any of the cats *in flagrante delicto* in the back room. All we've ever found is the damp, brown very smelly evidence that they have indeed been in there.

We sprayed the carpet with perfumed oriental elixirs; we plugged in an electronic gadget that was guaranteed to fill the room with the scent of roses; all to no avail. The stench of cat urine triumphed over every weapon we could bring to bear against it. The carpet would have to go.

"Hmmm," said Robin once the carpet had been removed. "I wonder what that is?"

One of the floorboards looked decidedly odd. Sort of lumpy in spots and sunken in others. Robin poked it with a dubious finger. "It feels squishy."

Squishy?

She scratched at it. Great clods of sawdust accumulated beneath her fingernails. Hmmm...

I thumped it with a hammer that I happened to have handy. The board disintegrated. I looked through the hole down into the foundations of the house. Bits of builders rubble covered with a light coating of sawdust and small lumps of floorboard stared back at me.

"I don't think that is normal behaviour for a healthy plank of wood," I remarked.

"No," said Robin. "I don't think it is."

We examined the remnants of the suspicious floorboard closely. It showed distinct traces of having been chewed up by some ferociously large insect. Giant sawdust-clogged tunnels vanished deep into the interior. Small amounts of tunnelling were also visible in adjacent boards, though to nothing like the same extent. Perhaps this insect was a homebody and did not like moving out of the safety and comfort of its baseboard.

"I think," I said, "that I'd better ring a carpenter. This might be a rather large job."

Fortunately, just the day before, a junk mail leaflet had appeared in our mailbox. Speedy Sam the Handy Man was apparently only a phone call away. No job too small, said the leaflet. Twenty four hour, seven day a week service. Call this number.

I called the number, but Speedy Sam wasn't at home. Doubtless he was racing to an appointment at 186,000 miles per second. His answering service responded to my phone call.

I explained my predicament. "I'll get someone to call you," said the helpful answering service lady.

While I waited for Speedy Sam to ring me back, I examined the floor again. It was obvious that the badly chewed board would have to be removed completely. There was almost no wood left in it at all. It was mostly sawdust held together by inertia, will power, and insect spit. So I hacked and hammered for a while and got rid of it. Then I examined the adjacent boards. These were much more sturdy - the burrowing insect had barely begun its depredations here. However to make assurance doubly sure, I decided to remove these boards as well. I brought out my trusty saw and demolished them. During the course of this destruction I came across the grey corpse of a single beetle-like creature about a quarter of an inch long. Obviously this was the fanatical tunneller that had chewed its way through my floorboards. I consigned it to perdition. I was rather

pleased to find only one – I had been dreading finding a whole colony of them, but there was no trace whatsoever of any other insect, alive or dead.

All this demolition took several days. During this time, the phone remained ominously silent. Speedy Sam was obviously moving at considerably less than the speed of light. Perhaps he could only manage the speed of sound. Or maybe he had failed to gain a dispensation from the Traffic Gods and was therefore restricted to 50kph in urban areas, on pain of having his picture taken and massive fines imposed. I found this quite disappointing. I was rather fond of my mental picture of a cartoon-like whirl of activity inside a tornado of dust as Speedy Sam raced between appointments, fixing things in an instant. Eventually, at long, long last, the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Ah, hello," said a slow, droning, incredibly laid back voice. "This is Speedy Sam. I understand you have a job you want doing?"

The last of my illusions was shattered. Speedy Sam was really Lazy Larry in a skin. I was bitterly disappointed; my view of the universe permanently soured. I sighed for the loss of such sweet innocence. Never again will I take a junk mail flyer at its word.

"Sorry," I said, "but I've made other arrangements."

By now I had a hole five planks wide in my floor. It was obviously time to purchase five planks of wood. I measured the planks and took a sample with me for matching purposes. The first place I visited failed to fill me with confidence.

"I wonder what kind of wood that is," said the man. "I haven't got any of it here."

He took my sample and held it up against various pieces of pine. It didn't match any of them. "Definitely not pine," he said.

I went to another purveyor of wood. This time things were a little better. "Rimu," said the man decisively. "It's rimu."

"What about the tunnelling?" I asked. "What's been chewing it up?"

"Looks like bush borer," he said with gloomy delight. "Nasty buggers. Much bigger than the usual house borer. Chew their way through an entire tree quick as a wink, those things can. Nothing left but a tube of bark filled with sawdust. Sneeze too hard and the whole forest falls down!"

He paused, entranced by his apocalyptic vision of devastation. "Little buggers," he said in heartfelt tones. "The milling process usually kills them, but sometimes an occasional one survives. There probably isn't much of an infestation in your house though. I doubt it will have spread very far. You'll be OK as long as you don't sneeze."

"Have you got any rimu?" I asked.

"Oooh no, squire. No rimu. Not allowed to sell rimu any more. It's a protected species you know. They don't cut down rimu trees now - big trouble if you cut down a rimu tree. It's been years since anyone used rimu. Years."

"What can I do?"

"Well there's the demolition yards. They get a fair bit of rimu in when they pull down old houses. And there's City Timber - they specialise in native wood. But whatever you do, it's going to be very expensive. Hard to get hold of rimu these days."

He shook his head sadly in grim satisfaction at my plight and at the vast amounts of money he was sure that it would cost me.

"I know," said Robin. "Let's tear up the whole floor, sell all the rimu for a fortune and replace it with pine."

There was a certain attractiveness in this idea - but the thought of the work involved made me shudder. "Let's not," I said.

We drove to City Timber, but it was Sunday and they were shut. I would be unable to visit them now until the following Saturday (they are too far from my office for me to be able to get to them during my lunch hour). So the project screeched to a dead halt and I went home to stare at the hole in the floor.

Over the course of the next few days I related this sad tale to several friends. "Oh aren't you lucky!" exclaimed one. "You've got rimu floors. Gosh I'm so jealous. My floors are all made out of weetbix board."

I spent the week waging chemical warfare. I equipped myself with every evil borer control chemical known to man. I sprayed the area under the floor with three extremely copious sprays just in case there were any eggs in the sawdust and I painted the boards around the gaping hole with three coats of nastiness to discourage anything that might still be lurking in the wood.

Eventually Saturday morning arrived and it was time to visit City Timber. An extremely helpful man examined my sample board and listened to my tale of woe.

"It's sap rimu," he said authoritatively. "I haven't got any of that in stock but I have got some heart rimu which should be a pretty good match. Let's have a look."

We went into the workshop and compared the sample to the stock. Heart rimu looked a good bet, but one more problem remained.

"Hmmm," said the man, "it looks like your floorboards have been cut to imperial measurements, and I only have metric boards."

I looked closely - all the boards he had in stock were fractionally wider than my sample board. This was obviously going to cause fitting problems.

"I can put them through the machine," he said, "and beat them a bit closer to size. That might help."

He took some of his planks down to the far end of the warehouse and fed them into an extraordinarily noisy

machine. It clashed and clattered and clanged and the boards emerged from the far end marginally thinner than they had been when they went in. I bought five planks. It cost me \$89 – which was far less than I'd been expecting to have to pay. Feeling pleased, I took them home and commenced repair work on my floor.

It was very easy to fit the first four planks. I just cut them to size and nailed them into place. But number five proved to be a problem. Despite all the planks having travelled through the noisy beating machine, they were still just that little smidgeon too wide. And by the time I came to fit the last one into place, the accumulation of errors meant that the plank was about 2mm wider than the gap it had to fit into.

The first rule of carpentry is "if it doesn't fit, use a bigger hammer". I used my very biggest hammer, but to no avail. No matter how hard I thumped it, it wasn't going to go. More subtle strategies were obviously required...

Working extremely slowly and carefully, I chiselled 2mm of wood from the edge of a floorboard on one side of the gap. This was extremely painstaking work for I had to be very careful not to chisel too much, and not to split the board. Fortunately I possess a very sharp chisel and I have not yet completely forgotten the chiselling skills that were hammered into me during month after tedious month of practice in long ago woodworking classes at school.

After several hours of closely concentrated chiselling I tried the last plank again. It slid neatly into its gap, fitting snugly up against its neighbours on both sides. A triumph of the chiseller's art!

Now all that remained was to punch the nails so that they sunk slightly into the wood, fill all the nail holes with plastic rimu paste, sand it all down and then polyurethane the floor. Tedious but simple.

And now that I've finished writing this article, I'm going to go and put the third coat of polyurethane on to my newly

solid floor...



# Alan and Robin Go Shopping

"What this room needs is a new lounge suite," I said.

"You've been saying that for the last nine months," Robin pointed out with delicate tact. "Perhaps it's time to get your finger out?"

With me, to conceive of an idea is to put it into practice. We drove immediately to Harvey Norman Furniture in Porirua.

The store was huge. The showroom stretched on forever, vanishing into a grey swirling mist at the limits of vision. The lounge suites were arranged in order of price. Just inside the front door they were made of cardboard and string and cost 3/6d, but as we followed them deep into the bowels of the store they gradually became more expensive, more luxurious and considerably less cat proof.

"Can you imagine what Ginger's claws would do that leather upholstery?" Robin shuddered with horror. "It doesn't bear thinking about."

The prices seemed to go up by about a thousand dollars per kilometre travelled. By the time we got a thousand kilometres into the store we were well into millionaire territory. The suites were upholstered in phoenix feathers and came with matching pouffs carved from solid rubies. We decided it was time to look elsewhere. Just across the road was a bargain furniture shop. Perhaps they would have a bargain.

"'ello squire," said a greasy man, "wot can we do you for, eh?"

"We're looking for a lounge suite."

"Oh, a lounge suite is it? We got lounge suites. Oh yes, do you a very nice line in lounge suites we can. 'Ow about this one then?"

It was purple and it smirked. Robin sat in it and an expression of deep contentment spread all over her face. I sat down beside her. I felt as if I would go on sinking into the sofa forever. Even when the first kiss of bottom to cushion had taken up most of the softness there was still a small sensation of sinking by increments that just went on and on and on for ever. It was indescribably comfortable, blissfully snug. And purple.

"Do you a good price, squire. Just to get it off the floor. New stock coming in all the time; we got to clear the floor. Special floor price, just for you."

"It's purple, " I said. "And I don't like the expression on its face."

"Yes," said Robin whose favourite colour is purple.  
"Purple."

"I'm not sure purple will go with the lounge that we have."

"It might be a bit dark," she conceded.

"Comfortable though," I said.

Robin got a wistful look. "Purple..."

We went back to Harvey Norman Furniture. When we reached the three kilometre mark, where prices were just starting to climb from outrageous to impossible, I heard choirs of angels and golden trumpets, and a celestial spotlight shone on an elegant couch.

"I'm sure that wasn't there last time we looked."

"No," agreed Robin. "It wasn't."

The couch was upholstered in glowing golden fabric and there were polished wooden inlays on each side, a perfect match for our polished wooden floors and our polished wooden wall.

"That is just the perfect colour," said Robin.

"Yes dear," I said and meant it.

We sat in the couch. While it lacked the sybaritic comfort of the smirking purple bargain, it was not without its own hedonistic delights. We sank deep into the cushions, rested our arms on the arm rests so thoughtfully provided at just the proper angle and turned to look at each other.

"Let's buy it!"

There remained only two problems. The floor display of this perfect suite had a three seater settee and two single chairs. We wanted a three seater and a two seater. We needed to confirm that this arrangement was configurable. The second problem was closely related to the first. We needed a Harvey Norman Furniture staff person to confirm this arrangement with, but there was none to be seen. Unlike the bargain furniture place where the greasy man attached himself immovably as soon as you entered the door, Harvey Norman Furniture was discreet, allowing you ample time to make your own mind up. Some might say they were too discreet. The store appeared denuded of staff.

"Perhaps I should just put the suite into my pocket and walk out," I mused. "A three seater and two single chairs isn't too bad, when all's said and done."

"It'll never work," said Robin. "You'll set off the magnetic alarm when you walk through the door. You are so impractical sometimes, Alan."

Suddenly I spotted a salesman hurrying past.

"Excuse me," I asked, "can you help?"

"Sorry," he said, looking harassed, "this isn't my department. I'm just taking a shortcut to the electronic goods section. I think it's about ten thousand kilometres that way." He gestured vaguely at the grey mist that roiled and heaved in the far distance and then plunged courageously into it. Faint screams emerged, and we never saw him again.

Then, just when I thought all hope was lost, the lovely Shari arrived.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes please - can we have this one in a three and a two instead of a three and two ones?"

"But of course," she said, obligingly.

She took us over to her computer. "I forgot my glasses this morning," she said, squinting at the screen. "I hope I type it all in correctly." She began to bang the keys. As she typed, she murmured, "Amsterdam 3+2 silksuede, colour jonquil." She looked up and smiled radiantly. "It should be ready in four to six weeks."

"Do you deliver on Saturdays?" I asked.

"Oh yes - in fact I'll let you into a secret." She leaned close and whispered, "Sometimes we even deliver on Sunday!" She sat back, delighted with herself.

"Perfect!" I said.

"Do you want it scotch guarded?" asked Shari. "It's got a five year guarantee and it makes the fabric so much easier to look after and it's only an extra \$250."

"Yes," said Robin decisively. "We've got two cats who are prone to vomit. Scotch guard is good."

"There's a \$45 delivery fee."

"OK"

"And GST is \$282.78."

"Humph!"

"Making a grand total of \$3,545."

"That can't be right." I'd been doing approximations in my head as she spoke. "That's about \$1000 too much."

Shari got flustered. "Oh I wish I hadn't forgotten my glasses," she cried. "My arithmetic goes all to pot when I don't wear my glasses because I can't see my toes."

She tried again, muttering to herself as she typed things into the computer. Then she hauled out a calculator and typed furiously on that as well. She frowned at both machines. Then she took an abacus out of her desk drawer and blew the dust off it. Her fingers flew across the beads. "\$2,545," she declared triumphantly and beamed at us. She held the abacus out to me so I could check her figures. I

confirmed the calculation with a slide rule and a set of Napier's Bones.

"It's a deal!"

We had a new lounge suite.

# Milopuss Ipsissimus

Milo the Cat died of kidney failure on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2002. He was sixteen years old.

I first met Milo and his sister Ginger when they were only a year old. My wife Rosemary spotted the advert in the paper.

"Look," she said. "Milo and Ginger. Terrible names, but you can't have everything. The owners are going overseas. Let's ring them up and go and see the cats."

"Do we need two cats?" I asked, dubiously.

"Of course we do," said Rosemary, horrified that I could ever have thought otherwise.

We took the travelling cage with us, just in case Milo and Ginger wanted to come home with us that day, and off we went to meet them.

The lady of the house answered the door. "My husband can't come to say hello," she said. "He's in the lounge with Milo."

I found this a puzzling statement, but she took us through to the lounge and all was revealed. The man of the house was lying to attention in an easy chair. Milo was sprawled out huge and black on his chest, purring like a power drill and dribbling copiously. This was a position with which I was to become all too familiar over the next fifteen years...

"Sometimes you have to turn him upside down," explained the man, and he demonstrated the technique. "That way the dribble goes back inside." Milo lay blissfully content while the man tickled his tummy.

Gradually it dawned on Milo that something new had happened. Oooh! People! Are they any good at stroking? He struggled upright, yawned like a gaping chasm so that we

could admire his fangs, and then jumped down onto the floor.

"Oooof!" came a sudden gasp as Milo propelled himself into space from the launching pad of the man's tummy. This too was a noise that I would soon become very practised in making...

Milo rubbed himself against us and we stroked his soft, black fur. Ginger came in from the garden where she had been chasing butterflies, and she too immediately made a bee-line for us and got a good stroking. I looked at Rosemary, and Rosemary looked at me and she nodded. No words needed to be said. We both knew that we had found two wonderful cats.

We put them in the cage, which surprised and upset them. I carried the cage out of the house and put it in the car and they began to wail piteously. As I drove away, I saw the lady of the house waving goodbye to them. There were tears streaming down her face.

Milo and Ginger howled and cried all the way home. Rosemary spoke to them soothingly as I drove, but they paid no attention. Their world had been turned upside down, and they didn't care who knew it.

I carried the cage into the lounge and we made sure all the doors were closed. Then I opened the cage. Ginger jumped out and immediately began to explore. She was obviously frightened, but she had an urgent need to know where she was. Milo took one horrified look at all the strangeness that surrounded him and immediately ran underneath the couch where he stayed immobile for twenty four hours until hunger, thirst and internal hydraulic pressure forced him out into the world again.

From the point of view of Milo and Ginger it was an inauspicious beginning. But it would lead to great things for all of us.

We soon learned their idiosyncrasies. Ginger was very athletic and liked to chase things. There was a tree in the

front garden that shed small, hard unidentifiable fruit all over the deck. I would throw these, and Ginger would leap off the deck and chase them as they bounced around the garden. When she was sure they were dead, she would sometimes bring them back to me as a gift. Milo would watch all this with a slightly bewildered air. He was a somnolent cat and he had no truck with all this activity. He preferred to curl up in the sunshine. As the sun moved away, he would sigh heavily, and plod after it until he found another comfortable patch of sunlight to plonk himself down in. He would sometimes give me reproachful looks. Why did I keep moving the sun thereby forcing him to expend energy chasing it? He always forgave me at dinner time.

Both cats appeared to be descended from monkeys and would happily chase each other up trees. Ginger in particular seemed more comfortable the higher up she was. But even Milo appeared to get pleasure out of high things. Once I was standing in the kitchen doing the washing up when I glanced out of the window and saw Milo walking casually over the roof of the house across the way. This was astonishing for there were no trees or poles overlooking the house and I have absolutely no idea how he got up there. I can only assume that, like most cats, he had the ability to teleport himself into and out of anywhere at will; provided nobody was watching of course.

He wandered up to the top of the roof, sat down and washed himself and then vanished down the other side. He was back safely in time for tea. He was always back safely in time for tea. In the whole of his life he never missed a meal.

Ginger was the hunter of the family. Most nights Milo would sleep on the bed with us, but Ginger would spend the night outside hunting things. In the morning she would often refuse breakfast because she was full of fur and feathers. She would bring home the choicest kills for all of us to appreciate and we soon got used to being woken up in the



wee small hours of the morning when she came in howling that very special howl that means, "Come here immediately and see what I've got for you!"

Birds, lizards, mice, rats and miscellaneous insects and arachnids - all were ruthlessly hunted down and killed and eaten. Her greatest triumph, from my point of view, was an entire bird's nest complete with two dead birds; though she herself seemed far more proud of the chicken breast she hunted down and killed one Saturday afternoon at next door's barbecue.

During one particularly productive week, she brought home three lizards, half a dozen mice, a rat, two wetas, four birds, a kitchen sink and a partridge in a pear tree. The pear tree was too large to fit through the cat flap, but she brought it in anyway. Milo and I were ragged and irritable with lack of sleep for we had been woken up at almost hourly intervals during the week to admire her trophies. Milo decided that something would have to be done.

At some ungodly hour the next morning I was woken by the familiar howling, but this time the voice was slightly deeper and more penetrating. Blearily I staggered to the back of the house where the cat flap was. Milo the great hunter was there to greet me.

"Look at that!" he said proudly and showed me a stick insect.

He was good with insects. We had a large population of cicadas in the garden and during the spring and summer they would buzz their little hearts out, sometimes drowning the sound of the television. On several occasions I saw Milo sneak up on a cicada and grab it. Then he would sit there looking slightly bemused as it buzzed inside his mouth. Eventually it would get waterlogged and stop buzzing and he would spit it out onto the lawn. It would crawl away wetly, a sadder and a wiser insect. Meanwhile Milo would go and catch another one and do it again. I think he liked the vibration inside his head. Probably it echoed through the

vast empty caverns of his skull (let's face it, there weren't any brains in there), and it just felt good.

I used to put scraps out for the birds. If ever Ginger was around the birds would fly up into the trees and hurl insults at her. But many times I saw Milo sitting benignly in the middle of the lawn while around him whole flocks of birds hopped and pecked and guzzled. They had him sussed straight away; they knew he was a wuss.

After fourteen years of being educated by Ginger, Milo finally caught a mouse. Actually I suspect it was senile and had died of old age and decrepitude. He probably found it lying somewhere and he only pretended to us that he caught it - but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He was ever so proud of himself.

"Look! I got a mouse! Isn't it the best mouse you ever saw?"

Ginger watched all this with mounting horror. Mice were hers! How dare he encroach on her territory. She sat in his blind spot awaiting her moment. Then she spotted her opportunity. Her paw shot out as fast as lightning and she hooked a claw into the mouse, dragged it away from Milo, popped it in her mouth and then ran out to the back of the house and ate it. It was all over in a fraction of a second and Milo blinked and missed it.

"There was a mouse here a minute ago. I remember it distinctly - it was a wonderful mouse! Where's it gone?"

He looked terribly bewildered, and he spent the next hour or so sniffing here and there in a bemused way, searching for his mouse.

But now that he'd finally learned to hunt, he realised it was in his blood. There was more hunting to be done; and on some nights, when it was fine and there wasn't an 'R' in the month, he would desert the warmth and comfort of the bed and go hunting for prey.

One bleak morning at 3.30am I was woken by the familiar howling and I went to investigate. There was Milo,

proud as a peacock. He'd hunted down and killed a slice of bread. There was the corpse, eviscerated on the kitchen floor. I praised him to the skies. Milo the Mighty, great hunter, great warrior. He lapped it up. Life doesn't get any better than this.

A few days later I was again woken by the howling. Milo really was making the most of this hunting thing. But when I went to examine what he had brought home this time, I found that he looked a little dejected and there was nothing to be seen. There was only one logical conclusion to be drawn. The bread must have put up a fierce struggle and escaped!

But Milo didn't despair and he didn't give up. About a fortnight before he died, he really got the hang of this hunting business, and he scored his ultimate triumph. He brought home a slice of toast.

Nunc dimittis.

And then, soon after, a hooded shape leaned over Milo holding a scythe. The face deep in the hood was in total blackness except for blue, gleaming almond shaped eyes.

IT'S TIME TO GO, MILO.

"Go where?", said Milo. "I'm happy here."

TOO LATE. HERE YOU ARE, said the Death of Moggies.

"That's what I said," Milo replied. "I'm happy here. Wha... Where's the sunshine? Where's Alan? Who are you? What are you doing in my yard? I'm going to tell Alan. He'll fix you."

SOME THINGS EVEN ALAN CAN'T FIX. I'M DEATH. I'VE COME FOR YOU, MILO.

"No," protested Milo. "I have things to do, sun to sit in, mice and bread to catch. I have to catch up on my sleep. And I have to watch that Ginger. Grrr, look. That darn Ginger is eating my food. I'll fix her. Whoops, my paw went right through her nose. Hey, I don't hurt anymore!"

THAT'S RIGHT, NO MORE PAIN. UNLESS YOU CHOSE ANOTHER LIFE. The Death of Moggies sounded a little

uncertain about this last statement. He knew all about death, but he found life a little puzzling.

"Mrrr," said Milo. "I think I'll just have a snooze and think about it. I'm not sure I could ever have another home as good as this one. Poor Alan, how will he manage without me?"

YOU HAD GOOD KARMA. The Death of Moggies was quite certain about this point. ALAN WILL BE PLEASED ABOUT THAT.

"Too right," said Milo. "Meow."  
MEOW.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to my good friend Nancy Peterson who eavesdropped on the conversation between Milo and the Death of Moggies and who reported back to me what was said. Thank you very much, Nancy.

# Mother Out Law's Tongue

Robin and I had it all planned. My mother-out-law was arriving for a holiday shortly after midnight on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> November (actually, to be precise, that's really the small minutes of Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> of November). I was teaching in Auckland that week but I was booked to fly back to Wellington on the 8.30pm flight which meant I should get home about 10.00pm. Just enough time to give the house a spit and a polish, sufficient to remove the more festering growths, and then off to the airport to pick up Phyllis.

I got to Auckland airport for my flight home just after 7.00pm. My 8.30 flight was on the board, but the ominous word **DELAYED** was displayed against it. I went to check in.

"I'm on the 8.30 to Wellington," I said. "Any chance of an earlier flight?"

"It depends what kind of ticket you have," said the man, and he banged a few keys on the keyboard and frowned at the screen. Then he shook his head sadly. "Sorry squire," he said in tones of deepest indifference, "you've got a T-class ticket. No transfers allowed. If you want an earlier flight you'll have to buy a whole new ticket."

"Damn! Oh well, I'd better go on the flight I'm booked on. How long is it delayed for?"

He tapped a few more keys. "Three hours," he said lugubriously.

"Oh come on!" I said. "That's ridiculous - do I really have to hang about for the next four hours waiting for the stupid thing? Isn't there anything you can do?"

"I'll talk to my supervisor," he said reluctantly and disappeared round the back.

A few moments later he returned. "I'll put you on standby for the 7.00pm flight," he said. "That's only delayed by one

and a half hours."

"Yes - that's much better," I said. He didn't react and I began to feel that perhaps irony was over-rated as a communication method.

He tied a yellow standby ticket on my bag and put it on the conveyor to the nether regions. The yellow sticker looked quite pretty next to the red priority sticker. I waved my bag a fond farewell and proceeded through security to the Koru Club lounge where I waited with keen anticipation for the flight to be called. Would I make it on board?

Then, wonder of wonders, I was paged to the desk.

"We've got you on the flight, Mr Robson," said the nice lady and she gave me a boarding pass for seat 14B which proved to be the middle seat of a row of three. An extremely large gentleman had the window seat and he overflowed generously into my space from the left. An even larger gentleman had the aisle seat and he overflowed into my space from the right. I crunched up small and read my book, dreaming about deep vein thrombosis caused by my utter inability to move for the duration of the flight.

Now that Air New Zealand has become an economy airline it no longer serves a meal on the flight between Auckland and Wellington. However in order to give the cabin crew something to do after they have gabbled their indifferent way through the safety demonstration, coffee and tea are served. First a trolley is trundled down the aisle and cups and saucers are handed out. This is followed, after a decent interval, by a man wielding jugs.

Everyone let down the tray table conveniently located in the back of the seat in front of them, and placed their cup and saucer on it. At that point we all made the very interesting discovery that the tray tables sloped downwards at slight angle below the horizontal, and no matter how carefully you placed the cup and saucer on the tray, they always slid down towards you and fell off into your lap.

All around me worried commuters pushed their cup and saucer up to the top of the tray table. Then they watched it slide down again, and just before disaster intervened, they pushed it back up. We all diverted ourselves with this game for several minutes while we waited for the cabin staff to come round and fill the cups.

The cups were pushed up, the cups slid down. In the early seventeenth century Galileo Galilei spent a lot of time sliding things up and down inclined planes that looked suspiciously like the tray table in front of me. From these experiments he deduced the basic laws of motion that were later embodied in Isaac Newton's first two laws. One of his deductions was that objects fell with a constant acceleration in a gravitational field. It didn't matter how light or heavy they were, they all fell at the same rate. I seem to recall an astronaut on one of the moon walks demonstrating this interesting fact by dropping a feather and a hammer. In the vacuum of the moon, with no air to support the feather, both hit the ground at exactly the same time.

The steward filled my cup with liquid mud coffee substitute, thereby making it substantially heavier than it had previously been. Immediately it slid down the tray table much faster than it had before! Somehow Air New Zealand had managed to repeal the laws of physics. All around me I could hear the screams of scalded commuters as the cups raced speedily down the tray tables.

Once we were all suitably refreshed, the cabin staff came round and collected our dirty cups from our soggy laps. We all stowed our tray tables away, glad that our ordeal was over. Soon my ears began to pop - we were starting our descent into Wellington.

We landed with the normal wobble and thud that accompanies most flights into Wellington and taxied to the terminal. The gentleman on my right struggled into the aisle and I managed to breathe properly for the first time in an

hour. My deep vein thrombosis miraculously vanished. I trotted off to claim my luggage.

You will recall that my luggage, festooned with yellow standby labels and red priority labels, was last seen disappearing into a black hole on the conveyor in Auckland. The priority label is supposed to ensure that it is among the first bags off the plane. Because I was a standby passenger, my bag must have been one of the very last on board. For both of these reasons, I was sure that it would be among the first into view.

Air New Zealand baggage handlers are the slowest in the known universe. Once, on a flight to a provincial city, I waited for my bags to appear for longer than the actual flight itself had taken. In the main centres it normally takes about twenty minutes before the first bags trundle into view. Today was no exception. But yet again, Air New Zealand proved their mastery over the laws of the universe. Despite the fact that my bag was the last one on the plane, it was also one of the last ones off the plane as well. I had almost given up hope and was about to report it missing when it finally appeared, looking rather embarrassed at the delay it had caused. So much for the priority sticker for which I pay \$350 a year to have attached to my bags. Everyone always ignores it. I can't think why I bother.

There is a very good reason why Air New Zealand is losing money hand over fist. And it isn't the high quality of their service.

Because I had travelled on the plane that was only running an hour and a half late, as opposed to the one that was running three hours late, I was home by the original expected time. The mother-out-law plans were still on schedule.

It was growing dark and the manky bits in the house were becoming hard to identify. I half-heartedly wielded a vacuum cleaner hither and yon, but I can't honestly say that anything much changed. Robin put clean sheets on the



guest bed, and we were ready to go. I drove out to the airport. It looked strangely familiar, almost as if I had been there before. We arrived shortly after midnight. The Air New Zealand flight had just landed - I knew it would be hours before we saw Phyllis. After all, the luggage alone could take days to work its way through the system. And then she would have to come through customs.

Uncounted aeons later she finally appeared through the immigration barriers. "The luggage took forever to appear," she said. I nodded knowledgeably. "Of course," she added thoughtfully, "my suitcase went round three times before I recognised it. I had a ribbon tied on it so I could spot it easily but the ribbon had fallen off in transit and I didn't notice."

"Welcome to New Zealand, Phyl," I said.

"Thank you."

# Gremlins

I really was on my hols. Four glorious weeks stretched ahead of me across Christmas and well into the New Year; and I had nothing to do but read and socialise the kittens. For four weeks Porgy and Bess and I played with each other every day (in between books, of course) and took an afternoon nap when we were tired. Kittens live at two speeds - on and off. When they are not active they sleep. When they are not sleeping they race around the house at the speed of light plus one. It is terribly disconcerting to leave the kittens in a room, then walk to the other end of the house and find the kittens already there, with nothing but a sonic boom and a blast of Cerenkov radiation to mark their passage.

Two kittens is the ideal number. One for each ear. Stereo purring is one of nature's more relaxing sounds. Invariably when the kittens climbed on top of me and slept on my shoulders, purring enormously the while, I would fall asleep as well. Believe me, there is no sleep so satisfying as a kitten induced catalepsy.

But all good holidays come to an end. I'd thoroughly enjoyed being lazy, doing nothing but read. Now I had to go back to work and the normal daily grind began again.

I took a taxi to the airport to catch my first flight of the new year. I was going to Auckland to run a Linux course. I went through the security gates and into the aircraft and made myself comfortable. It was fifteen minutes after the scheduled departure time and they were still boarding the flight - but that is quite normal for Air New Zealand who have a somewhat cavalier attitude to the strictures of the timetable. I have often considered nominating their

timetable for an award for the most creative fiction published in New Zealand during the year.

Eventually, half an hour late by now, a voice came over the speakers.

"Cabin crew arm your doors and cross check."

There was a brief flurry of activity around the door to the air bridge and then we taxied slowly out to the runway where we waited for a while, engines throbbing with anticipation. Then the captain made an announcement.

"While we were taxiing to the runway, the plane developed a small fault and I'm afraid we are going to have to return to the air bridge so that the engineers can check it out."

We taxied slowly back to the air bridge.

"Cabin crew prepare your doors for arrival."

It had been the shortest aeroplane journey I had ever made! Mysterious thumps came from underneath the aircraft as relays of engineers hit it with increasingly large hammers as they tried ever more urgently to find and fix the fault. A man in a fluorescent yellow jacket went into the cockpit to talk to the pilot. An announcement was made.

"Well I'm sorry everybody, but it seems that we have a major problem on our hands and I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you all to disembark."

We filed off the plane and as we re-entered the terminal a loud voice announced:

"Due to engineering requirements, Air New Zealand flight 446 to Auckland has been cancelled. Will all passengers uplift their luggage from carousel number one and proceed to the check in counter to be reassigned to a new flight."

My travel gremlins were working well. The rest of the year was looking promising. Three and a half thumb-twiddling hours later, I finally managed to fly to Auckland, kittenless and bereft.

# Alan And Robin Take A Trip

Another day, another course to teach. But this time it was in Vanuatu and Robin was coming with me so that she could have a holiday while I worked.

When we got off the plane at Port Vila, the hot, steamy atmosphere made us both start sweating immediately. We lined up in the immigration queue to have our passports stamped. While we waited, we were serenaded by a small band of musicians playing a complex island rhythm on what appeared to be home made instruments. At the front of the band, a man jiggled and hopped, playing a home made bass that could have come straight from a 1950s skiffle group, and probably did.

They came to the end of the tune, and the queue of tourists applauded sweatily. The band smiled and bowed and launched into another melody which was exactly the same as the previous one. I was reminded irresistibly of Lonnie Donnegan's skiffle group singing "My Old Man's A Dustman".

"Second verse," Donnegan would yell, half way through the song, "same as the first!"

And then he'd sing it again.

Eventually we got our passports stamped, reclaimed our luggage and passed on to the arrival hall where Mark was waiting to take us to our hotel.

Le Meridien is quite a posh hotel about five minutes drive from Port Vila. It is situated on a lazy lagoon in which there is a small island. A rope bridge connects the mainland to the island. The pillars supporting the bridge are carved with the faces of Gods, and they gaze protectively at the tourists as they cross. The bridge is of the kind which inevitably collapses beneath the Hollywood hero as he races across it,

pursued by ravening tribal hordes. He survives of course, and climbs up the slats to safety. The ravening tribal hordes are all precipitated into the gorge where they die a lingering death.

Robin and I checked carefully. There were no obvious hordes of tribesmen pursuing us, and therefore the bridge was probably safe. We walked across, and while it certainly swayed alarmingly in the middle, the carved Gods in the pillars smiled on us and we survived the crossing unscathed.

The island proved to contain two holes of the interminable golf course that wound its sinuous way throughout the entire grounds of the hotel, and also a collection of bungalows that were the hotel's most luxurious and expensive accommodation. A tiny beach on the far side of the island completed the list of attractions. We inspected the beach carefully (it was sandy) and then returned across the rope bridge to the main block of the hotel. Again the Gods smiled on us and we survived.

The day after we arrived, the hotel had a Melanesian Feast in the evening. Robin and I went along and munched on island goodies - taro, mysterious meat wrapped in banana leaves, and freshwater prawns as large as a lobster with claws that overlapped the plate and extended half way across the table and which held the sweetest flesh when carefully cracked. Dance troupes from many of the islands that make up the Vanuatu group performed for us and I was struck by the huge variation in costume, dance and rhythm. All were undeniably from the Pacific cultures, and obviously related to each other, but nevertheless each was unique and identifiable.

The final performance was announced as being from a small island on the periphery of the group, close to the Polynesian border. The dance and song, we were informed by the master of ceremonies, had many Polynesian influences that were never seen in the other islands. The

display began, and I was somewhat bemused to be treated to a superb performance of the Maori haka "Kamate!".

Since it was Melanesian Feast night and we were therefore surrounded by tribal hordes, we kept well clear of the rope bridge across the lagoon.

Each day the hotel staff slipped a newsletter under our door. It was called *Tok Tok* and it detailed all the things that would be happening at the hotel that day. Every day *Tok Tok* told us that the weather would be fine, with a high temperature of 31 degrees and a low of 21 degrees. (Once, for variety, the low temperature was forecast to be 20 degrees, but I feel that it might have been a typing error).

Every day, *Tok Tok* claimed that the sports hut had "...an active day planned for all..." and Robin could sail a catamaran, paddle a canoe, and play tennis or golf while I worked. Some of these she eventually did, but mainly she sat in the sun, and swam in the pool, and watched energetic islanders climb coconut trees and knock down coconuts for her, which she would then drink and eat with enormous gusto and much slurping.

We met a couple of young New Zealand girls who were staying at the hotel. They were having a wonderful time as they exposed every inch of skin that they could find to the pounding sun.

"You can't get skin cancer in Vanuatu," they assured us solemnly. "It's a different sun here, with a different kind of ultra-violet."

Robin basked by the pool, swim-suited, lotioned and slippery. When she got too hot she would go for a swim. She found the 30 degree heat quite pleasant. A lady from French Caledonia walked past wearing a heavy woollen sweater.

"I don't know why I came," she muttered (in French, of course). "It's far too cold."

I was teaching a Linux course at the Port Vila campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) and on the Friday Robin and I were invited to the campus Nakamal for kava.

I've had kava before in Fiji so I thought I knew what to expect. But I was wrong.

In Fiji, the kava is quite dilute and people sit around the kava bowl for hours at a time (sometimes all day) drinking the occasional bowl and talking while they drink. There is quite a strict ceremony associated with the drinking of kava. After downing a bowl, you must clap three times to show appreciation. As the hours pass and more and more kava is ingested, the pleasant, numbing effect of it gradually creeps over the whole body.

However in Vanuatu things are quite different. The Nakamal is a social place where kava is drunk. But the actual drinking itself is a private thing, a holy thing, a communion between you and the kava. You go off to the edge of the Nakamal to be alone, to contemplate the infinite, to clap one hand and listen to the sound of it (you get very Zen after too many bowls of kava). After drinking the kava in one huge gulp, you spit copiously to get the revolting taste out of your mouth (in Vanuatu the hills are alive with the sound of hoicking). Then you return to your group of friends and indulge in social chit-chat until it is time for more kava.

A visit to a Nakamal doesn't last for very long. The Vanuatu kava is enormously strong, not diluted at all. One drink, possibly two, and you are completely wrecked (in the nicest sense). I felt an enormous relaxation spread throughout my body. I felt calm and happy, completely unstressed and I became quite talkative (most unusual for me; I tend to be a listener rather than a talker in most social gatherings). I could feel the effect quite clearly and I absolutely knew that if I drank one more bowl I would be so relaxed that I'd have to be carried home.

At the Nakamal I got nibbled extensively by insects. Nobody else was bothered by them, probably because they were concentrating exclusively on me. I appear to be incredibly sexy as far as the average bug is concerned and

they come from miles around to feast on my flesh. Liberal daubings of insect repellent have little or no effect. My pheromones always get through and the little buggers bite me in spite of the clouds of diethyltoluamide by which I am always surrounded. I swear, I could lie submerged in a bath full of insect repellent and the bugs would equip themselves with scuba gear and swim down into the depths to bite me.

Although I was working, I did get a weekend to do the tourist things. Robin and I went on a cruise. Our first port of call was a turtle sanctuary where a large conservation effort is underway. Turtle eggs are gathered and hatched, and the hatchlings are raised in tanks until they are about a year old and then they are returned to the sea. The casualty rate among newly hatched turtles is astounding. Probably 99% of them fail to survive to adulthood, for they have many predators when young. Mature turtles are hunted for their shells which are in high demand as ornaments in the world outside Vanuatu. The combination of these things is starting to threaten the survival of the species. Hopefully the conservation effort will help to offset this and succeed in preserving them.

From the turtle sanctuary we walked to an isolated resort called Tranquility, where tourists are encouraged to come and stay for a while to get away from the hustle and bustle of the rat race in huge metropolises such as Port Vila.

"Tranquility Base here," I murmured to Robin. "The Turtle has landed!"

The man in charge of Tranquility gave us the hard sell on how restful and beautiful the place was.

"We're so isolated," he said, "that we don't even get the bugs that the other islands have. You won't get bitten here."

I slapped at the insect that was chewing hard on my left elbow even as he spoke. I didn't believe a word he said; but everybody else in the tour group nodded thoughtfully. Nothing was biting them; and they all remained completely unbit throughout the rest of the tour.



From Tranquility we sailed around to the other side of the island where we were ferried ashore onto a deserted beach and left to our own devices. The sea was crystal clear. Brightly coloured fish swam teasingly among the rocks. There was no sound save the lapping of the waves upon the shore. The sun beat down fiercely from a deep blue, cloudless sky and the coconut palms cast long, thin shadows on the sand. Hermit crabs in borrowed shells scuttled brightly here and there.

"Shark!" yelled the tour guide, and then she giggled.

There were no sharks. That day they were eating other tour groups and we were left alone. By sharks at least.

I waded into the sea, my own private cloud of insects buzzing merrily around my head and sipping occasionally from the nectar I was sweating. I donned snorkel and goggles and dived deep into the water where I admired the fish for a time. I made a point of swimming underwater until I was well away from where I had left my insect cloud. But when I surfaced, they were waiting for me, having followed me over the water as I swam beneath it. As soon as my head popped above the wavelets, they resumed their interrupted feast.

I returned to the shore and sheltered from the tropical sun in the shade of a tree. I read my book, accompanied only by the soporific splashing of the gentle sea and the lazy buzzing of the flies as they flew into my ears, crawled up my nostrils and tickled my toes.

Eventually it was time to return to the hotel. I arrived blotchy, pink, itching and desperately in need of beer and soothing skin creams.

The Vanuatu group comprises 80 islands. There are 170,000 people living in these islands and between them they speak 110 different languages. That's more than one language per island which is quite incredible, given how small the islands are.

Travel between the islands is very common and there are many marriages between people from different islands. As a consequence of this, most people are multilingual. Everyone speaks the language of their mother's island, the language of their father's island, and the language of their own island (if they happen not live on one of their parents' islands). They all speak Bislama, the pidgin *lingua franca* that allows everyone to understand each other regardless of their native island and language. They also speak English and French because of their colonial history when the islands (then called the New Hebrides) were jointly administered by England and France. Monolingual tourists soon get huge inferiority complexes in the face of such linguistic diversity.

I did a cursory web search after I got back home and soon discovered a Bislama translation of the story of the Tower of Babel, which I found appropriately satisfying.

"Thank you very much," I said to the English-speaking waitress as she poured my breakfast coffee.

"Merci beaucoup," I said, showing off to the French-speaking waiter as he poured my after dinner coffee.

"Tangkiu tumas," I started saying to both of them within a couple of days. Bislama grows on you.

On our last Thursday in Vanuatu, Mark and his wife Gayna took us out for dinner to Hideaway Island. First we drove to a Nakamal for kava and a spit and then, suitably relaxed, we drove off to the ferry. Just as we were about to turn down a one way street, a car came rocketing out of it, against the traffic flow. Mark braked sharply and then shrugged.

"French," he explained.

Personally I didn't think it mattered. "They were only going one way," I pointed out with impeccable logic.

The general thinking in the islands is that the French should be kept off the roads and in the kitchen. In colonial days the joint administration led to a lot of bureaucratic duplication - there were two police forces, for example. The

British were regarded as being somewhat more lenient than the French; but in compensation, the food in the French prisons was much better.

The French influence is still very strong and the food in the islands is absolutely wonderful. Mind you they have the best of ingredients to work with. The home-grown chicken is incredibly tasty (I'd forgotten that chicken could actually taste of something; in most countries it is just a sort of bland, tasteless plastic that fills up the empty spaces in the sauce). The home-grown steak simply melts into tiny taste bombs in the mouth. And the fish that they pull fresh from the sea each day is just heavenly. There are more exotic foods available as well; I ate stir fried stingray for the first time in my life, and very good it was too. Oddly, it didn't taste like chicken. It tasted like stingray.

For breakfast every day, I gorged myself on fresh mango, paw-paw and pineapple. It was positively orgasmic. There was fresh passion fruit as well, but I am less than passionate about this and so I passed it by. There was also a white, slimy native fruit with very little taste and an obscene texture. I avoided it after one mouthful.

Vanuatu grows its own coffee (the French take their coffee very seriously) and it has a wonderfully rich, almost smoky, taste and texture like no other coffee I've ever drunk.

We parked the car by the beach and walked out on to the sands. Mark waved vaguely at a dark blotch out on the sea. It turned and headed towards us and revealed itself to be a small aluminium boat with an outboard motor. The driver drifted up close to shore and we paddled through the shallows and boarded the boat. It chugged off towards a shadow in the sunset. After about five minutes we pulled up at a pier on Hideaway Island. The restaurant was right on the beach and we had a table outside on the sand. We dined romantically by the light of the moon (and a small candle)

while the sea whispered secrets to the sand. It was perfect in every way.

As we rode back in the ferry, the wake glowed with streaks of light from phosphorescent algae and the soft, silk night embraced us as we took off our sandals and paddled through the sea from the ferry to the beach and then up to the car.

Two days later I was back in New Zealand. The contrast was marked!

Mbae mi lukem yu, Vanuatu. Mbae mi kumbak.

# Alan And Robin Have Guests

Sue and James and their baby Jamie approached the Air New Zealand check in counter at Auckland airport.

"Lo!" they said. "Here we are. We wish to travel to Wellington to stay with our friend Alan Robson for the weekend.

"To hear is to obey," declared the check in lady obligingly. She poked keys on her computer, printed out luggage tags and issued boarding passes. "Have a wonderful flight."

Sue and James and their baby Jamie made their way to the departure lounge where they boarded their flight at the exact time printed on their boarding passes. They settled themselves in their seats and fastened their seat belts. No sooner had they done so, than the plane began to taxi out to the runway. Sue checked her watch. The departure time was exactly as it was advertised to be, to the second.

The captain made an announcement.

"Welcome on board ladies and gentlemen, And I would like to extend a particular welcome to Sue and James and their baby Jamie who are travelling to Wellington to stay with their friend Alan Robson for the weekend. Since Alan himself is not on board this flight, we have decided to depart from our normal practice, and take off on time. We do not plan to have any engineering difficulties, and we have not scheduled any bad weather. So hang on to your seats, and enjoy your flight."

Vroom, vroom! With a roar and a screech the plane took off into the vivid blue sky. Sue checked her watch again. Spot on! So far, everything was going to plan.

Tea and coffee were served and sipped. Sue and James and their baby Jamie enjoyed the smooth, level flying conditions. There was no turbulence, the plane did not quiver once. Coffee cups were collected, seat backs were put in the upright position and tray tables were stowed away. The plane descended smoothly and landed at Wellington without a single bounce or sway. As it taxied to the terminal building the steward made an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, and particularly Sue and James and their baby Jamie, welcome to Wellington. We apologise for the extremely early arrival of this aeroplane. We hope it hasn't disrupted your plans too much. It's all Alan Robson's fault. We had to arrive early because he isn't flying with us today. So please blame him, not us. Thank you all for taking part in the great conspiracy to frustrate Alan's plans. Even as we speak, he is driving to the airport to meet Sue and James and their baby Jamie, secure in the knowledge that we are bound to be late, as we always are when he travels with us. He will not arrive here for ages yet. Thank you for contributing to his paranoia. Enjoy your stay in Wellington."

Sue and James and their baby Jamie left the plane and walked to the luggage carousel. The instant they arrived at the luggage carousel, their luggage appeared before them as if by magic. They didn't have to wait a moment.

"I wonder where Alan is," said Sue.

"He'll be along in an hour so," said James. "About twenty minutes after the scheduled arrival time of the plane. Just be patient."

"Goo, gooo, gaah," said Jamie. And everyone agreed.

Sue and James and their baby Jamie spent the whole weekend with us. We did all the tourist things; we ate and drank and made merry, courtesy of Air New Zealand. Sue told me a joke:

An egg and a sausage lay together in a frying pan. The heat rose and rose and the sausage started to spit and sizzle.

"Oh my goodness," said the sausage to the egg. "This is horrible; all my fat is leaking out and my skin is going brown and it hurts. Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!"

"Eeeeeekkkk!!!!", said the egg. "A talking sausage!!"

# Alan And His Things

When I was a little boy I had a teddy bear. I don't recall that he had a name; or perhaps he was just "Teddy". But he had golden fur and when you pressed his tummy he squeaked. He was just a wonderful teddy bear, and I was heartbroken when one day one of his glass eyes cracked all the way across and fell out. But all was not lost. My father raced to the rescue with glue and sympathy, and the eye was quickly cured. I was happy again, and so was Teddy.

I still have him. The fur is faded now and he lost the ability to squeak many years ago. The crack across his eye where my father glued it back together is still clearly visible. He's nowhere near as handsome as once he was, but he still sits proudly on the shelf, just as he has done for nearly fifty years.

Shortly before I left England to come and live in New Zealand, there was a very popular advert for toilet paper on the television. The toilet paper was called Andrex and the advert starred the Andrex Puppy, a cute little dog that wrapped toilet paper round itself and ran all over the house trailing toilet paper behind itself and tying the paper in knots around the furniture and fittings. For unknown reasons, its owners didn't murder it on the spot. Instead they cooed adoringly and bought more toilet paper. My cousin Carole bought me an Andrex Puppy cuddly toy as a leaving present (I'm unclear as to her motives) and I carried it with me all the way to New Zealand. Twenty two years later, I still have it. I've used a lot of toilet paper in those twenty two years and the puppy has shown no interest in it whatsoever. So much for truth in advertising!

I collect coins. The habit has become so obsessive that I no longer buy things that I really need, or things of



particular quality or style. No - I buy things in order to maximise the amount of change that I am given. Then I bring the coins home and pour them into containers. One container for silver, one container for gold (well - brass, anyway). When the mood takes me, I do my world famous Scrooge McDuck impressions and I dive deeply into my vast wealth of coinage and swim to and fro, chuckling and giggling the while, and throwing my riches into the air in delight (always making sure to catch them cleanly again on the way down, for I am, of course, a Yorkshireman and where there's brass there's muck. HmMMM! That doesn't sound quite right...).

Periodically I take the excessively large number of coins that I have amassed to the bank, and a long suffering cashier counts (or weighs) them carefully, confirms the amount that I have scribbled on the paying in slip, and credits them to my account. Then I start all over again.

It is amazing how heavy even a small bowl full of coins can be. And when you are as anally retentive as I am you need to take periodic muscle building courses in order to build up the stamina necessary to lug the whole lot down to the bank.

I have a cushion shaped like a Buck Rogers rocket and painted in garish primary colours. It is an ideal accessory for a science fiction fan. In my dreams I cuddle my spaceship cushion and fight hordes of marauding Martians (I am always victorious of course). I have been observed to throw the cushion around the room and yell "Warp factor five! Vroom! Vroom!" and I am not ashamed.

Vroom! Vroom!

I have an open plan stereo system. The components sit elegantly on shelves near the top of the display units. The middle tier consists of a row of CDs and the lower level is stuffed full of LPs (remember them?). Wires dangle seductively down the back and coil attractively on the floor. Porgy and Bess, the kittens, like nothing better in life than to

climb behind the stereo units and chew on the wires. I am less than enthusiastic about their hobby and I am trying hard to persuade them to look elsewhere for their fun.

To begin with, all I did was push some of the LPs in the bottom row so far back into the unit that they reached right up against the wall, thereby preventing the kittens from clambering behind the records to get at the wires. But the kittens quickly discovered that the records were not very tightly packed and could easily be pushed to one side as they forced their way to the wires *through* the stack of LPs. So I jammed the Andrex Puppy between a couple of LPs, thereby crushing the records closer together and (hopefully) preventing the kittens from clambering through. The first time Porgy and Bess saw the angry face of the Andrex Puppy glaring out at them from amidst the records, they did a classic cinematic double take and ran away screaming. Problem solved!

I should have known better.

It wasn't long before the kittens discovered that they could jump up onto the second tier and run along behind the CDs and then jump down to where the wires were. I plonked my containers of coins into the gap they were using. The shelves bowed a little under the excessive weight. There was no way the kittens would ever grow strong enough to move that lot! Problem solved!

I should have known better.

One shelf on the third tier consisted largely of empty space. There were just a few ornaments sitting there looking decorative. Soon the kittens were making prodigious leaps to the third level, scattering ornaments far and wide across the room as they succumbed to the siren song of the stereo cables. I jammed the spaceship cushion into the shelf thereby obscuring the ornaments from view, but preventing the cats from using their new tunnel to paradise. Problem solved!

I should have known better.

Just to the left of the shelf with the ornaments is the shelf that holds my cassette player. There is a small gap between the top of the cassette player and the bottom of the shelf on the next layer up. It really is a tiny gap, far too small for a kitten - particularly given the fact that both Porgy and Bess appear to be doubling in size every single day as they convert their protein packed diet into fur and flesh. So you can imagine my astonishment (and rage) when I observed both of them leap up there one day, dematerialise themselves through the tiny gap, and start chewing blissfully on the cables again. There was only one thing for it - I jammed my teddy bear into the tiny gap. He barely fits and he looks a bit distorted as he crouches uneasily in the small space. I think he might be having trouble breathing. But never mind - problem solved!

For now...

A friend came to visit. She expressed surprise at my rather surrealistic looking stereo cabinet, awash with coins, cushions and cuddly toys; the stereo components themselves being barely visible as they peeked coyly around the barricades. She seemed to be particularly affronted by the rather painful looking posture of the teddy bear.

"He looks

very uncomfortable," she said sternly. "Don't you think you are being a little cruel?"

I explained what was going on.

"Oh," she said delightedly, "he's a *working* Ted."

That seemed to make everything alright.

# Water

Every week a coach arrived at our little village school to take us to the swimming pool down the road in Brighthouse.

"Eh up! Charra's 'ere."

We all piled on, clutching our swimming togs wrapped up in tightly rolled towels. It was about a fifteen minute journey to the pool. We turned right out of the school gates, travelled for a few hundred yards and then turned left past a pub called "The Malt Shovel" where my grandfather used to do his drinking. Then down past the church and on to Brookfoot which was an enormously steep hill with a very tight turn on to it. I used to wonder whether we'd make it safely, but we always seemed to manage. And so into Brighthouse and the pool which smelled tinglingly of chlorine.

The changing rooms were small private cubicles. We'd go into them two by two, boys on one side, girls on the other. I usually shared with my best friend Jimmy Leadbetter. Once when the class was too slow getting dressed again after the swimming lesson was over, Miss Beaver (our teacher) walked along the line of cubicles and pulled all the curtains back, exposing rows of naked children.

"Hurry up!" she yelled.

We hurried up - it was too embarrassing to do anything else. People might point at us and laugh.

When we were ready for the water, we plodded through the disinfectant foot bath and into the pool. Many of the children already knew how to swim and they were left to their own devices, to splash and dive to their heart's content. The rest of us gathered in the shallow end where we were instructed in the arcane mysteries of the breast stroke. We practised all the arm actions as we stood in the

water. Then we practised all the leg actions as we supported ourselves on the bars on the side of the pool.

"Now do them both together! Swim across the width of the pool."

I sank like a brick.

I'd always known that water couldn't support the human body. If it *had* been capable of supporting the body then I'd have been able to sit on top of the water when I took a bath. Much experimentation convinced me that I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried, I always sunk immediately to the porcelain bottom of the bathtub. I had a vague feeling that because I lived in a small and generally insignificant village it was likely that we got inferior water. Perhaps other places got water that would support people. Perhaps people in other places could sit on top when they took a bath. I felt quite jealous of them.

I got pulled up from the bottom of the pool.

"Try again."

"The water's too thin," I wailed. "I need *thicker* water."

Throughout the 1950s the British Government worked very hard to repair the battered infrastructure that the second world war had left in its wake. Eventually they got round to our insignificant little Yorkshire village and the water stopped being quite so inferior and it thickened up enough that I finally learned to swim in it. But I was deeply disappointed that it never quite reached a standard that allowed me sit on top of it. I always blamed Adolf Hitler for that.

My two cats Porgy and Bess have developed an inordinate fondness for water; the thicker the better. When Robin fetches the hosepipe to water the garden they go into paroxysms of joy. They chase the stream of water as it plays over the sweet peas, and they splash gaily in the mud pools it leaves behind. They drink delicately from the filthy puddles and then, muddy, soggy moggies, they leap

lovingly into our arms and wriggle ecstatically. Old clothes are *de rigueur* in the Robson household these days.

Inside water is almost as much fun as outside water. They can hear a tap from half a house away and they always come running to take part. On emerging from the shower of a morning, it is not unusual to find a cat sitting in the washbasin, eagerly awaiting its turn. As you towel off your moisty bits, the cat will jump down into the shower stall where it will lick up the soapy residues before they can all gurgle away.

Porgy is particularly fond of watching me when I clean my teeth. He can sit in the washbasin while water is actually running! He taps delicately at the stream with a paw and then quickly shakes off the excess. But what he is really waiting for is the excitingly orgasmic moment when I spit.

The one thing that Porgy simply cannot resist is the sound of me walking into the toilet and lifting the seat. He knows exactly what this means and races in so as not to miss anything. He puts his front paws against the rim of the toilet bowl and stares up, eyes round with wonder and delight. When he can't resist the temptation any longer, he reaches out a tentative paw and plays pat-a-cake with the stream of urine. When I finish, he sits down and thoughtfully brushes his paw behind his ears, then he licks his paw and chews between his toes to ensure that none of the bouquet is missed. When I flush, he immediately climbs up again to enjoy the swirl and twirl and gurgle.

I have to confess that the unnervingly unswerving stare of a fascinated cat has a distinctly desiccating effect upon the Robson bladder and Porgy is currently banned from the toilet, much to his disgust.

# Hotel

The flight from Wellington to Christchurch was completely uneventful. I should have realised it was an omen.

I arrived at my hotel, weary with the day.

"Lo!" I said. "Here I am. Pray show me immediately to the room reserved for me, that I may lie down and sleep the sleep of the just arrived."

There was much clicking of mice and poking of keys and staring at computer screens. Finally, in desperation, written records were consulted.

"I'm sorry, sir. We have no record of your reservation."

"Ha!" I riposted. "Here is written confirmation."

They examined the form supplied by my travel agent.

"Well," said the man behind the counter, "that's certainly the *name* of our hotel. But the street address is wrong. The address on the form is the address of one of our other hotels in Christchurch. I'll ring them and see if they have your reservation."

He rang the other hotel, but they had never heard of me either.

"I'll tell you what," said the man. "We've got a third hotel in the city. I'll ring them, just on the off chance."

But they too were utterly unfamiliar with my name.

I began to experience the feelings of existential dread commonly associated with having no hotel reservation.

"Do you perhaps have a list of convenient park benches?" I queried. "I hear that they are quite comfortable at this time of the year, though rumour has it that they are a little on the chilly side in the small hours of the morning."

"I'll ring head office," said the man. "Perhaps they will have an explanation for this."

He went into the back, just out of earshot. I heard low mutterings. He came back smiling.

"Well," he said, "it really does appear to be our fault. Somehow your booking has been lost in the system. We do apologise most profusely. So to make it up to you, we will accommodate you in one of our luxury suites, at no extra charge."

Perhaps the travel gods were on my side after all.

The luxury suite had a bedroom with a television, and a lounge with a television and a huge bathroom with two of every feature and fitting except televisions, which were noticeably absent. I felt deprived - I'd been looking forward to watching *Coronation Street* while sitting on one of the loos. I'd have to settle for just listening to it instead. However I didn't think I'd miss too many plot subtleties.

There was no alarm clock in the bedroom, but that was OK; I had my Palm Pilot which had a built in alarm clock. I set it for 6.30am and retired to bed, where I watched one of the televisions for a time. Most enjoyable. Then I curled up and went to sleep.

*Ring! Ring! Ring!*

My Palm Pilot woke me up. It was flashing its power switch at me and making horrible noises. Outside it was still dark. I hate winter. I pressed the flashing power switch and the Palm Pilot shut up.

Yawning, I forced my way out of bed and into the bathroom. I turned on one of the showers and waited for the water to reach a civilised temperature. I was just about to climb in when:

*Ring! Ring! Ring!*

The Palm Pilot was trying to wake me up again. Didn't it realise that I was already up? Obviously just pressing the power button was not sufficient to dissuade it from its self-imposed task. More subtle measures were called for. I



yawned back into the bedroom and examined it closely. This time I found an obscure button drawn on the screen. "Alarm Off" it said. I took out the Palm Pilot's pokey stick thing and prodded the button. The alarm shut up. I turned the power off again and went back to the shower.

Later, ablated and only mildly moist, I took my towel into the bedroom. I turned on the television in order to watch the news on the breakfast show. Oddly, all I could find was motor racing. No breakfast show. Strange...

I finished drying myself and began to get dressed. Powerful formula one racing cars screamed round the track. The commentator was so excited that he utterly lost the power of speech and was reduced to communicating with an incoherent babbling of words that seemed to contain no vowels. Most extraordinary. I picked up my watch, strapped it to my wrist, and glanced idly at the dial.

Oh, oh.

That was when I discovered that nobody had told my Palm Pilot about daylight saving. It had dutifully woken me at what it was convinced was 6.30am. Unfortunately the rest of New Zealand thought it was 5.30am. No wonder it was so dark outside. No wonder I still felt tired after my shower. No wonder I could only get motor racing on the television.

There being nothing else to do, I went down to breakfast. Not unnaturally I was the only person there. The waitress poured me coffee and fetched me toast. She seemed grateful to have something to do and hovered attentively, refilling my coffee cup whenever I took a sip. I breakfasted in the solitary luxury of the huge restaurant. It seemed as though there were hundreds of tables covered in acres of gleaming white tablecloths. I felt quite guilty about the coffee stains and crumbs that I was leaving on mine.

It was far too early to go into work, but I went anyway.

That evening, exhausted, I carefully checked the time on the Palm Pilot and compared it to the time on my wrist. I got

out the pokey stick thing again and prodded the Palm Pilot awhile. Now the two times agreed to the second. I turned the alarm on and watched something that wasn't motor racing on one of the televisions. I got bored, and watched something else that also wasn't motor racing on the other television. I went into the bathroom and washed my hands in one wash basin. Then I washed my face in the other wash basin. I contemplated the two toilets and used them both, for different purposes. Then I went to bed.

I opened my eyes. I was wide awake. I wondered what time it was. I turned on the light and stared at my watch, which stared back at me. It was 5.30am. The Palm Pilot sat smugly. It wasn't going to ring for an hour yet. It knew what it's responsibilities were. My body clock had betrayed me this time.

I considered going back to sleep, but instead I got up and used the shower that I hadn't used yesterday. I watched the motor racing for a while. This morning, for a change, the commentator's vocabulary contained no consonants. I went down to breakfast and yawned my way through cereals, toast and an amazing amount of coffee.

That evening, after work, I decided to go for a drink. Just across the road from the hotel was a pub which sold Guinness. However when I went in, I discovered that they also sold Bailey's Best Bitter and they had a special offer on. If you drank five pints, the sixth was free! Fortunately not all of the pints had to be drunk on the same night. What Yorkshireman could resist such an offer? Certainly not me. I drank several pints and vowed to return the next night and, ultimately, claim my freeby.

Bailey's Best Bitter obviously did the trick, for the next morning I was awoken at precisely 6.30am by the gleeful ringing of my Palm Pilot. I showered and shampooed (though only once) and finally got to watch the news on the breakfast show. However I felt that the motor racing commentary of the previous two days had been

considerably more lucid. The breakfast room was crowded and I utterly failed to obtain a second cup of coffee.

Nevertheless, for the rest of the week I drank Bailey's Best Bitter and it never failed to work. I recommend it highly.

# AKL

The lady at the Qantas check-in desk was looking a little frazzled. Crowds of bad-tempered commuters seethed and surged around her. There must have been something special happening somewhere in the country. I've never seen the airport so crowded on a Sunday before.

"I'm on the Auckland flight," I told her.

She clicked keys and frowned at the screen for a time. Then she pressed RETURN and her machine disgorged a boarding pass and a luggage tag. AKL it said, in large, friendly letters. She put the luggage receipt on my boarding pass and fastened the tag to my luggage. As usual, she forgot to put a priority sticker on. I wondered whether to point this out to her, but I decided against it. I'm fed up of constantly reminding the check in people how to do their job. Anyway, the baggage handlers never pay any attention to the priority stickers. My bags are always last off the aircraft, no matter what their priority. I pay several hundred dollars every year for the privilege of having my bags ignored by the baggage handlers. I think it's quite a bargain really; well worth the money.

I went off to the lounge where I poured free food and drink into myself. Then I boarded the plane for my flight to Auckland. The safety demonstration was unusually entertaining. The purser had the volume on the speakers turned down to ultra-low and he appeared to be whispering into his microphone as well. And so, to the accompaniment of a faint susurrus somewhat akin to the soporific sound of the sea kissing the beach, the cabin crew fluttered and postured, tightening and loosening their seat buckles, indicating their nearest exits, putting on their life jackets

and playing with their oxygen masks. It was a surrealistic dance by mad marionettes; a silent movie without subtitles.

The plane bounced in to the air and zig-zagged through the clouds. We were served coffee, which immediately caused massive turbulence. Before I knew it, we were landing in Auckland. I made my way to the luggage carousel. Lots of bags appeared, but none of them were mine. I wasn't too worried. I generally have to wait quite some time before my luggage arrives. However after a while it began to dawn on me that I was waiting longer than usual. All around me people were walking off encumbered with suitcases. The carousel got emptier and emptier, the people fewer and fewer. Eventually the horrible truth dawned. There were no more bags on the carousel and no passengers left in the baggage claim area. I was all alone. Qantas had lost my luggage.

My next problem was finding someone to report this to. All the office doors were firmly locked and all the check-in counters had massive queues in front of them. I joined the shortest queue which immediately came to a shuddering halt as a Julie Andrews look-alike at the head of it checked in dozens of awkwardly shaped brown paper packages tied up with string. The check-in lady looked as if these were a few of her least favourite things. But eventually I reached the desk.

"I've just arrived from Wellington," I said, "but my luggage hasn't. Here's the luggage receipt. What do I do now?"

"I don't know," said the lady. "My job is to check people in. I don't do lost luggage."

"Well can you please find someone who does?"

She looked around helplessly and transmitted telepathic waves of extreme distress. A man appeared and she gave him the luggage receipt. He took me to one side.

"Can you describe your luggage, please."

"It's a black cabin bag on wheels," I said. "Rather tatty. It's festooned with labels with my name and address on them. One of them is an Air New Zealand label. Do you suppose that could be why they didn't put it on the Qantas plane?"

"Oh no, sir," he said and vanished through a security door with my luggage receipt clutched in his hand.

About fifteen minutes later, just as I was starting to think I'd never see him or my receipt ever again, he came back.

"Well it's definitely not in the baggage area," he said, "and it's not in the hold of the plane. It seems to be lost."

"I know that," I said.

"Wait here. I'll make some phone calls."

He vanished again. I began to contemplate a desolate future with no underpants in it.

There was a puff of smoke, and the man reappeared.

"Well, there's news of a sort," he said. "There's no trace of your luggage in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch or Dunedin. I'll have to fill in a form and then we can put it in the computer. The computer will find your bag. Eventually."

Since I work with computers and know them intimately, this statement did not fill me with confidence. But we filled in the form and he issued me with a claim number which the computer would transmit to baggage handlers around the world.

"I'll telephone you as soon as I hear anything," he said. I went to get a taxi to my hotel.

The taxi driver was very sympathetic. "Woolworths is still open," he said. "They open 24 hours a day. Shall we stop there so you can re-equip yourself with essentials?"

"That's a good idea," I said. "I'll charge it to the company. After all, I have a company credit card."

I bought a roll of dental floss, a tube of toothpaste, a carton with a toothbrush in it, a bottle of shampoo, a bottle of conditioner, a packet of underpants, and a box of socks. It came to \$73 and Woolworths refused my company credit

card so I had to pay cash and claim it back later. My company credit card came in a weetbix packet and absolutely nobody except a few eccentric restaurants deep in the wilds of Lower Slobbovia will accept it.

Later that evening I got a phone call from Qantas. "We've found your luggage. It's in Sydney."

"Well of course," I said. "After all it was clearly marked AKL in large friendly letters. AKL is very similar to SYD. They've both got three letters. Anyone could easily get them confused."

"Quite," said the Qantas person. "We'll have it flown back on the first flight tomorrow. That's due in at lunchtime, so you should get your luggage back sometime tomorrow afternoon."

He was as good as his word. At five minutes to five the following afternoon, a taxi arrived with my luggage in it. The bag looked rather dissipated. It had obviously been making the most of its free evening in Sydney and appeared to have hit all the hot spots. It was now somewhat hung over and eager to rest. I took it to my room and gently unpacked it.

The worrying thing about all of this is how extraordinarily inept Qantas has proved itself to be in its implementation of the security rules that have been imposed on us all following the recent spate of terrorist attacks.

Unaccompanied luggage is not allowed on planes these days. If a passenger ignores the boarding call and fails to turn up for a flight, their luggage is always unloaded from the hold. After all, it could have a bomb in it. The airlines go to extraordinary lengths to reassure the travelling public that they are safe. We all have to go through security check after security check. Our nail clippers are confiscated and the gadgets on our key rings are scrutinised with an extremely intense scroot.

But behind the scenes, nothing has changed. The X-ray arches and security guards with wands are just so much window-dressing. They provide only hollow psychological

reassurance. My luggage still went to Sydney. An international flight took off with an unaccompanied bag in its hold, thereby breaking every security rule in the book. A whole plane full of people could have been blown out of the skies if my underpants had been just a trifle more lethal than they normally are.

I think Qantas has some serious soul searching to do.



# Alan and Robin Lose Their Spark

"Let's go out for dinner."

And so it was decided. It's something we often do of a Friday, for I have religious objections to cooking on Friday evenings, and there is a perfectly magnificent Malaysian restaurant not a five minute drive down the road.

Robin drove, and as she drove we chatted idly of cabbages and kings, having long ago exhausted the more mundane possibilities of shoes, ships and sealing wax. I'd been teaching all week and I was deep in lecture mode (something I find hard to turn off - Robin pulls my leg unmercifully). I was half-way through an animated and somewhat Rabelaisian monologue on cabbage seeding strategies when Robin said, "The car's stopped."

I listened carefully. Indeed there was no comforting whirr, buzz, click or even thud from the engine compartment. Silence reigned supreme. Robin coasted us to the side of the road but the car ran out of momentum a little too soon, and the tail was left poking slightly out into the road. Uncaring, the New Zealand traffic continued to roar past at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light, missing our tail by mere millimetres, doppler shifting themselves into the darkness. Robin leaned over the steering wheel concentrating hard as she turned the ignition key. Whirr-graunch. Whirr-graunch. The engine remained stubbornly silent.

I was about to suggest putting it in gear and using the starter motor to inch us forward away from the traffic when a car pulled up behind us and a knight in shining armour said, "Would you like a push?"

With his help, we got the car further on to the hard shoulder. I turned on my cell phone to call the AA.

Bugger! The battery was flat.

"Here - borrow mine," said the knight in shining armour.

"Thanks, Mr Knight."

I dialled the AA magic code, keyed in my membership number on request and waited to be connected. A charming lady asked how she could help and I explained the predicament.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"On the motorway, just before the Johnsonville exit."

"Where's that?" she asked.

"About half way up the Ngauranga gorge," I explained.

"Where's the Now Rongo gorge?". The mispronunciation, and the fact she'd never heard of either it or Johnsonville was the final clue. Pennies began to drop; light bulbs went on over my head. The AA call centre was obviously not in Wellington. I began to wonder where it might be. Auckland perhaps?

"Wellington," I said. "Ngauranga gorge. It's one of the steeper hills."

"There aren't any hills on my map."

I began to worry. What sort of map was she using? Wellington is all hills; there aren't any flat bits. Indeed, there aren't even any *down* bits. All directions in Wellington are up. I've never been able to find any downwards at all. Everybody in New Zealand knows this. Perhaps she wasn't in New Zealand. Perhaps she was in Outer Mongolia where maps are cheap, though inaccurate.

"Tell them I'm on State Highway 1, just before the Johnsonville exit. They'll know what you mean."

"There'll be a patrol car with you shortly."

"Thank you."

I returned the phone to the knight in shining armour. He drove off, his halo gleaming in the moonlight, and Robin and I settled down to wait for the AA man.

I was about to continue my discourse on cabbages when I gradually became aware of a flashing blue light. A police car had pulled up behind us. Presently it disgorged a policeman and we got out of the car to talk to him.

"Need any help?"

"It's OK - we've rung the AA. We're just waiting."

"Oh good," he said. "We got a phone call reporting that you seemed to have broken down but your tail was sticking out into the traffic, which seemed a bit hazardous."

It would appear that one of the maniacs speeding past us was somewhat public spirited. Or perhaps simply resentful of something that required him to slow down and take evasive action. Obviously we must be removed immediately so that he could continue to exercise his god-given right to exceed the speed limit.

"Also," continued the policeman, "the report said..."

Before he could complete the sentence, more flashing lights and a siren split the welkin and an ambulance shrieked in and pulled up in front of us. It disgorged two paramedics.

"...that the driver was slumped over the wheel," finished the policeman. "So we called an ambulance."

"Ah," said Robin thoughtfully. "That was me, concentrating hard on turning the key as I tried to restart the engine."

"Never mind," said the policeman. "No harm done."

He had a brief word with the paramedics, who laughed, got back into their ambulance and drove off again.

"Good luck," said the policeman, and he too drove off into the night, completely ignoring the speeding drivers racing along the motorway. Obviously he'd filled his quota for that day - not hard to do when you are on motorway patrol.

Robin and I settled down again to await the AA man. Rather to my surprise, he turned up a few minutes later. Obviously the lady in Outer Mongolia had successfully got

the message through, probably on a caravan of supersonic camels.

We explained the problem.

"Turn the engine over," he said. "Let's have a listen."

Whirr-graunch. Whirr-graunch. Whirr-graunch. Silence.

"Hmmm." He dived into his van and brought out wires with mysterious mechanisms attached. He unscrewed a spark plug from our engine and attached it to one of the mechanisms.

"Do it again."

Whirr-graunch. Whirr-graunch. Lots of absolutely nothing happened to the spark plug.

"Well that's it then," he said gloomily. "No spark. Your ignition system's dead. Nothing I can do about that. I can give you a tow to a garage though."

Robin and I conferred.

"OK - there's a garage just in Johnsonville; on the right as you take the Johnsonville exit."

No sooner said than done. He towed us to the garage which was (predictably) closed. We had no choice but to park outside it and leave the car overnight.

"Nobody's going to steal it," said Robin. "They can't take it for a joy ride."

We left the car and walked to the Malaysian restaurant.

"I'll get up early tomorrow and give them a ring," I said.

"The sign outside said they were open from 7.30am."

"Did you write down the phone number?" asked Robin.

"There wasn't a number on the sign. But they're bound to be in the book. I'll look it up when we get home. Autostart."

"I thought they were called Autostop," said Robin firmly.

"No, no," I said. "Autostart. Nobody is going to call a place that fixes cars **Autostop. Who'd be silly enough to take their auto to a place that promised to stop it? Autostart. Has to be.**"

"Quite right," said Robin. "Autostop doesn't make any sense at all. I was wrong."

Later, replete with impeccable Malaysian cuisine from Givas Restaurant, we walked past the garage on our way to catch a taxi home.

'Autostop ' said the sign, in large friendly letters.

"What really pisses me off," said Robin, "is that you sounded so certain, and your reasons were so logical that you actually made me doubt the evidence of my own eyes. I should have had the courage of my convictions and insisted you were wrong!"

"Sorry," I said. "I've been teaching all week. I'm always convincing in the classroom. Always certain, always full of logical explanations. It's part of the act. Students will believe any old rubbish as long as you keep your face straight."

"Humph," said Robin, and she held my hand as we walked to the taxi.

"Mind you," I said, "I convinced myself as well. I honestly thought it **was** Autostart."

Over the next couple of days, Autostop put the spark back into the car. Robin went to pick it up.

"Here you are," they said. "We've filled the spark tank full. Lots of spark now. By the way - your clutch is slipping. You need a new one urgently..."

# Alan and the Culture Clash

I work for a computer training company and we provide a lot of training on behalf of Microsoft.

Once upon a time it was very easy to be a Microsoft trainer. All you had to do was pass an exam in the product you wanted to train, and supply Microsoft with a video of yourself in full classroom flow, in order to prove that you were actually capable of standing in front of a group of people and talking coherently. Presumably Microsoft played the video during Friday afternoon drinks and if everyone laughed loudly enough you got to be a trainer.

Actually, since nobody in Microsoft ever laughs at anything, that probably isn't true. Microsoft is a particularly humourless organisation which takes itself far too seriously. I told a joke to a Microsofty once.

"When you go and work for Microsoft," I said, "they arrange for you to have an operation to put a microchip into your head to turn you into a robot. And because the surgeons are very cost conscious, they usually take the opportunity to remove your sense of humour gland at the same time."

"That's ridiculous," said the Microsofty indignantly. "Microsoft don't operate on their new employees." He sounded quite angry. "That's a stupid thing to say."

"See?" I said, and laughed.

He looked bewildered.

Over the years, the criteria for becoming a Microsoft trainer have become much more formalised and much tougher to meet. The programme also stopped being free – for the last few years, all trainers have been required to pay an annual fee to maintain their certification.

The introduction of that requirement was when we discovered that Microsoft had their own extremely bizarre notions of world geography. New Zealand, I was surprised to find, is a state of Australia. In the first year of the new regime, New Zealand trainers were required to pay their renewal fee in Australian dollars. New Zealand dollars were not acceptable. (To be fair, Microsoft fixed that in subsequent years). Furthermore, in the first year of the programme they made such a mess of implementing exchange rates that trainers in the UK ended up paying about \$100 (American) more than trainers anywhere else in the world. However this was offset by setting the exchange rate for Greek drachmas to such a ridiculous level that the Greeks ended up paying vastly less than anyone else in the world. Since both Greece and the UK are part of the European Union, a lot of UK trainers renewed their certifications in Greece in order to avoid the massive extra costs.

The storm of complaints over this seemed to take Microsoft a little by surprise. It was almost as if they had no real understanding of the non-American world. Perhaps their programmers simply implemented "foreign" requirements because the specifications told them to, but they didn't **really believe that foreigners were different from Americans, so they didn't test the system out too well before it went into production. After all, if programmers at NASA can completely destroy a space probe because they don't know (or don't care) about the difference between imperial and metric measure, then I'm sure Microsoft programmers can do the equivalent in their own areas of (non)-expertise. Doesn't everyone know that the world outside of America is purely imaginary, somewhat akin to the square root of minus one?**

Trainers see evidence of this every day in the classroom. All our students are presented with a training manual

printed on American letter stationery and bound in a three ring binder. It is completely impossible to buy American letter stationery in this country and it is almost impossible to buy three-ring hole punches. In New Zealand, in common with most of the rest of the non-American world, we print on A4 paper and bind the pages in two ring binders. As a direct result of this thoughtlessness, non-American students cannot bind the notes they take in the class into their manuals. Even if they do manage to get the holes into the right place on the paper, the pages stick out from the rest of the manual and very quickly tear and get dirty.

When you are a trainer, it is necessary to update your knowledge all the time. New products are constantly appearing, new things are always on the horizon. If you fall behind, you quickly lose credibility in the classroom. One way of keeping up to date is to attend technical presentations and meetings. Consequently when Microsoft announced the release of their new .NET environment, I went to a technical presentation to start learning about how it worked.

An extremely competent and switched on Microsofty stood on the stage and demonstrated many of the features of .NET. He wrote programs and made things happen. He really was very good indeed and was obviously thoroughly familiar with his material. He wrote a program which displayed a red square on the screen.

"Watch this," he said and pressed a key. The red square turned green. The audience watched in polite silence. Red square, green square. Very nice.

The demonstrator seemed quite nonplussed.

"When I do this in America," he said, "the audience always cheers and whistles and applauds when the square changes colour."

He did it again; and again it was received with a silence of the polite persuasion.



"I guess I really am in a foreign country," he said wistfully. "OK," he continued. "I'll write you another .NET program. You'll love this. It simulates the magic 8-ball!"

He beamed with pride and waited for an audience reaction again. Nothing happened and his smile gradually wilted away in the silence.

When the silence had endured for an almost unbearable length of time, a voice from the audience yelled, "What's a magic 8-ball?"

"You're kidding me, right?" asked the Microsofty, disbelief dripping from every word. "You really don't know what the magic 8-ball is?"

Silence again.

"Gee - I thought *everybody* knew about the magic 8-ball."

Since we obviously didn't know what he was talking about, he tried to explain the magic 8-ball, but since he hadn't pre-prepared the explanation (because he'd assumed that we'd know) it wasn't a particularly lucid explanation. If I understood him correctly, the magic 8-ball is a pool table ball that provides essentially random answers to questions and therefore "foretells the future".

He struggled bravely through the rest of the demonstration, but his two doses of culture shock had obviously unnerved him.

George Bernard Shaw claimed that the Americans and the English are two nations separated by a common language. He's quite right - but there's more to it than that. They are also separated by a common culture. The similarities often blind you to the differences and when you stumble over the differences it can sometimes be a real surprise to both sides.

For example, several years ago, shortly before Microsoft announced one of their significant new products to the world, some of our trainers went over to Microsoft's headquarters in America to get some pre-release training straight from the horse's mouth. The different approach to

learning that the different nationalities adopted was quite an eye opener.

American students clustered near the front of the classroom; they were quiet, polite and attentive. They took copious notes and asked grimly intelligent questions and appeared to respect their trainers almost to the point of adulation. And they applauded, cheered and whistled when red squares turned green (or whatever).

The Brits, Australians and New Zealanders, on the other hand, clustered at the back of the room, sniggered, made lots of sarcastic comments, and sneered at the trainers. They asked awkward questions, when they bothered to ask questions at all, and they didn't applaud anything.

As a trainer, I much prefer the latter behaviour in my students. Attentive respect, amounting sometimes to obsequiousness, scares the willies out of me and I'm never sure how to cope. I prefer my students to be a bit more bolshy. But then I would feel like that, since I share that same cultural background.

Despite this, all our trainers came back from America full of enthusiasm for the new product and stuffed to the gills with esoteric knowledge. All said they'd had a great time and learned heaps. So obviously the experience wasn't wasted. But they were quite unsettled by the behaviour they'd observed in the Americans. And I bet the Americans were equally unsettled by the behaviour they'd observed in our trainers.

I suspect this cultural blindness exists mainly in the English speaking world. Other areas of the world generally do not share a language or a common cultural background with their neighbours and therefore they don't expect people from other countries to be the same as they are. Because they *expect* differences, they sometimes tend to respect them more.

But the old British Empire that formed our common background was just too damn large and too damn

complacent, and its scattered remnants have grown too diverse without us realising it. Consequently we take each other by surprise far too often. The superficially familiar turns out to be unfamiliar when we examine it closely, which is unsettling. And that inculcates a distinct lack of respect for any cultural differences (both our own and others) since we find it too bewildering. Because we expect (and often require) similarity instead of difference, we become less tolerant. And the more extreme the difference the less patience we have with it. The truly foreign can often be terrifying in its unfamiliarity, and we want no part of it. Instead, we tend to insist that our own culture is the norm and deviations are not permitted (they frighten us).

Americans in general, and Microsoft in particular, are often completely indifferent to the annoyance that their cultural insensitivity engenders overseas. Indeed, I'm sure they don't even notice it happening much of the time since they never seem to change anything to suit local conditions (we've been getting three-ring binders and letter stationery for donkey's years). Might is right. In many ways America is merely Microsoft writ large.

However there are occasions when I find this behaviour extremely offensive. An American hotel once refused to take my reservation because I didn't have a zip code in my home address - not only was that offensive, it was damned inconvenient. Other things, such as the magic 8-ball, just make me laugh. But given that I **do sometimes find the behaviour offensive, I think it is only fair to ask myself just how much of my own instinctive behaviour offends members of other cultures? I'm sure it must happen rather more often than I realise; and that makes me feel uncomfortable for I do not like to think of myself as a cultural chauvinist, though I suppose at times I must be.**

Currently the Americans seem keen to impose their thinking upon the world by force of arms rather than by

force of commerce. Starbucks and MacDonald's and Microsoft are no longer in the vanguard. These days tanks and missiles are the preferred propaganda. And yet America appears to be having a lot of trouble with the idea that this forceful imposition may not be wanted at all in many places, and they seem somewhat bewildered by the resistance they are experiencing. If they don't learn to recognise the reality of the cultural differences they are so intent on smothering; if they don't learn to be more flexible in their attitudes to both small things (zip codes, three-ring binders and backward dates) and large things (Islam, oil and human rights) they may well find themselves the pariahs of the world instead of its saviours. There is much to admire about American culture, but its blind insensitivity to other viewpoints may well prove to be its downfall. I'm not very comfortable with the metaphor of Microsoft as representative of America - but the parallels are more than just anecdotal; they are truly scary.

# Alan and the Auto-Self-Destructing Class

Last week was very odd. I started the week with six students in a class. But one got sick and vanished, and two decided not to attend the exam on the last day. Of the three who actually turned up on the last day, one made a bit of a botch up on the exam and left early and one rendered his computer unbootable about a minute before the finish and therefore got zero marks. Fortunately the single student who survived all this carnage did pass the exam!

And so:

## **To the tune of "10 Green Bottles"**

There were 6 new students sitting in the class.  
6 new students sitting in the class.  
And one new student got a bug they knew would last.  
There were 5 new students sitting in the class.  
5 new students sitting in the class.  
But 2 new students were sure they could not pass.  
There were 3 new students sitting in the class.  
3 new students sitting in the class.  
And 1 new student got depressed and left quite fast.  
There were 2 new students sitting in the class.  
2 new students sitting in the class.  
And 1 new student completely stuffed his tasks.  
There was 1 new student sitting in the class.  
1 new student sitting in the class.  
And the 1 new student actually passed!  
There was 1 new graduate sitting in the class.

# Alan and the Ultimate Secret

Teenage boys are simply hormones on legs and they think about sex approximately four times a minute. When they aren't thinking about sex, they are thinking about food. And when they are thinking about neither sex nor food, they are thinking about football. This leaves almost no time left over to think about school work.

One weekend Mr Stone, our history teacher, got married. Our first lesson at 9 o'clock on the following Monday morning, was history. Mr Stone strode into class, much as he usually did, and began to regale us with an interminable discussion about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There is absolutely nothing titillating about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. Even teenage boys cannot find a *double entendre* in a discussion about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There being no immediate possibility of sex, food or football, tedium descended upon us all in thick clouds. One adventurous youth, stimulated by boredom, decided that something had to be done.

"Did you have a good wedding sir?"

Mr Stone seemed somewhat taken aback at being interrupted in mid flow, but he rallied well. "Yes thank you Wilkinson. It was very nice."

"I bet you got really drunk on your stag night, didn't you sir?" continued my classmate. "Tell us how much you drank, sir?" We all sat up and began to take notice. This might be fun.

"I never touch it, Wilkinson." Mr Stone sounded quite indignant. "I never touch it at all."

"No sir," said Wilkinson in tones of wounded innocence. "I was talking about what you were doing on your stag night sir, not what you were doing on your wedding night."

There was a moment of shocked silence as we all replayed the conversation in our heads. Had he *really* said that? Yes, he really had. Gales of laughter swept across the room.

"Harrumph!," said Mr Stone, glowing somewhat pinker than usual. "Boy, you are a buffoon! Now, after the Corn Laws were repealed..."

Latin lessons offered even more opportunities for disruption.

*Double entendres* were far too subtle for Latin lessons. In Latin lessons we got *single entendres*. We learned to count and the class had to chant in unison:

"Unus, duo, tres, quattuor, quinque, sex."

That was as far as we ever got. The forbidden word never failed to induce hysterical delight, much to the exasperation of the Latin master.

None of us, of course, were getting any. We were all mouth and trousers. It was an incredibly frustrating time.

Ever since the human race came into being in the depths of the primordial soup, men have been faced with a tremendously difficult problem - how on earth will they ever manage to get their end away? The average male is completely inept at this and as a result he spends most of his life bent double with sexual deprivation.

Rumour has it that back in the stone age, when life was much simpler than it is today, a caveman needing to get his leg over would simply club a passing female down, grab hold of her hair, and drag her off into his cave. I'm not sure that I believe this folk tale since I once saw a cartoon in **Mad Magazine** which revealed the genuine method.

The cartoon depicted a hairy cave man standing idly, just hanging out with his mates. Then a lady passed him by, and the caveman raised his arm high into the air, thereby

exposing his shaggy, fragrant armpit to the world. The lady, struck directly in the nostrils, immediately fainted and was then dragged away to a conveniently located cave.

In my youth, I tried this technique - with a distinct lack of success. I can only assume that I didn't really wait long enough after my shower before exposing my armpit to my lady of choice. Perhaps I should have measured the interval between showers in months rather than mere weeks.

I was sure that university would offer more opportunity than school had done. Initial impressions were promising. Brian was in the shower one day (he was not an admirer of the caveman technique). He sang lustily as he soaped himself, for he had a very good singing voice and was extremely proud of it. His girl friend Laura arrived, heard the song coming from the shower, and immediately took off her clothes and joined him there. They sang a duet, her voice blending with his in perfect harmony. He got a lot of brownie points for that, though there seemed to be no immediately obvious way that anyone else could benefit from his technique. None of the rest of us could sing.

Ice skating seemed to offer a lot more promise.

John was an expert ice skater. He could glide backwards, just like real ice skaters do and he could twirl himself to a stop in a dramatically impressive shower of ice crystals as his skates dug deep into the rink. The ladies found this absolutely fascinating and he was constantly surrounded by admirers as he showed off on the ice. All we had to do, we reasoned, was to tie a rope around him and send him out on to the ice to perform. Every few minutes we could pull him back in, peel off the tottie and then send him out again. It seemed as though we might be able to guarantee ourselves an inexhaustible lifetime supply of tottie! What a cunning plan!

There is, however, a considerable difference between theory and practice and the cunning plan quickly developed a fatal flaw. John's complex skating patterns simply caused



the rope to weave itself into complicated knots all over his body, whereupon he fell over, immobile and rigid. Oh the ignominy! His charisma disappeared and all the tottie vanished without trace.

Nowadays I work for a living and the caveman technique is frowned upon during office hours for it disturbs the people around me. Daily showers are *de rigueur*. I still can't sing and I do not know anybody who can skate. It would appear that I stand no chance at all of getting my ashes hauled.

However, quite by chance, I have discovered the holy grail, the secret of ultimate success, the keys to the gates of the universe, the knack. And I am going to share this secret with you all.

Just call me a saint.

It happened like this. I was working away from home. It had been a busy day and I went back to my hotel feeling quite tired. I was meeting some friends for dinner later that night and I knew that we would be going to a reasonably upmarket restaurant. I decided not to bother getting changed and kept my suit and tie on.

Sue and James came to pick me up and as we drove to the restaurant, James and I played our usual let's out-geek each other games while Sue looked on tolerantly. She knows that we are both still little boys at heart, though only one of us (me) wears long trousers.

"I'm loading Debian Linux on to a laptop computer," said James proudly. "I only need seven CDs."

"Aha!" I said delightedly. "I use Redhat Linux. Three CDs."

"Oh gloom!" declaimed James in tragic tones. "Yours is smaller than mine."

Size matters, don't let anybody tell you otherwise. And when you're a geek, small is extraordinarily beautiful.

I entered the restaurant in an extremely good mood, glowing with bonhomie, secure in the knowledge that everything of mine was the smallest of all.

It was a Thai restaurant with a menu crammed with exotic and unpronounceable delicacies. I ordered a conservative dish, a stir fry with ginger and spring onions. Sue ordered something which memory insists was called oom-pah oom-pah stick-it-up-your-joom-pah, but I'm sure that's not quite right. It was a fearsomely pink pork sausage with flakes of raw chilli sprinkled upon it and served on a bed of salad. Apparently the bits of sausage in between the chilli flakes were very tasty.

James ordered flaming chicken.

The waiter stalked across the restaurant to our table, plate held high. Upon the plate sat a whole roast chicken impaled upon a vicious spike through its bottom so that it sat up and begged (wouldn't you?). It was smothered in something flammable and as he walked towards us the waiter clicked a cigarette lighter close to the unfortunate bird. Flames sprang several feet into the air, almost removing the waiter's eyebrows. Fortunately he was prepared for this and had leaned backwards as he ignited the chicken. He placed it on our table with a dramatic flourish. It burned for about half a minute then the flames slowly died down. For the next minute or so it continued to burp and fart, and blue tinged flame spluttered from every orifice. Eventually it lay quiescent and James began to eat it.

"What's it like?" I asked.

He chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Tastes like chicken," he said.

The meal was pleasant and so was the conversation. I managed to avoid spilling anything messy on my shirt, tie and trousers - a big plus. Soon no food remained. We collected our stuff together and went to pay the bill. As I walked past one of the other tables, a voice said,

"Ahhhh! What a *wonderful* tie!"

The tie that I was wearing that day is one of my favourites. It has a picture of a very large, very smug looking grey and white cat on it. Clutched in the cat's mouth

is a freshly killed mouse (of the computer variety, you understand), with its cables dangling forlornly. The whole ensemble is unbearably cute, particularly for people who are owned by cats.

The voice belonged to a stunningly beautiful lady.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm glad you like it. I'm very fond of it."

"It's just gorgeous," she said, quite overcome. "My name's Julie." She looked at me expectantly.

"Hello Julie. I'm Alan." We shook hands. Her hand was cool and her nails were lovingly manicured and coated with clear polish. Reluctantly I returned her hand to her.

"I have to go," I said. "My friends are waiting."

"Aha!" said Sue as I rejoined her and James at the till, "you are wearing The Tie That Pulls." Sue is the only person I know who can pronounce capital letters.

"Indeed I am," I said. "It never fails. Whenever I wear this tie hordes of friendly ladies appear from nowhere and fall worshipfully at my feet. It's quite exhausting. I'm not as young as I used to be."

"It's a valuable tie," said Sue. "I know men who would give anything to own The Tie That Pulls. It is spoken of in legend and in myth. They say that it is woven from thread spun from the very fabric of the universe. Casanova wore that tie and so did Valentino. It is said that Kennedy had it briefly round his neck before Camelot crumbled into the dust at Dallas."

"You are right," I said. "It is written in the hidden books of lore that he who can extract the Tie That Pulls from the hidden Wardrobe of Desire will surely be laid, end to end. Many have tried. Few have succeeded. Dark were the paths I trod to retrieve this tie, and terrible were the sights I saw."

"Has it been worth it?" asked Sue.

"Oh yes," I said.

# Morning

Morning rituals *chez Robson* are heavily encrusted with tradition and habit, and are not subject to change. The alarm goes off at 6.29am so that I can listen to the 6.30 news broadcast on National Radio. This is actually rather silly, since the 6.30 news broadcast does not usually happen until 6.31 or 6.32 or, on one never to be forgotten occasion, 6.33. This is because the previous programme is the Rural News which is run by farmers who are unable to comprehend units of time smaller than a season, and therefore it invariably over runs.

By the time the alarm goes off at 6.29am I have probably been awake for about half an hour or so anyway. This is because the cats, Porgy and Bess, have been marching up and down on top of me for thirty minutes complaining bitterly about night starvation. When the alarm goes off, they jump off the bed eager for breakfast. They find it quite frustrating to have to wait for the 6.30 news. By the time that 6.32am rolls around, I'm finding it frustrating as well.

The alarm is also a signal for me to yawn and stretch; to scratch this bit and that, and to remove the leaves from my hair. Bess brings these hunting trophies in during the night. When Peter Jackson constructed the studio set of Fangorn Forest for the film of *Lord Of The Rings* he collected hundreds of sacks full of leaves to scatter around the set in order to give it an air of verisimilitude. He did not, however, completely exhaust the supply of leaves in the country and Bess has been very busy over the last year bringing them in one by one. Periodically I hire a mini-skip, and fill it with the leaves that Bess has brought me.

Once the news is over, I stagger to the kitchen trying hard not to trip over the cats weaving to and fro between

my legs. I fill their bowl with biscuits. Heads down, bums up, they dive in and crunch. I head off for the shower where I turn on the waterproof radio and listen to the Mana Report, which is usually quite interesting, and the Financial and Business news, which is not.

When I get back to the bedroom, Robin is slowly surfacing. Porgy has finished his breakfast and is curled up on the bed with Robin. Bess has gone outside to look for leaves. I get dressed and Robin goes for her shower. I prepare my breakfast. Toast, medium rare. Marmalade. I like marmalade.

Porgy waits outside the bathroom door. His second treat of the morning is about due and his eyes glow with excitement. A cloud of steam with Robin inside it emerges from the bathroom and heads for the bedroom where it will get dressed.

"Porgy!" calls the cloud of steam, "it's time! I've finished!"

Porgy charges into the bathroom, leaps into the shower stall and licks up all the soapy, shampooey water in the tray. Then he lies down contemplatively for a time, takes a final hopeful lick in the corners in case he's missed anything, and then plods out. His day is now over. Nothing else of any interest or excitement will happen until tea time. Sleep is indicated.

Robin dumps cereal in a bowl and smothers it with milk. "Yum!" She crunches contentedly for a while. Soon the bowl is empty. She scrapes hopefully with her spoon but nothing happens. It is time to go to work. Close the sliding door into the kitchen, check the lounge and Robin's office for somnolent cats and toss them out if any are found. Close the doors firmly and turn on the burglar alarm. Another day has begun.

Friday December 12<sup>th</sup> 2003 started just like any other day. Robin drove off to work and I waited for the bus to take

me into the city. The office was in its usual state of barely controlled chaos. I wasn't teaching that week, so I settled down in an out of the way corner. In the middle of the afternoon, I got an email from the reception desk.

Your burglar alarm has gone off. A patrol has been despatched.

The alarm monitoring company had apparently rung my number and since the receptionist didn't know which corner I'd hidden myself in, she simply took the message and emailed me.

I rang the burglar alarm monitoring service and got an extremely unhelpful person.

"Your code number?"

I gave her the super secret code that protects all my intimate secrets.

"I gather my alarm has gone off," I said.

I heard the clatter of keys as she consulted her computer. "Yes," she said.

"What should I do now?" I asked.

"We've sent a patrol," she said.

"Should I go home and see what the problem is?" I asked.

"Up to you," she said. She sounded bored.

I took a taxi home. A burly security guard was walking around the house making notes in an impressive notebook.

"There's no sign of a forced entry, he said. "Have you got a cat?"

"Yes."

"I thought so," he said. "I spotted the cat climbing frame in the lounge when I looked through the window. I bet it's your cat set the alarm off."

"No," I said. "That's not possible. I put the cats out this morning before I went to work."

We decided to go in and have a look. I opened the front door, and the security guard went in first to look for men with masks, striped jerseys and bags marked "Swag". None were to be found and so I turned off the alarm and we

examined the display. The sensor that had tripped was in the lounge. I opened the lounge door. Porgy, looking very frightened, ran straight to me. I picked him up and cuddled him.

"I'll swear he wasn't there this morning when I left," I said. The security guard gave me a pitying smile and a receipt.

I've always suspected that my cats can teleport themselves to wherever they wish to be. Now I have proof.

Friday December 19<sup>th</sup> 2003 started just like any other day. But it was a special day, it was my last day at work before the Christmas break. I was home by mid-afternoon, much to the surprise of the next door neighbour's cat which had snuck in through the cat flap to help itself to the remains of the breakfast that Porgy and Bess hadn't quite finished. It sneered at me and ran away.

Porgy and I curled up on the couch with a book. He knew it would be tea time in three hours and was quite excited by the thought. He read a page or so of my book, but couldn't get interested in it so he decided to sleep instead.

That evening, Robin and I were going to a party at a house in a particularly insect-infested area of the city. I hate going there in summer because as I walk the scant few yards from the street to the front door my ankles are stripped to the bone by huge herds of ravening sandflies and I fall onto the couch, bleeding, exhausted and itchy, and I swell up to enormous proportions with allergic reactions. The only possible treatment is champagne in copious quantities, administered internally.

I decided to frustrate the sandflies and so instead of my normal summer garb of bare feet and sandals, I donned thick socks and heavy shoes.

"Fooled you, you bastards!" I yelled as I walked towards the front door. A particularly miffed sandfly screamed with rage and flew up my left nostril. It appeared to like what it

found, for it never came out again. Champagne in copious quantities, administered internally, is also a sovereign remedy for sandflies up the nostril.



# Beelzebub Down Under

In order to travel from Wellington to Melbourne it is necessary to persuade the aeroplane to take off and fly. The aeroplane that we were sitting in was demonstrating a marked reluctance to indulge itself in such a controversial idea.

"I'm sorry for the delay," announced the pilot, "but the engineers want to perform some final checks on the ailerons and flaps."

Through the cabin windows I could see the wing of the plane. Interesting and complicated swathes of metal rippled hither and yon upon it as the wing distorted itself in obedience to mysterious commands from large oily gentlemen who scratched their heads at it. Eventually they pronounced themselves satisfied and the plane taxied out to the runway. Our Australian holiday was about to begin...

The plane roared into the sky. I watched Wellington airport shrink away to almost nothing as we climbed rapidly. Then the engines seemed to hiccup briefly and the plane dropped like a stone for a few hundred feet. My tummy tried to climb out of my ears and I felt a freezing terror as the ground loomed close again. But then, just in time, the throaty roar of the engines resumed as if nothing had happened. We soon regained the height we had lost.

The cabin crew poured food and drink into us to calm us down and it wasn't long before Australia stretched out beneath us, brown and sere. We landed at Melbourne without incident. We taxied to the gate and stopped. A man walked out and peered thoughtfully at one of the engines.

Everybody scrambled to get their hand luggage from the overhead lockers and then waited impatiently for the door to open. Through the cabin window I could see the air bridge

edging its way towards the forward door of the plane. It gently kissed the side of the plane, missing the door by several feet. It slowly backed away and tried again. This time it came in far too low. It bounced uncertainly for a while as the driver tried to raise it up. He failed miserably and the air bridge retreated all the way back to the gate and then came forward in slow jerks to try again. It was almost twenty minutes before the air bridge finally managed to attach itself.

"The driver must be a trainee," I said to Robin. "Perhaps they should have stuck 'L' plates on to it."

"I can't hear you," said Robin. "I'm not wearing my glasses."

We were in Melbourne to see Robin's sister Wendy and her three year old daughter Ella. Wendy drove us around in a huge four wheel drive monster machine that she referred to as "the truck". It was fitted with an altimeter so that we always knew how high we were driving, but since Melbourne is one of the flattest places in the world, the dial sat at zero for the entire holiday.

We drove out to Brighton, one of the more salubrious suburbs. Robin and Ella went to dig holes in the beach and paddle in the sea. Wendy and I sat in a nearby café and watched them.

Flies buzzed enthusiastically around the café. Corpses piled up in their hundreds on the window sills and overflowed on to the floor where they crunched underfoot. A man came and sucked them up with a vacuum cleaner. Presumably he took the bodies back to the kitchen to bake them into the spotted dick. He left a lot of corpses behind. Perhaps they weren't ripe enough for the spotted dick yet.

Patrons throughout the café were doing the Australian Wave - the hand brushed languidly through the air in front of the face when the flies got too close. I could trace the paths of the flies across the room as first one table of people

waved, and then the next and then the next as the flies advanced.

Robin and Ella came back from the beach, red faced, exhausted and happy. We piled into the truck, and Wendy drove us round to show us some of the sights of Melbourne. Ella was very tired after all her hard work on the beach.

"I want to go home now," she said.

Wendy was determined to show off her city to us and she didn't want to drive straight home. "We're going home the special way," she said to Ella.

"Oh no!" wailed Ella, heartbroken. "Not the special way!" I think she'd been taken that way before.

Melbourne was extraordinarily hot, humid and sweaty. Molten people flowed down the gutters as the high, hot sun beat down relentlessly. The air conditioning in the truck was a blessed relief.

"I wonder what the temperature is?" I asked Robin.

"I don't know," said Robin. "I'm not wearing my watch."

From Melbourne we flew to Perth. At least, that was the plan. However the plane just sat on the tarmac at Melbourne airport and showed no signs whatsoever of taking off.

"I'm sorry for the delay," announced the pilot, "but we've got a leak in the coffee brewer and we aren't allowed to take off until the engineers have repaired it. What's more, it's the *rear* coffee brewer. Very tricky, trying to fly with a leak in the rear coffee brewer."

A man with a wrench strode purposefully to the rear of the plane. Sounds of plumbing permeated the air and then he left again, looking pleased with himself. The crew closed the cabin door and we taxied down the runway and took off for Perth.

Every time I visit Western Australia, I am reminded all over again what a strangely surreal place it is.

We drove along a dual carriageway. As with all dual carriageways, there were regular openings in the dividing

barrier to allow cars to cross over and change direction, should they care to do so. And then we saw a sign. In huge, official letters it said:

Median Opening Closed

And sure enough – the next opening wasn't there!

Another sign said:

Audible Edge Lining

And sure enough, the edge of the road was lined with a rough undulating strip that made the car vibrate noisily should the wheels accidentally stray on to it. A good encouragement to straighten up and fly right. After several miles of this, the strip disappeared and another sign said:

End Of Audible Edge Lining

It didn't seem to have occurred to anybody that I could work this out for myself by virtue of the fact that the lining wasn't there any more.

There were a lot of roadworks. I could tell when the roadworks began because a sign said:

Roadworks

and another sign indicated a reduced speed limit. When the roadworks finished, a sign said:

End Roadworks

I could never decide whether this sign was giving me information or an instruction. Or perhaps it was a banner that a protest march had left behind.

As we drove along the main highway, the occasional minor road led off from it. One of these roads was called *Fifty One Road*. Later on we spotted another one. It was called *Sixty Eight Road*. But we didn't pass seventeen other roads between these two. We only passed four.

Nobody in Western Australia ever throws anything away. They keep everything, just in case. This became quite obvious to me on the day that we visited the small town of Pinjarra. Two ancient logs lay in the middle of the lawn just outside the tearooms where we stopped for lunch. There

was a plaque attached to one of the logs, and on the plaque the following message was engraved:

In about 1880 these Indian Teak logs were washed ashore south of Mandurah. They were pulled over the sand hills to the Herron homestead by a bullock team driven by Robert Herron where they lay for the next 111 years.

The plaque was dated 15/10/91, so by the time I read it, the logs had been lying there for a further twelve years. For 123 years, nobody has been able to think of anything to do with the teak logs except attach a plaque to them commemorating that fact. But they are far too good to throw away. They might come in handy one day...

"I wonder how far it is from Mandurah to Pinjarra?" I asked Robin. "How far did those poor bullocks have to pull the logs?"

"I don't know," said Robin. "I'm not wearing my hat."

Perth was hugely hot. Every day I felt as if I had been hit in the face with a red hot bar of metal. Melbourne had been hot, but Perth was incandescent. I could feel the fillings in my teeth melting and my toenails frying in sweat. Each day seemed hotter than the last, each night more sultry.

Friends from New Zealand rang us up. "It's ever so hot here," said Annette. "It's 29 degrees!"

"We had 29 degrees," said Robin. "We passed through it on our way to 40 degrees."

Perth had its hottest day for six years. Even the locals felt mildly uncomfortable. I felt like my blood was boiling in my veins. Puffs of steam came out of my ears. When I went to the loo, the urine evaporated before it reached the toilet bowl.

"Let's go south to Margaret River," said Robin. "It will be cooler there. We can visit my sister Jenny. And if we drive

down, we can spend a few hours with the air conditioning in the car turned right up!"

And so we did.

Margaret River proved to be just as hot as Perth but with the added disadvantage of thick clouds of flies desperately seeking moisture from all the people. Everybody did the Australian Wave all day long. Flies creepy-crawly tickling in your ears and up your nose. Buzz, buzz, buzz.

A fly flew into Robin's mouth and she swallowed reflexively and then spat. A leg and a wing came out but the rest went down her throat. Throughout the day she kept burping at irregular intervals.

"Tastes like fly," she said in disgusted tones.

Robin's sister Jenny owns a 50 acre block of native bush where she encourages the growth of native plants. She harvests the seeds for sale and generally does her best to conserve and protect the land. She showed us round proudly. In the centre of the block was an open area of dry, dusty earth, pounded down by the relentless sun. A small plastic toy boat lay forlorn, encrusted with dirt.

"In the winter," said Jenny, "we get a fair bit of rain and this area becomes a shallow lake. It's called Lake Jenny. And the boat is called HMAS Jenny. She patrols the lake and keeps it safe from pirates and piranha fish."

"I wonder how deep the lake gets," I asked Robin.

"I'm not sure," said Robin. "I'm not wearing my earrings"

Sometimes Australia can be magical. One warm twilight evening we were driving home from Jenny's along a quiet country road when a pair of kangaroos came bounding across the field on our right. One of them bounced into the road just in front of the car and casually lolopped along ahead of us, keeping us company. Its friend remained in the field and stared at us in horror.

"Oh, oh, oh! I need to get out into the road, but there's a roaring monster there. Oh, oh, oh! What can I do?"

Eventually the roo in front of us decided that it had travelled far enough down the road and it veered left, off the road and into the bush. As we passed it by, I could see it looking around for its companion. It seemed puzzled.

"Funny - I'm sure there was someone else with me when I started out. I remember it distinctly. I wonder where they went?"

We drove away and left them to it. I hope they got back together again. I'm sure they did.

"How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" asked Robin.

"I've no idea," I said. "I'm not wearing any underpants."

# Alan and Robin Get Wet

The weather in New Zealand has been less than clement of late. As I write, it is the height of summer, and we have just been experiencing the worst storms since records began. Hurricane force winds and driving rain day after day after day. Everyone is looking forward to winter. It might calm down and get warmer then.

It's my fault of course.

It all started four years ago. We were on holiday in Australia, staying in Robin's house.

"I think", said Robin, struck with inspiration, "that it might be a good idea to rent out my house here in Perth while I'm living in New Zealand."

"Not a bad idea," I said. "Of course we really ought to pack it all up. You don't want the tenants using your stuff."

Robin got all thoughtful. "Hmmm," she said, and set wheels in motion. Arrangements were made.

"These," she said proudly, "are boxes." She looked around for a moment. "Over there," she explained, "are things. Put the things in the boxes."

All was crystal clear. I now knew exactly what I had to do. "Of course," I said, and did as I was told. The boxes were large; many things went in them. Some of the things were also large. And heavy.

"Now," said Robin when all was done, "I think the boxes need putting over here."

I hastened to obey, but somehow, overnight, somebody had come into the house and nailed all the boxes to the floor. I heaved and struggled and managed to move the boxes, ripping great holes in the floor as the tortured floorboards gave up the unequal struggle. Robin didn't notice and I covered the gaping holes with rugs. Perhaps the



new tenants would fall through and kill themselves; but only after they'd set up the direct debit authority to pay the rent. I piled the boxes neatly and the moving men came to take them away.

"Nice one," said the moving man as he saw the tattered remains of the floorboards beneath the boxes. "The box nailer came in last night and nailed all the boxes to the floor, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said. "But don't tell Robin. She hasn't realised yet."

"No worries, mate. She'll be thirsty work though, getting those floorboards back into place."

"Have a beer."

"Good on yer, mate. Don't mind if I do. We'll get this lot out of the way in two shakes of a dead dingo's donger!"

I left it all to the experts.

Four years passed and Robin said, "Let's go back to Perth for a holiday."

"What a good idea," I said. And so it was done.

Perth was sweltering in a forty degree heat wave. "Let's check out the storage place where my things are," said Robin. "We can sort out the rubbish and throw it away and then maybe take the rest back to New Zealand. It's silly to pay storage fees when we could make good use of the stuff."

We drove to the storage shed. The air conditioner in the car made the journey a pleasant one. The brown, sere landscape outside drifted past, burned dry and dusty under the pitiless sun. Soon we arrived at the storage depot. Row upon row of identical concrete lockups baked in the sweltering heat. I got out of the car and rivers of sweat immediately broke out all over my body and flowed downwards to gush in never ending streams from the toes of my sandals. I squelched over to the lockup and Robin opened it. I recognised the boxes immediately. The

floorboards were all gone; the moving man had done a great job.

"We'll go through the boxes one by one," said Robin. "We'll pile the junk up over here and take it to the tip tomorrow. We'll repack all the good stuff and then arrange to have it picked up and delivered to New Zealand. Let's start with this box."

Interestingly the boxes appeared to have been spot-welded to the concrete. However we were in luck; the caustic properties of the great lake of sweat I was paddling in quickly dissolved the welds, and etched box shaped depressions deep into the floor. I chose a box at random and opened it.

"Jigsaw puzzles," I said.

"Ooohhh goody!" said Robin, elbowing me out of the way. "Let me see."

She sat down on the floor of the lockup and spread the pieces around on a spare space. It didn't take her long to have a rough rectangle blocked out. "Do you think this looks like sky?" she asked, holding out a piece for my inspection.

"I don't think so," I said. "Looks more like sea to me. If you examine it closely, you can see a fragment of shark."

"No," said Robin, unconvinced. "I think that's part of the wing of an eagle."

I opened another box.

"What shall I do with all these Anne McCaffery books?" I asked. "Can we put them on the pile for the tip?"

"No," said Robin, affronted. "Oooh - I haven't seen these for four years. Gosh, I missed them."

She began to read **The White Dragon**, holding the book in her left hand and reading with her left eye while her right hand and right eye continued to put the jigsaw puzzle together. I've always admired Robin's ability to multi-task.

"This box," I said, "appears to have several BBC computers in it."

"Oh, plug them in," insisted Robin. "Plug them in NOW! I must have a game of Elite!"

"These Dr. Who videos?" I asked. "Can I throw those away?"

"No, no! Find the video player. I want to watch the episode where the daleks say 'Exterminate' for the first time."

"What about the sewing machine?"

"Curtains," shrieked Robin. "I have to make curtains for the lounge. Right this minute!"

"This box is full of power tools. Drill, sander, a miniature lathe."

"Bookshelves! I want to build bookshelves. And a table. Wood! I must have wood."

By now all of Robin's limbs and most of her brain were engaged with multiple activities. It seemed the perfect time to introduce a delicate topic.

"When we get this pile of stuff back to New Zealand, what are we going to do with it? Where are we going to put it?"

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," said Robin. "I think we'll have to build six more rooms."

"That's a good idea," I said supportively. "But I have a much more cunning plan. There is a rather large room downstairs which we aren't currently using for anything. Perhaps you could take that over."

"But it's icky!" said Robin. "Bare concrete floor. My toes will freeze and drop off."

"OK. We'll get that seen to."

And so it was decided.

Back in New Zealand, we asked around. Who is good at floors? There was an outstanding unanimity of opinion. Carpet 2000 were the best. We drove there. They were closed.

Nothing daunted, we went back the next day. An astonishingly efficient and extremely pleasant husband and

wife team answered all our questions, told us what we needed and guided us to a solution.

"We'll be round on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> to lay the carpet."

"It's a deal."

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2004 dawned. It was a fine day though rather cloudy. A man turned up, festooned with carpet and intriguingly shaped bits of wood which had special nails in them. He laid these around the borders of the room and hammered the nails deep into the concrete. I'd never seen nails go into concrete before and I was genuinely impressed. Perhaps the boxes in the lockup had been nailed rather than spot-welded. Hmmmm...

"Did you live in Perth a few years back?" I asked. "Was it you who sneaked into houses and lockups overnight and nailed all the boxes to the floor?"

He looked shifty. "No squire. Not me! Never been to Perth in my life. I'd hate to go there. Everyone tells me it's as dry as a dead dingo's donger!"

My suspicions were confirmed. He spoke the language fluently!

He put down the underlay and then the carpet, attaching it cunningly to the bits of wood so that all was smooth and tickly beneath the feet.

"There you are, squire. All done. Brand new carpet. Makes a big difference to the room, doesn't it?"

I had to agree.

It is a well known fact that serving coffee in aeroplanes causes turbulence; and that washing a car causes rain. What is less well known is that laying a carpet causes hurricane force winds, and monsoon-like downpours for days on end. This is so that the wind can drive the rain in through the doors and windows so as to saturate the newly laid carpet and ruin it.

No sooner had the carpet layer left than the heavens opened and the rain pounded down. It flattened the grass

and vast torrents poured down the road.

On the evening of the day upon which the carpet was laid, David Bowie was giving a concert in Wellington. Robin and I went.

Bowie pranced upon the proscenium, out into the crowd, singing his heart out. I felt quite guilty as the rain poured down upon him. He donned an anorak and pulled the hood up and continued to sing, making the most marvellous music. The crowd was entranced.

At the end of one song, he turned to face the band who were safe and dry upon the covered stage behind him.

"Come on in," he invited them. "The water's fine!"

Every so often, a stage hand would slink on to the set and push the excess water off the proscenium with an extremely large mop. It slopped down into the crowd, but it didn't seem to dampen their ardour.

"We got everything here in Wellington," said Bowie. "We got squeegees, we got mops. Oh look! A towel!"

Like all good SF fans, Bowie knew where his towel was. He held it tight across his body and strummed it like a guitar.

"See!" he cried. "It's an air towel!"

He crumpled it and dried his hair with it.

"Now it's a hair towel!"

He laughed immoderately at his own joke. He was obviously having a great time, despite the weather. He sang another song.

Robin and I went home, buoyed up with enthusiasm after a wonderful concert. I went to the downstairs room to check out the carpet. Dry as a bone!

"Ya boo sucks, weather gods. I've got great drainage. You won't get me that way."

For the next two weeks they tried and tried. The rain poured down in solid sheets and the driving wind hurled it angrily in every direction. It sought out the most minute

cracks, the most minuscule crevices. All over New Zealand houses were flooded and roads were closed.

But my carpet stayed dry. I'm grateful for that. But I'm sorry that I almost sunk the whole country beneath the sea, just because I had a carpet laid.

I won't do it again. Promise.

# Monarch of the Road

As I leave my office of an evening to go home, I can clearly see the bus stop towards which I am heading. It is just across the road and up the street.

The buses I catch are green and they stand out from the crowd. They are owned and operated by the Newlands Bus Company (aka Mana Coach Services). Several species of green buses use my stop, but only one of them (number 56 in fact) is of interest to me. Numbers 54, 55 and 57 travel through a maze of twisty little passages on their journey to exotic, far away places with strange sounding names. Churton Park, Grenada Village, Woodridge. None of these destinations will do for me. I require route number 56, Johnsonville Via Newlands, because this bus has the convenient habit of stopping just outside my house.

No matter what time I leave the office, there is always a green bus standing at the stop. It is too far away for me to see the number and therefore I suffer agonies of indecision when I see it. Would it be a good idea to hold on to my hat and run towards the bus, thereby risking life and limb as I dash across the road, zig-zagging between the cars and courier cyclists, or should I merely walk briskly, hoping against hope that the traffic lights will be in my favour?

And what are the odds that the bus I see before me, the handle towards my hand, is actually a number 56? Given that the green buses travel only on four routes, you might assume that the odds are 1 in 4. Were all other things to be equal, you would be right. But since it is well known that million to one chances succeed nine times out of ten, and that God's surname is Murphy, there is actually a 99.9% probability that the bus I can see is a number 56. There is

also an absolute guarantee that it will pull away from the stop and roar around the corner before I get to it.

I have tried varying my departure time from the office, but it makes no difference. Somehow the conspirators at the Bus Company always know when I am about to leave the office and they carefully arrange the traffic flow so as to make sure that their green bus will always be at the stop when I walk out of the door.

Having just missed a number 56 bus, I now have to stand at the bus stop and wait for the next one. Because this is the rush hour, the timetable guarantees that there will be another one along in ten minutes. Unfortunately the rest of the rush hour traffic pays no attention to the bus timetable and therefore the bus will be delayed. Should the weather be clement, warm and sunny, the bus will arrive in about twenty minutes. Should it be cold, wet and miserable I will have to stand there for an hour or more.

But no matter how long I stand and wait for a number 56 bus, I will always have to suffer the inordinate frustration of watching several green buses that are not numbered 56 pull up to the stop and then gleefully drive away again when I don't get on them. On one never to be forgotten occasion, twelve buses that I couldn't catch arrived before the one that I could catch deigned to show up. By that time I was soaking wet and suffering from terminal frostbite on all my naughty bits. So I sat next to a pretty lady and dripped on her all the way home. It helped.

A few days after that particularly long interval between buses I stood at the bus stop and counted three number 54s, two number 55s and a 57 as they went past. Again I was cold, wet and very fed up. The next green bus that arrived was numbered 55. I crawled on to it.

"When is the number 56 due?" I asked the driver.

"That's me," he said, looking somewhat surprised that I had asked the question. "I'm a number 56."

"Then why does your sign say 55?" I asked.



He shrugged his shoulders. "It's all part of the Bus Company conspiracy to frustrate Alan Robson," he said. "I'll change the sign when I get round the corner. Look - here's the TV screen showing the image from the secret monitoring camera, so I always know where he is."

He glanced down at the screen and his face went white. He looked up at me again.

"Oops!" he said.

"You've been keeping the number 56 buses a secret from me have you?" I raged. "So how come they do occasionally turn up? Is there a flaw in the system?"

"No," he said miserably. "The telepathic scanning ray that monitors all your thoughts and feelings lets us know exactly when to send a bus along. We carefully time it to arrive just a few seconds before apoplexy blows the wax out of your ears. But the ray must be on the blink again. I thought I'd been getting a lot of static in it lately." He thumped his left ear very hard a couple of times and shook his head.

"Ha!" I told him, "It's the silver foil inlay in my hat band that's blocking the beam. I knew something like this must be going on and so I took the appropriate safety precautions. I've beaten you at last! I'll have a ticket to my house, please."

With bad grace, he sold me one.

Every Newlands bus comes equipped with a fearsome electronic device which will, when properly placated with a hi-tech card and the correct magic spells, disgorge a ticket and deduct the cost from secret total recorded in a microchip that is buried in the bowels of the card. If the total reaches (or falls below) zero, the machine becomes sulky and refuses to do business with you. Should this happen, one simply crosses the conductor's palm with green crinklies. The conductor then enters an incantation into the machine which will cause it to add more money to the total in the microchip.

These procedures are fraught with peril.

In order to purchase a ticket, the wielder of the card must wait until after the conductor has entered the destination into the machine. At that point (and only at that point) waving the magic card over a sensor on the top of the machine will cause it to print a ticket and deduct the cost. Should the card approach the sensor *before* the conductor has finished entering the destination, the machine beeps fiercely, red lights flash, sirens go off, the bus ticket police appear and the hapless passenger is summarily executed.

In order to add money to the total on the card, exactly the reverse procedure is followed. The card must be placed on the sensor before total is keyed in. Should the card approach the sensor *after* the conductor has begun to utter the incantation to update the total, the machine beeps fiercely, red lights flash, sirens go off, the bus ticket police appear and the hapless passenger is summarily executed.

Woe betide the passenger who gets out of sync with the machine. The bus ticket police show no mercy.

As well as having a ticket machine, Newlands buses also have a broom sitting just behind the driver's seat. This serves two purposes. When it is clutched at the bristly end, the driver can use it to poke recalcitrant doors closed without actually getting up out of the seat (many Newlands buses have doors that open; few of them have doors that close). When it is clutched at the non-bristly end it can be used to sweep up the pieces of passengers who have been dealt with by the bus ticket police. There is a certain elegance to the fact that a single low tech device can solve two such tricky problems.

Truly it has been said:

Caesar aderat forte  
Brutus aderam  
Caesar sic in hominibus  
Brutus sic intram

# Twisting By The Pool

**Contour - New Zealand's 25<sup>th</sup> Annual SF Convention,**  
Rotorua, Easter 2004

I set off in my trusty spaceship to drive to the science fiction convention on the planet of Rotting Rua in the centre of the New Zealand galaxy. Fortunately I had a good contour map. I brought a present with me for the guest of honour but somehow or other the wrapping got torn off so I thought I'd better do something about repairing it. I diverted my spaceship to Larry Niven's **Stringworld** where I unravelled a whole ball of superstring to tie the parcel up again. But something must have gone wrong because the more knots I tied in the string, the worse the quantum state of the parcel became. I'm afraid the physics and mathematics of string theory will always be a black hole in my understanding.

I resumed my journey - but it wasn't long before I ran into another problem. The air supply in the cabin was becoming increasingly foul as I breathed in oxygen and breathed out carbon dioxide. I needed to refresh the air - blow out the carbon dioxide; put oxygen back again. The technical term for this is "scrubbing" the carbon dioxide. The chemists among you will be familiar with the term. Fortunately, I was passing close to a planet where the native inhabitants have a very curious biology. They breath in carbon dioxide and blow out oxygen. A whole planet full of scrubbers! Just what I needed to blow the foul air away. I landed immediately and called in all the scrubbers to give me the best blow job they could manage.

And then, suitably refreshed, I continued on my way. I brought one of the scrubbers with me as a companion so that the emergency I had just survived would not occur

again. She'd be useful for hauling my ashes. Out of the space drive, you understand.

My problems were not yet over. I could feel my energy levels dropping, and so in order to renew them I made my way to Frank Herbert's **Dune**, the dessert planet, the place that supplies the entire galactic cluster with sweet things. Here are to be found inexhaustible chocolate mines and never ending rivers of treacle. Many New Zealanders work here, and they are extremely proud of their pavlova quarries. Australians are not allowed to quarry pavlova on Dune, the dessert planet. The New Zealanders throw lethal toffee kiwifruits at every Australian pavlova quarryman that they see.

However when I landed on the planet's marzipan icing surface I was quite surprised to find that there was nobody there to greet me. Where was the traditional melange of rude, crude, bullying and moronic customs and immigration officials whose job it was to photograph me, fingerprint me and measure my blood sugar levels? There was absolutely nobody around at all. Dune, the dessert planet, was completely deserted!

My companion and I wandered the streets in a daze, pausing occasionally to nibble at a chocolate pudding tree and drink from a sherbet stream. And then the sun went down and night fell with a splash that splattered us with sweetness. As the darkness spread, the reason for the empty streets began to manifest itself. Vampire hordes were crawling out of the buildings. Now that the sun was safely down, the vampires were coming out from the protection of their cookie jars. They were hungry and they were looking for prey.

We were was terrified! These were the dreaded alucard vampires, the backward vampires with a sweet tooth who only drank the blood of diabetics. Clutching my insulin tightly to my chest, I grabbed hold of my companion's hand

and ran back to my spaceship with the vampires in hot pursuit.

Luckily I managed to escape them by the skin of my rice pudding and soon I was safely in orbit. Breathing a sigh of relief, I continued on my journey.

By now, the planet called Rotting Rua was in sight. The sulphur stench from the thermal areas was nicely ripe. As always, I found the smell to be very nostalgic. I studied chemistry at university and hydrogen sulphide was a commonly used reagent in the laboratory. Rotting Rua always brings back happy memories of fossicking about in the lab making bangs, smells and pretty colours. You should only study chemistry if you like bangs, smells and pretty colours. There's no point to it otherwise. Some of the things you get to play with are pretty revolting; not to say dangerous. Chemists, unlike the general population, wash their hands **before** they go to toilet. Sometimes they wash their hands afterwards as well; but not often. Toilet nasties are positively benign compared to the evils that lurk in the average test tube.

I inhaled the delightful scent of Rotting Rua.

"Isn't it wonderful?" I said to my companion.

"It's fantastic!" she said ecstatically. "Nobody will ever know if I fart. And I won't need to take a shower the whole time we are here. It's paradise! Can we retire here, when the time comes?"

"Of course," I said. I was quite looking forward to not knowing when my companion farted. It would be a new experience for me.

I was feeling quite excited. Who would be at the convention? Would I get a chance to meet the writer of all those alternate history novels. What was his name? Oh yes - Harry Turtleplover. No - it was Lobstersparrow. Or was it Mockturtlepigeon? Tortoisevulture? Oysterchaffinch? Mussellduck? Oh, I remember - he's actually a Maori writer who writes very funny stories full of wit and wisdom, and his

name is Witi Pipimoa! He's got a couple of cousins who are also starting to make names for themselves: Witi Repartee and Witi Iadmireher.

Perhaps the convention would organise my favourite game - a Frederik Pohl-vaulting contest. Or maybe they'd have an attempt on the populate-a-planet-from-scratch world record where the people taking part are supplied with an anatomically correct cardboard cut out model of Douglas Adams and an anatomically correct cardboard cut out model of Douglas Eves. It's called a shaggy-God contest.

I made a mental note to check all of these details with the convention organiser Alan Parker-Pen, known as Ballpoint for short. Everybody knows Ballpoint. He's the man with the commonly felt tip and a lot of lead in his pencil.

It turned out to be a great convention.

With thanks to the *Harvard Lampoon*, from whom (which??) I stole a pun. All the rest of this nonsense is my own work (I think) - but nevertheless I refuse to accept responsibility for it!

# Alan and Robin Unpack

"We'll deliver six cubic metres of stuff next Tuesday," said the lady from the moving company.

"Fantastic," said Robin. "All my things from Australia have arrived at last." She glowed with enthusiasm. "Now all we have to do is find somewhere to put them."

I poked gloomily at the wall of the house. Nothing had changed overnight. It still wasn't elastic.

"I don't know where they can go," I said. "All of the cupboards are full."

"True," explained Robin. "But the cupboards are full of *your* stuff. If we empty them out, we can fill them with *my* stuff. Seems straightforward enough to me."

"We'd better hire a skip," I said. And so it was done.

The skip sat emptily outside my front gate. "Heaps of room in there," said Robin enthusiastically. "You'll be able to fit lots in."

I began to empty my cupboards. In many ways Robin was perfectly right. There was stuff in there that I hadn't looked at or used for thirty years or more. The only time I ever saw it was when I moved house and took it out of a cupboard at one end and put it back into a cupboard at the other.

Polystyrene beads for a dead bean bag. An electronic flash gun with a fitting for a camera I no longer possess. A 286 computer that didn't work last time I turned it on. Mysterious cables with unidentifiable plugs at each end, boxes of floppy disks and tape cartridges that I cannot use because the equipment that reads them died a decade ago. Keys that do not fit any lock in the house. Stereo speakers with a mysterious fault that causes them to blow up amplifiers at unpredictable intervals. Blue mechanisms, a

set of fish knives, three demijohns and a mouldy briefcase. Not to mention a partridge, a pear tree and a kitchen sink.

All my university notes went into the skip. I closed those folders for the last time on the day I took my final degree exam and I haven't opened them since. I looked nostalgically at them before tossing them and I found my old exam papers themselves. There were questions on those papers that I'd obviously answered, because I had ringed them. But as I re-read them I discovered that not only did I not remember answering them, I no longer knew *how* to answer them because I didn't understand them any more. So much knowledge had vanished from my head. It was all contained in the notes, but it seemed like too much trouble to put it back into my skull, so the notes got thrown away.

Similarly my old university textbooks, though I did keep one physics text book on the grounds that ten years ago I looked up the formula for the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction in it. You never know, I might need that formula again one day. So I kept the book, just in case. But everything else went into the skip.

I found a folder full of documents given to me by the New Zealand Government when I emigrated to New Zealand nearly twenty five years ago. One of the leaflets told me I would be liable for conscription into the armed forces. I remember discussing this with the Government representative at my interview at New Zealand House in London.

"What about conscription?" I asked. "I don't fancy that."

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "We got rid of that years ago. But unfortunately we'd printed several warehouses full of the leaflets just before we scrapped it, and we're still using them up. If you look on page 5 it says that the imminent arrival of colour television in New Zealand is causing great excitement. But we've had colour TV for at least ten years. One day we'll reprint the leaflets and correct the



information, when we've used them all up. But that won't be for decades yet."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm glad you clarified that."

I wonder if they are still using the same leaflet? Perhaps I should return my copy so that they can use it again for another immigrant? On second thoughts, into the skip with it!

Boxes and boxes full of wargames (aka military simulations) from SPI, a company that went spectacularly bankrupt about twenty years ago. Towards the end of their life, their games became unplayable because SPI were so desperate to get their games to market and sell them that they published the games without any play testing at all and the rules were inconsistent, contradictory and often incomprehensible. I appear to have bought all of those games and I never played any of them, because I couldn't! The rules wouldn't let me. Into the skip with them!

The skip was starting to bulge ominously as I filled it up with decades of detritus. The phone rang.

"Hello, it's Annette here. Do you need any help with the sorting and unpacking.?"

"Yes please!"

Scarcely had I put the phone down when Annette arrived with a distinct *whoosh*.

"Oooh! A skip!" she said. "I love skips!"

She clambered in and started sorting stuff.

"War games! You can't throw those away!" She piled them carefully by the side of the skip so she could take them away with her. "Oooh! Text books! Chemistry text books! I love chemistry text books. Are there any physics books as well?"

"No, I kept the physics book."

Her face fell with disappointment. "Oh well, never mind." The chemistry books joined the pile.

Annette burrowed deeper and deeper into the skip. Every so often she would emit a squeal of joy and emerge red-

faced and puffing with a new treasure for her pile.

"Oooh! Blue mechanisms, a set of fish knives, three demijohns and a mouldy briefcase. Not to mention a partridge, a pear tree and a kitchen sink." By now her pile was tottering alarmingly.

The skip was now embarrassingly empty. I had nothing left to throw away because I no longer owned anything. The situation was desperate.

"Don't worry," said Robin, "I've got lots of garden rubbish."

The next day dawned and we went out to the skip to throw garden rubbish into it. Much to our surprise, someone had wandered past in the night and thrown some of *their* rubbish into it. We were now the proud possessors of a (presumably) empty LPG cylinder; the kind of thing you use on barbecues and stoves.

"I don't like that," I said. "I'm pretty sure you can't just dump those in a skip. They are quite dangerous, even when they are empty and they have to be disposed of properly."

"How do you dispose of them?" asked Robin.

I didn't know, so I rang the council.

"How do I dispose of an empty LPG cylinder?"

"Take it to the Northern Landfill," said the council person. "It's called the Happy Valley Tip. They'll dispose of it. It will cost you \$6."

We continued to fill the skip. I was bereft of possessions and the garden had no more rubbish. And so the men came and took the skip away.

The next day, we discovered that the phantom skip filler had again visited us during the night. He had been intent on disposing of a rusty bicycle frame. Annoyed at finding that the skip had gone, he had simply dumped the rusty bike in front of my garage and run away. I rang the council.

"How do I dispose of a rusty bicycle frame?"

"Take it to the Northern Landfill," said the council person. "It's called the Happy Valley Tip. They'll dispose of it. It will

cost you \$6."

I began to wonder if perhaps the skip filler had got into the habit of giving me difficult to dispose of rubbish. What more would I receive? The next day I found out. I rang the council.

"How do I dispose of a rusty centurion tank that is missing its caterpillar tracks?", I asked.

"Take it to the Northern Landfill," said the council person, completely unfazed by the question. "It's called the Happy Valley Tip. They'll dispose of it. It will cost you \$6."

"Thank you," I said.

"No worries," said the council person. "We've been getting a lot of those lately."

My cupboards were now utterly empty, and so Robin began to fill them with her stuff. In went blue mechanisms, a set of fish knives, three demijohns and a mouldy briefcase. Not to mention a partridge, a pear tree and a kitchen sink.

"What's this?" I asked, holding up a bottle full of rough grey-brown objects.

"Oh I've been looking all over for that," said Robin. "We've got to put that in our display cabinet. Right at the front where everyone can see it."

"OK," I said. "But what *is* it?"

She gave me her withering don't-you-know-*anything* look. "It's a bottle full of gall stones," she said. "When I had my gall bladder operation they let me keep the stones as a souvenir. Impressive, aren't they?"

"Very," I said. "Perhaps we could have them polished up and set into a pendant or possibly made into ear rings?"

"Don't be silly," said Robin. "Who wants to wear gall stones in their ears?"

Now all the cupboards are full again, but Robin still has several boxes of indescribable things lurking in the spare room. The walls of my house are still not elastic. More cupboards are called for...

# The Joy of Socks

I've always had an ambivalent relationship with my clothes.

When I was a child, my family had an annual ritual. Just like everybody else in Yorkshire we would dedicate two weeks at the height of summer to sea, sand and bingo. We'd have liked sun as well, but since this was the north of England, the chances of sun in summer were small. Three out of four would have to do. Off we went to Bridlington, or Scarborough or Whitby - anywhere that had a beach and a bingo parlour.

Of course two weeks away from home meant that we had to take two weeks worth of clothes with us - and they had to be the best clothes because my mother would have died of embarrassment had we been caught on holiday not dressed in our best.

The logistics of wearing our best clothes on holiday required that we wear our worst clothes on the week preceding the holiday so that my mother didn't have to do a special wash just before we left. She had a secret drawer that she opened once a year and it contained all our pre-going away clothes. For the week prior to the holiday my father and I wore shattered underpants and ragged shirts. We looked like charity cases. People stopped us in the street and gave us money out of pity for our neglected state. But mother was adamant - the good clothes were for the holiday.

Once we got back home, she would immediately do an enormous wash. The pre-holiday clothes that survived one more trip through the washer and the ringer were put back into the secret drawer and everything returned to normal for another year.

At various points during the year, if my parents were feeling rich or benign, (or rich *and* benign) it was possible that I would have new clothes bought for me. A big expedition to town would be mounted. The planning alone took days of effort.

We would visit all the clothes shops where I would be thrust forcibly into garment after garment. The clothes were always too big for me. The reason, my parents solemnly informed me, was that in order to get good value for money we needed to keep the clothes for a long time and I would, of course, grow into them. Consequently the sleeves of the shirts brushed against my knees and the waistband of the trousers had to be pulled right up into my armpits. I needed braces and two extra notches in my belt just to keep the trousers up. And we still had to roll up the legs so that I didn't trip over them and break my neck. There was room in each outfit for both me and my twin brother. Since I didn't have a twin brother, I had to occupy the clothes alone. A depressing thought.

Once we got the clothes home, they were hidden away in another secret drawer and I was forbidden to wear them because they were new and I might get them dirty or (horror or horrors) tear them. Eventually sufficient time went past that their newness was deemed to have worn off and I was finally allowed to wear them. By this time I had usually grown so much that they were far too small for me, but nevertheless I was crammed in to them anyway and my previous generation of clothes then got relegated to the pre-holiday drawer.

Like most students, I eventually discovered that my mother had lied to me about the length of time that socks and underpants can reasonably be worn. Experimental evidence soon convinced me that these garments can be kept on the body for weeks or even months at a time without any undue difficulty. It has to be admitted that, when I indulged myself in this manner, the garments did

add an interestingly fragrant ambience to my bedroom, but I felt that was a small price to pay when weighed against the convenience of the habit.

However, if I was foolish enough to let my underpants and socks dry out overnight, they became quite brittle, and then they showed an alarming tendency to shatter if I treated them at all roughly when I put them on again the next day. Even the simple act of flexing my toes was fraught with peril until my socks had re-moistened themselves, and I had to severely ration my lecherous glances at attractive ladies until my underpants became flexible again. The only way I ever found of preventing that catastrophe was to sleep in my socks and underwear, thus keeping them moist and supple with my night time secretions.

There is much debate about the optimum length of time that must pass before you really have to change into new underpants and socks. I recommend the pragmatic approach. Throw your socks and underpants at the ceiling. If they come down, you can wear them again.

# Alan and Robin Get Adopted

The cat wanted to sit on the mat. But there wasn't a mat to sit on. There was a lawn, but the grass was rather damp and cold, and the weeds tickled the cat's bottom. The cat sat on the grass and howled. The stairs leading up to the front door seemed promising at first, but they were very exposed to the elements. The wind ruffled the cat's fur and the rain saturated it. The cat sat on the stairs and howled. Finally the cat settled on the small gap under the stairs that led up to the front door. It was sheltered from the wind in there and the rain only blew in on alternate Wednesdays. The cat sat under the stairs and howled.

The cat was small, black and fluffy. There was a white patch under its chin and it looked for all the world as if the animal was wearing an elegant dinner jacket with a white shirt and a bow tie. Perhaps it was a cultured cat, on its way home from an evening at the Opera. It had a blue collar with a bell on it which suggested that somebody, somewhere must once have loved it. Nevertheless the cat showed no inclination to return to wherever home was. It just sat outside the house and howled miserably.

Porgy and Bess found this quite fascinating. They stood on the windowsill where they were warm and dry and cosy, and they watched the fluffy, bedraggled scrap of fur that was shivering outside.

"Yah, boo sucks," said Porgy. "I've got some biscuits left over from dinner. I think I'll have a snack. And you can't have any, ho, ho, ho!"

"Go away," said Bess. "This is my house."

The cat howled.

No matter how high we turned up the volume on the TV, we couldn't drown out the sound of the cat howling. The noise vibrated its way through the walls of the house as if they weren't even there, and then it bounced around inside our skulls, insinuating itself into all the sympathy nodes in our brains.

"Let me in. Please let me in. I'm cold and wet and hungry and miserable. I desperately need someone to stroke me. I want to sit on the mat."

After two days of listening to the animal howl, I couldn't stand it any more. I went and introduced myself to the cat.

"Hello, I'm Alan." I held my hand out so that the cat could sniff it. There was a very bad wound on the cat's nose. It had probably been in a fight. It stopped howling for a while and looked at me hopefully. I stroked it and scratched it behind the ears. Immediately it began to rumble and its whole body vibrated as it revved its motor up to full throttle. It was a tiny wee scrap of a thing and the black, fluffy fur stuck out haphazardly in every direction. I carried it into the house and gave it some food.

It inhaled all the food in the bowl. It obviously hadn't had anything to eat for days. Then it spotted the bowls belonging to Porgy and Bess. As usual, they'd left half of their tea so that they could come back later for a midnight snack. The cat inhaled all of their food as well and then it sucked up all the water in the water bowl.

"Any more food?"

"Sorry, mate. You've just had three teas. I think that's enough for now. You don't want to overdo it if you haven't eaten for a while. You might get sick."

The cat trotted round the house for a while, exploring and looking thoughtful. Then it found the bathroom. It had obviously seen bathrooms before. It jumped into the bath and ejected all the food it had just eaten out of both ends simultaneously.

"I warned you that would happen," I told it.



"It was worth it," said the cat. "Yummy food. Got any more?"

"No!"

It went into the lounge and sat on the mat. Then it washed itself and went to sleep. I cleaned up the mess in the bath.

"Perhaps we ought to make up a dirt tray and put it in the bath," suggested Robin. "Since that's where it seems to want to go."

So that's what we did. The cat seemed very grateful.

Despite being made of nothing but fluff, the cat appears to produce three times its own body weight of poo every single day. And there's an extremely efficient biological warfare factory hidden somewhere inside the beast. The smell alone turns the stuff into a weapon of mass destruction. We have all given up breathing. We've given up taking baths as well. Has that brown stain always been there or is it a new one? That is not a question you want to have to ask yourself half way through a soak.

And Robin no longer licks chocolate ice cream off her fingers. Just in case.

Robin went outside to do some gardening and the new cat went with her. Robin dug a hole.

"O, wow! Thanks!" said the cat and instantly filled it up with poo. The smell drifted into the air. Three ravens, two golden eagles, a partridge, a pear tree and an Air New Zealand jumbo jet fell dead from the sky.

The cat has a huge vocabulary and never shuts up. It purrs, it howls, it chatters away.

"I think its name should be Harpo," said Robin. "After the Marx Brother who never said anything at all."

Porgy and Bess were not pleased to have a new cat in the house. Porgy went on hunger strike. Despite the fact that he is three times the size and three times the weight of the little ball of fluff, he is scared stiff of Harpo and runs away when the animal gets close. Bess is slightly braver,

but even she seems a little bit intimidated by the tiny, fluffy thing and tends to keep her distance.

We took Harpo to the vet.

"Gosh! What a fluffy cat," she said. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"We don't know," I said and I explained the background.

The vet raised Harpo's tail and stared. "I don't know either! This is a *fluffy* cat." She moved her head closer to Harpo's bottom, wrinkling her nose as the special Harpo fragrance struck her nostrils. "Aha! He's a little boy; an un-neutered male. I think he's about eight or nine months old."

"Hmm," said Robin. "Do the arithmetic. It sounds like he's a Christmas present who has outstayed his welcome. I bet the children got bored."

The vet clicked her tongue over the wound on Harpo's nose. "That's quite nasty," she said. "It has split the septum, the join between the nostrils. It will probably never heal properly. And he's got some blisters in his mouth. He might have a mild dose of cat flu. I'll give you some antibiotics to clear up any lurking infections. They'll help the wound on his nose heal as well. And if he's still with you in a couple of weeks, bring him back and we'll vaccinate him and worm him and chop his nadgers off."

Harpo has been with us for nearly a fortnight now. His nose has healed nicely and you have to look very closely indeed to see the damage to the septum. It doesn't appear to worry him at all. He's definitely the boss cat - he eats first, he owns our bed, he gets first choice of toys. Ping pong balls are good. He chases them up and down the polished wood of the hallway and when they bounce unpredictably he skitters like a cartoon cat, legs going a thousand miles an hour, body not going anywhere at all. Eventually he manages to get a bit of traction and he changes direction and heads off again at a gallop.

Porgy is slowly getting his confidence back. He has started eating again, though he is still a bit nervous and will back away if Harpo comes after his food. Bess has pretty

much accepted him and they largely ignore each other. If he gets too stroppy she usually talks to him severely. Sometimes it works.

Nobody appears to be missing him - there's nothing on the SPCA list, no notices on the supermarket notice boards, no adverts in the local paper, no pleading leaflets in every mailbox in the street. Harpo doesn't seem to care. He likes it here. He's a very affectionate cat. He loves a cuddle. And his tiny body is jammed full of enough personality for three ordinary cats. He's a bloody nuisance! I hope he decides to stay.

# Alan Flies Undone

I arrived at the airport in good time for my flight. Some might say I was excessively early. Hah! Such people are not wise to the ways of the travelling world. There are no worms left at the feast when the late birds get there.

"Lo! Here am I," I said to the nice lady at the check in desk. "You can stop worrying now. I've arrived. Pray provide me with my boarding pass for flight NZ446 to Auckland."

The lady clicked keys on her keyboard and peered short-sightedly at the screen.

"I'm sorry sir," she said gleefully, "but that flight has been cancelled due to engineering problems. Would you like me to rebook you on to the next flight?"

Cancelled? Could it be that the engine had fallen off the aeroplane and they'd run out of string and duct tape, and thus were unable to fasten it back on?

"Yes, please," I said.

She clicked more keys, frowned and then clicked them all again.

"I'm sorry sir," she said with a happy smile, "the next flight is fully booked. Would you like me to try the one after that?"

I heaved a deep sigh at her, but she dodged it skilfully and it bounced harmlessly off the wall behind her and fell on to the luggage conveyor belt.

"Yes, please."

Fortunately that flight still had seats available (though not many). I would fly to Auckland a mere three hours later than I had originally planned. I was glad that I had chosen to arrive at the airport excessively early (as some might say). Who knows how many flights would have filled themselves

up if I had arrived fashionably late? Who knows how much longer I might have been delayed?

I took myself off to the Koru Club Lounge so that I could indulge myself excessively in strange, grotesque and debilitating luxuries utterly unknown to the common herd milling below.

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the Lounge, eager for debauchery, I discovered that the majority of the place was blocked off and completely inaccessible to me. An enormous storm the previous week had ripped the roof away and saturated the carpet with tons of rain water. Presumably this was why my flight had been cancelled. It wasn't just an engine that had dropped off the aeroplane; the entire machine had disintegrated into tiny shards when the Koru Club Lounge roof fell upon it from the sky, driven by a mighty wind. The amount of duct tape required to stick it back together again beggared the imagination. No wonder they hadn't finished the job yet. No wonder they wouldn't let anyone fly on it.

The Lounge was undergoing massive repairs, but until they were complete, it was reduced to less than half its normal size, and the luxuries were reduced to less than half their normal level of sinfulness. Furthermore, the reduction in the lounge size meant that all the people were forced to sit much closer together than would otherwise have been the case. It is very hard to debauch yourself when everyone is crammed too close together to let the dancing girls through.

The time passed slowly.

Aeons later I arrived in Auckland and I went in to the office to set up my classroom for the course I would be teaching the next day. It was a routine operation and it was soon successfully complete. I staggered off to my hotel feeling reassured that nothing else could possibly go wrong...

I arrived at the office for the first day of the course. It was a cloudy and drizzly day. I squelched in to the classroom and waited for my students to arrive, and then I began to teach. And as I taught, I made reference to slides that I was projecting on to the screen behind me. I began to suspect that all was not well when one of the students asked:

"Where can we find these slides in our manuals?"

Before I could say anything, another student said, "They are right there in the first chapter. One on each page, just as Alan is projecting them."

"Not in my manual," said the first student.

Close examination revealed that some of my students had the same manual and slides that I was teaching from, but others had a later version of the manual and at first glance it seemed to be quite different from mine. However it soon became clear that the later version of the manual contained all the same chapters that mine did - they were just in a different order. And when we found the chapters that corresponded to mine, they contained (almost) exactly the same information and the same slides but again they were arranged in a different order. There seemed to be no very good reason for this - the order of both sets of chapters and the information within them made perfect sense whichever way you presented them, so the shuffling that the material had been subjected to between the two versions of the manual seemed more than a little arbitrary. I suppose that this is the kind of change that you implement for the very best reason of all - because you can!

I began to consider slicing both myself and the classroom up the middle so that I could present each set of students with the material that corresponded to their manual. Perhaps I could clone myself. Maybe I could address every alternate word to the opposite side of the room. I listened to myself carefully. This is what I heard myself say.

"For those of you with a manual like mine, this is chapter three. For those of you with the new manual, it's a combination of chapters five and eight and you haven't got this slide, but don't worry because it isn't a very important one and I think I'll ignore it anyway. I usually do."

Some of the students looked a little twitchy at the extra complications I was introducing into their lives, but mostly it seemed to work. I spent the day teetering on tenterhooks, madly comparing the manuals one chapter ahead whenever I got a spare minute.

I finished the day quite exhausted, but triumphant. We'd got through everything I wanted to cover that day and the students seemed to be keeping up well. Crisis solved, nothing else could possibly go wrong...

It was raining again when I walked home to the hotel after the class. As I walked, I became conscious of a certain dampness seeping through my left sock, and strange *squelching* noises made themselves heard.

When I got back to the hotel room, I examined my shoes closely. At some unknown moment during the day, the upper surface of my left shoe had split in two directions and there was a large flap of leather that bounced up and down as I walked, thus exposing a huge hole to the elements. Needless to say the water had eagerly poured in through this enormous gap, which explained my damp sock and my *squelching* sounds. My left shoe was ruined and completely unwearable - even the act of gently removing it from my foot widened the split.

I had no other shoes with me. Oh gloom!

Close scrutiny of the yellow pages revealed that there were no late night emergency shoe shops anywhere close by. It seemed that I would have to wear my unwearable shoe until at least tomorrow lunchtime, when perhaps I would be able to find a shoe shop within walking distance of the office. I was not looking forward to this. The office is in a very posh part of town. Any shoe shop available to me

would doubtless impose a huge posh surcharge on top of the basic price. Oh my aching credit card!

Fortunately I was having dinner with friends that night and when I explained my predicament, Sue had the perfect solution.

"Come with me to The Warehouse," she says. "It is open late tonight, and you are certain to get a bargain. Everyone does. All the adverts say so, and adverts never lie. It is against the law."

Sue took me to The Warehouse.

"Over there are the shoes," she said. "I'll go and look at the bargain books while you choose."

I glanced around. Shoes. Shelves full of shoes. I picked up a pair. Too large.

I picked up another pair. Too small.

I picked up another pair. Just right.

"Who's been trying on *my* shoes?" said baby bear inside my head.

I put one of them on to a foot. Perfect.

"OK," I said to Sue. "These will do."

Sue looked a little flabbergasted. "Don't you think you should try them on?" she asked.

"I've done that," I said, puzzled. "They're fine."

"But you've been gone less than two minutes," said Sue. "You haven't had time to make an informed choice.

Shopping with men is so frustrating! Don't you know that you are supposed to compare prices and styles and try on at least a dozen pairs before you finally settle on the first pair you tried?"

"No," I said. "I didn't know that. Why do you have to do that?"

"In case you find a better bargain, or nicer shoes."

"Nicer shoes? Shoes are shoes. They cover your feet and stop your toes from fraying at the edges. As long as they fit, what else matters?"



"Oooh!" said Sue. "Aaaahhh!" she explained. Then she hit me with a bargain book and took me back home and we ate dinner.

# **The Silence Of The Harpo - whistle, whistle, honk**

It is five o'clock in the morning. Everything is muted and misty. I'm drowsy now and I'm seesaw sleeping, up and down. I'm almost awake, I'm almost asleep and I'm drifting in low, slow fluffy clouds of unconsciousness, warm and snug. And then:

"AAAARRRRGGGGHHH!!!"

Suddenly I am wide awake, pain pulsing, my foot on fire, my eyes wide with shock at the throbbing agony that has pulled me so rudely from sleep.

Harpo the Cat, desiring his breakfast, has crawled under the sheet and duvet at the bottom of the bed and has dug all his claws deep into my big toe. As my screams of agony ring through the house, nine kilogram Porgy races into the bedroom, leaps high into the air and thumps down heavily on my chest.

"OOOOOFFFFF!!!"

Every molecule of oxygen shoots out of my lungs and I am unable to draw any more in because Porgy is such a dead weight that my chest muscles do not have enough strength to move my diaphragm. Unable to inhale, I begin to strangle while Porgy looks at me with deep and abiding love in his eyes. He purrs like a traction engine. He too wants his breakfast.

Bess, aware of sudden activity and wishing to attract my attention so as to ask me for her breakfast, leaps on Porgy and begins to fight him for possession of my chest. They scream and yowl and hurl each other up and down my torso; full body slam, sunset flip, Oklahoma roll, camel

clutch, half-nelson and a Boston crab. I don't need a television set to watch WWF wrestling matches.

Harpo, having shredded my big toe, has moved on to the next one. Cats caterwaul, the bed threatens to collapse. I snatch a quick breath as Bess knocks Porgy into the middle of next week with a particularly unsubtle karate chop. I let out another shriek as Harpo brings his teeth into play on my toes.

Robin grunts sleepily, turns over and continues to snore in deep contentment. No help there. I stagger bloodily into the kitchen and fill the cats' dishes with biscuits and I make sure their water bowl is topped up. It's been just another normal morning in the Robson household.

Harpo the Cat has lived with us for nearly three months now, and we all defer to his wishes. Like Edward Lear's pobble, I have no toes. Robin is getting nervous about her shed.

Robin is currently deeply engaged in concreting the floor of her garden shed. Every so often she gets into the car, disappears for a couple of hours and comes back with a boot full of bags of cement and builder's mix. When we go shopping, she scours the shelves for interesting things to embed in her concrete.

"Plain concrete is dull," she said to me. "I want concrete that is vibrant and exciting; concrete that has a personality."

She is building the shed floor in small sections. Some sections have had glitter scattered upon them. Some have small stars twinkling, and one has a pair of eyeballs. It is quite disconcerting to walk into the shed and feel the floor staring at you. You can't help wondering what it is thinking about.

She has a birthday coming soon.

"What would you like for your birthday present?" I asked her.

"Ooohh - builder's mix," she said dreamily. "Cement. Perhaps a collection of coloured pebbles to make a mosaic.

Just to add a touch of class."

"Would you like the new DVD of the Star Wars Trilogy?" I asked.

She looked slightly affronted. "That would look silly embedded in concrete!"

Every time Robin digs out a section in the shed and levels the dirt, Harpo poos in the nice, soft earth she has just exposed. Porgy, who hero-worships Harpo, immediately follows suit. The floor of Robin's shed is actually a nice layer of concrete perched on top of a thick layer of cat poo which is sitting directly on the soil. Judging by the corrosive effects of Harpo's poo on his dirt tray, both Robin and I are expecting the concrete floor to disintegrate any day now. Either that, or a small, fierce volcano will erupt as his poo eats through the Earth's crust and exposes the raw magma below.

Harpo is the smallest cat in the house but he has the largest personality. I've never seen anyone take such an exuberant joy in simply being alive. His every waking moment appears to consist of pure pleasure. He leaps and gambols, he races and chases. Everything is a toy - butterflies, bumble bees, the cables that plug the units of my stereo system together, the mouse on Robin's computer and the large tennis balls that Porgy and Bess have long ago given up on because they are too heavy to control. Not a problem to Harpo. He bats them around as if they are feather light. He chases them across the room. He lies in wait for them and ambushes them when they aren't looking. He makes the games more challenging by attacking the toys around corners and from behind curtains.

Last week our vet had an open day and was offering big discounts on items in the store. We bought a large climbing frame for the cats. It has columns that are scratching posts and platforms at the top of each column. It is three storeys high and the middle platform has a curtain around it which transforms it into a cave that is just wonderful to hide in.

Things dangle on strings and jiggle enticingly, just asking to be chased and killed. All the cats love it and they perch at different levels and have boxing matches with each other.

Harpo hides in the cave and dangles his tail outside. He waits patiently – a fisherman hunting for prey. Eventually the temptation becomes overwhelming and either Porgy or Bess (or both) will leap for the tail to attack it. Quick as a flash, Harpo takes his tail out of danger, whirls round and beats seven kinds of brick dust out of the intruder, grinning delightedly from ear to ear. What a game!

Porgy and Bess retreat to lick their wounds. A few minutes later, being rather dumb cats, they have completely forgotten what happened. Glancing idly round in the middle of an important wash, they notice a black fluffy thing dangling down from the cave in the middle of the climbing frame.

"That looks like something worth attacking," says Porgy.

"Good idea," replies Bess.

"*Snigger*," says Harpo.

The other day the whole family was gathered together watching the television. Porgy found the programme less than enthralling and fell asleep. Bess felt the need to indulge in a practical critical evaluation of it and spent the duration of the programme licking her bottom. Harpo vanished.

The programme finished and Robin yawned.

"Coffee?" I suggested.

"Yes, please."

I went into the kitchen and did the coffee thing. While I was doing it, the cat flap flapped and Harpo came in. There was a sort of a black *swish* across the kitchen as he headed for the lounge. I paid no attention. Just Harpo, oozing cute as normal.

Soon I heard *rattle, rattle, rattle*. Harpo playing with some toy or other. Nothing odd there. I took the coffee in to the lounge.

"Beware," said Robin. "I'm armed and dangerous!"  
"?"

Robin brandished a blue tube at me.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Eye shadow," she said.

"What's dangerous about eye shadow?"

"I don't own any," said Robin.

We both looked at Harpo. Harpo looked at us.

"Nice eye shadow," said Harpo. "Great to play with. Just try chasing it - it *rattles*. Really neat!"

"Where did you get that from?" I asked.

"Dunno," said Harpo vaguely. "Somewhere. Isn't it great?"

A lady walked past the house. One eye was blue. One eye wasn't.

# Things I Have Learned This Month

The first thing I learned this month is that if you are attached (in every sense of the word) to your feet, you should never come between a lady and her corpse. Especially if the corpse hasn't quite become one yet...

It was about 6.00am on a drowsy Saturday. Harpo the Cat was cuddled up close to me, purring like a power drill. Robin was curled up close to me as well, and she too appeared to be purring. I've learned that Robin never snores. There is a subtle, though well defined, difference between purring and snoring. Robin is quite clear on this point and has explained it to me several times. With diagrams and gestures. And a rolling pin. I think I'm beginning to understand.

All ten kilos of Porgy were wrapped around my feet which were sinking deep into the mattress springs as a result. He too emitted an occasional purr. As a consequence of all this applied affection, I was wide awake and sweaty, but I didn't dare move. If the cats realised I was awake they would demand breakfast. I wasn't quite ready for that yet.

"Clatter, clatter," went the cat flap.

"Shriek!!!" yelled something that wasn't quite dead yet.

Robin, Harpo and Porgy all woke up, instantly alert.

"Sounds like Bess has brought breakfast home," said Robin.

We have a rule in the house. Robin is in charge of dead things and vomit. I'm in charge of everything else. Since it sounded like we might soon have a dead thing, she went to investigate. Harpo followed, full of curiosity.

"Shriek! Clatter, thud, shriek! Bang! Crash!"

"It's a bird," said Robin.

"So it is," said Harpo. "That looks as though it might be interesting. I wonder if it bounces? I wonder if it rattles?"

"Well done, Bess," said Robin soothingly, trying to make the best of the situation. Perhaps the cat could be placated enough to rescue the bird that was yelling its head off in her mouth.

"mmglfff", said Bess.

"Can I have a bit?" asked Harpo, starting to edge forward.

Bess opened her mouth a little, presumably to say no you can't, but before she could say anything at all, the bird slipped away from her and raced towards Harpo, yelling and shrieking at the top of its voice and scattering feathers in a fine black cloud.

"Oh, oh," said Harpo. "That looks a bit scary - I think I'd better run away."

He drilled one claw deep into Robin's naked foot and used it as a pivot to swing himself round a hundred and eighty degrees. All his other claws were out as well, and as he pivoted on the embedded claw they dug a neat semi-circle of flesh out of Robin's foot.

"Aaaaahhh, you little bugger," yelled Robin, grabbing hold of her wounded foot.

"SHRIEK!" yelled the bird.

"Bye, bye," said Harpo over his shoulder as he fled.

"Come back, you bastard", called Bess as she made a mighty leap towards the bird. She missed, and the bird took refuge behind Robin. For a moment, cat and bird played peek-a-boo through Robin's legs. Bess actually growled; a sound which is not normally part of her vocabulary.

"Get out of my way!" said Bess angrily, and she bit Robin firmly on the foot that Harpo hadn't shredded, in order to make her move aside. "Let me get at that bloody bird!"

"Aaaahhh!" yelled Robin one more time, grabbing hold of her other wounded foot. Both Robin's feet were now in mid-air as she tended to her injuries. With one foot in each hand,



she was staying upright by sheer will power alone. She moved to the left a little. Bess shot through the gap so fast that the sonic boom stunned the bird into immobility.

"Ha! Got you!"

Bess picked the bird up and raced out of the cat flap into the garden.

There was a blessed silence, broken only by the splashing of blood from Robin's multiple cat-induced wounds. Black feathers swung gently down through the air and settled on the floor.

"Is it safe to come out yet?" asked Harpo, peering shyly round the door.

"Did something happen?" queried Porgy, who is definitely not the tastiest biscuit in the bowl. Events were taking place far too fast for him to keep up with them. He was still comfortably curled around my feet, pinning me immovably to the bed. "What have I missed? Is it breakfast time yet?"

The next thing I learned this month is: never tell the truth to a computer.

It all started when my AA membership came up for renewal. For the princely sum of \$78.35 I could renew my membership and Robin's membership for another year. What a reasonable fee – I was keen to proceed! All that remained was to sort out the practical details.

One mechanism for paying the fee required me to spend thirty seconds walking across the road to the AA office where I would have to stand in a queue for two minutes, after which I would wave a credit card at the nice lady behind the counter and sign a piece of paper. Total elapsed time, approximately four minutes. It all seemed far too onerous to contemplate. Feeling indolent, I determined to see if technology would solve my problem. Why leave my seat if I didn't have to?

A few clicks of my mouse brought me to the AA web site where, I was pleased to observe, I could fill in an electronic form and renew my membership online. That'll do me! I

clicked and typed and typed and clicked. The only fly in the ointment was that I had to tell the computer my credit card number so that it could take \$78.35 away from me. I'm always dubious about giving my credit card number to a web site, but the site assured me I had nothing to fear. It was a secure web site, safe from prying eyes. Surely I could trust it?

Convinced, I filled in my credit card number and expiry date and I clicked the submit button. There was a short pause while the web page verified my card details and then it thanked me very much and told me my AA membership was renewed for another year. Easy!

The total elapsed time was approximately four minutes; about the same length of time it would have taken had I done it in person at the AA office. But this method had the substantial advantage that I didn't have to endure thirty seconds of exercise as I walked across the road to the AA office, and I didn't have to suffer through a further debilitating thirty seconds as I walked back again. All in all I felt well pleased.

A few days later, I had occasion to do some internet banking, so I logged on to my bank account. My credit card details are also available at this same internet banking site and I glanced cursorily at the account balances as they displayed. Funny, I thought. Why is my Visa balance \$391.75? I don't recall spending that amount of money on anything. Perhaps I ought to look at the details. I clicked on the link that displayed my credit card transactions.

Much to my bewilderment, I discovered that I had renewed my AA membership five times. There it was in front of my eyes. Five charges of \$78.35, making a grand total of \$391.75 which Visa was now insisting I pay them. Immediately. Or else!

Hmmm. That's not supposed to happen.

I printed out the transaction details and then spent thirty seconds walking across the road to the AA office where I

stood in a queue for two minutes. Then I explained what had happened to the nice lady behind the desk and I showed her the printout of the credit card transactions.

"That's odd," she said. She called up my account on her computer. "It all looks normal here," she said. "It just shows that you have renewed for the next year. I can't see any extra charges. I'd better talk to my manager."

Her manager happened to be passing as she said this so she grabbed him and explained. Being a manager, he was far too exalted to deal with mere mortals like customers and so he completely ignored my existence. He wouldn't look me in the eye and he refused to answer me when I directed a question at him. He spoke only to the lady behind the desk, and he spoke very rudely, because he was a manager and she was an underling.

"Ring Paula Upstairs," he said. "It's her department. She'll know what to do." He bustled away to do important managerial things.

The lady rang Paula Upstairs and explained the problem. Paula Upstairs asked to speak directly to me.

"Did you notice anything odd when you renewed online?" she asked.

"No," I said. I explained what I'd done and what happened. "Everything was quite normal and I saw exactly what I expected to see."

"You didn't click the submit button five times, did you?" asked Paula Upstairs.

"No," I said. "I only clicked it once."

"Very peculiar," said Paula Upstairs. "I'll report it to our systems people and see if they can make anything of it. Meanwhile I'll put through a credit of \$313.40 to your Visa account which will reverse four of the five transactions so you'll only have to pay Visa the \$78.35 of your actual membership fee."

"Thank you very much," I said. "That should do nicely."

I returned to my office. Total elapsed time was approximately eight minutes, including one minute of exercise (thirty seconds each way). Plus the original four minutes I'd used on the web site. Twelve minutes in all. Perhaps I really should have renewed my membership the old fashioned way. It would have taken only a third of the time.

Truly it has been said that all the time you save by using a computer will need to be spent checking the computer to make sure it got everything right, and then fixing everything it got wrong.

Paula Upstairs was as good as her word. The credit came through straight away. Ten out of ten to the AA for sorting the mess out quickly, politely and efficiently as soon as the cock up was pointed out to them. Zero out of ten for letting it happen in the first place - if any of you renew your AA membership online this year, check your credit card statements very carefully. Who knows what you'll find...

I learned one more thing this month. I learned that econometrics is pedagogic play therapy. But that's so trite and obvious, that I'm a bit ashamed to even mention it at all.

# Alan Goes Squelch

The lady at the check in desk handed me my boarding pass. Despite the fact that I had checked in at the Koru Club counter and identified myself with my Koru Club card, there was no mention of my membership on the boarding pass and I was not in my preferred seating position.

"I prefer an aisle seat near the front," I said.

"There aren't any," she snapped. She didn't even glance at the screen to check. She just naturally knew these things. She attached the flight tag to my case and pushed it towards the carousel.

"Don't forget my priority tag," I said mildly.

She sneered at me and, with bad grace, attached a priority tag.

I made my way to the Koru Lounge and presented my boarding pass.

"Oh dear," said the lady. "They haven't put your details on the pass. Let me give you a new one."

"Thank you," I said.

"And they haven't given you your preferred seat," she said as she checked my details against the boarding pass. "Would you like an aisle seat near the front? I can give you 4C."

"Yes please, that would be lovely."

She clattered keys. "Oops!" she said. "That one's just gone as we were talking. I'll give you 6C and block the middle seat so you won't have to sit next to anybody and you can stretch out a bit."

"Thank you." I felt bemused. Such friendliness. Such service. She must be a new recruit. They'd soon knock that out of her.

"My pleasure, sir," she said. "Enjoy the lounge."

The doors swished open and I splashed across Alph the sacred river, and entered a stately pleasure dome where luxuries beyond the dreams of mortal men awaited me.

I sipped a glass of lemonade and nibbled a water biscuit. I checked my flight details on the monitor.

The flight was delayed.

I wasn't at all surprised that the flight was delayed. The only time I've ever been on an Air New Zealand flight that wasn't delayed was one glorious day when all the ground staff were on strike and had been replaced by emergency management volunteers. It was amazing! The counter staff were friendly, cheerful and helpful. The plane took off to the second and landed right on schedule. My luggage, festooned with priority stickers, came out of the hold first, within seconds of my arrival at the baggage carousel. Normally the baggage handlers ignore the priority tags and my luggage comes out last. And often I have had to hang around the baggage area for almost as long as the flight itself took before any bags at all appeared. All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the day the Air New Zealand ground staff went on strike. I would suggest to the Air New Zealand management that they encourage their staff to go on strike more often. The airline would run far more efficiently.

But today the staff were all working as normal, and my flight was delayed.

"Bing, bong! Air New Zealand regret to announce that flight 465 to Auckland will be delayed for at least thirty minutes."

Let me guess, I thought to myself. It's delayed because of the late arrival of an inbound flight. That's the normal, vague excuse. That or the ubiquitous engineering concerns. The voice continued:

"This delay has been caused by the fact that flight 465 has no cabin crew, technical staff or pilot. They are all arriving on an inbound flight which itself is running late. We apologise for this delay."

Just as the microphone clicked off, I heard the beginning of a giggle. At least somebody at Air New Zealand still had a sense of humour. Must be a management volunteer. The ice-cold ab-humans who usually make the announcements would never do anything but sound smugly satisfied at the inconvenience caused by the delay.

I returned to my book. Eventually, thirty minutes late, as advertised, we began to board. The flight crew looked exhausted. Perhaps they'd had to hand crank the propellers on the incoming flight.

The plane soared into the air and levelled off at its cruising altitude. The crew prepared to serve coffee and tea and water. They bustled down the aisle with the trolley, handing out plastic mugs and small, sealed containers of water. As the lady reached my row, she dropped one of the water containers. It landed with a thump, split itself in two, and poured water all over my right foot. My sock absorbed the water gleefully. I wriggled my toes. They went *squelch*.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, embarrassed. We both mopped my sock with paper napkins. It made no discernible difference. She marched away with her trolley, determined to get as far away from me as possible.

I pushed my crew call button. Sirens screamed and red emergency beacons flared. The lady reappeared. "Yes?"

"You forgot to give me my plastic mug and small, sealed container of water." I said. She plonked them down in front of me and ran away again. I drank my water quickly in case it caused sudden, unexpected turbulence. Every so often I flexed my toes experimentally. They continued to go *squelch*. A man with a coffee pot filled my plastic cup with something that might have been coffee. I drank that as well.

We began our descent into Auckland. I could feel the pressure building up in my head and I held my nose and popped my ears to relieve it. A small baby began to scream with pain. We thumped on to the runway.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Auckland. For your comfort and safety please remain seated until the captain has switched off the fasten seatbelts sign."

We rolled slowly towards the gate. The plane came to a gentle stop, the engine noise dropped away. Bing, bong! The fasten seatbelts sign went off. There was the normal mad scramble to get bags down from the overhead lockers. We all stood in the narrow aisle, waiting for the door to open. Through the cabin window I could see the air bridge moving out towards the aeroplane. It stopped about six inches from the door, thought for a moment and then retreated. Then it tried again. And again. But no matter how hard it tried, it could not reach the plane door. It always stopped six inches away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologise for the delay, but there seems to be a fault with the air bridge. We've called engineering to come and take a look at it."

Several people sat down to wait. Through the cabin window, I could see men hitting the air bridge with hammers of gradually increasing size. It quivered under the onslaught, but remained stubbornly six inches away from the aeroplane. Eventually the men ran out of hammers and walked away scratching their heads.

"Sorry squire, can't find anything wrong. Looks perfectly normal to me. Perhaps you are doing something wrong?"

We waited a few more minutes and then the captain himself made an announcement.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but the engineers tell me that they can't do anything with the air bridge and so I shall have to move the plane six inches to the left. Can you all please sit down while I do this. You don't have to fasten your seat belts, but you must sit down."

We sat down, clutching our in flight baggage to our chests, eagerly anticipating our extra free ride. Slowly the plane reversed away from the air bridge.

"Left hand down a bit, co-pilot."



"Left hand down a bit it is sir."

Then we straightened up and edged our way in again.

"Anchors out, co-pilot. Handbrake on. Ignition off. Put the gear stick into neutral."

The air bridge gently kissed the side of the plane and the crew opened the door.

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen, you may now disembark. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us."

I squelched out of the plane. On the horizon, the setting sun was busy turning the clouds pink. The aeroplane, embarrassed at being driven by a pilot who landed six inches too far to the right, was blushing all the way down to its wheels and all the way out to the tips of its wings.

I squelched over to the baggage claim area. My case, complete with priority tag, was the very last one to appear on the carousel. It had been a completely normal flight.

# Them's The Breaks

"I think I want to be an actor when I grow up," said Porgy the Cat. "I'd be great at Puss in Boots. And I've been practicing Dick Whittington's cat. Do you want to hear me miaow in character?"

"Not just at the moment," I said. "I'm sure you do it wonderfully."

"Miaow, miaow," said Porgy anyway.

"Break a leg," I said.

And so, being an extremely literal cat, that's exactly what he did...

One Monday evening, after Porgy had been unusually somnolent for a couple of days, even by his extremely loose standards, I picked him up to give him a cuddle. He screamed in agony.

I put him down gently and he cowered against the wall, refusing to put any weight on his right back leg. I phoned the extremely expensive after hours vet.

"Bring him in immediately," said the lady. "And bring three credit cards as well."

The vet examined Porgy carefully. She poked and prodded and gently moved his leg backwards and forwards. He wasn't happy about it, but he let her do it.

"He is presenting with two symptoms," she said eventually. "He has an extremely full bladder and he obviously doesn't want to put any weight on his leg at all. I'm more worried about the bladder. He might have a blocked urethra and that can be very serious - we often lose them when that happens. I'll take a urine sample."

She produced a huge syringe with a fearsome needle and thrust it deep into Porgy's body. She pulled back the plunger and it filled with urine. She took it over to the other side of

the room and put a paper strip impregnated with sinister chemicals into it. After a few seconds, she took the paper strip out again and compared the colours on it to a chart.

"Well there's no blood in the urine," she said, "which is a good sign. But the pH is a little abnormal. I'm very worried about his bladder. Have you seen any sign of him urinating?"

"He's been lying on a chair for two days," I said. "And he hasn't moved at all."

"I think we need to keep him in overnight," said the vet. "I'll give him an anaesthetic and relieve his bladder and at the same time we can take X-rays of the leg. It's going to be hugely expensive."

"Let's just do whatever is right for Porgy," I said.

She looked things up on pieces of paper. "It will cost you somewhere in the region of your limit on two credit cards," she said happily. "Plus GST. And a tip."

We took Porgy into the back room and put him in a cage. He looked a little bewildered. He crossed his eyes and he crossed his legs and he looked pathetic. The vet put a dirt tray in the cage. Porgy blinked at it for a moment and his eyes uncrossed and he began to smile. He hobbled into the dirt tray and squatted and an expression of absolute bliss appeared on his face.

"About bloody time," he said.

The vet watched the dirt tray closely and stuck her thumb in the air gleefully.

"He was obviously just holding it all in until he found a socially acceptable place to pee!" she said. "Look at him - I don't think he's ever going to stop. OK - plans all changed. You take him home overnight. I'll send a fax to your vet and you take him in there for an X-ray tomorrow."

We took Porgy home.

"It hurts!" he said, and he just lay on a sheepskin rug in his travelling cage and refused to move.

The next day, we picked up a few more credit cards from the drawer and took Porgy back to the vet. They gave him an anaesthetic so that he was immobile while they X-rayed him, though given the fact that he did not appear to have moved a muscle for at least the last twelve hours, other than to twitch an occasional eyebrow, I felt that perhaps this was unnecessary.

The verdict was not long in coming.

"Porgy has broken his right rear leg just at the place where the bone attaches to the ball and socket joint in the hip. He will have to have surgery on the hip. The ball in the hip joint is now isolated from the blood supply in the body and will simply die. So we have to remove the ball completely. He should make a full recovery. He's a young, strong cat and the bone will form a callous round the joint. The muscles in the thigh are very dense and will also hold the bone in place. In a few weeks, he'll be right as ninepence."

"Good," we said.

"Have you got ninepence?" asked the vet.

"I might have to apply for another mortgage on the house."

"We'll send him off to our surgery on the Kapiti coast," said the vet. "Sea air and lovely views. It will do him the world of good. You can pick him up in a couple of days."

The next two days passed very slowly. The house seemed empty without Porgy in it, even though, when he was around, all he ever seemed to do was sleep. We rang the vet.

"He's still out in Kapiti," said the vet. "He's making a remarkable recovery; quite the best patient they've ever had. They've all fallen in love with him. Are you sure you want him back?"

"Of course we do!"

"Well you can pick him up from us tomorrow," the vet explained, "or you can drive out to Kapiti and pick him up

yourself."

"We'll drive out to Kapiti."

And so we did.

Porgy was in a cage. He stood up as we came in and moved to the front of the cage and gave a little chirrup.

"Just look at him," said the vet who had done the operation. "He's walking on the leg already! Usually it's at least a couple of weeks before they put any weight on it at all. But he's walking already! He really is a remarkable cat. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I think I'll write a paper for *Vet Surgery Monthly*."

It was hard to tell whether the vet was more pleased with himself for having done an extra specially skilful operation, or with Porgy for having done an extra specially unusual recovery. Either way, he was pleased as punch. Pride oozed out of every pore.

Porgy had been shaved from the middle of his body, all across his side and down his leg almost to the ankle. A wound about five inches long stretched across his thigh, the edges held together with a dozen or so stitches.

"I usually do horses," said the lady who assisted the vet. "But I just pretended that he was a small horse while I shaved him. He didn't seem to mind."

We all looked at the vast areas of naked skin that Porgy was exposing to the world. He blushed a little and shuffled his feet.

"We charge extra to make them look like a poodle," said the lady, in a hopeful tone of voice.

"I don't think we need to go to those lengths," I said. "He'd only get a swollen head when he realised how handsome he was."

"Woof!" said Porgy. "Woof, woof."

"Stop messing about," I said. "Nobody is gong to fall for that."

The lady put her clippers away and looked disappointed. Porgy drooped noticeably.

"These are the X-rays," said the vet, and he showed us where the bone had broken. "And this is the bit I took out of him."

He handed me a small plastic jar with the ball joint from Porgy's hip rattling round inside it. It was smaller than I had expected. And redder. There was a jagged edge where the bone had fractured. Something small and squishy was hanging off it.

"Can I keep it as a souvenir?"

"Oh yes," said the vet. "You've paid several fortunes for it, after all."

"When I was at university," I said, "I had a friend who took his tape recorder apart to service it. When he put it all back together again, he had a ball bearing left over. He never found out what it was for, but the tape recorder ran quite happily for years without it." I shook the jar with Porgy's ball joint in it. "I suppose cats are a bit like tape recorders really, aren't they?"

"That's right!" said the vet. "In a couple of months time he'll be bounding about as if nothing had happened."

"That will be interesting," I said. "I've never seen him bound about before. Will he be able to play the violin as well?"

"I imagine so," said the vet. "He really is a most extraordinary cat. Look! He's putting all his weight on it. Unbelievable!"

"How do you think he broke his leg in the first place?" I asked.

"Probably he jumped down from a place that was a little bit too high. It's not uncommon."

"What do we do now?"

"Keep him inside for the next three days. Encourage him to exercise the leg. The more use it gets, the faster it will heal. Bring him back in ten days to have the stitches out."

We took Porgy home. As soon as we let him out of the cage, he walked around a bit, just to make sure that he

really was home, and then he went into Robin's room and hid himself in the darkest corner of the deepest closet he could find. He stayed there for two days and made the world go away. He poked his head out only for the occasional drink, the occasional nibble and the occasional visit to the dirt box.

After two days, he decided that he didn't need to hide any more. Perhaps the world wasn't so bad after all. As I write, he is asleep on his favourite chair, shaved side down so that nobody can tell he was ever injured at all.

# A Purple Box For Alan And Robin

For several months now, whenever anybody has asked me what I want for a wedding present, I've answered: "Toasters, please."

I feel that you can never have too many toasters, and a wedding seems to me to be an ideal opportunity to stock up for a rainy (and toastless) day. However Robin has firmly forbidden me from saying the word anymore on the grounds that somebody with an impaired sense of humour might take me seriously and fill our house with toasters.

Personally I feel it is far more likely that our more sadistically inclined friends will fully realise that I am not in the least bit serious in my expressed desire for toasters. Nevertheless they will take me at my supposed word and gleefully immerse me in toasters, chuckling furiously the while.

Either way, I suspect that Robin is correct in her feeling that this is not an outcome to be desired (though a toaster each might be nice in case we ever split up).

However, long before Robin laid her edict down, I sent an email to my friend Ian in Holland. A toaster, I implied, would be nice. And Robin likes boxes, I said. And her favourite colour is purple. The rest I left to his imagination.

I was late home from work on the day that the present from Holland arrived and when I got home, Robin was positively hopping up and down with frustration.

"Where've you been? " she demanded. "Ian's present has arrived. Open it NOW!"

I took off my hat and hung it on the hook.

"Hurry up!" said Robin, stamping her foot.



I took off my jacket and hung it on the hook.

"The present is just over there," said Robin, pointing at a large brown parcel. "I really think it should be opened IMMEDIATELY, don't you?"

I took off my trousers and folded them carefully and hung them in the wardrobe and then I put on a pair of casual trousers.

"AAAAAGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!!" explained Robin.

I took out my swiss army knife and opened the sharpest blade.

"At last!" Robin heaved a deep sigh of relief and picked up the camera to record the moment for posterity and for Ian.

I cut carefully at the tape on the large brown parcel and slowly removed the top layer. Somewhat to my surprise, another layer of cardboard was revealed. I cut carefully through this as well and pulled it away from the parcel. I peered inside the box.

"Hmmm," I said. "Robin - I think you ought to carry on with the unwrapping now. I'll take the rest of the photographs."

We swapped places and Robin looked inside the box. A smile spread across the whole of her face.

"Purple!" she said.

She reached carefully into the cardboard and pulled out a large purple box. It had an angular lid with a twirly handle on top and there were wooden studs set around the lid. There was a drawer at the bottom.

"Purple!" said Robin in tones of deep satisfaction.

The lid opened easily, though close examination revealed that it shouldn't have. Inside, a rod extended out from the back of the box across to the front and hooked in to a catch that should have been attached to the box lid, but wasn't. One of the studs around the outside of the box was attached to the rod and could be used to pull the rod out, thereby releasing the lid. However the catch had come unglued,

thus invalidating the mechanism. (I later reattached the catch with a dab of wood glue and then everything worked properly again).

The box turned out to be a jewellery box with two cushioned trays and a cushioned drawer. Robin was ecstatic.

"What a beautiful box," she enthused. "And it's purple! Isn't that just perfect?"

"Indeed it is," I said, and I took a photograph.

"Purple," said Robin and started to take out the trays.

"Ooooh look!" she exclaimed. She was holding a small parcel. On it was written:

THIS IS THE **\*\*REAL\*\*** PRESENT

She unwrapped it carefully and her eyes lit up.

"It's a TOASTER," she shouted gleefully. "Just what you always wanted."

The toy toaster was about an inch long and half an inch wide. It gleamed and sparkled, dazzling us both with reflected sunlight.

Robin played with the toaster for a while. "And it's got real toast!" she enthused as she hit a hidden spring and two tiny pieces of white plastic bread shot across the room, to the great bewilderment of the eagerly watching cats who weren't sure whether or not to chase and kill them as they flew through the air.

Robin put the toaster reverently into the new purple box, and carried the box into the bedroom. She went over to where I strongly suspected the dressing table was (I hadn't seen it for several years because of the clutter surrounding it, and I was no longer sure we still possessed it) and she cleared a space by throwing a whole pile of stuff off onto where the floor would have been if it too hadn't been covered in clutter. I wasn't completely certain that we still had a bedroom floor either - memory of these things tends

to fade with the passing years when you don't get the constant reinforcement of seeing them every day.

Having cleared a space, she put the box down carefully and adjusted its position so that she would have a good view of it while she was lying in bed. That night she lay there with her back to me so that the box would be the last thing that she saw as she drifted off to sleep.

"Purple," I heard her murmur.

Shortly after that she began to snore.

I hastened to inform Ian of the safe arrival of the box and toaster and I sent him the photographs of the ceremonial opening. He sent me a letter describing its provenance:

Dear Robin and Alan,

So glad the box arrived safely. It was made by my partner-in-crime and apprentice bowyer Daniël Kamp. You can see that he is a talented cabinet maker, too.

The timber for the panels comes from the beams of a concealed Catholic church that was discovered when a farmhouse in Brabant was demolished. The timber, we guess, is more than 300 years old. It was most probably imported from the Baltic into Zaandam, where it lay in the Zaan river to season before going on to its temporary destination. On returning to the Zaan, it was stored waiting for a good purpose, sawn into panels and made up into your box.

The twirly bits are yew wood, made from one of my own English longbows. The yew grew on the Veluwe National Park, on a royal estate. It was more than 500 years old when the tree was felled, laid for 5 years to season, and made up into a longbow.

There is only one box of its kind, naturally, as Daniël made it on commission for you-all. It's unique.

The purple colouring is a mineral-based wax made to Daniël's own special formula, using materials obtained from the dye and colour mill The Cat, run by my brother-in-law

Piet. The solvent used in the wax, by the way, is citrus turpentine, which will account for any smell of citrus fruit that may waft around the box.

The satin lining and beading are of course all hand stitched.

The toaster is of course fully functional, but runs only on Gnome Stroom, available from the windmills in Holland.

A toaster packed in a purple box is what I promised. So that's what you get.

Daniël suggests that you re-wax the outside about once a year. I shall send you a small tub of magic purple wax later on. Given Holland's reputation in your part of the world, maybe I should mark the tub "Lebanese Purple" or something, just to amuse the Customs officers.

The timber will colour up over the years. The acquired patina is part of the aesthetic. It should mellow through time. Don't we all?

# Alan And Robin Catch A Train

In theory it was very simple.

"I'll get home from work about 6.00pm on Friday," I explained to Robin. "We'll have a leisurely tea and then pack our cases."

"What time do we have to leave?" she asked.

"We'll go to bed early," I said, cleverly avoiding the question. "I'll set the alarm."

"What time will it go off?" she asked suspiciously. She knows me of old and was determined to add at least half an hour to whatever time I suggested.

"3.30am," I said. "That will let us get to the airport in good time to check in for our 7.40am flight to Sydney."

However the man in charge of the fog machine at the Meteorological Office had a secret agenda and on Friday morning he superglued the switch into the 'On' position. Then he went home and took the phone off the hook.

Wellington airport was fog-bound and closed all day Friday. There was little or no chance that we'd be able to fly to Sydney the next morning. Indeed, towards the end of the afternoon, our flight was officially cancelled.

A lot of frantic rushing around revealed spare seats to Sydney on flights leaving from Auckland. There was much hurried rearranging of tickets. Now all we had to do was pack in a tearing rush and drive through the night to the other end of the country. Easy!

I slept in the back of the car. Robin snored, so presumably she slept as well. Ross drove and Simon sat in the front passenger seat and talked to him to keep him awake. The fog thinned out and vanished as soon as we

reached the outskirts of Wellington and apart from a small patch around Huntley we saw it no more. We reached Auckland about 5.30am, in plenty of time to check in for our flight and we breakfasted on black coffee in the Koru Club lounge so as not to fall asleep in the comfy chairs and miss the last call for our flight.

We boarded the plane. The pilot was obviously going for a world record because we took off on time. Even more surprisingly, we arrived in Sydney on schedule as well. We took a taxi to Sydney's Central Station where we were due to board the Indian Pacific train for three days of sybaritic luxury across the Nullarbor to Perth.

The platform was empty, not an Indian Pacific to be seen.

"It's late," said the man at the enquiry desk. "It's got a flat tyre."

"What time is it due?" I asked.

"It'll probably be here in a couple of hours, but it will have to be cleaned before they'll let you on. You won't be able to get on for ages yet. Hours and hours." He shook his head, taking a gloomy pleasure in his news. "Hours and hours and hours."

We sat in the less than salubrious station bar/café and ate cholesterol and chips. I have sat in railway station cafes all over the world - St. Pancras in London, Nottingham Midland, Beijing Central and the Finland Station in Moscow. Railway cafes are all assembled in a factory in Redditch, to an original design by Bloody Stupid Johnson, and then they are exported to stations worldwide. The one in Sydney is a typical example of the type.

"Pass the heart attack on a stick, please," said Robin. I passed it over and she took a big bite.

The Indian Pacific pulled in on platforms 2 and 3 simultaneously.

"Stand in the middle," said Robin, flourishing a camera. I felt very Harry Potterish as I stood (it seemed) at platform 2" to have my photograph taken.

There were eight of us in our group, and we had hired our own private carriage; the Chairman's Carriage. It was equipped with easy chairs in which we could lounge luxuriously and sip complimentary champagne. We were all exhausted – some of us hadn't slept for 48 hours. My underpants were making themselves known to the world. Everybody else was just as uncomfortable. We all had a shower and then we went to the lounge car for the reception for Gold Kangaroo passengers. Gold Kangaroo service is available to many, but only we had our own private carriage in as well. We sipped vividly blue champagne cocktails designed to represent the colour of the two oceans that are linked by the train. We indulged in fairly zombie-like conversations with our fellow Gold Kangaroo companions and then we were summoned to the dining car. I dined on trout and Robin had steak. And then, at last, to bed.

The train rattled and rambled and shook its way across Australia and I kept waking up scared, convinced that we were experiencing an earthquake. Nevertheless, I slept refreshingly well and I awoke for the day just before dawn. I could see the stars of the Milky Way smeared across the sky. I don't remember ever seeing so many stars before.

And somewhere in there the day turned in to Sunday. We were safely on the train, we were fully rested and all we had to do was allow ourselves to be waited on hand and foot for three days. It seemed like a minor miracle that we had made it at all.

Our first stop was at Broken Hill. It was supposed to be quite a long stop with a chance to explore, but the train never made up the lost time from being late out of Sydney and so we only had ten minutes – just enough time to take photos of the station and to browse through the items for sale from the tables of the local entrepreneurs who just *knew* that the passengers were all eager to buy a tatty paperback to read on the train, or to purchase lumps of the

broken hill itself masquerading as jewellery. Simon bought a pack of cards in case he got bored.

Back to the train and we stared through the windows in air conditioned luxury at never ending scrubby red soil. Some wallabies wallabied and once we saw a wedge-tailed eagle soaring majestically.

Next stop Adelaide and we took a coach trip around the city with the most boring tour guide in the world. He told us lots of local scandals involving road building and corrupt politicians. He hated anybody who wasn't from South Australia and he reserved a special hatred for people from New South Wales.

"Don Bradman is the only New South Welshman who ever had any sense," said the tour guide loudly. "He came to live in South Australia."

The train stayed in Adelaide for about two hours. It felt like two days. They were supposed to put the train through the equivalent of a car wash, but in an attempt to make up lost time, they decided to leave it grimy. We left Adelaide only an hour behind schedule.

We had to adjust our watches and clocks as strange Australian time zones caught up with us and then passed us by. Moving from South Australia to the West required the watches to be put back two hours. However the train crew decided this was too big a change to do all at once so we did one hour on Sunday to be followed later on Monday by another hour. And so for almost a day we lived on train time - a mobile time zone different from everywhere else in the world. I felt very Einsteinian for a moment and I began to realise why all the explanations of relativity in the physics text books began with an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman getting on a train.

Monday morning, and the scrubby red soil sprouted spindly trees. Interspersed between them lurked glum, blue-tinged bushes. Perhaps they were blue with cold? Relatively speaking, of course. The soil was red and rusty and the



engineering works from the railroad had gouged great gashes in the lumpy landscape. Every so often isolated patches of solar panels sucked greedily at the blazing, pitiless sunshine. It was not immediately obvious what they were powering. Possibly a great, but unknown, underground city?

Suddenly, within half a kilometre or so, the landscape changed dramatically. It became perfectly flat and much less red. The trees disappeared completely and only the scrubby blue bush remained all across the face of the earth from one horizon to the other. This was the Nullarbor, God's ironing board, the flattest, dullest, most unchanging place upon the planet. There is a certain hypnotic fascination to the never ending sameness of it. We saw a herd of feral camels sneering and swearing at the train as it invaded their territory. And always, stretching on forever, the unchanging Nullarbor; brown, sere and washed out.

Cook is quite literally in the middle of nowhere. The Nullarbor stretches as far as the eye can see in every direction, flat and empty. Ramshackle buildings huddle together for protection. Cook has a permanent population of two people and fifty million friendly flies. The train re-waters at Cook and swaps drivers. The retiring drivers wait for the Indian Pacific coming in the opposite direction and return to Adelaide on it. While they wait, they count flies. There isn't anything else to do in Cook.

I had a pee in the station toilet and got back on the train. I couldn't help feeling that I'd just passed more water than Cook had seen in a decade. Except for the train water in the holding tanks, of course.

The water we took on at Cook had obviously been sitting in holding tanks exposed to the full glare of the sun. For the next day or so the water that flowed out of the taps marked 'Cold' was almost the same temperature as that which flowed from the taps marked 'Hot'.

And always the flat and dreary landscape baked unchangingly across the whole of the visible world.

A signpost flashed past the train. Blink and you'll miss it. 'Prisoner of War Camp' it declared. There was no evidence of any buildings, no indication that anything had ever been here. It was unclear whether the site was reserved for future implementation or simply a relic of the past. Either way, this would be a terrible place to be incarcerated.

The desert stretched on endlessly. God bless air conditioning.

Kalgoorlie was the next stop. It is a mining town with a fearsome reputation. "We lock all the carriage doors in Kalgoorlie," said the lady in charge of our carriage, "to stop undesirable elements from looting the train."

Kalgoorlie sounded like fun. A pub crawl was obviously called for,

The town was almost deserted. It was Monday evening and everybody was at home watching television. We found an empty pub which had Swan beer on tap. When in doubt, always drink the local beer. We ordered a Swan and discovered why the pub was empty. Swan beer has a putrid aftertaste and a rancid duringtaste. After one sip, the evil anticipation involved in the beforetaste is overwhelmingly off-putting. We went back to the train.

"Are you an undesirable element intent on looting the train?"

"No!"

"What's the password?"

"Swordfish."

"Enter friend."

And so to bed.

The following day we had breakfast and then packed our bags. Next stop Perth and the end of the journey. We arrived at 9.15am almost exactly on time. It was the end of a great adventure.

# Alan And Robin Get Married

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2005 dawned bright and hot in Perth. The sun was a yellow furnace in a bright blue sky and the maximum recorded temperature that day was 42 degrees. I was glad I was getting married indoors at the Hillcrest Restaurant; a place with very efficient air conditioning.

Robin spent the morning being equipped with wedding hair, wedding fingernails, wedding toenails and a wedding face. When all was finished to her satisfaction, she climbed into her wedding dress. She tried very hard not to smile in case the make up cracked and fell off, but she couldn't help herself and she grinned widely at her reflection in the mirror. Fortunately everything stayed in place - a great tribute to the skills of Kylie the make up specialist who had been summoned with frantic last minute phone calls the night before.

I arrived at the Hillcrest about 3.00pm. People drifted in slowly.

"You look very calm," said Phyllis, my soon to be mother-in-law.

"Only on the outside," I said.

At about 3.45pm Robin arrived. Unfortunately, her brother Ian, her sister Wendy and her neice Alex had not yet appeared. But nobody told Robin. The bridal music blared and Robin walked in on her father's arm. She looked around, puzzled.

"Where's Ian? Where's Alex? Where's Wendy? She's got the video camera. We can't get married without a video camera."

"Sorry," said Carol, the celebrant, "but you'll have to go out again and wait. The guests aren't all here yet."

Robin and her father backed out and the wedding music faded away.

"I've been marrying people for thirty-one years," said Carol, "and this is the very first time I've had to send the bride away."

"The only wedding in the world," I said, "where the bride is on time and the guests are late. It could only happen to us."

Eventually Ian, Wendy and Alex arrived. Alex and Wendy were festooned with musical paraphernalia: a flute, a music stand, the occasional cello. They bustled in a corner as they put everything together. Eventually they were ready. The video camera was switched on and we began again.

The Beatles *All You Need Is Love* blared out. Robin walked in on her father's arm to the trumpet fanfare and John Lennon's nasal voice assured us all that we could do anything. All you need is love.

Carol introduced herself and went through the preliminaries. Then she asked: "Who brings this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," said Tim. I shook his hand. "Good luck with her," he said. "You'll need it." He had both a twinkle and a tear in his eye as he went to sit down. He really does love his daughters.

Then it was time to make our vows. We turned to each other and held hands as we repeated the words that Carol read to us. It was the first time I had looked directly (and closely) at Robin since she arrived and I had an almost irresistible urge to giggle for somehow her make up had slipped and there was a thin, white half-moon arc of cream decorating the bottom of each lens of her glasses. She blinked owlishly at me across the top of the cream. Fortunately I managed to contain my giggles and we both declared our love for each other and held that love up for all

the world to see. It was our moment, our magical moment. We exchanged rings (miraculously they had not been lost).

And we were married.

As we signed the register, Wendy and Alex played Bach in the background. It was a perfect moment.

We milled around for a while. Photos were taken, champagne was drunk, canapés were nibbled. The children played with the wedding balloons, chasing each other around the room. Someone had bottle of bubble mix and soon lots of people were blowing bubbles. Alex's brother opened his mouth to eat a canapé and Alex blew bubbles into it. He remonstrated mildly with her. After we cleaned up the blood, we went into the restaurant. Food!

But first, after we were seated, my best man Laurie sang *The Sparrow And The Gentle Dove* by Henry Purcell to a flute arrangement by Geoffrey Coker. He was accompanied by Wendy on flute and Alex on cello. It was sublime.

Then Wendy's five year old daughter Ella danced to *Grow* by Hi-Five. I've never seen someone so young dance so well. She is stunningly talented.

Then food. And drink. Yummy stuff! And Robin and I got it first. Boy! This marriage lark is a good idea. Plates groaning beneath a heavy load, we chomped.

Then it was time for speeches. Tim officially welcomed me to the family and I got huge hugs from a seemingly never ending queue of utterly gorgeous sisters in law and nieces.

"Can we get married again?" I asked Robin. "I want to go round and hug them all a second time."

The best man gave a speech which it turned out I'd written. Laurie nicked some of my more vividly described autobiographical writings and strung them together to present a word picture of me. It seemed to go down well, though I couldn't help feeling that he shared rather too much information about my underpants with my gorgeous

new sisters and my stunning new nieces. Sometimes one needs to retain an air of mystery about these things.

Then the master of ceremonies called on me to speak. I rose to the occasion and took a deep breath. But Robin was having none of it. She forced me to sit down again before I had said a word. She stood up regally and surveyed the crowd with an icy optic:

"My husband and I..."

There was more music from Wendy and Alex. Then Robin's other sister Jenny accompanied her daughter Moana on guitar and together they sang for us, finishing with a rousing rendering of *Rockin' Robin*. Go girl!

And then by special request (from me), Jenny and Wendy took to their flutes and played a most wonderful arrangement of J. S. Bach's *Bourée*.

What a perfect way to finish.

# Alan Stays At Home

I am a gentleman of semi-leisure.

For the last month or so I have been working part time. I turn up to the office for two weeks and then I stay at home for two weeks. Then back to the office for two more weeks. Lather, rinse, and repeat.

When I announced this, everybody got very worried.

"What will you do? How will you occupy your time? You'll get bored."

Well actually, no I won't. There's been heaps going on...

The first Monday of my first fortnight off dawned wet and miserable, just like every day in Wellington for the last six months. I snuggled and luxuriated in the warmth and comfort of my bed and thought about all the people who were going off to work, out in the cold, wet weather.

Eventually, once the streets were nicely aired, I got up and staggered off to the bathroom, yawning and scratching the while. A day of idleness beckoned. I showered and decided not to shave, a decision I have made every day for the last thirty years. I cleaned my teeth. A filling fell out and went *clatter* into the wash basin. Bugger!

Sharp edges of broken tooth rasped across the inside of my cheek. There was absolutely no doubt how I would be spending my day. I looked up "Dentists" in the yellow pages and sat down with the phone.

"We can fit you in next week."

"Sorry - we don't have any free appointments for the next month."

"There might be a free appointment in December 2010."

"We aren't taking new patients at the moment."

"You want what? An appointment for treatment? Ha, ha, ha, he, he, he. Oh dear, I haven't heard anything so funny

for years!"

Considering how expensive dental treatment is, I was amazed at the number of people who seemed to have nothing better to do than visit the dentist. Most of Wellington, it appeared was over-supplied with money and couldn't think of anything better to do with it than to donate it to a dentist in return for several hours of extreme unpleasantness.

"We've just had a cancellation. Can you get here by 11.15?"

"Indeed I can, " I said, and headed for the bus.

The waiting room was empty. I reported to the lady behind the desk. She gave me a form to fill in. "The dentist won't be long," she said.

There was a computer in the waiting room. FREE JETSTREAM FOR DENTAL PATIENTS proclaimed a nicely printed notice on the monitor. I checked my email. I hadn't got any. I looked at the list of recently visited sites in case any of the other patients had been whiling away the time with pornography. No such luck.

"The dentist will see you now."

I gave the lady my completed form and went into the torture chamber.

Several subjective hours later I staggered home with a numb jaw and a light wallet. I also had an appointment for a check up on the first day of my next fortnight off and the gloomy possibility of more fillings on the horizon. Two weeks on, two weeks off was starting to seem much less attractive than once it had. Never mind - today was only Monday, I had lots of free days left before I would have to go back to work.

The next day dawned wet and miserable again. My bed was warm and snug and shaving seemed far too much of an effort. I resolved not to bother. Nobody would ever notice. Anyway - I don't own any shaving equipment and nobody



had seen fit to give me any for a wedding present. Wedding present. The phrase reminded of something. Oh yes...

Robin and I, having got married in foreign parts (well, Australia) decided that we would hold a wedding reception in New Zealand for all our friends who couldn't make it to Australia. Annette, our Best Woman, went hunting for venues.

"The Dog and Bone," she said. "It's a pub on Lambton Quay. They'll let us have the downstairs bar. It's got a huge plasma screen and it has English beers on tap. And more whiskeys than you can shake a distillery at. Talk to Preston."

I rang Preston who proved to be eager to help and quite thrilled at the romantic notion of having a wedding reception to celebrate an Australian wedding. We arranged to meet.

"Can I bring a DVD player with me?" I asked. "So we can test out the plasma screen. We want to play a DVD of the wedding ceremony."

"Of course," he said. And so I did.

We plugged cables into the plasma screen and the DVD player. The screen remained embarrassingly blank. We pushed buttons and plugged more cables into other orifices. The two devices refused point blank to talk to each other and continued to live smugly separate lives.

"I'll talk to the people we bought the screen from," said Preston. "Can I keep the DVD player for a while?"

"Of course," I said and went home.

Over the next few days Preston spoke to many people about his plasma screen. Experts came and scratched their heads at it.

"Should be quite straightforward squire," they said, one and all. And one and all they were wrong. Complex manuals were consulted. Wiring diagrams were downloaded from Japanese web sites. Video engineers were flown in at vast expense from all over the globe. Many cups of tea were drunk and a goat was sacrificed.

Eventually a special set of cables was obtained. Success! We had a DVD player and our New Zealand wedding reception went ahead as planned.

I spent the rest of my fortnight at home alternating between visiting Preston to swear at the plasma screen and visiting my sick cat to encourage him to get better. There was scarcely time to shave. So I didn't.

You may recall that a few months ago Porgy The Cat broke his back leg and had to have the ball removed from his hip joint. He never really recovered from that operation and remained extremely reluctant to walk. He also became very antisocial, refusing to be picked up and cuddled. All he wanted to do was hide under cupboards. He didn't want to walk and when I tried to force him to, he hissed at me and once he tried to bite me. This was most unlike Porgy who has always been a placid, good natured cat.

I took him back to the vet. A thorough examination revealed that his other back leg was also broken and the operation to remove his ball joint had to be done all over again. It is unclear as to whether or not he broke both legs at the same time (and we only spotted the first, worst break at the time) or if he broke the other leg at a later stage. Either way it was clear that the second break had been there for quite some considerable time. The poor animal must have been in horrible pain for weeks, or possibly months. No wonder he wanted to hide himself away.

"Look on the bright side," said the vet. "He's run out of back legs now. It can't happen again."

After this second operation Porgy was very fragile and very sick. I didn't really know how to look after him. Harpo The Fluff Monster, our other extraordinarily bouncy cat, would pay no attention to Porgy's fragile state. He would only want to play. The thought of the damage he could do to Porgy by trying to play bouncy games with him gave me nightmares.

So Porgy went to Purrrville to recuperate.

Purrville is the cattery just up the road and Porgy has had holidays there before. The owners, Dianne and Robert, are old friends of his and for the last month Porgy has been slowly recovering in the safe environment there.

At the beginning, he could barely walk. He limped slowly from his bed to his food bowl and then limped slowly back to his bed again. His hindquarters looked thin and fragile and the newly operated upon leg hung at an unnatural angle, occasionally crossing over the other, stronger leg as he limped along.

Slowly he grew in strength and gained more control over his leg. He walked a little further every day. He started to take an interest in things again. When Robin and I visited him he would sit up in his bed and ask for a pat and he would purr and rub his face over our hands. Eventually there came a day when he heard our voices at the door, and he got up and limped towards us to say hello. That was a good day.

Then there was the day that I saw him chase a moth. The moth ran away, and it ran faster than Porgy. Oh dear! Porgy still had a long way to go.

After a month, at the beginning of my second fortnight off work, Porgy came home.

"Hello," said Harpo, bouncing up to him. "Want to play a game?"

"Not just now," said Porgy. "Maybe later."

"I've got a catnip mouse and a stuffed snake that crackles and a blue rat!"

"No thanks," said Porgy. "Not just now."

Harpo lost interest and went to chase a ping pong ball.

Bess, Porgy's sister, sniffed him all over from head to tail. She paid particular attention to his weak leg. Then they touched noses and Bess went outside.

We made Porgy comfortable, locked Harpo out of the room, and went to bed. The next day, Porgy was still asleep in his box - he hadn't changed position all night. But sitting

close to him, where he could easily see it when he woke up, was a dead rat. Bess had brought him a welcome home present; a get well soon rat.

Last night, as I write this, Porgy voluntarily went outside for the first time in nearly five months. He sat and looked at the back door. He tried to get out of the cat flap, but he could quite make it. He sat down and looked at the door again.

"Maiow," he said. "Mwaaa!"

I opened the door. He looked out at the world for a couple of minutes. Then he limped outside and, keeping very close to the house, walked slowly round the corner. Then he sat down to rest for a while. Then he walked a little further and sat down again. He progressed slowly, exploring as he went, smelling the night smells and giving every evidence of enjoying himself. Eventually he reached the front door and asked for it to be opened. I let him back into the house and he walked to his bed and flopped down, exhausted. He went to sleep with a little smile on his face.

And so did Robin and I.

# Alan At The Charge

The other week I had occasion to visit Auckland. I got to the airport with plenty of time to spare. I indulged myself with a glass of wine and a snack, and then an announcement rang through the lounge:

"Air New Zealand flight 475 to Auckland is now boarding through gate lounge 16."

We all went to the boarding gate. A nice lady confirmed the flight number on our boarding passes and we walked down the air bridge to the plane. The air bridge walls were painted black with large white words written on them exhorting the All Blacks Rugby Team to victory. The black walls made the air bridge feel very gloomy and claustrophobic.

Rather surprisingly, the plane at the end of the air bridge was painted bright yellow and it had the words "Freedom Air" written on the side of it. Where was the Air New Zealand flight to Auckland? A smiling lady welcomed us on board.

"This *is* the plane to Auckland, isn't it?" asked the person in front of me, thereby removing from me the embarrassing necessity of asking the same question.

"Indeed it is," said the nice lady. "Don't worry - we aren't flying to Brisbane."

I was pleased to hear it. I'd left my passport at home.

When we were all comfortably seated, and as the plane taxied to the runway, the nice lady made an announcement.

"Welcome aboard Air New Zealand Flight 475 to Auckland. Yes - we *are* going to Auckland, but we are going in disguise! Won't that be fun?"

So we had a stealth flight in camouflage colours. It must have worked, because we landed precisely on time and my

luggage appeared within a few seconds of my arrival at the conveyor belt. Both these events are absolutely unprecedented on real Air New Zealand flights. I wholeheartedly recommend disguised flights.

However because the flight had been so trouble free, I just *knew* that I was building up trouble for myself in the future. There's always some sort of catastrophe lurking malevolently whenever I travel away from home. I began to dread the week ahead of me.

The problems began when I plugged my mobile phone into its charger. Nothing happened. Not a volt, not even an amp made its way from the charger to the phone. Bugger! I plugged the charger into another socket. It didn't work; all the electrons were on strike. I examined the charger closely. The end that plugged in to the phone only had one terminal on it. The other one had fallen off, never to be seen again.

Fortunately there is a mobile phone shop just up the road from our office. I went there the next day and explained my predicament to the lady behind the counter.

"Here's my phone," I said. She took it and plugged it in to a charger that was lurking beneath a table. Electrons raced eagerly down the wire.

"Well, the phone's OK," she said. "Have you got the charger itself?"

I showed her the charger and she scrutinized it with an intense scroot.

"There's the problem," she said triumphantly. "One of the terminals has broken away."

"Have you got a new charger I could buy?" I asked.

"No - we don't have any in stock. But I'll ring round and see if anybody else does."

She spent the next twenty minutes or so on the phone to various branches throughout Auckland.

"Have you got an Ericsson charger?" she asked.

"No," they said, one and all.

"Nobody has one," she said. She dived into a desk drawer and produced a copy of the yellow pages. "I'll try our competitors now."

She rang her shop's largest business opponent.

"Have you got an Ericsson charger?"

"Yes we have."

Rather glumly, she asked them to reserve it for me.

"You'll have to go and pick it up yourself," she said.

"Because they are the competition, I can't really get the charger delivered here for you."

She gave me the address. All I had to do was get to the Downtown Shopping Centre before 6.00pm which was when the shop closed...

One of Auckland's more interesting features is the link bus. This bus travels on a circular route around the city. It has a fixed fare (\$1.30) and passengers can get on or off at any of the stops along the way. At peak times, the link buses are scheduled to run every 10 minutes.

It is not always completely clear which point on its route any given bus has actually reached, or which direction it is travelling in, and it is not unheard of for people to spend more than an hour getting to a destination that is only five minutes from the stop at which they boarded the bus because they got on a bus going the wrong way. However once you have a degree of familiarity with the route, this problem generally disappears.

Recently, a high technology gismo has appeared at the link bus stops. It is an electronic display which tells the eager hordes of prospective passengers how many minutes they will have to wait before the bus actually arrives. The display is updated at one minute intervals and absolute accuracy is assured, because each bus is fitted with a GPS device so that its position is always known and its speed of travel may easily be calculated.

I went to the nearest link bus stop and examined the gismo. The next link bus was 4 minutes away. I leaned

against the bus stop to wait. Soon the display updated itself and I was horrified to learn that my bus was now 12 minutes away. Since a bus was supposed to appear every 10 minutes, I found this less than reassuring. Glumly I watched the display count itself down at one minute intervals. Soon I had only 5 minutes to wait and I began to tingle with anticipation. But then the display shot up again to 15 minutes. My anticipation subsided. Obviously the driver kept getting his gears in a knot and the bus was travelling backwards. Either that, or it was trapped in Auckland's hideous rush hour traffic. I could be in for a long wait. I wondered if I would make it to the Downtown Shopping Centre before the shop closed.

Slowly the display counted down again. Eventually, after 15 agonising minutes, the display claimed that the bus was now due. No sooner had the magic word **Due** appeared on the board than the bus swung round the corner and screeched to a halt in front of me. I got on and paid my \$1.30 and then I endured an excruciatingly slow journey into the city. Every traffic light was red, necessitating a long wait. Sometimes the queue at the lights was so immense that we actually had to wait through two or three cycles as we slowly inched our way forwards. I imagined link bus displays all through the city displaying ever-increasing wait times, to the despair of chilly commuters queuing impatiently in the cold winter evening.

I looked anxiously at my watch. Would I make it in time? It was getting ominously close to 6.00pm.

At long, long last, after what felt like geological ages, the bus stopped by the Downtown Shopping Centre and I alighted. It was 5.55pm. The shop would close in five minutes. I hastened towards the automatic doors of the shopping centre, but they refused to open for me and I banged right into them and bruised my nose. I stepped back and waved at the sensor. It glowed a sullen red and refused to take any notice of me. Then I noticed the opening and



closing times for the shopping centre displayed on a helpful sign attached to the door. The shopping centre closed at 5.30pm.

But the people at the mobile phone shop had assured me that they were open until 6.00pm. What was going on? I got my phone out and turned it on with a small prayer to the Gods of Communication to allow me enough of a charge on the battery to make one phone call. The charge meter barely registered anything. Nervously I dialled the number of the shop.

"Hello?"

"Hi. You have an Ericsson charger reserved for me. I'm outside the shopping centre, but I can't get in because the doors are locked."

"No problem," said the cheerful voice. "I'll open them for you."

With a star-trek like *whoosh* the doors opened and I walked in. As I crossed the threshold, my cell phone turned itself off with smug finality. The battery was now utterly flat.

The charger cost me \$40. But it came complete with both its terminals and when I got back to the hotel and plugged it in, it worked perfectly.

# Alan In The Pink

There are times when you wish with all your heart that you could melt into a puddle, ooze between the cracks in the floorboards, and trickle down deep into the bowels of the earth never to be seen again. You have said or done something so exquisitely embarrassing that you just **know** that people all over the world will be talking about it for years to come, and every time you walk down the street people will point at you and giggle.

When I was three years old I approached my grandmother, a dinosaur lady with extraordinarily advanced wrinkles, and I asked her, "Nana - how old are you?"

"I'm 42," she said proudly.

I was aghast! I'd realised she was old. But I hadn't realised she was quite as ancient as that.

"Nana," I said, somewhat diffidently, "if you are that old, why aren't you dead yet?"

After a start like that, the rest of life can only be an anti-climax. Fortunately I'm not alone in my suffering. Sometimes I have watched my friends open their mouths and insert both feet up to the ankles. That's always fun.

For instance, every so often, when the mood takes me, I go ten pin bowling. I'm not very good at it and apparently I have a somewhat unique style as I race up to the line and release the ball. My friends in England used to refer to me as the Sugar Plum Fairy which I am sure was a reference to the balletic grace and style that I brought to the game.

When we had finished bowling, it was our custom to retire to the pub, compare score cards, and analyse every roll of every ball to death. As the levels of Guinness dropped in the glasses, the volume of the conversation tended to rise.

My friend Jennifer was a lady with a screeching voice that cut right through every conversation even at the best of times. After she'd soaked up a couple of pints, you could etch glass with her.

"Look how good my husband is," she declared, waving his scorecard in the air. "Look how well he did tonight."

We agreed that he had done very well indeed, rolling his ball and knocking down the pins like an automaton. Strike after strike. Classy stuff.

"He owes it all to me," howled Jennifer. "I taught him everything he knows. Before he met me he didn't even know which holes to put his fingers in!"

Every single conversation in the pub came to an abrupt halt as Jennifer's words vibrated across every eardrum in the building. A cone of silence descended and every male face assumed the same thoughtful look.

Shortly before I left England to come and live in New Zealand, I visited the family home for the last time to say goodbye to family and friends. The village was all of a twitter - my parents had told everybody that I was off to the other side of the world and every single person in the village was amazed that I could even conceive of such a plan, let alone carry it out. Most of them didn't believe that there was any such place as New Zealand. Mind you, many of them weren't too sure that far away, exotic places like London or Redditch existed either. And Wigan just had to be the product of someone's fevered imagination...

It was decreed that I had to have a haircut. It was not possible to visit other countries when you had untidy hair. What would people think? And so my mother made an appointment for me to visit her hairdresser. I turned up at the appropriate time and sat myself down in the chair. The lady whose job it was to do me up nicely approached and wrapped several bedsheets around me and then set to with the scissors and shampoo.

"Why are you going to New Zealand?" she asked. "It's such a long way away."

I muttered something innocuous.

"We were so thrilled when your mother told us all about it," she said. "It's so exciting."

I muttered something else innocuous.

"I recognised you as soon as you walked into the salon," she said. "You look exactly like your mother."

"It's the beard," I said loudly. "It fools everybody."

There was a horrified silence. Everyone in the salon stared at me.

Fortunately I was 12,500 miles away when the story finally got back to my mother. I heard her shrieks of outrage as clear as a bell.

I soon settled down in New Zealand and began to make friends. I got invited to parties. Life was good. One of my friends was an extremely well endowed young lady who I will refer to as Sue, for that is indeed her name.

Sue arrived at the party wearing her new T-shirt. She was very proud of it, having only just bought it, and this was the first time she had worn it. The slogan on the front was quite witty, though the letters were somewhat distorted by her very shapely bosom.

"Isn't it great?" she said happily. "Isn't it just the cleverest thing you ever saw on a T-shirt?"

"Indeed it is," I said. "I wish I was blind so I could read the Braille version."

Slow circles of silence spread around the room as people turned towards us. There were whispers as those who had heard what I said told the people who had missed it. The story quickly reached the furthest corner, and a whole room full of people stared in shock and horror at me and at Sue. It was a silence of the jaw-dropping variety and everybody was dropping jaws. The absence of noise was deafening.

Sue and I looked at each other and held a blushing competition. Sue won on points – even her toenails blushed.

She never wore the T-shirt again.

In the fullness of time I got a job that required me to teach people how to look after their computers. One of my more boring courses involved running mysterious unix programs with names like *iostat* and *vmstat* and *netstat*. They gather performance statistics about the computer and when you analyse the figures you should be able to work out just where you are going wrong, and then you can tweak various system configurations and the computer's performance suddenly goes through the roof and everybody says:

"Wow! I've never seen a computer run as fast and as efficiently as this one is running!"

Your boss gives you a huge pay rise and for the first time in your life you have so much money that you don't know what to do with it. You can't think of a single thing to buy. You've bought a home theatre and a plasma screen TV. You've bought an ipod and you've bought a cell phone with a built in video camera and a gadget for taking stones out of a boy scout's feet. You've bought everything you can plug into a USB port, including a USB memory stick in the shape of a barbie doll, and a USB vibrator with a built in french tickler. You've completely run out of ideas.

At least that's the theory. In practice, you gather the figures together, analyse them, tweak lots and lots of system configurations, and absolutely nothing happens at all. The system continues to run like a dog, only now it's a Rhodesian Ridgeback instead of the Jack Russell Terrier it was last week and everyone is after your blood, and it doesn't look like you'll ever be able to afford the USB vibrator with a built in french tickler that you've got your heart set on, and even if you *could* afford it you'll never have time to play with it because you are too busy working 24 hours a day trying to keep the computer running at all, let alone running more efficiently. Oh God, I'm so depressed.

Anyway, the course was designed to teach people how to gather the figures together and, more importantly, how to interpret them. We also deliberately set the computers up in, shall we say, slightly sub-optimal ways, so that we could see the kinds of figures that corresponded to a three-legged Rotweiler with mange.

One student, David by name, had been working with computers for almost as long as I had. He was old with knowledge, grey-haired and stooped with experience.

"Let's try this," I said to the class, and I instructed David to modify certain parameters and to compare the results he got with the unmodified machines belonging to the other students. I was aiming to have his computer slowly get worse and worse as a backlog built up. The differences should be quite obvious.

"David," I said in ringing tones, "as time passes, does your performance degrade?"

# Alan And The Empty Money Box

I've had a financial crisis every November since I was nine years old.

It all began the day my father took me to one side and said, "It's your mum's birthday soon. Don't you think you are old enough now to buy her a present?"

I hadn't realised that grown ups had birthdays. I thought that only children had birthdays. I knew that birthdays meant that you got presents (I got lots of presents on my birthday), but children and adults were quite different beings and I thought of them in completely separate compartments in my head. I was sure that different rules applied. How could adults possibly have birthdays? I hadn't yet made the connection between birthdays and growing up. I didn't know that the more birthdays you had, the older you got. Indeed, I hadn't even realised that one day I would be a grown up. I thought that my parents were adults and I was a child and that's just the way it would always be.

So everything my father said in that little speech was very puzzling indeed.

"When's her birthday?" I asked tentatively.

"November 11<sup>th</sup>," said my dad.

"November 11<sup>th</sup>?"

"Yes," said my dad. "That's the day that everybody in the country wears a poppy. It's the day that all the towns in England have a celebration at dawn, and the Queen lays a wreath at the Cenotaph in London. You've seen it on the television."

"Gosh," I said, impressed beyond measure. "My mum must be really special if they do all that on her birthday."

"Yes she is," said my dad. "She's very special indeed."

My pocket money was only threepence a week. Even in 1950s England, you couldn't get anything very elaborate for threepence. Mum would have to have a small present. I was sure she wouldn't mind. Perhaps I could afford a penny. That would still leave me twopence to pay my regular bills. Frozen jubbies and a potato for my potato gun, the occasional Lucky Bag.

A few days later, my mother took me to one side. "Your dad's birthday is coming up soon," she said. "Don't you think you are old enough now to buy him a present?"

Gosh! My father had birthdays just like my mum did. Was there no end to the wonders of the world?

"When is it?" I asked.

"November 13<sup>th</sup>," said my mum. "Just two days after my birthday. That's why I find it so easy to remember."

Things weren't looking good. Two birthdays in the same week! Oh, no!

Perhaps I could manage one penny for mum, and one penny for dad, which would mean I had one penny left over to see me through the week. I wasn't sure my money box could cope with that degree of financial pressure though. It was starting to look like it would be a very lean week.

"And it's Christmas soon after that," said mum thoughtfully. "You'll need to start saving up for Christmas. Christmas presents are always bigger and better than birthday presents."

Christmas presents? What did that have to do with me? Didn't Father Christmas take care of all that? I asked my mum how that worked.

"Father Christmas doesn't come for grown ups," she explained. "And so children have to buy presents for their parents to make up for it."

I was horrified! I'd never have any money of my own again if I had to make it stretch that far.



"But I only get threepence a week," I howled in anguish.

"Well, I suppose you could borrow against your future earnings," said my mum doubtfully. "But you might find the interest payments hard to manage on only threepence a week. Compound interest, of course"

"What's compound interest?" I asked. It sounded as if it might be, er, um, interesting.

"Einstein called it the greatest mathematical discovery of all time."

"What's an Einstein?"

I really didn't know very much at all when I was nine years old.

My teenage years passed in a haze of beer, exams and sexual frustration. All three things may well have been connected. Compound interest soon revealed its mysteries to me and I learned that if you divide 72 by the interest rate, the answer is the number of years it takes for your investment (or, more likely, your debt) to double itself. If you borrow \$2000 at 6% and never make any repayments, after  $72 / 6 = 12$  years, you will owe \$4000. It was all very depressing and not at all interesting. My parents continued to have birthdays far too close together for comfort and Christmas remained irritatingly close to the birthdays - bad planning on someone's part, I always thought.

University seemed like a great way of putting off the evil day of having to get a job. Students are notoriously poor. Surely to goodness I could be allowed to forget birthdays and Christmases?

"Buy a poppy for armistice day, guv?"

"No thank you."

"Your mum will never forgive you if you don't buy one. It **is** her birthday, after all."

"Oh all right then." I dug my beer money out of my pocket and clanked it into the collecting tin. The sacrifices I had to make! Being a student was very hard sometimes.

Eventually I couldn't put the decision off any longer. I had to get a job, and so I did. November rolled round with its normal irritating precision and I went to see the boss.

"I'm having my annual financial crisis," I explained. "Can you do anything for me?"

"As it happens I can, young Robson," he declaimed. "Walk this way."

He lurched out of the office and I lurched after him. We both pretended that we had one leg shorter than the other and that we were hunchbacks. The old jokes are the best ones. We cackled as we lurched.

He took me to the computer room. "One of the operators is on holiday," he said. "If you stand in for him on the night shift, we'll pay you a miserable pittance and it will be much cheaper for us than getting in a contractor."

"It's a deal," I said, and for the next few weeks I worked my normal 9.00am to 5.00pm job and then I did the 5.00pm to 1.00am shift in the computer room. After a month of 16 hour days I was a zombie - but a zombie who could once again afford birthdays and Christmas. I did this every November for eight years until I'd had enough and so I moved to New Zealand to escape from it.

When I arrived in New Zealand, I made an interesting discovery. Mum's birthday was on April 25<sup>th</sup> here. I never really worked out how they calculated that, but sure enough, every April the poppies went on sale and the dawn ceremony took place. I told mum and she was horrified.

"But that means I'll be seven months older than I really am!" she declared and nothing would shift her from this idea.

I hadn't been in New Zealand very long when my parents died. It was a sad time, but it proved to have hidden benefits. November ceased to be as financially frightening as once it was. This would never do - I was at a complete loss! Financial habits are hard to give up. I immediately

arranged for my house insurance, house contents insurance and car insurance to fall due half way through November, thereby guaranteeing me my usual impoverished Christmas. As an added attraction, I got the AA to demand their membership fee in November as well. I paid all these bills with my credit card and then I spent the next twelve months carefully not paying the credit card bills, so that I could be absolutely certain that when November rolled around again I wouldn't have paid for last November yet.

At last I could relax. Things were back to normal. Then I met Robin. "It's my birthday soon," she hinted one day.

"When?" I asked her.

"November 17<sup>th</sup>," said Robin.

"Perfect!" I cried. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," said Robin.

# Alan And The Toaster

When Robin and I announced that we were getting married, everybody asked us what we wanted for a wedding present.

"Toasters!" I said long and loud.

And not one person took me at my word, except my mate Ian who gave us an ornamental, and therefore somewhat impractical, toaster.

Then, one recent morning, I put some breakfast bread in my reliable old toaster, the one that Noah gave me after the Ark came to a halt and the animals got off. He didn't need it any more 'cos he'd taken the opportunity to pop down to the Ararat Market and buy a new one.

I turned the toaster on.

Have you ever noticed that toasters don't toast if you don't turn them on? Every morning I have to say "Toaster, I love you, you hot, sexy brute." If I don't say that, it just sulks and refuses to turn the bread brown.

But this morning, things were different. I turned the toaster on, and it exploded and burst into flames and that was the end of my breakfast. The explosion was loud, and it made me jump. The flames went out all by themselves after a couple of seconds. There was never any danger. But morning starvation seemed imminent. Fortunately Robin had some spare cereal and the milk wasn't *too* rancid. I coped.

But now I've had to buy a new toaster.

My new toaster has deep slots for large bread and dynamic braces to hold the bread firmly in the optimum toasting position, no matter what its thickness. My new toaster has stay cool sides which are shiny silver so that I can stare into them and watch my reflection trim its

moustache while the bread toasts itself perfectly deep inside the machine. My new toaster even has a stay cool bottom, exactly like my own. It has a button specially for crumpets and another one for frozen bread. It is a prince among toasters.

I walked straight to a shop and five minutes later I walked out of the shop with my toaster neatly wrapped and a receipt stored safely in my wallet. It wasn't hard to do and it took almost no time at all. Why couldn't any of my friends do that? Could it be, perchance, that my subtle hints were not understood?

"Toasters!"

In future I shall eschew subtlety and employ only direct instruction.

"Toasters NOW!"

# Alan And His Laughter

One day I was sitting in the classroom while my students worked their way through some exercises. Because it was getting close to the middle of the day, I suggested to them that once they had finished the exercises, they should probably go straight off for lunch. I reminded them of the time that the class would start again in the afternoon, and left them to it. I've always found this to be a successful tactic because it gives the students an incentive to finish the tasks ahead of them. Their reward is an extra long lunch hour.

And so, in dribs and drabs, off they went for lunch.

By the time the official lunch time arrived, only two students were left. By coincidence, both were of Chinese descent.

At that moment an email arrived in my in tray. Naturally I read it. It contained a joke, and so I laughed out loud.

The two students looked up and for a moment I felt embarrassed. Teachers aren't supposed to do that sort of thing.

And then I realised that both of the students were looking at me with very puzzled expressions on their faces. The penny dropped. I'd been laughing in English, with a Yorkshire accent, and they hadn't understood me.

# Alan And His Windows

The cats and I often sit in our nice warm lounge watching Robin working outside in the cold, cold garden.

Sometimes she will notice us and she will say something to us in a normal conversational tone of voice and at a normal volume. We have no trouble at all hearing and understanding her. The words penetrate the glass in the window as if it was not there. So we say something back, the cats and I.

Robin stares at us in a bewildered way.

"?" she says.

We try again.

"Can't hear you," she says, and goes back to her weeding.

It would seem that the glass in the window is preventing our voices from reaching Robin. Sound travels *in* from the outside but does not travel *out* from the inside. Obviously all the windows in my house have had the glass installed the wrong way round.

I now intend to go round to each window and reverse its polarity by turning it through 180 degrees in its frame. That way all the sounds inside my house will go outside, and all the outside sounds (including noisy cars and aeroplanes) will fail to enter the house, thus ensuring peace and tranquillity in all the rooms.

I will then sue the original glazier for failing to fit the glass the proper way round in the first place.

# Harpo On The Roof

I was standing idly at the bus stop across the road from my house. I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye. I glanced up and saw Harpo, my fluffy black cat, wander casually across the roof of the house. Then he sat down and looked smug. After a few moments, he got bored with this and he stood up and strode purposefully down to the gutter. Since the guttering is only thin plastic, it bowed under his not inconsiderable weight. That didn't seem to bother him though. He scratched underneath the roof - there was obviously something very fascinating down there. He kept stretching hard in an attempt to reach whatever it was. The guttering shook. Then he crawled back up on to the roof, trotted a little bit further along and resumed his investigations.

I started to get a bit worried. He was right at the place where the electric power lines entered the house. The wires were very close to his head, and it wasn't long before he glanced around and noticed them. Oh dear...

I left the bus stop and went back to the house. I opened up the shed and got a ladder out. I anchored it firmly, well away from the power lines, and I clambered up it.

"Harpo, come over here you little ratbag."

"Oh hello," said Harpo. "Have you ever noticed these long thin things attached to the roof? I bet they go *twang* really nicely. Shall I give it a go?"

"I'd rather you didn't," I said. "How about coming over here so we can get down off the roof?"

"I don't think so," said Harpo. "That doesn't sound like much of an idea to me. I think there might be a dead bird just under here. I really ought to investigate more closely."

A big green bus sailed by. Everybody in it stared at me.



I got down from the ladder and went in to the house. I picked up a handful of cat treats and then went back up the ladder. Harpo was still playing by the power lines. I threw a cat treat towards him, hoping to entice him away from the power lines and closer to me.

Plink!

Harpo looked up at the noise.

"Oooh! A cat treat! I like cat treats." He trotted up to it and inhaled it. "Yummy!"

I threw another one.

Plink!

He trotted up again and delicately licked the treat from the roof. "Oh gosh, that's good," he said. "Got any more?"

Plink!

He came closer, and I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Oy! Gerroff! Bastard!"

He disapproved, but all his kittenish instincts kicked in and he simply couldn't stop himself from relaxing and going limp. Unfortunately he's far too heavy to pick up solely by the scruff. I needed another hand underneath him in order to lift him up and hold him steady. Supporting myself firmly on the ladder with my third hand, I hauled him up off the roof with my other two. He struggled and kicked a bit but I held on tight. I knew that if I let him go, I'd never get another chance. He'd be too wary.

Another bus went past. All the people in it were laughing their socks off.

I started down the ladder. Harpo wriggled and writhed and slashed at me with his claws. About half way down the ladder I lost my grip on him and he dropped with a thud into the garden. He picked himself up and had a brief wash.

"Don't think that's going to stop me," he sneered. Then he stalked off into the undergrowth and waited for me to leave so that he could go back to playing with the power cables.

I put the ladder away and locked the shed. There was a bus due. I left him to his own devices.

# Warrant Of Fitness

It's that time of the year again, the time when the cats go to the vet for their annual Warrant of Fitness, colloquially known as a WOF. First problem, find the cats. Porgy was easy. It's been at least a year since he was last outside for more than five minutes. Two broken legs makes you appreciate the comforts of home. Harpo was easy too - I'd had a box of books delivered from Amazon that morning and Harpo spent the entire day asleep in the empty box. Like all cats, he cannot resist a box. No box ever remains unslept in. Bess was the problem. She had taken a constitutional just after breakfast and there hadn't been any sign of her all day long.

We hunted high, we hunted low. Upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber. No Bess. So only two cats went to the vet. They howled in chorus all the way there.

The vet kicked their tyres and checked their oil pressure. Harpo was so fluffy that it took the vet about five minutes to find his exhaust pipe so that she could check that his thermostat was OK and he hadn't blown a gasket.

"I know it's here somewhere," she muttered, poking blindly under his tail with her thermometer. "Aha! There it is!"

She gave them both a lube and a shot of antifreeze and pronounced them perfect.

We made another appointment for Bess.

"When would you like to bring her in?"

"Saturday morning is the only free time," I said.

"We've just introduced a \$5 surcharge for weekend visits."

"BLOODY CATS!"

When we got home, Bess was waiting patiently for us.

"Where's my tea?"

# Alan And Robin And Their Car

Just before Christmas, our car got written off in an accident. Nobody was hurt, but the back of the car was caved in where the hoon ran into it, and the front was caved in where it hit the median barrier. The whole thing was a terrible mess.

After the excitement died down, I went to the tow yard to get all our personal belongings from the car. The usual polite and helpful towie was sitting behind the reception desk.

"You haven't got any tools with you, have you?" he asked suspiciously. "No ripping the radio out or any clever tricks like that. You can only take personal things that aren't nailed down."

"No," I said, "I haven't got any tools with me."

"Oi, Derek!" yelled the towie.

"What?" growled Derek.

"Go with him and show him where the car is. Make sure he doesn't nick anything he shouldn't."

Derek took me out to the car. It looked quite forlorn and I felt very sorry for it. I collected a rather pathetic pile of things. A torch, a book of maps, a tyre pressure gauge.

"There's a blanket in the boot," I said. Derek and I pushed and pulled, but the boot was too distorted and we simply couldn't get it open.

"Wait here," said Derek. "I'll get a crowbar."

He jammed the crowbar under the boot and heaved hard on it. With a shriek of tortured metal the boot opened up. It sounded like the car was crying. I collected the blanket and

wrapped all the other things up in it and then I went home. I could feel the car staring after me as I walked away.

"Don't leave me! Please don't leave me. I'm hurt and I'm frightened."

It was worse than taking the cats to the vet!

To cheer ourselves up, we went shopping for a newish car. I began with a nostalgic visit to the outskirts of Wellington, to the car yard from which I bought my very first car after arriving here in New Zealand twenty five years ago. The car yard has gone through several ownership changes and name changes since then, but it still exists.

"That's a nice blue car," said Robin.

"Ah yes," said the sales thingy. "The Norwegian Blue. Beautiful plumage!" The sun was hot and the sales thingy was oozing grease. "Handles like a dream. You should see it drive through the pine trees around the fjords."

"I don't want a car that is pining for the fjords," I said.

We moved on and outwards in ever increasing circles.

In the Hutt Valley we found a car yard with a human being in charge. Either that or he was just extremely good at his job.

"Take a look at this," he said. "It's got a spoiler!"

And it had.

"It's got an aerial that goes up all by itself when you turn the radio on."

And it had.

"And the aerial retracts when you turn the radio off."

And it did.

"It's got a cup holder."

It did too.

"Did I tell you it's got a spoiler? It's got a spoiler."

"I'll buy it!"

And I did.

It's an eight year old Nissan Primera. Sort of silvery. With a spoiler.

Vroom! Vroom!

# The Flight Of The Humble Me

I always arrive at the airport sufficiently early to allow plenty of time to catch my plane. I have to - if I didn't, events would conspire to prevent me from ever completing my journey.

Every time I walk through the sliding doors into the check-in area, I find that I have to stand in a vast and slowly moving queue that is wending its way towards the only premium check in window that is open. The premium person currently checking in appears to have lost his Koru Club card. He has forgotten his name, and he didn't remember to put his underpants on this morning. The person in charge of the counter is being very patient - she fires powerful X-ray beams at his skull in case his name is engraved on the inside. The X-rays shoot through the vast, empty, echoing caverns inside his head and bounce around for a while. His eyebrows fall off and wriggle like demented caterpillars all over the desk. Men in white coats hold him upside down and shake him. Small coins, fingernail clippings, peanuts, hot wireless sets, aspirin tablets, the sandpaper sides of used matchboxes and something that might have been castor oil fall out of his pockets.

Aha! A Koru Club card appears! It is picked up and examined closely and the premium person's name and number are punched into the computer which goes down immediately and is counted out.

The computer thinks carefully for a while and then tells the premium person that he does not exist. With an agonised scream, he melts into a greasy puddle and oozes

into the carpet. The next person in the queue steps up to the counter and the whole rigmarole is repeated.

After several geological ages I finally arrive at the desk. I proffer my Koru Club card. The lady examines it carefully.

"Did you remember to put your underpants on this morning?"

"Yes of course." They aren't going to catch me out that way!

"Did you pack them yourself? Do they contain any forbidden substances, sharp objects or weapons of mass destruction?"

I consider the contents of my underpants carefully. "Yes," I say. "No," I continue.

She taps my number into the computer and issues me with a boarding pass for the wrong seat. I politely point out that my preferred seat is a front aisle and that this information is recorded in my Koru Club details.

"Sorry," says the lady. "Our check in computer system, isn't attached to our Koru Club computer system and it can't look those kinds of details up. Seats are assigned by a random number generator."

"Then why did I have to provide the information in the first place?"

"That's in case we ever manage to get the two computer systems to talk to each other. We haven't been able to make it work yet. But we've only been trying for twenty years. These things take time."

"Can I have my preferred seat please?"

"Of course you can."

She tears up my boarding pass and taps a few more keys. A new boarding pass is disgorged and a luggage receipt is issued. A luggage sticker and a priority tag are attached to my bag. I wend my way to the Koru Club lounge, where I indulge myself in hideous dissipations until my flight is called. I stagger bleary-eyed, weary and sore to my seat, and I strap myself in.



The plane takes off at least three quarters of an hour late. There are two passengers somewhere in the terminal who are ignoring all boarding calls. Eventually muscle bound security men track them down, club them into submission, bind them hand and foot with rusty manacles and carry them on board the plane to the accompaniment of rousing cheers.

The safety demonstration is performed as we taxi to the runway. I pay careful attention to everything that is said. My closest exit is behind me. The bag on my oxygen mask may not inflate. There is a life jacket in a pocket under my seat. Should the plane crash and kill me, I must put on the jacket and I will come back to life. Makes sense.

We lumber into the air and bump and grind across the sky. For my reading pleasure there is a copy of the Air New Zealand magazine in the pocket of the seat in front of me. I read it. It gives me no pleasure.

I drink lukewarm black sludge that pretends to be coffee. I refuse a sweetie. The plane lands and I make my way to the baggage claim carousel which whirrs and clicks as it spasms on its infinite journey.

Bags appear on the carousel, none of them mine. The first thousand or so bags that pass me on the carousel have no priority tags on them. The only function of a priority tag is to ensure that any bags adorned with one will be the very last ones off the plane. Koru Club members pay an annual fee of umpteen hundred dollars to enjoy the benefits of this service.

Eventually, after most of the people have collected their bags and vanished in the direction of surface transport, I spot the distinctive yellow and green striped handles of my case. It sits forlornly with the rest of the priority luggage, coming off last. I pick my case up and head off to get a taxi. There aren't any taxis. The passengers who didn't have priority luggage have used them all up.

I always arrive at the airport sufficiently early to allow plenty of time to catch my plane. For my latest flight, I left home while the dawn chorus was still having a cough and a spit, prior to bursting into song. The plane was scheduled to take off shortly after dusk.

However this time it proved to be an unnecessary precaution. To my enormous surprise, I was checked in faultlessly within thirty seconds of arriving at the terminal. I was even assigned my correct seat without having to ask. And the secret sins available in the Koru Club were the most sensual and decadent that I have ever indulged myself with.

The plane took off on time and arrived at its destination on time. My luggage, positively festooned with priority tags, was the *very first bag to appear on the carousel*. There were so many taxis waiting for passengers that I had to fight the taxi-touts off with a stick.

Things *always* go wrong when I fly. This journey was no exception to that rule. What went wrong was that everything went right. It completely upset all my plans.

And so, as always, I arrived at my motel tired, and fed up with the inefficiencies of Air New Zealand.

# 3G Alan

Suffering from terminal technolust, I went to the Vodafone shop and said, "I want to buy a mobile phone with so many bells and whistles that I can't even pick it up without falling over."

"Fortunately," said the Vodafone man, "you've come to the right place. By a strange coincidence, that is exactly what we sell here. Our phone designers have all been recruited from the secret school that trains the designers of Swiss Army Knives. Have you any other, more specific, criteria?"

"Yes I have," I said. "It must be a beam me up Scotty model, and it must have a keyboard I can actually see and use, as opposed to my current phone whose key caps are so minuscule as to be all but invisible, and whose keys cannot be pressed with the ball of the thumb. Only my thumb nail can reach the tiny, tiny keys and so I am obliged to maintain my right thumb nail in such a state and at such a length that I am in danger of being arrested for the possession of an offensive weapon."

I brandished my thumb at him and he recoiled from the nail in shock and horror. "You could use that for slashing throats!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed," I said. "I killed a mugger with it last Saturday, and it still had such an edge left on it that I was able to use it to sharpen the pencil with which I wrote my statement to the police."

"What an inspiring tale!" said the Vodafone man.

"Show me some phones," I said, "and rescue me from my current horror."

There were several beam me up Scotty phones, most of which combined the functions of a phone with the ability to

take photographs, and movies. Some were MP3 players and Organisers as well. One had a built-in electron microscope, an infra-red spectrometer and a gas-chromatograph, all suitable for performing DNA analysis. And as an added bonus it had a coffee percolator, a gadget for opening wine bottles and a device for removing stones from the feet of Boy Scouts.

"I'll have *that* one!" I declared.

"A very wise choice, if I may say so sir," said the Vodafone man. "That model comes with a free trolley for pushing your phone from place to place as you walk around with it. The trolley fits nicely in a shirt pocket. It's a marvel of precision engineering!"

"Show me the details," I said, "and let me play a while."

"if u do this u cn snd txt msgs," he said. "& this btn will add pxt of yr bum"

"!" I said. "I hve 1000s of uses 4 tht. xqs me l " 2 p"

"thru dor & 1<sup>st</sup> lft. rnbr 2 flsh"

When I returned, we continued our exploration of the phone.

"It's a 3G phone," said the Vodafone man. "That means you get access to Vodafone Live!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a sort of cell phone version of the internet with a trimmed down web browser built in to your handset. It's major purpose is to let you download enormous quantities of soft porn, music and ringtones."

"What's the difference between music and ringtones?"

"Nothing at all!"

He pressed buttons with his thumb. The nail was trimmed close to the flesh and there was no dirt at all underneath it. I was jealous.

Soon Vodafone Live! sprang into view. He pressed more buttons and Maxim TV asked me to confirm that I was over sixteen. Once I'd done that, it asked me to wait while my

video downloaded. I waited, and soon scantily clad ladies with enormous boobs were to be seen leaping around my phone as they played tennis, volleyball and basketball. I think one of the basketball players threw her left breast into the net thereby scoring the winning goal.

"How about *that!*" said the Vodafone man.

The Vodafone Live! front page seems to have been designed by a male chauvinist pig who speaks in txt. Under the heading **Pics & Images** I am offered the opportunity to view *Babes, Celebs, Cards...* Under the heading **News & More** I have access to *Weather, biz, Lotto...*

"What age group makes most use of cell phones?" I asked.

"Probably teenage girls," said the man. "They appear to have the phones permanently fixed to their fingers with superglue. Have you ever noticed them walking down the street, completely oblivious to their surroundings, flashing their thumbs for all to see and crashing into lampposts, telegraph poles, post boxes and passing pedestrians? Have they no shame?"

"Why would teenage girls be interested in pictures of *Babes*? Why would they want to watch massively endowed mammals playing basketball?"

"Why not use Vodafone Live! to check your email?" asked the Vodafone man, subtly changing the subject. "That's a wonderful feature."

"How do I do that?"

"You press these buttons 513 times in this sequence and then you walk across the room and lose the signal and have to start again."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "I've always wanted to do that." And so I gave the Vodafone man lots of money and took my new phone home.

It's an extremely Shiny! phone and I'm overcome with happiness at owning it. But let's face it -- the thing is nothing but a toy. Virtually everything it does is something I

neither want nor need. Doubtless I will make use of all its features at some point, simply because they are there. That's what technolust is all about, of course. We all want to live in a Dick Tracy comic at least once in our lives. I have two friends who make video phone calls to each other across their lounge because they don't know anybody else who has a phone capable of doing video calls, and they really, really, *really* want to play with video calls.

The phone came with Windows (spit!) software for connecting it to a computer. I do actually have a Windows (spit!) computer sitting in a dusty, neglected corner of my study. So I installed the software and clicked on its icon.

"Hello," it said. "Where's your phone?"

"Here," I said.

"No it isn't," said the software, rather annoyed. "Stop messing about. Where's your phone?"

"It's here," I said. "Look!"

"No it *isn't*," said the software emphatically. "Come on, you can't fool me. You haven't actually got a cell phone at all, have you?"

"Yes I have," I insisted. "Here it is." I held the phone up and showed the software that the phone was plugged in to the right socket and was switched on, ready and eager to communicate.

"Rubbish," said the software, sneeringly. "I know you haven't got a phone. Go away and don't bother me again until you actually get yourself a phone."

Then it performed an illegal operation and vanished up its own protocol port.

So much for that. I immediately connected myself to that there intraweb thingy, and went looking for Linux software that would talk to my phone.

"I'll give it a go," said one program. "Actually I'm designed to talk to Nokia phones, but I'm sure your Motorola phone will do just as well. They're all the same really, you know."

I connected my phone to my Linux laptop and turned the phone on.

"Oh look," said the software. "A cell phone! Hello."

"Hello," said the phone, shyly.

"How about you give me your contact list?" asked the software, seductively.

"No problem," said the phone and promptly dumped its guts all over the disk drive.

The file the phone gave me was in a very odd format indeed. For a moment I thought there was no data in it at all and that I was back to square one. But closer investigation showed that there really was information in there, it was just hiding. For those who care, the file was UTF-16 with 0xFEFF in the first sixteen bits.

Once I got that sussed, it was all completely straightforward, of course.

I soon realised that the data in the file was quite unsuitable for easy modification on the computer - the layout was rigid and complex, full of auto incrementing numbers used as keys by the phone and arcane text strings that defined whether the number was to be stored in the phone's memory or on its SIM card. Fiddling with it directly was far too awkward.

Never mind, it was nothing that two small C programs and three shell scripts couldn't fix, and it wasn't very long before I had my contact list in an easily editable file that I could quickly reformat into the idiosyncratic layout that the phone demanded. Now I could upload the data back into the phone any time I felt like it, at the touch of a button. No sweat. Problem over.

I opened up my new phone and I said, "Beam me up, Scotty."

And he did.

# Alan And The White House

"Knock, knock!" said the front door.

"OK - I'll play your silly game," I said. "Who's there?"

"A little old lady," said the door.

"A little old lady who?" I asked.

"I didn't know you could yodel," said the door, smugly.

Annoyed with the door, I yanked it open, just to aggravate it, and to shut it up. Standing there in the entrance way was a little old lady, cunningly disguised as a man with a clipboard.

"Hello," he said, "my name's Tim and I couldn't help noticing just how amazingly dirty the outside of your house is."

"Dirty?" I asked, puzzled.

"Dirty," he confirmed. "Astoundingly so. But fortunately I have the perfect solution. In exchange for a brutally large sum of money and the soul of your first born child, I will clean all the dirt away."

"Show me this mythical dirt," I commanded him in regal tones.

"Observe this mould," said Tim, pointing at swathes of green stuff hanging from the guttering.

"You must have put that there before you knocked on the door," I accused him. "It wasn't there last time I looked."

"When was the last time you looked?"

"Five hundred years ago, when I bought the house. The previous owner was extremely proud of how mould free his guttering was and he took particular care to point it out to me."

Tim poked at a singularly virulent looking sheet of mould. It swayed sickeningly back and forth, and then a rather annoyed looking BBC camera team under the direction of



David Attenborough poked their heads out from behind the green curtain.

"Stop that immediately," said Attenborough, rather peeved. "You're frightening the wood lice. And the spiders are none too happy either, not to mention the snails!"

"OK," I said, "I'm willing to concede that there is a bit of mould here and there. But surely the rest of the house isn't all that dirty?"

"Walk this way," said Tim, lurching in a hunchback manner towards the front garden. I lurched after him. Tim waited for me to catch him up and then pointed to the large expanse of somewhat dingy grey wood that made up the front of the house. "Shouldn't that be a clear, blinding white colour?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose it should," I admitted.

Tim took out a small pickaxe and chopped fiercely at the grey grit. Lumps fell off and Tim picked one up. "Been building up for donkey's years, that has," he said. "Look here!" He pointed at something in the lump of grime that he was holding. "That's a fossil. I think it's an ammonite. It's beautifully formed. When did you say the house was last cleaned?"

"I think it was some time in the late Cretaceous," I said. "All right. You've convinced me. My house really does need washing. I suppose you'd better get on with it."

"Sign here," said Tim, proffering a piece of paper. "And here, and here and here. And here as well. And if you sign here, I'll do your garage and the concrete paths at no extra charge. And if I'm in a good mood I'll do the garden fence."

I signed there, there, there and there. And there as well.

"See you Saturday," said Tim. And it was agreed.

Saturday dawned warm and sunny and semi-tropical. Layers of humidity caused gushing faucets to open in my armpits. I bribed the cats with dead rodents and in return they lashed their tails backwards and forwards, fanning cool air over my greasy body. Then they got bored and ran off

with their rats. Crunching sounds could be heard from beneath the sofa.

"Knock, knock!" said the door.

"Who's there?"

"Doctor!" said the door.

"Doctor Who?"

The door began to make noises like the BBC Radiophonic workshop.

"Shut it!" I yelled and then opened it. The door, now being open, stayed shut.

Tim was standing in the entrance way dressed from head to foot in rubber, leather and PVC. He was a fetishist's dry dream, though given the humidity and the hosepipe he was brandishing I suspected he would soon be a wet dream.

"Okay to start?" he asked.

"Go for it," I said.

He unpacked a compressor, attached things to it and turned it on. It roared into gleeful life and Tim started spraying high pressure water all over my house, my garden and himself. Enormous layers of steaming grot flew everywhere and it soon became blindingly obvious that my house had been dirtier than even Tim had realised. It also became clear to me that my windows and door were not waterproof. Niagras of filthy water streamed in; and for the next few hours, as Tim sprayed the outside of the house, I followed him around to corresponding positions inside the house armed with ever diminishing piles of increasingly soggy towels as I vainly tried to cope with the influx.

Eventually Tim reached the extractor fan in the kitchen window. An extractor fan is simply a hole in the window with fan blades that screw all the kitchen fumes out into the wide world so that your neighbours always know what you are cooking for tea. A small roof sticks out over the top of the hole to protect it from the rain. This setup was no match at all for Tim's super high pressure portable storm, and a huge torrent of water erupted through it into the kitchen. Even

though it wasn't turned on, the fan decided that it didn't like the situation at all.

"BANG!" said the fan, and let all its magic smoke out in a smelly cloud.

It is a well known truism that electronic equipment works by passing magic smoke down its wires. The plugs in the wall are a never ending supply of all the smoke necessary to keep the equipment going. When a gadget has used up all the smoke inside itself, it simply gets more from the supply in the plug. It's a completely closed system with one fatal flaw. If you ever let the smoke out, the equipment stops working immediately. My fan had lost all of its smoke because the thousands of gallons of high pressure water flowing through it had joggled two wet bits that weren't supposed to be touching into a loving embrace. The excitement was all too much to bear; the fan died in mid-orgasm and the smoke blew everywhere. The neighbours complained immediately.

"Now we can't tell what Alan is cooking for tea. Our lives are ruined!"

"Sorry," said Tim, and he began to spray the security sensor lights which started to flash on and off in a very worried fashion. I immediately turned off the power to the lights in case they too decided to let their smoke out. Everybody knows that during the hours of darkness, security lights surround the entire house with an impermeable force field. If the lights ever stop working, the force field goes down and all the burglars that have been vainly beating their swag bags against it slither in through the cat flap and steal your ornaments. I definitely didn't want that to happen!

Eventually the house was completely clean.

"Knock, knock!" said the door. It sounded grumpy.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Tim."

"Tim who?"

"Tim, the man who's been cleaning the outside of the house all day long," snarled the door. "Which other bloody Tim could it possibly be?"

"My, my," I said. "You do sound pissed off at something. What's wrong?"

"I'm soaking wet," said the door petulantly. "That's what's wrong. And the water's got into my joints and they're all swollen and painful. Humph!"

"But at least you are clean," I pointed out. "I could eat my dinner off you."

"Don't you bloody dare," said the door. "Come on, open me up and get rid of the soggy bastard."

I opened the door.

"Come and have a look," said an extremely moist Tim, and so I did.

He had done a magnificent job. The house gleamed as white as as an Antarctic iceberg. It reflected the sunlight in a dazzling glare. The concrete had stopped being muddy grey and was now pale and interesting. The brick path, small but beautifully formed, had lost all the weeds that had been growing up in the gaps. The garage looked piebald where chunks of old paint had fallen off under the pressure from the water blasting. I was very pleased indeed with the final result.

"What happened to David Attenborough and the BBC film crew?" I asked.

"Oh, they went next door," said Tim. "Have you noticed how incredibly dirty the house next door is?"

"Now you come to mention it," I said, "I have."

# Alan Has An Adventure

"Let's go for an adventure," said Ross.

"What a good idea," I said. It was Thursday and neither of us was working that day. The thought of all our friends slaving away over a hot desk at their 9-5 labour made the idea of an adventure irresistible. They'd all be so jealous. So we got into Ross's car and drove off to the Wairarapa, an area that is largely *terra incognita* to me, though not to Ross.

It soon became abundantly clear to me that New Zealand road engineers have learned nothing whatsoever from the Romans. Roman roads start at point A and go straight to point B. The operative word here is *straight*. The Romans simply moved any lumps of inconvenient geography out of the way. New Zealand road engineers have a different approach. It would seem that they are paid by the corner, and the road to the Wairarapa must have made very rich men of all of them. It has almost no straight parts on it at all as it winds its way up the mountains and encircles every rocky outcrop.

"Bendy bits for the next 3 kilometres" announced a road sign, and it wasn't lying. Three kilometres later, another road sign said: "More bendy bits for another 3 kilometres. Ha, ha, fooled you!"

The road is only a two lane highway. Woe betide you if you get stuck behind an overburdened and very slow logging truck. Overtaking is hard. There are occasional passing lanes, but they are very, very short; cunningly designed to disappear from beneath your tyres when you are less than half way past the lumbering leviathan. You stare helplessly at the oncoming traffic (which has no intention whatsoever of slowing down so as to allow you

time to get safely back into your own lane). Massive acceleration and tight sphincters are an advantage here. Fortunately Ross has a very powerful car, and both he and I were wearing brown trousers.

Once we reached the top, we stopped at the café for a look at the view. It is truly spectacular. You feel as though you are perched on the roof of the world, and the lands spread themselves out all around you, green and welcoming.

We got back into the car and began to wend and wind our merry way down towards the vineyards of Martinborough.

"There's a brewery somewhere in Martinborough," said Ross. "It might be worth stopping there and picking up a few bottles. It's a very hard beer to find outside Martinborough itself."

"That sounds like a good idea," I said.

"It's on New York Street," said Ross. "Oh look - by a strange coincidence, here is New York Street!"

We stopped at the cross roads. New York Street stretched both left and right of us. There was no immediately obvious brewery to be seen.

"Hmmm," said Ross. "Let's try right."

We went right. There being no intervening geography now that we were out of the mountains, the road stretched infinitely straight and Roman-like in front of us. We drove and drove and drove some more. Lots of vineyards, no breweries.

"Odd," said Ross. "Perhaps we should have gone left. Never mind. If we turn here, here and here we'll go round in a circle and we can try again."

About half an hour later, after passing several hundred vineyards, we arrived back at the crossroads again. This time we turned left.

"There's the brewery," said Ross triumphantly, and he turned into the suspiciously empty parking area. "I think it's

closed."

"There's a sign in the doorway," I said. "I'll hop out and have a look."

The brewery was open to the public on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday afternoons only. Today being Thursday, it would seem that beer was out of the question.

I carried this sad news back to Ross. Fortunately he is not the kind of person who shoots the messenger. "Looks like it's wine, then," he said phlegmatically and drove off down New York Street once again. "Here's a nice sounding road," he said and turned left into Princess Street. Left had been a good direction all day, so I was cautiously optimistic.

We chose a vineyard by the pragmatic method. That is to say Martinborough Vineyards was literally opening its gates to visitors just as we drove past them. So we screeched to a halt, and then drove in.

The wine tasting room had large lists of wines for sale with the depressing words *Sold Out* against most of them. We were right at the end of the season (or, for those who see the glass as half full rather than half empty, right at the beginning of the current season, and the wine hadn't been made yet).

There were two *Pinot Noir* wines on offer. One was cheap and one wasn't.

"They're both from the same grapes," said the lady, "and both the same vintage. But they come from different barrels and they have quite a different taste as a result."

She was right - the wines were obviously closely related, but easily distinguishable by taste. She pointed at the one that wasn't cheap.

"That will be wonderful in about ten years time, and absolutely brilliant in fifteen, though it is quite acceptable now."

She pointed at the cheap one.

"That's a good quaffing wine and it's probably at its best now. It isn't really suitable for keeping and is unlikely to

improve."

Being a man who requires instant gratification, I bought two bottles of the cheap one. If it turns your teeth pink and makes you fall over, it's a good wine in my book. I'm a philistine.

Ross bought two bottles of a dessert sticky. He didn't taste it because he'd had it before and so he knew just what he was buying. I had a taste, and it was like drinking liquid gold; sweet, fulfilling and head-blasting. I was sorely tempted to follow his example and buy some of my own, but I had no money left.

The hour being still somewhat pre-prandial, Ross and I decided to walk around the town of Martinborough. This takes approximately five minutes, but it is not without interest. There is a small, beautifully maintained park in the town centre which has a war memorial in it. Nothing strange about that - but what *is* strange is that it memorialises the Boer War and the men of Martinborough who died in it. I don't recall seeing a memorial to that sad little skirmish in any other New Zealand town. Indeed I would have assumed that the Boer War really had no part to play in the history of this country and I would not have expected that any New Zealand town would have sent its men off to fight and die there. But nevertheless, Martinborough had. It was a strangely sad and sobering thought.

The town has an art house cinema which shows films I've never heard of that (presumably) have writing on the bottom of them. This is the very last place that I would have expected to find such an establishment and I have no idea how it manages to survive, but it is housed in a smart building so it must be paying its way. Perhaps TV reception is bad in Martinborough. And maybe all the vintners are French and Czechoslovakian.

Lunch! My companion and I decided upon a smart looking restaurant. I ordered squid and my companion ordered sausages. Wise choices, both of them. We also



found that the restaurant had a selection of locally produced beers, so the day was not as wasted as we had at first thought it might be. I drank something light and frothy and my companion drank something dark and frothy. Both were toothsome and refreshing.

My squid was lightly fried in several spices (I think I identified cinnamon, not a spice I would have expected, but it worked very well). It was served with a green salad and a caterpillar – though I was unaware of this extra gustatory treat to begin with, for it was not mentioned on the menu. Obviously an oversight.

It came to my attention towards the end of the meal. I poked at something which I thought might be a small piece of rolled up lettuce. I attempted to unroll it, but it refused to unroll. I pushed it to the side of the plate, and noticed that it appeared to have lots of feet. And a head. With eyes in it. Unblinking.

"I think that might be a caterpillar," I said.

My companion inspected it cursorily. "Added protein," was his expert judgement. He speared a sausage. It wasn't green. I found that strangely soothing.

"Protein," I agreed, "but not in a form that I care for."

I vaguely recalled other small pieces of rolled up lettuce that I had examined with a much less jaundiced eye earlier on in my meal. Could that emphatic hint of bitter sweetness in one mouthful have been caused by something other than a chef with rather too heavy a hand on the spice spoon? Hmmmm.

I took my plate back to the counter and showed the lady the caterpillar. She turned pale and dashed into the kitchen with my plate. Almost instantly a grovelling chef appeared.

"Sorry. So sorry. It should never have happened. So sorry. We'll refund your money, of course. So sorry."

Pink and peeved, he returned to the kitchen. Faint roars emerged in which the words: "...and examine every single

salad green with a microscope before you put it on a plate..." could be distinguished.

Meanwhile the lady behind the counter had a problem. The till was computer controlled and while it was more than willing to open up in order to receive money, it stubbornly refused to open up in order to dispense it. That was against the natural order of things. The lady desperately pushed buttons and pleaded with the computer, but the till remained firmly closed. Eventually she had to call the manager who poked at special managerial keys. The computer was unimpressed and paid no attention. The till drawer remained closed. The manager gave up.

"We'll enter it as another meal," she said. "At least that way the drawer will open for me! I'll make a manual adjustment in the accounts when we cash up tonight."

She rang up another squid and caterpillar. "Ping!" said the computer, and opened the drawer. The manager took my money out and returned it to me.

"Time to go home," said Ross.

So we did.

# Alan Goes Out For Dinner

It has been swithening (*sic*) for what seems like considerably longer than the traditional forty days and forty nights. The ground is saturated and squelchy and, in many low lying places, under several feet of water. Chimneys poke pathetically through the waves. Large parts of Wellington have fallen off the cliffs onto other large parts of Wellington; generally on to the roads that wind alongside the sheer cliff faces. Traffic inches slowly past the blocked lanes. Tempers are frayed and journeys that usually take minutes start to take hours or even days. Drivers die of hunger and thirst, trapped in never ending queues. Desiccated driver corpses festoon the sides of the roads.

"Come for dinner," suggested Ross.

"What a good idea," I replied. Since I intended to drink a smidgeon, I called a taxi. The taxi turned up in good time, and I climbed in to it, clutching my smidgeon. We set off on our journey.

Then we hit the queues and began to crawl along. I telephoned Ross.

"There's been another slip on State Highway Two," I said, "and I'm stuck in the queue. Expect me when you see me. I might be some time."

"Ah," said Ross. "That might explain why Laurie and Annette haven't turned up yet either."

"Indeed it might," I said. "I'll give them a ring."

No sooner said than done.

"Hello," I said. "I'm stuck in a queue."

"Funny that," said Annette. "So are we! I think there must have been another slip."

"Oh well. I'll see you at Ross's place sometime or other."

I settled back and gloomily watched the meter ticking over far too rapidly for comfort. Dollar after dollar added itself to the already frighteningly large total.

The taxi was in the right hand lane, working on the theory that when we reached the slip, it would be the left hand lane that was blocked since the left hand lane was closest to the cliff face. For a while the cars in the right hand lane did indeed move faster than the cars in the left hand lane and I experienced the giddy thrill overtaking, even though we were only moving at 3 kph. One of the cars just ahead started to look vaguely familiar and once we got alongside it I rang Laurie and Annette again.

"If you glance to your right," I said. "You will observe me sitting in a taxi that is about to overtake you."

They both glanced to their right, and we waved enthusiastically to each other for a while. Then boredom set in and we stopped.

For no immediately apparent reason, the traffic in the left hand lane suddenly speeded up and Laurie and Annette pulled ahead of my taxi. I watched their rear lights vanish into the murky rain. The only amusement left to me now was to return to watching the enormously large number on the taxi meter get even larger. It reached a number that approximated New Zealand's national debt and we were still stuck in the traffic. I began to wonder just how large the taxi fare would eventually become. Perhaps it was time to sip a smidgeon...

We arrived at the slip and, as expected, the road reduced itself to a single lane. The left hand lane was completely blocked by what appeared to be an entire pulverized mountain. Seven maids with seven mops were slowly sweeping it away. I was absolutely certain that half a year would not be nearly enough time to clear it away. I shed a bitter tear. I am the walrus. Coo coo ca choo.

The number on the taxi meter was now so large that the entire contents of Fort Knox could not have paid the fare.

And anyway, the taxi driver's pockets weren't deep enough to store that number of dollars. The figure asymptotically approached infinity and the taxi driver began to giggle like a maniac as we slowly edged past the vast broken bit of Wellington.

The sides of the meter were visibly expanding now as the display area got larger and larger in order to accommodate the increasingly ridiculous total. The meter was occupying most of the front of the taxi and there was scarcely any room for me and the driver any more. The display indicated that my debt was now a googolplex dollars. Next stop infinity plus one. Then something went *sproing!* deep inside the mechanism and the meter instantly shrank back to its usual size as the total wrapped round and the numbers started counting up again from one dollar. I was reprieved!

Once we got past the slip, progress was fairly rapid and we soon arrived at Ross's house. The taxi pulled up behind Laurie's parked car and the driver and I looked at the meter. The final total was \$65.

"Give me \$45, and we'll call it quits," said the taxi driver.

"Sir, you are a scholar and a gentleman," I told him, for indeed he was. And I still had a smidgeon left!

# Weird Topologies

Every week I go to Woolworths to do the grocery shopping. Most weeks I wander up to the delicatessen counter and purchase a few hundred grams of this and a few hundred grams of that. Sometimes a few hundred grams of the other. All relatively fat free, of course.

The nice lady behind the counter weighs my choices accurately, presses a magic button and prints out a price tag. She picks up the plastic bag with the goodies in it, twirls it, twiddles it, makes a magic gesture and sticks the price label to it. I take the bag from her and place it in my trolley. In the fullness of time I pay for it and take it home.

Round about lunchtime, fancying a sandwich, I take the bag of goodies out of the fridge. And every week I discover that the simple plastic bag with the turkey pastrami (or whatever) in it has turned into a Klein Bottle. I can see the turkey pastrami. I can feel the turkey pastrami through the convoluted folds of the bag. What I can't do is remove the turkey pastrami from the bag. No matter how I twist and turn the plastic, no matter which orifice I stick my hand into, the turkey pastrami remains just out of reach on the other side of the plastic. I follow every fold of the bag with my fingers and there is no doubt at all that the bag has become a three dimensional mobius strip. It only has one side and one edge and one surface. And the turkey pastrami isn't on any of them. It's hiding in plain view on the side that doesn't exist. And as I do every week, I have no alternative but to rip the bag to shreds. This collapses some sort of wave function, and it forces the bag to re-enter the same space-time continuum that I inhabit. Once more the bag has an inside and an outside; dimensions that previously were

sorely lacking. The turkey pastrami is now available for my sandwich, but I'm too exhausted to eat it.

It's extremely frustrating!

Last week I was in Woolworths again. They had a vacancy in the delicatessen. There was an advert sellotaped to the glass:

Wanted -- someone to serve on the delicatessen counter. Must have an in depth knowledge of exotic meats and a passion for pork. Must be turned on by turkey, and must cherish chicken. Must be good with people. Must have an advanced degree in topology.

# ***AIDS Memoires***

We've had the cats vaccinated against feline AIDS. It's a relatively new vaccine which was developed in America. It's an offshoot of research into human HIV/AIDS. Perhaps one day there will be a human vaccine as well...

Anyway, feline AIDS is endemic in New Zealand and about 20% of the feline population has it. It is passed on through bites and scratches. Since my cats are constantly fighting with each other, as well as with any other moggy that wanders into view, it seemed a wise precaution to have them vaccinated. Harpo is particularly prone to fighting. Sometimes when you stroke him, you can't feel anything except half-healed scabs! We were told that the AIDS vaccine is only about 80% successful, but nevertheless we decided that any protection was better than no protection at all.

The initial treatment involves 3 injections given at 3-weekly intervals. After that, there's an annual booster. Since we've got three cats, we've spent a grand total of about \$500 on the first three injections for each of them. Cats really are very expensive animals sometimes.

Each time we've taken them in for an injection, the vet has given them a general checkup, just to make sure they are in good health. He put Harpo up on his bench and poked and prodded a bit. Then he stuffed a thermometer up Harpo's bum and waited a few minutes. While he waited, he made casual conversation with me.

"Should be an exciting week, next week," he said. "The World cup final."

I made non-committal noises, being less than interested in football. The vet took the thermometer out of Harpo and examined it closely.



"And there's tennis as well," he said. "In fact, it's the Wimbledon final today."

"How did you figure that out just by reading a thermometer?" I asked him, greatly impressed.

# Is This A Record?

When I was a small child I had a wind up gramophone and three records. They had been given to me by my parents who seemed to feel that I lacked music in my life. I quickly developed enormously large biceps in my right arm as I enthusiastically wound up the gramophone and played my three records hour after hour after endless hour. Looking back, I marvel at the patience of my parents – they must have been so sick of hearing those same three songs all day long. But I never tired of them.

My three records were; *The Ballad of Robin Hood*, *The Swiss Canton Polka*, and *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*. The Disney movie of *Davy Crockett* starring Fess Parker was very big that year and you could buy imitation coonskin hats and plastic smooth bore muskets in the toy shops. The records played at 78rpm and each song lasted about two minutes. The records were made of a very brittle plastic (probably bakelite or some close relative). You had to be careful not to drop them or they would shatter into unplayable fragments.

Logic suggests that there must have been songs on the other sides of these records, but for the life of me I cannot recall what they were. I only ever played the real songs on the front of the records.

I would remove the record from its paper jacket and place it on the turntable. Then I carefully put a steel needle into the pickup and tightened the screw that held it in place. I cranked the handle, started the turntable and placed the needle gently on to the lead-in grooves. Music would pour from the cabinet. There were two little doors in the cabinet. When you opened them, the music played louder. I always played my records at maximum volume with the cabinet doors wide open.

I had to change the needle after every couple of plays – they soon became blunt and the quality of the reproduction suffered. Because I played my three songs so frequently, I was always running out of needles and I had to go to the shop to buy more. They came in tiny tins which my father used for keeping small screws and tacks in after I'd used up all the needles.

Eventually it dawned on me that my three records were not the only records in the world. If I saved up my pocket money I could buy others. The shop where I bought my needles had a huge rack that covered the back wall and the shelves were jammed tightly with paper-jacketed 78s. All I had to do was ask the shopkeeper for the record I wanted...

I bought *I'm Not A Juvenile Delinquent*, by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. I recall that the song opened with the inspiring lyrics:

*woh woh woh woh woh woh woh woh  
woh woh woh woh woh woh woh woh  
woh woh woh I'm not a juvenile delinquent*

When pocket money was tight, I could go to Woolworths. They had their own record brand called Embassy which sold for about half the price of real records from a real record shop. Anonymous singers who sounded almost but not quite unlike the real thing sang cover versions of currently popular songs.

Shortly before I became a teenager (though not a juvenile delinquent) records shrank, became much less brittle and had to be played at 45rpm instead of 78rpm. My gramophone could not play these new fangled things. I needed a record player – a fantastic electronic gadget which meant I'd never have to crank the gramophone handle ever again! And it had a stylus! No more needles; which was just as well because they were getting harder and harder to find. The shops weren't stocking them any more. Perhaps the

needles weren't even being manufactured any more. Certainly 78s weren't being made now. You couldn't buy them for love nor money. The record shop moved its shelves closer together to make room to jam more of the smaller records in.

The record player had a very Heath-Robinson contraption that you could attach to the turntable. It allowed you to stack records on top of each other. As the current record finished playing, the pick up arm would move aside, a new record would crash noisily down from the stack and the pick up arm would automatically move over and play it. Luxury! You could lie back and listen to the music for at least twenty minutes without having to get up and change the records.

My record player was able to revolve its turntable at 78rpm, but that was not recommended. Though sometimes it was fun to play my 45s at the faster speed. It added a whole new dimension to the sound of the songs. But the stacking gadget wasn't good for the brittle 78s themselves so if I really wanted to listen to *The Swiss Canton Polka* I had to disengage it and return to the old fashioned one-record-at-a-time method. Naturally I sneered at this old-fangled approach to music and it wasn't long before I completely stopped listening to my 78s. They gathered dust in a cupboard along with the gramophone. Eventually they disappeared from the house, never to be seen again.

Today I rather regret that, though at the time I didn't give it a second thought.

No more Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers! Now I could listen to Tommy Steele singing *Little White Bull* In retrospect, I'm not sure that was an improvement, though Tommy Steele did seem to know a lot more words than Frankie Lymon did..

Soon another technological marvel manifested itself. They managed to squeeze extra songs onto the 45s. For a small increase in the price, you could buy an extended play record (EP) with two, sometimes three, songs on each side.

Ordinary 45s, with a mere one song per side, were now called singles.

I began to notice some big records in the record shop where I bought my singles and my EPs. They were much larger even than the old 78s. They were called Long Players (usually abbreviated to LPs) and they had lots of songs on them. They also moved very slowly, only 33<sup>1/3</sup> rpm. You could easily move your head around in time with the record and read the words on the label as it revolved; though if you did too much of it, your neck unscrewed and your head fell off. I bought *The Shadows Greatest Hits* and I still possess it today, the only record that has survived from my early childhood.

When I was twelve the world changed forever. The number one song on the hit parade was *Please, Please Me* by the Beatles. It was the only topic of conversation at the dinner table that lunchtime at school. I still remember the electric excitement of it. Nothing was ever the same again. Popular music stopped being trivial and it turned into art.

We had a record player in our school common room. We only had one permanent record, though others came and went as we brought in our newest acquisitions and then took them home again. The one constant in our lives was Otis Redding *Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay*. To this day, I remember every word and every note.

By my late teens, I had become aware that things called stereos existed. For some time, the small print on the covers of the LPs (we called them albums now) had been proclaiming that:

This stereo record can be played on mono reproducers provided either a compatible or stereo cartridge wired for mono is fitted. Recent equipment may already be fitted with a suitable cartridge. If in doubt consult your dealer.

Nobody I knew had a stereo. They were far too expensive and we regarded them as unattainable luxuries. Then my

Uncle bought one. I think he probably had to re-mortgage his house to afford it. It had a separate amplifier with far too many knobs, and red lights that glowed malevolently. My uncle sat in a strategically placed chair that nobody else was allowed to sit in so that he could get the full benefit of the stereo effect. He had a record of two people playing tennis and he would sit for hours listening to the ball bounce between the speakers. He also had an album of steam trains with pretentious sleeve notes assuring you that if you listened carefully you could hear the wind on the left side of the carriage as the train passed through a culvert. He would sit with a great big grin all over his face as the *Flying Scotsman* chuffed through his living room. He bought frighteningly technical magazines full of impenetrable articles about sound spectrums that warned of dire consequences if you mis-matched your impedances. The articles had graphs and tables. And sine waves. His conversations consisted entirely of woofers, tweeters and flutter.

I bought a reel-to-reel tape recorder. I borrowed records from my friends and made tapes that I could listen to. Initially I recorded the tapes by simply putting a microphone in front of the speaker of my record player. My early tapes had music overlaid with the doorbell ringing and the dog barking at it. Sometimes you could hear my mother vacuuming the lounge.

"You need a cable to connect the tape recorder to the record player," advised my Uncle. "That'll block out all the extraneous sounds that the microphone picks up. Make sure the impedances match."

I found this advice puzzling. Partly because I'd never heard anyone say "extraneous" before, and partly because the record player had nowhere to plug a cable in. I informed my Uncle of this and he turned up with a soldering iron, a socket and a magazine with a circuit diagram in it. He cut a hole in my record player and dripped solder into it. He

plugged one end of the cable into the record player and the other end into the tape recorder. Then he departed in triumph.

I made more recordings. They all had a deeply irritating mains hum behind the music. I asked my physics teacher about it.

"Sounds like the impedances don't match," he said. "The symptoms are typical."

At university I met someone who had build his own stereo from the ground up on the theory that was the only way he'd ever be able to afford one. When he finished, he had a button left over that he couldn't think what to do with, so he wired it up so that it swapped the channels when you pushed it once and put them back to normal when you pushed it again. He claimed that this added a fine level of unpredictability to the stereo effect, particularly if he got someone else to press the button when he wasn't expecting it.

I saw him once, with stereo headphones clamped to his head, listening to something terribly avant garde. I pushed the button to swap the channels and his eyes crossed. I pushed it again and they went back to normal.

One day I went out to buy a tape for my reel to reel recorder. Somewhat to my surprise, the shop where I usually bought them didn't have any.

"I can order them specially for you," said the man. "But we don't get much demand for reel to reel any more so we don't carry any stock. Everybody uses cassettes these days."

"What's a cassette?"

He showed me one and I was overwhelmed by the cleverness of it. Such a tiny thing, a self-contained unit of tape that you just clicked into a suitable gadget. It was obviously far superior to my old fashioned reel to reel tapes, which now looked clunky and badly designed to my suddenly more modern, more sophisticated eyes. The

recorder was soon confined to a cupboard along with all its tapes. I never saw it (or the tapes) again.

I bought a small cassette deck which appeared to be happy with the impedances of my very cheap stereo (they'd come down in price a lot by then) and I listened to my new hi-tech miracle. Every so often the motor in the deck would grab hold of the exposed tape in the cassette and suck it deep inside itself, wrapping the tape tightly around its capstans and slowly grinding to a halt. Sometimes it would emit a puff of smoke. When this happened I had to dismantle the deck, remove the tape, throw it away, remantle the deck and then go out and buy a new tape to replace the one the deck had eaten.

The cassette deck seemed to have a special hatred of Freddy Mercury. It ate three copies of Queen's *A Night At The Opera* before I gave up and bought the LP instead. That proved to be a good thing in the end, for the LP was not the usual boring black groovy thing, it was brilliant white. What a clever idea! It remains the only non-black record in my collection.

Cassette tapes were very irritating things to record on to. They were invariably too long or too short for the LP you were recording, which meant that either you couldn't fit the LP on to the tape or else you had far too much tape left over and you had to listen to lots of empty silence at the end of each side. Furthermore they deteriorated over time and began to sound quite muddy. They left flakes of themselves over the playback heads and no matter how much isopropyl alcohol you scrubbed on the heads, the brown shit-stains never came off. This too contributed heavily to the muddy sound.

One of my cassettes grew a fine multi-coloured mould inside itself, which seemed a suitable accompaniment to the psychedelia recorded on it (*At The Mars Hotel* by the Grateful Dead). Perhaps I should have smoked the mould. Cassettes were very convenient, but flawed and I began to



regret the loss of my old reel to reel. LPs continued to be the medium of choice for the connoisseur...

By now I too was reading magazines with articles that had sine wave diagrams in them. There was much talk about balancing the turntable arm correctly, particularly after replacing the stylus. The counterweight had to be adjusted so that the stylus barely kissed the surface of the record. Too much weight on the stylus would damage the surface and degrade the sound. You could buy special scales and microgram weights to get it just right. Real enthusiasts had stroboscopes to check the wobble on their turntables and microscopes to check the wear on the stylus. I'd had many of my LPs for decades and when I played them on my increasingly more sophisticated equipment, they gave the impression that they'd spent their lives being played with six inch nails on a series of cheap groove-straighteners. People sneered at the sound quality. I considered downgrading my speakers, but I couldn't bear the social shame of it.

One day I went out to buy a record. Much to my surprise, the display space for records in the shop was a mere fraction of its former size. The bulk of the shop was taken up with small, round silver things about half the size of a 45rpm single. They were compact disks. In the fine old tradition of EPs and LPs, they quickly became known as CDs, though most shops advertised them as CD's, a practice which has cost them dear over the years since I never, ever under any circumstances buy CD's. I only buy CDs.

It was the kiss of death for the record. It had a good run for its money but it couldn't survive the sheer convenience of the CD which required much less storage space than a record, and didn't need cosseting and cleaning like a record. Furthermore a CD player didn't need a new laser every year like a turntable needed a new stylus. Hi-fidelity weenies who listened far more to the sound than they listened to the music complained that the sound quality of a CD was

inferior to that of the LP, but nobody paid any attention to them and they took their stroboscopes, microscopes and scales home in a huff. They continued to write erudite articles about impedances and draw pictures of sine waves, but nobody read the articles anymore. Except for small, speciality labels, nobody made records any more either..

As time passed, it became harder and harder to find a replacement stylus for my turntable. They vanished, just like the needles that had preceded them. Speciality shops charged grotesque sums of money for the styli their idiosyncratic owners secreted in hidden drawers. Soon even that hidden supply dried up. Like everybody else, I gave up and bought a CD player.

Nowadays I play my records only at rare intervals, only on special occasions. When my one remaining stylus deteriorates beyond bearing, it will be the end of an era. I look forward to that day with dread.

The arrival of home computers in my life gave me an interesting challenge. Wouldn't it be a good idea to catalogue my library and my record collection? Rising to the challenge, I have done just that. I find that I have 218 LPs and 128 CDs. Only half a dozen cassettes have survived and most of them are unplayable for one reason or another. Cassettes have not aged well. These are not large numbers, compared to some other collections that I know. But they are respectable numbers nonetheless.

At least half my CDs are duplicates of my LPs. Since I so rarely play the LPs, and since so much of my favourite music is to be found in my LP collection, I have spent far too much money buying the records over again in their new format. When CDs are replaced by whatever technological innovation comes next, I will probably have to do it yet again. I find that I bitterly resent this.

Furthermore many of my LPs have never been re-issued on CD and probably never will be, given the plethora of new material. So they cannot be replaced and when I no longer

have the equipment to play them, they will vanish from my world.

I also find it annoying that CDs, whose production costs are fractions of a cent, are sold in the shops for many tens of dollars. The mark up is gratuitously huge; and only a tiny percentage of it is made up of royalty costs. I don't begrudge the royalties to the artists, but I do begrudge the obscene profit taking by the production companies.

I've seen several generations of music players come and go. And every time one of them is superseded, some of the music dies. I've lost *The Swiss Canton Polka* and Frankie Lymon and whatever was on my reel to reel tapes. Soon I'm going to lose Country Joe and the Fish and John Renbourn.

Of course, the arrival of home computers has made it trivially easy to convert old media into new media. It would be very simple indeed to turn my surviving records into mp3 files and CDs.

But that's illegal. So I can't.

# The Haul Of The Mountain King

Porgy the Cat has a cold, wet nose. Every morning at 6.00am he thrusts it in my ear and snorts loudly. I ignore the slimy trail of cat snot trickling moistly over my earlobe and pretend that I am still asleep. Porgy burrows down in the bedclothes and pushes his nose up my left nostril. Companionably we share bodily fluids for a short while and Porgy purrs like a train, perhaps with happiness, perhaps with hunger. It's hard to tell.

"Where's my breakfast then, you lazy sod?"

Ah. Hunger it is then.

Bess sits at the foot of the bed, far too ladylike to bully me. But when she sees that Porgy has succeeded in arousing me she politely asks:

"Breakfast for me too? Now!"

Hearing lots of activity in the bedroom, Harpo swaggers in on all four feet, his tail to attention. He catches sight of my shoes and is distracted by the laces. He chases them for a while, then he kills them. He thrusts his head deep inside my right shoe and inhales luxuriously. His head emerges with a great silly grin from ear to ear.

"Aaaaahhhh!" he sighs luxuriously. "That really sets me up for the day. All I need now, to make a perfect day absolutely pluperfect, is breakfast. How about it?"

Bess growls deep in her throat. She regards Harpo as a threat and doesn't even like him to be in the same room as her.

"Go away!" she says forcefully. But she's only a girl, and Harpo pays no attention.

I crawl out of bed and the cats dash ahead of me. Harpo waits in ambush just outside the bedroom door and as I stagger sleepily past he swipes at my leg. There may or may not be claws. It depends how long I've kept him waiting. I scratch his scabs to encourage him. Harpo is mostly scabs; his hobby is fighting.

There is chaos in the kitchen. Cats intertwine between my legs. Cats sit beside their bowls telling me to hurry up. I pick up the feeding bowls and get the biscuits. Normal biscuits for Harpo and Bess, special diet biscuits for Porgy because he sleeps all day and all night (except for mealtimes) and is mildly spherical as a result.

Heads down, tails up. Silence descends except for the sound of chomping. Porgy watches the other two carefully. Perhaps they'll leave some biscuits and he will get a forbidden treat. I set off towards the shower, and Harpo raises his head.

"Hey," he says, "You've studied chemistry haven't you?"

"Yes," I admit warily.

"How many atoms are there in a guacamole?" asks Harpo  
I think about it.

"I don't know. How many atoms *are* there in a guacamole?"

"Avocado's number," says Harpo smugly, and goes back to his breakfast.

After my shower, I have breakfast. There are no cats to be seen, for which I am grateful. I have my own breakfast. Toast and marmalade. I like marmalade. Alan's psychedelic breakfast. Then I go and wait for a bus.

I stand shivering at the bus stop. A wind from the antarctic blows up my trouser legs and freezes my naughty bits. I wonder if the lady standing next to me will massage them so as to prevent frostbite. Unfortunately I suspect she will not. Wind ripples are running hither and yon across the long grass on the verge as the wave front curls and shifts. The timetable insists that the bus should have been here

ten minutes ago, but buses are always late in cold weather. The wind makes their tyres sluggish.

The lady standing next to me has icicles dangling from her nostrils.

"How do you keep your hat on in such a strong wind?" she asks me.

"Clean living," I tell her. "And extremely strong follicles."

A bus appears. It stumbles slowly to the bus stop and I get on.

"I don't think the bus before this one ever came," I complain to the driver. "I've been waiting for ages."

"This *is* the bus before this one," the driver tells me gloomily. "I'm running a bit late. Too much frost on the fetlocks."

I spend a cold day teaching. When I get home in the evening, Robin shows me the solar lights that are growing in our garden. They soak up sunshine during the day, charging their batteries. During the night they glow, lighting up the whole garden. Planes *en route* to the wide, wide world take diversions and fly low over our garden so that the passengers can enjoy the view. Robin waters the solar lights assiduously and feeds them solar light food. She's obviously doing something right, for they are thriving - nothing else in our garden grows quite so well. The gnomes are thrilled.

Yes - we have gnomes living in our garden. I'm not quite sure when they moved in (Robin is in charge of the garden; I seldom go there). They seem quite happy; presumably we have provided them with all the comforts of home. They can fish, chase frogs, and bathe each evening in the glow of the solar lights. They are getting quite tanned. We call them the garden gnomes of Zurich.

Robin has a new toy for the garden. It's a big noisy device. You put trees in the top of it and wood chips fall out of the bottom. Very useful. Fortunately Robin has access to a lot of trees, so now we are awash with wood chips. A gnome drowned in them last night.

To pass the time, I have been honing my haiku. A haiku is a Japanese verse form. It has three lines and seventeen syllables. The first and last line have five syllables each and the second line has seven syllables. In those seventeen syllables you are supposed to say something pithy, and perhaps even profound. Instead of forcing you to read the last few thousand words, perhaps I should simply have written these one hundred and nineteen syllables:

Porgy and Bess sleep  
I open up the cat food  
Two cats inhaling

Harpo has a fight  
Crusty scabs adorn his head  
Happiness is gore

Wind in the morning  
A frozen moment in time  
Buses die of cold

Alan reads a book  
The words swim round on  
the page  
A book reads Alan

Chlorophylliac  
Robin mulches a big tree  
Chlorophobic chips

Photosensitive  
Solar cells unfold petals  
Tanned gnomes are  
drowning

Here is a haiku  
Compressed essence of static  
Prose under pressure

# Old Hundredth

"Now then Alan," said James. "About this laptop computer of yours."

"Yes," I said suspiciously, "what about it?"

"As I recall, it started off with two serious problems," James continued. "You couldn't get the sound card to work, which meant that you couldn't listen to music on it, and the disk access was so slow that you couldn't watch DVDs on it either."

"True," I said, because it was.

"Well," said James, "it was so easy to get the sound working, that I really think it's time we addressed the last issue. You can't leave it only half fixed. It's very important that we get it to a state where you can watch DVDs."

James is a man who lip-syncs Muppets. Such men are deserving of respect. So I didn't laugh at him.

"It wasn't all that easy to get the sound working," I protested. "As I recall, you made me download heaps of arcane software from dusty, seldom-visited web sites. I had to blow the cobwebs off before I installed it and the wires going in to my modem were clogged with dirt for months. It cut my internet connection speed almost in half!

"And the instructions for using the software were written by Zen-Buddhist monks who were high, or possibly low, on mind-altering substances of indescribable complexity. They all stared intently into each others belly buttons and copied down what they saw scribbled on the fluff. All the sense was hidden in the spaces between the words. It took weeks for me to understand what it wasn't saying, and then implement it.

"And even when I *did* finally get the sound card to work, the only noise it made for a month was the sound of one



hand clapping. That's a very boring sound, you know!"

"That's right." James nodded happily. "Easy."

Men who lip-sync Muppets also have access to esoteric dictionaries which contain strange definitions of words like *easy*.

I accepted the inevitability of my situation. "What do I have to do?" I asked.

"I'm glad you asked me that," said James. "Here is a Fedora Core 5 live CD. Use it well and wisely, grasshopper."

A live CD, for those of you who may not know about these things, allows you to run another operating system on your computer without making any changes to the original operating system on your hard disk. Everything runs directly from the CD. You can try things out and experiment wildly in the sure and certain knowledge that if everything dies a horrible death because of your extreme tweaks and twiddles, all you have to do is turn off the power and then boot up as normal from the hard disk and all your catastrophes go away as if they had never been.

I took the Fedora Core 5 live CD away with me to experiment with.

The next day James asked me: "Well? How did it go?"

"I have bad news," I said and his face fell.

"Oh dear," he said, "that's a shame."

"It worked perfectly," I said. "The disk responded as never before. It ran at super fast speeds. Cerenkov radiation flew from the slots in the side panel as data was read and written faster than the speed of light!

"I could play DVDs at twice the speed that they ran on the commercial DVD player plugged in to my television set.

"The sound card worked brilliantly. It played me the music that was played at the birth of the universe. Do you know what music everybody listened to on the day when the Big Bang first exploded?"

"No," said James.

"*Bohemian Rhapsody*, by Queen," I said, and James frowned, as well he might.

"All the hardware on my laptop responded to Fedora Core 5 as if it had been granted a new lease of life," I told him, gloomily. "It was absolutely perfect."

"Why is this bad news?" asked James, puzzled.

"There is no upgrade path from my current operating system to Fedora Core 5," I said. "I am going to have to install it from scratch and re-tweak and re-twiddle all the many thousands of customisations that I set up in order to give myself warm fuzzies whenever I log on. It's going to take weeks."

"Cheer up," said James. "It could be worse. You could have had to lip sync a Muppet instead!"

I bit the bullet that had been shot to me.

"What do you want me to do?" asked the install software.

"Blow everything away and install yourself," I told it. Obliging, it did exactly that. While it was thus occupied, I painted a wall and watched carefully as the paint dried. There was a particularly interesting smear in the top left hand corner which appeared almost to spiral in on itself. It developed a fascinating crust that spread from the edges in towards the middle where it formed an irregular, crystalline skin...

"I've finished," said the install software. "Do you want to have a look at what I've done?"

I looked and it was good. The display on the screen was crisp and clear. The network connection was fast, and the sound card played sweet music. I tweaked a bit here and smoothed out a rough edge there. I clicked on a convenient icon which allowed me to set the background picture to a map of Middle-Earth and I clicked on another icon that encouraged me to put a rude message designed to frighten away trespassers on to the login screen. I played with a few more little customisations and then went on to the next major step in the process...

All the documentation that I'd read insisted that after I'd installed the system from the original distribution disks I should immediately attach myself to the internet in order to update the software. A lot of the packages had changed in the months since they were first issued. Many bugs had been fixed and exciting new ones had been introduced. Security updates that would stop people from hacking in to my system needed to be installed. It all sounded terribly thrilling and important and necessary.

I decided to go in to the office in order to make use of their high speed internet connection. I plugged everything in, switched everything on and incanted the correct magic spell. Things started to happen.

"I will now download and update 387 software packages," said the laptop, smugly. "This will take me about twelve hours, give or take a few minutes, so I suggest you go to the pub."

Twelve hours and several pints of Guinness later, things stopped happening and I made two interesting discoveries.

The first discovery was that all the documentation I'd read had lied to me - it had insisted that the default was to save all the newly downloaded files on the local drive in case I ever needed them again. In fact, the opposite turned out to be the case and after all the software had been updated, all the downloaded files were then carefully deleted. If I ever *do* need any of them in the future, I will have to download them again. Humph!

The second, and more important discovery, came when I was smitten with a sudden desire to change the picture in the background. I'd been using the map of Middle-Earth as a background for several years on several different computers and suddenly I was bored with it. I clicked on the same convenient icon that I'd used when I originally set the background picture. A message box appeared on the screen.

"The program that sets the background picture has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the

developers or cancel the operation?"

Hmmm. Odd. I think I'll inform the developers.

"The program that informs the developers that the program that sets the background picture has crashed, has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

I'm sure the developers would like to know about that one!

"The program that informs the developers that the program that informs the developers has crashed, has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

This could be the start of an infinite series. I think I'd better stop. Perhaps I'll change the pointer that the mouse uses, instead.

"The program that changes the pointer that the mouse uses has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

Over the next hour or so I discovered that none of the housekeeping functions in the pointy-clicky environment worked any more. I couldn't change the picture on the desktop; I couldn't change the theme or the keyboard characteristics. I couldn't change anything at all, really. Those operations had all worked perfectly before I'd foolishly updated the system with all the latest and greatest versions. Now they all crashed as soon as I started them up. Bugger!

For the next week, most of the housekeeping GUI functionality remained flat, busted, broke while I considered what to do about it. It was very annoying. I could do all the *proper* computing that I needed to do inside the pointy-clicky area, so that was all right. I just couldn't change the way things looked and felt any more, and that was becoming very frustrating.

Eventually I reached a point where I simply couldn't stand it any more. I decided that I no longer had any choice.

Since everything had worked perfectly on the initial install, I would just have to downgrade my system again and reinstall all the original pointy-clicky stuff from the distribution DVD.

"You want me to do *what?*" asked the software installation program in horror. "You've got to be joking! You want me to ignore all my instincts and downgrade all my shiny, new, up to date software?"

"No way! Sod off!"

But I insisted and eventually it gave in and did what I told it to do, complaining all the while that I was causing it much unnecessary pain and suffering.

And now the pointy-clicky admin stuff is all working again. Phew!

I suppose the moral is, if it isn't broken, don't fix it. I really should have known that all along. I can't think why I didn't...

# Alan And The Tooth Fairy

Every few months I visit a charming young lady and pay her very large amounts of money. In return for this emolument, she rubs her breasts all over my head. Strangely this gives me no pleasure.

You see, the charming young lady is simply using my head as a convenient support over which she angles her body into the position that gives her the optimum leverage for attacking my wide open mouth with instruments of torture. She is my dental hygienist, and we have an uneasy relationship.

I visited her again this month.

"Hello," she said, "how are you?"

"Fine thanks," I said. "How are you?"

She looked a little puzzled at this response. I think she was expecting me to say, "I' ine, acks. 'ow ah oo?"

Members of the dental profession are only completely comfortable when talking to supine people whose conversation consists simply of vowels and glottal stops; the only sounds that can be made when your mouth is wide open and full of sterile metal. Complete words that are filled with consonants are not something that dentists hear very often. Consequently they seldom know how to react when such words are spoken to them.

"Lie back on the couch," she said.

I did so, and she slipped some safety glasses over my eyes in case a randomly flung tooth should chance to crash into an eye socket and blind me for life - a scenario I find extremely unlikely since I always screw my eyes tight shut in order to avoid examining the various scrapers, wrenches, gougers, drills, saws, chisels and hammers too closely.

"Open wide!"

I opened wide. She thrust her left breast into my right ear and began to scrape and saw and drill and hammer at my teeth with exuberant enthusiasm. I really like seeing people who enjoy their work so much. Within limits, of course.

"Hmm," she said as she lined up a chisel and hit it a couple of times with a large yellow hammer, "that's a particularly resistant lump of plaque." She changed the angle of the chisel slightly and hit it again, but the plaque remained stubbornly in place. "I think it needs extreme measures," she decided.

She attacked my tooth with a pneumatic drill, not dissimilar to those with which council workmen dig up roads. She drilled a deep hole, stuffed it full of dynamite, attached a detonator and led wires back from the detonator to a switch. She went behind a screen and flipped the switch.

**BANG!**

Plaque crashed down in a huge avalanche from around my teeth. She came back from behind the screen and said, "Rinse out, please."

I rinsed out my mouth and spat into the bowl. A big, nasty lump the size and shape of a small alp went *clang!* into the bowl and cracked the porcelain from side to side. I lay back down and opened my mouth. She repositioned her breasts and resumed scraping.

Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.

Faint abdominal rumblings came from some hidden place deep within the hygienist. The noise made her vibrate pleasantly. She ignored the sounds and carried on scraping and, being a gentleman, I too did my best to pay no attention to the incipient volcano standing beside me.

**GURGLE, GURGLE!!!**

Some things simply cannot be ignored.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That's my tummy rumbling. It always does that at this time of day."

I couldn't help myself, and I started to laugh. That set her off, and we giggled companionably together for a time.

"I think my tummy needs some food," she admitted. She stared vacantly into space, obviously dreaming about roast turkey and stuffing; caviar and chips. I took the opportunity to rinse and spit. She'd been very heavy handed with her power tools and there was quite a lot of blood. I stared at it with gloomy suspicion.

"I could cook you a black pudding," I suggested.



# Alan And Robin Break Christmas

Christmas day. I snuggled up to Robin and whispered, "Merry Christmas."

Her eyes were open but everything else was closed. I could tell she was still fast asleep when she replied to my greeting by saying, "It'll be floating water that we're swimming in competitively; so that we get better times."

"Yes, dear,' I said.

Her eyes fluttered closed and everything else started to open up for the day. When she was finally awake she said, "I dreamed that you just won lotto. The winning numbers were 1 2 3 4 5 6 and another number I can't remember. Perhaps it would not be a good idea to buy a lotto ticket based on that predictive dream."

"I agree," I agreed.

I got up and fed the cats their Christmas breakfast of turkey giblets, which they adored. Then I had a shit, a shave, a shower and a shampoo. Except I missed out the shave. Steaming, I wandered back to the bedroom.

"Christmas presents," I said. "Smoked salmon. Strawberries."

Robin got up and followed the ablutionary trail I had blazed, except that she missed out the shave as well. And then, at almost the exact second that she rinsed away the last foaming bubble, the water went off. Every tap was dry.

Oh, No!

I rang the council.

"Welcome to Wellington Council. Merry Christmas. You are speaking with Colin."

"Merry Christmas, Colin," I said. "I'm calling from Newlands. Our water supply appears to have been turned off."

"Ah yes," said Colin. "We've had a burst water main in Glanmire Road."

"Glanmire Road?" I said. "That's where I live!" I suddenly felt very guilty. Perhaps it was all my fault. Had I shattered the pipes with the detritus from my sweaty armpits?

I looked out of the window. Dimly, through the grey mist and drizzle of the typical Christmas weather, I could see a large man wearing fluorescent yellow trousers. He was poking gloomily at the road with a big stick. Soon he was joined by an even larger man wearing an orange jacket. They scratched their heads at the problem, normally an infallible solution, but this time it didn't work. I explained what was happening to Colin.

"That'll be the one," said Colin. "It's a big burst. The water will be off until at least one o'clock this afternoon and maybe later."

There are only two things a man and a woman can do together when they have no water on Christmas Day. So we did both of them.

And once we'd finished drinking the bottle of champagne and opening our Christmas presents, we watched the television with our legs crossed, in the sure and certain knowledge that we only had one flush left...

I decided to start writing this article.

Frederik Pohl once said that professional writers write every day. High days and holidays, birthdays and Christmas days. And days when you are so hungover that your eyebrows bleed. Today matched many of those criteria. I felt encouraged.

I also had the shining example of Dave Cutler to inspire me. Dave, for those of you who may not know, was the designer of Microsoft's NT operating system. In an article I read once, he claimed to be very, very proud of the fact that

there was some code that he'd written in the NT kernel which was dated Christmas Day. I'm quite sure that yuletide programming effort had a lot to do with the way that the NT operating system worked. I wonder if he drank a bottle of champagne before he wrote that particular block of code?

Obviously there is something very special about stuff you write on Christmas day. This sentence, for example, was written on Christmas day. And so was this one. But his one was written the day after. I think the difference is quite marked, don't you?

# Alan And Robin Go Bush

When one is in Karori, one must visit the Karori Nature Reserve. So we did.

It's a small area bounded by a pest proof fence. The fence goes deep underground so that the vermin can't dig underneath it; it has a fine mesh so that they can't get through it; and it has a complex slope at the top so that anything that climbs up it won't be able to climb over without falling off.

Building the fence must have been a job and a half in itself. It runs firmly up some very steep hills, and it pays little or no attention at all to the local geography. There is not so much as a zig in it, and scarcely even a zag. The fence is so straight, it could have been built by the Romans. I shudder to think what it must have cost, and how difficult it must have been to build, given the extraordinarily steep terrain that it marches through.

Once the fence had been put in place, the area inside it was cleared of pests &ndash; no rats, no stoats, no ferrets, no mice, no possums. Native flora and fauna were then introduced into the reserve and left to flourish. For a modest fee, people can wander round inside the fence and if they are lucky they get to see and hear lots of amazing nature.

Just outside the entrance gate is a small fenced area containing a table. On the table is a plastic rat which is sitting up on its hind legs snarling at the visitors.

"Ahhh," said Robin, stroking it lovingly, "it's so cute."

The Karori Nature Reserve lady glared at her.

"This," said the lady, "is the kind of pest that has decimated New Zealand's wild life over the years and we simply don't want it, or anything like it, in the reserve. So before you go through the gate, can you all please examine

your bags very closely to make sure that there are no rats or mice or pussy cats hiding in them."

We examined our bags.

"Do people really come here with rats and mice and things in their backpacks?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "It's quite common &ndash; usually they are people who've been on a camping holiday or something, and things sneak in to their bags without them knowing anything about it! We've had quite a few shrieks and screams from visitors when the unexpected nasties run out of their bags."

"And is the fence successful at keeping the reserve free from predators?"

"Pretty much," she said. "There's certainly nothing large and vicious in there. No rats or cats or possums; the fence does a wonderful job of keeping them out. We do have some mice though, and we suspect they've been carried there by birds flying over the fence with their prey in their talons. When the birds settle down for a good feed, some of the not-quite-dead-yet mice manage to escape. We've got traps set and hopefully that will stop them from getting to be too much of a nuisance."

"Are there any birds strong enough to fly over the fence with a rat or a possum in their talons?"

"I hope not," she said grimly, "but I'm suspicious of the morepork."

"The morepork?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It's New Zealand's native owl. Do you know why it's called a morepork?"

"Because that's what its song sounds like," I said. I was quite certain of this, having heard the story many times. "*morepork. morepork.* I've heard them singing."

"Well, that's part of it. But there's a bit more to it than that. Pork really *is* their favourite food and they'll go to any lengths to get hold of a pig. All the neighbouring farms have to keep their pigs in morepork-proof sties. But sometimes

the pigs get out, and several times I've seen a giant morepork flying over the pest proof fence with a squealing, wriggling pig clutched in its talons. Fortunately moreporks always seem to eat the entire pig, including the squeal. We've never even found any bones! But one day one of those unfortunate pigs is going to escape, and then we'll have a real problem on our hands as the reserve fills up with feral pigs."

Solemnly, she handed me a bowl of salt. I took a large pinch and returned the bowl to her.

Once our bags had proved to have no cats or dogs or dragons or pigs in them, we were allowed into the reserve proper. It's just bush, with paths through it. The creatures are not captive, they are not in cages, so it's pure luck whether you see anything on your visit. The guidebook admonishes you to keep quiet and listen closely. Often the first intimation that something is sneaking up on you is a rustling in the bush, or a chirrup from up a tree. And if you pause and look carefully, you might just spot something looking back at you.

Of course sometimes it's easy.

"Chirrup, chirrup, tweet tweet tweet," sang something.

We looked around eagerly, and a tui came crashing through the canopy, singing at the top of its voice. It made a bee-line for a nice looking tree and came in fast for a three point landing. It grabbed hold of the branch, and engaged full reverse thrust on all its engines to soak up the momentum. But I think its instruments must have been faulty because it fell off the branch and tumbled head over heels all the way down to the ground.

And as it fell, it said: "SQUAWK!", and we all knew exactly what it was saying. Some words are part of a universal language.

It landed with a thump and struggled to its feet. It seemed a bit dazed. It shook itself, looked a little embarrassed and preened all its feathers very thoroughly.

Then it said: "I meant to do that, you know. It was all done on purpose."

It flew back up into the tree and settled down on a better branch.

It is quite obvious to me that tuis are descended from cats, and they still retain much of their feline nature. I do so enjoy seeing evidence of evolution in action.

We saw a tuatara as well, though being a lizard and not a bird, it didn't sing any songs. Indeed it didn't do anything except sit in a hole and look at us.

"People," it said to itself. "I don't like people. Noisy things. Far too active. I think I'll move away from them."

"Look, look," we said to each other excitedly. "It's a tuatara. Look!"

"Any week now," said the tuatara, "once I get a round tui. I mean tuit."

"Quick, quick, where's the camera? Gimme the camera!"

"Definitely going to move," said the tuatara. "They've got a camera for goodness sake. Every picture steals a bit of your soul. I can't be having that. I've got to move."

"Is it real? It isn't even blinking. I'm sure it's a plastic model."

"Yep!" said the tuatara, "I'm definitely going to move somewhere else. Plastic model, indeed! I've never been so insulted. Moving. Moving..."

The connection between the tuatara's brain and its muscles is notoriously slow, and by the time we left it in order to go in search of further excitement, it hadn't even blinked yet, let alone moved its body. However when we came back about two hours later there was no sign of it. So obviously the messages had finally got through to the muscles in the legs. Either that or a Karori Ranger had come by when we weren't looking, and had picked up the plastic model and put it elsewhere in the reserve to fool another batch of tourists.

One of New Zealand's more amazing creatures is the weta &ndash; a fearsome insect that is named after the famous digital effects studio that did all the computer graphics for the *Lord Of The Rings* movies. The weta is best described as a cross between a cockroach and tyrannosaurus rex. They are quite harmless (though the larger ones *can* give you a painful bite). However they have all the aggressive instincts of their T. Rex ancestor. They are one of the very few insects that will actually chase a human being, though they seldom know what to do with one when they catch it. Most New Zealanders, suitably bribed with beer, can tell you horror stories about being trapped in a corner of the garage by an angry weta out for blood.

The Karori Reserve has built quite a lot of hotels for its wetas where they can live a life of unbridled luxury and decadence. A weta hotel is simply a dead tree with lots of holes going deep inside it. Such holes are very attractive to wetas. A section of the tree has been cut in half lengthways, thus exposing the interior of the holes. Transparent plastic has been set into the holes so that the viewing public can see inside them. Then the tree is put back together again, complete with a set of hinges so that one side can be swung open by any passing visitor. In the fullness of time, wetas will move in to the hotel in search, perhaps, of unbridled luxury. Wetans enjoy being waited on hand, foot and antenna. Visitors to the Reserve can open up the hotel and stare through the plastic at the wetas as they consummate their passions.

I swung open the door of a weta hotel. A dozen or so wetas, who were sitting around a table in the bar drinking vintage champagne, waved their antennae furiously at me.

"Shut the bloody door! The sunshine is blinding!"

"Sorry," I said.

"Hey Jimmy, can your mother sew?" asked one particularly vicious specimen.

"Yes," I said, puzzled.



"Then tell her to stitch this, Jimmy!" And he head butted me through the plastic.

I staggered back, shut the hotel door and left them to their carousing. It was time for me to go home and do some carousing of my own. Someone had moved the plastic rat at the entrance and now it was staring longingly into the reserve that it was forbidden to enter.

"Poor little thing," said Robin, and she gave it a final stroke as we left.

# Alan And Robin Get In Hot Water

Bang!

I was half asleep, so I just turned over in bed and punched the pillow even though it hadn't done anything to me. I can be cruel like that sometimes. The pillow took it uncomplainingly, wimp that it is. Robin came in to the bedroom carrying a bowl of cereal.

"Did you hear a bang?" she chomped.

"Maybe," I said.

"I thought it came from the kitchen," she said, taking another mouthful of cereal. "I checked to see if it was my coffee exploding in the microwave and I opened the cupboards to see if any shelves had fallen down. But it wasn't any of those things."

There being no obvious signs of terrorist activity in any room in the house, we decided the bang had probably come from next door. Robin went to work and, in the fullness of time, I went for a shower.

About half way through my shower the fog of sleep began to lift from my brain and I recalled that about twenty years ago the immersion heater in my hot water tank exploded. It had said "Bang!" in much the same tone of voice as the bang that banged this morning. I wonder...

Showered, unshaven, dried and dressed, I looked in the cupboard where the hot water water tank lives.

Drip, drip, drip...

The floor was very wet, and getting wetter. Oh dear, where's the Yellow Pages?

I found a plumbing company with an intriguing advert. "We know how frustrating it can be when tradespeople don't

turn up at the promised time. So if we don't arrive when we say we will, we'll do the job for free." That sounded promising. I rang the number and spoke to Dan.

"OK," he said. "I'll come and have a look at it."

I noticed he hadn't mentioned a time. "When exactly should I expect you?" I asked cunningly.

"Oh, in about 30 or 40 minutes or so," he said, seeing right through my ploy.

Exactly 35 minutes later there was a knock on the door.

"Hi, I'm Dan," said Dan, "and this is Felix."

Dan was young, small and super-model slim. He looked very much like Steve Marriott, the singer with Small Faces and Humble Pie. Felix was slightly bulkier and very, very black.

"Where are you from, Felix?" I asked him.

"I'm from Zimbabwe," he said, "and I am just 16 days old in New Zealand."

"Well, welcome to the country," I said and shook his hand.

He grinned broadly. "It's so cold here," he said. "But the people are nice and warm and that makes up for it."

Cold? Both Dan and I were sensibly dressed for the weather. We wore t-shirts, shorts and sandals and I suspect we both found the day a little sultry even for that minimal set of clothes. Felix wore a bulky woollen sweater over a heavy shirt, denim jeans, boots and thick socks. In moments of silence I could hear his teeth chattering.

I showed Dan the hot water tank. "Gosh, it's well lagged," he said. "Best lagging I've seen in years!" He pulled out pins and tore off sticky tape and removed untold layers. Then his face lit up like beacon. "Wow! Look at that! It's the second oldest tank I've ever seen. 1967. They built them to last in those days. Look; it's exactly forty years old!"

"Happy birthday," I said. "What's the oldest one you've seen?"

"1958," said Dan. He looked carefully around the tank. "The good news is that we can get the tank out without having to demolish the cupboard. You wouldn't believe how many times we have to tear cupboards apart. Far too many people put the tank in first and then build the cupboard snugly around it. Not a good idea.

"The bad news is, we've got to take the tank out of the cupboard. You need a new one. The old one's stuffed."

"What a way to spend your fortieth birthday," I said. "Getting ripped out and sent to the tip. Poor little thing. Oh well, let's do it." I wiped away a surreptitious tear.

Dan turned off the valve that controlled the water supply from the header tank. "How do I get down below here?" he asked. "I need to find the drainage tap so I can empty it."

"There's a very small crawl space," I said dubiously. "But it's really, really cramped."

"Oh that's OK," said Dan. "We only employ very small people. As long as it's larger than the glove compartment on a car, I can get in to it."

I took him downstairs and showed him the tiny cupboard with the removable back that gives access to the crawlspace. With a twist and a wriggle he was gone.

"If you find any hidden treasure, it's mine!" I said.

"Fair enough! Oh wow – look at this. Your pipes are all copper. That's great. You just don't see that these days." He wriggled about a bit. "There's no drain tap here. The pipe leads outside. There must be a tap out there somewhere. Felix – can you go and look outside?"

Felix and I went out exploring. I took Felix to the side of the house which I thought the crawl space led to. Sure enough there was a tap sticking out of the wall.

"Here it is," said Felix.

"Great," said Dan's disembodied voice from behind the wall. "I'll come out."

He and Felix unscrewed the stopper from the front of the tap and turned the tap on. Hot water began to gush out and

boil the weeds.

"I always wondered what that tap was for," I said.

"Right," said Dan. "We're off to Plumbing World to buy a new tank. See you in an hour or so."

An hour or so later the tank was fully drained. Dan and Felix arrived back, exactly on time.

"Here we are," said Dan, "bearing gifts."

"Gifts?" I asked. "Does that mean it's free then?"

"I spoke metaphorically," said Dan.

"Oh."

They took the fuse for the water heater out of the fuse box and then began disconnecting everything. It wasn't long before the tank came loose and they carried it downstairs, through the sliding door and out into the garden. They left it lying on the lawn. I went and had a look. The bottom of the tank was very corroded and flaky. I could peel strips off. It obviously wouldn't have been very much longer before the whole bottom gave way, dumping the entire contents of the tank onto the floor in one fell, foul swoop. I began to feel very lucky that I'd got away with only a slow drip from (probably) a small fracture in a welded seam, or maybe a tiny hole in the corroded bottom.

"How long do you think it's been leaking?" I asked Dan.

"Maybe a couple of weeks or so," he said. "Certainly not very long. I could see that water had soaked through when I was down in the crawl space, but there wasn't any real damage to see.

"You were lucky you caught it early. Some people don't notice until the rotten floorboards give way and the whole thing crashes down into the room below. That can be very messy, not to mention expensive."

"Expensive?"

"I told you not to mention expensive!"

They fitted the new tank very quickly and efficiently and let some water dribble in to test the seals. It all seemed watertight.

"All we need now," said Dan, "is an electrician to wire up the heater. I've rung several but either they're not answering the phone at all or they can't give me an appointment until the middle of next week. I presume you *do* want hot water before the middle of next week?"

"Yes please," I said, contemplating with horror a week of being unable to do the washing up or take a shower. Of course, Robin would love it - washing the dishes is her job; and she resents time wasted in the shower when she could be doing more interesting things, like gardening. But I was not attracted to the idea.

"Bloody tradespeople!" said Dan. "You can never get one when you need one." He made a few more phone calls. "OK," he said, "we've tracked one of the elusive bastards down. He says he'll be here early in the afternoon, whatever that means. Felix and I are going off to our next job. When he arrives, give me a ring and I'll come straight back."

By about 2.45pm I was starting to get worried. It was no longer early in the afternoon. The afternoon was getting later (and older) by the second. Then a van drew up and Dan and Felix got out.

"The electrician's just sent me a text message," said Dan. "He'll be here at 3.00pm. So while we're waiting, I'll just start work on attaching the straps that will stop the tank falling over in an earthquake. I'll only fix up one end at the moment, just in case we need to swivel the tank for the electrician."

He carefully measured the length of strap required and cut exactly that length off a roll. It was an inch too short.

"Bugger!"

He tried again, with slightly more success. By now it was 3.15pm. No sign of the electrician. "Anything else you need me to look at while we're waiting?" offered Dan.

"Well you could have a look at the cistern on the loo. It fills up a bit too much and water runs out of the overflow pipe."

He took the lid off the cistern and peered at it. "I've never understood how these work," he said. He poked at it a bit and twirled the flushing handle. Nothing happened, apart from a couple of gurgles.

"Would you like me to flush it for you?" I asked.

"Yes please," he said, mildly embarrassed.

I gave the handle a little twiddle and water gushed like Niagara Falls. "It's all in the wrist action," I said. "And the suppleness of the follow through."

We watched the cistern fill up. Dan poked a thingie here and twisted a whatsit there. Then he turned the flushing handle again. Nothing happened so he tried one more time. It still didn't flush. I reached past him and twirled gently. Niagara Falls again.

"Call myself a plumber," said Dan, chuckling at his own misfortune. "I can't even flush a toilet. Perhaps it's time to hand in my cards."

"If it's any consolation," I said, "lots of people find this design hard to flush. My mother in law can't flush it, and her middle name is efficiency. Phyllis Efficiency Clarke. I really can't imagine what her parents were thinking of when they christened her that."

"I've adjusted it a bit," said Dan, peering into the cistern as it filled. "And now the water level is about an inch below the overflow pipe. That should fix it."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at my watch. "It's nearly quarter to four. In light of your advertised promise, do I get the job done free because the electrician's so late?"

"It doesn't filter down to subcontractors," explained Dan. "They're outside our control. Come to think of it, they're outside *everyone's* control."

"Pity."

The electrician arrived just after 4.00pm. He attached wires, put the fuse back, waved a voltmeter and said the happy word, "Perfect!".

He went away again and Dan finished fixing the earthquake straps. Then he opened the valve to the header tank and turned the heater on.

"There we are," he said, "all finished."

"Any idea what went bang?" I asked.

"No idea at all," he said. "It wasn't anything to do with the old tank. There was nothing dislodged, nothing obviously broken. Bit of a puzzle, really."

Odd...

The next morning I lay lazily in bed, cuddling a cat, at peace with the world.

Bang!



# Alan And Robin Go North

"What time shall I set the alarm for?" I asked Robin.

"5.00am would be good," said Robin. "That's really 6.00am because the clocks go back an hour tonight, so we'll get a good night's sleep and still be able to make an early start."

To hear is to obey, and I set the alarm for 5.00am.

At 4.00am, which was really 5.00am of course, I woke up full of excitement and anticipation. There was no sound of snoring, so it was a fairly safe bet that Robin was awake as well. "I'm awake," I said quietly.

"So am I," confirmed Robin.

"Why don't we get up and make an extra early start?" I suggested. I looked out of the window. Rain was stair-rod-rod-rod out of a pitch black sky; visibility was nil.

"Conditions are perfect," I said.

And so we packed the car and set off for the far north of New Zealand. Not surprisingly the roads were almost empty and we made very good time. Slowly the black, wet night turned into a grey, wet dawn and the grey, wet dawn turned into a grey, wet day. I kept the headlights on to give the car maximum visibility just in case anybody else was mad enough to be out. However as far as I could tell, everyone else in the country was still tucked up warm and snug in bed.

As we passed across the central plateau, there was no sign whatsoever of the mountains. They were hiding shyly in the mist, refusing to come out and play.

"They know their own names," I told Robin. "If you call them by name they'll come to you."

"Nonsense," said Robin. "You're pulling my leg. Aren't you?" She sounded doubtful.

"Honest," I said. "They really do come when you call them. Try it and see."

Ngauruhoe, Tongariro, Ruapehu – Robin tried hard, but she couldn't quite get the names right, and so the mountains stayed hidden. Ngauruhoe and Tongariro paid us no attention at all, but Ruapehu was so annoyed at this seeming disrespect that he roared out loud, shattered the walls of his crater lake and threw a mighty lahar down towards us. As we sped away from the raging mud and water, we could hear the sounds of gates crashing shut as the desert road was closed behind us. But we didn't care, we were away free and the mountains were far behind us now.

We stopped for lunch in Taupo. The weather eased slightly and though it was still misty, the rain was less intense. An extremely damp motorcyclist pulled up outside the café. His helmet had recently been groomed with a mohawk haircut, but the spiky black hair now sagged sadly to one side. Helmet under his arm, he stomped into the café and steamed as he ordered chips. We resumed our journey.

Just beyond Taupo, a farmer was winding string around stakes arranged in a small square. Bemused cows stood huddled together inside the string fence.

"We're trapped, ladies," said the head cow. "There's nowhere to go. We'll never break out of here in a month of Sundays. What a small field this has turned out to be!"

"I know what we can do," said another. "Let's chew cud. That always makes things better."

The road went ever on, north and north and north again. Blue signs with stylised white pictures indicated accommodation (a picture of a bed) and food (a picture of a crossed knife and fork) and service stations (a picture of a petrol pump). Once we passed a blue sign that contained only of a picture of a bed and a picture of an aeroplane. I have no idea at all what it was trying to tell me.

And so we reached the Bay Of Islands – it's a bay; it has islands in it. What else would you expect of a country that calls its northernmost island The North Island and its southernmost island The South Island? We were staying in The Duke of Marlborough Hotel in Russell. Round the corner is a pub. It's called The Pub Round The Corner.

About five minutes drive from Russell is a beautiful beach with lazy waves. It's just perfect for swimming or for simply sitting in the sun. The beach is quite long; it's called Long Beach.

There's a flagstaff on top of a hill called Flagstaff Hill. You drive up Flagstaff Road to get to it. There's a church in the middle of Church Street; and just by the sea is a house called Wharemoana, which translates as *seahouse*. This last gave me a little thrill – when I was a small child in England, we would often take our summer holiday in a small coastal village in Northumberland. The village was called Seahouses. That's *Wharemoana* as well.

Ferries run regularly across the bay linking Russell to Paihia. There's a ferry that is painted blue; it's called The Blue Ferry. There's a ferry that is painted white; it's called The White Ferry. There's a ferry that is painted red. It's much faster than the other two and so it is called The Fast Ferry. That's the one we took.

Paihia has a mall with 24 shops in it. It's called The 24 Shop Mall. There's a licensed restaurant with a name that cannot be read for the sign outside is written in such a distorted script as to be completely illegible. Possibly the real name of the restaurant is The Illegible Licensed Restaurant, but I'll never know.

We rejoined the Fast Ferry to return to Russell.

"Today," announced the driver, "we are going to be the Very Fast Ferry for I have six stranded Germans on board. They got stuck in traffic and missed their tour boat. It's waiting impatiently for them in Russell, so I'm going to get them there as quickly as I can."

He was as good as his word. We simply tore across the bay. We overtook the Blue Ferry. We overtook the White Ferry. We overtook a low flying seagull who looked rather bewildered as the water from our wake almost knocked him out of the sky. We squealed dramatically to a stop by the pier at Russell, spraying water everywhere. Six moist Germans marched straight to their tour boat which immediately headed off to the islands. Then the Very Fast Ferry became the Very Slow Ferry as it went *putt, putt, putt* to its proper berth where Robin and I got off. We went round the corner to The Pub Round The Corner and we each sank a soothing pint of their home brewed beer. They have a choice of two; a bitter and a lager. One is called The Pub Round The Corner Bitter. The other is called The Pub Round The Corner Lager.

The next day we went exploring. There's a back road out of Russell which twines, twists and turns for mile after tedious mile until it joins State Highway 1 just south of Kawakawa. Interesting signposts declare that it isn't far to some small township or other, but they are all telling lies.

"Hey," said Robin. "It's only six kilometres to Rawhiti. Won't we have such fun when we get there? I can hardly wait!"

Six kilometres of rugged bush and sheer cliffs later, with no sign whatsoever of Rawhiti, we learned that Ngaiotonga was only another ten kilometres down the road.

"Well, I never did care much for Rawhiti anyway," said Robin. "Let's stop trying to find it. Let's go to Ngaiotonga instead. I've heard that it's a much more happening place in every respect."

Ten kilometres later we stopped and got out and looked around a bit. Ngaiotonga, just like Rawhiti before it, appeared to be town built of invisible buildings.

"Perhaps it's concealed inside a Klingon cloaking device," I suggested. I kicked a stone out of the road and looked

around a small, scrubby fern in case Ngaiotonga was hiding behind it. It wasn't.

"I'm bored with Ngaiotonga. Let's go on to Tutaematai," said Robin. "This signpost says it's only three kilometres away."

"OK," I said and we got back in the car and drove off. As we drove round the first bend in the road I heard a distinct *click!* behind me as the people of Ngaiotonga turned off their Klingon cloaking device and resumed their partying.

The road went ever on and on, but we never did find any of the small towns that the signs pointed to. Just endless bush and steep, rugged cliffs. Eventually the road met State Highway 1 and we turned on to it with a sense of relief. All the signs on the state highway pointed to places that really did exist. It was nice to be back in the real world. We headed north again, towards Russell. A thin, brown man with a long beard walked along the side of the road. He was bowed down under the weight of a huge wooden cross which he was carrying over his shoulder. Presumably he was heading north for Easter.

The best way to see the islands that fill the bay is to take a cruise around them. We went on the Cream Trip, which lasts all day and which visits all the major islands. The cruise is not just a tourist trip - the boat delivers packages and mail to the islands as well. From the main cabin of the boat you can look out of the very large forward-facing observation windows. A tourist with an enormous bottom spent the entire cruise outside on the forward deck, leaning up against the windows, buttock cheeks spread out squashily all over the glass. I took a photograph.

The boat travelled leisurely around the islands, mooring at jetties in order to deliver the mail. All the people on the islands knew when the boat was near because they all had dogs, and all the dogs barked in delight when the boat appeared. The dogs all love the boat because the crew always make sure to give each dog a biscuit before the mail

is handed over. As far as the dogs are concerned it's the biscuit boat, not the mail boat.

One dog was so enthusiastic that he leaped on board and said hello to all the tourists. He got lots of pats, but he didn't get any extra biscuits. Not that he seemed to mind; pats are almost as good as biscuits.

One of the jetties was rather hard to moor against. Somebody had bolted a small dinghy on to the end of it. The dinghy was full of earth, and growing in the earth was a huge flax plant. The skipper of our boat was bewildered.

"That wasn't there last time I tied up to the jetty," he announced over the public address system. "Some eccentric or other has obviously been very busy indeed. But why on earth would anyone want to grow a flax plant in a dinghy on the end of a pier?"

Answer came there none. Silence was the stern reply.

Many of the islands are known by their Maori names. Thus we have Moturoa Island, Moturua Island, Motukiekie Island and Urupukapuka Island. Since the Maori prefix *motu* means *island*, some of the names are tautological. It also turns out that the Maori are just as unimaginative about naming things as the Pakeha are. The suffix *roa* means *long*. Thus the rather long and skinny island called Moturoa is simply Long Island.

The suffix *rua* can be translated as *pit* or *chasm*. So Moturua Island is the island with a chasm on it. A *kiekie* is a species of thick vine. Motukiekie Island is an island where the kiekie vine grows. *Uru* is a grove (as in a grove of trees) and a *puka* is a shrub-like tree with large leathery leaves. The repetition of a word in Maori adds emphasis to the word. Thus *pukapuka* would mean lots and lots of this particular shrub. And so Urupukapuka Island would be the island covered with thick groves of shrubs. Oddly, the word *pukapuka* also exists in its own right (rather than as added emphasis for *puka*) and it means a book or, more generally, a document of some sort. So perhaps Urupukapuka Island is

the island where books grow on groves of trees! What a paradise for a bibliophile like me. I couldn't wait to get there.

We stopped at Urupukapuka Island for lunch. The books hanging from the trees had not yet reached their full growth. They were unripe and unreadable. It would be at least another two months before they ripened and were ready to be harvested. Disappointed, Robin and I headed off to the island's other major attraction; the yellow submarine *Nautilus*.

It isn't really a submarine, though it is shaped like one, just for fun. Tourists climb on board and take their seat in the keel which is, of course, under the surface of the sea. The keel has glass sides and as the boat chugs slowly around the bay the glass sides afford a perfect view of the fish swimming past in huge shoals. There are always massive numbers of fish, because the crew of the *Nautilus* always make sure to put a lot of fish food into the water to attract them. They've been doing this for years, and word has spread. Every fish in New Zealand territorial waters knows exactly where to come for a good feed. There are so many fish in the water that you can almost walk across the bay on their backs.

From Urupukapuka Island, we headed off to The Hole In The Rock. It's a huge great rock with a hole in it. When the sea is calm, the boat sails through the hole from one side of the rock to the other. There is something amazingly surreal about sailing right through an island.

The sea was completely calm and clear and we could see shoals of fish swimming around the boat as we emerged from the hole. Sometimes a fish would jump exuberantly into the air and then dive down again into the water with a huge splash of foam.

We sailed away from the Hole In The Rock and headed down the mainland coast back towards Russell. We briefly explored Deepwater Cove - it's a cove where the water is

very deep - and Assassination Cove. Can you guess what happened at Assassination Cove in June 1772?

We got back to Russell just in time for tea.

One of the must-see excursions that you can take in the far north of New Zealand is a coach trip up to Cape Reinga at the very top of the North Island. Along the west edge of the spit of land that terminates at the cape is a beach that is sixty four miles long. It is called Ninety Mile Beach. Since sixty four miles is almost exactly ninety kilometres, a better name might be Ninety Kilometre Beach. But the beach is very old and set in its ways, and it has no patience with these modern, new-fangled metric measurements. So it remains Ninety Mile Beach, and if you dislike the inaccuracy of the name that's your problem. The beach doesn't care.

At low tide, the beach is officially part of the state highway system and the coaches on their way to and from Cape Reinga always zoom along the hard-packed sand close to the water's edge. There's something quite thrilling about zooming along the beach at 100kph for mile after mile after mile.

We travelled north on the beach. On our left, the sea stretched endlessly west to the horizon, and the sea and sand ran together north and south as far as the eye could see. Long, lazy waves swept in and beached themselves gently on the shore. To our right huge, soft sand dunes loomed, held together by spinifex and scrubby grass.

Birds strutted along the sand and glided gracefully in the air, skimming along the edge of the waves. Pied shag, red billed gull, black backed gull, oyster catcher, dotterel, godwit, caspian tern, white fronted tern, left tern, right tern...

The coach stopped and we got out for a walk on the sand.

"Don't get hit by a bus," warned the driver, and he wasn't joking.



There were some rocks poking up from the sand. Thousands upon thousands of worm casts pock-marked the surface of the sand around the rocks. Small creatures scuttled in little pools. The wind rustled across the sand stirring it up into crazy patterns.

We got back on the bus and carried on to the end of the beach where huge sand dunes towered like mountains. Adventurous souls carried body-boards up to the top of the dunes; an enormous trek. The dunes were so tall that the line of people walking up them looked as tiny as ants. Everybody walked in single file, putting their feet carefully in the footprints of the person in front of them. When they reached the top, each person flung themselves head first on to their body board and slid down the side of the dune at an enormous rate, screaming all the way in a huge cloud of sand.

Some people braked themselves by digging their feet in. Other, hardier souls just zoomed in at full speed and splashed down in the water at the bottom. All of them spent the rest of the day picking sand out of their teeth.

The bus drove on to Cape Reinga, popularly supposed to be the northernmost tip of New Zealand, though in fact the rather more aptly named North Cape stretches 15 kilometres further north.

From Cape Reinga, the spirits of the Maori dead make their way down to the underworld. It is a very spiritual, very sacred place. The cape is also where the Tasman Sea meets the Pacific Ocean. As you stand at the lighthouse on the cape and look north you can see the waves from the Tasman Sea on your left rolling in from west to east. The waves in the Pacific Ocean on your right roll in from east to west. The two sets of waves meet just below the lighthouse and annihilate each other in a shattering spray of white water. It is a hugely dramatic and humbling sight.

From the cape we headed south again and travelled through the Puketi kauri forest. There are very few kauri

trees left now. The small number that remain are tall, graceful giants more than 1000 years old. There have been three distinct kauri forests here in the last 50,000 years. Each has been destroyed by the forces of nature, rather than by the depredations of man, though nobody is quite sure exactly how it happened. Excavation of the remains of these forests suggests that the trees grew roots only on one side in order to anchor themselves against the prevailing winds, which tend to blow in a constant direction. Perhaps one day there was a storm and the fierce winds blew from a different direction. Since the trees lacked support on that side, whole forests simply lay down and died.

The weather had been quite gloomy during the trip to Cape Reinga and as we got back to our hotel Robin remarked, "We were very lucky really. The rain kept away while we were sight seeing. It only rained while we were driving around in the coach."

"Yes," I agreed. "It could have been worse. We could have had continuous rain."

No sooner had I spoken the words than we began to get continuous rain. It tumbled out of the sky in a drenching torrent. It got heavier and heavier. So we went to bed and ignored it.

The next morning it was still raining. Actually, "rain" is much too small and insignificant a word to describe the huge niagra-like cascades that were pounding down. The roof of the hotel rang and rattled as though it was being battered by liquid cannonballs. The rain was hitting the ground so hard that it was bouncing up into the air again before finally settling into enormous puddles and, where the ground sloped away, into raging rivers.

It soon became clear that the hotel leaked like a sieve. The staff scurried around putting pot plants under the most significant leaks. The plants greedily sucked up the water like manna from heaven; which it was of course. But the rain was so heavy that it wasn't very long before the plants

began to exhibit symptoms of acute indigestion. Soon they were writhing in agony, and vomiting up all the water they had just drunk. They were quickly replaced by a collection of miscellaneous buckets and tubs dragged up from who knows where, and someone was deputed to run around emptying them before they overflowed.

Robin and I sat in the bar watching the rain fall down. We hadn't brought any wet weather gear with us; everyone knows it doesn't rain in the winterless north in the tourist season. So we were stuck in the hotel. Through the window we could just see the end of the pier jutting out into the bay.

"Look," said Robin. "There's a ferry."

We watched as the ferry from Paihia appeared out of the curtain of rain. It moored itself to the pier. Nobody got off; nobody got on. The ferry hung around for a while and then went back to Paihia. Half an hour later it reappeared in Russell. Again, nobody got off and nobody got on. Neither Robin nor I was very surprised at this. Who in their right mind would ever want to go out in this weather? Obviously the ferry company came to the same conclusion, for the ferry went off back to Paihia and we never saw it again. Service was suspended for the duration of the storm.

I ordered another beer, plugged in my laptop and watched a DVD. Robin went up to our room and watched the television.

And so the day passed. It was a day of beer, DVDs, television and rain. At a suitable time, we went to bed. The rain continued to fall. We lay in bed listening to it and soon the regular sound, loud though it was, lulled us to sleep.

The next morning it was still raining. If anything, the downpour was heavier than it had been the day before.

"Looks like another day of DVDs, beer and television," remarked Robin.

"Yes," I agreed. "But it could be worse. At least we've still got electricity."

No sooner had I spoken the words than the lights went out. There was a brief pause and then the lights flickered and came on again. We heard a rumbling sound and the air filled with the distinctive smell of diesel fuel as the hotel's emergency generator kicked in. It had just enough grunt to keep the essential services running - the lights, the bar, the till, the kitchen, and the sign outside the hotel that advertised Stella Artois beer. There was no power for the televisions or for the sockets in the wall. Even the water supply to our room stopped because it was a high pressure system and there was no power for the pumps. We couldn't flush the toilet in our room and so, whenever we felt the urge, we trotted off to the public toilets in the bar. That way the stench became someone else's problem instead of ours.

"Well," I said, "we won't be watching any television or DVDs today. What shall we do instead?"

"Eat," said Robin. "And drink a lot."

Shortly after the power failed, we heard the chilling sound of sirens in the distance.

"I bet that's something to do with the power failing," said Robin. "I hope there hasn't been an accident."

We learned later that there had been an enormous slip on the main road out of Russell. Six huge, ancient trees had fallen with it and they had crashed across the power lines, bringing them down.

Our hotel was the only building in Russell with its own generator and therefore it was the only place in Russell where food and drink could be obtained. It wasn't long before the glowing Stella Artois sign at the front attracted people like moths to a flame and the hotel did a roaring trade as most of the tourist population of Russell ate, drank and made merry as they watched the never-ending rain fall down.

About twelve hours later the power came back on, though few people were in any position to notice since most of them were over-full of beer and wine. I went up to our

room and had a celebratory flush of the loo just because I could.

By now the rain was starting to die down and by the next morning it had gone completely. The day dawned bright and cheerful with clear blue skies. Six grim men wearing fluorescent orange jackets trudged past the hotel. They had a lot of work to do...

All the roads out of Russell were closed, blocked by enormous slips. Opuia was still without power and it too was isolated because the roads were blocked. The bridge at Kawakawa was closed to traffic because it was unstable. Four motel units had been swept away by the raging river at Haruru Falls. Fortunately nobody was in them at the time. A fourteen year old girl had been winched to safety across the river. We were marooned in Russell and we had nothing to do except wander round the immediate area and look at things.

We went up to Flagstaff Hill, the highest point in Russell. There were several large slips on the road up to the hill, but one lane was open. From the top of the hill we could see out across the bay. The water was a deep yellow colour because it was so full of churned up sand. A boat chugged slowly across the bay leaving a wake behind itself. The wake didn't go away - the sand was so thick in the water that the boat was making a permanent track.

Twenty four hours later the situation had slightly improved. Some roads had been opened by the simple expedient of pushing all the slips to the side with a bulldozer, thus opening up a single lane. We drove cautiously out of Russell past enormous teetering heaps of earth and trees and rocks. Many roads were still closed and detours were in place to bypass the worst of the damage. But even the roads we detoured through were only barely passable. At one point half the road simply wasn't there any more; the floods had undermined it and swept it away without trace.

We drove past paddocks that looked like swimming pools. The topmost branches of trees stuck forlornly above the flood. A house sat abandoned in the middle of a field, the flood water lapping gently against the downstairs windows.

"We were very lucky really," I said. "It could have been worse. We could have had..."

"Shut up!" Robin interrupted fiercely. "Haven't you realised yet that those words are a magic spell? Every time you speculate on how it could be worse, it gets worse! Just keep your mouth shut and let me drive us out of this mess that you've made of the north of the country."

So, being an obedient, dutiful husband, I did what I was told.

# Alan And The Fungi From Yuggoth

The back bedroom in my house had been invaded by Lovecraftian Fungi from Yuggoth and I was starting to think that it was time to do something about it. Black mouldy bits were spreading over the walls and the wallpaper itself was starting to peel.

"I'm worried about the Fungi from Yuggoth in the back room," I said to Robin. "I think they're carnivorous. Have you noticed the strange absence of spiders in the house?"

"Well," she said, "a couple of days ago I cleared up a pile of vomit from the kitchen floor which consisted mostly of diced carrots and spider legs. So I suspect it's much more likely that the cats have been supplementing their food supply. Unless you've gone on a strange diet again?"

"I'm on two diets at the moment," I said. "You don't get enough food on one."

"Let's do an experiment," suggested Robin. "You catch a spider and release it in the back room. I'll take notes."

To hear is to obey. I hunted down a spider and the experiment was conclusive. The spider died a horrible death.

"No, Alan," explained Robin patiently. "You were supposed to feed the spider to the Fungi from Yuggoth, not eat it yourself."

"Sorry," I said. "Anyway, it tasted really nasty without a side dish of diced carrots."

"Let's try the experiment again," said Robin. "And this time do it properly!"

Under Robin's strict supervision, I tried again. The spider screamed horribly as the Fungi from Yuggoth slowly

ingested it. There was no doubt in my mind any more. The Fungi from Yuggoth would have to go before they ate all the remaining spiders in the house thus reducing me to only one diet; a thought too terrible to contemplate.

The first step was to remove the wallpaper. That wasn't difficult; large areas were already hanging loose and all I had to do was grab hold of them and peel them off. The top layer came off easily, leaving the backing paper behind. This was stuck firmly to the wall and the Fungi from Yuggoth were well entrenched in it. Hideous chemicals would appear to be required.

I spread the chemicals lavishly and the backing paper came off in great swathes except in the places where it didn't. These were mostly the areas occupied by the Fungi from Yuggoth. Perhaps the Fungi had eaten the original paste and excreted superglue. It seemed likely. I applied chemicals that were even more hideous than before, and I scraped away at the soggy walls. The Fungi from Yuggoth snarled, and bit huge chunks out of my scraping tool with their snaggly, spider-haunted teeth. But eventually I triumphed over them and all the paper was off. What remained of the Fungi from Yuggoth sulked in the plaster. Never mind - a chisel would soon take care of them.

Take that, you bastards!

The walls revealed themselves to be deeply pitted with acne scars. Craters abounded, smoking sullenly as the volcanoes beneath them fumed. Various screws and nails had to be removed, and there was a curious hole about a quarter of an inch across that was plugged with blu-tac. I removed the plug and pushed a rusty nail through the hole. It fell down inside the wall and went *clink* as it landed on something clinky. Hmmm...

For no readily discernible reason the figure 605 was written in pencil just to the right of the window sill. The words '*Porl rote this*' had been scribbled below the light



switch by somebody who couldn't spell his own christian name and who had learned to spell the word '*this*' by rote.

Pollyfilla was obviously the answer, though the question remained obscure. Fill, scrape, sand - oh bugger! Every time I sanded down a pollyfilled chunk and smoothed off its edges, a new hole appeared. Large areas of the wall were covered in a thin plastic skin of what appeared to be improperly applied undercoat, and as I sanded across it jagged strips peeled off leaving large and slightly countersunk gaps that had to be filled up again. It became clear that I had seriously underestimated the amount of pollyfilla needed to complete the task.

"Robin, let's go to the hardware store."

"Oh, goody!"

Robin loves hardware stores. Put her down in front of a wall full of power tools and she won't move for hours. Take her to the gardening section and she starts to dribble and sway. "Shiny," she murmurs as she strokes the solar lights. She grows them from seed and gets a bumper crop every year. One of her many skills.

Eventually all the gaps were filled and smoothly sanded. I'd put so much pollyfilla on the walls that the room was now noticeably smaller than it had been when I started; but at least everything was smooth.

Time to choose the paint. Robin consulted catalogues.

"What colour do you fancy?" she asked.

"Yellow might be nice," I suggested tentatively. I'm not very good at colours so I tend to leave that kind of decision to other people.

"There's *mellow yellow* from one company," she said, "and *flower power* from another. I like those names."

"Perfect!" I exclaimed. "I've got a long-haired paint brush with a paisley head band, beads and granny-glasses. It would be just the thing for applying that kind of paint."

Robin was dubious. "What about flares?"

"No, no," I said firmly. "Flares would attract unwelcome attention from the Westpac Rescue Helicopter."

The shop that sold *mellow yellow* was closed when we visited it in the middle of Sunday afternoon. So we went elsewhere and bought a large can of *flower power* instead. The man picked up a can of basic white and then consulted a complex recipe sheet. Frowning, he began to inject pigments into the white paint. A bit of this, a bit of that, absolutely heaps of the other. Then he banged the lid firmly on the can and put it into a fascinating machine that twirled, twisted and shook in eight dimensions as it thoroughly mixed my *flower power* for me. Robin watched open mouthed.

"I want one," she said firmly.

"?" I asked.

"Just imagine the milk shakes you could make with that."

As I applied *flower power* to the walls, it slowly became clear to me that the simple action of painting over the pollyfilla was causing huge new craters to appear above and below the pollyfilled areas (and sometimes to the right and left as well).

"They weren't there before I started to paint," I insisted to Robin.

"Of course not dear," she said soothingly.

I applied the paint thickly. Perhaps the hollows would fill with paint and vanish from view. It's a theory I formed about thirty years ago, but unfortunately I've never been able to make it work in practice. However I remain optimistic. Maybe this time...

One coat, two coats, three. The cats found the whole thing fascinating. They sat in a row and their heads moved up and down, right and left in unison as they followed the brush strokes.

"That's a pretty colour," said Bess and she poked the yellow wall with a paw. Then she shook her paw violently

and began to chew the paint off. "Yuck!" she spat, "that tastes horrid."

"I bet you could do that," said Porgy. "You could paint a wall." He admires his sister and is quite in awe of her brain power and her many skills. He's better than her at eating and sleeping, but she is better than him at everything else.

"Nonsense," said Harpo. "She's useless. She's just a girl. Girls can't do anything." Harpo is not an admirer of Bess and beats her up every time she shows off by doing something he can't do. That's why he's always covered in scabs – she's better at fighting than he is, though he refuses to admit it.

I gave Bess a paint brush. "Here you are," I said. "You can do the fourth coat. That will probably be the last one that we need." I left her to it and trotted off to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

When Robin came home that evening she went to admire the state of the back bedroom, just as she had done every day since I started work on it.

"Wow!" she said. "That looks fantastic. There's no trace of the Fungi from Yuggoth any more. Why is Bess yellow; she was a tabby this morning?"

"She spilled some of the paint," I explained. "She put a bit too much on the brush to begin with. It took her a while to get the hang of it, but once she figured it out, she did an absolutely wonderful job."

"Are you telling me that Bess did this?" asked Robin.

"Yes," I said proudly. "She's inherited a lot of skills from her daddy. I must have really strong genes."

"Inherited?" Robin began to laugh. "She's a cat. She's got a leg at each corner, she's covered in fur and she has a tail. How can you possibly be her father? Sometimes I think you live in a dream world."

"You're forgetting something," I said. "You married me because you think I'm absolutely wonderful and magnificent. You've only ever seen me when I'm wearing my

super hero costume. You don't know what I look like without it."

"Yes dear," said Robin and she patted me on the head. I purred, and when she wasn't looking I tickled her with my tail.

# Alan Goes Screwing

Robin looked at the far wall of the newly decorated back room and frowned.

"Shelves," she said firmly.

"You think we should put shelves on the wall?" I asked.

"Shelves," she agreed.

It seemed like a good idea to me, and so we got in the car and drove to Bunnings, which is the largest hardware store for miles around. The instant we walked through the door, a Bunning clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, approached us. He brandished the magic chisel *Excalibur*, and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Shelves?" asked Robin tentatively.

The Bunning put down his magic chisel, and pulled out a map of the warehouse which he scrutinized with a pale pink scroot that he removed from secret orifice.

"Take a left turn at Aisle nine," said the Bunning. "Then go straight on until you come to a traffic island. Take the third exit and go past a pub called The Hard Wear And Tare."

"I've heard of that pub," I said. "Rumour has it that they do a very nice draught turpentine, though their methylated spirit leaves a lot to be desired."

"So true," said the Bunning, "but they do feature a paint stripper every Monday, Wednesday and Friday lunchtime."

"Shelves!" hinted Robin.

"Turn right after the pub," continued the Bunning, "and then immediately left through the concrete jungle. Pay no attention to the garden gnome with his trousers round his ankles who is the principle water feature. Turn left again onto Aisle nineteen; you can't miss it, there's a plumbing display on the corner with a special discount on a transparent toilet that has goldfish swimming in the tank.

Join the dual carriageway on Aisle forty two and take exit twenty seven. It's signposted '*nut screws washer and bolts*'. Turn left, left and left again and there you are."

"Where?" I asked.

"Shelves," said Robin, and off we went.

The shelving section of Bunnings proved to be remarkably bereft of shelves. There were cupboards which had shelves in them and there were shelves which had wardrobes wrapped around them. But the closest thing to shelves that you could attach to a wall were flimsy, plastic covered wire contraptions with large holes in them for things to fall through. Nothing seemed suitable for our purposes.

"Shelves," said Robin wistfully, and she shook her head.

"Never mind," I said. "Let's go and have a look at Mitre 10. I'm sure they'll have lots of shelves."

"Shelves!" Robin brightened immediately and we headed off to the car.

The door into Mitre 10 slid welcomingly open. A young man in a blue pullover picked his nose. It didn't quite fit, so he picked another one. Satisfied, he turned to us.

"Yes?"

"Shelves?" asked Robin.

"Over here." The young man gestured vaguely to the right hand wall of the store and ambled off into the middle distance. We followed him into the shelf section. It wasn't far.

Shelves of every size and shape stood to attention against the wall. Brown support brackets festooned the racks on every side.

"I'll have ten of those," I said, pointing at the proudest shelves. "And thirty brackets. I think every shelf should have at least three brackets to support it."

"Good idea, squire," said the young man. "Nice and sturdy. But we've only got seven shelves in stock and eighteen brackets to go with them."

"OK - I'll take those. Can you order three more shelves and twelve more brackets?"

"No problem, squire. Anything else I can help you with?"

"Shelves," said Robin.

"Screws," I said.

"Walk this way."

Hunching our shoulders, we lurched companionably across to the other side of the store where I found a jar of ideal screws. There was only one problem - it cost \$60. I sucked air through my teeth and shook my head sorrowfully.

"Have I got a deal for you!" said the young man, not in the least put out. "Take a look at this! It's just incredible! Seeing is believing! What a bargain!!!!!!!"

Pocketing all the exclamation marks that had fallen on to the floor, he led me round the corner to a special shelf labelled '*Screw Sale*'. There sat an absolutely identical jar of ideal screws with a price tag of only \$5.

I expressed bewilderment.

"No, I don't understand it either," said the young man. "They pulled all the sale screws on my day off. I have no idea what criteria they used. Probably a random number generator. We've got one of those on special as well. Want to buy it?"

"No thanks," I said. "I'm trying to give them up."

We took the shelves home and I measured the wall more carefully than I had in the past. Eight things immediately became clear to me, and I rang Mitre 10.

"That order I gave you for three shelves and twelve brackets," I said.

"Yes?"

"Can you add two more shelves and six more brackets to it?"

"So that's five shelves and eighteen brackets in total?"

"Yes please."

"The brackets come in boxes of twenty." The voice sounded peeved.

"But I only need eighteen."

"Well I suppose we can put the extra pair into stock."

"Good idea," I said. "You'll be amazed at the wonderful flavour they'll add to your casseroles."

"You can pick the items up next week," said the voice, and it rang off.

I looked around thoughtfully. All I had to do now was screw thirty six brackets into the studs that were hiding behind the plasterboard and then attach twelve shelves to the brackets. Simple really.

First find your studs. I composed an advert – studs needed to satisfy a lady who wants shelves.

"Shelves," said Robin, deeply moved.

The advert failed to produce any studs. Only high technology could help me now. I invested in a stud finder – a gadget guaranteed to beep loudly and turn its green light red in the presence of studs. Such equipment, I am told, is *de rigueur* among builders apprentices, who are much given to boasting.

Beeping and flashing, I set to with a will. However a multitude of semi-random results soon forced me to the reluctant conclusion that while there may well be lots of virile studs concealed beneath the surface of my yellow wall, there was also a plethora of dweebs, dwarves, dwangs and similar builders jargon in there as well. Mapping this confusing array of timber was turning into a problem somewhat akin to finding my way through a twisty maze of passages, all alike. And, Murphy's Law being what it is, I just *knew* that as soon as I drilled a hole it would bypass every single solid block of wood and pierce itself deeply into insubstantial nothingness.

Walls are just like atoms. No matter how large and complex their internal structure, they nevertheless consist mostly of empty space. And just like atoms, the bits that make up the walls are in constant motion. When a solid particle is identified, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle



guarantees that any attempt to drill into it is doomed to failure. As soon as you pick up a drill, the wood will move to one side. Your only hope is to take it by surprise. Mark the place carefully with your finger, distract the wood by singing a song (*I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK*) and drill straight into it. Put in a screw immediately to hold it firmly in place and prevent any further movement. Then clean up the blood from your drilled through finger.

Using this infallible technique, I soon had thirty six solidly anchored brackets each one checked against its neighbour with a tape measure and a spirit level. Nevertheless, despite such care and attention, one shelf exhibited a slight list to starboard. I suspect the house may have twisted slightly when I wasn't paying attention.

As I fitted the shelves side by side across the wall, I realised that the room was a most inconvenient size. The shelves were not quite long enough to run all the way across. There was a half inch gap between each pair.

It seemed to me that I had three choices. I could join the shelves together in the middle of the wall, leaving a quarter inch gap between each shelf and the two end walls; or I could put the shelves flush to the end walls and have a gap running up the middle of the wall. Or perhaps I could fill the gap running up the middle of the wall with a vertical support brace. I experimented - and found that two shelves standing on their edges filled the gap nicely and ran from floor to ceiling giving a most pleasing effect. I could easily anchor them in place by attaching small brass braces to the edges of the shelves and the upright, which would have the additional beneficial effect of firmly supporting the edges of the shelves. Without some such construction, the edges had a tendency to go *boi-oi-oi-ng*, with possibly fatal consequences for anything stored too close to them.

There was only one problem. I rang Mitre 10.

"I need two more shelves," I said.

A very patient man took my order. And lo! It was done.

"Shelves," squealed Robin with delight.

Thirty six brackets, each of which required six screws; three into the wall and three into the shelves. Twelve brass braces each of which required two screws. Two hundred and forty screws. That's a lot of screwing.

And it put a great big smile on Robin's face.

# Alan And Robin Dry Out

Condensation has been an ongoing problem *chez robson* ever since we moved in.

Robin opened the curtains and wrinkled her nose at the water streaming down the windows, flooding the window sills, soaking the curtain and dripping on to the floor.

"It's worse than it was yesterday," she said.

I clambered out of bed and splashed through huge puddles to the shower. I got myself clean and dry, and then I swam back to the bedroom to get dressed. I picked up the extra towel I keep in the bedroom and dried myself again before I put my clothes on.

Robin drew a stick man in the condensation on the window pane. She considered him thoughtfully for a time, and then she drew a stick woman to keep him company. She decided that they didn't look happy together and so she wiped them out.

"Yuck," she said, "my hand's all wet."

"It's the blood," I told her. "From the stick man massacre. It gets everywhere."

The cats tippy-toed into the kitchen in search of food – they never look very grunted in the morning until they have had their breakfast, but when the condensation is at its worst, they look singularly disgruntled as they step carefully towards their biscuits, shaking each paw as it comes up from the water covering the floor.

"It's not good enough," said Porgy. He sounded angry. "You've got to do something about it. We can't carry on like this."

"I agree with Porgy," said Harpo. "Get it fixed or I'll bite you." He thought for a moment. "Perhaps I'll bite you anyway," he continued, "because I can."

Bess didn't say anything. She just ate her breakfast before the boys stole it.

"I'll take care of it," said Robin, "don't you worry your fluffy heads about it."

"It won't stop me biting him," said Harpo, and he bit me just to prove the point. "Yuck!" he said, "you taste horrid. What have you been eating?"

Over the next few days hordes of sleazy house drying salesmen came to the door, summoned by Robin through the magic of yellow pages. Each attempted to convince us that their particular product was much more suitable than the rubbish being offered by those other salesmen whose business cards they couldn't help noticing piled on the lounge table. Robin collected vast mounds of leaflets which she thumbed through carefully every night before she went to bed.

"Have I got a bargain for you squire. Low mileage guaranteed; one careful little old lady owner who only used it to drive to church on Sundays. You'd better buy it quick, it won't last long at this price."

"Why are you trying to sell me a second hand car?"

"Oh, sorry squire. Force of habit. That was last week's job. Now what am I selling this week? Oh yes - I remember..."

And then the man from HRV arrived to peddle his wares. He had a clipboard, which immediately impressed us. He measured up the rooms and took copious notes. He drew little diagrams for us and sketched in arrows to indicate how the air should flow for maximum drying effect. It all seemed terribly efficient.

"Can I look in the roof?" he asked. "That's where we fit the fan and the ducting. I'd like to make sure it's roomy enough."

I carried a stool into the hallway and positioned it nicely below the trapdoor that opens up into the roof space. He

climbed on the stool and stretched up towards the trapdoor, but he couldn't quite reach it.

"Bugger!" he said. "My arms aren't quite long enough. Never mind! I have the perfect answer."

He reached down and unclipped his prosthetic left leg then, balancing carefully on top of the stool on his right leg, he used his left leg as a lever to push open the trapdoor. Once the trapdoor was properly open, he re-attached his leg, jumped up and grabbed hold of the frame and heaved himself into the opening. He looked around the roof for a time and then dropped back down onto the stool.

"That looks perfect," he said. "Isn't it amazing the number of things you can do with an artificial leg? It's so much more useful than having a real one. I'd recommend it to anybody."

Robin and I were in instant agreement. We didn't even have to talk about it. It was never going to get any better than this.

"Where do I sign?" asked Robin.

"Here, here, here and here," said the man from HRV. He scratched his left leg. "It still itches," he said thoughtfully, "even though it isn't there."

In the fullness of time, HRV engineers came and laid pipes throughout the roof. They put ceiling vents into all our upstairs rooms and connected the vents to the pipes. They attached the other end of the pipes to a mysterious humming mechanism. Wires ran from the mechanism to a dinky little control panel on the wall in our hallway. The engineers pressed the on button and it beeped (always a good sign). Red lights came on, and mysterious numbers glowed. It was all very impressive.

Astonishingly, the instruction manual was only four pages long. Furthermore it was only written in English. I found this quite unnerving. These days even the instruction manual for the kettle is a hundred pages long and written in twenty languages. I began to wonder if perhaps we'd made

a mistake buying something with such a thin manual. I read it nervously. The device seemed quite simple and straightforward. I felt worried all over again.

Mostly the unit is completely automatic. It just sits and hums quietly to itself as it sucks moisture up through its vents. If the temperature in the roof space gets higher than the temperature in the rooms it starts to blow instead of suck, and all the hot air from the roof gets spread around the house. This is indicated by a little red light coming on. When the light goes out, the unit stops blowing and starts sucking again.

By pushing buttons in arcane patterns, the unit can be switched to burnt toast mode. This is a super suck designed to rid the house of horrid smells and fumes such as those produced by burning toast. Oh yes! I had to try that. I pushed the buttons...

The unit in the roof began to hum as the fan went into overdrive. The ceiling vents vibrated slightly as air rushed up through them into the roof space. Vast draughts of air whistled past me as the fan sucked mightily. My hair stood on end and loose papers plastered themselves over the vents. Porgy the Cat gave a frightened squawk as the suction pulled him upwards. Fortunately I managed to grab him as he flew past me. I hid him safely in his favourite cupboard until the burnt toast mode turned itself off. Wow! That was impressive.

After a day or so of happy sucking we noticed a big improvement in the condensation problem. Robin could no longer draw stick figures on the window in the morning.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I think I'm going to miss those stick people. I felt I'd got to know them really well. And it was such fun, wiping them out every day."

Even the cats noticed the difference.

"Gosh," said Porgy, "it's so nice having dry paws at breakfast time."

"I like it when the kitchen floor isn't covered in water," said Harpo. "I think I'll bite you, just to show my appreciation."

He bit me.

"Yuck!" he said. "You still taste horrid."

# Alan Gets Crowned

I know how bodies work. I've read **Fantastic Voyage** and **Fantastic Voyage II** (biology text books by Isaac Asimov). I've seen the instructional video that was made from Asimov's books, and I pay close attention to the documentaries that screen on television in between the programmes. So I am completely familiar with the armed forces that trudge up and down the highways and byways of my body fighting off infectious invaders and keeping my bodily fluids pure and fresh. The minutiae of health care are as an open book to me. So I was somewhat annoyed when a recent rebellion in my mouth caused me a few problems.

It all started, as so many of these things do, with a slice of bread; an attractively brown slice of bread, nice and healthy, chock full of fibre, anti-cholesterol oats and lots of seeds. Some of the seeds appeared to have taken advantage of the cooking process to change their chemical composition slightly. They had undergone a rather arcane phase change, and now appeared to be made of a specially hardened chrome-steel alloy. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. Trust me - I know these things; I've got a degree in chemistry. That's why I work with computers all day and every day.

I tried to avoid biting down on these devil seeds and I began to wonder if perhaps I should extract them from the bread and use them as reloads in my shotgun cartridges. They seemed almost to have been designed for the purpose. No sooner had I begun to consider this idea than I heard a great "Aha!" inside my mouth, closely followed by the ratcheting sound of a shotgun being made ready for use.



Bang!

Lumps fell off my upper right molar and the armed rebels in my mouth began to cavort with glee.

"The revolution has started lads. Free vodka for the workers! Free white stick with every bottle!"

I rang my dentist and explained the problem.

"We can fit you in at 3.00pm."

"I'll be there."

The edges of my broken tooth were sharp and I had to be careful not to move my tongue across it in case I got cut. Volunteers from the rebel army tried valiantly to drag my tongue up and over to the tooth, but because it was right at the back of my mouth and was thus somewhat awkward to get to, they failed in their purpose. The revolutionary leaders had them shot, and I spat the bodies into the gutter.

The dentist sat me down in a comfortable chair and reclined me at a suitable angle. A wide screen LCD monitor on the wall was connected to his computer and on it was displayed my dental records and a diagram of my teeth. He probed my mouth with his instruments and compared what he found in there with the picture on the monitor. Suddenly the computer's screensaver kicked in, and lines of green symbols extracted from the movie

**The Matrix** began to scroll down the screen.

"Wonderful," said the dentist. "It matches the inside of your mouth perfectly."

"i' 'a 'o," I said. "a's 'ood 'o 'ow!"

"Well," said the dentist, "actually it only matches for quite small values of perfectly. Your upper right molar appears to be on the point of disintegrating. Several large lumps have dropped off and there are cracks in the surface structure indicating that several more large lumps will drop off soon. I think I spotted a few armed rebels hiding in the cavities and they seem to be equipped with dynamite and detonators, so your tooth may not have long to live."

He swung me into an upright position and removed his instruments from my mouth. He put the instruments carefully on his tray. There was a saxophone, a cello, a flute and a violin. The violin was a Stradivarius. Nothing but the very best instruments for my dentist.

"I could fill the tooth," he said, "but it wouldn't be a satisfactory solution. It won't be very long before the rest of it falls apart. What you really need is a crown."

"What's a crown," I asked with vague black and white memories of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 floating through my head.

"One thousand two hundred and eight dollars and forty two cents," said the dentist. "And two more appointments."

"No, really. What's a crown?" I asked.

"Well," said the dentist, "we reduce your tooth to a stump using an angle grinder, a pneumatic jackhammer, two steamrollers and possibly an atomic bomb. Then we superglue a lump of gold to the tooth and cover the gold with porcelain."

"Why do you cover the gold with porcelain?"

"So that nobody knows you've got gold in your mouth. It's a safety precaution to stop you getting mugged when you go out on the razzle of an evening."

"That sounds wise," I agreed. "But I don't do much razzling these days, so I doubt that it will be a problem. How do you think the rebels in charge of the revolution in my mouth will cope?"

"I should imagine that they'll accept the *de facto* situation as *de jure*," he said, and I was forced to agree with that incisive insight. "But even if they don't," he continued thoughtfully, "they'll probably try to sell the gold on the black market to finance the purchase of more weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps I'll put two dabs of superglue on the crown so they won't be able to lever it off in the night when you're asleep."

The grinding proved to be less of a problem than I had anticipated. Atomic bombs were not needed; conventional explosives were all that were required. The pneumatic drill *did* spin out of control and emerge from the top of my head in a shower of brains, but no serious damage was done. I wasn't using those particular brain cells for anything important. At the end of the process, the rebels surrendered and were safely incarcerated in an antibiotic camp.

Currently I have a temporary, plastic crown stuck to the stump with library paste so that it can be easily removed when the time comes to fit the real crown, which is being transmuted by dark alchemical rites from a lump of lead even as we speak. Apparently this process takes at least two weeks. Since the temporary crown is designed for easy removal I have been forbidden to eat brown bread with shotgun-shell seeds and I have also been forbidden to floss. Both these actions, it seems, are likely to strip the temporary crown from the stump thus causing another, possibly very painful, revolution in my mouth.

But a crown, even a temporary one, is still a crown. I expect you to bow next time we meet.

# Coaching Days

I was booked on quite a late coach back to Wellington from Palmerston North. As it happened, I managed to finish my business in Palmerston early, and so I went to the coach company to enquire about the possibility of changing the booking to an earlier time.

That was my third mistake.

The first mistake was making the original booking on that there intraweb thingy, and the second mistake was paying for it with my company credit card. Those actions immediately turned me into a second class citizen of the coaching world, and help was not forthcoming.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the nice lady at the counter, "but I can't change an internet booking. I'm only allowed to make modifications to *proper* bookings. But I'll tell you what, here's an 0800 phone number to ring - you might be able to persuade head office to do something for you..."

She seemed genuinely sorry that the hidebound rules and regulations prevented her from helping me. She really wanted to please me by changing my booking, but since I'd made an improper booking in the first place, her hands were electronically tied and there really was nothing she could do.

"Have you a phone I can use?" I asked.

"Of course, sir; you can use this one." She proffered a complex device that looked capable of controlling a cruise missile bound for Iraq. "Press button five, then press the blue button that says 'External' on it, turn the light emitting diode gauge to 4.5 on the Richter scale and then dial the number," she instructed me.

I did as I was told. Then I fought my way through the elaborate defences erected by the alarmingly vague

automated menu which insisted on offering me choices that had nothing to do with what I wanted to achieve, and finally I ended up talking to an extraordinarily dim and unhelpful American lady who appeared to have recently graduated with distinction from a course on customer dissatisfaction.

I explained that I'd like to transfer to an earlier coach from Palmerston North to Wellington and that the lady behind the counter couldn't do anything for me because the original booking had been made on the internet.

"How can I help you sir?" asked the American lady.

I said it all again.

"Do you have a booking number?"

"5995536", I told her, and I could hear her computer grinding as it extracted me from her database.

"That coach ride was booked on the internet," she said.

"Yes, I know that," I told her. "That's why I'm ringing you. The lady here at Palmerston North said that you would be able to do the transfer for me."

"So how can I help you sir?"

I explained again what I wanted.

"But it was booked on the internet," she said, puzzled.

"Yes," I said. "So can you transfer the booking to an earlier coach? I'm told there is one at 4.50pm."

I heard a distinct *clang* as the penny finally dropped. Lightbulbs sizzled and glowed above her solid ivory skull.

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

There was a long pause and I could hear keys clattering as she typed furiously at her computer. Then she said, "There's a coach from Palmerston North to Wellington at 4.50pm."

"Thank you," I said, raising my eyes to heaven. "Can you transfer me on to it?"

"There's a surcharge fee of \$1 for the transfer," she said. "How would you like to pay for that?"

"Oh I'll just give the cash to the lady at the counter here in Palmerston North," I said. "I have a shiny new dollar in my

pocket which I can dedicate to the purpose."

"I'm sorry," said the American lady," but the original booking was made on the internet and paid for by a credit card, so we cannot accept payment across the counter. You will have to put it on the credit card. Can I have your credit card number?"

With a superhuman effort, I refrained from asking her why she had given me a choice of methods for paying the \$1 surcharge, since only one acceptable payment mechanism existed.

"Don't you already have it?" I asked. "After all, you've got a complete record of the original booking."

"I really need you to give me your credit card number at this time," she said, her language becoming more impenetrably American as the task she was facing began to overwhelm her with its complexity. I decided to just go with the flow and I quoted the number to her.

"And the expiry date?"

I told her.

"And the name on the card?"

I told her that as well.

"That's the original fee of \$34 and a \$1 surcharge, making \$35 dollars in total for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said, slurring thirty into thirty.

"It's a transfer," I said, "not a new booking. Shouldn't you just be charging me \$1?"

"The original booking was made on the internet and paid for with a credit card," she explained to me.

"Yes, I know."

"So that's the original fee of \$34 and a \$1 surcharge, making \$35 dollars in total for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said again, in the robotic tones of a *Star Trek* computer.

I could almost hear her brain frying under the stress of my unusual and complicated requirements.

"OK," I said, giving up the struggle.

"Booking number 5995536," she said. "I'll change it momentarily."

I winced, deeply hurt by this abuse of the language. Would she really change the booking for only a moment and then, perforce, change it back again? But I kept quiet. If I said anything to her about the *proper* meaning of the word she had just inflicted on my eardrum, I was afraid that she might blow a circuit breaker and I'd have to start all over again. Anyway, the coach company already had its own definitions of 'proper' and 'improper'. Who was I to rock the boat?

"Booking number 5995536 is confirmed for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said.

"Thank you," I said, and she rang off.

"Well, I think the transfer has been done," I said to the Palmerston North lady. "Can you check it on your machine and, if possible, print me a piece of paper with the details?"

"Of course," she said, "no worries." And thirty seconds later the paper was in my hand.

I await the credit card bill with interest. It seems highly likely that it will show a charge of \$34 for the original booking and an additional charge of \$35 for the new one which will almost certainly lead to some interesting arguments with the bean counters at work as they endeavour to figure out just what kind of ingenious scam I'm trying to defraud them with this time. It will take reams of paper and countless phone calls to clear up the mess. The administrative effort involved will cost the company orders of magnitude more money than the cost of the original coach fare. As a direct result, profits in the next financial year will be seriously lower than forecast, the share price will tumble, bankruptcy will loom and all my friends will lose their jobs.

And it's all my fault.

# Robin And The House Of Blue Lights

"Pfft!" said Robin's computer.

"Excuse me?" asked Robin, somewhat taken aback.

"I said Pfft!" said the computer. "Have you got cloth ears? Pfft!"

"But what does it mean?" asked Robin.

"Mean?" said the computer. "It means Pfft! That's what it means."

"Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Robin.

"Pfft!" said the computer with an air of finality, and all its lights went out and the gentle humming of its parts faded away into silence. Robin pressed buttons here, there and everywhere. Nothing happened; the computer remained silent, lifeless and pfftless, pining for the fjords.

"Ah!" said Robin. "So *that's* what Pfft! means. It means I need a new computer."

For many years, when overtaken with overwhelming techno-lust, I have been in the habit of slaking that lust in the welcoming wallet of my friend Helen who builds computers to order, stuffs them full of the sexiest electronics she can find, and then sells them for ridiculously low prices. In the days when we lived just up the road from each other at the top of the North Island, this was an easy thing for me to do. However these days I live at the bottom of the North Island and she lives at the bottom of the South Island where her cats spend their days hunting sheep and their nights howling rabidly at the moon. But I couldn't see why the distance between us should make any difference to the habits of a lifetime and so I sent her an email:

Robin needs a new computer.



Once I had broached the subject, I retreated into the background while Helen and Robin spent some considerable time discussing the finer points of graphics cards and processor speeds before finally coming up with a design for a super-computer housed in a gleaming silver case fitted with huge swirly ventilation slots that are protected by an embedded wire mesh behind which electrical components can be seen lurking slyly.

No sooner was the specification agreed upon than a courier delivered a large cardboard box to the door. Robin unpacked it and drooled.

"Careful you don't short circuit the motherboard with saliva," I warned.

Hurriedly she thrust cables into appropriate looking holes and turned the computer on. It glowed cool blue round the edges and through the sides. Perhaps the computer was so powerful that the electrons were moving between the components faster than the speed of light and so we were being bathed in Cerenkov radiation. I adjusted my lead lined underwear appropriately and nodded with admiration while Robin explored the many features of this undeniably sexy box.

"Look at that!" she exclaimed with glee, pointing out the gauges and meters on the front of the case that were displaying the temperature of vital internal components.

"Oh wow!" she gasped as she watched the *blinkenlights* flashing on and off in boastful and hypnotically complex patterns. "Everyone knows how important proper blinkenlights are," she assured me solemnly. "I can't think how we ever managed without them."

In addition to *looking* powerful enough to control the finances of a galactic empire while still having enough grunt left over to play graphics-intensive games in its copious spare time, this computer really *is* powerful enough to control the finances of a galactic empire while still having enough grunt left over to play graphics-intensive games in

its copious spare time. For once, function follows form. I began to feel quite inadequate and more than a little jealous.

"If you are an extra specially good boy during the day," said Robin sweetly, "I'll let you touch the case for five minutes in the evening before you go to bed."

What a thrilling promise! Fair sent shivers down me timbers, it did.

There was only one problem. Everything the computer did was done silently. Robin examined the sound card carefully. There were six identically unlabelled holes into which it was possible to plug the cable that connected the card to the speakers. The designers of sound cards appear to be in love with vague ambiguities. Robin took the cable out of its current hole and tried another one. It made no difference to the lack of sound so she tried again with another hole. Not unnaturally, it was only when she plugged the cable into the sixth and last hole that the computer finally began to make noises. What a relief!

"I've got a birthday coming up," Robin hinted at me.

"Really?" I asked, as if I had forgotten all about the strategic reminder notices I kept finding written on the fridge with the words from the magnetic poetry kit we got given as a wedding present. Since the magnetic poetry kit is the erotic edition, there was more than a certain piquancy to the reminders, and I was quite looking forward to her birthday. Strange delights beckoned.

"Yes," said Robin, "I really do have a birthday coming up. Don't you think my old beige monitor looks a little *infra dig* when set alongside the new computer?"

"It's got a nineteen inch screen," I pointed out.

"But it's *beige*," said Robin. "And it's bulky as well. It's got a really old fashioned cathode ray tube in it. It's so twentieth century!"

"But it's got a nineteen inch screen," I said.

The computer flashed a few of its *blinkerlights*. "It's *beige*," said the computer forcefully, experimenting with its new-found ability to make sounds. "And cathode rays give me a headache in all my diodes; particularly the ones down my right side."

"Don't you mean the ones down your left side?" I asked.

"No," said the computer. "I haven't got any diodes down my left side. I keep my spare capacity there. I've got rather a lot of that," it added smugly.

"OK," I said to Robin, "let's go to the shopping mall."

A new shop has recently opened in the shopping mall. It has a noticeboard outside it which proclaims, in large friendly letters: We Fix PC's. Because of the apostrophical misuse on the notice, I have always refused to enter the shop, but Robin is less sensitive to punctuational abuse than I am and she has browsed around inside it several times and has been quite impressed with the things that she found there. It is a one man and a dog operation (I think the dog wrote the notice) and therefore they have a very small, but very carefully selected, stock of computer bits and pieces for sale.

"Can I help you?" asked the man.

"Wuff," said the dog, looking up from a complex spreadsheet displayed on a massive wide screen LCD monitor of fearsome proportions and alarmingly bold sensuality. He wagged his tail and typed a complex mathematical formula for calculating the tensile strength of a bone into a vacant cell. I began to change my mind about who might have written the notice.

"I want one of *those*," said Robin, pointing at the screen in front of the dog.

"Well hello there," smirked the screen in a sultry voice, "I'd really like to go home with *you!* Just wait 'till you check out the depth of my colours."

"Wuff," said the dog, ears drooping with disappointment.

"That's the only one we have in stock," said the man. "I'll go and get the box."

"I notice that you fix PC's," I said to the man when he returned with the box for the LCD monitor. "Do you, perchance, also fix PCs?"

"Yes," he said, looking slightly puzzled.

"We have a computer that said Pfft!" I explained. "Do you have any advice for us?"

"Ah!" he said wisely. "I know exactly what that means. Bring it in and I'll take a look at it."

"What does it mean?" asked Robin.

"Mean?" said the man. "It means Pfft! That's what it means. Could be quite serious. Or possibly not."

We brought the new screen home and Robin retired to her room to enjoy her hugely graphical games. It was obvious that I wasn't going to see her again until bedtime (and probably not even then) so I went downstairs to my distinctly primitive looking computer and clicked on the icon that connects me to the internet.

"No dial tone," it said smugly. "And therefore no internet either. Go away!"

I picked up the phone that is connected to the same socket. It was dead as a very dead thing. I was not being lied to. Hmmm. What about the other phone sockets in the house?

I went up to Robin's room. She was absorbed in building the Roman Empire. The new graphics card and huge monitor allowed her to zoom in and micro-manage every blade of grass in Italy. She didn't even notice me come in to her room. I unplugged the cable leading from the socket and plugged the phone in. I was greeted by the warm, friendly sound of a dial tone and the lights on my phone lit up. I plugged Robin's cable back into the wall socket and went downstairs.

"No dial tone!" said the internet connection icon. "It isn't your lucky day, is it?"

Fortunately there are two phone lines coming in to the house. I used the other one to phone TelstraClear.

"I understand simple words and phrases," said the TelstraClear robot that answered my call. "Please tell me which of the following options best describes your needs."

It gave me several choices.

"Report a fault," I said.

"Did you mean debauch a sloth?" it asked.

"Report a fault," I said again.

"I do not know how to deport a malt," said the robot. "I will connect you to a human being who is an expert in divorcing vaults."

The phone rang in my ear and then a human voice said, "Salt department. How can I help you?"

I explained my problem.

"We'll send a technician round tomorrow," said the human voice.

The technician tested my socket and found it wanting. I showed him Robin's socket. He was greatly impressed.

"That's live," he said as he unplugged himself and put Robin's cable back.

He carefully traced the phone line from the top of the gently rotting pole out on the footpath to a mysterious grey box attached just to the right of my front door. Then he dismantled the box and attached meters to various cables. He examined their dials with a frown on his face.

"That's not possible," he said, and he did it all again with the same result. Desperate measures seemed to be called for, so he scratched his head. As it invariably does, this worked perfectly and the answer was revealed to him. All he had to do now was reveal it to me.

"The cable from your new computer is shorting out the phone line," he said. He unplugged the cable from the socket in Robin's room. "Now go and check your socket downstairs."

I did so and was greeted with the melodious hum of a dial tone.

He plugged the cable back into the wall. "Now go and test your socket again."

Dead as a dead thing. A small pile of dodo corpses lay rotting around the phone.

"See?" he said triumphantly.

I stared suspiciously at the back of Robin's computer. For the first time I noticed that the phone cable was plugged into the network socket. It wasn't a perfect fit (the plugs are the same shape, though a slightly different size) but it fitted well enough to make contact with some wires that disagreed with it and which gave it indigestion of the phone circuit, thus causing dodos in the downstairs room. I carefully removed the cable from the network socket and plugged it into the modem socket where it belonged.

Dial tones! No dodos. Scarcely even any dodo's.

The technician packed his bags and left, happy with a job well done. Robin, glowing blue, returned to Rome. I went downstairs to check my email.

# Alan And Robin Go Overland

It is a truth known to all travellers that interesting journeys always begin at uncivilized hours of the morning. And so, bleary eyed and tetchy, we took a taxi from our warm, comfortable bed to Wellington Railway Station where we joined the check in queue for the Overlander; the train that takes at least twelve hours to travel between Wellington and Auckland.

The man in front of us pushed his ticket through the window and the lady examined it suspiciously.

"Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup>?" she asked.

The man nodded. "Today," he said.

"No," said the ticket lady. "Yesterday."

They began to argue. Eventually they came to an agreement of some kind and he slouched away. It was our turn now and the lady was in a bad mood.

"Tickets," she snapped. I handed them over. "Mr Robinson?" she asked as she checked my name against the list of approved passengers and failed to find it.

"No," I said. "Mr Robson." I read her list upside down and showed her my name on it. She looked bewildered, but nevertheless drew a line through my name and wrote my seat allocation on the ticket. "Carriage Q, seats 11C and D," she said and handed the ticket back. We went off to check our luggage in.

"Where are you travelling to today?" asked the baggage check lady.

"Auckland," I said.

"Auckland?" She sounded surprised. "Really? You're going all the way to Auckland?"

"Auckland," I confirmed. "Right to the end of the line."

"All right. If you say so."

She tied a green ticket to our two bags and gave me the receipts. We had a black wheelie case and a backpack. She dumped the bags in a higgledy piggledy pile of other luggage on the concrete floor of the station. A man with a trolley came and picked up some of the bags and trundled them off to the baggage car. Our black wheelie case vanished but our backpack remained forlornly behind. The trolley man came back for another load but still our backpack remained unclaimed. It was now sitting about six feet away from the few remaining bags; guaranteed to be forgotten. I couldn't stand the suspense any more.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "I think I'll take this as hand luggage." I picked up the backpack.

"No worries," said the baggage lady.

We went to the platform to get on the train. It had four carriages labelled A, Q, B and C. Railway staff use an odd alphabet of their own devising. We entered carriage Q and took our seats. The man who was travelling yesterday was asleep across the aisle.

The train pulled slowly out of the station and our journey had begun. An incoherent lady came on the PA system and explained that we weren't supposed to put heavy things in the overhead rack and that the café counter would open soon for the serving of refreshments. There was a menu in the seat pocket in front of us.

At least, I think that's what she said. Her syntax was so twisted and her words so out of touch with each other that she was impossible to understand. A stream of utter gibberish would be followed by a very long silence as she realised that there was no way at all that she could ever bring the current sentence to a successful conclusion. So she would leave it in mid-creek without a trace of a paddle and start a new one. Also every sentence started with the word also.



To be fair to the lady, we learned later that the person who usually made the announcements was on holiday and she was standing in for him. She was probably scared stiff at the thought of talking to a train full of people; fear does strange things to the syntax.

I went to the café counter and ordered refreshments. The man behind the counter was new and had never seen a coffee machine or a till in his life before and didn't know what to do with either of them. Aeons slowly passed as he tried to figure them out. When I got back to my seat, noticeably older and greyer, I checked the prices on the menu in the seat pocket. He had overcharged me by three dollars, but I had no proof; it was too late to complain.

Later in the journey, I went grumpily back to the café counter. We went through the same tedious rigmarole and this time he undercharged me by five dollars. Again, I said nothing. I felt that my net profit of two dollars was fair compensation for the strain and stress of watching his utter incompetence.

The train went up hill and down dale across indescribably beautiful crags and crannies. Sheep and cattle ran away from the noisy monster and a man called Kevin waved enthusiastically to us as we passed his farm. He makes a point of always being there to wave at the Overlander. Nobody knows why. Recently there were rumours that the Overlander service would be cancelled. Kevin went into a deep depression. However, the news that the service was not being cancelled after all soon cheered him up again.

As we trundled over the central plateau the snow-capped mountains brooded on the horizon. I took lots of movie footage of their stationary majesty. They were a little shy and kept hiding behind trees. We stopped at the station at National Park and now they couldn't escape. I took lots more movies of them as they sat silently aloof.

The south bound Overlander shot past on its way to Wellington. We found this surprising as our crew had told us

that they were swapping with the south bound crew at National Park. However a few minutes later the mystery was solved as the train reversed in to the station and parked neatly behind ours. The crews duly changed over and then the south bound train pulled slowly out of the station chased enthusiastically by a small yapping dog who came prancing back to us, extremely proud of his courage at scaring the noisy monster away.

Onwards ever onwards. We crossed spectacular viaducts and wound our way down the Raurimu Spiral to the (relatively) flat lands a long way below. And so to Auckland where we stayed with friends.

A few days later it was time to repeat the journey in the opposite direction. With sparrows farting all around us, we made our way to the modern, hi-tech Britomart station in Auckland. A large group of confused people milled around. There was no obvious place to check in as there had been in Wellington. Everybody asked each other what to do and nobody knew the answer. Eventually the PA cleared its throat and made an announcement:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed to the top end of platform 3 where the train manager will allocate seats and you can check your baggage."

Platform 3 is straight and flat. It has no slope whatsoever. It has two ends, but neither one is obviously a top or a bottom. Where to go? What to do? Somebody stopped a passing, railway-uniformed man.

"Which end is the top end of platform 3?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "No spikee eenglish!"

We milled around some more. The PA got very annoyed:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed **immediately** to the top end of platform 3 where the train manager will allocate seats and you can check your baggage."

Nobody moved. The PA got really pissed off:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed ***immediately***, in other words right now to the top end of platform 3."

Somebody spotted a dot in the distance. It was a desk with an angry lady sitting at it. She waved impatiently. A queue formed.

Eventually we got our boarding pass and we checked our baggage. We were sitting in carriage Q again. We waited for the journey to start. The lady at the desk continued doggedly to check people in. She worked at the speed of a rheumatic snail; one of the endangered ones that are too slow to escape from predators. The train left Auckland twenty minutes late.

The journey proceeded. Every so often, the PA would announce:

"We have just passed *tangled-name...*"

It would then spend the next ten minutes telling us about all the magnificent things we would have seen if only we'd known about them before they passed us by.

I went to the café counter in search of refreshments. Again a bewildered person took my order.

"Twelve dollars please."

I was fed up with this. "No, I said. It's nineteen dollars."

"?"

"Add it up again," I advised.

There was much head scratching and pushing of buttons. Several other people were consulted and they all stared suspiciously at the till. Eventually a consensus was arrived at. I was right!

"Nineteen dollars, please."

I passed over a twenty dollar bill. Rather surprisingly, they managed to work out the correct change. I took my refreshments back to my seat and got there just in time to wave to Kevin, though he probably couldn't see me through the smoked glass.

Children threw stones at the train and once we shuddered to an emergency halt and an engineer got down from the cab and removed a bicycle that was lying across the track. We got into Wellington very late and very tired.

But despite all that we'd both do it again in an instant. It's a wonderful journey with so much to see. However next time we will take our own refreshments...

# Alan Gets A Toy

I'm writing this article on my new computer. It's about the size, shape and weight of a large(ish) paperback book – a slimline stand-alone novel by somebody like Joe Haldeman, you understand; not an immense door stopping wodge of a book which is itself only one volume of a twelve part forest-destroying trilogy by Robert Jordan.

When I've finished using my new computer, I can close it down and slip it into a pocket or a bag and carry it to my next destination. In terms of system resources and general computing grunt it is approximately 10 million times as powerful as the mainframe computer I worked on in 1971. Indeed, this one small computer sitting on my lap probably has more computing oomph than the sum total possessed by the entire world in 1971.

And it fits in my pocket.

The machine is an Asus Eee. The three ee(e)s stand for Easy to learn, Easy to work, Easy to play. I'll stop writing for a moment so you can go away and vomit.

Ready to carry on?

The basic machine costs only \$599. I got a memory upgrade and some extra storage so in fact I ended up spending \$748. But it's still a bargain, however you do the arithmetic. It is the neatest gadget I've ever owned and I'm passionately fond of it. Who would have believed, in 1971, that computers would ever be as small and as powerful and as cheap as that? Only science fiction writers and their devoted readers. We're very, very special, you and I.

# Robin Gets Cut Up

"Does this hurt?" asked the doctor as he poked Robin in a pokeable place. She let out an Australian shriek and leapt for the ceiling. The nurse reached casually up, pulled her down again and settled her back in the bed. By and large, you can't surprise a nurse; they've seen it all before.

"I'll take that as a yes," said the doctor. "Nurse, I think we need some pain relief here. Go and get the morphine syringes."

He scribbled a signature on an authorization form and the nurse bustled off. Soon she was back with two syringes filled with a colourless fluid. She injected the first one into Robin who began to relax a bit. For the first time since arriving at the hospital an hour ago, the pain was at a bearable level. The nurse frowned for a moment and then used the second syringe. Robin relaxed completely.

"I feel a bit light headed," she said.

"That's only to be expected," said the nurse. "You've got two syringes full of morphine in you."

"Nice," said Robin dreamily. "Can I have some more?"

"We're taking you up to the ward now," said the nurse. "We've made an appointment for a scan so we can find out exactly what's happening inside you. It's likely that you'll have to go into surgery at very short notice, so you aren't allowed any food. But you are allowed an occasional sip of water."

Robin nodded. She didn't care; she had two syringes of morphine in her. She was pain free and as a bonus she felt deliciously swimmy. They wheeled her up to the ward, attached a drip to her arm and hung a "Do Not Feed The Animals" notice on the foot of the bed.

"There's a call button here," said the nurse. "If the pain comes back and you need more pain relief, just press the button."

The hours drifted by. Every so often someone came and gave Robin a sip of water. Eventually the morphine started to wear off and they gave her some pills to take the edge off the pain again. Robin began to get bored. More hours passed.

"When is something going to happen?" she asked.

"Soon," said the nurse. "We work on hospital time here. It's a bit like the Spanish concept of mañana, only not nearly so hasty. A hospital minute is at least an hour in real time; sometimes longer. We'll be taking you to the scanning machine in about five minutes. So just be a very patient patient. You'll like the scanning machine when you get to see it. It goes buzz."

"I'm hurting again," said Robin. "Can I have more pain relief?"

The nurse went to get the tablets. When she returned, there was a doctor frowning over Robin's chart. "What a lot of tablets they've been giving you," he said.

"My tummy hurts," said Robin. The doctor poked her pokeable place again. "Ow!" said Robin. "See?"

"I've brought some more pain relief tablets," said the nurse. "Can I give them to her?"

Just then Robin's tummy emitted a gigantic gurgle.

"Aha!" said the nurse, the light of understanding dawning on her face. "You're not really in pain - those are stomach cramps. You're just hungry, that's all."

"Better give her the tablets anyway," said the doctor. "It's going to be a very long time before she eats again."

"Pain relief tablets for hunger pangs," muttered the nurse. "I don't know what the world's coming to."

Five hospital minutes later they wheeled Robin off to the machine that went buzz. Eventually it disgorged a blurred

and blobby picture and everyone gathered round to examine it. It didn't take long to reach a verdict.

"You've got appendicitis. We'll operate this afternoon."

"I told you it was appendicitis two days ago," said Robin.

"Two days ago you were thirty years too old to have appendicitis," said the doctor. "The symptoms were quite atypical. We all knew that whatever you had it couldn't possibly be appendicitis. We were absolutely certain it was something else."

"Thank goodness you've got a machine that goes buzz to tell you when you're wrong," said Robin.

"One of the first things I learned in medical school" said the doctor, "is that under conditions of constant temperature and pressure the organism being studied will do whatever it damn well pleases. That's why we need machines that go buzz. They help to keep us humble."

A gaggle of nurses gathered around Robin and presented her with bits of paper.

"This is a consent form for the operation. Please sign here, here and here so that we can cut you up into little pieces. This is a form for the anaesthetist so that he can make you unconscious. Sign here and here.

"What do you want us to do with your appendix after we take it out? Do you want to keep it? It is yours after all."

"Oh yes please!" said Robin eagerly. "Of course I want to keep it."

"Ewwww!" The nurses seemed quite taken aback. One of them flipped frantically through her pieces of paper.

"I haven't got the form that lets you keep it," she cried. "Nobody's

*ever* asked me if they can keep the slimy, rubbery bits we cut out of them before." She bustled off in search of the special form.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked one of the other nurses, consumed with prurient curiosity.



"I thought I'd put it on the coffee table in the lounge," said Robin. "It would make a nice ornament."

"Ewww!" The nurses pulled faces at each other.

"Perhaps I'll have a dinner party when I get out. I could put the appendix on the dining table as a conversation piece."

"Ewwwwwwwwwwwwwwww!!!!!!"

"If I ever get bored with it, I could give it to the cats as a special treat for their tea."

"Eww!!!!!!!!!!"

The nurse who had gone looking for the special form that would allow Robin to keep her appendix returned, blowing dust off a rather grey piece of paper.

"They reprint these forms when they are all used up," she said. "And every time they reprint them they put the re-printing date on the bottom of the form."

Robin and the other nurses looked interested.

"This one was last reprinted in 1958," said the nurse. Robin smiled with secret satisfaction as they wheeled her away, knocked her out, cut her open and took her appendix out. And she hasn't stopped smiling since.

# Harpo Gets A Hair Cut

Harpo the cat came for a cuddle. He went straight to Robin because he hates me. I'm no good at cuddling. All I'm good for is putting food into bowls. Apparently I do that quite well. He comes back for more food almost every day, when there's a 'q' in the month. But right now he wanted a cuddle. He climbed up onto Robin's chest, thrust his head into her armpit, inhaled deeply and began to purr with pleasure. Robin scratched his head, checking out the scabs from his latest fight. They seemed to be healing well. She ran her hands all over his long black fur and he wriggled with ecstasy.

"Gosh," said Robin. "His fur is really thick and matted in places. It's just a solid lump. He's never going to be able to untangle it himself. I think we ought to cut it off for him."

"He's not going to like that," I said. "Remember, he's got lots of pointy bits and he knows how to use them."

"We'll put clothes pegs on his neck," said Robin. "He's a wonderful clothes peg cat."

The theory goes that since mother cats carry their kittens around by the scruff of the neck, pressure on the scruff will make the cat go all limp and pliant so that mum can take care of it. Clothes pegs on the neck apparently feel just like mum, and many cats will let you do almost anything to them as long as the pegs are in place. Others, of course, will just try to rip your arm off and hit you with the soggy end if you put pegs on them. We've been very lucky with Harpo – he's the best clothes peg cat that's ever owned us.

I went to get the pegs, Robin went to get the scissors. I held the end that bites while Robin snipped at the matted fur on the other end. Despite the pegs, Harpo wriggled and cried. He obviously didn't like what we were doing at all.

"I think it's hurting him," said Robin. "I think there's more than just matted fur here. There might be a wound underneath it."

Harpo shrieked with sudden anger and tried to bite me. The pegs simply weren't working.

"I think we'd better go to the emergency vet."

The emergency vet picked up an electric trimmer and buzzed it over Harpo's matted fur. It came off in great heavy black lumps. Harpo protested loudly but it did him no good. The vet continued to trim the fur. Then he gave his official diagnosis.

"Daggy bum," he said.

"Is that all?" asked Robin. "No wound or anything?"

"Just a daggy bum," said the vet.

"So why did he complain so much when we were cutting it?" I asked.

"Because he's a cat," said the vet. "Probably he was just telling you to stop messing with his bottom. I can't say I blame him. I'd tell you to stop messing with my bottom if you did it to me."

He shaved off some more fur and peered closely in order to confirm his diagnosis.

"Yes," he said. "That's all it is."

He turned to his computer and typed "daggy bum". The computer didn't seem to mind.

"Now comes the bad news," said the vet, smiling sweetly. "The diagnosis and treatment comes to \$88."

"Shit and corruption," hissed Harpo. "Just wait till I get you home!"

# Soothing The Savage Breast

Back in the days of my youth, when dinosaurs roamed the West Riding Of Yorkshire and television sets were powered by steam, music was a hugely important part of my life. Generally speaking, I was a folky; most other people that I knew were rockers. Naturally we didn't talk to each other. They were musical philistines. So, presumably, was I; in their eyes at least.

My father would sit in his chair moaning bitterly about "twanging guitars" whenever *Top Of The Pops* was on the television. I was always glued to the screen because all the girls on the dance floor wore very short skirts and the cameraman had a knicker fetish. He kept trying to peer up the girls' legs as they twitched like epileptics to whatever group was currently miming a hit. Every so often, if you were very lucky, you'd get a flash.

"They can't be good songs," said my father. "If they were good songs, The Black And White Minstrels would sing them."

"Yes, dad."

I didn't think much of most of the music on *Top Of The Pops* either. But I'd have died before I admitted it to my father. I got my real musical thrills late at night beneath the bed covers as I tuned my transistor to Radio Luxembourg. It crackled and whined and faded in and out, but in between the interference and the adverts a whole new musical world opened up for me.

No knickers on the radio though.

I spent my teens and twenties travelling round to obscure pubs where folk singing was committed. I learned many

things - I learned that *Whiskey In The Jar* is a cliché and it must never be sung on pain of being booed. I learned that after six pints of Guinness, anybody can sing a folk song and usually they will. I learned that folk singers stick their right forefinger in their ear when they sing, unless, of course, they are called Martin Carthy (who played, on occasion, with Steeleye Span). He would stick his right forefinger in his right ear and his left forefinger in his left ear when singing, thus making it hard for him to play the guitar accompaniment. Memory insists that he stood on his right leg and ran his left foot up and down the frets, strumming the strings with his willy. But that may well have been a hallucination induced by six pints of Guinness.

Many musicians started to marry the folk tradition to contemporary rock music. I heard them on John Peel's radio show and I hunted down their albums and, on rare occasions, I saw them in the clubs. Most of the groups consisted of two or three men playing instruments and a woman with a golden voice that was almost an instrument in its own right singing all the songs. I fell in love with Maddy Prior, Sandy Denny Jacqui McShee and Annie Haslam. Many of the groups performed the traditional finger-in-the-ear songs but they also wrote a lot of their own material. Some of it even had a driving beat. Suddenly folk music was modern and trendy. Perhaps I wasn't a complete philistine after all. Sometimes I saw bewildered rockers looking very out of place in the folk clubs.

"Nice Guinness!"

"Yes it is. The blackness of the drink matches your tee shirt perfectly and the white head looks just like the ones around your nose."

"When does the head banging start?"

"After they sing *Whiskey In The Jar*."

"They don't play very loudly do they?"

"Pardon? I can't hear you over the noise; they've really got the amplifiers turned up high tonight."

We didn't have a lot in common.

Then somebody clicked their fingers and forty years passed, just like that. Wellington was hosting a weekend of rock and roll. Superannuated wrinklies with corrugated iron skin and no eardrums were playing a concert in the stadium. Rumour had it that their contract stipulated that there must be wheelchair access to the drum riser at all times. Scores of groupies were recruited from the Malvina Major Retirement Village in Khandallah. They had their hair done specially, and they were all of a twitter.

Robin and I took the bus into town. It was our wedding anniversary and we were going out to dinner.

The bus stopped at every blade of grass, and lots of people in black jeans, black tee shirts and tattoos got on. One individualist was wearing a white tee shirt and they made her sit in a seat all by herself. They carefully left their beer bottles behind in the shelter and dutifully stubbed out their joints before they climbed on to the bus. They knew that smoking and drinking were forbidden on the bus and they were anxious to obey the rules like the good little rockers they were. They were all high and happy; they'd been preparing carefully for the concert for hours and hours. One of them had his eyeballs rolled so far up in his head that he'd had to drill holes in the top of his skull in order to see out.

"How much to the stadium?"

"\$3.00," said the bus driver.

There was much scrambling around in pockets for loose change. They were all from out of town and none of them had a magic bus card. One of them picked up a single dollar coin and gave it to the driver with an air of triumph.

"The fare's \$3.00", said the bus driver.

The rocker looked puzzled. "Yeah," he said vaguely. "That's right. Three."

One of his friends reached over and handed the driver another two dollars. "He's a bit out of it at the moment,"

explained the friend. "I don't know what he's been on, but he's seeing three of everything."

"Then god help him when Ozzie Osbourne comes on stage,' said the driver as he handed over the ticket. "Three of him will be a sight too terrible to see."

Most of the rockers were teenagers. They were far too young to remember Ozzie's first bat (mind you, it's doubtful if even Ozzie remembers his first bat these days, so they had lots in common with him). There was the occasional middle aged greaser looking very self-conscious in his torn and faded twenty year old reunion tour tee shirt and stick on tattoos, but mostly they were teenagers, chattering gaily and txtng thr frnds.

The driver closed the doors, ready to pull away from the stop.

"Wait, wait!"

One of the young rockers raced up to the driver and began whispering and gesticulating wildly. The driver sighed and opened the doors. The young man got out and ran down the road. He looked round the corner and began jumping up and down and waving his arms.

"The bus is here," came the faint and distant cry. "Get your finger out. Stop doing that you evil pervert, and get over here right now!"

He shambled back to the bus, giving his mate plenty of time to finish whatever unsavoury thing he was doing. Presently a harassed looking rocker appeared and raced towards the bus. He was trying to multi-task, running and drinking at the same time. Being a man (sort of), this was utterly beyond him, and his bottle was still quite full when he arrived panting and choking at the bus. He laid it rest among the corpses of its brothers and climbed aboard.

"How much to the stadium?" he asked.

"\$3.00," said the driver patiently.

The closer we got to town the more excited the rockers all got.

"Is this the stadium stop?"

"No, it's not this one."

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Here we are!"

Buses from all over town were disgorging snakes of black clad rockers which wended their gothic way to the stadium. Ours joined them and we wished them well.

"Enjoy the concert," I said. "Have a great time."

"Rock on dude!"



# Robin Flies West

Robin was off to Australia to celebrate her mum's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. The cats and I were looking forward to two weeks of eating mice, and sharing our lizards in the bed.

The first thing Robin needed to do was pack a suitcase. Like many things in Robin's life, her suitcase is purple. She claims it matches her hair, and who am I to argue with something that is so demonstrably true?

She opened a few dressing-table drawers at random and tossed a bra, a sock and a knicker into the suitcase. Then she held them in place with a tee shirt and a trouser. Now all she needed was her toilet bag. This was difficult – she had two to choose from. Naturally she chose the wrong one.

"My toothpaste tube is too big to fit into the bag," she complained, brandishing something the size and shape of a small alp.

"Fold it in two," I suggested, and she gave me a purple glare.

"Never mind," I said. "I can easily fix the problem. Pass it over here."

Somewhat dubiously, she gave me her toothpaste tube and I went into the bathroom where I swapped it for a smaller tube that I just happened to have lying around. However when I got back to the bedroom where Robin was busy with her suitcase, I found that it wasn't needed. She'd changed her mind.

"I think I'll use the other toilet bag," she said. "It's bigger."

She began transferring things from the old bag to the new one. "Can I have my original toothpaste tube back, please?"

I retrieved it from the bathroom. "Thanks," said Robin vaguely, as I handed it to her. She was too deeply immersed in the intellectual problem of deciding which items needed transferring and which ones she could do without to pay much attention to me.

"Shampoo?" she pondered. "Yes, I think so." It went into the new bag. "Conditioner? Yes, my hair is in a delicate state at the moment. Toothbrush? I suppose so, since I'm taking the toothpaste. It would be a shame not to use it. Nail clippers? No, I don't need those. Motor bike?"

"Motor bike?" I asked.

"A girl never knows when she'll need her motor bike," said Robin as she retrieved the small plastic model from one toilet bag and placed it carefully in the other.

I left her to her packing and went to watch the television. I had 42 channels to choose from but there was nothing on any of them, and so I watched the blank screen instead. Have you ever noticed how well designed screens are? They are just perfect for watching. I've tried feeling them and smelling them and tasting them and even listening to them, but nothing works nearly as well as watching them.

Robin's plane left at sparrow fart which meant that check in time was at evil-o'clock. The alarm went off at 3.00am.

"Yippee!", said Porgy The Cat, wide awake in an instant, and eager with the anticipation of breakfast. "Yummy, yummy. Feed me now."

"Me too, me too!" Bess was anxious not to be left out.

"Hurry up with those biscuits," growled Harpo, "or I'll bite you in the goolies. Perhaps I'll bite you in the goolies anyway just because I can. I'm fluffier than you are and that counts for a lot; you just can't win against me. I'm wearing knickerbockers and white ankle socks."

With cats criss-crossing dangerously between my naked and moderately fluffy legs, I staggered into the kitchen, put some biscuits down and topped up the water bowls. Then I went to have a shower. As I was drying myself, Porgy

wandered into the bathroom for his daily treat. He ambled into the shower stall and slurped up some shampooey water. Then he sat down in a puddle of it and watched me pulling the towel back and forth across my damp skin.

"You look funny without your fur on," he said. "What colour fur are you going to wear today?"

"I think I'll wear black," I said to him, "so that I blend in with the darkness outside."

"Good idea," he replied and he wandered off, his wet bottom gleaming in the light of the energy saver bulb.

"Ahhhhhhh!!!", screamed Robin from the bed, where she was cunningly grabbing a few more moments of illicit sleep. "Porgy sat on my face! He's all wet!"

"Have a shower and wash it off," I suggested. She crawled out of bed and began to ablute.

I got dressed and made myself a cup of coffee. I picked up the biscuits that Harpo had scattered all across the kitchen floor (he's a very messy eater) and put them back in the bowl as a surprise treat for Bess. Robin staggered sleepily from the bathroom to the bedroom to get dressed. "I wish I hadn't packed my motor bike," she said. "I could really use a motor bike just at the moment."

"Can't you make do with the stress turkey that's hiding in the dragon's hollow tree instead?" I asked.

"I suppose I'll have to," she said. "But it's not the same."

Once she was dressed we put the purple case into the car and set off for the airport. It was about 3.45am. The man who lives in the house at the bottom of the street was mowing his lawn, and he waved as we drove past. The roads were full of traffic.

"Where are all these people going to and coming from?" I wondered. "Surely they can't all be catching a plane? If they were all leaving, the country would be empty! Oh wait..."

"I bet none of them have purple cases," said Robin proudly. I'm sure she was right.

"Did you remember to pack a book to read on the plane?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "I chose it very carefully. It's a bodice-ripper called **Emma And The Persuasion Of Mansfield Northanger**. I picked it because it's full of purple prose, but with no sense or sensibility about it at all."

"Any pride?" I asked.

"Only prejudice," she replied.

The airport was full of hustle and bustle and bright lights. I dropped Robin off and gave her a hug. She purpled herself and her suitcase into the terminal building where she checked in and received a boarding pass with a luggage receipt stuck on the back of it. The luggage receipt was about an eighth of an inch wider than the boarding pass, and so it exposed a small sticky strip around the edge that was just ideal for picking up pocket fluff and cat hairs, and for sticking firmly to the pages of a book and tearing them when you used it for a bookmark. I do admire such design perfection - it must have cost the airport authorities a fortune to get it just right.

I left Robin to the tender mercies of the airport administration and I drove off to Woolworths to do the weekly shopping. What else is there to do at that time of the morning?

Woolworths was deserted. The drunks were long gone, sleeping off the beer and wine they'd blearily bought two hours ago. Cashiers with nothing better to do chattered in a desultory fashion, waiting for their shift to end so that they could all go home and sleep the sleep of the just finished work. As I pushed my trolley round the empty aisles, I could feel their suspicious eyes staring at me.

"Oooh look! He's put some vegetables in his trolley! Nobody's ever bought vegetables at 4.30am before. Do think we should ring the police? He must be up to no good."

I wandered past the meat counter and down to the bulk produce area.

"He's chosen some lamb! That proves it. He must be a terrorist. Look! Look! Cashew nuts! What's going on?"

I pushed the trolley past the chiller.

"Oh no! Yoghurt! There's no way he can be an honest man. What is the world coming to?"

I paid for the things in my trolley and took them home. The man in the house at the bottom of the street had finished mowing his lawn and was now pruning his roses. The prunes kept falling off the thorns, and he was swearing at them.

I cooked a lamb korma with the ingredients I'd bought from Woolworths. It had finished simmering by 8.30am, and I put it to one side to cool down. It always tastes better after the ingredients have had several hours to mingle and rot. I would be eating lamb korma for my tea for the next four days. Ah - the joy of homonyms!

Time to put the washing on. Perhaps I should vacuum the carpet or clean the windows. It was still very early, and the rest of day stretched endlessly before me. I was rapidly running out of avoidance tactics. Soon I would have to read a book...

# Autobiographical Interlude

I am 25 years old and I am embarking on my first really responsible job. Serious things depend upon how well I work over the next few weeks – several years of environmental thinking are coming to a head. These days we'd call it a green initiative, but in the 1970s it is just another government programme, and not a very important one. Nevertheless I feel a deep sense of involvement. I've been working on things that can make a difference to the way the world lives, and my colleagues and I are about to report to our peers and make some suggestions for future actions. I am on my way to the first Governing Council meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). I am a member of the British delegation and I am nervous – it's my first time in such rarefied circles and it all sounds very diplomatic and scary. However I am the low man on the totem pole. I make the metaphorical tea. I take comfort in that thought – it makes me feel less exposed.

The Swissair flight from London to Geneva takes off exactly on time. Even abroad the Swiss are a superbly efficient nation. You can set your watch by their timetables. Geneva is in the French speaking part of Switzerland. Except for a very small enclave comprising about one percent of the population, the Swiss don't have a language of their own. Ever frugal, they use other people's languages instead. On the plane, I try to remember my schoolboy French but it all feels vague and foggy.

Geneva airport is clean and well organised. We pass through customs and immigration as if they are not there and we take a taxi to the hotel. It too is clean and well organised. The Governing Council meeting will take place at the Palais Des Nations; the old headquarters of the

disgraced League Of Nations. We walk from the hotel; it isn't far.

We can see out over Lake Geneva. It seems to stretch on forever. Today the weather is crisp and clear and the beautiful single jet of the fountain sparkles in the sunlight as it reaches up with gorgeous elegance high into the sky. It seems to be trying to drown the clouds, and they hover nervously, eyeing the enormous column of water with deep suspicion. There is a multi-level car park under the lake, reached by brilliantly lit tunnels that burrow far underground. A very efficient (and typically Swiss) idea. I hope the roof never caves in under the weight of the water.

The Palais Des Nations is an old and elegant building with peacocks strutting proudly through the immaculately maintained gardens. Pompous diplomats arrive in shiny cars and the peacocks can see themselves reflected in the highly polished vehicles. This annoys them - enemies in the reflections! Screaming war cries, they charge forwards and peck furiously at the invaders. The drivers try in vain to shoo them away. Huge holes appear in the car doors. Automotive body shops in Geneva do a roaring trade in peacock repairs.

The Governing Council meeting takes place in a large auditorium with rows of flip top chairs banked up at an angle like seats in a cinema. We have tiny desks on which we can spread our papers. A plaque on the desks tells people that we are British. We have headphones to plug into small sockets built in to the desks. Through the headphones we can listen to the simultaneous translations of the speeches that the delegates are making. When we get bored with the speeches we switch to the Chinese translation, which none of us understands and which never fails to make us laugh. Hee, haa, hoe, hoo go the voices in our ears.

The translators are sitting in booths above the auditorium. Headphones are clamped firmly to their ears

and they concentrate fiercely as they mutter into their microphones, turning the words that flow into their heads into words that flow out of their mouths. Ideally these words should form a continuous stream; they drop in at the top and they fall out at the bottom without a pause. Mostly this works well, except for those poor people who have to translate from the German.

Translators from the German have the hardest job of all. They have absolutely no idea what the speaker is saying until all the words are put into context by the verb. And in German, the verb is always the very last word in the sentence. Consequently the translators have to hold untold levels of seemingly unconnected subordinate clauses in their minds as they wait desperately for the arrival of a verb that will finally turn the whole mish-mash into something that will, with luck, make sense. Only then are they able to translate it. Unfortunately some sentences are so long, and so twisted up with bureaucratic jargon, that by the time the speaker reaches the convoluted end of the sentence, the translator has long since forgotten the beginning. Therefore translators from the German often speak in long eloquent silences as they wait for the sense of the current sentence to unravel in their minds. They tend to say "Ummm!" a lot, and they sometimes find themselves having to make inspired, artistically creative guesses about what might have just been said. And while they are muttering their translation of the current sentence, the speaker is already a long way into the next one, and the translator has probably missed most of it, being still heavily occupied with the work of translating the previous one. It is always a Red Queen's race and nobody ever catches up.

Further complications are caused by the fact that a native German speaker, faced with a new situation, will simply make up a new word on the spot to describe it. German lends itself to this - short words are easily combined into longer portmanteau words that just don't



exist until the speaker proudly declaims them. Thus the language is constantly evolving and it is always full of confusing slang. Everyone remembers that not so very long ago the American President enthusiastically assured a cheering, but slightly bewildered, crowd of German supporters that he was a jam doughnut. Simultaneous translators from the German are haunted by the fear of committing similar solecisms. Wars have been started for less.

The nervous tension induced by these terrors causes a high turnover in German-speaking translators and the UN is always scouring the world for more of them.

People come and go in the auditorium without ceremony, delivering papers to their delegates and taking other papers away. The delegates pay no attention to the scurrying. They read their speeches in a calm, unhurried, very formal way. Everything seems minutely choreographed and well rehearsed. There are no surprises in the debating chamber.

The formal sessions are just a place to present foregone conclusions. All the real business of the Governing Council is discussed and settled at the evening parties where the drink flows freely, lubricating the wheels of power. We schmooze with the best of them and put forward proposals which are tentatively adopted. Everyone has another gin and looks at things from a differently blurred angle. The next day, more dull speeches in a politically appropriate language fill the time in the chamber, and the members ratify what little they remember of the previous evening's drunken diplomacy.

A motion is proposed and seconded and discussed and passed. The Soviets are jubilant - this topic seems to be important to them. We supported their motion and the next day a member of the Russian delegation turns up in our offices in the Palais Des Nations with a well chilled bottle of vodka and a large tin of caviare. It is only 9.00am, but that doesn't seem to matter. We drink very large shots of vodka,

downed in one, and we chase them with Beluga Caviare; the very best caviare, we are informed. The rest of the day is a blur - but much more vodka features largely in it. The Russian delegation starts partying at 9.00am and stops partying at 9.00am the following day, which is when the next party starts. We join in enthusiastically.

Then we have a day off and so we go for a picnic - the hills around the French border are very pretty and nobody cares all that much if you stray too close to the dividing line between the two countries. The French officials are jovial and not at all averse to sharing a glass of wine with us. We sit on something that might be an alp when it grows up and we eat our picnic food and we drink far too much red wine. Flies join in enthusiastically and swim in our wine glasses. It just adds protein to the day.

The French speak very fast and I cannot make sense of the gabble. The Swiss speak more slowly, more precisely and they are much easier to understand. I remember that when I was first learning French at school I used to listen to the speeches of General de Gaulle on the radio. Unusually for a Frenchman, he spoke slowly and sonorously, enunciating every syllable very clearly. He spoke beautiful French and it was a joy to listen to him, even though most of his speeches consisted of him simply telling the English to get lost each time they applied to join the Common Market.

Geneva is an ancient city and the old town and the new town are quite distinct areas. We go out for dinner in the old town, where all the best restaurants are. We eat a fondue with sticky Swiss cheese and fresh French bread and then we have grilled sausages that taste of heaven and herbs. More wine!

One of the American delegation attaches himself to us. Perhaps he's a spy! He works for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), an acronymic organisation that never uses one short word when ten long ones will do. His name is Lester Philip Needle - LP Needle. I pull his leg about

this and he admits that his parents have an odd sense of humour (or humor, I suppose, since they are American). But he's got (gotten) used to it over the years.

Because the Soviets have obviously suborned us with vodka and caviare, Lester feels that it is his patriotic duty to emphasise the moral superiority of American ideas. He attempts to reverse their subtle socialist influence by plying us with Coca-Cola. He seems bewildered when we reject it in favour of more vodka. We discover that he doesn't understand the difference between raw sugar (Coke) and refined sugar (Vodka). The refinement comes from the application of yeast, you understand. The difference may be small, but it is hugely important. We ply him with caviare diluted with vodka, and we speak to him severely in subtle tones. He soon comes round to our way of thinking.

The *lingua franca* of the Governing Council is French. Faced with such total immersion, my early language lessons soon come rushing back to me and I find that it isn't long before I am chatting gaily. I meet an Italian delegate at a diplomatic party. We have a long conversation in French, the only language we have in common. Fuelled by wine, I tell him jokes in French. Fuelled by wine, he laughs in French, with an Italian accent.

Apart from the members of my own delegation, almost nobody seems to speak English. Even we don't bother with it much. By now I am fluent in French. After all, it is the language of diplomacy; and it has been for more than two hundred years. I begin to dream in French and the restaurants and cafés have no terrors for me any more. English fades to the back of my brain as the weeks pass by.

Eventually the business of the Governing Council concludes and it is time to go home. At the Geneva airport I buy a Swiss Army Knife as a souvenir. I decide that I will refer to it in conversation as my Swiss Swiss Army Knife. I wonder if anyone will notice.

The Swissair flight from Geneva to London takes off exactly on time. I drink a gin and tonic; they have no vodka on board the plane. The stewardesses chatter gaily in French. The pilot makes a French announcement that it is raining in London. We land at Heathrow, on time to the scheduled second and, clutching my passport, I queue up at the immigration desk.

"Had a good trip?" asks the immigration official as he examines my documentation.

"Mais oui," I reply. "Merci bien!"

He gives me an odd look. I have no idea why, I haven't said anything rude. I pass through into rainy London and it is only when the taxi driver fails to understand where I want to go that I finally realise I have to start talking in English again.

# skool daze

Well i mite hav expected it. The game's up.They got me just  
when i thort  
i was safe. So here i am back at skool agane for a joly term  
chiz chiz chiz.

-Nigel Molesworth

There's a rather threadbare towel hanging in my kitchen. I dried my hands on it a couple of hours ago. It has a name tag on one edge, put there by the loving needle of my mother's sewing machine about forty five years ago and still firmly attached. Things my mother sewed always stay sewed. They would never dare to do anything else. The towel is the only physical object remaining from my school days; the only thing I have, apart from my memories, to prove that I was really there.

I have no other artefacts from that time of my life. I don't even have any photographs - all such memorabilia got thrown away after my parents died. By then I was living on the other side of the world and it seemed quite pointless to spend money shipping things such a distance just for the sake of sentiment. So it all vanished. Today I rather regret their loss, but at the time it made sense. Recently, thanks to the kindness of old friends from school, I've been sent scans of those school photos, and I treasure them. One of the pictures now forms the background behind the login screen on my computer and people look at it and play the game of "guess which one is Alan". I always give them a clue:

"I didn't have a beard when I was at school," I tell them.  
It doesn't seem to help.

When only memories are left, it can sometimes be fun to take them out and prod them a bit, just to see what

wiggles. Most of my time at school was spent listening to teachers haranguing me, so naturally most of my memories are of those teachers. Some were good teachers, some were bad teachers. Some were indifferent teachers and some were downright creepy teachers who probably should have been in jail. Nowadays I too am a teacher, and several times I've caught myself imitating some of those teachers of my youth who still dance and gibber in my head. Hopefully not the creepy ones, though.

The man who stands head and shoulders above all others in my memories is Mr Tennant, my English teacher. He taught me to be proud of my writing. I've always been a writer – from my earliest days I've scribbled notes, snatches of dialogue, poems and stories. I used to feel slightly ashamed of this habit and tried to keep it secret; writing was what other people did, they were real writers. I felt that I was just a dilettante, a scribbler who couldn't hope to compete. Nevertheless I always spent a lot of time and care on the essays I wrote for Mr Tennant. Writing was fun and an essay for an English class was a legitimate reason for doing real writing. I was always looking for justifications for my writing (these days I don't – nowadays I know that it is its own justification; but I was much less confident and less certain of things back then).

Mr Tennant never said much about my work in the class (apart from giving me good marks), but he certainly noticed what I was doing and in private he was always encouraging and supportive. Of course, being the man that he was, he couldn't do it without sarcasm. He had the sharpest tongue in the world. His words could make a week old corpse squirm with embarrassment.

He always claimed that he knew exactly who I was reading whenever I wrote an essay for him. I was a stylistic chameleon and my prose always seemed to transmute itself into the authorial voice of whatever library book I'd borrowed that week. He followed me through Leslie

Charteris, Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway (distinctive stylists all), though I was extremely puzzled when he accused me of Raymond Chandler since I thought I was channelling Len Deighton.

He kept telling me that I needed to find my own voice, to stop being so dependant on the voices of others and he assured me again and again that I really could do it. That early encouragement was very important in the development of whatever voice it is that I use in my writing these days.

Meanwhile, in the class, he provided me with the tools that I needed to make my writing more effective. We took sentences apart, looked closely at all the individual bits, sneered at them and then put them back together again. He taught me the structure of the language, and he taught me about the subtle rhetorical and grammatical glues that stick the words together. He taught me to love words and the patterns that they make. When all the right words line up in a sentence, they go *click!* as they slot in with each other. There is no such thing as a synonym.

Recently I destroyed a few hundred thousand words of juvenilia, much of which dated back to those school day scribblings. Many, many hundreds of thousands of words more remain intact. I've published two books and goodness only knows how many articles. I've written scientific papers and doggerel verses; computer manuals and comedy sketches; fiction and non-fiction. One year I made \$500 from selling my words to newspapers and magazines (that was a high point - I've never made as much money before or since). Probably none of it would have happened without Mr Tennant.

And as an added bonus, he played clarinet in a jazz band. How cool is that?

When I went into the sixth form, I had to choose the subjects I wanted to study. I followed the siren song of the sciences and specialised in maths, physics and chemistry. I

loved the logic and rigour of science. I loved the way it arrogantly took on the challenge of explaining the universe, trying to figure out what it all meant and how it all worked. Nevertheless, I embarked on that study with a real sense of regret. I could hear intellectual doors slamming shut all around me. I was reading C. P. Snow and that ominous phrase "two cultures" was ringing in my ears. I wasn't at all sure that I'd made the right choice.

One of the mandatory sixth form subjects was "General Studies", a catch-all course that tried, not always successfully, to round out our education by giving us at least a nodding acquaintance with things outside of our specialised areas of study. Here Mr Tennant came back into my life. He ran a history of science course, an odd subject to be taught by an arts person, but he proved to be both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about it. He was particularly good on the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (he of the silver nose and exploding bladder) but as well as bringing the personalities to life, he managed to explain the scientific ideas that these people were exploring as well. This was an eye-opener for me. Here was a man who obviously had no time whatsoever for the two cultures. If you straddle the fence, they don't always build the fence right through you. Sometimes your legs grow to compensate. I began to feel a lot more comfortable with my chosen specialisations. Another insight that I owe to Mr Tennant.

Of course, once I started to specialise in the sciences, I needed a firm grounding in mathematics. It's impossible to do any significant work in physics and chemistry without using maths. Unfortunately I was rather weak in maths. That was where Mr Ludlum came in. There's a certain cold pleasure to be taken from a mathematical proof. It isn't a coincidence that mathematicians refer to particularly clever solutions to any given problem as "elegant". Mr Ludlum understood this perfectly, and he knew exactly how to share



it. He kept my head above the mathematical waters in which I was swimming. It wasn't until my second year at university when tensors entered my mathematical life that my life jacket ruptured with an enormous bang! and the waters rushed over my head and I drowned.

As I struggled with the mathematical underpinnings of physics and chemistry, I always took solace from Einstein's grumbles about how hard he found mathematics to be and how difficult he found it to describe his insights in the mathematical terms that were really the only possible language that could describe them and explore their implications. But at least he understood tensors, damn him, and he used them in his work. Perhaps that's why I didn't discover general relativity. Well, that and the fact that I was born fifty years too late.

Mr Ludlum's genius lay in making it all sound so easy. He would cover the blackboard with small, neatly lettered equations. He never missed a step out, he explained things clearly and precisely. Whenever he said "Therefore..." the conclusion he drew really did follow on from what went before it - it was never the baffling leap into magic and mysticism that it so often was when his colleagues used the word. Like Winnie the Pooh, I am a bear of very little brain and I really appreciated the baby steps that Mr Ludlum took. And I loved his beautifully dotted i's and his neatly crossed t's.

My handwriting has always owed much to the stylistic school known as drunken spider. I am perfectly qualified to write prescriptions. However after a short exposure to Mr Ludlum's blackboards full of nifty squiggles I made a conscious effort to re-style my own writing after his. It looked so pretty! I got just as much of an aesthetic thrill from the appearance of a page full of neatly lettered equations as I did from the elegance of the logic that underlay them. Perhaps that's an odd reason for working hard at mathematics, but nevertheless it was a real one. I'm

sure Mr Ludlum would have understood, though I never discussed it with him.

I also enjoyed looking at a page covered with multiple instances of alpha, beta, gamma, delta, pi, epsilon, theta *et al* and thinking, that's all Greek to me.

I never claimed to have a sophisticated sense of humour.

Mr Brearley taught us religious instruction. The lessons were quite dull affairs during which we had many opportunities to practice falling asleep with our eyes wide open. Mr Brearley did his best but even though he had an appearance and personality that consisted mainly of idiosyncrasies, and speech patterns that consisted mainly of impediments, he seldom managed to inject much flavour or interest into the subject. I suspect he might have found it as boring as we did.

He had a huge mole on his cheek from which sprouted a couple of long grey hairs. In moments of stress or elation he would clap one hand to his cheek and suck in a hissing breath. He had a broad Yorkshire accent.

One of the boys, Brian Teal by name, was the class clown and he could always be relied upon to add mirth to almost any situation. He was a marvellously eccentric boy. He would run home every lunchtime so that he could go to the toilet (he found the school toilets too disgusting to use). By noon each day he was generally to be found with his legs crossed, bouncing up and down in his seat. Sometimes a teacher would construe this as eagerness to answer a question. But Brian had other things on his mind and seldom obliged with anything coherent. He was a great fan of the Beach Boys and in between classes he was often to be found playing the drums on his desk top and trying very, very hard to sing four simultaneous falsetto harmonies, with mixed success.

On one particular day, in one particular religious instruction class, Mr Brearley was rambling on about Jesus' ministry and how it might have been perceived by the

society of the time. Jesus really was quite radical in his thinking, quite scandalous in his teachings.

The hand slapped the cheek, the breath was sucked in with a mighty squelch and then expelled with a sigh as Mr Brearley said:

"...and Jesus lowered himself to speak to fallen women!"

As he said that phrase, every eye in the classroom moved to Brian Teal, who was sitting at his desk behind a pillar, concealed from Mr Brearley's direct view. Brian pantomimed staring down a sheer cliff and waving hello to the people at the bottom.

The class erupted into hysterics. Mr Brearley looked puzzled for a moment and then slapped his hand back to his cheek again. The Yorkshire accent became particularly prominent as the stress got to him.

"Is it that choomp Teal, be'ind t'pillar?"

Games periods were loathed by the less sportily inclined among us. Many of us had a fundamental lack of eye-hand co-ordination skills and any excuse was taken to avoid the humiliation of being the last one chosen for a team. Peter forged a note from his mother to Mr Ryan, the games master. It read:

Please excuse Peter from games because I have a cold.

And at the bottom was the scribbled signature:

Peter's Mum

Others were less inventive. Steven simply never turned up for games. Every games period would find him hiding in the school cellars smoking cigarettes. At the end of the year, most of us got the usual phrases written on our reports by Mr Ryan.

Could do better.

Lacks enthusiasm.

On Steven's report Mr Ryan wrote: Who is this boy?

Some excuses were more legitimate. One term Malcolm was properly excused games because of illness, and he elected to do woodwork instead.

The woodwork class was supervised by Mr Gallagher. He taught us to make mortise and tenon joints, and dovetail joints. He taught us to plane a plank of wood square. He taught us to saw in a straight line (the only one of these skills that I retain to this day). I built a small bookshelf, a stool and a coffee table in his classes. All were sturdy constructions, all were useful and all were used. This pleased Mr Gallagher.

Malcolm elected to build a coffee table. He measured and marked, cut and planed.

Mr Gallagher checked his work every so often.

"The edge is not square. Look - you can see daylight when I hold my set square against it. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more.

"It still isn't square. It has to be square. You can't make a table if it isn't square. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more. Over the course of a ten week term, he planed and planed and planed some more. At the start of the term, the planks he was planing measured eight inches across. By the end of the term, they were two inches across, still not square, and suitable only for building furniture in a doll's house.

The next term Malcolm voluntarily went back to playing rugby. It didn't demand a square field or a square ball and he felt much more at home with the irregularity.

The school had its own swimming pool which was quite a novelty for those times. A curious construction of concrete slabs rose from the side of the pool at the deep end. From these you could dive or belly flop into the water, depending upon your skill level. Set up in one corner was a small trampoline (we called it a trampet) upon which the braver people would bounce up and down, going higher and higher with each bounce. Once the height and momentum was deemed sufficient the bouncer would alter the angle and project his body out into space, entering the water with a

huge splash and a shriek of enormous triumph or, depending upon the angle of projection, enormous pain.

The boys changing rooms were on one side of the pool and the girls changing rooms were on the other side. A narrow corridor went from each changing room via a disinfectant foot bath to the pool. The sexes were strictly segregated and any lessons that involved use of the swimming pool were carefully timed so as to be exclusively mono-gendered. Mostly it worked.

After a games period, many of the boys had developed the custom of showering and then having a swim. This was particularly their practice if the games period was the last in the day for then they could take their time over their swim and just mess around in the pool for ages. Nobody ever bothered wearing swimming costumes for these impromptu events. We'd seen each other naked so often in the changing rooms over the years that nobody really cared very much at all. There was nothing worth looking at.

One Wednesday, after a particularly strenuous rugby game, the pool area was full of shrieking, naked young men racing around the pool, throwing each other in, diving from the steps, generally having a fine old time. One boy, Andrew, was bouncing up and down on the trampet, taking no part in any of the things going on around him. Bounce, bounce, bounce, lost in a trance, deep in a world of his own. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to us, the girls were just coming back from a particularly strenuous game of lacrosse.

"How about a swim?" someone suggested.

"Oooh, yes!"

They all changed into their togs ('cos that's what girls do) and padded off to the pool where they stood open mouthed with astonishment at the sight that greeted them.

Almost without exception, the boys stared for one horrified moment at the girls who were staring at them and

then, one and all, covered their groins with their hands and jumped into the concealing safety of the pool.

Only Andrew, utterly lost in his trance, failed to notice the girls arrival as he went bounce, bounce, bounce on the trampet and with each and every bounce his little willy waved hello...

Teenage boys, of course, are simply hormones on legs and they think about sex approximately four times a minute. When they aren't thinking about sex, they are thinking about food. And when they are thinking about neither sex nor food, they are thinking about football. This leaves almost no time left over to think about school work.

One weekend Mr Stone, our history teacher, got married. Our first lesson at 9 o'clock on the following Monday morning, was history. Mr Stone strode into class, much as he usually did, and began to regale us with an interminable discussion about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There is absolutely nothing titillating about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. Even teenage boys cannot find a double entendre in a discussion about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There being no immediate possibility of sex, food or football, tedium descended upon us all in thick clouds. One adventurous youth, stimulated by boredom, decided that something had to be done.

"Did you have a good wedding sir?"

Mr Stone seemed somewhat taken aback at being interrupted in mid flow, but he rallied well. "Yes thank you Withey. It was very nice."

"I bet you got really drunk on your stag night, didn't you sir?" continued my classmate. "Tell us how much you drank, sir?" We all sat up and began to take notice. This might be fun.

"I never touch it, Withey." Mr Stone sounded quite indignant. "I never touch it at all."

"No sir," said Withey in tones of wounded innocence. "I was talking about what you were doing on your stag night

sir, not what you were doing on your wedding night."

There was a moment of shocked silence as we all replayed the conversation in our heads. Had he really said that? Yes, he really had. Gales of laughter swept across the room.

"Harrumph!," said Mr Stone, glowing somewhat pinker than usual. "Boy, you are a buffoon! Now, after the Corn Laws were repealed..."

Latin lessons offered even more opportunities for disruption. Double entendres were far too subtle for Latin lessons. In Latin lessons we got single entendres. We learned to count and the class had to chant in unison:

"Unus, duo, tres, quattuor, quinque, sex."

That was as far as we ever got. The forbidden word never failed to induce hysterical delight, much to the exasperation of Mr Rushworth, the Latin master.

Latin was not the only language that amused us. I still remember my first French lesson. I was eleven years old and I'd just started at Crossleys. Along with all the other new boys I sat in my classroom waiting for who knew what? There was a clump, clump, clump on the stairs and the door was flung wide to the wall with a resounding CRASH. In came a begowned schoolmaster who strode to the front of the room and announced in ringing tones, "Bonjour toute la classe! Je me suis Monsieur Antoine."

For the next forty minutes he harangued us in French. Gabble, gabble, gabble. We all stared at him in complete bewilderment. Then the bell rang to signal the end of the lesson.

"Au revoir!"

He strode from the classroom slamming the door behind him.

For the rest of the year he taught me French. He believed in the total immersion method and would not permit a single word of English to be spoken in his lessons. Outside the class Mr Anthony was a perfect English gentleman and total

raving loony. He felt that hymn tunes were far too dirge-like so he sang them fast and cheerfully at morning assembly and was invariably two verses ahead of the congregation, much to the consternation of the pianist and the discomfiture of everybody else since his singing voice was powerful and tended to overlap and lead the crowd. Hymns invariably ended in total confusion with Mr Anthony looking puzzled, all the other masters looking angry and the school as a whole feeling semi-hysterical.

Inside the class Monsieur Antoine spoke French, and only French. I still treasure the memory of the day he taught us the French words for various articles of clothing. As he named an article, he would take it off and wave it at us. Perhaps I should point out that to this day I do not know the French for "underpants" (but I do know "jacket", "shoes", "shirt", "vest" and "trousers"). I've had a soft spot for foreign languages ever since, though Latin tested that tolerance sorely, and it is probably worth pointing out that I learned more French in that eccentric year with Monsieur Antoine than I learned in the next four years with more conventional teachers. I remember him very fondly and will always be grateful for the firm grounding he gave me in the one foreign language that I can claim to speak with a fair degree of fluency.

In *The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* Douglas Adams taught us just how important it is to know where your towel is at all times. Mine is hanging in my kitchen, wrapped around my schooldays. I dried my hands on it a couple of hours ago.



# The Graunch That Didn't Steal Christmas

"Graunch?" asked my computer tentatively.

"No," I said, and thumped it on the side. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

"Sorry," it said and relapsed into silence.

For the next day or two it thought hard about what I had said. Then it decided to try again.

"Graunch?"

"No," I told it, thumping it again. But this time it obviously felt that my bark was worse than my bite, because it completely ignored my orders.

"Graunch, graunch, graunch!" it declared. "GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

"Oh stop that," I yelled, thumping it even harder than before.

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

"Oh, for goodness sake!"

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

I'd had enough. I turned the computer off and left it alone to sulk a bit. Hopefully once its temper had cooled it would be more inclined to behave itself.

The next day, I turned it on again.

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH! GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

I turned it off and immediately rang the man at WeRepairComputers Ltd.

"My computer's going graunch," I told him.

"Ah yes," he said. "There's a lot of it about at the moment. Bring it in and I'll see what I can do."

I packed the computer up and drove down to the workshop. A young man was sitting behind the counter, playing solitaire on his laptop. Apart from him, there was nobody to be seen. It was obviously a quiet day in the computer repair business.

"I'm the person whose computer goes graunch!" I said.

"Oh yes," said the man as he moved a black jack onto a red queen. Then, his eyes still fixed on the screen of his laptop, he opened a drawer in his desk and rummaged around until he found a scrap of yellow paper. "Just write your name and phone number on this."

I did as requested. He took the paper back and turned away from his game for a moment. He looked at the piece of paper. I could see his lips moving as he read the words to himself.

"Put the red ten on the black jack," I suggested. "It frees up a column."

"Cellphone number?" he grunted, handing me back the paper.

I wrote down my cellphone number.

"Thanks." He casually tossed the piece of paper back in the drawer and returned to his game of solitaire. Red ten on to the black jack. I was pleased to see him take my advice. I wanted to ask for a receipt, but I was afraid to break his concentration. He might not win his game if I interrupted him again. I left my computer sitting on his desk. Even though it wasn't plugged in, I could hear it say "Graunch." very quietly as I went back to my car.

Back home, the empty space where my computer no longer stood looked a bit sad. Cables dangled forlornly, eager to be plugged into sockets. Filling the space became a matter of urgent priority. Fortunately I remembered that Robin had a spare machine hidden somewhere in her study. I opened the door to her room and peeked in. Piles of scrap paper and strange objects filled my field of vision. Huge mounds rose from where I vaguely remembered once

having had a floor right up to where the ceiling might have been. In among the piles of unidentifiable bric-a-brac I spotted 12 expired book tokens, a collection of naughty postcards from Brighton, share certificates from companies that no longer existed, 42 beer mats, an aquarium in a cardboard box, a street map of Redditch, 19 half-completed Sudoku puzzles, a machine for blowing soap bubbles, a wind up plastic monkey that turned somersaults, a partridge, a pear tree, a kitchen sink and a small jam jar full of gallstones.

"Robin?" I asked. "Are you in there?"

She rustled a hole through one of the piles and blinked owlishly at me.

"Yes?"

"Your old computer," I said.

"What about it?"

"Can I use it?"

"Of course," she said obligingly. "I'm not using it for anything - it's just taking up space in here. If you remove it, I can squeeze heaps more heaps of stuff in!"

"OK. Where is it?"

She looked vaguely around. "It's here somewhere," she said. I fetched a couple of long sticks and we poked them at random into miscellaneous piles. Eventually something went *clang!* "Aha!" said Robin. "That must be it."

We pulled screwed up papers, a bowl of breakfast cereal festering in rancid milk and the mummified corpse of a rat out of the teetering mound. "You've been letting the cats hide treasure in here again," I observed, tactfully saying nothing about the breakfast cereal.

Soon I was rewarded with a distant glimpse of beige. "I think I can see it."

I reached in and grabbed hold and heaved a mighty heave. I staggered back with a computer clutched in my arms. Several hundred old Christmas cards fluttered after it. A stack of stickers crashed down into the space it vacated.

There was a note taped to the top of the computer. Written on it were the cryptic words:

Luckley. Cullercoats. Shipwreck.

"Is this important?" I asked.

"Oooh!" said Robin, snatching it out of my hands. "I've been looking all over for that. Thank you darling."

"Don't mention it," I said, and I took her computer down to my own paperless office where it breathed an enormous sigh of relief at the lack of clutter. I plugged it in and turned it on and it hummed efficiently.

"Graunch?" I asked it.

"No," it said smugly. "I don't do that."

A few days later, the man from WeRepairComputers Ltd. rang me up. "We've repaired your computer," he said.

"Good show! What was the problem?"

"The noise was coming from the CPU fan. I think the bearings are stuffed and it wasn't revolving much at all. I've replaced the fan and now it is beautifully silent. Not a graunch to be heard."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll come and pick it up."

To think is to do. Do be doobe doo. I went and collected it immediately.

I was now faced with a problem. Robin's old computer was outperforming the job that my computer had once done and so I was reluctant to reinstate it. I decided instead to use my newly repaired computer to replace an extremely slow and ancient machine that was performing various network services and to retire the old machine. Step one - install Linux.

"Oh, no!" howled my computer in horror. "That's one of those nasty open source things. I don't want anything to do with it. Take it away!"

The install process stopped dead in its tracks. Indeed, it was so dead and the machine was so hosed that even the mouse pointer wouldn't move across the screen. I had to hit

the reset switch before it would take any further notice of me at all.

I found this rather surprising. I've installed linux hundreds of times and never once have I had any problems whatsoever. Normally it just works. Time for a different approach. I am an expert in the arcane art of skinning cats, just ask Porgy, Bess and Harpo. They've been at the receiving end of my skinning tactics all their lives long. As a result of this experience I have bald cats (I can show you photos) and the ability to infiltrate Linux on to a computer in a myriad different ways. So I tried another approach...

It seemed to work, in the sense that the installation completed and the system rebooted. But rather to my surprise, about half the software I'd asked to be installed simply wasn't there. So I started to do it slowly by hand.

"I haven't got a clue what you are talking about," said the computer. "I can't do that."

But I insisted and so it tried hard. Strange error messages that I'd never seen in my life before appeared. Files vanished from view even as I was looking at them. Hmm...

"FSCK!" I yelled, only I yelled it quietly in lower case, because that's the only language linux understands.

"'ello, 'ello, 'ello," said the fsck program. "What have we here then? My goodness me, that's a stuffed up disk. I've never seen one quite as stuffed up as that before. I can try and fix it, but I can practically guarantee massive data loss."

I've never had fsck say that to me before, either.

I was now officially bewildered. Time to go to the tubes on that there interweb thingy for help. I giggled all the error messages and it soon became clear that this was no laughing matter. I really was comprehensively fscked. Everything I read told me that what I was seeing was symptomatic of an overheated, very overstressed CPU that was probably about to kick the bit bucket.

In retrospect, it was clear that the graunch didn't steal christmas, but it *did* steal the cooling powers of the fan. At some time between the start of the graunch and the replacement of the fan, the CPU got a bit too hot and some vital bits were now dead.

Bugger.

# **In Which We Sit In A Box, Fly To Australia And Make A Phone Call**

Books from WarriorWomanWithOnlyOneBreast arrive in cardboard boxes. This is a law of nature. Cardboard boxes have to be sat in by cats. This too is a law of nature. In our house, Harpo, being junior cat, has been designated as the box sitter. The sequence of events goes something like this.

A courier man bangs on the front door and runs away before I can catch him (courier men are notoriously shy and are seldom observed in the wild). Porgy and Harpo, who are asleep on the bed, wake up in alarm at the hideous noise and stare at me suspiciously as I open the door and retrieve a parcel.

"It's OK," I reassure them. "Just another book."

They settle down and watch me open the box.

"Hurry up," says Harpo, his red eyes gleaming. Harpo is a very impatient cat who belongs to the instant gratification generation. Slowly I unseal the box. Porgy generally finds this boring and goes back to sleep, but Harpo is soon jumping up and down with frustration as I tease him with the prospect of a box.

Eventually the books are unpacked. Porgy opens a world-weary eye and watches as Harpo hops in to the box, turns round three times and settles down. Some boxes are too big and, feeling exposed, Harpo soon gets out again.

"That's a useless box," he says in disgusted tones as he stalks off to relieve his frustrations by beating Bess up. Hisses, spits and squeals from the back of the house indicate success.

Some boxes are too small and the sides bulge as Harpo squirms, seeking a comfortable spot. Eventually, unable to support the strain, the box ruptures.

"That's a useless box," says Harpo in disgusted tones as he stalks off to relieve his frustrations by beating Bess up. Hisses, spits and squeals from the back of the house indicate success.

But just occasionally the boxes are exactly the right size and Harpo snuggles down to snooze in cardboard coated bliss. Bess, let off the hook, sleeps soundly on the back of the sofa.

One such box is currently sitting on the floor of the lounge. Harpo seldom leaves it except to eat. Scruffy though it is, I don't dare throw it away. Bess would suffer too much, and she needs her sleep.

Robin was going to Australia to visit her sister. The plane departed at sparrowfart and check in time was two hours earlier than that. All of which meant that we had to get up at THERE'S NO SUCH TIME o'clock in the morning. The cats were thrilled:

"Hey, wake up everyone," yelled Porgy. "Breakfast is early today."

He bounced into the kitchen, eager for food. Bess yawned and stretched and followed rather reluctantly. "If there's food going," she said, "I want more than my fair share. But really, at this time of day, I'd rather be asleep."

Harpo biffed her on the nose. "Shut up you silly girl," he said. "If you keep saying that, the big apes might go back to bed and then we'd have to wait for hours before we had a chance at breakfast again."

I put some biscuits down for them. Soon their heads were down, their bums were up and the soporific sound of crunching filled the kitchen. I put a pot of coffee on to brew and went for a shower. Perhaps I'd feel better if I was wet.



I washed and dried and dressed. Robin stumbled, half-blind with sleep, into the bathroom, intent on ablutions. When she emerged, I poured coffee into her. Eventually she became capable of speech.

"What time is it?"

"Half past dark," I said. "We ought to be going."

I carried her luggage out to the car and then we set off for the airport. The roads were empty and we made good time, though the closer we got to the airport, the denser the traffic became. Most of the people of Wellington, it seemed, were off to Australia this morning.

As we drove towards the terminal Robin spotted something interesting. "There's an Air New Zealand plane over there," she said. "I know it's an Air New Zealand plane because of the koru design on the tail. But the plane is green all over. Why is that, do you suppose."

"It's feeling poorly," I said. "Those are the recuperation gates. It'll stay parked there until it feels better and its colour improves."

"Oh poor thing." Robin was immediately sympathetic. "I wonder what's wrong with it."

"Air sickness, I should think, " I said.

The telephone in the hall was looking a bit sad. The aerial had been chewed by a cat, the numbers on the buttons were so worn as to be barely legible and the buttons themselves could not be trusted to send proper signals down the wires. For the last three months we had been unable to ring any of our friends who had a 4 in their phone number and we were getting an anti-social reputation as a result, since almost all of our friends had one or more 4s somewhere in their phone number.

"Let's go to Dock Smooth and buy a new phone," I said.

"OK," said Robin.

There were multitudes of phones on display. Big phones and small phones; pink, blue and green phones; slim phones and plump phones; self-satisfied phones and slightly anxious phones. "We'll take that one," said Robin when an assistant came to see if he could help us.

The phone we chose had a base unit with an answering machine built in. It had three handsets the size and shape of a television remote control. Each handset could store an enormous collection of phone numbers. The caller-ID feature could be configured so that whenever any of our friends rang us up their name and number would display on the handset screen in large, friendly letters. We could assign each of our friends their own special display colour and their own special ring tones. We agonised for hours over the correct colour for Robin's mum and the correct ring tone for the president of the science fiction club.

"I wonder who will be the first person to ring us on our new phone?" asked Robin.

"Me!" I said, taking out my mobile phone and dialling my home number. The handset flashed red and played something vaguely Wagnerian involving lots of Valkyries a couple of dragons and a sword.

"Hello," said Robin.

"Hello," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," said Robin. "What's the weather like over at your side of the lounge?"

"It's a bit cold," I admitted. "What's it like at your side?"

"Much the same," said Robin. "Bye, bye"

"Bye, bye."

We both turned our phones off.

"Well, that was fun," said Robin. "What shall we do now?"

"Why don't we watch TV?"

"Will you pass me the TV guide, please?" asked Robin. I passed it across and she studied it and then picked up the remote to change the channel. She pressed a button.

Nothing happened, so she pressed it again. Still nothing happened, so she tried one more time.

"Emergency. Which service do you require? Police, fire or ambulance?" asked an official voice.

"Oops, sorry," said Robin contritely. "I was trying to watch *Coronation Street* on channel 1." She turned the phone off and tried again, with the proper remote control this time.

# In Which We Go Knitting And Breed Some Bacteria

"I want to knit you a cat," said Robin.

"Haven't we got enough cats?" I asked. "Remember, more than three cats and you are officially eccentric."

"No, no." She shook her head irritably. "I've got this book called *Beastly Knits*. It's got patterns for jumpers with animals integrated into the pattern. I want to knit you a jumper with a cat just like Porgy draped across your shoulder. What do you think?"

"Hey," said Porgy, quite taken with the idea, "how about you knit me a jumper instead, with Alan draped over my shoulder?"

"Don't be silly," said his sister Bess. "Cats don't wear jumpers. We prance around completely naked." She lay on her back and waved her legs in the air to prove it. She has no shame.

"Do we?" asked Porgy, puzzled. "What's all this furry stuff then?" He held a paw out. "I thought it was a woolly jumper, just like Alan wears."

Suddenly he noticed the paw he was holding out and got distracted. He gave it a tentative lick. "Hey! That feels good." He licked it some more and then worked his way up the leg and down his body. Then he concentrated on licking his bottom. "If I wore a jumper," he said, his voice slightly muffled, "I wouldn't be able to do this." He thought about it for a moment. "On balance, I think I'd rather lick my bottom than wear a woolly jumper. It's much more fun. So why don't you just go ahead and knit a jumper for Alan. But do make sure that the cat draped over his shoulder looks *exactly* like me."

"Definitely," said Robin. "Alan wouldn't have it any other way." She armed herself with a tape measure and prepared to record dimensions. I regarded this with some trepidation – she's not all that clear about sizes and she tends to measure them in pounds, shillings and ounces, in the same way that her hero Winnie Ther Pooh once measured Tigger. Most of what Robin knows she learned from Winnie Ther Pooh (she even knows what "ther" means). On balance, I approve. There are worse teachers.

"Raise your left hand," she ordered.

I raised my left hand, and she took careful measurements, writing them down on a piece of paper in degrees Fahrenheit. Then she lost the piece of paper.

"OK," she said, "raise your right hand."

I raised my right hand.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" asked Robin.

"I do."

"What's the meaning of econometrics? I've always wanted to know."

"Ah, the easy ones first. Econometrics is pedagogic play-therapy. I thought everybody knew that."

"Well I do *now!*"

She settled down to knit and slowly the jumper grew. Every so often she measured me again, writing down the results in rods, poles and perches. Once she took a chest measurement and wrote it down in hundredweights. Then she corrected herself and converted it to drachms with a remainder in scruples. She made me stand on the kitchen scales and measured my height in furlongs. Slowly the jumper gained weight. It began to look very jumper-like. But one thing puzzled me.

"What's the amorphous white blob?"

"That's Porgy," said Robin. "Don't you recognise him?"

"Now that you mention it, no I don't."

She took out a needle and threaded some dark wool into it. Then she stitched carefully into and around the amorphous white blob. All of a sudden it leaped into shape – it had eyes and ears and a nose, whiskers, teeth and claws. My goodness me! Porgy smiled up at me from the jumper. I looked back to the sofa – there he was, sound asleep, exhausted after his bottom washing marathon. And yet, there he was as well, bright eyed and bushy tailed on my jumper. It was uncanny. I was very impressed.

"Now all I have to do," said Robin, "is attach the sleeves and then you can wear it."

She sewed and sewed and sewed and then it was done. I put it on. Hmmm...

Mostly it was perfect. But there was something not quite right about the sleeves. They dangled about a foot beyond the end of my fingers. When I stood up straight, the ends of the sleeves brushed my kneecaps. It appeared as though Robin had been knitting a jumper for an orang utan.

"You measured these sleeves in firkins, didn't you?" I asked.

"What's a firkin?" asked Robin.

"The standard British measure of excess," I said. "As in these sleeves are too firkin long."

I rolled the sleeves up and examined myself in the mirror. Porgy, draped woollenly over my shoulder, looked happy.

"It's magnificent!" I said to Robin.

My problems began, as so many of these things do, with a tickle in the back of Robin's throat and a snuffle in her nostrils.

"I feel like there's a ton of quick drying cement in my nasal cavity," she said gloomily.

"That's your own fault," I said. "I told you it wasn't cocaine, but you paid no attention."

She coughed, sneezed and blew her nose; sounds I would become very familiar with over the next few days and weeks. Gloomily she examined the contents of her tissue, looking for traces of brain.

"Oysters!" she announced.

"Yummy!"

"Perhaps I could save all the bogies, dry them out and build a pyramid," she said musingly.

"What's the difference between bogies and broccoli?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

"You can't persuade children to eat broccoli," I said.

"Boom-boom!"

"I think I might have a cold," she said.

"Nonsense!" I declared. "Having a cold is only a state of mind."

She blew her nose again and narrowed her eyes at me. I knew this look of old. It meant that the rest of my life would be nasty, brutal and short.

Two days later she got her carefully planned revenge. I awoke with a sore throat. I felt somewhat light-headed, but I had no problem coping with it - I just wore a heavier hat. Somewhere deep inside my chest, clouds of bacteria clustered and fed, like maggots on a dead mouse. Soon I began to cough up interesting slimy things. Something the size and shape of a green shrew shot out of my mouth and ran, howling with fear, across the room with Harpo the Cat in hot pursuit. It hid under the sofa. During quiet intervals in the television sound track, we could hear it whimpering.

The next day the bacteria moved into my nose and I began to leak like Niagara Falls.

"I think I've got a cold," I said.

"Nonsense!" said Robin triumphantly. "Having a cold is only a state of mind."

"You don't understand," I said. "This is a man cold. They're the worst kind, utterly debilitating. They require

fevered brows to be soothed and unending cups of coffee to be delivered to the sick bed where I writhe and moan."

"No," Robin explained.



# In Which We Fall Down Stairs And Rip Up A Weed

This is the sound that Robin makes when she trips and falls down the concrete steps in the garden:

Bump, bump, bump, bump...Bump.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Thus summoned, I raced outside to see what had happened. Robin was lying, pale, shocked and tearful at the bottom of the steps. I hurried down to her.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Can you stand up?"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Hang on to me and try and stand. Then we'll get you inside and take a closer look."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Eventually, taking slow, baby steps, we climbed back up and got ourselves into the lounge. I sat Robin down and examined her carefully. There was a small cut oozing blood on her knee and a ragged graze on her other knee. A small graze on her bottom looked quite insignificant, so I ignored it and concentrated on cleaning up the two cuts on her legs. I put sticking plaster on them.

"I think you'll be OK," I said. "You've been very lucky; there doesn't seem to be any significant damage."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Perhaps you ought to go to bed," I suggested. "You've had quite a shock and you need to rest."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The next morning she was very stiff and sore. The cuts on her legs had scabbed over nicely. However the graze on her bottom, which I'd ignored because it looked so superficial, had blossomed overnight into an enormous purple and red blotchy bruise that covered most of her hideously swollen left buttock.

"You must have taken most of the force of the fall on your bottom," I said. "Good job it's extremely well padded."

I ducked quickly in order to avoid the vase that she threw at me. She craned her neck and admired her left buttock in the dressing table mirror. "Purple," she said in tones of deepest satisfaction. "I like purple. It's my favourite colour."

"Well," I said, "I think you're going to have plenty of time to enjoy it. That is a very impressive bruise!"

"Purple."

The bruise was exactly the same shape as Australia. Interestingly it was exactly the same size as Australia as well. Robin had to shuffle sideways into the bedroom. Continents can't get through doors broad side on; they can only infiltrate with their edges.

"What's that square, pink bit?" she asked, poking the Gulf of Carpentaria. A salt water crocodile swam up from the depths of Robin's bottom and snapped at her fingers. Fortunately she snatched them away in time.

I tried to take a photograph of her bottom, but I couldn't find a lens with a wide enough angle. I pondered the advantages of hitching a ride into low Earth orbit over Robin. Surely her bottom would fit in my viewfinder if I was high enough above it?

She took her bottom to the doctor who was most impressed at the enormous size and the rich colour of the bruising. Nurses were called in to admire it, and there was talk of framing it and exhibiting Robin in the waiting room for the edification of waiting patients. Adverts were booked on the television, an interview was arranged on John Campbell's current affairs show and an eager queue formed outside the medical centre. A nurse was seconded to collect the entrance fee...

But no agreement could be reached on how to split the proceeds, and so the plan came to nothing. Arnica cream was prescribed instead; it seemed a reasonable alternative.

Since Robin couldn't really reach to rub the cream in herself, twice a day I had the indescribable pleasure of saying sternly to her: "Right! Take your pants off and bend over!"

And she did. Oh! The power, the power!

Arnica cream is rather strong smelling. As I massaged it into Melbourne, Robin's sister and her children stuck their heads up and said: "Pooh! What's that horrible smell?"

I rubbed more cream into the Nullarbor desert and herds of feral camels fled in terror across the vast, trackless wastes of Robin's bottom and smashed themselves into the Indian Pacific train. Eventually the cream reached Perth where it made the fairway on the golf course very slippery and completely messed up her father's game. He was furious. "Get that stuff out of here! You ruined a perfect hole in twenty one."

Over the course of the next few days, and after several copious applications of Arnica cream, the purple colour receded until it occupied only Robin's coastline. Sharks swam lazily up and down the fringes of her left buttock, feeding on careless surfers and the corpses of the pre-chewed get-well-soon rats that our cats brought in to comfort her. The interior of her posterior turned yellow and began to look much more like the vast

deserts that actually make up much of Australia. At night, when I put my head beneath the bedclothes, I could distinctly see the flickering flames of Aboriginal campfires scattered all over Robin's bottom, and I could hear the hollow, haunting rhythms of a didgeridoo. I watched, fascinated until olfactory evidence convinced me that it wasn't really a didgeridoo that was making that noise, and I was forced to retreat from Robin's weapon of mass destruction, back into the fresh air.

Over time, we eased off on the application of Arnica cream. Sales of gas masks in Australia dropped as dramatically as a Qantas aeroplane and the feral camels of the Nullarbor stopped their hysterically frenzied attacks on the first class coaches of the Indian Pacific railway. The aborigines ended their corroboree and packed the didgeridoos away in the luggage compartments of their Daimler and Rolls Royce billabongs. Robin's father had a hip replacement operation to try and improve his golf game. It worked brilliantly, but he remained uncertain as to whether or not the lack of Arnica cream was a contributing factor. All the sharks died of starvation. The swelling died down and once again, Robin had a pristine bum and could walk forwards through doors.

And they all lived happily ever afterwards.

My garden was a jungle. Creepy creepers crept over the lawn and engulfed the shed. Triffids lurked in the weeds, stalking and ambushing the innocent travellers who waited patiently at the bus stop on the footpath just outside the gate. On quiet days the pathetic cries of strangling roses wafted in the wind. Deep in the foetid undergrowth gangs of Maori freedom fighters could be heard holding a hui on the application of Marxist-Leninist doctrine to iwi and hapu, and its effect on whanau in a post-Hegelian, post-Colonial society.

Drastic action was required. I made a desperate phone call.

"Help," I explained.

"I'll be there immediately."

There was a whoosh and suddenly there he was - Supergardener to the rescue! His torn cloak billowed in the wind. He wore a blue boiler suit with grass-stained underpants hanging loosely on the outside. He struck a dramatic pose. The dramatic pose struck him back, but after a brief squabble Supergardener triumphed.

"Show me this garden, squire," he commanded, and I obeyed.

"Oooohh. Sheeee...", he sucked air through his teeth. "It's a big job, squire. Lots to do. And it's a bad time of year." He paused and thought for a while, supporting himself on the dessicated corpse of a Mormon missionary that was slowly digesting in the belly of the enormous Venus Fly Trap that coiled around the front gate. "I'll tell you what," he continued. "Because it's you, I'll give you a special rate and we'll clear the lot for a small fortune. How does that sound?"

"Fortunately", I said, "my fortune is very small indeed. It's a perfect match. I'll accept your kind offer. When can you start?"

"Tomorrow," said Supergardener. He scratched vigorously deep inside his grass-stained underpants. "Hedgehogs," he explained.

The next day Supergardener and Derek the Boy Wonder turned up bright and early, pitchforks at the ready, flame throwers cocked. Slowly the jungle retreated under their onslaught. "Nasturtium," said Supergardener as he dragged a huge ragged bush up the garden path to the trailer attached to his ute. "You can put that in a salad. Good for you." He tore off a broad leaf and took a bite. He chewed thoughtfully for a time and then spat it out. "Perhaps not," he said and re-entered the fray. He rescued Derek from the clutches of an over-enthusiastic vine that was slowly strangling a power pole and which appeared to prefer the taste of the Boy Wonder to the taste of concrete lightly seasoned with possum collar. "I've warned you about that stuff before," he said. "Don't you ever learn?" Derek looked suitably chastened.

Faster than I would have believed possible, the dynamic duo cleared up the weeds. Naked beds of dirt shivered in the breeze and hunched against the fence, protecting their vitals with rampant roses and begging for mercy and mulch.

Supergardener leaned nonchalantly on his pitchfork. "Just got to get rid of the stuff we pulled up and then mulch the dirt beds and we're done," he said. He turned his super gaze to the tottering tower of foliage piled up in the trailer. Heat rays shot out from his eyes and the foliage shrivelled and burned to a dull grey ash which blew away in the wind.

"Very Aristotelian," I said.

"Yes," agreed Supergardener, "those post-Platonic Greeks really knew their stuff when it came to their theories of vision and their descriptions of how eyeballs work."

He sent the Boy Wonder off to get a load of mulch and when he returned they hastily spread it all over the whimpering soil. Sighs of relief could be heard quite clearly as the mulch covered the multitude of sins that the weeding had exposed. The garden lay naked, silent and still, basking in the sunshine.

Whoosh!

Supergardener and Derek the Boy Wonder left to rescue another hapless garden. This fight was over now; it had been just another job. From their point of view it was just one more skirmish in their never ending battle to make the world a sanctuary for flowers; a place where vegetables could stand tall and proud without their rights and freedoms being compromised. Death to All Terrorists! Weeds will never flourish as long as Supergardener and Derek maintain their vigilance.

"Who was that masked man?" asked Robin as they rode off into the sunset.

Now that everything was safe and quiet again, the cats came out of hiding and began to explore the revitalised garden that had been presented to them.

They were thrilled. So many new toilets, so little poo.

# In Which Our Eyeballs Go Oblong

In 1953 the world was black, white and several shades of grey. It was the dawn of a new Elizabethan age and in London a grey young queen was about to ascend the throne. A man dressed in flowing grey robes would place a grey crown on her black hair and grimly grey lords and ladies would sing *Zadok The Priest* at her.

"What we need," declared my father in ringing tones, "is one of those new-fangled television things. It would never do to miss the Coronation!"

And so a black box manufactured by Pye entered the corner of our lounge. There was a sloping, corrugated section on the front with two brown, knurled knobs on it. Above the knobs was a small (probably 10 inch) screen. One knob turned the television on and adjusted the volume, the other knob controlled the brightness. There were smaller knobs hidden away at the back of the box - these controlled frightening things called the vertical hold and the horizontal hold. Only my father was allowed to touch those. My mother, if she was very good, was allowed to turn the television on and off. I wasn't allowed to touch it at all.

I don't think I ever actually saw the Coronation - or if I did, I retain no memory of it. But I do remember watching *Bill and Ben The Flowerpot Men*, and *Rag, Tag and Bobtail* and *Muffin The Mule* (contrary to later salacious speculations, this last was not a sexual offence).

Another favourite programme was *The Sooty Show*. Sooty was a glove puppet, a little bear manipulated by his master Harry Corbett. Every week Sooty would get the better of the man with the hand up his bottom, and cover

Harry Corbett with flour, water, cream cakes, ink, paint, eggs and any other messy substance that could be found. The poor chap would endure this torture with stoic calm.

"Bye, bye everyone. Bye bye," he would whine as the show came to an end and nameless substances ran down his face and dripped stickily on to his shirt. Sooty was hugely popular with everyone. My parents bought me a Sooty glove puppet for Christmas. I rejected it.

"It's *ginger*," I wailed inconsolably. "Sooty is *grey*!"

There was only one channel, of course - the venerable BBC. It wasn't until 1956 that competition (in the form of ITV) appeared on the scene. Our ancient Pye television couldn't receive ITV; it had no tuner, having been built in the days when there was only one broadcast frequency, and it was inexorably bound to the BBC. My father steadfastly resisted the lure of ITV.

"We don't want that," he thundered. "It's got adverts on it."

I'd never seen an advert - they sounded fascinating and I was consumed with jealousy to think that my friends up the road could watch as many adverts as they liked on their more modern television set. I did eventually get to see ITV adverts and they were just as exciting as I'd hoped they would be. I'd go round to a friend's house and we'd watch ladies who extolled the virtues of washing powder and toothpaste, and we'd laugh at the cartoon salesman who raved about Esso Blue paraffin oil and who referred to himself, in moments of stress, as the Esso Blee Dooler (boom, boom, boom, boom; Esso Blue - I can still sing the jingle). In between the adverts my friend and I watched *Popeye The Sailorman* cartoons. They made a huge impression on me.

"Mum," I insisted, "I want to eat *spinach*!"

My mother was bewildered, but obedient. I'd never previously been observed to voluntarily allow potentially poisonous things like vegetables into my mouth. Indeed, on

the rare occasions that my mother managed to force a pea or possibly a bean into me, I immediately threw it back up. So I wanted spinach did I? She shot off to the village shop where, to her mild surprise, they actually had some spinach for sale. She cooked it and served it and I rejected it immediately.

"That's not spinach," I insisted. "That's yucky green stuff. Spinach is *grey!*"

I have since come to realise that the only food that could possibly be shown accurately on the television of the day was porridge, the world's only grey food - if indeed it is a food at all; opinions on this differ. But as a child I lacked such sophisticated insight. The fibrous green mass on my plate could not possibly be spinach. I practised projectile vomiting for a while in order to take my mind off it.

My father eventually succumbed to the lure of ITV. Seduced, I suspect, by the prospect of extra cricket, he had words with the man in the TV shop. An ugly black box was bolted on the side of the Pye television. This was supposed to allow us to re-tune it so that we could watch ITV, but it never worked very well. The picture was shimmery and it faded in and out. The sound was crackly. Eventually my father couldn't stand it any more and the Pye, that faithful workhorse, went to the great television studio in the sky and other, more anonymous television sets replaced it.

In the early 1960s, the BBC fissioned, rather like an amoeba, and turned into BBC1 and BBC2. This last was supposedly a more intellectual channel and it was full of panel games where talking heads declaimed pompously about art, music and literature. On one such show, a poem was read to the panel:

She (We gave her most of our lives)  
is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives)  
home (We gave her everything money could buy)



She's leaving home after living alone  
For so many years. Bye, bye

"That's a Beatles song," I said.

"Rubbish," said my father, who knew everything about everything. "They wouldn't put pop music trash on a show like this."

The panel had obviously never heard the poem before and they were very impressed with it. They discussed the cleverness of the imagery and the honesty of the emotions it portrayed. They begged the host to reveal the name of the talented poet who had produced such a marvellous work. This poet, they were sure, had a brilliant future.

"Well actually it's a Beatles song," said the host.

"See?" I said to my father.

"Humph," he replied.

To a man, the panel then repudiated everything they had previously said. The imagery was a little clumsy, the rhythmical patterns were flawed, the emotions at best second hand. An obviously juvenile work, shallow and trite.

This kind of two-faced intellectual snobbery was rife throughout BBC2 and it wasn't long before popular pressure caused programmes such as this one to vanish from the airwaves. BBC2 then became pretty much indistinguishable from BBC1. I'm not completely convinced that this was a good thing.

By now the television companies were starting to broadcast some of their programmes in colour. The programmes were also a lot more daring than they had been in the past and every so often, if you were very lucky, the leading lady in a bodice ripper would indeed have her bodice ripped. Attracted by the prospect of bare breasts in glorious flesh tones instead of gloomy grey, my father got a colour television.

Only about half the programmes were broadcast in colour. Every day my father would carefully check the

details of that day's potential viewing in the Radio Times (BBC) and the TV Times (ITV) and make a list.

"Dad, can we watch..."

"NO! It's in black and white!"

He seemed to regard it as almost heretical to watch black and white programmes on a colour TV. He also harboured the vague suspicion that if the colour TV showed too many black and white programmes, its colour tanks might dry out through lack of use and render the set inoperable. Only the constant watching of colour broadcasts would keep the tanks topped up and their contents properly moist. Fortunately the number of programmes broadcast in colour increased daily, so the colour tanks on our television set were constantly being replenished. This kept my father very happy.

As the years passed, I moved from house to house and from country to country. Televisions came and televisions went. None of them made much of an impression on me. However each of them (sometimes in combination with other gadgets) allowed the reception of more and more channels. Eventually Robin and I found ourselves with about 50 channels to watch, most of which broadcast utter rubbish 24 hours a day.

All of the televisions that we watched this rubbish on had one thing in common; they contained bulky cathode ray tubes which projected a square picture. As time went on, we began to find this more and more frustrating since a significantly large proportion of the programmes we were watching were now being broadcast in high definition with an oblong aspect ratio. Watching these on square screens was, shall we say, a distinctly sub-optimal experience.

"We need a new television," said Robin. "One of those beautifully slim LCD ones that are specially set up for oblong pictures."

I had to agree with her. The world was imploding into a financial crisis and spiralling into a recession. I had just seen

\$8,000 vanish from my life savings in less than a week. It was obvious to the meanest intelligence that now was the absolutely ideal time to spend lots of money on a new TV.

"Let's round the loss on my superannuation to \$10,000," I said. "That gives us \$2,000 spending money."

"Shopping!" exclaimed Robin and she went to get the car.

The new Sony Bravia in my life dominates the lounge. It has a gigantic 42 inch oblong screen. My father's original Pye would just about be able to accommodate the newsreader's nose, as long as the newsreader doesn't have a cold. Audio cables connect the television to my stereo system, and an S-Video cable connects it to the Telstra-Clear decoder. 50 channels of appalling mediocrity are sharp, crisp, colourful and stereophonically loud. Bill and Ben make political statements on TVNZ one, Popeye eats authentically green spinach on the Cartoon Network, the ladies in the adverts extol the virtues of washing powder and toothpaste. Robin and I watch it all, enthralled.

But sometimes, as the old, familiar images from my childhood invade my lounge (albeit in colour), I suspect that not a lot has really changed since the 1950s.

# The Customer Is Always Wrong

Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...

Once upon a time there was an insurance company called S and another one called A. They each had a client called I (that's me, in case you were wondering). I had a life insurance policy with A and a superannuation policy with S. Year in and year out, at monthly intervals, both S and A extracted vast amounts of money from my bank account using direct debit authorities set up for exactly that purpose.

I was never very sure what A did with my money, apart from vaguely promising to pay it all back to me with enormous interest added on should I ever be unfortunate enough to die. However S were much more open about what they needed the money for. Every month they invested and reinvested my money in the stock market. S were very proud of the skill of the professional gamblers that they employed for this function. S dignified these dice-rollers with the job title of Financial Managers. Every year S would send me large, expensively glossy statements that extolled the virtues and talents of the problem gamblers that were in charge of investing the slowly accumulating funds in my account. I always found these documents very puzzling - when I added up the amount of money that had vanished from my bank account over the years and compared it with the accumulated sum in my superannuation account, I failed to see any significant difference between the two totals. All the profits that the investments generated, if indeed there were any, appeared to have vanished into a line item called Fees. I was less than impressed with the final minuscule

sum that was somehow supposed to pay for my retirement. It occurred to me that the funds would probably grow much faster if I simply stuck the money in a term deposit account in a bank and forgot all about it for a decade. The slow, steady, conservative performance of a term deposit was consistently better than that of the less than inspiring guesswork produced by the random number generators used by the Financial Managers at S in their frantic attempts to foresee the performance of the stock market. But being lazy, and hating to mess with the status quo, I just let things drift.

And then one day I turned on the radio and heard an announcer say: "The world is falling into a recession. Stock markets are collapsing and insurance and finance companies all over the planet are going bankrupt. The sky is falling! The old order is coming to an end. Woe! Woe! Sackcloth and ashes are now the garments of choice on casual Friday. Unclean! Unclean! The great bell tolls for us all and lamentations are heard from the palaces of the smug and prosperous."

"Hmmm!" I thought to myself. "I wonder how that will affect me?"

It wasn't long before I found out. Two days later a letter arrived from A (remember them?).

"Don't worry," said the letter in soothing tones. "The fact that our parent company in America has just gone spectacularly bankrupt is of no importance whatsoever. It really doesn't matter that all the directors are on trial for fraud, and nobody except the directors themselves cares that they will probably go to jail for a thousand years each. Trust us, none of this is of any significance whatsoever and we are committed to continuing to provide you with an absolutely first class service on your life insurance policy. Honest!"

"Really?" I asked. "Pull the other one, it plays *Hey, Big Spender!*"

"That's right," continued the letter from A. "None of it matters a fig. We won't go bankrupt like head office did. And anyway, we don't have any connection at all to the insurance company in America that has the same name as us. We're not really a branch of them. No, no, not at all, not at all. Oh, by the way, we're increasing your premium payments."

"No you aren't," I said, and I rang my financial advisor.

"No problem," said my financial advisor. "I'll cancel the life insurance policy with A and set up a new one with S. And I'll send you a form to fill in instructing S to close the superannuation account and transfer the money to you so that you can put it in a term deposit."

"Sounds good," I said..

"And you'd better cancel the direct debit authorities," continued my financial advisor. "You don't want A and S to take any more money now that you have decided to cancel their policies."

That sounded like good advice to me. What's the point of having a financial advisor if you don't listen to the advice you get? So I filled in all the forms and cancelled all the direct debit authorities. And that's when my problems *really* started...

The first hint that something might be going wrong was an extremely rude letter from A.

"The direct debit request for this month's premium payment was refused by the bank," said A. "Fix this immediately or face the awful consequences."

"You shouldn't even be trying to take any money from me," I said. "I cancelled the policy."

"What difference does that make?" asked A. "We've got a direct debit authority. That means we can take as much money as we want from you whenever we like and you can't stop us."

"Yes I can," I said. "All I have to do is cancel the direct debit, and that's exactly what I've done because I no longer

have an insurance policy with you."

"That's all very well," said A, "but we are an insurance company and therefore we never get anything wrong. The policy isn't cancelled until we say it is cancelled. So you need to stop prevaricating and pay us the money immediately."

"No," I said.

"Humph." A departed in an angry silence and a week later I received another letter informing me that they noted that the policy had been cancelled and therefore I should feel free to cancel their direct debit authority since they would no longer need to take money from it. Being grateful for a happy ending, I left it at that. But more troubles were soon on the way.

"Now then," said S, "you've sent instructions to cancel the superannuation policy and transfer the funds to you. That sounds like a very bad idea to us. Do you realise that since you sent us those instructions the value of your account has decreased by \$8,000? We strongly advise you not to cancel the account. Leave the money in there and wait for it to recover."

"But what if the value goes down even further?" I asked.

S made spluttering noises. "Oh, in my opinion that's extremely unlikely."

"Other people's opinions differ from yours," I pointed out. "I just want to cut my losses before things get even worse. I've filled in the form and signed it in triplicate in all the right places. Why can't you just follow instructions and send me what little money remains?"

"Because you are a customer," said S, "and customers are always wrong."

"I'm not changing my mind," I said.

"Oh all right," said S with bad grace. "I'll send you a cheque sometime this week."

"Please hurry up," I said. "I'd hate to lose even more money while I'm waiting."

"All right, all right," grumbled S. "Now about this new life insurance policy you've taken out with us."

"What about it?"

"We need you to fill in a direct debit authority form immediately," said S. "I'll post one to you today."

"No," I said, "you don't *need* me to fill one in. You'd *like* me to fill one in."

"That's what I said." S sounded puzzled.

The direct debit authority form arrived the next morning and I filled it in and returned it immediately. The cheque for the superannuation money arrived four days later. Amusingly, another \$1,000 had vanished from the account in the interim.

The date of the first premium payment on the life insurance policy came and went, closely followed by a very rude letter from S.

"The bank refused the direct debit request," said S. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, but get it fixed immediately. Meanwhile, send us a cheque for the premium you missed. Now!"

I posted a cheque to S and then visited the bank. "What's all this about refusing a direct debit request?" I asked.

A charming young lady rummaged through files and tapped keys on her keyboard. She looked flummoxed. "I really can't explain it," she said. "There's no record of us refusing the request. Indeed, we would have had no legitimate reason to refuse it. Your account was well in credit when the payment was due, and even if it hadn't been, you've got a huge overdraft facility on the account, so we'd still have honoured the payment."

I passed this information on to S.

"Oh," said S. "Probably we requested payment from the bank before we actually posted the direct debit form to them. That's handled by people in two different departments and they don't synchronise their procedures very well because their desks are on opposite sides of the



room. And they don't communicate at all because they had a huge row about who ate the last chocolate biscuit at morning tea. They haven't spoken a word to each other for six months. Your cheque hasn't arrived yet. Are you *sure* you posted it? Get your finger out."

I reassured S that the cheque was in the mail; a phrase which I always enjoy immensely every time I use it, but which I get to use less and less frequently in this modern era of electronic banking. Computers have a lot to answer for. In my opinion they have destroyed far too many of life's little pleasures. S grumbled away back into whatever hole it had crawled out of, and I settled down to take advantage of a small period of perfect peace. Then one more letter arrived from S and the final, ludicrously surreal chapter of this comedy of errors unfolded itself.

"We've had a communication from the bank," said S. "Our direct debit authority has been cancelled on your instructions. What on earth do you think you are playing at? To reinstate it, we have to start again from scratch. There's a new direct debit authority form included with this letter. We need you to fill it in and return it to us immediately."

I underlined the word *need* and put a question mark beside it. Then I contacted the bank. "I don't remember cancelling the direct debit," I said. "Did I do it in my sleep? Was I drunk perchance, or under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs? Perhaps I have an identical twin brother from whom I was separated at birth and who has been blighting my life in secret ever since?"

"No, you didn't do it at all," said the same charming lady with whom I had spoken last time. "The instructions to cancel the direct debit came directly from S, not from you."

"Thank you," I said, and I passed the information on to S.

"Nonsense," said S. "You did it."

"Didn't!"

"Did!"

"Didn't"

"Did!"

"Didn't, didn't, didn't!"

"Did, did, did! A thousand times did!! Nyah! Nyah! Nyah! We're an insurance company and we don't make mistakes. You are only a customer. By definition everything is your fault. Fill in the new direct debit form immediately so that the next premium payment can go through without any fuss."

I heaved a huge sigh, but S dodged it skilfully and it did no harm. The next day, S contacted me again.

"That direct debit authority?" said S.

"Yes?"

"It seems we did cancel it after all. Well, what we *actually* did was cancel the direct debit payment on the superannuation policy that you closed down. However since you had already cancelled that authority, the only remaining direct debit on your account was the new one that we'd just set up for the life insurance policy. Consequently our instructions to the bank had the unfortunate side effect of cancelling the new authority instead of the old one. So it really was your fault after all. If you hadn't cancelled the superannuation direct debit, none of this would ever have happened."

"But I closed the superannuation policy down three months ago," I said. "If I hadn't cancelled that direct debit authority, it would have stayed active and you'd have taken three premiums to which you were not entitled."

"Of course we were entitled to them," said S. "A direct debit authority allows us to take as much money from you as we want, whenever we wish. That's what insurance companies do with direct debits. Surely that's been explained to you before. Don't you know *anything*? Now, get your finger out and send us the form again. Don't forget to sign it in blood. Preferably your own."

I posted the direct debit authority form last week. So far I've heard nothing back from S. Mind you, it is Christmas

and consequently there is nobody in their office to process the form. That's probably my fault.

# In Which Bits Of A House Are Painted

In the suburb where I live, the sunshine is quite significantly different from the sunshine in other parts of the world. Here the sunbeams are very sharp, with bevelled edges just like chisels, and they slide along the house peeling the paint off in great flaking strips. Naturally all the flaking paint is at the top of the house because that's the closest to the sun and therefore the sharp sunbeams hit that part first. By the time the sunbeams reach the bottom of the house they are much blunter and so the paint is able to resist them.

Eventually such a lot of paint was flaking off my house that I decided I needed to do something about it. I had sandpaper, polyfilla (the woodworker's friend), paint, a paintbrush and a ladder. The only thing preventing me from setting to work was the extreme vertigo from which I suffer whenever I find myself at the top of a ladder. Obviously I needed a cunning plan. Fortunately I swiftly came up with one.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

That'll be the phone.

"Hello," I said.

Ring, ring.

Eventually I realized that phone conversations work a lot better if you pick the phone up before you talk at it. So I did.

"Hello."

"Hello," said a voice. "This is John. I'm building a tree house and I wondered if you had a ladder I could borrow?"

"Of course I have," I said. "My ladder is your ladder. Feel free to borrow it for as long as you need it. Why are you

building a tree house?"

"Because Dylan needs one," said John. Dylan is John's five year old son. They have a wonderful relationship. John uses Dylan as the excuse for playing with all the toys that he really wants to play with. Once he took Dylan to a motor show (they are both extreme petrol heads). A mutual friend spotted them there, watched them for a while, and then rang Lynelle, John's wife.

"Your small child and your other small child are having the time of their lives!"

Lynelle wasn't at all surprised at the news. So, knowing this, I was sure that Dylan would have an absolutely wonderful time playing with his new tree house. But John would have a better time because he'd been waiting for his tree house for thirty years longer than Dylan had.

"Dylan will love that," I said. "Come and get the ladder straight away."

Within minutes, John and Dylan turned up and took the ladder away. I was very pleased. Now I had a perfect reason for not painting the top of my house. There was nothing I could do until the ladder came back. Time passed...

Wavy lines, wavy lines, wavy lines.

A year later, many months after the completion of the tree house, I decided I couldn't put off painting my house any longer.

"Can I have my ladder back?"

"Of course," said John.

I prepared myself for the ordeal. I assembled my tools and then approached the ladder with fear and trembling. My ladder is an origami ladder. It can be folded into a multitude of configurations, thus allowing any conceivable climbing task to be conquered. So I folded the ladder this way and that, and it turned into a frog.

Hmmm. That didn't seem quite right. How could I climb to the top of the house on a frog? Perhaps I was supposed to cling to its back while it jumped high in the air. I tried again,

and this time I got a fireman's greasy pole. great for coming down from the top of the house, but not a lot of use for climbing up there in the first place. Three times is a charm. I folded the ladder once more and this time I got pitons, a mountaineering harness and an ice axe. I was tempted by this, but I was worried at the thought of the damage I might do by banging the pitons into the walls of my house, so I tried another set of folds instead. Success! This time I got an actual ladder. I propped it against the house and inched my way gingerly up it, sandpaper, polyfilla and spatula clutched in my hand.

I found it hard to breathe in the rarefied air at the top of the ladder. Wind whistled past my ears, pushing and shoving, trying desperately to make me fall off. Wisps of cloud made it hard to see what I was doing. Low flying aeroplanes made strafing runs which broke my concentration.

I reached out tentatively to peel off the flaking paint, sand down the borders and fill the gaps with polyfilla. With my right hand I scraped and sanded. With my left hand I held whichever tool I didn't need at the moment. And with my middle hand I held on to the ladder with a vice-like grip to stop myself falling off. Since my middle hand is purely imaginary, life at the top of the ladder was more than a bit scary. And it didn't help that I kept stretching and straining to get at things that were just out of reach. This is not a sensible thing to do on a ladder - but it takes such a long time to climb down, move the ladder a foot to the left and climb up it again that I simply couldn't help myself. Several times my centre of gravity swayed almost to the tipping point.

But eventually the preparation work was finished and I hadn't fallen off the ladder and died. All that remained to be done now was to paint the newly prepared wood.

The next day I opened up a can of paint, stirred it vigorously and then folded the origami ladder into a spiral

staircase. I climbed up and, holding the can in my left hand, the paintbrush in my right hand and with my middle hand clutching the ladder, I began to paint. First I painted my trousers, then I painted my shirt and then, having nothing else to paint, I painted the wood. A curious fly landed and explored the newly painted wood. It got stuck and buzzed plaintively. Aha! The perfect opportunity...

When I was a little boy I used to sneak up on the flies that crawled on the window panes and squash them between my thumb and forefinger. My mother found this habit quite gross and would tell me off whenever she caught me doing it. She particularly hated it when I put the flattened corpses in my pocket for safe keeping. She was always complaining about the dessicated bodies and putrefying fly guts that floated out and stuck to her fingers when she hand washed my trousers.

I became quite skilful at squashing flies. Rare indeed was the fly that escaped my grasping fingers. However some *did* escape and therefore the natural processes of Darwinian evolution meant that very soon the fly population of the world started selecting for the gene that gave them the speed and manoeuvrability to easily avoid me. The number of corpses in my pockets dwindled to zero as they evolved, and it has been many years since I was last able to squash a crawling fly. But now I had a fly trapped in front of me in the paint. No way was this one going to escape. I reached out and squished my first fly for forty five years.

Ecstasy! Nunc dimittis! Time to fall off the ladder.

# Alan And Robin Go South

Robin and I and Phyllis and Tim (Robin's mum and dad) were about to set off on our holidays, in the South Island of New Zealand. Our journey would begin in the North Island, so a trip on a ferry was called for since the inter-island road was waterlogged because of the high summer tides. The Bluebridge ferry sat quietly at the Wellington wharf, puffing smoke. Next to her was moored her sister ship, the Santa Regina *Monte Stello* which had been broken for a fortnight and which therefore puffed no smoke at all. Both ships (or are they boats?) were painted blue on the bottom as is only right and proper, given the name of the company. They each had a white superstructure and blue funnels.

We checked in and surrendered our bags.

"Hello," said the check in man, giving me a public relations smile and four wooden sticks which were painted dirty yellow.

"What are these for?" I asked.

"These are your boarding passes," said the man.

"Why aren't they blue?" I asked. "Everything else is blue."

"Don't lose them," the man told me, ignoring my question, "or you won't be able to get on the ship."

"Is it a ship, then?" I asked. "I thought it might be a boat."

His smile got grimly fixed and I retreated in confusion, the questions still unsettled in my mind. Ship or boat? Boat or ship? Why couldn't I have blue sticks? I put the yellow sticks in my pocket where they bulged ominously. I walked lopsidedly because of the unevenly distributed weight.

Eventually a boarding call was made and we all filed through a door and out on to the wharf. Along the way, we passed a woman with a big white plastic box.



"Boarding passes, please," she said.

I retrieved my yellow sticks and dropped them into her box with a satisfying clatter, though I was still vaguely perturbed. Shouldn't the box have been blue as well? Oh well, at least I could walk upright again.

We boarded the boat (or possibly the ship) by walking through the vehicle deck, entering a narrow doorway and clambering up some slippery, badly painted metal stairs. Everything reeked of cat pee. Presumably the last cargo carried by the *Santa Regina* was a batch of hugely incontinent tigers.

Soon we reached the passenger decks. We passed small alcoves containing comfortable leather couches and no portholes whatsoever. Since there was no prospect of being able to see out, we avoided these areas. Other people, more experienced than us in the etiquette of travel, took advantage of our error of judgement, and the alcoves soon filled up behind us. It wouldn't be long before we discovered our mistake...

The main lounge area had sets of aeroplane-like seats arranged in rows in front of a large, flat screen television set. As we entered, nothing was showing on the TV. Around the edges of the lounge were some more comfortable leather couches, each with easy access to a porthole. We settled ourselves down on a couch, congratulating ourselves on our good seating judgement. Little did we know...

"These aren't really portholes," said Tim. "They are square. Portholes are supposed to be round."

"Quite true," I said. Now I had another nomenclature niggle to worry about. Would it never end? "If they aren't portholes, what are they then?"

"How about starboardholes?" suggested Tim.

The nomenclature niggle died away. I liked starboardholes.

Amazingly, the boat (or perhaps it was a ship) pulled away from the wharf five minutes before the scheduled

departure time. We all took this as a good omen. The ship (or boat -- I'll tell you what, let's compromise and call it a vessel) glided smoothly out into the harbour. The sea was so still and calm that hordes of gulls were strutting up and down on top of the water, pecking at the occasional passing fish.

Someone turned the television on and it quickly became clear why the alcoves were so popular, even though they had no starboardholes. Some terrible American movie was being broadcast at eardrum shattering volume. Astronauts in orbit in the International Space Station sent letters of complaint about the noise level. Zombie passengers sat transfixed in their aeroplane seats, eyeballs glued to the screen.

I went in search of food and drink. On the second level of the vessel (yes, that's a much better word) I found a cafe that served anything you cared to ask for as long as it was deep fried. I had deep fried soup with a deep fried bread roll and deep fried salad. The deep fried coffee tasted strange, so I had deep fried Lemon and Paeroa instead. Much better.

As we pulled out of the harbour and into the open sea, mobile phone reception started to disappear. All over the *Santa Regina* teenagers went rigid with shock as sensory deprivation set in. Thumbs twitched impotently as the inability to send text messages became frighteningly clear to them. Withdrawal symptoms drained all energy from them and they became quite catatonic. Euthanasia seemed the kindest solution.

After a while we looked through the starboardholes and we could see the South Island peeking coyly through a cloud layer on the horizon. It crept closer and we entered the Sounds through a narrow channel. Rugged coastlines slid by on each side of the vessel. Every so often we could see a smug looking house squatting in isolated surprise on the beachfront.

"How do people get to their houses?" asked Phyllis.  
"There aren't any roads."

"Dolphins," I told her with a straight face. "The more adventurous people harness and saddle the dolphins and ride them around the bays. Those of a more sedentary nature take water taxis, which are carriages hitched to teams of specially trained dolphins."

Phyllis gave me the look that mothers-in-law reserve especially for use on irreverent sons-in-law who they suspect of taking the Michael. Suitably withered, I changed the subject.

Picton Harbour came into view and the vessel swung round in a semi-circle, presented her statuesque rear end to the pier and gently reversed into her mooring. We disembarked and waited for the coach to take us to the baggage reclamation area. From there we headed to the Interislander Ferry Terminal where we were due to catch a bus to Nelson.

The bus check in kiosk was closed but the timetable was prominently displayed. It informed me that the bus we were due to catch ran only on Mondays. Today being Friday, I began to panic and I rang the bus company for advice.

A cheerful lady utterly failed to understand the problem.

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

"But the timetable says it only runs on Mondays."

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

"Tonight?" I asked desperately.

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

It was now 5.45pm. A coach pulled up and stopped. On the front was a sign that said Nelson in large friendly letters.

"Ah," I said. "the coach is here. The problem is solved."

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed, and rang off.

Nelson advertises itself as the sunshine capital of New Zealand. Therefore, on our first day, it rained. The rain was very pretty, but nonetheless, it was rain. Clutching umbrellas, we visited the Nelson Market which was full of stalls selling organic fruit and veg and tourist-trap greenstone carvings. We approached a stall, intent on purchasing organic apples.

"I have scales over here," said the stall holder. "Come with me to the other side of the stall and I will weigh you out some good ones, special organic apples chosen by me just for you."

My mother in law trotted off with him. Twenty minutes later, just as we were beginning to consider sending out search parties, they returned. Phyllis was clutching a plastic bag full of apples. The plastic bag made me suspicious - surely a true organic stall holder would use something recyclable.

"Here we are," the stallholder said gaily. "Sorry about the long wait. I didn't sell her. I got a lot of good offers for her though!"

We took the apples back to our motel where we discovered that organic means that the flesh of the apple turns brown the instant you cut into it and expose it to the air. Organic also means that the fruit has been extensively bored into by real live wriggling bugs which are still in residence and having a good chomp. They were properly organic bugs, though...

The next day dawned clear and sunny. Nelson's reputation was restored. We arranged a trip with Cactus Tours, which is owned and operated by a young man who answers only to the name CJ. He picked us up at our motel and showed us everything there is to see in Nelson.

CJ showed us a statue of Abel Tasman staring in bewilderment at a beautiful bay that he never actually saw in real life.

Then CJ showed us a Japanese garden. Stones sat elegantly in beautifully raked sand in which local teenagers had scrawled cryptic messages and left fashionable Nike footprints.

"Soon the tidal gardeners will come on their regular morning rounds," explained CJ, "and they will rake the sand clean again. The temporary messages will vanish just like sand castles vanish from the beach."

Then CJ took us on a little walk through a park which contained a plaque marking the exact centre of New Zealand. Standing there, you have precisely as much land north of you as there is to the south. I stood, feeling in balance with the land. Harmony and good vibes, man.

CJ pulled a leaf from a tree.

"This is a kawakawa tree," he told us. "It's a close relative of the kava root that grows in the Pacific islands. If you chew it, it has a nice pepperminty flavour and it makes your mouth numb." He took a big bite and chewed thoughtfully. "Yummy!" he said in distorted tones.

"Try some," he encouraged us. "Choose the leaves with holes in -- the bugs always know which are the best ones."

We took his advice. It was good advice. The leaves were indeed richly minty and the narcotic effect was quite pronounced. Being firmly of the opinion that anything worth doing is worth overdoing, I munched several handfuls of leaves. Soon I could no longer feel my arms and I was beginning to wonder whether or not I still had feet.

CJ is just starting out in the tour guide business. If he makes a success of it, as I am sure he will, it won't be very long before the streets of Nelson are littered with paralysed tourists and the kawakawa trees are denuded of leaves.

On the way back to town, we passed Abel Tasman's statue again. A seagull perched on the statue's head and expressed his opinion. Tasman tried to clean up the mess but was unable to move his arms. Presumably he had eaten too many kawakawa leaves.

CJ took us out of town and dropped us at our next destination. He had another customer to meet and we wouldn't see him again. We thanked him for his tour and watched him leave with a real sense of regret. If you are ever in Nelson, get in touch with Cactus Tours. You won't regret it.

Our final destination was the WOW centre, a huge complex which housed a Classic Car museum (boring) and costumes from the World Of Wearable art (not boring). The costumes were breathtaking, some for their elegance, some for their cleverness and some for their humour. One costume was made of more than a thousand hand sewn silk butterflies and was stunningly beautiful. Another, a training bra, consisted of a model railway circling a large pair of tightly cantilevered breasts.

That evening, our last in Nelson, we ate at a Chinese restaurant. Gesturing extravagantly, I spilled a whole glass full of beer all over my hat. This was a terrible waste of beer; almost sacrilegious, and it sent me into a deep depression. However my hat didn't seem to mind. My hat is an Akubra and it is designed to have beer and other, more unmentionable, fluids spilled over it. It shrugs these things off without a second thought. However throughout the rest of the holiday casual passers by inhaled the fumes arising from my hat and went immediately in search of a pub. I began to consider sending the brewery an invoice for services rendered...

The next day, at an obscenely early hour, we boarded an InterCity coach to Greymouth. The road from Nelson to Greymouth twists and winds like the devil's corkscrew. It is well known that New Zealand Road engineers are paid by the corner. The ones who built this road must have retired as multi-millionaires.

Our coach driver flung his vehicle around the bends with gay abandon to the accompaniment of much vomiting on

the part of passengers with sensitive tummies and turbulent inner ears.

"Sit closer to the front," the driver told them. "Oh, yes!"

We hurtled through the Buller Gorge at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. Steep sided cliffs covered in a thousand shades of green towered ominously above us. Feathers of ferns peeked coyly through the bush. The coach ran upside down over a switchback spiral. Road signs warned of the danger of rock falls. One somewhat mysterious and vividly orange sign simply proclaimed:

Slump!

The exclamation mark is in the original.

Sitting closer to the front of the coach made no difference to the terminally travel sick, and we arrived in Greymouth with the coach awash in stomach contents. Coffee, curry, corn flakes and diced carrots predominated. We splashed our moist and lumpy way out of the coach and rang the motel where we had reservations. They sent a courtesy shuttle to pick us up, and when we arrived at the motel we were introduced to the seven cats and one Jack Russell terrier who really ran the place. The cats ignored us and the dog presented us with a ball to throw. We proved to be less than talented at this, and he took his ball away again in disgust. We had failed the initiation rites. We would not be allowed breakfast.

Directly across the road from the motel was a supermarket. Phyllis had finished the organic apples she bought in Nelson and was now suffering from fruit deprivation. We mounted an expedition to the supermarket which proved itself to be singularly inaccessible. It was surrounded by a chain link fence. The only holes in the fence were those made by vandals. Wriggling through a hole placed us at the top of a sheer cliff side which made non-negotiable gravitational demands.

Time to implement Plan B.

Plan B involved walking downhill away from the supermarket. When it was just a dot on the horizon, a sharp turn to the right brought us to the huge expanse of the supermarket car park, which, interestingly, contained no cars. We hiked across the tarmac. Sheer cliffs topped by the chain link fence that we observed from the motel towered above us on our right. Another chain link fence on our left separated us from the Greymouth Railway station and prevented us from damaging the trains, should one happen to run into us when weren't looking. Eventually, just as terminal exhaustion set in, we arrived at the supermarket. It was closed.

The next day dawned. There was a thin mist covering the town and we could barely see the supermarket. A very chill wind was blowing. Robin and I implemented Plan B again and headed for the supermarket where we bought breakfast cereal and fruit.

"It's freezing cold," said Robin, shivering.

"Yes," said the checkout lady. "We call the wind '*The Barber*' because it cuts through you like a barber's straight edged razor."

"That's a good name," said Robin. "Very descriptive."

"It takes a unique set of geographical characteristics to produce the barber," explained the check out lady cheerfully. "It's caused by cold air moving down a steep slope and being funnelled through a gap that the river has worn in the limestone hills. Technically it is known as a katabatic wind. There's only two places in the whole world with a proper barber. Greymouth and Norway." She sounded quite proud.

"Brrrr!" Robin shivered.

"Don't worry," said the lady. "The sun will soon burn off the mist and the wind will die down. It will be beautiful and warm in an hour or so." She gave us our change. "Have a lovely holiday," she said.



"How did she know we were tourists?" Robin asked me as we left.

"Because we were shivering as the barber cut us up," I explained.

The predictions of the check out lady were accurate and by the time the coach arrived to take us to Shantytown, the day was warm and sunny.

Shantytown is a reconstruction of a gold mining town with lots of authentic buildings full of authentic relics. There's a gold buying office, a bank, a hotel, a gaol, a printing shop, stores, stables and a long drop dunny. The dunny is a two seater. I took a photograph of Phyllis sitting in it and then a passer by took a photograph of Phyllis and me sitting companionably side by side sharing a conversation.

We took a short ride on a steam train past a sawmill to the gold diggings and back again. The engine was called Katie and she chuffed and puffed as she pulled the carriages just like the little engine who could. Her brass work gleamed and her freshly blackened smokestack belched clouds of smoke into our faces.

We saw a demonstration of gold panning and then we had a go at it ourselves. A man dressed in authentic gold mining clothes handed each of us a pan of gravel.

"There's gold in every pan," the man assured us. "All you have to do is find it."

We stood by a line of sinks full of water and washed our gravel. The swirling water took the gravel away, hopefully leaving the gold behind. The gold, being much heavier than the gravel, tends to accumulate at the bottom of the pan as you swirl the water round; at least that's the theory. However too vigorous a swirling can remix the gold with the gravel and then the gold washes away of course. As always, happy mediums have to be struck.

The first sight of little gleaming things in my gravel was indescribably thrilling. I washed and swirled, washed and

swirled and there it was, indisputable gold. The man in charge gave my pan a final swirl and decanted the gold into a small tube for me to take away as a souvenir. I was quite proud of my few grains of shiny stuff.

Robin proved to be a particularly talented gold panner and she did even better than I did. All I had was a few tiny particles. Robin's gold had definite lumps in it and she had a lot more than I did. Presumably I'd swirled a bit too hard and washed some of my gold away into the sink.

Unfortunately, even when we combined our gold, we didn't have enough to pay for holiday. What a shame.

As we left, I could see the man who had done the demonstration for us panning the tailings we'd left in the sinks. Presumably the staff supplemented their wages with the gold the tourists left behind.

In the afternoon we visited the pancake rocks at Punakaiki. These are limestone rocks layered down in distinctly stratified stacks and they really do look like pancakes piled higgledy piggledy one top of the other. When the sea is in a bad mood it rushes and roars up into the rocks and propels itself out through huge blowholes high into the air, throwing up enormous columns of dazzling spray to the accompaniment of deep booming noises. Unfortunately, on the day that we visited the rocks, the sea was in a good mood, calm and serene as it sailed to the shore and there was no blowhole activity at all. However even without the blowholes being active, the raggedly sculptured pancake layers are still a thrillingly surreal sight.

The next day was the 4th of March 2009 and it marked the completion of my 59th orbit around the sun. I celebrated by taking a train trip across the mountains on the Trans-Alpine train from Greymouth to Christchurch. Very few people have spent their birthday on top of an Alp. I felt privileged to have done so.

There was no snow on the peaks. I suppose the summer weather had chased it all away. But the mountains were still

breathtakingly dramatic with their sheer sides and fiercely sculptured crags. As we went through Arthur's Pass, I caught a glimpse of a sword stuck in the top of the highest peak.

The train was running about an hour and a half late. Apparently it always runs behind schedule because of speed restrictions on the rather poorly maintained tracks. However nobody has bothered reprinting the timetable to make it match reality, and so the carriages are always full of tourists muttering urgently into mobile phones as they frantically try to rearrange the onward connections that they had pre-booked based on the erroneous assumption that the timetable was accurate.

Every so often the train ran parallel to the road which stretched emptily from horizon to horizon. Roads in the South Island are always relatively traffic-free and driving is an absolute pleasure. Sometimes you can drive all day and seldom, if ever, see another vehicle. That's what driving is *supposed* to be like.

Tim stared through the carriage window at the empty road. "I think I understand now," he said thoughtfully. "Southern roads are things that New Zealanders build just in case a car comes along."

"That's right," I said, because it was.

As the train approached Christchurch, we passed through six tunnels in the course of a mile. This section of the track is called "The Mile Of Six". What else would you expect in a country which has an island in the north called the North island and an island in the south called the South Island. New Zealand nomenclature is often prosaically literal.

"Perhaps The Mile Of Six is the train equivalent of the Mile High Club," I suggested suggestively.

"No!" said Robin, fiercely rejecting the suggestive suggestion. "My mother is sitting beside me."

"Pardon?" asked Phyllis who had been concentrating on the view and paying no attention to the conversation. I let Robin explain it.

We stayed overnight in Christchurch and ate at a magnificent restaurant called "Two Fat Indians" which we chose simply because we liked its name. Then, the next day, we hired a car and drove to Hanmer Springs. This small village is named after Thomas Hanmer, one of the first European settlers. He was a man with a most unfortunate name. Many people find 'Hanmer' quite hard to pronounce and there is a common tendency to transpose the middle consonants, turning the word into 'Hamner'. Early documents and maps of the area are rife with this misspelling and I was amused to find that Robin consistently mispronounced it as well.

"Han," she said and then paused for a second or so, girding her vocal chords. "Mer Springs," she said proudly.

"Well done," I congratulated her. "Now say it without the pause in the middle."

"Hamner Springs," she said.

Oh, well.

We were staying at the Alpine Springs Motel; words that Robin had no problem with whatsoever. The motel was owned by three Golden Retrievers. The eldest, called Sophie, had a blue ball of which she was inordinately fond. She carried it around with her everywhere she went. The ball was not only blue, it whistled loudly when squeezed. Since Sophie refused ever to relinquish the ball, except possibly when eating, her morning greeting to all and sundry tended to be:

"Woof - whistle - woof - whistle. BA - whistle - RK!"

The only reason to visit Hanmer Springs is to take the waters. The area's principal claim to fame is its thermal pools. A large complex offers soaking facilities in rock rimmed ponds of varying temperature and chemical composition. The water is quite salty; it contains large quantities of sodium chloride together with sodium carbonate, sodium borate and various lithium salts. Some of the hotter springs contain sulphur compounds and there is a

distinctive whiff of rotten eggs drifting over the area. Many of the pools simply present the water *au naturelle* but, for the fainter of heart, there are also pools where the water has been filtered and chlorinated for your comfort and safety.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the springs became increasingly popular. However mixed soaking was strongly discouraged. A flagpole by the springs flew a pair of trousers when it was the men's turn to bathe, and a skirt when it was the women's turn. But now, in these enlightened modern times, this segregation has been dispensed with and the flagpole is long gone.

We soaked ourselves for three glorious days, becoming somewhat wrinkly and prune-like (but *extremely* relaxed) in the process. We also discovered that soaking, while undeniably therapeutic, is also extraordinarily tiring and we collapsed early to bed every night, much to Sophie's disgust.

"Woof - whistle - woof - whistle. BA - whistle - RK!" she told us in no uncertain terms.

At last, relaxed and cheerful, we drove back to Christchurch for the final few days of our holiday.

Our first stop in Christchurch was the Willowbank Wildlife Reserve. It offers two main attractions, a wildlife park with a nocturnal kiwi house and something called *Ko Tane*, the Maori experience. Since Tim and Phyllis had never experienced either of these, we decided to indulge in both of them.

"Do you want to feed the animals?" asked the lady we bought tickets from.

"Yes, please."

And so, for a small extra fee, we were given a paper bag of pellets with the letter 'B' written on it for feeding the birds, a paper bag of different pellets with the letter 'F' written on it for feeding the farm animals, and a small

plastic container of pink stuff together with a long spoon for feeding the eels.

The eels were crowding around a small platform full of people who were dipping their spoons into the pink goo and spoon feeding the eels. The eels were obviously very accustomed to being spoon fed and knew just how to slurp the goo gently off the spoon, though one rather enthusiastic eel grabbed hold of Robin's spoon and pulled it out of her hands, refusing to let go.

They were very impatient eels. If there was the slightest pause in the spoon feeding, they raised themselves out of the water, mouths agape, and attempted to climb up on to the platform in search of more goo. This was more than a little frightening. The goo was obviously very nourishing - one and all, the eels were about the size and shape of Arnold Schwarzenegger's left thigh. Being pursued by ravenous, disembodied Terminator legs is the stuff of which nightmares are made.

Eventually we ran out of goo and went to throw pellets at the birds instead. These consisted mainly of ducks who followed us round, threatening us with a severe quacking if we didn't feed them fast enough.

The final paper bag, marked 'F' if you recall, was eventually shared between some kunekune pigs and a rather grand clydesdale who were all duly appreciative and very polite, unlike the eels and ducks. That's the difference between wild and domesticated animals, I suppose.

And then it was time for the kiwi. I've been to a lot of kiwi houses up and down New Zealand. The one at Willowbank is the best I've ever seen. In most kiwi houses there is a big glass wall between you and the birds and you strain your eyes in the nocturnal gloom trying hard to ignore the reflections in the glass that are interfering with your view of whatever kiwis may be on show behind it. But not at Willowbank. There is no glass at all in the kiwi house at Willowbank. The birds are on open view. There's just a waist

high fence to protect the people from the kiwis should they happen to run amok.

We leaned over the fence watching a busy little kiwi running around and poking at the leaf mould with his enormously long beak. He knew we were there, but he wasn't very interested in us. He just wanted to scurry and scritch, and that's exactly what he did.

Never before have I been so close to a kiwi with nothing between us at all. I could lean over the fence and get up close and personal. I could have reached out and touched him, though I was careful not to. I felt extremely privileged.

Then, together with about a dozen other people, we assembled for *Ko Tane*, the Maori Experience.

A young Maori lady called Tina who was dressed in traditional costume and who had the proper facial *moku* tattoo introduced herself to us and welcomed us.

"You," she explained, "are visitors to our land. But before you can be properly welcomed, we must know who your chief is. Which one of you is the chief?"

Every eyeball in the audience clicked into place and stared at me.

"Are you the chief?" asked Tina.

"Yes," I said, "I suppose I am."

"And is the beautiful woman beside you your queen?"

"Indeed she is."

And so I became a chief for a day and Robin became a queen.

Tina led us off into the forest, explaining points of interest to us along the way. Suddenly an enormous tattooed Maori warrior jumped out of the bush and confronted us. Eyes popping, tongue sticking out, he waved his spear and roared a challenge. He placed a small, leafed branch on the ground and retreated. I picked it up and held it, thus indicating that I was coming in peace.

This was my first ever powhiri – a Maori challenge and welcome. I was astonished at the overwhelming emotion of

the moment, the sense of taking part in a truly foreign and yet at the same time oddly familiar ritual. There was a feeling of spiritual rightness about the moment. I felt very strongly the deep cultural heritage with which I was now involved. It was all extremely moving, and I confess I was close to tears.

We were led to a marae. There were special seats for me and my queen, and then the warriors and ladies of the village put on a show for us. Afterwards the ladies in our group were taught to use *poi* and the men were taught the haka *Kamate*. This was great fun – it's always good to have a legitimate excuse to stamp your feet, stick out your tongue and roll your eyeballs around.

As we left, I planted the small leafed branch that I had been presented with in the soil. It seemed wrong to take the branch away with me. It belonged here in the forest. But I couldn't bring myself to simply discard it either. Probably it won't take root, but nevertheless planting it seemed like the right sort of gesture to make.

The other big attraction of Christchurch is the Antarctic Centre. It is housed in a huge building close to the airport. In the entrance foyer was a board displaying the various delights available to us, together with their costs. We could experience an antarctic storm and see the blue penguins being fed. For an extra \$20 we could go behind the scenes of the blue penguin enclosure. It seemed very reasonable.

"Let's do it ALL!"

And so we did.

The antarctic storm takes place every half hour (they have very accurate weather forecasts in Antarctica). Before we could go into the room where it was taking place, we were outfitted with warm, furry, hooded anoraks so that we wouldn't freeze, and overshoes so that we wouldn't get the snow dirty when we walked on it. I pulled up my hood and Robin took a photograph of me.

"You look very intrepid," she said.



The temperature was  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The wind chill factor brought this down to about  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Robin, Phyllis and Tim are from Perth in Western Australia and are used to spending most of their days at about  $+42^{\circ}\text{C}$ . As soon as they were exposed to the storm, their extremities froze solid, went brittle and dropped off. I gathered up all the fingers and toes from the ice and put them in my pocket. When we got back outside into the warmth I stuck them back on again in the appropriate places. But I'm not sure everyone got the right bits back. I think I might have mixed them up by mistake. Ever since we visited the Antarctic Centre, the finger that Robin uses to poke me in the ribs when I do something wrong has started to look a little bit masculine. That probably means that Tim got some of Robin's fingers. I hope it improves his golf game...

The blue penguins have an enclosure all of their own. They aren't an antarctic bird - they are too small to survive the extreme weather conditions down there. They are, in fact, a native New Zealand penguin. All the penguins at the centre have been injured by boats, or cars or (sickeningly) by human thugs. Although many have recovered to a certain extent, they are all too weak or too injured to survive in the wild and so they live out their days safely in the Antarctic Centre. These poor, injured birds are (the notices reminded us) the lucky ones. Many others die alone, in pain.

The penguins swam around the pool. It was dinner time and they knew it.

"Fish!" they yelled. "Where's my fish? I want fish now!"

Fish was not long in coming. Some of the birds were lame, some blind, one had an artificial beak. But all seemed happy and frolicsome. The fish was eagerly gobbled up.

Later we were given a guided tour through the penguin enclosure and we learned that despite their sometimes horrible injuries, the penguins do, on occasion, hatch and

rear chicks. It is obvious that the Antarctic Centre is doing a wonderful job with these extraordinarily cute birds.

And with that our holiday was over. The next day we took the Trans Coastal train to Picton where we joined the ferry for our trip back to Wellington. The Bluebridge ferry *Monte Stello* was still broken and so, rather than transfer to the (very) late sailing of her sister ship the *Santa Regina* we booked ourselves on to the Interislander ferry *Kaitaki* instead.

As the train travelled North up the coast, I saw a light dusting of snow on the majestic Kaikora mountains. To an extent, that made up for the lack of snow on the alps and I was quietly content as we boarded the ferry.

*Kaitaki* pulled away from the dock and somebody with no training in public speaking made an announcement over the loudspeaker system. He was trying to be very formal and correct, but he didn't quite do it properly...

"Passengers are reminded that alcohol purchased on board may be consumed."

Well that sounded like a good idea to me, so I went upstairs to the bar and consumed some. When I came back, Tim said:

"I looked for you for *hours!*"

"I was there all the time," I said.

"Well so was I," said Tim. "But the there where I was obviously wasn't the there where you were."

Robin started to giggle. "You sound just like Pooh and Piglet discussing deep and meaningful things," she said.

We docked in Wellington and all the people with cars on board hurried down to the car deck. As they went, the man who couldn't do public service announcements said:

"Passengers are reminded not to start their engines until asked to do so by the chief screw."

We disembarked and collected our luggage and then went looking for a taxi to take us home.

"We'll never get four people and all this luggage into one taxi," said Robin. "Let's get two taxis."

"OK."

"I'll go in the girl's taxi with mum," Robin said to me. "You and dad can go in the boy's taxi."

And so it was done. Robin and Phyll stowed their luggage in the boot of the first taxi and then got in to the car. As it pulled away, Tim and I climbed into the second taxi.

"Follow that cab!" I said.

# The Fone Of Bafut

I was away from home, on business in Auckland, and the battery on my mobile phone was getting rather low on power. But that wasn't a problem - I've had a university education, which means that I understand about half of the instructions in the manual that came with the phone. I consulted the instructions, then I turned the phone off and plugged one end of the charger into a power point and the other end of the charger into the phone. To my surprise, the phone turned itself on again. Then it said, "Unable To Charge."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Unable To Charge," said the phone smugly.

"Yes, yes. I heard you the first time," I said. "Why are you Unable To Charge?"

"I don't know," said the phone. "I'm only a phone, not an electrical engineer. Unable To Charge."

I turned the phone off again and took it to the Vodafone Shop that was just up the street from the office. The person behind the counter looked to be about twelve years old. He was deeply immersed in something on his laptop computer, but eventually, after indulging myself in much throat clearing, screaming and a significant amount of violent banging on the counter, I managed to attract his attention.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his eyeballs still superglued to the screen of his computer.

I explained that my phone was Unable To Charge.

"How old is the phone?" he asked, finally glancing away from the laptop.

I took the phone out of my pocket and showed it to him.

"Gosh," he said, greatly impressed with its clunkiness.

"That is really ancient. It must be at least four years old!"

"Possibly even five," I said. "I imagine that you had only just completed Stage 2 Potty Training when this phone rolled off the assembly lines."

"It's well out of warranty," said the child. "There's nothing we can do."

"Nothing?" I asked.

"If you leave it with us," he explained, "we'll charge you a small fortune just to look at it in order to decide whether or not it can be repaired. And if it turns out that it can be repaired, we'll charge you another, significantly larger, fortune to repair it."

"I see," I said. "There really isn't anything at all you can do, is there?"

"Well I could always sell you another phone," he said.

I looked around the shop. There were many phones on display. Prices ranged from mildly expensive to \$OH-MY-GOODNESS. I pointed to the cheapest one. The leaflet attached to it informed me that it had a built-in still camera, a video camera, a music player, bluetooth compatibility, a coffee percolator and a device for taking stones out of a horse's hoof. Oh, and it also allowed you to make phone calls.

"I'll have one of those, please," I said.

"We haven't got any of those in stock," said the urchin. "How about one of these instead? It has the same functionality and it only costs \$100 more."

"No thank you," I said, and left the shop. The child went back to his computer and I went back to my hotel. I plugged the phone back into the charger and it turned itself on again.

"Unable To Charge," it said.

"I know," I said. "You don't have to keep repeating yourself."

I noticed that the little symbol that showed me how much power was left in the battery had vanished from view.

"Where's the battery power icon?" I asked.

"Don't need it," said the phone. "I can use the power from the mains to drive all my functions. As long as the charger is plugged in, I can bypass the battery completely."

"Why can't you just pass the power along to the battery instead?" I asked.

"Oh, that would never do," said the phone. "Unable To Charge."

I rang Robin and explained the situation.

"Fortunately it seems I can still use the phone as long as it is plugged in to the mains via the charger."

"Aha!" said Robin. "So your mobile phone has now become a stationary phone."

"That's right."

"Hmmm," said Robin. "When you ring me, the caller-id gadget at this end says *Alan Mobile*. Shall I change it so that it says *Alan Motionless* instead?"

"No, don't bother," I said. "You'll only have to change it back again when I get a new phone."

All went well for a couple of days. Being tethered to a power socket was mildly inconvenient, but I was willing to put up with it in the short term. Then, one day, I plugged the charger in, the phone turned itself on as usual, and then it said, "Registering With The Network."

An hour glass appeared and twirled around and around. Tiny pixels of sand fell through the hole in the middle.

"Get a move on," I said impatiently. "You aren't boiling an egg."

"I'm doing my best," said the phone, sounding quite disgruntled. "Registering With The Network."

Finally the hourglass vanished. "No Signal!" said the phone triumphantly.

"Pardon?"

"Unable to Charge."

I turned the phone off, unplugged the charger, and moved to a different place. Sometimes the signal strength can vary quite markedly depending where you are in the

room, though I'd never before had any problems when standing in my previous location. I plugged the charger into a different power socket.

"No Signal! Unable To Charge. No Signal!"

"Can't you do *anything* any more?" I asked.

"No I can't," said the phone, and it switched itself off. Nothing I did would persuade it to turn on again. It was utterly dead.

I threw the corpse down in disgust and I went back to the office where I phoned Robin on the land line.

"My phone is pining for the fjords," I told her.

"I didn't know you spoke Norwegian," said Robin, greatly impressed. "Us English speakers always call them fiords."

"Either way, my phone is now moribund. I'll have to go shopping for a new one when I get home."

"Oooh, how exciting! Can I come with you?"

"Of course you can," I said. "Someone has to make the aesthetic decisions, and I'm no good at that."

"Gosh, I can't wait for Saturday," said Robin. "It'll be good to have you home."

And so it was that Robin and I went shopping in Lower Hutt. We chose Lower Hutt because Robin knows it well and there are several electrical gadget shops within easy walking distance of each other.

"That's a nice phone," said Robin, pointing at an incredibly slim "beam me up Scotty" phone. It had a metallic grey finish and the keyboard was covered with a membrane that shielded all the individual keys from the elements, thus preventing moisture from damaging the delicate circuits should it chance to be raining while you were making a call. It was the cheapest phone on display, as well as the most elegant. I liked it immediately. There was only one fly in the ointment. A sign beside the phone said that it required a SIM2 card, which could be obtained for only an extra \$40.

"I wonder what a SIM2 card is?" I pondered thoughtfully. "And how does it differ from an ordinary SIM (or possibly

SIM1) card?"

"Perhaps we should ask a man," suggested Robin.

However there were no men to be had. The approach of a real live customer appeared to have frightened all the sales people away. I whistled casually, and picked up various expensively shiny things; then I put them down again in different places. I waved my arms and jumped up and down. I unveiled an enormous placard which said I WANT TO GIVE YOU LOTS OF MONEY in eye-searing fluorescent Day-Glo orange letters. Nothing worked.

"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin, and so we did.

The next shop had exactly the same phone on display with exactly the same notice about a SIM2 card. I polished the phone carefully with a soft cloth, and it emitted blue smoke which coalesced into a salesman. I felt encouraged.

"What's a SIM2 card?" I asked, pointing to the notice.

He stared at the notice as if he'd never seen it in his life before. His lips moved as he read the words to himself. "I don't know," he said. "I'll go and ask someone."

He went away, never to return.

"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin, and so we did.

Again, exactly the same phone was on display.

"Can I help you?" asked a sales droid.

"I'm interested in this phone," I said. "What's a SIM2 card?"

"That's a very old fashioned phone," said the sales weasel. "Flip tops are terribly passé. Wouldn't you much prefer this model with the slide-out keyboard and a built-in vegetable garden? It's only an extra \$85 plus \$40 for a SIM2 card."

"No I wouldn't," I said. "What's a SIM2 card."

"It's the next generation card after a SIM1," said the sales thing.

"What does it do, and will the phone work with an older SIM card?"

The sales monkey shrugged its shoulders.



"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin.

"There isn't a next shop," I said. "We've run out."

We drove home. Gloomy clouds hovered and rain threatened. Perhaps I was destined to remain forever incommunicado.

"Sod it," I said. "Let's go down the road to the local Dirk Smooth. I never did trust the shops in exotic, foreign locales like Lower Hutt. Local shops are always the best."

Again the same phone was on display. It was still the cheapest phone in the shop and, to my eyes, still the prettiest.

"Nice phone, that," said the salesman. "I particularly like the slim styling. Small is beautiful. And it's a very cheap phone as well – it gives you a lot of bang for your buck."

"What's a SIM2 card?" I asked.

"It's just got a bit more software on board," said the salesman. "It's a mechanism for plugging more functionality into the phone."

"Will the older SIM cards still work in it?" I asked.

He nodded firmly. "Absolutely," he said. "A SIM card is a SIM card. The phone doesn't care."

"OK, I'll take it," I said.

"I'll go and get one out of stock," said the salesman and he trotted off to the back of the store. A few minutes later he was back, clutching a bright red box. "It comes with a one year warranty," he said. "We also offer an extended three year warranty for \$40, but frankly it's not worth it. The phone's so cheap that if it dies after a year, you might as well just buy a new one."

"Fair enough," I said. "Can I sit down for a minute? I feel quite faint. I've never met such an honest and knowledgeable salesman before."

"I get that a lot," he said, smiling.

He also got the sale.

# **In Which Alan And Robin Widen Their Intertubes**

In the old days connecting to the internet in our house was a laborious process. You had to put a shovel full of coal into the modem and turn up the heat on the boiler. After a while, when the steam pressure was sufficient to push the electrons down the pipes at just the right speed, you set the semaphore flags to the proper number, listened for the sound of frying bacon as the modem at the other end built up a head of steam, and then (lo and behold!) a connection was made and the world was available to you at 1200 bps. Oh the fun we had!

Over the years, great progress was made in modem technology. The pipes got a bit wider and the steam pressure increased. Ominous rumblings could be heard from the boiler and there were occasional sparks as the electrons found themselves in two places simultaneously. I upgraded to 9600 bps and then 14,400 bps and finally to the almost unheard of rapidity of 56,000 bps.

By now we were using coal at an alarming rate. The sound of steam hissing from the safety valve was a constant background noise. Furthermore, limitations endemic to the technology meant that only one of our many computers could connect to the intertubes at any one time. That in itself wasn't much of a problem since Robin and I tended to be on line at different times. However we both agreed that our connections were now running noticeably more slowly than once they had. Subtle giggling revealed that more and more people all over the world were producing more and more information at an exponentially increasing rate, and so the intertubes were getting very clogged up with junk data.

The relevant bits that we were interested in were finding it harder and harder to struggle through the mess that was blocking the pipes. Faced with this, even our super-fast dial up connection found itself unable to cope. It seemed to take forever for me to get my daily lolcat fix, and Robin's genealogical documents could barely squeeze themselves down the gunged up pipes at all.

"We need broadband," declared Robin.

I rang TelstraClear.

"We'll send a technician around to install the modem immediately," said the nice lady. "There's a spare slot at 11.00am a week next Tuesday. Will that do?"

"Haven't you anything earlier than that?"

"No, sorry."

"Then that will do fine."

A week later, two sun tanned TelstraClear technicians arrived. They stared at the hideous mess of cables that dangled and twisted around the room and muttered to each other in Afrikaans.

"Have you been in New Zealand very long?" I asked.

"About 6 months," said the younger of the two. "The electron wells in South Africa were starting to run dry. So we came out here to make a new start." The second one said nothing at all. He only spoke Afrikaans, and he had no idea what I'd said to him.

They went outside and climbed up the telephone pole where they checked the connections and measured voltages. Then they climbed down and dug a huge trench across the lawn. They pulled out all the old, narrow, plastic dial up pipes and replaced them with enormously wide and shiny stainless steel broadband pipes.

"Soon have your data flowing rapidly down those, squire," said the one who spoke English, in tones of deepest satisfaction. Then they went inside and joined the hugely wide pipe to the computer with a modem.

"Where do I put the coal?" I asked.

The technician muttered some Afrikaans to his colleague and they both gave me a pitying glance. "You don't need coal for broadband," said the English speaking one. "They've done away with boilers and steam power. Up to date communication devices like broadband modems use nuclear powered robot hamsters to push the electrons really, really fast down the pipes."

"Gosh," I said, impressed. "That's good news. I wasn't looking forward to shovelling huge amounts of coal. The dust gets everywhere. It makes the cats all gritty. How does this new technology work?"

"There's a cobalt-60 radiation source deep inside the modem," said the technician. "It's housed in the tummy of a robot hamster and it makes the hamster run really, really fast in a treadmill which is joined to an electron pump. The pump shoots the electrons down the broadband pipes at twice the speed of light. If you look out of the window when you are uploading data, you'll see the hideous blue glow of Cerenkov radiation flashing over the grass above those hugely wide pipes we buried in the lawn.

"Don't look too closely though," he continued thoughtfully, "The blue radiation might turn you into a Star Trek special effect. And don't go poking around inside the modem hamster either. The cobalt-60 is likely to give you a severe case of Klingon Forehead."

"What sort of upload and download speeds will I get?" I asked.

"Infinitely fast!" declared the technician. "And if that proves to be too slow, just give us a call and we'll upgrade you to a gerbil. They give you infinity plus one!"

The technicians packed their tools away and left, pleased with a job well done. I tested out the new broadband connection. Bloodyhellitwasfast!

A potentially tricky problem soon became clear to me. The broadband modem was directly connected to one and only one computer. None of the rest of the computers in the

house had any idea it was there at all. This was not a satisfactory situation. Robin and I needed to be able to sit in separate rooms with separate computers connected simultaneously to the intertubes so that we could have video conferences with each other. Surely that's the major reason for having broadband in the house? I consulted the yellow pages and rang Geeks On Wheels.

"Hello, Geeks On Wheels. You are speaking with Tina. How can I help you?"

"I think I need a geek," I said. I explained the situation.

"Aha!" said Tina. "We get this situation quite a lot. What you need is a wireless router." She began to sing a song: "The modem bone connects to the wireless bone. The wireless bone connects to the computer bone. Now hear the word of the lord!"

"Sounds good," I said. "You ought to give serious consideration to becoming a professional singer."

"I am a professional singer," said Tina. "I only do this job to earn money."

"Can't you make money as a singer?" I asked.

"No," she said. "The intertube pirates have stolen every penny."

"Damn those fifteen men and their dead man's chest," I sympathised. "Have a bottle of rum. The world will look better."

"I'll get a Geek onto his Wheel and send him round," promised Tina. And she was as good as her word. Not long afterwards, a unicycle wobbled up to my front door and a geek got off and rang the bell.

"Why have you only got one wheel?" I asked him.

"I've just started working with the company," he explained. "I'm their newest geek. I won't get a second wheel until after I install my hundredth wireless router. But I did ninety nine last week and so you are my lucky customer. I'm eager to get started."

He plugged the router in, then he sacrificed a goat and sprinkled the blood on to the antenna. The cats ate the rest of the goat - except for the horns and hoofs of course.

"Abracadabra!" intoned the geek. Then he turned to me with a big smile. "There you are," he said. "It should work perfectly now. Let's get a couple of computers and try it out."

My laptops connected wirelessly with no problems at all and were soon sending data up and down the new ultra-wide pipes with gay abandon. I was thrilled.

"What about the computers downstairs?" I asked the geek. "They don't have wireless cards. How can I attach them to the broadband pipes upstairs?"

"Well, you could drill a hole in the floor and run a cable through it," said the geek.

"Robin suggested that as well," I said. "But I am peculiarly reluctant to do that."

The geek nodded his head sagely. "It's an inelegant solution," he agreed. "And the sawdust is an enormous nuisance. It gets everywhere. It will probably make the robot hamster in your modem sneeze a lot. You wouldn't believe the data corruption that would cause."

"Is there anything else we could do?" I asked.

"Indeed there is," said the geek. "What you need is ethernet over power!"

"Ethernet over power?"

"Ethernet over power," confirmed the geek.

"What's that?"

"It's a device that sends network traffic up and down the power lines. You don't need real network cables at all when you've got ethernet over power."

"Let's do it!" I said.

The geek went out to his unicycle and returned with two small white boxes. He plugged one end of one box into the wireless router and the other end of the box into a power socket. Then we went downstairs and connected the second

white box to the hub that joins all my downstairs computers together.

"I'm glad the boxes are white," I said. "I was afraid that they might be black."

"Indeed," agreed the geek. "White is the new black. Black itself is so infra dig."

He turned the white boxes on. Each box had a glowing blue light that flashed morse code messages as data travelled up and down the power lines between the upstairs and downstairs computers.

"What are the flashing blue lights for?" I asked. "Are they perchance holes in the boxes which let out the Cerenkov radiation caused by super-speed electrons zipping infinitely fast between the computers?"

"No," said the geek. "They are just flashing blue lights. They are really more of a fashion statement than a technological one. Although anyone who was a boy scout in their youth and who still remembers their leet morse code skills will be able to read the information that is being sent up and down the wires as the blue lights flash. I suggest that you keep the curtains drawn when you are using the connection. Spies equipped with binoculars may steal your data if you don't."

"Of course," I said, impressed all over again.

The geek began to pack away the boxes that all his gadgets had come in. He handed me a registration card.

"We've got a special offer on this month," he said. "If you register with us we'll send you a free tinfoil hat. That way your data is guaranteed to be safe no matter what the circumstances."

"Sounds good", I said and I filled it in.

# In Which Alan Geeks

"It's black," I said to Robin, "and it's *very* shiny."

"Yes," she said, "but just what are you going to use it for?"

"It's *shiny!*" I explained.

She gave me a long suffering sigh which I put carefully away in the pool room with the rest of my treasures for later gloating over. "I suppose you'd better buy it then," she said.

And so a new computer entered my life. For the technically inclined among you, it's an Asus Eee 1000HE Netbook. In practical terms, that means that it's black and shiny, and about half the size of a laptop, but with just as much oomph. Perhaps it should be called a kneetop, or possibly a toetop. Small is beautiful.

There was a time when machines like these came pre-installed with Linux. Unfortunately that doesn't seem to happen any more. The ones I found for sale only came with Windows XP. I suspect it's a marketing thing. Linux is scary; and so it's easier to sell Windows to the punters because it's more familiar to them. Everybody hates change.

Since Windows was already installed, and since it was equipped with special drivers to make sure that all the oddball hardware packed inside the tiny case worked properly, I decided to keep it. You never know, I might need the built-in webcam one day and my experience suggests that Linux is seldom very good with webcams. However I was not going to be utterly deprived of my Linux experience (to use a particularly vomitous marketing term) just because Windows was already firmly ensconced *in situ*. This machine, I decided, was going to dual boot both Windows and Linux. And, just because I knew how to do it, I would make Linux the default. Yah, boo, sucks!



But first, since I had decided to keep Windows, I had to tell Windows all about myself. It's a notoriously nosy operating system, and the first time you boot it up, it asks a lot of obnoxious questions.

"What's your name?" asked Windows.

Aha! The difficult questions first!

I told Windows that my name was Pascal Python, middle name Monty, spelled 'Perl' but pronounced Monty; English names are like that, don't blame me. My parents' careful choice of names obviously meant that they had my future computer career planned out for me from the minute I was born, despite the fact that when I was born, that career didn't actually exist in the world, and neither did the programming languages I was named after. Prescient people, my mum and dad. However an unfortunate side effect of being called Pascal Python was that at school I got nicknamed Ada. Johnny Cash sang about the trials and tribulations of a boy named Sue. Trust me, they pale into insignificance compared to those lavished upon a boy called Ada. Still, it could have been worse. Ada's American cousin Linda didn't start making her famous dirty movies until long after I left school...

"Age?"

I lied, and said I was 42.

"Height in kilograms?"

Yet more proof, if proof were needed, that Americans don't understand the metric system.

And so it continued. As soon as I answered one question, another popped up in its place. They formed a seemingly interminable list requiring ever more embarrassing information from me as the interrogation continued with extreme prejudice.

I dutifully typed in my fictitious autobiography in excruciating detail. Presumably the racier bits all got sent to Redmond and filed away in Microsoft's customer database where they would doubtless form the basis of the company's

next marketing campaign. I wondered if Microsoft would notice that my answers to some of their questions were, shall we say, inventive. Then I decided they probably wouldn't, since Microsoft marketing people are notoriously lacking in a sense of humour.

Once, in conversation with a Microsoftie, I said: "It's a well known fact that when you go to work for Microsoft, the first thing that happens is they make an appointment for you at the hospital where you undergo the operation to implant the chip in your brain that turns you into a robot slave. However the Microsoft surgeons who perform the operation are very cost conscious, and in order to prevent you having to come back for another operation later on in your career, they always take the opportunity to remove your sense of humour gland at the same time."

The Microsoftie gave me a withering look which I put straight in the pool room. It was the best withering I'd ever experienced, and believe me, I've been withered by experts. "That's nonsense," he said firmly. "They don't send us for an operation! Who told you that?"

"See!" I said.

Meanwhile, back at the Netbook, Windows asked me a question that I couldn't answer.

"What is the name of this computer?" it demanded, smugly.

My mind went utterly blank and I appealed to Robin for help.

"Oh that's easy," said Robin. She's good at this kind of thing. "You've got to call it Gimli, because, being a Netbook, it is small, stocky and powerful."

"Perfect!" I said. "Gimli it is." I stored the name deep in the pool room, in the place reserved for extra special things; this name was so right, so proper, that it was a definite treasure.

Now that Windows was satisfied with me, it was time to put Linux on the machine. The most popular Linux

distribution is Ubuntu, the brainchild of South African millionaire Mark Shuttleworth. Ubuntu is a Swahili word which means "this is the Linux distribution for people who find Red Hat Linux too hard to understand". Swahili is a very compact language with a small, but extremely powerful, vocabulary.

I installed Ubuntu and it had a look around.

"Hello there!" said Ubuntu, in a strong South African accent. "I see you have a wireless network card."

"That's right," I said. "Why don't you use it to connect to the internet?"

"OK," said Ubuntu. "I'll give it a go."

There was a brief silence and then Ubuntu said, "Hey! I've found this really, really powerful access point in the next room. Wow! Just look at that signal strength. Never seen one as powerful as that before, squire."

"That's right," I told Ubuntu. "That's the one I want you to use."

"OK," said Ubuntu. "What's the password?"

I told Ubuntu the password and there was a long silence.

"Well," said Ubuntu at last, "actually it doesn't seem to be quite OK. I gave the password to the access point, but nothing happened. It's completely ignoring me. So I can't connect to the internet. Sorry."

"Never mind," I said. "How about you play some music for me while I think about it."

"Oh yes!" said Ubuntu, anxious to redeem itself, "I can do that. Where's the music?"

"Over there," I said.

"Got it," said Ubuntu and a media player appeared on the screen. Coloured histograms bounced up and down in time to the music. Utter silence emerged from the speakers. I turned the volume up to its maximum value. The speakers hissed a bit, but not a note of music emerged.

"Have you noticed how quiet the music is?" I asked Ubuntu.

"Sorry about that, squire," Ubuntu replied, "I've never seen a sound card like yours before. I don't know how to get it to make a noise. But you must admit the histograms are pretty."

"Very pretty," I said, "but they don't compensate for the lack of sound."

Since Ubuntu was utterly unable to make the two most important bits of Gimli work properly, I uninstalled it, trying hard to ignore the agonising screams as its files got slowly deleted, one by one.

What to do? What to do? I decided that I wouldn't be able to solve this problem alone. I needed advice from an expert. I went to consult with Porgy, the cat who knows everything.

"I have a problem," I said to Porgy.

"Miaow?" asked Porgy impatiently. He'd just woken up from a preprandial nap and was on his way to dinner, after which he was planning an elaborate postprandial nap, perhaps the most important nap of the day because when he woke up from it, it would be breakfast time. He hates having his plans interrupted.

"Linux doesn't seem happy with the hardware on my new computer," I explained.

"Miaow," said Porgy, deeply sympathetic and momentarily intrigued by the problem.

"So I need some advice about how to proceed."

"Woof!" said Porgy. He thought the answer was obvious and he couldn't understand why I hadn't thought of it.

"Of course!" I said. "Puppy Linux will do it. Thank you Porgy. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

"Miaow," said Porgy, deeply satisfied, and he gave his bottom a thorough licking as a reward to himself. Then he resumed his stroll in the direction of dinner.

Puppy Linux is a distribution put together by an Australian called Barry Kauler. It is named in honour of his Chihuahua, a fearless animal who didn't appear to know that he was small and vulnerable. In his own mind he was a

giant among dogs. He used to chase kangaroos. And sometimes he caught them...

Puppy Linux does lots of extraordinarily clever technical things that I won't bore you with, but one of its many strengths is that it reaches hardware places that other Linuxes cannot reach. Its default administration password is woofwoof and the login name of the default user is spot. Those jokes (for small values of humour, anyway) definitely belong in the pool room.

"G'day," said Puppy, after I booted it up. It pushed its Akubra to the back of its head and wiped the sweat from its forehead. "Got a password for the wireless access point? I've done everything else, but I can't do that without a password."

I provided the password.

"What kind of password is that?" sneered Puppy, doing the Australian Wave to keep the bugs at bay. "Do you want me to save it so that I can automatically connect to the internet next time? After all, you don't want to have to type that rubbish in every day, do you?"

"OK," I said. "Now, how about playing some music for me?"

"You want me to choose something from those files over there, cobber?" asked Puppy.

"Yes please."

"No problems, mate."

Music poured out of the speakers. I smelled the faint odour of steak sizzling on the barbecue and I heard the distant sound of a can of Fosters having its tab torn off.

"Can you turn the volume down a bit, please?"

"Sure, mate."

It's ever so nice when things just work.

"Walkies!!"

# Varsity Vignettes

The University of Nottingham, in the Midlands of England, is just outside the city proper. It is set in a huge park with a boating lake at one end. Weeping willows dangle romantically over the water and when you take your girlfriend out on the lake and row your boat beneath them, sticky black stuff falls onto your head, suitably destroying the moment. The lake is inhabited by the most enormous carp I've ever seen. Nobody ever fishes there, and the carp are very tame. They greatly enjoy ham sandwiches and students are often to be found throwing their lunch into the water.

An old university tradition that I've just made up requires that students who fail their end of term exams must be chopped up and fed to the carp. Over the years, an awful lot of students have failed their exams. The size of the fish can't be explained by ham sandwiches alone.

Along with the rest of the first year students, I arrived at the University a week before the term officially started. It was probably the first time most of us had been away from home by ourselves and the University authorities were keen to minimise the trauma. Hence this initial, very special week, known as freshers week. It was specifically designed to make us feel wanted and to acclimatise us to the university environment; curing our homesickness by keeping us busy in a mad social whirl. And so we wandered in a daze, attending dances and concerts and spending money to join societies whose meetings we would never attend. Fleecing the freshers in this manner is an old university tradition that I haven't just made up. It's the only way most of the societies managed to stay solvent.

Because the Nottingham University campus is so large and so self contained, most students lived in halls of residence. I lived in the oldest and smallest of the halls. It was called Wortley Hall. Some students in Wortley were in double rooms, but I was lucky enough to have been allocated a single room. Not all students were fortunate in their random choice of room mate. Brian was sharing a room with an archetypal Welsh rugby player whose personal habits were so revolting that Brian, a sensitive soul, took to sleeping in the bath rather than in his bed. Fortunately we had two baths in the block. Unfortunately I soon commandeered the second bath because I wanted to grow the world's largest chemical garden in it. One shower now had to serve the whole block. Somehow we managed - and everyone, including Brian, was very keen to see the final results of my experiment.

My chemical garden was only a marginal success. But I remain quite proud of it. It was probably the last chemical garden ever grown in the Western world. I don't think you can get the secret ingredient any more. It requires large amounts of water glass - a concentrated solution of sodium metasilicate, once commonly used for preserving eggs but now quite obsolete in this refrigerated age. You mix it half and half (ish) with water and then drop chemicals into it. The chemicals precipitate their silicate salts which tend to be rather voluminous and which grow into spindly, wavy and very attractive multi-coloured shapes.

I'll swear I visited every chemist and crumbling back street grocery shop in Nottingham.

"Water glass, me duck?" was the generally astonished reaction. "Water glass? I haven't been asked for that for years. I might have an old can somewhere in the back of the storeroom. Wait here."

After much searching, the proprietor would emerge in triumph, blowing the cobwebs off an old, rusty can of water glass. The faded label generally had a picture of a woman

dressed in quaintly old fashioned pre-war clothes, grimly dropping eggs into a bowl. Usually the shopkeeper was so glad to get rid of the rubbishy thing that I was given it for free. I'm certain I tracked down every remaining can of water glass in Nottingham. Nobody will ever be able to make a chemical garden in Nottingham again.

When growing a chemical garden, it is important to let the silicate solution settle down. There should be no convection currents remaining from the initial swirling as you dilute the solution and stir it into the container. The silicate salts that form the garden are very delicate and tend to shatter under the force of the currents. I let the water glass settle in the bath for five weeks before I started growing the garden. In retrospect, it wasn't nearly long enough. I did get some nice growths, but too many of them succumbed to the hidden turbulence of the currents and collapsed into sludge at the bottom of the bath. Actually, I quickly came to suspect that this would have happened no matter how long I left the solution alone. It seems likely that the solution never really settled down properly because of the vibrations induced in it by the clomping feet of dirty students heading past it on the way to the shower.

Nevertheless everyone agreed that the experiment had been well worth while and can we have our bath back now, please? Reluctantly I washed the sludge down the drain and normality returned.

Geoff bought a dartboard and hung it on the wall of his room. We played darts every day. Unfortunately we were utterly shite at it and every game turned into a race for double one. Loser had to make the tea. We got very good at subtraction and complicated factorisation. We knew exactly what double and triple numbers to aim for, we just couldn't hit them. Well, except for double one of course. We drank a lot of tea as well.

Eventually we got fed up with darts and took up Monopoly instead. During the summer term we would go out



on the roof where there was a flat sunny nook well sheltered from the wind. We played Monopoly all day long. Geoff was a born and bred Londoner. He claimed that gave him an advantage; he knew the Monopoly board better than the rest of us ever would, having tramped all over it in his youth. I suspect there was some truth in his claim. He won the game far more frequently than anybody else did. Of course, maybe we were just shite at Monopoly as well.

John was a motor cycle freak and his room was largely occupied by an enormous motor bike chassis and the engine from a Morris Minor, with very little room left over for John himself. He was trying to combine the one with the other, convinced that if ever he succeeded, he'd have a super powerful bike. John's subject of study at university was mechanical engineering, so it was clear that success was imminent.

John's only subject of conversation was motor bikes. At meal times, he would regale us with motor bike reminiscences. He was particularly fond of telling us every detail of all the various accidents he'd had on his bikes. He'd had a lot over the years, and he hadn't emerged from any of them unscathed.

"There I was, flying through the air after I hit the kerb and shot off the front of the bike," he said one breakfast time as he used a couple of slices of toast to scoop up watery fried tomato and rubbery scrambled egg. "I put out my arms to try and cushion the fall. That was a big mistake. When I landed I broke both arms. Snap. Just like that. I was in plaster for six weeks." He shook his head sadly. "But that wasn't the worst of it," he said.

Someone always took the bait.

"What was the worst of it?"

"I was in plaster from my wrist to my shoulder on both arms," John continued. "I couldn't bend my elbows or reach behind myself. I had to call my dad to wipe my bottom every time I went to the toilet." He speared a sausage with his fork

and chewed in meditative silence for a time. "I used to pray for constipation."

John never succeeded in marrying his bike chassis with his Morris Minor engine. He also failed his exams. The carp fed well that term.

Greg was studying mining engineering, though if you asked him why he'd chosen that particular subject he became very vague. He seldom went to lectures. He slept all day because he worked most nights as a bouncer at a Nottingham night club. He knew many dubious people and bought very dubious drugs from them. Once I went to his room to get some coffee (I'd run out) and I found Greg sitting bolt upright on his bed, completely catatonic from whatever it was he'd been ingesting. His eyes were wide open and they tracked me all around the room, but there was nobody home inside his head.

"Can I borrow some coffee?"

Silence.

I took the coffee and left him to it.

One day Greg got a letter from his tutor, a man who Greg rarely visited and who appeared determined to extract the maximum possible amusement value from his recalcitrant student. He arranged a perfect summer vacation job for Greg; working as a labourer in a coal mine in Northumberland. Greg was horrified – the last thing he wanted to do was go down a mine. He sent a letter back to his tutor by return of post.

"Thanks for the generous offer," said the letter, "but I won't be able to take you up on it. I'm spending the summer vacation in hospital having my haemorrhoids repaired."

We acquired a magic ball from a toy shop. When you dropped it, it seemed to bounce back higher than the original level from which it was let go. This was intriguing. The ball apparently violated all the conservation laws that underpinned everything we were taught in lectures and that we used every day in our laboratories. The fundamental

laws of physics were in peril. The very structure of the universe itself was under threat from this bouncing ball!

Careful measurement proved that it was all just an optical illusion; the ball was indeed bouncing very high, much higher than a normal ball would bounce, but it wasn't bouncing higher than the original point it was released from; it just looked as though it was because of the unexpectedly high return. If left alone, like any other ball it would eventually run out of energy and stop bouncing. But whatever strange material it was made of did seem to be highly efficient at converting potential energy to kinetic energy and back again with very little loss; hence the enormously high rebound. The conservation laws still applied (thank goodness); they just applied a lot more slowly than we were generally used to. The laws of physics were safe. The universe would survive for at least another day. Entropy could go on rising. On balance that seemed like a good idea.

"If it bounces so high when you just drop it from waist height," mused Greg one day, "what would happen if you dropped it off the roof? Would it bounce right up to the top of the building again? That would be an amazing thing to see!"

Now that the thought had occurred to us, it was irresistible. We hurried to the highest roof we could find and dropped the ball eighteen storeys. It hit the concrete pavement and, stressed beyond its storage capacity, it shattered into millions of minuscule fragments. Obviously there was a finite limit to the amount of energy the magic material could absorb before disintegrating under the load. What a shame.

Dave played double bass in a trad jazz band. They called themselves *The Campus City Jazz Men*. They eventually made an album (**Jazz On A Boot Lace**). I still have a copy, and it's not at all bad. But at the beginning of their career, they knew only one tune: *Ain't She Sweet*. For a Rag Week

stunt, they decided to go busking. Since they only knew the one tune, that was the only tune that they played. None stop. For 18 hours. They were trying for 24 hours but their stamina ran out. Their audience ran out after about 2 hours. *Ain't She Sweet* is not one of the tracks on their album. They never played it again after that first mammoth endeavour. They detested every hemi-semi-demi-quaver of it.

The band had a semi-regular gig at a pub called *The Bell*. One of the tracks on their album is called *Dorothy* and it was written by the band themselves as their tribute to the landlady of the pub, the eponymous Dorothy herself, a fierce lady who stood no nonsense from anyone. Everybody was terrified of her.

One steamy summer day some friends and I were drinking in *The Bell*. The pub was crowded and the atmosphere was very hot and muggy and so we took our pints out on to the pavement in a vain attempt to cool down. We'd only been outside for a few minutes when Dorothy herself appeared in a towering rage.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded rhetorically. "Are you deliberately trying to get my license confiscated?"

"What's wrong, Dorothy?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I don't have a liquor license for the pavement," she yelled. "I'm only allowed to sell drinks inside the pub. Get back in. Now!"

She hustled us back through the door. Meekly, we went.

Many people have been thrown out of a pub. But I am one of the very few people in the world who has been thrown in to a pub!

You couldn't be a student in those days without being involved in the politics of the era. The killing machine that was the Vietnam war ground inexorably away with no end in sight, and civil rights were a burning issue (sometimes literally). Only the political left seemed to have any solutions to these problems. Sometimes it seemed like the left wing

was the only viewpoint that recognised that the problems even existed at all! We weren't the first generation to believe this but, as it turned out, we were pretty much the last generation to believe it. I still think that's a shame. As a direct result of that shift in fashionable thinking the world is a poorer place now than it was then.

Like all universities, Nottingham had its radical student fringe. We had a sit in once, protesting against the war. There was a huge turnout because the organisers had the brilliant idea of showing pornographic movies to while away the long hours of boredom. There's a limit to how many times you can chant "Give peace a chance."

Derek was a socialist (as were all right-thinking people. Joke! Insert emoticon of choice). He played lugubrious tunes on his violin and claimed inspiration from the **Thoughts Of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung**. That famous little red book was on every student's bookshelf at the time, though I suspect that few of them read it, for it was rather dull and self-contradictory. Together with his friend Michael, Derek organised a socialist soccer team. Every time they scored a goal, they would wave their little red books triumphantly in the air. Another success for Maoism. *Imperialism And All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers* (pp 72-81. I still have my copy of **Quotations From Chairman Mao Tsetung**. Have you still got yours?).

Michael was a close friend of Tariq Ali, the organiser of many of the more effective political demonstrations of the time. Though he was based in London, Tariq Ali was often to be found at Nottingham. Strangely, however, he had almost no involvement in any activism on the campus. I suspect he came there to relax and perhaps to play a game of socialist soccer. That was a joke he would have greatly enjoyed. He was passionate about his politics, but he was also a wonderful conversationalist with a wicked sense of humour. I liked him a lot.

One day Tariq Ali arrived at Nottingham with a taciturn and very hairy man who appeared to live only on beer and cigarettes. This was Mick Farren, another political radical and journalist. He wrote much of *International Times*, an underground magazine that was required reading in those days, though its habit of printing articles in light green ink on a slightly darker green background sometimes made its message difficult to decipher. It was usually on sale in the University Bookshop (distribution was erratic; it didn't always turn up). I always made sure to buy every issue I could find. I didn't keep them though, and now I rather regret that. I suspect they'd be worth a lot of money if I still had them.

Today Tariq Ali is a respected member of the establishment though he is still politically active. He writes erudite novels and political tracts which few people read. He retains his impish sense of humour. His book **Pirates Of The Caribbean: A New Hope** is a thorough analysis of the political philosophy of Hugo Chavez, the President of Venezuela and leader of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Mick Farren went on to make several forgettable rock albums which all had wonderful titles and execrable songs. **Mona - The Carnivorous Circus** and **Vampires Stole My Lunch Money** are two examples that spring to mind. These days he makes a comfortable living by writing cynically decadent fantasy novels.

I have no idea what Derek and Michael are doing now - but I do know that the carp never got anywhere near them. They both ended up with very good degrees, as indeed did most of the rest of us.

Isn't that what it's all about?

# Snot

It started, as so many of these things do, with Robin sneezing and saying, "I've got a cold."

"Bless you," I said, absent mindedly.

"My nose is dripping like a tap."

I examined her carefully. There really was a chromium plated tap sticking out of her left nostril, and its twin protruded shinily from her right nostril. One tap was engraved with the word *Hot*, the other with the word *Cold*. Intrigued, I twiddled them, adjusting them carefully for both flow rate and heat. Body temperature mucous streamed freely from her nose and the house began to fill with slime...

The cats perched themselves on the top of the furniture and regarded the swelling sea of snot with horror. "How am I going to get to my food bowl?" asked Porgy plaintively.

"Swim," advised Bess.

"But I can only do the doggy paddle," whined Porgy, "and I'm scared of dogs."

"You're not getting me in there," said Harpo. "I've got beautiful fluffy fur - there's no way I'm going to slime that up." He watched in admiration as Robin swam past on her way to the bathroom. "That's a stylish Australian Crawl you've got there, Robin."

"Thanks," said Robin. "That's because I'm Australian."

"Are you?" asked Harpo, surprised. "I didn't know that. Prove it to me. Tell me what to do with a wombat."

Robin thought for a moment. "Play a game of wom?" she suggested.

"That's right," said Harpo. "Gosh, you really are Australian."

"Dingbat," muttered Robin in disgusted tones.

"Is that what you use to play a game of ding?" asked Harpo.

"No," said Robin. "It's a precision instrument used for tuning bells."

"Hey," said Porgy. "I've got one. I've got one. What's a numbat?"

"It's a nocturnal, flying mammal that feels no pain," said Harpo.

"Oh, you've heard it before," said Porgy, deeply disappointed, and he pushed Harpo into the seething slime.

Harpo struggled out of the snot pool and began to comb his long, shaggy fur with his claws. "Hey," he said, "look how well my fur holds its shape now. This stuff is even better than brylcreem. Hairdressers would pay a fortune for product like this!" He began to curl, tease and slime his fur into place.

Robin laughed so hard at the sight of Harpo carefully styling his fur that she forgot to control her breathing. She inhaled at precisely the wrong moment, choked on a bogie, coughed and sank beneath the surface. She struggled to the kitchen and supported herself on the sink while she regained her breath. I've always wanted to include the kitchen sink in a story, and now I've managed it!

"Turn it off," begged Robin. "Please turn it off."

I swam over to her, using a rather clumsy breast stroke. I've always enjoyed stroking breasts, I've just never been very good at it. I turned the taps firmly in the direction of off, but to my horror they came away in my hands.

"Oh no!" I cried. "They've broken off and now there's a gaping hole in your pipes."

"Aaagghh!" sneezed Robin as more torrents of high pressure snot threatened to fill the house and drown us all. I opened all the doors and windows, but Robin was producing fluid faster than I could get rid of it. A bowl full of cat biscuits floated past with Bess in hot pursuit. Being the



clever animal that she is, she was swimming with an elegant catty paddle.

"See?" I said to Porgy. "Pay attention to your sister. You can learn a lot from her."

"Woof," said Porgy, miserably.

By the next day, Robin was feeling a lot better. The slime had dried out and the house was now full of huge grey, grimy lumps. Robin hit one with her silver hammer (the one she borrowed from Maxwell) and it disintegrated into a fine, powdery dust.

"Hey! This is fun."

She raced through the house, hitting the dessicated piles of snot. One by one they vanished into a haze of fine ash. All our furniture, the TV, the stereo system and the computers were covered with a thin grey film. Harpo strode in to the room, proudly displaying his new beehive furstyle.

"That looks good," I said.

"Thanks," said Harpo. "You can stroke me if you like."

It was like stroking a concrete path. Harpo wiped his bushy tail over the coffee table, producing clouds of fine grit. Then he sneezed.

"Bless you," I said, and he bit me to show his appreciation.

"That gives me an idea," said Robin. She went into her room and started rummaging about in the drawers and digging around in boxes. "I know I've got them somewhere," she muttered.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, as she examined and rejected a shoe, a ship, a stick of sealing wax, a cabbage and a King. Then: "AHA! I knew they were here." She was clutching a bag that was packed full of small gaily painted boxes.

"What are you going to do with those?"

"I'm going to fill each one to the brim with my snot dust and then sell them for a vast profit on TradeMe."

"Who's going to pay money for a small box full of dried slime?" I asked.

"Everybody will want one," said Robin. "I'll market it as genuine, high class, luxury, fully tested, pre-sniffed snuff."

"Snuff?"

"Snuff," she confirmed. "Straight out of my nostrils and into yours. Satisfaction guaranteed. An authentic sneeze in every particle. It can't fail."

And now you know why Robin has as much money as she does.

# When It Changed Forever

1963 was the year when everything changed. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, John F. Kennedy was assassinated and the new Beatles album **With The Beatles** was released. The lights went out in Camelot, but they were turned up very brightly in Liverpool. And the hindsight of history suggests that the release of the album was perhaps the more significant of the two big events of that day.

The album had a monochrome cover with the half-shadowed and very grainy faces of John, Paul, George and Ringo glaring at the world. It was their second LP that year – they were always a prolific band – and I'd practically played the grooves off **Please, Please Me**, their first album. Now I had some new songs to listen to. I approached it with a sense of enormous anticipation.

Initially I wasn't impressed – the quality control on the new album was terrible, it was obviously a rush job aimed at the Christmas market. The sound balance and the mix was appallingly bad; and on my cheap Dansette record player there were tracks where Ringo's cymbals all but drowned out the voices and guitars of the other three. And the only way I could get it to play at all was to put a sixpence on top of the stylus to weigh it down and force it to follow the grooves. Without the sixpence it jumped and skipped and made nonsense of the song. **Roll Over Beethoven**

Nevertheless, this was a Beatles Album, the *new* Beatles album. In 1963 that overshadowed everything else.

There had been music before the Beatles, of course. I had an LP by the Shadows and singles by Marty Wilde and Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard. I even had some singles by American singers; Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly. And who could forget the gloriously named B. Bumble

and the Stingers with their rock and jazz inspired parodies of classical themes? But that music was just there, not quite in the background, but definitely not part of the foreground either. If it came on the radio I listened to it with enjoyment, but I made no great effort to seek it out and often I didn't turn my record player on for weeks at a time.

But in 1963 the Beatles were number one in both the singles charts and the album charts and absolutely nothing else had any significance to me at all. I was living in a whole new world, a whole new time, a whole new sensory experience. Black and white turned into colour overnight. Away with drabness and post-war austerity! Begone dull care! We'd never had it so good. Suddenly music mattered in a way that it had never mattered before. It was a revolution into style, to paraphrase George Melly who wrote a whole book about it. Popular culture had turned into art, and the Beatles were in the vanguard of the revolution.

In that same magical year of 1963, Dora Bryan sang **All I Want For Christmas Is A Beatle.**

My friend Chris' cat had four kittens. They were called John, Paul, George and Ringo, and who cared that they were all girl cats? Everybody wanted a Beatle for their very own. Newspapers conducted surveys to find out which Beatle was the most popular Beatle. It turned out that they all were.

The carefully coiffured duck's arse haircut with its outrageously elaborate quiff that my generation had borrowed from the teddy boys of the 1950s, and which we cemented securely into place on our head with brylcreem, was now a thing of the past. Brylcreem vanished from the shop shelves. We washed our hair (some of us for the first time in years) and we combed it forwards and we grew it long, inducing apoplexy in retired colonels from Tunbridge Wells. I remember having hair inspections at school. Grim faced masters with rulers measured the length of our locks and issued firm instructions to visit the barber. (Today, now that shaved heads are a fashion statement, I imagine that

the teachers issue firm instructions to stop visiting the barber. So it goes.)

It couldn't last, and it didn't last. By 1970 the Beatles had split up and gone their separate ways. We only had them for seven years and thirteen albums. Such a short time to change the world; but that's what they did.

And now those classic albums have been remastered and re-released in an attractive CD box set and as I played them all this weekend I realised that, quite literally, I knew every word and every note of every song on every album. The Beatles had worn deep, familiar grooves in my mind. But familiarity has not bred contempt. Far from it. True magic can never grow stale.

The Beatles defined and sometimes redefined the meaning of music. Even in the early songs, when they were just another rock and roll group, they still managed to demonstrate musical and lyrical subtleties that were head and shoulders above anything their contemporaries were producing. ("Twanging guitars!" yelled my father in annoyance. "I'm fed up of hearing twanging guitars!").

Everybody who was anybody (and quite a lot who weren't anybody at all; do you remember Marmalade?) wanted to record a Beatles song, and most of them did, to their great, albeit temporary, fortune.

William Mann, a music critic with *The Times* analysed their music and praised the aeolian cadences of John Lennon's voice as he sang **Not A Second Time**. When Lennon read the article he was heard to mutter, "What the hell is an aeolian cadence? Sounds like an exotic bird!"

Perhaps the Beatles really didn't know what they were doing in a strictly technical sense. Certainly there's absolutely no doubt at all that behind the scenes the svengali-like presence of George Martin, their record producer, contributed enormously to their success. But talent is its own reward. When you pay no attention to the rules (because you don't know what the rules are) the

results are almost always dire unless you are genius enough to invent a whole new set of rules to put in their place. Out of ignorance, the Beatles told George Martin what they wanted to do. He showed them how to do it. It worked. Oh! How it worked.

I suppose everybody has a favourite Beatles song. Mine is **Strawberry Fields Forever**. What's yours?

**Strawberry Fields Forever** was released in 1967 as a single (backed with **Penny Lane** which is also my favourite Beatles song). I'd pretty much given up buying singles by then because they were too expensive. But I bought that one and played both sides of it to death. My father hated it.

"Living is easy with eyes closed," sang John Lennon on **Strawberry Fields Forever**.

"That's stupid," said my dad. "You can't live with your eyes closed. You'd keep bumping into things and hurting yourself. It isn't easy at all, it's very hard."

My father, a very literal man, simply couldn't cope with metaphors.

As Robin and I listened to the Beatles over the course of a music filled weekend, Robin said something very profound:

"The only drawback of being a Beatle is that you never got to listen to the music the same way that other people did. Isn't that a shame?"

# Sleeves

One day Robin came home from work bubbling over with excitement.

"I've been asked to knit some jumpers for the dogs," she announced.

"?"

"The Animal Control people at the city council want jumpers for their dogs so that the poor things don't get cold in winter. We're all doing it. Look - here are the patterns." She showed me a leaflet with a picture of a goofy dog on the front cover. It was wearing a red jumper and it looked mildly embarrassed. Its tongue was blushing.

"Isn't it cute?" asked Robin. "This is going to be great. Knitting dog jumpers is my favourite kind of knitting."

"Why?"

"Because dog jumpers have four sleeves."

Robin is good at knitting sleeves. Eventually, when she has enough of them stockpiled, she will grudgingly knit backs and fronts, tops and bottoms, necks and crotches. But she rather resents having to do that. Sleeves are her pride and joy. Once she knitted me a jumper.

"It's got three sleeves," I said.

"No it hasn't," said Robin. "It's got two sleeves and a willy warmer."

# So Hotel

Recently, while in Christchurch, I stayed at the So Hotel in Cashel Street. Trust me, it really is *So* hotel. I had a thoroughly pleasant time and I'd be very happy indeed to stay there again. But it is an undeniably bizarre place...

I started to wonder about it when the taxi pulled up outside the hotel and dropped me off. Enormous signs indicated that rooms could be had from as little as \$69 per night. That is an absurdly cheap rate for a mid-city hotel. My heart sank as I walked through the doors into a blast of over amplified music that roared out of the bar. I went up to the front desk and introduced myself to the man who was tapping away at the keyboard of an elegant looking, very modern and very sexy Apple computer.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you'll have to speak up. I can't hear you. The music is too loud."

I introduced myself again at a higher volume.

"Welcome to the So Hotel," he said as he confirmed my details and prepared the magnetic card that would allow me access to my room.

"Why are the room rates So Cheap?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

I repeated the question at the top of my voice.

"Because we don't service the room while you are here," he said.

"What?" I boggled, "Not at all?"

"Not at all," he confirmed. "Once you enter your room, that's it for the week. No hotel staff will enter it as long as you are in residence. It won't be cleaned, it won't be serviced, the bed won't be made, the towels won't be picked up off the floor, and nobody will fold the next available sheet of paper on the toilet roll into a neat triangular point."



I began to worry. "Don't I even get clean towels when I've used up all the ones in the room?"

"No," he said. "Not unless you pay a \$15 surcharge to have your room serviced."

I began to understand why the rooms were So Cheap. I took my magnetic card and headed towards the lift. Just past the lift was a table with six Apple computers on it that were providing free connectivity to hotel guests. It was So Internet. Six Chinese teenagers were superglued to the screens. Their mousing arms had bulging biceps, their non-mousing arms hung limp, atrophied and withered. They gazed unblinkingly at the screens in front of them, clicking furiously as they did mysterious internetty things involving hieroglyphs.

I took the lift to the fourth floor and headed for room 417. The magnetic card allowed me entry to a room that was about the size of a jail cell. The bed was a steel frame securely bolted to the far wall. A deep mattress sat on the frame and a strange blue glow shone out from underneath it. A large flat screen television hung on the wall at the foot of the bed. A telephone and a control console of frightening complexity were built in to the headboard.

Just to the right of the door was a frosted glass cylinder that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. A sliding panel in the cylinder revealed a shower, washbasin and toilet.

To the left of the door a stainless steel pole was bolted firmly to the floor and to the ceiling. A small horizontal bar joined the pole to the left hand wall. Three coat hangers swayed gently on the bar, forming a minimalist wardrobe. A small shelf was attached to the wall and a hard plastic chair was sitting underneath it.

I edged into the room and unpacked my case. I hung my jacket on one of the coat hangers and piled the rest of my clothes on the shelf. I slid my empty case under the bed into the sinister blue glow and I sat down on the bed; the plastic chair looked far too uncomfortable to sit on. There was a

bed side table on which sat the remote control for the TV and a very large loose leaf folder with 40 pages of small print that described how the room worked. I settled down to read...

The compendium began by explaining that the hotel was So Conscious of its environmental responsibilities. Everything in my room that wasn't screwed down was biodegradable and the toilet and shower were specifically designed to use as little water as possible. The hotel was So Proud of its contribution to the environment and the compendium suggested that I could contribute to this environmental effort by walking everywhere. They would So Appreciate the help.

Then the compendium began to describe the control console in the headboard and things really got weird.

First the alarm clock. The compendium explained how to set a wake up time on the clock and then told me that the alarm would not ring, buzz, beep or vibrate, and neither was there the equivalent of a snooze button. Instead, a few minutes before the alarm was due to go off, a light above my bed would very gradually get brighter and brighter. This, the compendium informed me with a perfectly straight face, was to simulate a sunrise that would allow me to wake up naturally with the day. Once the simulated sun had fully risen, the television would turn itself on and show me inspiring (yet soothing) pictures of stunningly beautiful New Zealand scenery to the accompaniment of of a soundtrack of New Age whales singing something scored by Wagner after a hard night out with the Valkyries over-indulging in chips and real ale.

Intrigued, I investigated the television. It had all the usual channels (though Prime and CTV were not working; there were channel slots available for both, but they were blank). None of the channels synchronised properly with the sound, and the lip movements of the people on the screen lagged seriously behind their words giving the distinct impression

that everything, even the news, was a badly dubbed foreign film. I kept expecting to see bands of starving peasants, bronzed farm workers singling patriotic songs, close ups of wrinkled faces and monochrome supernatural entities playing symbolic games of chess.

As I explored the TV options available to me, I discovered a whole sequence of serene channels for meditating by. The first of these was the New Zealand scenery that the alarm clock had promised me, but there were several others as well. There was a waterfall, waves splashing gently on to a sandy beach, a fire burning cheerfully in a grate (with the appropriate crackling sound effects) and several meditative channels that simply consisted of the message "NO DISC" in white letters on a swirly blue background.

I turned the TV off and returned to the compendium which was now ready to explain the delights of the mood button to me.

The mood button was a special switch on the headboard console with six different settings. Each setting caused a different coloured light to glow eerily behind the frosted glass of the shower unit which then diffused the light dimly over the room. In deeply serious tones, the compendium explained that falling asleep bathed in the rich radiative glow of these pastel shades would ensure that I enjoyed a satisfyingly natural sleep which would cause me to awake refreshed and eager for the new day. Several pages of the compendium expounded at length on the different mental and physical benefits to be gained from each colour.

This section of the compendium also explained the blue glow that shone from under the bed. It was a night light for those of a nervous disposition who found the mood lighting too intrusive but who were nevertheless worried about sleeping in the pitch dark of a lightless room. It had a switch all of its own and when turned on, it would continue to shine even when nobody was in the room. Presumably this constant unattended glow would discourage monsters from

sneaking in and hiding under the bed from where they could grab your unprepared ankles when you arose refreshed in the morning.

The next section in the compendium told me that the So Hotel had a bar and restaurant in the foyer called What Bar. So What, as it were. The compendium didn't quite nudge me in the ribs and say, "Geddit? Geddit?" at the top of its voice, but I'm sure the next release of the book will fix this obvious bug in the humour module.

Pages 28 and 29 were missing from my compendium and therefore I will never know what delights the rest of the control panel may have contained. Pages 30 to 40 explained how to use the telephone and listed the international dial codes for every country in the world, including Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria and Lyonesse.

I decided to visit What and drink a beer. As I went to open the door of my room I discovered signs I could hang on the outside. One, printed with the words "So Sleepy" meant that I would not be disturbed. The other, printed with the words "So Untidy" requested that my room be serviced and noted in positively minuscule print that there would be a surcharge of \$15 for doing this. I made sure to leave both of the signs inside my room and I took the lift to the foyer where the Chinese teenagers were still monopolising the free internet connection.

"They've been using those computers non-stop for a week," said a disgruntled man who was obviously suffering from severe pornography withdrawal symptoms.

"They do look a little dusty," I said. "Presumably Chinese teenagers don't get serviced on the same schedule that the residential rooms don't get serviced."

I wondered whether I should hang a sign on them. So Untidy.

"They shouldn't be allowed to use the machines for all that time," complained the man. "They should be circumscribed."

"Well, there's no drawback in that," I said.

"What?" He looked a bit shocked.

"Yes, that's So Where I'm going."

So What had no beers on tap and charged me \$8 for a 330ml bottle of New Zealand beer. Even by central city standards this was exorbitantly expensive. No wonder the hotel was So Profitable. I determined not to drink there again and went out in search of cheaper watering holes.

Right next door to the So Hotel was a bar called the Stock Exchange. A sign in the window claimed that it offered a range of tap beers and therefore I went in to explore. It was a themed bar and the walls were decorated with financial memorabilia such as old Stock Exchange chalk boards and the like. As a concession to modernity, they also had some computer screens displaying ever changing graphs of fluctuations in this, that and the other stock and share option. It soon became abundantly clear to me that the price fluctuations displayed on the screens were directly linked to the till behind the bar. Every time I bought a beer, it rang up a different price; reflecting, as it were, the current situation described by the bouncing graphs. Obviously the owners of the Stock Exchange were as eccentric as the owners of the So Hotel (perhaps they were the same people?), but at least the beer was cheaper at the Stock Exchange than it was at the So Hotel and it was served in larger quantities as well; always a bonus.

I had not brought my spectacles with me and consequently I was unable to make much sense of the rather blurry displays on the Stock Exchange screens. Invariably I utterly failed to correlate the situation the graphs described with the current beer price. As a result of this, many of my beer buying decisions proved to be sub-optimal. But never mind. *Bibo ergo sum*, as it were.

Over the next few days I explored the possibilities of the mood lighting in my room. Green and yellow did little for me other than to wake me up at random intervals during the

night convinced that the walls were covered with phosphorescent Ganymedeian slime-moulds which were intent on digesting me and spitting out the bones. Red gave the room the glow and ambiance of an Amsterdam brothel and my dreams were visited by nubile Indonesian princesses who sat on the hard plastic chair and knitted elaborately patterned batik jumpers. Sometimes the girls giggled at me.

Purple was the very best colour of all and I used it the most. As long as I didn't turn on the proper shower light (which tended to drown out the colours) I could shower in purple rain and sing at the top of my voice, pretending to be the artist formerly known as Prince. Then I could carefully clean the soap scum from my body as I indulged in my world famous impression of the artist formerly known as Rinse. And later, having dressed, I would go to So What for breakfast and eat toast and Marmalade (*ob la dee, ob la da*; by the artists formerly known as Quince). Perhaps I could have meatloaf as well; the artist formerly known as Mince.

After a week of New Age colour therapy and simulated sunrises, I was unbelievably soothed. My karma was calm, my chi was chipper, my consciousness was well raised and spiritually I was at peace with the oneness of the all (or was that the allness of the one? I often get them confused). I felt So Cosmic. However I had no soap left, and I was down to my very last sheet of toilet paper which I'd folded into a sharp triangular point - after all, I do have standards which I endeavour to keep up. My towels were So Damp that I'd been unable to dry myself for two days. I'd tried standing in front of the open fire on the television set after every shower, but it didn't work very well.

"I've had a wonderful time," I said as I checked out. "But I'd So Like to pay the bill and go home."

"No problem. Here's the smallest hotel bill you've ever been presented with."

I waved goodbye to the Chinese teenagers as I left but they were concentrating So Hard on clicking that they didn't notice.

# Three Cat Tails

## Tail The First - Porgy

This tail was inspired by (and is dedicated to) Leiber, a very Porgy-like cat who owns my friend Paul Riddell.

\* \* \* \*

There are four ways a cat can sleep with you on the bed, and Porgy has thoroughly explored all of them, trying hard to find his favourite.

The first, and simplest, requires him to stretch himself out over my lower legs, thus effectively pinning me down and preventing me from moving at all during the night. This also has the amusing side effect of blocking the circulation of blood to my feet so that I wake in the morning, cramped, paralysed and grumpy. Porgy jumps off the bed, refreshed and rejuvenated by his night of comfy slumber. As his weight leaves me, the sudden rush of blood to my toes causes me to scream in exquisite agony, and a violent outbreak of pins and needles threatens to sever my feet from my ankles.

"That's a funny noise," says Porgy. "I hope it won't get in the way of breakfast."

"No, no," I mutter through clenched teeth. "I'll be with you as soon as I regain the power of movement. Just give me an hour or so."

Sometimes, for variety, Porgy moves to the other end of the bed and stretches out across the top of my head as he performs his world famous impression of a coonskin cap. I lie there like Davy Crockett in a coma while the top of my



head keeps Porgy's tummy warm. He likes this a lot, and he purrs loudly.

Human beings radiate a huge amount of heat from the top of their heads. I have discovered by experiment that when Porgy prevents me from disposing of my excess heat in this manner, the temperature soon builds up inside my skull and eventually my brains begin to boil and leak out of my ears causing strange, nameless stains to appear on the pillow.

"Oh look," cries Porgy with glee, "a midnight snack!" He gobbles up the unexpected windfall.

I'm sure this is the reason why I have found it harder and harder to focus my thoughts in recent years. Porgy has feasted on all my spare brain cells. Now I have exactly enough left to allow me to eat and talk (as long as I don't show off by trying to do them simultaneously), but I no longer have any to spare for more intellectual pursuits.

By far the best way of sleeping with a cat requires the cat to stretch out by your side and place his head close to yours. This is cosy and snug and cuddly and it generates warm and emotional feelings for both animals involved when the cat purrs.

However Porgy has invented his own variation of this pleasant position. It involves him turning through 180 degrees and placing his bottom in close proximity to my face. This is a much less pleasurable experience, particularly since Porgy is prone to farting in the night. My dreams have taken on a distinctly brown tinge of late, and perfume features in them a lot.

"Get your bottom out of my face!"

"You're supposed to lick it clean," says Porgy, affronted. "That's what a good parent would do."

"Obviously I'm not a good parent."

"Oh well," Porgy heaves a long suffering sigh. "I suppose I'll just have to do it myself." He proceeds to do exactly that. I watch with mild disgust. I don't want to be reincarnated as

a cat. They have to spend far too much time licking their bottoms. It's a rule.

## **Tail The Second - Bess**

The lizard had lost two legs and a tail and seemed unlikely to be able to regenerate them in the near future. It lay bleeding on the kitchen floor. Bess licked her lips and burped reflectively.

"Does it taste like chicken?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It tastes like lizard."

"Well, go on then," I told her. "Finish it!"

"I'm not sure I want to," she said and coughed a bit.

"What's wrong? Doesn't it taste very nice?"

Bess coughed again. "I've got a frog in my throat," she said and threw up copiously on to the lino.

"Ribbit!" said the frog as it hopped out of the pool of vomit and hid behind the fridge.

## **Tail The Third - Harpo**

From a distance, Harpo can easily be mistaken for a tree hugging hippy. He's long haired and laid back and he smokes only the highest grade catnip. Closer investigation soon dispels the illusion.

"Don't let the long hair fool you. I'm not a hippy. I *like* violence!"

I'm very glad that the fashion for wearing dress shorts at work has largely vanished from contemporary New Zealand. My left leg is mostly scabs and scars and I am ashamed to bare it in public. Harpo carries a full complement of concealed weapons and he is an expert in their use. Superficially they look like claws and teeth, but that's just a cunning disguise. Really they are stealth swords that can rip you to shreds without warning from right across the room.

Sometimes, after a particularly soothing roll-up of the mellow weed, Harpo will relax enough to allow Robin to stroke him. If I come any where near him, he invariably threatens to terminate me with extreme prejudice, but Robin is allowed to stroke him until she isn't allowed to stroke him any more. Removal of permission to stroke usually involves the spilling of blood One day she called me over in mid-pat.

"Harpo's got dags," she announced. "Have a feel."

I was dubious - I'm fond of my fingers and poking Harpo's matted fur seemed like a good way to have them ripped out by the roots. Nevertheless I ventured a tentative poke. The coat on one side of his body was an almost solid mass of tangled fur.

"We could try brushing it out," I said dubiously.

"You come anywhere near me with a brush and you'll regret it," announce Harpo. His demon eyes glowed red with fury.

"Time for plan B," said Robin. "You put him in the travelling cage and I'll phone the vet."

Robin headed for the phone while I dressed myself in an ex-police kevlar stab-proof vest, a riot helmet with a specially strengthened perspex visor, heavy leather leggings and welding gloves. Thus protected, I manoeuvred Harpo into his cage, losing less than a pint of blood in the process. I'm getting rather good at putting Harpo in his cage.

He howled all the way to the vets.

"Help! I'm being catnapped. Call the police. Help! Help!"

But when we got to the vet, he was an absolute pussycat, bumping heads with the nurse and purring like a train. The nurse was smitten.

"Awwwww! Diddums gorgeous den?"

"You'll pay for this," whispered Harpo in my ear. "Just wait until I get you home." His claws hissed from their sheaths and then withdrew.

Clippers were produced. They buzzed and whirred and great solid lumps of fur fell from Harpo's side leaving him exposed and curiously piebald.

"Brrr!" he shivered. "It's suddenly got cold in here."

The nurse held a mirror up so that he could approve the short back and sides that had been inflicted on him. Harpo examined his reflection carefully. On one side he was his normal long-haired hippy self. On the other side he was a skinhead with anti-social tattoos and boover boots.

"You utter, utter bastard!" cried Harpo. "Now I'm going to have to beat myself up!"

# Tidings Of Comfort And Joy

Christmas comes but once a year. Aren't you glad you're not a Christmas?

Well, actually...

Christmas is supposed to be a family event. But when I was a child in 1950s England, the only family members within a hundred miles were my grandparents who lived about fifteen minutes walk away on the other side of the village. So each household took it in turns to host Christmas – one year they'd come to us, the next year we'd go to them.

My grandmother had a huge and ancient fireplace with a built in oven off to one side. The fire itself was used to heat the hot water cylinder and it also kept the oven nicely warm. This gigantic oven was the only thing in the entire village large enough to contain a full sized turkey and so, once every two years, it would be ritually cleaned and scrubbed and serviced. This generally involved at least one, and possibly two, visits from a chimney sweep. He always came well equipped with oddly flexible brushes with which to poke and prod the oven's mysteriously convoluted pipes and grilles.

When all was deemed ready, the coal fire would be carefully lit and fed regularly with the best of all possible coal. The turkey would go into the oven early on Christmas eve and cook slowly for at least eighteen hours. Occasionally it would be prodded, and the juices and giblets would be examined with all the care and attention to detail of a haruspex on the threshold of an important divination. Eventually the monster bird was deemed to be cooked to perfection. Time to overeat...

Despite all the careful servicing of the oven, when the bird was eventually brought forth it would reach the table dusted with a light sprinkling of soot. The really lucky diner would also get the occasional crunchy cinder to chew on.

When it was time to go back home, my grandmother would insist that we took the turkey carcass away with us. We always obliged, and then we lived on turkey for most of January. Eventually even the dog refused to eat any more of it, at which point the semi-stinking carcass would finally get thrown away.

When my grandparents came to us the following Christmas, they were always mildly disappointed to find that my mother was serving chicken. My mother claimed that her oven was far too small to accommodate the average turkey. My grandmother was not convinced by this story, and she always seemed mildly miffed that tradition was being so blatantly violated.

The chickens of fifty years ago were very different birds from the anaemic mass produced assembly line chickens of today. The breast meat was white and succulent and juicy and the flesh on the thighs and drumsticks was very dark, almost black, with a much smoother taste than the breast. Sophisticated carvers would always enquire:

"White meat or dark?"

Less sophisticated carvers would ask:

"Breast or thigh?"

Extremely unsophisticated carvers would demand:

"You a tit man or a leg man?"

When did the chickens of yesterday metamorphose into the bland, uniformly coloured, plastic tasting birds that we know and love today, and what caused that transformation?

After my grandmother died, the Christmas ritual changed. Now my grandfather came to us every year. He would arrive at lunchtime.

"Hello, Billy," he would say to his son William, my father. "Hello Mu," he would greet Muriel, my mother. "Hello

Jumbo," he would say to me.

I don't think my grandfather ever called me by my proper name from the day I was born to the day that he died. He was very upset that I was the first male child in the family for untold generations who had not been called either Thomas or William. When I was christened Alan, my great-great-grandfather, who was called both Thomas *and* William and who was consequently an extremely important person in the Robson clan, began to spin like a top in his grave. This greatly upset my grandfather and therefore he refused ever to use my real name. I was always Jumbo. I do not know the derivation of the name.

One year, my grandfather arrived at our house clutching a bottle of wine. It was his first ever contribution to the festivities. We were utterly amazed. But he explained that he had found an absolute bargain which he simply couldn't resist.

"It only cost 2/6d," he told us proudly. "I bought it at the chemist's shop in the village."

Even in the late 1950s, half a crown was an amazingly cheap price for a bottle of wine. Normally you'd probably pay at least 10 shillings. What a bargain!

Of course, it tasted exactly as you would expect a 2/6d bottle of wine bought from the local chemist to taste. It had obviously been manufactured in the back of the shop from drugs that were past their sell by date and it had been cleared and polished by filtering it through damaged condoms. But none of that mattered; it was a bargain!

Once my grandfather had arrived and settled in, lunch would be served. He would chomp his way solemnly through his chicken and then retire to the lounge where he would fall asleep in the most comfortable chair and snore loudly all afternoon. He would wake up at 6.00pm whereupon he would declare, "Well, I have to go now," and then he would leave.

We were never sure why he felt he had to leave just before tea time. The full secret was not revealed until many years later, after he died and his will was read. That was when we discovered that the randy old goat was having an affair with a lady in the village. He left her most of his estate; my father got almost nothing. Not surprisingly, this annoyed my father no end and I'll swear that if the old bastard hadn't already been dead, my father would have killed him.

And so, every year, when my grandfather left us at tea time on Christmas day, he would trot off to visit his fancy woman where he'd have yet another Christmas meal, and a quick game of hide the cracker to round off his day.

While my grandfather was busy getting the last turkey in the shop nicely warmed up, the rest of us would take the opportunity to indulge in another Christmas tradition. We'd huddle round the television set and listen to the Queen's Speech. Queenie herself was always nicely dressed, sometimes formally and sometimes in a cosy twinset and pearls. Her hair was freshly permed. There was always a Christmas tree in the background of the picture and Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. She spoke to us with the precisely enunciated glass-etching vowel sounds of the English aristocracy.

"My husband and I..."

I feared for the integrity of our cathode ray tube, but it always survived unscathed. Once Queenie was safely out of the way, the BBC would broadcast a movie. Throughout the 1950s this was always an impossibly young looking John Wayne in *Stagecoach*, a movie I detested because there was far too much dialogue and no shooting until the very end. As a child, I liked my cowboy movies to have shooting all the way through.

Nowadays it is strange to think that there was once a time when Christmas television did not involve *The Sound Of Music* or *Mary Poppins* because the films hadn't even



been made yet. *The Wizard Of Oz* had been made - it was released in 1939, the year the second world war broke out; the two events may not have been unconnected. However in 1950s England *The Wizard Of Oz* was still doing a roaring trade in the cinema (which is where I first saw it, *circa* 1958) and it would be many, many years before it eventually appeared on television.

As soon as they decently could, my parents would send me off to bed and my Christmas day would come to an end. Because I'd been up since 4.00am tearing paper off my presents, I was usually ready to go. December 25th was always a very long day for all of us. Every year, my parents made me promise not to wake them up early after Father Christmas had been, and every year I broke that promise. I was always so excited on Christmas eve that I was sure I'd never get to sleep. Periodically my parents would check up on me.

"Has Father Christmas been yet?" I would enquire anxiously.

"No," my father would say severely. "And he won't come while you are still awake."

My parents would force themselves to stay up until about 3.00am to make sure that I was really sound asleep and then they'd put a huge pillow case full of excitingly wrapped presents just inside the door of my bedroom before they went off to bed themselves. In retrospect, I can't help thinking that they brought the full horror of what came next on themselves...

An hour or so after my parents went to bed, I'd wake up, spot the pillow case that Father Christmas had left for me, completely forget my solemn promise of the night before, and start investigating all the parcels.

Often there would be drums to bang, racing cars to *vroom, vroom* around the bedroom and science kits (batteries included) with which the adventurous boy could make door bells, air raid warning sirens and atomic bombs.

One year I got an electric kit which contained an induction coil with two bare metal handles. I connected the batteries, turned the circuit on and grabbed hold of the handles. A massive electric shock threw me out of bed on to the floor, and I screamed.

"Go back to sleep," my father would yell every year. He was a very naive man, with no understanding of the ways of children. My mother would put on her red flannelette dressing gown and come into my bedroom. Between jaw breaking yawns she would examine my presents with me and agree that, one and all, they were the best presents ever.

Once my father was finally persuaded that further sleep was simply not going to happen, we'd go downstairs for breakfast. Often it was still dark outside and if I was very lucky there might be swirls of snow, with the promise of a snowball fight later in the day. Perhaps I'd get a chance to throw a snowball at my grandfather.

"I didn't do it, grandpa. It was a boy called Alan."

There would be Christmas Carols on the radio. I'd listen while I ate my toast. What carol do they sing outside German lunatic asylums?

"God rest you jerry mentlemen let nothing you dismay..."

# A Storm In A Teacup

Now, a whole decade after the shocking events of 2010, I can finally look back on that frightening year with perfect 2020 hindsight.

I was standing in a park with my friend Flickr when it all began. "I've just finished my first year at university," he said. "I've got millions of great photos. Would you like to see them?"

"No thanks," I said. "It'll probably involve eating too many cookies. How are you liking university?"

"Oh it's great," Flickr said enthusiastically. "There's so much to do. So many concerts to see, so many clubs to join. The social life is superb."

"But what about your studies?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not doing very well there. My tutor, a man called William Archibald Spooner, insists that I'm not working hard enough. He told me I'd completely tasted three worms, and he's probably right."

Just then a saucer flew in low over the trees and landed, quietly and without any fuss, in a small clearing. I had scarcely recovered from the shock, when a teacup swooped across the trees and landed on top of the saucer. There was a definite *clink* to be heard as it touched down. A small spiral of steam quivered over the top of the teacup. The handle of a silver spoon could be seen jutting up from the rim.

As Flickr and I stared in astonishment, a door opened in the side of the teacup. An ornate staircase slid down from the doorway and thumped into the ground. Three aliens emerged from the teacup and walked down the stairs. One was a large, silver robot who said, "Klaatu barada nicotine," as he puffed on a huge cigar.

Just behind the robot was a gorgeously proportioned lady who looked exactly like Nigella Lawson.

"Cor," said Flickr, "she's built like a chic brithouse."

"You're doing your Spooner impression again, aren't you?" I asked.

"Neigh," said my friend Flickr. "What's that?" He pointed at the third alien that was now scuttling down the staircase.

"It's a weta," I said. "Have you never seen a weta before? It's an insect-like special effect that eats money and excretes movies."

"Oh, I see," he said, looking hard at the aliens as they walked over to us.

Once they got close enough, the Nigella glared at us with her exquisite strabismus and said, "I need butter, cream, and a dozen eggs."

"What for?" I asked.

"Cholesterol inna bun," she said.

"Never mind that," said the robot. "I need a garage with a good workshop. I'm having problems with the tachyon drive in the teacup."

"I'm not sure I can help you with that," I said. "I don't think we know anything about tachyon drives in this part of the world."

"But tachyon drives are simple," said the robot, sounding quite astonished at my ignorance. "Let me explain it to you. Why did the tachyon cross the road?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Why did the tachyon cross the road?"

"Because it was already on the other side," said the robot. "There, now you know how tachyon drives work. I told you it was simple."

The weta scraped its mandibles together and I got the distinct feeling that it was applauding. It excreted a blue meanie with a ring on a gold chain around its neck.

"Wot? Wot?" asked the blue meanie. Then it put the ring on its willy, dissolved into the air and vanished from sight.

"Can't the Nigella or the weta help with the tachyon drive?" I asked.

"Oh no," said the robot. "The weta only forges pictures, it can't forge metal. And the Nigella was expelled from school before she reached that part of the curriculum."

"Why were you expelled?" I asked the Nigella.

"I was caught cheating in a biology exam," she explained. "The invigilator noticed me counting my breasts."

"Oh, I am sorry," I said sympathetically.

"I don't suppose it really matters," said the Nigella. "I'd never have passed the exam. I ran out of fingers."

I raised a quizzical eyebrow at the robot who shrugged and said, "Well, we are aliens after all!"

"Wow!" said my friend Flickr. "Can I take a photograph of you?" He took an impressively complex looking digital camera out of his pocket and began to focus carefully on the Nigella. "Look at the dead birdie!"

The Nigella looked up and anxiously scanned the sky. "Where is it?" she asked.

"Don't be so literal," Flickr said. "Take off your clothes."

"Certainly not!" said the Nigella. "I'm not that sort of alien."

"That's all right," said my friend Flickr. "I'm not that sort of photographer!"

"I'm not taking these clothes off," said the Nigella firmly, "and that's final. I'm far too fond of them. They were an absolute bargain, as indeed they would have to be because I bought them at the Warehouse."

While we had been talking, a host of grey clouds had gathered and once they reached critical mass, it began to rain. The weta frantically clicked its mandibles as the rain hosed down.

"He's not happy," said the robot. "He's rapidly turning into a wetter weta and he doesn't like it. Perhaps you'd better all come and shelter in the teacup."

I held my face up to the rain and let it splash caressingly all over me. "He really doesn't have anything to worry about," I said. "We have very soft water here. It's quite harmless."

"Soft water?" asked the Nigella.

"Yes," I said. "As opposed to hard water. You know - ice?"

"I'm not sure if that's the real meaning of soft and hard water," said the robot dryly.

We all climbed back up the stairs and went into the teacup. We passed through an archway. Embedded in the pillars was a full body scanner that photographed us, fingerprinted us and projected inside and outside pictures of our naked bodies on to a TV screen for all the world to see. As the weta passed through the archway, I got a glorious view of his inner structure.

"Lovely bones!" I said admiringly.

My friend Flickr took frantic photographs of everything he saw. Unfortunately there wasn't much to see. Grey walls sloped up to a high ceiling and small blue lights glowed at random intervals. There was a teapot on a table, and a dark brown brew was steeping in it.

"Would you care for tea?" asked the robot.

"Yes, please," I said. "Milk and no sugar." Flickr took a photograph of the teapot and nodded his head. The weta tickled one of the glowing blue lights with a mandible and a cupboard opened in the wall. The weta removed some mugs and put them on the table.

"I'll be mother," said the Nigella as she grabbed hold of the pot. But no matter how she struggled and strained, she couldn't pick it up. "You idiot!" she said to the robot. "You brewed the tea with heavy water again!"

"Sorry," said the robot. "Perhaps we'll skip the tea and go straight to the anal probe. Bend over!" he instructed me and my friend Flickr.

Flickr and I looked at each other. "On the count of three," said Flickr, "run for the stair of the headcase."

"OK." I agreed.

"Three!" said Flickr, and we ran, with the robot, the Nigella and the weta in hot pursuit. As I ran, I noticed a darkness in the wall where a blue light was no longer glowing. I thumped it hard, and it started to glow again. The robot screeched to a halt.

"The tachyon drive!" he said. "You've fixed it. How can I ever repay you?"

"You could let us go home," I suggested. "And then you could fly away and never bother us again."

"Of course," said the robot, and the Nigella and the weta concurred.

My friend Flickr and I stood in the park and watched the teacup take off and fly away. Soon afterwards, the saucer set off after it in hot pursuit.

"As my tutor would say," remarked my friend Flickr thoughtfully, "this story needs to end with a good lunch pine."

"Just like that," I agreed.

# Looking Back In Anger

When you read this I will be a year older than I was when I wrote it. And the birthday I'll be celebrating is a very important one. I'll be twice as old as the minimum age of people you can trust.

When I was a youth, we had a saying: you should never trust anyone over thirty. We all knew that the old people, the generations that preceded us, had screwed things up. They didn't care about the state of the world; they were too inward looking, too self-obsessed and too selfish. They'd never had it so good – the Prime Minister told them that in 1957, so they knew it was true. And the sad thing was that once upon a time they'd been just like us, only somehow, as the years passed, they seemed to have forgotten what it used to be like.

Eerie music and wavy lines...

In England in the 1930s, all right thinking students were thinking left. As Europe descended into fascism, the political left wing seemed like the only remaining hope for the freedom of the world. At its core was an idealism that promoted the greatest good of the greatest number. It's very hard to resist a seductive mantra like "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." People who had never worked in their lives made speeches in support of the working class.

There was a very romantic war going on just across the channel and a significantly large number of intellectual Englishmen put their principles in their pockets and, thus armed, went over to Spain to fight the good fight against Franco. Some of them survived; an even smaller number survived with their ideals intact.



Universities are supposed to be hotbeds of intellectual discussion. It's one of their main reasons for existing. In the 1930s, the sense of commitment to idealism that arose in the student body stopped being just an intellectual exercise. It trickled over into reality and it became a lifestyle choice. Given the *zeitgeist*, it's not hard to understand why the KGB found it so easy to recruit Burgess, Maclean, Philby and Blunt. But it's much less easy to understand why those people's commitment to the Soviets lasted a lifetime. Experience suggests that all too often youthful idealism degenerates into worldly cynicism. Somebody (good guesses are Chesterton, Churchill or Shaw but nobody is really sure) once said: "If a man is not a socialist when he is 20 he has no heart. If he is still a socialist when he is 40, he has no head."

But all too many people of that generation proved that cynical observation to be wrong. Sometimes idealism can survive and even flourish. It's a hopeful sign.

At the same time, across the pond, America was also experimenting with radicalism at both the left and right ends of the political spectrum – though unlike England, the impetus for it was not coming from the universities. The depression hit America much harder than any other country. It affected everyone in every class of society and it was a great wake up call. There was a general acceptance on all sides that Something Needed To Be Done! Furthermore, the potential revolutionaries had two brand new tools with which to promulgate their propaganda: radio and the mimeograph, tools which opened the door to almost every household in the country. By the mid 1930s a considerable number of ordinary Americans were at least nominally communist and the left wing was stronger than it had ever been before.

The journalist John Reed had actually witnessed the 1917 Russian Revolution and he came home fired with enthusiasm for the promise of Soviet style socialism. Reed

and his colleagues preached their message so successfully that it even began to seem as though America too might have a revolution of its own.

Reed died of typhus in Moscow in 1920 and the Soviets gave him a hero's funeral. He was buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis where he was later joined by Stalin, and similar luminaries. Even in death, he remained an influential figurehead in radical American politics. In 1981, Warren Beatty played the part of John Reed in a Hollywood biopic.

Meanwhile, at the other extreme, big business was pushing hard towards the right and by 1935, the fascist influence was making huge progress thanks largely to the efforts of Henry Ford and other business magnates who thought that what Hitler was doing with Germany was just absolutely the cat's pyjamas.

Indeed, by the beginning of World War II, the Ford Motor Company was actually manufacturing tanks for the German Army in the same Detroit factories that it was using for making civilian vehicles for sale to Americans. At one point, Ford even threatened to shut down his company's contributions to the war effort if he wasn't allowed to continue to help his best friend Adolf as well.

There were good reasons why Woodie Guthrie used his guitar to kill fascists. A lot of them needed killing.

The furore died down in England in the 1940s and 1950s. The young people of those decades seemed to shun intellectual discussion. There was a hardness in them and anyway, their world lacked any deep causes with which to get involved (except for a small number of duffle coats who pursued a campaign for nuclear disarmament). By and large, students just went back to just being students again, doing the normal student things. They got drunk and stole policemen's helmets. They lived what were often shallow and superficial lives under the twin stimuli of post-war austerity, and the grim sword of Damocles of National Service that hung over everyone's head. Have fun while you

still can was the message of the day. The time you have left to you is all too short. Screw you Jack, I'm alright. Time to party! They were grim, grey years, intensely conservative, and everyone was very determined to preserve a status quo that almost nobody felt able to argue against.

In 1950s America, a weak and incompetent president handed control of the country over to the twin tyrannies of Hoover and McCarthy. Even the slightest trace of non-conformity was labelled communist and un-American and it was ruthlessly suppressed. Lives were, quite literally, ruined and lost. The radical left essentially vanished as the country dived back into its hole and pulled the hole in after itself. Like the British, the Americans had an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo again. They knew they were living in the best of all possible worlds.

Eerie music and wavy lines...

But by the late 1960s, the cracks were starting to show. My generation of students was re-opening the debate about social and political values and the status quo was starting to look flimsy. This time the driving force of the movement was centred in America. There was pressure from above sparked by the perceived corruption of the people in charge of the government and there was pressure from below as the disenfranchised grew more and more dissatisfied with their lot. Something had to give.

Like the students of the 1930s, we had a foreign war to measure ourselves against, but there was nothing romantic about Vietnam and the daily images on our television screens were sickening. It began to seem to us as if the political left wing was the only one that cared at all about the people who were suffering in South East Asia. We questioned the motives of the movers and the shakers of the world. Their specious self-justifications were patently absurd. Indeed, we later learned that the event which more than anything else persuaded America to escalate the war (the so-called Gulf Of Tonkin incident) never even took

place! Why did so many people have to die so cruelly for something that had never happened, in pursuit of dubious political aims? Did nobody care about all those lives? It seemed not.

Kennedy and Johnson and (later) Nixon were cynical men with selfish agendas that had to be paid for in blood. They seemed to take a perverse joy in the perceived necessity of their actions. There was something corrupt in Camelot and the stink of it was foul in our nostrils.

The revolution began in Berkeley as so many things did in those days, but it quickly spread throughout the country and throughout the Western world. And while the protest against the Vietnam war was always a rallying cry for the movement, it also took to other causes, not least the vicious racial apartheid that split American society in two.

And so Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin wrote angry books and they led protest marches to keep their philosophy in the public mind. The Weathermen, extremely articulate and charismatic radicals with a surprising and very refreshing sense of humour, amused themselves by blowing up government buildings and banks in celebration of inexcusable political and humanitarian screw ups such as the invasion of Laos and the bombing of Hanoi. Meanwhile the Black Panthers threatened armed revolution and they hung around on street corners looking menacing in their dark glasses and berets.

America was teetering on the edge of anarchy.

We had no direct involvement in any of this in England. There were no British troops in Vietnam (that's not quite true, but it's close enough to the truth not to matter) and, compared to America, we had no racial problems at all and no tradition of discrimination – at least not enshrined in legislation. America had racially divisive laws, racially segregated schools, restaurants, buses, trains and toilets. We had no such laws. But nevertheless it was clear to me and to the majority of my contemporaries that the anti-war

movement and the agitation for social equality without racism were ideals greatly to be desired.

And so we marched and we picketed and we sat down in support of our left pondian colleagues. We stole Abbie Hoffman's book, just like he told us to. Did we actually make any difference? I don't know, but I like to think that we did.

And then, for a short while, it seemed that we had won. The war ended, civil rights legislation was passed. The movement died. Jerry Rubin became a stockbroker and one of the Weathermen bought a bar in New York and won a pile of money on a television quiz show. They all became part of the establishment; they all became the kind of people they'd spent their lives telling us not to trust.

Humph!

But worse than that - students stopped thinking again. The left wing vanished from the intellectual world again; criticism and the questioning of the people in charge simply stopped happening. A black curtain descended over the radical freaks on both sides of the pond, and they disappeared from view.

Eerie lines and wavy music...

There has been a very visible change in the attitude of students on campus. Their motivations for coming to university in the first place are very different from the motivations that I had. Students today generally study subjects that they hope will help to get them a career. Often they have very little interest in the ideas that are presented to them. Study is regarded as only a means to a very practical and rather short sighted end: employment.

I find this attitude impossible to understand - I went to university so that I could postpone the evil day of having to get a job for a few more years, and the only reason I studied the subject I was majoring in was because I found it interesting, not because I felt it would help in the employment rat race. Indeed, as it happened, I ended up making a career in an area that had no connection

whatsoever with my degree speciality. I simply cannot imagine the soul searing boredom that must accompany the in-depth study of things that are intrinsically dull to the student, but nevertheless today that seems to be the norm.

And because the central goal is (ultimately) to score a career based on good grades, the students tend to pursue those grades not through intellectual appreciation of the subject (they don't care enough about it for that) but by being spoon fed "right answers" (whatever that means) from their tutors. A friend of mine who lectures at university is almost in despair at the impossibility of getting any original ideas out of his students. Again and again and again they ask him what he wants them to say in their assignments. They want him to tell them the answers so that they can write them down in the papers they present, and no matter how many times he tells them that he wants them to express their own opinions (and justify them, of course) they simply refuse to do so - mainly, I suspect, because they don't have any opinions; the subjects are too dull to excite their brains.

Assuming that they actually have any brains, of course.

These people are supposed to be the intellectual elite (how else can you get into university, for goodness sake). Nevertheless the stultification engendered by the lack of involvement in their chosen subjects seems to extend into all other fields of endeavour as well. Their brains just turn off no matter what the subject in front of them. They seem to have a basic lack of curiosity about the world and a total inability to comprehend the things that make it tick. When all your depth is in shallow places, you lose track of the complexity of real life; you lose the ability to follow (sometimes convoluted) arguments about its workings and so you cannot draw conclusions of your own. You look for the right answers from an authority figure instead and if you get them, all you then have to do is regurgitate them when challenged.

Thinking hurts. So let someone else do it for you. That way you avoid the pain. Eventually you simply stop thinking altogether and, because you are no longer using the skill, it atrophies, withers and dies.

I would be willing to bet that a significantly large number of the students at university today are (for example) quite unable to understand the political arguments put forward in newspaper editorials – indeed they probably don't even know what an editorial is, because they never read newspapers anyway! And not only can they not understand such things, they don't really care about them either.

Too hard!  
TL;DR!

For those of you who aren't up to date with these things, the initials TL;DR stand for "Too Long; Didn't Read" and it's a standard comment posted by internauts who exhibit all the attention span of a wood louse whenever they are faced with any piece of prose longer than a couple of sentences. None of them would even attempt to read this essay that you are reading now, for example. And that intellectual laziness is typically symptomatic of the things I am discussing here.

The students drift, blown hither and yon by winds of circumstance. They don't feel deeply about anything substantial; the war in Iraq, global warming, the appalling human rights violations committed every day by both the American and British governments – these things just pass them by. They probably don't even know that the events are taking place, and they certainly don't care. This general dumbing down of their universe of discourse means that, quite routinely, they ignore things that would have made my generation riot in the streets.

And so the movers and the shakers of the world now find themselves in a position where they can just walk all over

everybody without recrimination, no matter how egregiously they sin. They feed the people shit and sugar, and the people lie back and eat it; they don't seem to know any better.

They make me despair.

Today I am one of the old farts. When my generation were young we asked to be given the world so that we could fix all the broken bits. Well - time passed and they gave us the world, but we didn't fix it. Instead we screwed it up just as badly as the generation that we once condemned for that very sin. So why aren't the youth of today condemning us for it? Why aren't they actively trying to get rid of us as they have every right to do?

Because they are too dumb to realise just how badly we screwed them over and just what a mess they will inherit when their own time comes.

Call me a cynic if you like, but today I'd change just one word in the mantra that guided my generation. Today, in my opinion, you should never trust anyone under thirty.

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank James Finley, a work colleague with whom I had several very interesting and stimulating conversations which sparked the train of thought that led to this essay. Thanks also to Paul Riddell who showed me that American Radical Politics was not the oxymoron I'd always thought it to be.

This is one of the hardest things I've ever written and I've been struggling with it for several months. I shudder to think how many drafts it has gone through. Both James and Paul contributed a lot to the final structure, but of course I take full responsibility for any errors of fact that may remain and the (sometimes outrageous) opinions expressed here are purely my own.



# Alan And The Bureaucrats

It was time to re-register my car and so, being a creature of habit, I did what I do every year and I wandered down to the closest office of the Automobile Association.

I pushed open the door. There seemed to be a lot of resistance, which I found puzzling, but once I got through the door I quickly found the reason. The office was absolutely seething with people. I've never seen such a crowd concentrated in one small office before. Worried looking people dressed in AA uniforms scurried hither and yon behind the counter. There was a constant buzz of conversation, punctuated by the clack of keyboards, the clicking of mice and the occasional very rude word.

Three positions at the counter proclaimed that you could renew your drivers license at them, should you be so inclined. The crush of people around these was the thickest in the room. Another position claimed to deal with AA Membership Enquiries. The queue here was the shortest, for very long values of short of course. The final position at the counter had a sign which declared that it dealt with Vehicle Registration. Just what I needed. Unfortunately it also boasted a large, emphatic notice which said: Closed!

I joined the queue for AA Membership Enquiries, on the grounds that it only had eighty people in it and, after about an aeon and a half, I reached the counter and obtained the attention of the lady sitting behind it.

"Can I do this here?" I asked, flourishing my car re-registration documents.

"Of course you can," she said. "But you'll have to wait a few minutes. My shift has come to an end and I need to log off from the computer. When I've done that, my colleague will log on and then she'll be happy to deal with you."

"Righto," I said, having little choice in the matter. And then I watched in fascination as she logged off from her computer. I've never seen any process quite so complicated in my life before. Her eyes flicked around her screen, top to bottom, left to right, corner to corner. She typed furiously on her keyboard, pausing every so often to click on things with her mouse. I couldn't see the screen; I have no idea what prompts she was responding to, but it required huge concentration from her (the tip of her tongue was poking out of the side of her mouth; always a sure sign of deep thought). Eventually, after about five minutes of non-stop typing, she heaved a huge sigh of relief, sat back in her chair and smiled at me.

"My colleague will be with you soon," she said and left, hopefully to drink a reviving cup of coffee. I'm sure she needed it.

Her colleague sat down in the recently vacated chair. "I'll deal with you in a moment," she said, somewhat ominously. And then the whole process went in reverse as she logged on. Eventually, after typing in her entire autobiography from age 3 until 10.00am this morning, the system grudgingly decided that she really was who she claimed to be, and it allowed her access. She picked up my form, keyed in a few details and then asked, "How are you paying for this?"

I proffered an eftpos card.

"Thank you," she said. "Please swipe your card."

I swiped my card. Nothing happened.

"Other way round," she said.

I turned the card round and swiped again. Nothing happened.

"No," said the lady. "The *other* other way round."

I tried again. Nothing.

"You do it," I said, handing her the card. "All these machines swipe in different ways. I can never get them right."

She rotated my card through the fourth dimension, turned it sideways and swiped it.

"PIN Number?" demanded the tautologous machine. I supplied the number.

"Accepted," said the machine smugly, and I was several hundred dollars poorer, just like that.

"I'll just print out the docket for displaying on your windshield," said the lady, giving a delicate click with her mouse. A printer at the other end of the office graunched into life and the lady left to get my docket. She came back with a long face and an even longer docket.

"Something's gone wrong," she said gloomily, proffering the docket.

The printer was obviously horribly misaligned - the docket had printed across the perforations that separated two stationery items, thereby ruining them both. Furthermore, about half an inch of the left hand side of the docket was missing, the print heads having failed to make any contact with the form at all.

"Two for the price of one?" asked the lady hopefully.

"I don't think so," I said.

"I'll try again."

She went and opened the printer, poked something a bit half-heartedly, wiggled a wiggly bit and then came back and clicked the mouse. The printer sprang into life again, but the result was, if possible, even worse than before. Again it had used up two forms and most of the left hand side was still absent without leave. But this time the large black letters and numbers were missing several vital aspects and were almost illegible. They were also very smeary as if phantom fingers had brushed across the ink before it was dry.

"I think we'll have to put in a support call to IT," said the lady. "Can we phone you when it's fixed?"

"Well, not really," I said. "Isn't there any other alternative?"

"You could go to the Post Office," she said doubtfully. "Show them the receipt and explain what happened. I'm sure they'll print one out for you."

I heaved a sigh, but she dodged and it missed her and fell on to the floor, waiting for someone unwary to trip over it. I took my receipt and forced my way out through the struggling hordes (the number of people in the office seemed to have doubled since I'd arrived nearly two hours before).

The Post Office was about five minutes walk away. It was utterly deserted. Obviously today the AA office was the trendy place to be. The ladies behind the counter were knitting and gossiping to each other. I approached one of them, showed my receipt and explained what had happened. She started to laugh.

"Hey Alice," she said to the lady next to her, "the AA vehicle registration printer has broken down again."

"Again?" said Alice incredulously. "That's the third time this week. What do they do over there? Kick it every time they walk past?"

"I don't know," said my lady, "but I think we'd better brace ourselves for a mad rush as they send everybody over here. Gird your knitting, girls. We might be busy soon."

She glanced cursorily at my receipt. "I'll just log on," she said. "We've been very quiet today and I haven't logged on yet."

Logging on took less than ten seconds. Obviously the Post Office system had a much less rigorous authentication mechanism than the corresponding AA system. Then the lady keyed in a code from my receipt, wandered over to the printer in the corner and came back with a perfectly printed docket. The whole exercise took less than a minute from woe to go.

"There you are, dear," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "Next year I think I'll cut out the middle man and come straight here."

"We'll see you then," said the lady and she went back to her knitting.

\* \* \* \*

I needed a new passport so I went to the Department Of Internal Affairs which is on the third floor of a building with a lift that takes nearly twenty minutes to arrive when summoned. Perhaps it was having a tea break.

A dark brown man wearing a dark brown suit sat behind a dark brown desk with a dark brown notice on it that said: Enquiries.

"Can I help you sir?" he Enquired in a dark brown voice.

"I need to renew my passport," I explained.

"Here." He handed me a dark brown form. "Fill this in and bring it back with two photographs. Remember not to smile when you have the picture taken."

I followed his instructions to the letter and returned a few days later with my completed form. I was told to wait for my name to be called. I sat down and watched various people being interrogated by bureaucrats. This involved much enthusiastic checking of forms and the pounding of the forms to death with rubber stamps. Eventually the customers slunk away, much subdued. Finally my name was called and I took my form up to the window. The nice lady smiled.

"Hello," she said. "How can I help you?"

I presented my form and photographs and she scrutinised them with a dark brown scroot. She checked a couple of answers with me and then picked up the largest stamp I've ever seen, inked it carefully and thumped it fiercely on the front of the form. When she removed the stamp, I could see the large friendly letters "Routine" all across my paperwork and I felt a great sense of relief. There are two things that guarantee severe problems in your immediate future. One is to hear your doctor say, "Hmm.

I've never seen one of *those* before." and the other is to have a civil servant catch you out in any non-routine exercise...

While the lady had been checking my form, I couldn't help overhearing some of the conversation that was happening one window down from mine.

"I accidentally ticked the wrong box on the form," said a man. "And now he has three surnames and no first names. Can we fix that please? He's being teased about it at school."

"Oh dear," said the clerk. "Well, you could change his name by deed poll. It takes a long time and it costs a lot of money."

"But it was an accident. I ticked the wrong box by mistake. Can't we just rearrange the information in your records?" The man was almost crying with frustration.

"Oh, it's not as simple as that," said the clerk. And then she uttered the dreaded words, "It's not routine."

"He's got three surnames," wailed the man. "Nobody has three surnames. Can't you tell it was just an honest mistake?"

I left him to his dilemma and went home to await my new passport.

Several days later it arrived. It's a deep sexy black document with half a fern outlined down one side. When you open it up, you find a very thick page stuffed full of biometric magic. Written on this page in stern dark brown letters is a dire warning to Customs and Immigration officials not to stamp visas on it. Presumably dreadful penalties will be imposed on them should they happen to chip the chip embedded in this page's folds.

According to the book of words that came with the passport, there is a radio frequency ID (RFID) chip lurking in there. Consequently, whenever I decide to travel to Australia, as soon as I walk into the airport, all the machines will immediately say, "Hello, Alan - we've been waiting for

you. Come in, come in." and I will be ushered past glaring officials who are powerless to interfere. Protected by the subtle power of biometrics, I will stroll off again at the other end with nobody to say me nay.

I really can't wait to try it out.

In order to grant me this magical travel ability, the New Zealand Government has doubled the price of the passport and halved its lifetime. I will have to fill in another dark brown form in only five short years.

Humph!

# The Garden City - So Called

I've been in Christchurch, staying at the So Hotel again. You will be pleased to know that it has lost none of its eccentricity. Indeed, it has gained some. Being clean and green and proud of its image, the hotel now offers free charging for electric cars, and it has an electric car proudly on display in the foyer in order to demonstrate solidarity with the cause. The car itself is painted a delightful shade of pink (perhaps pink is the new green). Some days the car is parked by the lifts and some days it is parked in the entranceway. And doubtless it is always fully charged.

The rooms themselves are still an utter delight. Each evening as I went to bed I was soothed to sleep under the gentle glow of a coloured night light; red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. What a choice to be presented with! I experimented with them all, and all were equally beneficial.

The in-room compendium has been severely edited since last I stayed in the hotel. What used to be nearly 50 pages of new age waffle interspersed with technical instructions about how to use the console beside the bed has now been reduced to a mere 20 pages of new age waffle with very few technical instructions in it at all. Truly, it has become So Brief. As a consequence, the hi-tech control unit beside the bed is now an enormous mystery to each and every guest. It has four buttons engraved with kabbalistic runes, three switches, two rotating control knobs a digital display, a telephone handset, three more buttons that I've only just noticed, a partridge, a pear tree and a Sew Ing Machine. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that given the right combination of twists, pulls and pushes, the console would



manufacture an electric car for me which I could then charge for free if only I could work out how to drive it down four flights of stairs to the reception desk. Like daleks, electric cars don't do stairs very well. So Sad.

The compendium also assured me that simulating the passing of an entire day by putting the light over the bed into sun mode would be an enormously therapeutic experience. Unfortunately the only remotely applicable instruction told me simply to press the up arrow key on the console. Since there was no up arrow key on the console, I was left helpless. I never did work out how to put my room into sun mode which is a shame - I'm sure that at the end of a tiring day I would have greatly benefited from a little blast of high energy gamma rays while I bathed in the jets of plasma emitted by the miniature nuclear fusion plant concealed in the bed head light fitting.

One page of the compendium was written in the enigmatic and So Secret alphabet of the planet Rot13. Upon reading this page I discovered that the area outside the hotel was colloquially known as Soho. People were encouraged to walk up and down by themselves so that they could claim they were walking Solo. In a small garden just by the hotel, guests could Sow Seeds. Fb Gurer!

Every day as I walked from the So Hotel to the office, I passed a shop called NOOD. The acronym stands for New Objects Of Desire. There's no doubt at all that the things the shop sells are objects, and I'm perfectly willing to believe that they are new. However they evoked no feelings of desire in my breast; quite the reverse in fact. I found them to be only So So.

NOOD, being trendy, obviously uses its position at the cutting edge of fashion and taste as an excuse to sell tat at exorbitant prices. On display in the window is a chair with a stainless steel frame and two red cushions that form the back and the seat. It is a bargain for only \$699. A similar stainless steel chair frame has no cushions on it at all, just

an animal pattern fabric stretched tightly over the frame. It looks extremely uncomfortable, and it could be yours for a mere \$1199.

You could probably buy them both as kits from Ikea or the Warehouse for at least \$50 without feeling too ripped off...

During the whole week that I stayed in Christchurch, NOOD remained entirely bereft of customers - or noodists as it So Coyly called its clientele in the advertising leaflets available from a small pouch stuck on the shop window. I found the daily emptiness of NOOD So Unsurprising.

Christchurch is a city of constant surprises. As I walked across the square on Sunday evening I was overtaken by a large striding man with his hair gathered into a pony tail that hung down below his waist. Perched on his shoulder was a cockatiel (*Nymphicus Hollandicus*) who was admiring the world and being admired in his turn by all the Japanese tourists who were thronging the square. There was much pointing, much camera clicking, much giggling, and a lot of oohing and ahing. The cockatiel raised his crest and bowed to his subjects, accepting their praise as his just due. The man paid no attention to any of this and strode silently across the square. When he reached the other side he vanished from view down a small and narrow alley. I waved - So Long.

I had a clear view of the square from the window of my office, and on Wednesday the most perfect rainbow I've ever seen arched across the city. The colours were strong and well defined; it looked like all of the night lights in my hotel room had turned themselves on at once and smeared themselves over the sky. Distinct though the colours were, I still couldn't separate indigo from violet - I've never been able to do that; perhaps it's a myth that they both exist, or perhaps Isaac Newton just had funny eyes. Being hit on the head by an apple can do that to you, particularly if it's an iPad with sharp corners. So Juicy.

The rainbow was So Strong and So Perfect that I was absolutely certain I could see the pot of gold at the end of it. I went looking for the gold later, but it wasn't there any more. Obviously somebody else got there before me.

I love Christchurch; it's the oddest city I've ever seen. So To Speak.

# In Which We Discover A New Way Of Reading

Book.

Ah yes! I know what one of those is. I remember reading a book once, long ago. It was fun. Book – the word trips nicely off the tongue. It's almost as neat a word as the object itself. No other word quite works.

Koob.

Not quite right, let's try again. How about ookb? No – too Pratchettian as well as being hard to say. Those two terminal consonants just don't go together. You'll get a tooth rupture trying to pronounce them properly.

Obok.

No. That sounds too much like an Irish-Chinese vegetable. Obok choy and monosodium glutamate for tea tonight.

Kobo.

That's it!

Whitcoulls sell books. And they also sell Kobos. I bought one.

A Kobo is a rather simple-minded gadget for reading electronic books or ebooks as they are popularly known. An ebook is a computer file in a special format – there are various different ebook formats but one of the more popular ones is the epub format, and that's the one the Kobo uses.

The Kobo itself is about the size of a paperback book, though it is much slimmer, less than a quarter of an inch thick. It's very light and easy to hold and the screen is easy to read; there's no glare to irritate the eyes. It's a design quite elegant in its simplicity.

However as a geeky gadget it does have some distinct drawbacks, not least among which is the fact that almost everything the manufacturer tells you about the thing in the instruction booklet and on the Kobo web site is completely incorrect. Oh there are some nuggets of truth in the dross of the documentation. But mostly the documentation is a misleading, steaming pile of very unhelpful nonsense, which makes it rather difficult to come properly to grips with the device.

For example, the Kobo comes loaded with 100 "classic books" which appear to have been chosen by the simple process of waving a random number generator over the Project Gutenberg database. The documentation on the Kobo web site insists that these pre-loaded books cannot be deleted and assures anyone who cares that the Kobo engineers are working really, really hard, day and night, on the problem, and there might be a software update in a few months which will implement this feature.

It took me less than an hour of poking around in the guts of the Kobo to work out how to delete the pre-loaded books. Does that mean I'm significantly smarter than the entire team of Kobo engineers? I doubt that. It is much more likely to mean that, for mysterious reasons of their own, the Kobo engineers don't *want* anyone to delete the pre-loaded books and so they insist that it simply can't be done. This arrogant attitude doesn't fill me with confidence - any organisation that begins life by treating its customers like mushrooms (keep them in the dark and feed them lots of bullshit) probably isn't going to be around in the world for very long. So I strongly suspect that we will never see an upgraded, new model Kobo. The company simply won't survive long enough to address the shortcomings in its product unless it changes its "mummy-knows-best" stance on customer relations.

Anyway - let's begin my Kobo adventure at the beginning when I unpacked my shiny new ebook reader and read the

accompanying quick start instruction leaflet. This leaflet is the only printed documentation supplied with the gadget. It told me to plug my new Kobo into my PC and strongly implied that when I did this for the first time a registration program would start to run. So I plugged the Kobo in and waited for the program to appear. Nothing happened. However the Kobo did show up on my computer as an extra disk drive and when I browsed around the files on it I eventually found the registration program lurking in a dark corner. So I loaded the program and ran it.

The program took me straight to the Whitcoulls web site and asked me to create an account so that I could spend lots of money on ebooks (something I have no intention of doing). The program also recorded information about me on the Kobo itself and, presumably, on a database at Whitcoulls. This information is used to generate the key that allows me to read Digital Rights Management (DRM) protected books on my device. DRM protected books are encrypted files which can only be decrypted and read by people who possess the proper key. If I purchase such a book, it is encrypted with my key and only I can read it. If I were to give a copy of the file to someone else, they would not be able to read it because their key is different from mine. At least that's the theory. In practice there are ways around this limitation, but frankly it's all too much of a hassle, and I can't be bothered with it. And quite apart from the practicalities involved, I have philosophical objections to DRM protected material anyway. Consequently I will not be reading any DRM protected books on my Kobo.

The only file formats the Kobo lets you read are epub and PDF. There is no support at all for common formats such as plain text or RTF files which, I gather, other ebook readers like the Kindle do support. This is mildly irritating. It is quite easy to convert text files and RTF files into epub format if you know what you are doing; but it's an annoying extra step which just adds to the irritation engendered by the

device. Again, the Kobo engineers are reportedly working day and night to solve this "problem" so that they can start to support plain text and RTF files on the device. I'm getting more and more sceptical about the technical skills of the Kobo engineers. These kinds of files have a *much* simpler structure than the already supported PDF and epub files. I would have expected the Kobo engineers to have tackled them first, before they began to consider how to work with the more complicated formats on the grounds that you shouldn't try and run before you learn how to walk. But obviously I know nothing about how such things are developed. Nowadays they do things quite differently from the way they were done when I made my living as a developer. I don't think I could ever get a job as a Kobo engineer...

The first time I started to read something on the Kobo, I quickly came to realize that the reading software itself is extraordinarily primitive - there are only two ways to move around in an epub format book. You can go through it page by page, or you can jump straight to a chapter chosen from the table of contents and then start paging again. It would be nice to be able to jump to a given page number, but you can't. It would be nice to be able to search for words and phrases in the book, but you can't. And if you happen to have an ebook that doesn't have a table of contents (yes, they do exist) you are completely screwed because all that is left is the painfully slow paging method.

Reading a book serially like this is, of course, the way fiction is generally read. However non-fiction books, particularly reference books and text books, are best read non-serially with constant jumps to and from given pages (or even, in some cases, paragraphs within a page). Since this simply cannot be done in any way, shape or form on the Kobo, the device is utterly useless for carrying reference material around on. I consider this to be a huge drawback.

Doubtless the Kobo engineers are working tirelessly day and night to solve the problem...

Not only is the reading software extremely crude and primitive, it is also rather bug-ridden. On more than one occasion it has locked up solid on me leaving me no option but to reset the device and start again. Furthermore, you are supposed to be able to adjust the font size of epub books on the fly, and mostly (to be fair) you can. However there are some epub format files on which the Kobo simply refuses to resize the fonts at all, for no readily apparent reason. Again, the Kobo engineers have acknowledged that the bug exists and are working day and night to solve it even as we speak...

If you are willing to jump through a lot of processing hoops, it is possible to manipulate such a fixed font document on your PC in such a way that the Kobo will be able to resize the font after you load the book back onto it. But the method will not work on DRM protected material. Another reason, perhaps, for not buying DRM protected material in the first place. Doubtless the Kobo engineers have this problem well in hand as a high priority on their twenty four hour day development schedule.

Support for PDF files is even more primitive and is utterly pathetic. You can't adjust the font size other than by choosing to magnify the whole document and when you do that, it no longer fits on the screen properly. So if you happen to have a PDF document with an unreadably small font, you are completely screwed again. Furthermore you cannot jump around a PDF document at all. The software ignores the PDF document index and the only available navigation method is to go page by slow page through the whole book from start to finish. Software does exist to convert PDF files into epub files, but the results are variable and are generally unsatisfactory. So if you want to read a PDF file on your Kobo, mostly you are just screwed again.



Books that you are currently reading are put into the Kobo's "I'm Reading" list. This list quickly fills up (and so becomes very slow to navigate) as you glance through some book or other just to see if you are in the mood to read it. And once a book appears on the reading list there is absolutely no way to remove it again (according to the Kobo engineers) without reading the whole thing all the way through. Or, more accurately, you have to go to the last chapter and then slowly and painfully page through it to the end. This is an enormous nuisance, particularly for books which have 100 pages in the last chapter!

The User Guide says that you can cull the reading list by using the desktop software that you originally registered the device with, but that's a bare faced lie; you can't. If the book is one you loaded onto the Kobo yourself (as opposed to one that you bought from the web site), you can remove it from the list by deleting the book completely from the reader, but that strikes me as being more than a little bit draconian, and decidedly inelegant to boot. But I'm absolutely certain that the Kobo engineers are working night and day to fix the problem.

As it happens, after a lot more poking around inside the beast, I have beaten the Kobo engineers at their own game and I have figured out how to remove items from the list properly. Unfortunately the procedure involves connecting the Kobo to a computer and doing deep magic on its internal database. This is so tedious, laborious and error prone (if you have clumsy fingers that make unnoticed typos), that it probably isn't worth while. There might be a way to automate it; but if there is, I haven't found it yet. I will work on it day and night, just like a real Kobo engineer.

I spent the first few days after I got the Kobo learning everything I could about the epub format. Then I converted the two volumes of **Trimnings From The Triffid's Beard** into epub books and loaded them on to the Kobo. Oddly, I couldn't read them -- the Kobo claimed that the content was

locked and it refused to display the books. A lot of googling later, I discovered that the Kobo assumes that any book with an apostrophe in the title has locked content. All I had to do was remove the apostrophe and then I could read the book in all its glory! That is just plain dumb - what were the Kobo engineers thinking of when they implemented that feature? Perhaps they were just very tired from their endless work schedule and let that little bug slip through unnoticed.

So what will I use the Kobo for? I certainly won't be buying any DRM ebooks to read on it. Consequently the only books on my Kobo will be epub documents that I have created myself from my own computer files and free books that I have found on the internet. Fortunately there are heaps of those available. I've already got a lot of Henry Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs novels from Project Gutenberg, for example. So I'm sure my Kobo will get a lot of use. But in its current state of development, it is not going to replace proper, made out of paper books in my affections. My Kobo is strictly for public domain / creative commons material that is otherwise unavailable. I hope that doesn't upset the Kobo engineers too much.

# iThought iSaw A Shiny

It was iPad day in New Zealand so iWent to Dick Smith to consult with a techxpert. The man himself was there demonstrating away like mad. The crowd was iV people wide and iX people deep. Greasy fingers, toes and the occasional willy poked the display models and, in response, pretty icons zinged back and forth on smeary screens. There was a distinct odour of techno-lust in the atmosphere. Or possibly it was sweaty feet.

"iWant one," iSaid.

"WiFi by itself or WiFi and 3G network?" asked Dick Smith.

"What's the difference?"

"WiFi connects to the internet through a wireless router such as the one you absolutely must have at home if you want to get any use at all out of the iPad, and 3G connects to the internet through the telephone network at enormous cost to you which results in hugely obscene profits for the phone company."

"iThink that 3G is not for me," iSaid. "My WiFi router at home will suffice. Good job I have one, eh?"

"Indeed it is," said Dick Smith. " iAssume, being the well prepared nerd that you so obviously are, that you also have a PC running Windows?"

"Yes," iWhispered, ashamed. "Is that really necessary?"

"The iPad won't work without it," explained Dick Smith. "You need to run iTunes on a separate computer to set up and maintain your new gadget. The iPad is sexy, but it won't stand up alone. It needs the helping hand of a professional to bring out its most satisfying performance."

"Does iTunes work on Linux?"

"No."

"Not even if iOffer it a glass of Wine?"

"Especially not then. Steve Jobs has had a liver transplant and so he doesn't allow his minions to drink alcohol any more. He rules Apple with a rod of iRon, you know."

"What are his feelings about cider?" iAsked.

"Only with Rosie," said Dick Smith gnomically. "Now which iPad is to be yourPad?"

"The WiFi model, please."

"iWill see if iHave one in the storeroom," said Dick Smith. He vanished into the back room and had words with a harassed looking person hiding behind a pile of cardboard boxes. The man delved deep into his pile and emerged holding a significant box. Dick Smith took it from him and carried it in triumph to me. "Here it is!" heDeclared. " And now weCome to the sordid commercial part of our intimate relationship."

"iHave money," iTold him.

"That's just as well," heSaid, "because iWant lots of it."

"iAm fed up with this joke," iSaid.

"You should try selling these things for a living," heSaid. "iWas sick of the joke within five minutes of putting them on display. We've been open since sparrow fart; it is now the middle of the afternoon and iHaven't even had time to get myLunch yet!"

"Are they selling well?" iAsked.

"iSold nothing else all day," heSaid. "Nobody wants any of the other boring stuff in the shop. This is the only thing that people are interested in buying today."

iTook my cardboard box home and unpacked it. Rather to my surprise, iDiscovered that the battery in the iPad was fully charged, so iCould start using my new gadget right away. Just like me, Steve Jobs is a member of the instant gratification generation and little touches like this show that he truly understands his target market.

myPad is just as wonderful a toy as all the media articles say it is. It has its drawbacks, of course. It isn't a proper

computer (unless you jailbreak it, but that invalidates the warranty). It is severely limited in what it is allowed to do and it point blank refuses to let you get inside it and fiddle around, which is very frustrating for geeks like me. However if you are willing to treat it as what it is rather than curse at it for not being what it isn't, it soon becomes clear that it is a magnificent gadget, full of possibilities and the source of endless fun.

Mainly there is the sheer child-like pleasure to be taken from the clever elegance of the design. Apple really do know how to make extraordinarily beautiful objects. Just holding it in your hands evokes a technological orgasm. And then you turn it on and start to stroke it and your cup of delight runneth over. Applications zoom up to fill the screen and you control them with suitable gestures of the fingers. Do you feel the urge to indulge in a larger font? Simply squeeze your finger and thumb together, touch them to the screen and then separate them. The image behaves like an elastic surface and stretches out beneath your fingertips, increasing the size of the letters as it grows. When you read an eBook and need to turn the page, just position your fingers exactly as you would with a real book and make the same gesture you would make to turn a paper page and the electronic page flips over just like a real one! I didn't read a word of the first eBook I loaded on to myPad. I just turned its pages all the way through to the end. And then I went back to the beginning and turned them all over again.

The only fly that I've found swimming in the soup of myPad is that stray cat hairs floating around the house tend to plonk themselves down on the screen in great abundance. Presumably there is a small static charge attracting them. I have found that it is important to resist the temptation to brush them off -- whatever application currently has the focus tends to go berserk at such random gropings, and who can blame it? I've tried blowing them away, with mixed success. The hairs do tend to detach

themselves, but they are usually replaced with a thin layer of spit which is even less aesthetically pleasing. Once the power is safely turned off, I find myself constantly polishing the screen with the same sort of microfibre cloth I use for cleaning my glasses. It works quite well, actually...

But when you get right down to the actual nitty gritty of it, myPad is really only a device for showing off just how cool iAm in coffee shops and pubs. I'm absolutely certain that it will prove to be a geek babe-magnet. iCan easily imagine myself browsing the web with one finger and using my other fingers to titillate all the giggling, squirming geek groupies one by one by one (just like me, the iPad doesn't multitask).

iRule!

# Jughead

"The jug is dead. Long live the jug."

After many years of faithful service, my electric jug could no longer muster the strength to boil water. Old age and decrepitude had set in, not to mention a touch of dementia. Depressed, the jug took to its bed. It could no longer work; its days of independent living were over.

The jug doctor agreed with me.

"The kindest thing to do would be to put it painlessly to sleep in a yellow council rubbish bag."

So that's what we did. And then, in an attempt to short-circuit the grieving process, I decided to go shopping for a replacement.

The new jug, Woolworths' cheapest, was not yet fully grown. It was unable to live without a permanent connection to the power. The previous jug, properly mature, had a base from which it could detach itself and walk around at will, sneering at the toaster and pulling the leg of the slow cooker which, poor bullied thing, simply couldn't run fast enough to catch the jug and give it the pummelling it deserved.

But the new jug had just a single power cable which needed to be unplugged in order to take the jug over to the sink to fill it with water. Mind you -- once the water was in the jug and the power cable was reconnected, it boiled up really well. When the jug was just a young, impressionable pot, long before its element made a full circuit, someone had obviously invested a lot of time and effort in the potty training of it. But nevertheless the constant plugging and unplugging was a nuisance. Robin never really took to it at all.

"It's an ugly juggle," she said. "It will never mature into a juggernaut."

"But it's doing so well," I protested. "It's really very proud of itself."

"Humph!" said Robin, unconvinced. "What's it got to be vain about? Is it pretending to be a jugular?"

And there things lay for a while. The jug soon settled in to the routine of life as a Robson. In its maturity, it adopted a new hare style (jugged, of course), but it never did learn how to free itself from the tyranny of tethering.

Things came to a head one ominous Saturday..

It began much like any other Saturday I got up and boiled the jug. As always it was grateful for the attention, and it steamed up a treat. I made a cup of instant coffee. Sipping thoughtfully, I wandered round the kitchen making a shopping list.

"Buy stuff," I wrote. "And beer."

I decided to check with Robin and see if there was anything special she needed. She was still in bed, snoring gently. If it hadn't been for the noise she was making, I wouldn't have been able to see her at all. She appeared to be mostly cat. Porgy was draped over her head, Harpo was warming her feet and Bess was curled up on her tummy.

"Need anything from the supermarket?" I asked.

"Urrgghhhnnnnngggggg," said Robin.

I wrote it down. "Anything else?"

"Gggdddnnwwwgggsssng."

I wrote that down as well and went to Woollies. I came back laden with stuff. And beer. And Robin's special treats. I put the stuff away in its proper place and the beer in the fridge. It took a bit longer to find a place for Robin's things, but eventually I fitted them in. Then I went into the bedroom to report to Robin. Neither she nor the cats had moved in the hour or so that I'd been away.

"The urrgghhhnnnnngggggg is in the cupboard," I said, and the gggdddnnwwwgggsssng is hanging up."



"Pppppussleflush," said Robin. She began to twitch semi-humanly, a sure sign that she was about to get up. The cats eyed her anxiously and adopted defensive postures. Zombie-like, Robin rose from the sheets and twitched herself into the kitchen.

"Coffee..."

Disdaining the jug with which she still maintained her hate-hate relationship, she poured water into the coffee maker. She delicately inserted a filter paper and spooned coffee into it.

"Coffee..."

She flicked the switch and the red light came on.

"Coffee..."

Nothing happened.

Gradually Robin became aware that the coffee maker was silent. No gurgles as water trickled through the coffee grounds steeping thick, brown life giving liquid from them. Nothing. Silence. No coffee. The horror! The horror!

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

I raced into the kitchen. Robin, a look of extreme shock on her face, pointed inarticulately at the coffee maker.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" she explained.

I examined the coffee maker carefully but the conclusion was never in doubt. It was broken. No coffee.

"It's dead," I said. "Bereft of life, it is no more. It's pining for the fords -- anglia and cortina. Possibly prefect."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" said Robin, and she hit me with the new gggdddnwwwgggsssnig.

I made her a cup of instant coffee and she became capable of speech once more. "Let's go shopping," she suggested. "We can get a new jug as well as a new coffee maker." And so that's exactly what we did.

The electric shop had lots of goodies on show. Jugs and coffee makers in every shape and form known to

humankind, and some that weren't. There were gleaming stainless steel ones and black dramatic plastic ones. Some were tall and thin and some were short and fat. And every single one had a digital clock embedded in the base, goodness knows why.

"Pick me! Pick me!" The chorus was deafening. And each had its own undeniable charm.

Robin's heart melted. "Can we take them all?"

"Well..."

"Ooooh look at that! It's shiny! Do we need one?" Robin's attention was distracted and she poked a gadget of particular intricacy.

"No, we don't need one," I said. "What is it anyway?"

Robin gave me a look of withering scorn. "It's a gadget of particular intricacy of course," she said. "According to the leaflet in the box, it opens cans and circumcises gerbils."

Something else attracted her attention. "Oh that's so clever," she said, dragging me over to the other side of the shop where something sparkled in the sunlight that poured through the window. It was long and slim with far too many knobs and switches. There were slots festooned with heating elements for making perfect toast. Nestled snugly at one end was a pot with a small coffee filter and clipped to a convenient clip at the other end was a deep dish with a detachable lid into which eggs could be broken. The leaflet explained that, in less than four minutes, this technological marvel could simultaneously make two slices of toast, a pot of coffee and a poached egg; all of which would reach perfection at exactly the same time. An ideal breakfast with no fuss or bother.

"?" said Robin.

!" I replied.

"&?"

"0", I said firmly.

Finally we chose a squat black coffee maker with a clock, and a mature jug with a base from which it could easily

detach. The jug didn't have a clock, but it did have a blue light, which in my opinion, more than made up for its inability to tell the time. We took them out to the car and drove home. They were both apprehensive and they cried throughout the journey. However once they were plugged in and filled with water, they soon settled down to make the best of their new home.

The tethered jug, predictably, was not happy.

"What about me?" it wailed. "Didn't I do a good enough job? Wasn't my water hot enough? Didn't I deliver copious quantities? Please don't do this to me. Please."

"There, there," I said soothingly as I unplugged it, and its light went out for the final time.

It went without a struggle. Perhaps, loyal to the end, it knew that this was for the best.

I keep the corpse on the kitchen windowsill. I like to think that it enjoys the view.

# In Which We Are Conventional

The plane landed at Melbourne with a bump and a rattle. It was World SF Convention time, Aussiecon 4, and Robin and I were keen to see what was on offer. But first we had to find our hotel. Since we were staying at the Hilton, that shouldn't be too hard...

We hopped in a taxi.

"Γειά σου," said the taxi driver. "Πού θέλετε να πάτε?"

All the taxi drivers in Melbourne are Greek, except for the ones that aren't.

"The Hilton Hotel on South Wharf, please," I said.

"Δεν ξέρω όπου το ξενοδοχείο Hilton είναι." The taxi driver sounded puzzled. He dug around under the dashboard and produced a rather tattered looking book of maps. "Θα εξετάσω έναν χάρτη!"

Eventually, after much study and scratching of the head, he found where the Hilton Hotel might be and he set off to drive us there. Melbourne is a city of sloping structures, and we drove past many a curious artistic shape that pierced the skyline at surrealistic angles. I felt as if I was travelling through a picture by Magritte or Dali. It was the perfect landscape for a science fiction convention.

Eventually we reached South Wharf. There was an Exhibition Centre where the Convention itself was being held, and a Shopping Centre full of shops that weren't open because it wasn't 10.00am yet. The Hilton Hotel was between the two, and just behind it was a land locked wharf where a very large sailing ship was moored. The sails were furled, and it rocked gently to and fro.

"How did they manage to get that huge boat in there?" asked Robin. "There's no access to the sea."

"Probably it's a time machine in disguise," I suggested, "Perhaps it's a TARDIS which actually has a working chameleon circuit, unlike that decrepit pile of junk that Doctor Who stole from the Time Lords back on Gallifrey."

"Yes, that would make sense," said Robin. "Exciting isn't it?"

"I agree," I agreed.

The Hilton Hotel was hugely luxurious. The view from our room was of South Bank Promenade where, every evening, we could enjoy the huge jets of flaming gas that shot into the sky at hourly intervals, incinerating low flying seagulls for the amusement of wandering tourists. The guidebook told us that every time the jets went off they consumed a year's supply of gas for a domestic household. If you squinted just right, the spectacle looked exactly like a fleet of rocket ships taking off for Mars. Very appropriate for a science fiction convention.

The bed in our hotel room had a mattress that was two feet deep and wonderfully comfortable. When you lay down on it you fell immediately asleep and your rage at being awoken was almost homicidal.

"What more could anyone want?" I asked Rhetorically.

"Nothing," said Rhetorically to me as she fell asleep on the bed.

The room had both a shower and a bath (luxury, luxury) and it was also equipped with a hot and cold running Paris, ooh la la! Naturally I immediately indulged myself, but strangely it gave me no pleasure. It just made me sneeze.

I blew my nose and then investigated all the myriad cupboards and wardrobes in the room. In one of them I found an open safe with a combination lock. Inside the safe was a leaflet that told me how to choose my own private combination. Immediately I chose one and locked and

unlocked the safe a few times just to prove that it worked. Then I put our passports in the safe and locked it firmly.

"I've put the passports in the safe," I told Robin, "so that they won't get lost or stolen."

"What a good idea," she said. "Now, let's go and investigate the convention." To hear is to obey, and so that's exactly what we did.

The Melbourne Exhibition Centre is a gigantic building with umpteen floors and a myriad of rooms on every floor. Quite honestly Aussiecon 4 was a little lost in such an enormous building and we rattled around in it. The week before the SF Convention, the centre had hosted a UN Convention and I suspect that even the entire world, as represented by UN, might have been a little bit lost in the building. Truly the centre is *huge*.

We registered ourselves with the convention and went exploring in order to get our bearings. Gaggles of fans gossiped in corridors and played spot the celebrity. Robert Silverberg walked past dripping groupies. Kim Stanley Robinson looked suavely intellectual. Charles Stross's flat Yorkshire vowels cut through the conversations. An American fan came up behind me and said, "Hello George."

My name is not George, but nevertheless, in the interests of international fraternity, I turned round and said, "Hello."

"Oh," said the fan, taken aback as he saw me close to for the first time, "you aren't George Martin."

"It's an easy mistake to make," I said. "After all, I am wearing the same kind of jacket and cap that George Martin wears, I have a grey beard just like George Martin has, and I am roughly the same endomorphic shape as George Martin. However when you meet the real George Martin, you will find that he is much larger than me in every single dimension, including the fourth. Also, he's a famous science fiction writer and I'm not. But other than that, we're absolutely identical."

"Sorry," said the flustered fan backing away with embarrassment, "sorry, sorry..."

The dealers room was full of stalls selling obscure books from small (mostly Australian) presses. I bought far too many of them and started to suspect that my luggage would be severely overweight when I flew home. Books are *heavy*. Robin bought some t-shirts, a shoulder bag, some postcards, two books with hollowed out interiors for hiding jewellery in, some jewellery for hiding in the hollowed out interiors of the books, and some small furry aliens which stretched and wriggled with pleasure when stroked.

Panel discussions on subjects both obscure and arcane took place every hour on the hour in all the myriad of tiny rooms scattered through the Exhibition Centre. Often it was hard to choose which one to attend. Mostly I think I should have chosen one of the other ones. Some of the events for children looked far more interesting than those for adults, but unfortunately I wasn't allowed in to the rooms where they were taking place because I had a beard. Children don't have beards in this universe, though they do in mine.

There was one very large room with tiered plush seating and a stage. Here the guests of honour gave their speeches.

Kim Stanley Robinson interviewed himself and refused to answer the questions that he was asked. Instead he answered the questions that he felt he *should* have been asked. The interviewer was left feeling very frustrated, but the interviewee spoke learnedly on Mars, Antarctica and the impact of science on society, to the benefit of all in the audience.

Shaun Tan showed us a drawing of a dinosaur that he had done when he was three years old (his mother is a hoarder and she never throws anything away).

"People ask me how I started drawing," he said. "I find this question hard to answer, so instead I just ask them why they stopped drawing. All children draw all of the time when

they are young. But sooner or later, most of them stop. I just never stopped."

A perfect formula for an illustrious career as an illustrator.

After Shaun Tan's speech, Robin and I made our way back to the Hilton thinking vaguely of using the Paris for an hour or so. A fan came up to Robin and said, "Excuse me, could you ask Mr Martin to autograph a book for me?"

"I'd be happy to," said Robin, "but the man with me isn't Mr Martin."

The fan looked bewildered.

"Honest," I said in my best non-American accent. "I'm not George Martin."

The fan stared suspiciously at my convention name badge and read the name written on it. I noticed that he moved his lips as he sounded out the words to himself.

"Oh, sorry," he said and slunk away.

Robin and I carried on towards the Hilton. "I wonder how the fan knew that I was in charge of you," mused Robin. "Perhaps I give off supervisory vibrations?"

"I expect that's probably the case," I said. "You know, if the convention ever decides to have a science fiction writer look-alike competition, I think I'm in with a good chance of winning."

"Who would you enter as?" asked Robin.

I thought about it for a while, but really there was only one possible answer.

"Isaac Asimov," I said.

The convention lasted for four days. Both Robin and I had a ball as we over-indulged ourselves in food, drink, conversation and the sybaritic luxury of our hotel room. We were both sorry when it was all over. But we were looking forward to spending the next few days staying with Robin's sister Wendy, Wendy's husband Jon, the children Ella and Tilly, and Daisy the dog. The accommodation would be less luxurious than the Hilton and I for one would certainly miss



the Paris, but, in compensation, there would be children to play with and a dog to take for walks. On balance, it seemed like a fair exchange.

We checked out of the Hilton and caught a taxi. The driver wasn't Greek.

"أين يمكنني أن يأخذك؟" he asked.

Robin gave the driver the address that we wanted.

"لا مشكلة," said the driver and he took us straight there.

Everyone was thrilled to see us. Daisy brought us her favourite squeaky rugby ball and a saliva soaked teddy bear. Tilly had just lost a tooth and she proudly showed us the gap and the actual tooth itself that she was saving for the tooth fairy. Unfortunately she later lost it, so she had to write the tooth fairy a letter instead. But that worked just as well. Ella played us a concert on her clarinet, Wendy gave us food and Jon gave us beer and wine. The conversation and the fun flowed backwards and forwards unchecked.

And just before midnight I suddenly remembered that I'd left our passports locked securely in the safe in our room at the Hilton.

# In Which Alan Travels In Time

It was twenty years ago today  
Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play....

John Lennon & Paul McCartney

"I've booked you onto a Unix training course," said my boss.

I was puzzled. "I use Unix every day," I said. "My extensive knowledge of Unix is one of the reasons you hired me for this job in the first place. Why do I need a training course?"

"You don't," he said. "I want you to evaluate the course to see if it's worth sending your clients on it."

I was having major problems with my clients. They had a nasty habit of ringing me at all hours of the day and night.

"The computer's broken!"

"Can you describe what happened?"

"No."

"Type this magic spell for me..."

And then I would listen to the clatter of the keyboard in my headset as their fingers fumbled and failed to find the correct keys. Generally whatever they ended up typing would make the situation worse, not better. It wasn't really their fault -- they had very little understanding of their computer systems and as far as they were concerned, what I was asking them to type really was a magic spell. Any education that could ameliorate this irritation had to be a good thing. It seemed that for once in his life my boss had had a good idea.

"Where and when?" I asked.

"There and then," he said. And so it came to pass.

The training company was called Auldhouse. It was a very new company and the course I was attending was one of the first they had ever run. The trainer was a charmingly vague American lady called Cathy Curley who appeared to be somewhat overwhelmed by the sea of faces that stared stonily back at her.

"OK - let's get ourselves logged on..."

It soon became clear that there were far too many people in the class, and Cathy was in danger of losing control as she tried to deal with all the questions and pleas for assistance that were coming at her non-stop from all sides. It also didn't help that at least two of the students were pompous idiots who kept trying to show off by constantly interrupting with questions whose sole purpose was to impress the rest of us with their grasp of obscure minutiae. Hey, everybody -- look at all the clever stuff I know. It was clear to me that all their depth was in shallow places.

Cathy was obviously very knowledgeable about Unix. She knew the subject backwards, forwards, sideways and upside down. She made everything look easy, even when it wasn't. I discovered later that she had actually worked at Berkeley with some of the original developers of the operating system. I began to wonder where I'd left my autograph book...

I was particularly impressed with the way she handled the training material. There was always a spoonful of sugar to take with the medicine -- lots of nice jokes, and amusing exercises for us to do. Cathy was also extraordinarily good at varying the pace and rhythm of the lessons; we'd grind slowly up a peak of learning and then pause for breath and race down the other side with a joke followed by a relaxing cup of coffee. If you drew a graph of her class showing achievement versus time, the shape would be a saw-tooth or possibly a sine curve.

In an effort to ease the pressure on her (and also to curb the excesses of the showoffs who were annoying me), I tried to help Cathy with some of the questions and the practical exercises. Nothing was ever said in any formal sense, but it quickly became understood between us that when the students were doing the exercises, Cathy would look after one side of the room and I'd look after the other. It seemed to work, and I had a lot of fun.

At the end of the week I went back to the office.

"How was it?" asked my boss.

"Pretty good," I said. "I think we ought to start sending my clients on the course as soon as we can."

"I'll see to it," he said.

Unfortunately he was overtaken by events before he could organise anything. Not very long after our conversation took place, mysterious men in shiny suits and tightly knotted ties appeared. They held whispered conversations in locked offices with all the managers. Something was obviously going on, and it wasn't long before we were all summoned to a meeting at which it was revealed that the company was to be reorganised along more efficient lines. This was, of course, a very positive thing and the future was bright with promise. The light at the end of the tunnel, we were assured, was positively blinding in its intensity. All we had to do was travel through the tunnel together -- well, those of us who remained would travel together. It seemed that a lot of people would be exploring other options instead, and perhaps spending more time with their families.

The next few months were total chaos. My boss was an early casualty and I was shifted from department to department as my job description and responsibilities were organised, reorganised and then modified again. I changed managers like other people changed underwear and on one never to be forgotten day I was introduced to my new boss in the morning, and then I was introduced to his

replacement in the afternoon. It was not a happy time and I was not a happy vegemite.

Then I saw a job advert -- Auldhouse was looking to hire a Unix trainer. Well, why not? I sent off an application.

A couple of days later, across the other side of town and quite unbeknownst to me, a conversation took place between Cathy and her boss Judy.

"Cathy," said Judy, "is there any way you can postpone your trip back to America? We're finding it terribly difficult to replace you. Would you believe that we've only had one response to the job advert?"

"I'm sorry Judy," Cathy was firm. "It's far too late to change the arrangements now. I'm getting married at the end of the month. The church is booked, the relatives are making travel arrangements. I'm sorry, but I'm flying home to California at the end of the week. I'm going to miss you, and I'm going to miss New Zealand, but I'm definitely going back to America."

Judy frowned, and her partner Duncan said, "Have you any suggestions about who we might find to replace you? Perhaps one of the students you've been teaching over the last few months? Do any of them stand out in your mind?"

"The person you really need," said Cathy thoughtfully, "is the guy who helped me out on that first course. He was really good. I can't remember his name though."

"The only person who's responded to the job advert," said Judy, "is somebody called Alan Robson."

"That's him!" said Cathy firmly. "I remember the name now. That's the guy. He's the one you want."

"I'll send him a letter inviting him to come for an interview," said Duncan who liked to do things very formally. The job interview was an absolute farce.

"Hello, Alan. I'm Judy," said Judy, "and this is Duncan."

"Hello, Judy," I said. "Hello Duncan. I'm Alan."

"When can you start?" asked Judy.

And so I had a new job. I went back to the office and handed in my notice to my latest manager.

"Why are you leaving?" He sounded honestly puzzled. "There are so many exciting opportunities just around the corner."

About two months later, the company ceased to exist. But by then I was long gone...

On the morning of my very first Unix class I didn't have butterflies in my tummy, I had vultures. I could feel them bumping into my stomach lining and pecking hard to see if I was dead yet so that they could start to feed. I looked at the faces of my students, and the faces looked back at me, some with enthusiasm and expectation, some with disdain. What was I supposed to do now?

I tried hard to picture all the teachers I'd had in my life. What did they do? How had they handled things? The only example that came to mind was my Latin teacher screaming that I was a steatopygous bushman when I declined to decline *mensa* for him. Somehow I felt that this would probably not be an appropriate teaching technique to use on my Unix students. I tried to remember how Cathy had done things. Surely I couldn't go wrong if I followed her example?

"OK - let's get ourselves logged on..."

And we were off and running!

Then somebody blinked and twenty years passed; just like that. A lot of things happened during those years. Judy and Duncan sold the company and retired to live a life of sybaritic luxury and golf. I got a new boss called Melanie and a line manager called Craig. I ran an awful lot of Unix training courses. And even today, twenty years down the track, I'm still using some of the teaching techniques and jokes that I heard Cathy use on that very first course. By now I've got the timing of the jokes honed to absolute perfection.

Mind you, it was fifteen years before I managed to get my first laugh.

"Let's go for lunch to celebrate your twentieth anniversary," said Melanie.

Lunch was in one of Wellington's most magnificent restaurants which sits in the heart of one of Wellington's sleaziest areas. I suspect that tired and emotional businessmen searching for fleshy pleasures of the evening often use the restaurant as an excuse when they bump into acquaintances and colleagues beneath the red lights. "Oh! I'm just on my way to Logan Brown," they say. "Got to dash!"

Lunch began at 12.30 and it finished about 4.30. Surprisingly it wasn't particularly liquid, just particularly magnificent with precisely timed pauses between each course. A wonderfully gastronomic time was had by all.

I was given some extra special twentieth anniversary presents to mark the occasion. A t-shirt with appropriate anniversary embroidery, a leather document case with the word "Auldhouse" embossed on the front, and a truly superb Parker pen with a Unix joke engraved on the barrel. It is a positive pleasure to write with the pen (early drafts of some parts of this article were written with it -- it's easy to tell which parts; they're the best bits). I'm going to have to be very, very self disciplined about putting the pen away whenever I finish writing something. I don't ever want to lose it.

And now I'm back at work. It's my twenty first year as a trainer and I have a Unix course to teach. Let me see. How to begin?

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Unix System Administrator walked into a pub...

# Alan And Robin Re-Fuse

Morning rituals chez Robson are as predictable as the sunrise. About an hour before the alarm clock is due to go off, 8.3Kg of anxious fur jumps on the bed and whines worriedly in my ear. Porgy is a cat of low self esteem and he is convinced that unless he constantly reminds me of his presence in the house, I will forget that he exists and will not fill his breakfast bowl with goodies.

If the whining fails to rouse me, he paces up and down on my chest for a few minutes and tries a few experimental jumps, hoping perhaps to elicit an "Ooof!" from me. Sometimes he misjudges his target on purpose and crashes down from a great height, claws fully extended, right on my naughty bits. My "Ooof!" tends towards the soprano, and I begin to contemplate the advantages of felinicide.

Having succeeded in his aim of drawing attention to himself, Porgy then curls himself up around my head and purrs loudly in my ear. Sometimes he rasps his tongue over my nose, which feels rather like being rubbed down with wet sandpaper. Layers of nasal skin flake away as I lie there praying for the alarm to go off so that the day can begin.

Eventually it rings, and Robin screams with fright as she is dragged headlong out of a deep and satisfying slumber. I sooth her with calming soothes and then, yawning and stretching, she heaves herself out of bed. Porgy immediately forgets all about me. Robin is up! She'll do! Harpo and Bess, waiting politely outside the bedroom door, seem to agree with him.

Robin heads into the kitchen trying not to trip over three cats who are winding themselves backwards and forwards between her legs, crying with eagerness to be fed and holding occasional impromptu boxing matches. She puts



biscuits in their bowls and then heads for the bathroom where hopefully a shower will bring her fully awake. I lie in bed, relaxed by the distant sounds of running water and companionable crunching. I turn on the radio and listen to the news.

Eventually a cloud of steam with Robin inside it floats into the bedroom.

"Lights!" warns the cloud of steam, and I close my eyes to protect my delicate corneas from the photonic rocks that electric lights always seem to throw out in the mornings. It's a good job that daylight photons out in the real world don't have mass otherwise we'd all be stoned to death every day.

Now it's my turn in the shower and off I go, leaving the cloud of steam to get dressed.

On the particular morning of which I now speak, all began as usual. My shower was a little lukewarm, particularly towards the end when it got decidedly chilly, but I simply assumed that Robin had soaked herself a bit longer than normal and used slightly too much hot water. I dried myself off and trudged back to the bedroom to get dressed. Robin, less steamy than when last I saw her, was now dressed and breakfasted and about to leave for work. I waved goodbye as I clambered into my underpants; a bit of multitasking that is very hard to do without breaking a leg, but nevertheless it is a skill of which I am an internationally acknowledged master. For a small fee, I am willing to give lessons...

When I got home that evening, all the taps marked *Hot* were producing only *Cold* water. Oh dear.

"Could it be a fuse?" suggested Robin.

I went to the fusebox. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that most of the circuits were protected by old fashioned ceramic fuses. One or two had been upgraded to circuit breakers, but a surprisingly large number were still using the old technology. The water heating circuit was one of these. I removed the ceramic fuse and looked inside it.

There was no fuse wire to be seen and streaks of metal on the ceramic base suggested that the fuse had somewhat dramatically self destructed at some point in the not too distant past. I actually had some fuse wire in my tool cupboard (heaven knows why), so I repaired the fuse and put it back. All we could do now was wait.

The next day I turned on a *Hot* tap. High temperature water gushed forth. Yippee! Problem solved.

BANG!

That sounded ominous. I went back to the fuse box and pulled the water heating fuse again. The fuse wire had literally exploded under the load and melted itself all over the inside of the ceramic. Somewhat foolishly, I replaced it again. It lasted about five minutes.

BANG!

Time to call in the professionals.

Ken the electrician came armed with impressive gadgets that had digital displays. He poked probes into dark places on the water heater and looked at the numbers on his dials.

"Hmmm," he said thoughtfully. "I know the fuse is out," he said, "and therefore there is no current going through the circuit at the moment, but nevertheless I think I'll turn the switch to the water heater off, just in case I accidentally short circuit something."

He pressed the switch with his thumb.

"That's rather stiff," he said in surprise, and he pressed it again, using two thumbs this time. The switch refused to change position. "Aha!," said Ken. "A clue!"

He got down on his knees and examined the switch more closely. He sniffed it. He rubbed his finger over the top of the plastic box in which the switch was housed. "Feel that," he said to me.

I felt it -- the plastic under my fingers was slightly rough and bubbly.

"That's got quite hot at some point in the not too distant past," said Ken. "Hot enough to start melting the plastic. I'm

surprised you didn't smell it; it reeks of rat piss as it melts."

"Oh we'd never have noticed that," said Robin. "Neither Alan nor I have much of a sense of smell. That's the secret of a truly happy marriage, you know -- when neither partner can smell anything."

Ken considered this solemnly. "You have a good point there," he said. "I always get on much better with my wife when we both have colds." He produced a screwdriver and began to dismantle the plastic box.

The inside of the box looked like a battlefield in miniature. The wires leading into the switch were black and burned and the switch mechanism itself was a solid, distorted lump where the plastic had melted and flowed into surrealistic deformities.

"No wonder I couldn't close the switch," said Ken. "That's never going to move again."

He clipped the wires and removed what was left of the switch. He examined it closely and broke away some bits of plastic. "Look at that," he said, pointing at a particularly interesting bit. "That got so hot it's partially melted the brass of the terminal. You're lucky the fuse blew when it did. If this got much hotter, it could have started a fire, and that would have done your house no good at all!"

He scraped away the burned insulation from the wires, fitted new rubber sleeves and wired in a new switch. He remantled the plastic box and replaced the ceramic fuse with a circuit breaker.

"I don't trust the fuse any more," he said. "It obviously exploded quite violently, so goodness knows what stresses that put on the ceramic. We don't want it disintegrating some dark and stormy night."

He turned everything on and poked his probes into dark corners again. The numbers obviously satisfied him for he began to pack away his tools.

"There you are," he said. "That should do the trick."

The next morning, the usual 8.3Kg of anxious fur jumped up on the bed. The daily ritual had begun and my shower, when I got to it, was satisfyingly hot.

# Alan Has Visions

One Saturday early in December 2010 I went to bed so as to sleep the sleep of the just returned home from a party. When I awoke the next morning, my whole world was subtly changed.

Wherever I looked spider webs, blobs and suggestive silhouettes drifted across my field of view. Even closing my eyes didn't help much. I could still see the shapes glowing in the darkness against my eyelids. Funny, I thought; somehow that doesn't seem quite right.

The dark shapes are called floaters. Everyone has them at some time or other and generally they are of no great significance. But now I seemed to have rather more of them than I had ever had before. They were all concentrated in my left eye. My right eye was quite free of them. Nevertheless my whole field of vision was covered with them as my brain tried hard to reconcile the two quite different views of the world that it was receiving. Perhaps I had inadvertently picked up somebody else's floaters at last night's party and brought them home with me? But wherever they had come from, they were singularly annoying. It is very distracting to sit and read a book only to have something the size and shape of Queen Victoria's profile drift across the words and obliterate them completely. Neither she nor I found it at all amusing.

I checked my symptoms at various medical sites on that there interwebby thing that turns up on my computer every so often. The conclusion was inescapable. Clearly I was pregnant.

Perhaps I should consult an ophthalmologist? But first I had to learn how to pronounce ophthalmologist. It turned out to be surprisingly difficult, even for a man with a degree

in chemistry who had never had any trouble at all with the tongue twisting consonants embedded in that curious chemical phenolphthalein, the part time laxative and titration end point indicator. Perhaps the problem lay in the extra syllable lurking in ophthalmologist. Maybe practice would make me perfect.

I checked the intertubes again. Alarming suggestions of leprosy sent me scurrying to the telephone. On the whole, pregnancy seemed a more preferable diagnosis. Though there remained the small, but distinct, possibility of housemaid's foot, athlete's elbow or maybe even tennis knee.

"8.30 tomorrow morning," said the ophthalmologist's receptionist.

I arrived in plenty of time.

"Please fill in this form," said the receptionist. I took the form, and a pen and tried hard to squint through the girders of the Eiffel Tower as it slid across the paper.

"Name."

Hmmm. The hard questions first. I struggled through that and moved on to the next.

"Address."

Today was a good day. I could manage that.

"Height, weight, inside leg measurement. Do you dress to the right or the left?"

I scribbled some figures and ticked the box marked 'Not In These Trousers'.

"You can go through now," said the receptionist. So I went through.

"Just sit here," said a nice nurse. "First of all we'll give you a little eye test." She held a black piece of plastic across my right eye, the one without floaters. Everything went much darker.

"Can you read what's on the chart pinned to that wall, please?" she asked.

I concentrated hard.

"Marilyn Monroe, Mount Fuji, the Titanic and something that might be a bunny rabbit."

"Good," she said and transferred the dark plastic to my left eye, thus exposing my severely short sighted right eye.

"Can you read what's on the chart pinned to that wall, please?" she asked.

"What wall?"

"Excellent," she said, and made a note. "Now I need to give you some drops that will make you dilate."

"I thought I only needed those in the last stages of labour." I was puzzled. Surely my pregnancy wasn't that far advanced?

"No, silly," she said. "It dilates your pupils so that we can see inside your eyes. Open wide!"

Anything to oblige. I stretched my mouth to twice the diameter that I usually present to my dental hygienist.

"No," said the nurse. "Your eyes, you idiot. Here -- let me do it." With thumb and forefinger she held my eyelids open and squirted half the Pacific Ocean onto each eyeball. I felt a momentary pang of conscience about all the sharks left to drown in the thin air of the Mariana Trench.

"The doctor will see you now."

The nurse took me into a small, dark room where a man sat waiting behind a complex machine full of dials, lights, mirrors and lenses.

"Hello," he said. "I'm the Doctor."

"Who?" I asked.

"Mackey," he answered, and we shook hands.

"Just rest your chin on this chin rest," said Doctor Mackey.

I did so, and he adjusted some levers that raised my head slightly and tilted it back. A brilliant white light shone dazzlingly into my eyeball and Doctor Mackey peered at me through a magnifying lens.

"Look up. Now down. Look right. Look left. Look right again."

"Can I cross the road now?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "It's all clear. You've had an acute posterior vitreous detachment. We usually call it a PVD for short. Doctor's jargon."

"Just as I thought," I said. "What's a PVD?"

He produced a cross sectional model of an eyeball and began to point at bits of it. "The jelly in your left eye has detached itself from the retina at the back. It's also ruptured a small blood vessel which has leaked into your eyeball. The floaters you are seeing are blood clots. Fortunately there seems to be no sign of any damage to the retina. Sometimes, when the jelly is particularly firmly attached, it leaves small rips in the retina and the fluid in the eyeball leaks in behind the retina and starts to detach that as well. If the retina detaches and you don't have treatment, you'll go blind within a very short time. But you seem to have escaped that. Lucky you."

"What causes a PVD?" I asked.

"Old age and decrepitude, mainly," he said. "Debauchery and unclean living. Most of the seven deadly sins in fact. Short sighted people like you are particularly prone to PVD. I imagine the other eye will do it at some time or other as well."

"Oh," I said. "When?"

He shrugged. "Next week, next year, ten years time. Who knows?"

"What can we do about it?"

"Nothing much," he said. "You're making a good recovery. Your immune system will take care of the floaters all by itself over the next six or seven weeks. You might want to consider wearing sunglasses for a few weeks; the darker field of view will help your brain to cancel out the more annoying effects of the floaters. There's less contrast for it to cope with so it doesn't have to work quite so hard. Just watch out for people who mistake you for a film star and ask for your autograph."



"Oh I'm quite used to that," I said. "It happens to me all the time. Is there anything else I need to be careful of?"

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "your eye is in quite a delicate state at the moment. While it fixes itself you need to avoid doing anything that will put any stress or strain on it. You'll have to give up bungee jumping for a few months and don't have any arguments with your wife. If she hits you in the eye I won't answer for the consequences."

"Do you need to see me again?"

"No, not unless the symptoms get worse. If you start getting more floaters or if you see flashes of light it might be a sign that more detachment is occurring. That needs to be checked immediately in case there is any retinal damage left behind. But other than that, have a good Christmas."

"Eye, Eye, doctor," I said, saluting smartly.

# **We Can't Take You Riding In Our Car Car**

It was a dark and stormy night. Robin and I, each of us well supplied with a cat to cuddle, snuggled down into the safety and warmth of our bed while we listened to the wind and the rain howl and crash against the windows. Little did we know that outside our house, camouflaged by the shelter of the storm, a terrible crime was taking place...

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Robin's car pool partner was picking her up that morning to take her into work and so she went out bright and early, leaving me half asleep and practising my world famous impression of the meat in a cat sandwich. Porgy was asleep on my right side and Harpo was cuddled up close on my left. Robin had been gone for about two minutes when the front door opened and she came back in. Perhaps she'd forgotten something. The cats and I ignored her. If we kept quiet, maybe she'd go away again.

"Alan," she said, "the garage door is open and the car has gone."

"What!" I sat up in bed, scattering indignant cats far and wide.

"The garage door is open and the car has gone," she repeated. "I've got to go to work. Can I leave you to deal with it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

The door closed behind her as she left again and I struggled into some clothes and went out to examine the crime scene. The garage looked empty and forlorn. I closed the door. The lock had been levered off. Broken pieces of it were scattered on the ground in front of the garage. I

opened the door again. I noticed that there were shards of safety glass glittering on the garage floor. Presumably the thieves had smashed their way into the car. I closed the door and went back into the house. My next tasks were obvious; phone the police and the insurance company so as to put the investigative wheels in motion.

First the police. I opened the cupboard where we keep the telephone directories, but the white pages were missing. I vaguely recalled that Robin had recently looked up a phone number. No wonder the directory was missing -- many years ago the gigantic pile of stuff in Robin's room reached critical mass and imploded. Now her room contains a small black hole which greedily absorbs anything that wanders within its gravitational influence. Over the years we've fed it cats, clothes, casual visitors and Mormon missionaries. I knew that I would never see the telephone directory again.

Oh well, time to see what the googles had to say on the subject. I soon found a phone number for the Wellington police and I rang it.

"Police, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

There was a *beep, beep, beep* in my ears as buttons were pressed and then a new voice said, "Watch house, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

After a couple more transfers I finally ended up with someone who seemed able to deal with my problem. I described the broken lock on the garage door and gave the police the registration number of my car. In return they gave me an incident number to use with the insurance company. I thanked them and rang off. Now to contact the insurance people. That was easy; their phone number was printed on the policy. I rang it.

"Insurance, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

Again I found myself involved in a telephonic game of pass the parcel. Eventually, after speaking to several people who denied all knowledge of anything whatsoever to do with insurance policies, I finally found someone who grudgingly agreed to take my details. "There's an excess of \$300 on the policy," said the insurance man. "The car itself is valued at \$3,300 so taking the excess into account you'll get \$3000 back on the claim. We'll need you to fill in a claim form before we can take it any further."

That's the problem with cars and insurance. The value depreciates and so when you come to replace the car you find that it's worth next to nothing. No matter what happened over the next few days, it was clear that I'd be seriously out of pocket.

About ten minutes after I finished talking to the insurance people, the phone rang.

"Hello, this is the police," said a dark blue voice. "We've found your car."

"Gosh, that's impressively quick service," I said. "It must be a world record. I only reported it stolen an hour ago."

"The car has been abandoned on Black Rock Road. Can you come and meet us there, please?"

Black Rock Road is about half a mile away.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," I told the voice.

My car was sitting by the side of the road with a police car parked on guard behind it. The car was a mess. The windscreen was completely opaque, heavily gouged and spider webbed with cracks. All the other windows were shattered, smashed to smithereens. There were glass shards all over the floor and the upholstery and the road. There were several dents and scrapes on the passenger side panels where the car had crashed into something. The lock on the driver's door had been torn out so that the door could be opened. The ignition lock had also been forced

apart in order to start the car, and the broken remnants of it were dangling down at the end of the exposed wires. The ceiling light had been ripped out for no very obvious reason. There was quite a lot of blood soaked into the upholstery and there were several large bloody smears all over the outside of the driver's door. Obviously whoever had broken into the car was utterly inept and had cut themselves rather badly in the effort to break in. The engine was still running, and the petrol gauge showed that the tank was still almost full. Obviously the car had been stolen, driven about half a mile and then just trashed and abandoned. It made no sense. Why break into a locked garage to steal a car, only to abandon it almost immediately? Particularly when there were other cars parked out in the open on the road. Surely they'd have been much easier to steal?

"Can you examine the car and see if there is anything in it that doesn't belong to you?" asked the policeman.

I glanced over the wreckage.

"That screwdriver isn't mine," I said. "And neither is the small stick on the floor. The cell phone on the back seat isn't mine either."

It seemed clear to me that we weren't breeding our car thieves for intelligence. What kind of moron leaves behind the screwdriver that they used to break into the car? And as for not noticing that your cell phone has fallen out of your pocket! Words fail me.

I sat in the police car while the policeman took a statement from me.

"This has all the hallmarks of a revenge attack," he said. "Why else would they go to all the trouble of smashing their way into your garage, only to abandon your car almost immediately and trash it so severely? Have you got any enemies who would do that to you?"

"Well," I said, "one of my cats hates me, and he bites me whenever he gets the opportunity. But he has a perfect alibi.

He was asleep on the bed all night. Anyway, he doesn't know how to drive a car."

"No," said the policeman. "I doubt if it was a cat who did this."

"I wrote a book review last month," I said. "I was very critical of the book. I said it was one of the worst novels I'd ever read; that the author couldn't write his way out of a wet paper bag. I was very rude about his writing competence."

"Ah! A clue!" said the policeman. "Where does the writer live?"

"America," I said.

His face fell. "No," he said, "I don't think that works either."

Neither of us could come up with any other ideas. It seemed that the motives of the morons would forever remain a mystery.

"We'll tow the car away for forensic examination," said the policeman. "We'll be able to get a good DNA analysis from all the blood he has spilled. If it matches anyone on the database, we'll soon find the little ratbag."

Soon a tow truck arrived and drove off with the wreckage. "I'll take you home," said the policeman. "I'd like to look at the garage." So I got my first ever trip in a police car. It was quite thrilling. He had his radio turned down low and an almost inaudible voice muttered mysteriously about crimes and criminals as we drove up the road.

All too soon, we arrived back at my house. We got out of the car and the policeman looked closely at the torn and mangled lock on the garage door. "They've obviously gone to a lot of trouble to force their way in," he said. He walked into the garage and looked carefully around. "Oh!" he said. "Look at this!" He was pointing to something on the floor. I went in to see what he was looking at. There were several large patches of blood on the garage floor and there, right in the middle of a puddle, was a single small footprint. The

thief had been wearing trainers and the pattern of the tread was clear and sharp in the blood.

"We'll get the forensic people to look at this as well," said the policeman. "Lots of good clues here."

"This guy's lost a lot of blood," I said. "I wonder if he's had to have hospital treatment?"

"We'll certainly check that out," said the policeman.

"With any luck, he'll get a massive infection and die screaming in agony," I said.

"We can but hope," said the policeman.

Later that afternoon a forensic examiner arrived. I felt quite sorry for him. He was dressed in full police uniform with a thick anti-stab jacket covering his chest. He was sweating profusely in the hot sun and he looked enviously at the shorts and T-shirt that I was wearing.

"Now then," he said, "what have you got to show me?"

He took photographs of the broken lock and he dusted the garage door for fingerprints. "Nothing useful there," he said. "Just a lot of smudges. They must have been wearing gloves. I didn't find any useful fingerprints on the car either."

"What about the cell phone they left behind?" I asked.

"Oh that was full of clues," he said. "It had a lot of photographs of his bros waving their arms about in gangsta attitudes, and a whole heap of text messages to his mum."

"I suppose even car thieves have mothers," I mused. "I wonder what she thinks of his evening hobby?"

"Probably not much," said the forensic man. "Now where's the bloody footprint that the report mentioned?"

I took him into the garage and showed him the blood puddles. "I doubt we'll get much useful DNA from these," he said. "The floor is a bit dirty for that. But that doesn't matter; we got some lovely clean swabs from the blood in the car. I'll take a photo of the footprint though."

He stuck a small paper arrow to the garage floor. It pointed directly at the footprint so that there could be no

doubt about exactly what to look at in the photograph. He put a ruled strip of paper down beside the footprint so as to give some indication of scale. Then he took the photograph and picked the pieces of paper up again. He also took a DNA swab, just in case.

"How long will it take to get the DNA results?" I asked.

"Probably about ten days," he said.

"Gosh, that's fast," I said. "I would have expected that it would take at least a month."

"Oh no," he said. "New Zealand has one of the best forensic lab services in the world. We get a very rapid turn round on results." He seemed quietly proud of that, and who could blame him?

The next few days passed in a blur. I was almost constantly on the phone with the police and the insurance company sorting out this and that detail. It seemed that there were an infinite number of i's to cross and t's to dot.

The insurance assessor confirmed that the car was a write off. It would cost far more to repair than the car itself was worth. In many ways I was pleased about that. I don't think I'd ever have felt comfortable driving it again, and I was particularly not looking forward to sitting on the upholstery that the thief had bled over so profusely. Of course I now had to buy another car and finding the money for that was not going to be easy. The slightly derisory \$3000 that the insurance company was willing to pay out was merely a fraction of what I would have to pay for another set of wheels.

Since the car was being written off, I went to visit the wreck to reclaim whatever bits and pieces of my personal property might have been left behind. Interestingly, everything was still there. Even the CDs were still sitting happily in their cases. The thieves had not even bothered searching the car for valuables. My opinion of their intelligence plunged to new depths, though their motives remained, if possible, even more murky and puzzling.



The police interviewed the person who had left the cell phone behind. Naturally he denied all knowledge of the crime and, in the absence of any other evidence, they had to let him go. It isn't a crime to leave a cell phone in a stolen car. It implies a lot, but it doesn't prove anything at all. He voluntarily gave a sample for DNA testing so obviously he was quietly confident that he hadn't left any DNA behind. He wasn't the bleeder.

One week to the day after the car was stolen, Robin and I took delivery of a new (to us) Subaru Legacy. There's a button on the dashboard that, when pressed, causes a coffee cup holder to telescope out into the car. Who could possibly resist a feature like that? It was love at first sight.

# Porgy

Porgy the Cat is dead. He was nine years old, which is no great age for a cat. But Porgy had a life full of illness and injury, and his last illness was just too much for him.

However in between the times of pain and fear, he was a happy cat. He didn't ask much from life; just a warm lap, lots of cuddles, yummy food and constant reassurance that his bottom was pretty.

"How does it look this morning?" he would ask anxiously, thrusting his bottom into my face for its daily inspection.

"It looks fine, Porgy. Just perfect."

"Are you sure? I had a feeling that perhaps it was just a little bit asymmetrical today."

"No, no. There's nothing to worry about. It's everything a bottom ought to be."

"Good," said Porgy in tones of deep satisfaction. "Is it breakfast time now?"

"Yes, Porgy. It's breakfast time."

Porgy had one major talent. He was extraordinarily good at identifying the best seat in the house and then sitting in it. The best seat in the house was the seat that I was sitting in. His logic was irrefutable. Alan is in charge of the universe and his choices are always the best. Alan is sitting in that seat. Therefore that is the best seat in the house. Porgy was a very Aristotelian cat who always thought in syllogisms. None of this new fangled Null-A first order predicate logic for him, thank you very much!

If ever I got up to make a cup of coffee or visit the loo, Porgy would invariably be curled up in the seat I had just vacated when I returned. He would look at me through half closed eyes, pretending to be asleep.

"Porgy!"

"What?"

"You're in my seat again."

"It's the best seat in the house. And it's particularly good today. You had a little fart just before you got up didn't you?"

"Well, what if I did?"

"It adds a comfortable fragrance. I'm going to sleep now." The eyes would now be fully closed.

I had been out-manoeuvred again! And so I reconciled myself to an evening of watching television from the second best seat in the house; the one that Porgy had just vacated.

I have a habit of stretching out on the sofa when I'm reading a book. I hold the book in my left hand and prop my left arm on the arm of the sofa. This leaves my right hand free to turn the pages and to pick up my glass of beer. Porgy always regarded this as a perfect opportunity for a bottom inspection. He would plonk himself down on my left arm and tickle my nostrils tactically with his tail while he checked out my book.

"Why are you reading this tripe?"

"It's a good book!"

"No it's not." Porgy could be quite scathing in his disapproval of my reading material. He felt that books should be about important and significant things and he was constantly disappointed to discover just how few people wrote stories about mouse hunts and breakfast biscuits and crackly toy snakes with catnip inside them.

Eventually Porgy's 8.5 kilos of furry book criticism would cut off the circulation in my left arm. All feeling would vanish and my book would fall to the floor as my nerveless fingers failed to retain their hold on it. When this happened, I was left with no choice -- I had to slide my arm out from underneath Porgy and then massage the life back into it. Sometimes I would scream with the pain of returning circulation. Porgy was usually a bit indignant when I did that.

"Why are you moving your arm and making all that noise?"

"My arm's gone to sleep."

"I'd go to sleep as well, if only you'd lick my bottom. That's what a proper mum would do."

"I'm not your mother, Porgy. I don't want to lick your bottom. Why don't you do it yourself?"

"Oh all right."

And then, after a thorough bottom lick, he would fall asleep.

He was always quite choosy about where he slept. When he was just a little kitten, his favourite place to sleep was a kitten sized basket with a fur lining. He could curl up in its warm softness and just drift away. He never lost his fondness for that basket, even though he couldn't fit into it any more. No matter how tightly he curled himself up, he could only ever get the tip of his tummy in. The rest of him overflowed its tiny boundaries in every direction. Nevertheless it remained a favourite. He knew what he was sleeping in even if the rest of the world couldn't tell that it was there at all once he'd plonked himself down on it and covered it up completely.

Porgy didn't have many domestic chores, but one duty that he took very seriously involved him supervising my morning shower to make sure I did it right. He would wait outside the bathroom door until the sound of running water stopped and then, while I was briskly towelling my naughty bits, he would push the door open and wander casually in.

"Morning, Alan," he would say. "How was the shower today?"

"Pretty good, thank you Porgy. Warm, wet, soapy. Just like it's supposed to be."

"I still need to check it out and confirm that you did it properly."

Then he would go into the shower cabinet and lick up the soapy residue with the air of a wine connoisseur tasting a

vintage unoaked Chardonnay. Except he never spat it out.

"Yes, a definite hint of sweat with an overtone of soap and a finish of unmentionable bodily fluids in the back of the throat. Tastes like you really did clean all the nasties off yourself. I'll let you go to work now."

"Thank you Porgy."

He hated Sundays. I don't shower on Sundays because it's a day of rest. On the other hand, Sundays often found me chopping raw meat for a casserole. This invariably attracted an audience of adoring cats. Porgy always made sure that he got his unfair share of the leftovers. Perhaps there were compensations for the lack of showers that day.

Porgy didn't move around much; that's one reason why he weighed 8.5 kilos. When he was a young cat he broke his back legs and had to have both hip joints surgically removed. This meant that he had to learn to walk all over again and my heart went out to him as I watched him struggle with this.

But he was a courageous cat. He had the heart of a lion, and he never gave up. Slowly, painfully slowly, he learned to support himself again and to put one foot in front of the other. He never re-developed much muscular strength at the back of his body after this, and his rear legs remained very weak for the rest of his life. He compensated (some might say he over-compensated) by developing enormous muscles in his front legs and chest. He used his massive front legs to haul himself along and to pull himself up trees, fences and furniture and on to laps. Both Robin and I have permanent scars on our thighs where Porgy dug in the pitons that he used for front claws so that he could heave the rest of himself up into a comfortable sleeping position. And the mattress on our bed leaks stuffing from the holes he left when he joined us each evening so that he could wrap himself around our heads and purr loudly in our ears all night, thus preventing us from sleeping and leaving us

tetchy and bad tempered all the next day. Porgy enjoyed that a lot -- it was his major hobby.

Because he was so hugely strong and wide-bodied at the front and so comparatively thin and weak at the back, he looked a little lopsided and deformed. It was easy to understand and sympathise with his obsessive worry about the symmetry of his bottom.

One of his favourite places in all the world was a hydrangea bush by the side of the house. He could hide inside it and absolutely nobody except me knew that he was there. From this place of safety he could watch the world go by. Unfortunately not a lot of the world went by since the hydrangea was well inside our garden, far away from the street where the action was. But all the things that really mattered to Porgy were always there for him to watch. There were blades of grass moving in the wind and sometimes a bee would bumble by. However the highlight of his hydrangea day was when he noticed legs walking past. If he recognised them (in other words, when they were my legs) he would always chirrup "Hello", so that I would stop and pat him.

And if he kept ever so, ever so still (not a hardship for Porgy; stillness was his default state) he might catch a butterfly or possibly even a mentally defective lizard which he could bring inside the house and boast about.

Once I saw him staring at a hedgehog. It stared back.

"What do I do now?" asked Porgy. "It's got too many pointy bits."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not well versed in cat and hedgehog etiquette. Whatever you do, don't show it your bottom. Why not just run away?"

"Good idea," said Porgy. And that's just what he did.

We have buried his ashes under the hydrangea bush where he spent so many contemplative hours. The silence when I walk past is deafening; but there is some comfort in

knowing that he is still there, still watching over all the important and interesting parts of his world.

# Toast

Toast is the most important and versatile item in the gastronomic universe. At breakfast time it suppresses the pangs of night starvation. At lunch time it adds interest to boring sandwiches and in the evening, in homoeopathic quantities, it can be imbibed in a celebratory manner.

"Gentlemen, The Queen!"

"God bless her, and all who sail in her!"

Let me tell you about toast...

When I was a child we had a toasting fork and, as a special treat, I was sometimes allowed to spear slices of bread and toast them on the glowing embers of the coal fire in the dining room. Getting the toast perfect was a precise and delicate skill. The toasting fork had to be angled correctly and the bread had to be just the right distance from the coals. Failure in either of these things could ruin the whole enterprise. I had no great problems with distance, but angles were tricky; the bread had a tendency to slide around on the prongs of the fork, and on more than one occasion a minute adjustment of the slant would cause the bread to fall off the fork and land in the fire, thus defeating the whole purpose of the exercise. But when everything came properly together, the toast was just perfect. It was golden and crisp with an elusive, smoky piquancy that tantalised the taste buds. Knowing what I know now about the combustion products of coal, I am not entirely sure that eating all that toasting fork toast was a good idea. But gosh, it was yummy!

We also had a toaster, but my mother was highly dubious about it. If left unsupervised, it had a tendency to produce lumps of charcoal rather than legitimate toast. When this



happened, my mother became somewhat agitated at the waste of bread.

"Eat your toast!"

"But mum, it's all black and burned."

"Charcoal is a well known antidote for arsenic poisoning. Eat your toast!"

"But I haven't been poisoned with arsenic."

"How do you know that? Napoleon died a slow, lingering death from all the arsenic in the paste that stuck the wallpaper to his bedroom walls. These things take time. Eat your toast!"

That sounded interesting. How do you get poisoned by your wallpaper?

"How did that happen, mum? Did he commit suicide by eating the wallpaper? Do you have to eat a whole wall full, or will small strips from a dark corner do just as well? Perhaps he put it in his pipe and smoked it? If I promise not to eat or smoke the wallpaper in my bedroom, can I be excused toast?"

"Prevention is better than cure. Eat your toast!"

I ate my toast. And, being full, I didn't eat my wallpaper, thereby proving that toast really does protect you from the wallpaper's deadly dangers. Always listen to your mother. Mothers are invariably correct.

Mostly my mother made toast in the grill. The grill was at eye level so she could observe it at all times and could easily remove the tray from the heat when the toast was perfect. My mum's toast was always perfect...

An ideal piece of toast is golden brown from edge to edge, with not a trace of black or burned bread to be seen. Once the bread has toasted, it must be allowed to cool. Only barbarians butter their toast while it is hot. Toast is not blotting paper; it is not supposed to be absorbent.

Toast cooling mechanisms are also very important for that perfect final result. Ideally the toast should be placed in a toast rack (we had a lovely silver Georgian toast rack -- I

wonder what happened to it?). A toast rack holds the individual slices of toast a carefully calculated distance apart so that the steam from the hot toast can escape into the atmosphere without condensing on the surface of the toast. If you don't have a toast rack, it is also quite acceptable to prop the slices of toast together at an acute angle as if you are building a house of cards with them. Under no circumstances should the toast be left lying flat while it cools. The steam will condense beneath the toast and it will soak up the water like a sponge, becoming pliable rather than friable, soggy and quite disgusting.

Once the toast has cooled, a thin layer of butter should be applied. The butter should stretch from edge to edge but no further; no toast surface at all should be exposed and there should be no buttery overhangs. If any butter at all soaks into the toast, then you buttered it too soon and it is now ruined. Throw it away and start toasting again.

The buttered toast should then be covered with marmalade; preferably Seville orange marmalade, though other orange marmalades are acceptable if the real stuff is temporarily unavailable. Some people prefer grapefruit based marmalades. I am not one of these people, but I can understand the craving.

On the other hand, heathens, barbarians, philistines and people who are utterly beyond the pale like to cover their toast with peanut butter, vegemite, marmite or jam. Such people are barely human and they are absolutely never invited to the best parties.

Eating a slice of toast excites all the senses. There is the simple aesthetic perfection of the layered symmetry of the presentation; the mingled scents of bread, butter and oranges and then the crisp texture of the toast itself as your teeth take that first succulent bite and a delectable *crunch* sound echoes through your aural cavities. The crispness is complemented by the smooth silky softness of the butter which itself is overlaid with the bitter tang of Seville

oranges. All these things combine together into a truly perfect gastronomic delight. Trust me -- when the Gods on Mount Olympus become bored with ambrosia, they eat toast.

When I was a student, we didn't have a toaster. All we had was a solid hot plate. After some experimenting, we discovered that toast can indeed be made on a hot plate, though it requires close observation and more than a little skill. Simply turn the hot plate up as high as it will go, slap a slice of bread on, turn the bread over just before it bursts into flames, repeat the same formula for the second side, and then remove the toast and eat it. We charcoaled a lot of bread before we finally learned how to precisely identify the flash point, but, on the bright side, none of us ever died of arsenic poisoning and the wallpaper remained unchewed.

This simple toast recipe proved both tasty and fraught with peril. For mysterious chemical reasons that we never quite managed to solve, toast prepared in this manner proved to be a highly effective laxative. We had only two toilets between ten of us. Consequently an evening of toast tended to involve much buttock clenching. But we were addicted to toast and we were quite unable to stop preparing and eating it...

You cannot get toast in hotels. It often appears on the breakfast menu, but nevertheless, it remains elusive and largely unavailable.

Some hotels take the easy way out and require you to order your toast and then wait for it to arrive. Experience suggests that you can read at least two newspapers from cover to cover before the toast appears. And when it does finally arrive, you are invariably presented with two slices of lukewarm bread rather than with toast. Obviously the bread has been slapped in a toaster or put in a grill for about thirty seconds in order to take the chill off, and then sent out to your table. So why does it take so long to prepare? I have never been able to solve this conundrum.

The two slices of lukewarm bread will cost you \$14. More "toast" will cost you incrementally more; \$7 a slice every time. Do they bake hotel bread with gold dust instead of flour?

Other hotels provide toasting mechanisms in the breakfast room and you are expected to make your own toast. Since the hotel staff have no hand in the preparation of the toast, this represents an obvious cost saving to the hotel. Consequently such self-prepared toast is charged at \$10 a slice.

The most common device for making your own hotel toast is a machine with a conveyor belt that sucks your bread deep into its interior, passes the bread across a red hot grill and then spits it out again. The slower the conveyor speed, the more time the bread spends beneath the grill and the darker the toast. At least that's the theory. It tends not to work very well in practice.

The first time you send your bread through the machine, it invariably re-appears barely toasted at all. Therefore you send it through a second time whereupon clouds of smoke arise from the machine. The over-toasted bread re-appears as charcoal. Your day is ruined, though you do remain safe from arsenical wallpaper.

I have never, ever found one of these machines that could produce proper toast -- they seem capable only of extremes. One such machine in one hotel was so badly adjusted that it required multiple passes of the bread before it became even faintly toast like. A breakfast patron lost patience with it and sent his bread through once too often. The smoke alarms went off, the sprinkler system kicked in and the breakfast room had to be evacuated. The wallpaper in the hotel was alarmingly chewed that day as starving guests roamed the corridors like zombies.

"Toast! Toast"

"Brains!"

"Trout!"

No, I was not that breakfaster, and yes it really did happen.

Now you know the secret lore of toast. However the rules of toast do not necessarily apply to other toastable products -- and they particularly do not apply to crumpets. Unlike toast, a crumpet should never be left to cool. Crumpets are designed to be buttered and eaten when piping hot. The molten butter is supposed to be soaked up by the crumpet and then slowly disgorged as you chew.

The perfect crumpet is warm, fragrant, moist and slightly greasy. That's why Englishmen refer to their girlfriends as "...a bit of crumpet."

# Observations

It is Easter and therefore the shops are closed for two days. Along with everyone else in the country, I developed a fear of starvation and so I went to the supermarket in order to stock up.

It was, of course, seething with people. I drove round the car park three times before a shopper with a boot full of goodies finally finished packing their car and drove away. I pulled into the space before anyone else noticed it and then ran the gauntlet of cruising cars, all desperately looking for a parking slot before arriving safely at the supermarket doors. I grabbed a trolley and went inside. The shelves were getting quite bare. Stocks, particularly fresh food stocks, were not being replenished as the supermarket itself wound down for the holiday.

I wandered round, buying the things I normally buy. Fresh vegetables, bread, avocado oil. I found that I was completely unable to buy caviare, stuffed vine leaves, Dijon mustard, sesame oil and venison brains. Fortunately I had no immediate need for any of them, but I did wonder what on Earth the people who had stripped the shelves bare of these items were going to be doing with themselves over Easter.

As a special Easter treat I also bought some rather nice pork which I intend to turn into a huge pot of curry over the weekend. And, just in case I ran out, I made sure to buy lots and lots of onions. I have a theory about cooking: first fry your onions and then decide what you are going to cook. Everything starts with onions. Probably that's why I don't make desserts -- people get quite horrified when I serve them Black Forest Gateau on a base of fried onions.

Whenever I go shopping for groceries, I enjoy observing the contents of other people's trolleys. Why is that lady buying 15 two-litre bottles of coke? Will she buy another 15 next week? I wonder if she (and, presumably, her children) have any teeth left? That man over there probably lives alone and doesn't know how to look after himself. He has nothing but tins and packages of pre-prepared frozen dinners in his trolley. I feel quite sorry for him. That lady is owned by at least 10 very hungry cats. Look at the huge pile of gourmet cat food cans in her trolley! Tucked in one corner, hiding behind all the cans, is a small packet of mince, a leek and a carrot. She won't be eating very much today, but her cats will be happy.

Easter trolleys are twice as entertaining as ordinary weekend trolleys. That man is having a barbecue and everyone in the country is invited. I didn't know there were that many sausages in the world! How did he manage to squeeze them all in to his trolley? I wonder if he has heard the weather forecast. Does he know it is going to rain all over Easter? That man has the right idea -- he has 5 dozen bottles of beer and a packet of peanuts in his trolley. I suspect that he bought the peanuts because that was all that he could fit into the trolley after he put 5 dozen bottles of beer into it. In my opinion, he doesn't have nearly enough peanuts to go with the beer, but after the first dozen, I doubt if he will care. Why has that extraordinarily slim young lady crammed her trolley full of pork chops that appear to be all fat and almost no pork? How does she stay so slim? Perhaps they aren't for her own consumption; she obviously hates her husband and is trying to kill him with a heart attack. That young couple's trolley has a bottle of champagne, some smoked salmon, a cream cake and a packet of K-Y Brand His and Hers lubricant. Happy Easter!

I have 877 ebooks on my iPad. I haven't paid for any of them because they are all, quite legitimately, available as free downloads. Soon I will have 878 ebooks on my iPad because I have actually bought and paid for my first ever commercially produced ebook. I had to pre-order it; it won't be published for another couple of weeks or so. But I'll download it as soon as it becomes available.

Will I ever read all 878 books? Probably not. It's more a case of just wanting to own them all, simply because I can. And of course there's also the very science fictional thrill that I get from carrying a whole library around with me.

In 1989, Ben Bova wrote a satirical (and very prescient) novel called **Cyberbooks** in which he accurately predicted pretty much everything that has actually come to pass in the ebook world, together with quite a lot that hasn't happened (yet). The novel is about an MIT software engineer called Carl Lewis, the inventor of the first electronic book. He is absolutely certain that his invention will revolutionize the publishing industry and bring enormous benefits to everybody. The coming of ebooks will make books inexpensive and therefore available to everybody everywhere. Unfortunately the publishers do not agree with this viewpoint. Much mayhem ensues. Ironically, **Cyberbooks** is now itself available as an ebook.

Fifty years ago Yuri Gagarin became the first human being in space. He wasn't the first living thing to leave the Earth. That honour belongs to Laika, a Russian dog, who was blasted into orbit in Sputnik 2 on November 3rd 1957. She died in orbit -- she was always intended to die in orbit, Sputnik was not designed to re-enter the atmosphere and return to Earth. Nobody had figured out how to do that yet. There is a statue of Laika and a plaque commemorating her at Star City, the Russian cosmonaut training facility.



I grew up knowing that space travel was real. The newspapers were full of space stories. After some initial setbacks, America was soon orbiting animals of its own -- chimpanzees, all of whom returned safely to Earth. Then, in a blaze of publicity, seven astronauts were chosen for manned missions. Presumably the Russians were also busy doing the same thing, but they weren't telling anyone what they were up to. So it came as quite a surprise, to me at least, when Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth.

I was amazed at the wonder and excitement of it all. I wanted to be an astronaut. I knew I could never be a cosmonaut because I didn't speak Russian. But surely I could be an astronaut?

Alan Shepard was the first American in space. He was my hero. He had the same first name as me! Almost a month after Gagarin orbited the Earth, Shepard flew his spacecraft (Freedom 7) on a suborbital, ballistic trajectory. Because of delays in the countdown, Shepard had to lie there in his capsule for hour after hour after unending hour as technical problems were discovered and overcome. By the time his rocket eventually blasted off, Shepard was very relieved in every sense of the word. He made his flight lying in a puddle of cold urine.

Space flight suddenly didn't seem quite as romantic as once it had. Perhaps I should be a computer programmer instead? The only problem with that ambition was that there was no such thing as a computer programmer yet. Never mind -- I could wait, and I did.

# To Cook Or Not To Cook? That Is The Question...

The cooker in my kitchen wasn't quite as old as me, but I ran it a very close race. When it was cooking its first meal, the Beatles were at the top of the charts and I was struggling with the intricacies of the ablative absolute in Latin classes half a world away. So when the cooker and I finally made our acquaintance, we were both of us well past the first flush of youth.

It was brown -- well, either that or there had been an awful lot of food spilled on it over the years. This gave it a somewhat gloomy appearance. Considering when it was born, it really should have been enamelled in day-glo orange, but I'm very glad it wasn't.

The timer was clockwork, and its cogs and gears were so congested with the grease from a million joints of roast beef that it was no longer capable of timing anything at all, unless the dish required infinitely long cooking. Very few recipe books recommend cooking times that long...

The oven was suffering from senile dementia. It would warm itself up nicely to something slightly above the temperature that I'd selected -- the thermostat was not the most accurate in the world and it tended towards the hotter rather than towards the colder -- and happily sit there for a few minutes. Then it would forget that it had already heated itself up, and so it would turn on its coils again for a little while. The temperature would start to rise well above the setting on the thermostat. But after a few minutes, the cooker would remember that it had forgotten that the job was already done, and so the coils would go off again. Then a short time later it would once more forget that it had

remembered that it had already reached the optimum temperature, and so the coils would turn on again as the cycle repeated itself. If left alone, this behaviour always resulted in an oven set with an initial temperature of (say) 150 degrees which had reached a final temperature of 350 degrees with all the elements glowing white hot as they desperately tried to raise it even higher. Since food cooked in this manner tends towards the excessively crispy, I therefore had to keep a very close eye on the oven in order to discourage its demented behaviour. And so every time it turned itself on, I would dial the temperature down a bit until it turned itself off again. Thus a constant oven temperature of 150 degrees (give or take 50 degrees) was cleverly maintained by lower and lower settings on the controls. By the time the cooking was done, the oven would still be somewhere in the region of 150 degrees, even though the dial would now be set to round about 10 degrees and my nerves would have frazzled themselves into shredded wreckage.

I compensated for this eccentricity by seldom using the oven at all. Fortunately there were four powerful hotplates on the top. These worked quite well and over the years they cooked me many a successful stew, casserole and curry. I find it hard to tell these three dishes apart -- I think the differences depend far more upon the guests at the table than they do upon the ingredients of the food itself. If your guests won't eat nasty foreign muck, just tell them it's a stew; if they find stews dull and old fashioned, tell them it's a casserole and if they find casseroles too bland tell them it's a curry. Make sure that you serve the appropriate side dishes for whatever you have decided the main course is pretending to be and Robert is your avuncular relative. Works every time!

And then, one weekend, the hotplates decided to play the same silly games that the oven was playing. None of this slow simmering, thank you very much. Slow simmering

is for wimps. Lets get it over and done with. Up with the temperature! Soon the hotplates were able to give me only two temperature choices. On and off. Yin and yang. Hot and cold. Top and bottom. Maximum and minimum. Up and down. Black and white. Computer nerd though I am, I simply couldn't face the future with a binary only cooker. Culinary creations require far more subtlety than that. It was time for a new cooker. Sunday morning dawned bright and clear; a perfect time to head off to the showrooms!

It soon became clear to me that modern cookers came in two flavours. Cheap white ones and expensive stainless steel ones. Brown was definitely not possible in either incarnation. Unfortunately, even the cheap white ones were priced in the eye-watering range as far as my wallet was concerned. And the stainless steel ones, while undeniably sexy, were about the same price as a luxury car, with almost as many gadgets but without the ability to roar down the motorway at 100kph.

I pointed to the cheapest of the cheap white ones, four rings and an oven, just like my old brown one.

"I'll have that cooker, please."

"Certainly sir. When would you like it delivered?"

"Tuesday, please. And will you take the old one away and dispose of it?"

"Of course we will, sir. Would you like us to give it a long, lingering, painful death or would you prefer a quick and easy euthanasia?"

"Oh, the latter, please. I don't want it to suffer. I'm not a cruel man."

That afternoon I cooked my last ever meal on the old brown cooker. I played the usual game of temperature tag with the senile oven. I think it must have known that its end was nigh because it bit me viciously as I took the roasting pan out, and I now have a vivid burn on the back of my right hand which shows promise of an interesting scar.

Tuesday dawned and two men delivered my new cooker. One of the men looked like Russell Crowe and one of them didn't. They wheeled the new cooker in to the house and the one who didn't look like Russell Crowe said, "Watch out for the snake," to the one who did look like Russell Crowe as he walked past the toy rattlesnake that we have hanging from a lamp on the wall. I rattled the tail and the one who looked like Russell Crowe smiled a secret smile.

The one who didn't look like Russell Crowe unplugged the old cooker and then disconnected its power cable which he left neatly coiled on the kitchen sink ready for the electrician to connect to the new cooker. They took the old cooker away. It whimpered pitifully as it left the house it had lived in for nearly fifty years, but I hardened my heart. The one who looked like Russell Crowe patted the snake as he walked past it and it bit him on the bum.

While I waited for the electrician to come and connect up the new cooker, I passed the time by cleaning up several decades worth of greasy, brown manky bits that the old cooker had excreted all over the floor beneath itself. Despite the advice given in the TV adverts for miracle cleaning products, you can't just spray and wipe this stuff away. Prolonged and vigorous scrubbing is essential. And even then it doesn't necessarily work too well, particularly when the goo has been there for so long that it has fossilised into something closely resembling a collection of coprolites. Perhaps I was cleaning a very old and very gradual increment of excrement!

Eventually I got the area vaguely clean and then the electrician arrived.

The first thing he did was screw a complicated looking device to the floor.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's an anti-tilt device," he said.

"What's an anti-tilt device? And why do I need one? The old cooker didn't have one."

"It's the law now," he explained. "You see, in the years following the delivery of your old cooker, far too many little old ladies opened their oven doors, bent down to inspect their scones, and then slipped and fell onto the open oven door. Their weight on the door caused the oven to tilt forwards and fall down on top of them, crushing them to death and getting the scones dirty. This was widely regarded as being bad for business and therefore all modern cookers are required by law to have an anti-tilt device so that when the little old ladies fall across their oven door the cooker stays upright and they live to bake more scones."

"What a good idea," I said. "How does it work?"

"Oh it just hooks into the back of the stove and holds it firmly in place so that forces from unexpected angles won't topple it over. It works in earthquakes as well."

"Presumably that's an unexpected side effect?" I asked.

"Oh, indeed," he said.

He wired it all up, tested it out and said, "There you are, squire. All done. Happy cooking!"

It's my first ever brand new cooker. All the cookers I have used in the past have been pre-loved and have exhibited various eccentricities of control caused by miscellaneous bits wearing out and being replaced by things that weren't quite right or, in some cases by not being replaced at all. So I was quite looking forward to playing with a cooker that had all its mechanisms in place and which did everything exactly as it was told to do; no more and no less. I carefully planned the first week's menus in order to make the maximum possible use of every cooking surface available to me rather than for the sake of any nutritional content in the food itself. That meant that I could get the greatest possible cooking pleasure from my new toy.

As might be expected, I had some initial timing issues because years of coping with ancient and eccentric cookers had given me all the wrong reflexes.

The first major setback was caused by the oven heating itself up to the temperature I'd told it I wanted and then just stayed there. This was quite an unexpected surprise. I'd completely forgotten that ovens did that. And because the oven never overheated itself, the vegetables roasting in it proved to be nowhere near ready when the stew/casserole/curry on top was thoroughly cooked. Fortunately stews/casseroles/curries are very forgiving of longer cooking times than they are expecting. It's the long, slow simmering that makes them so flavourful and my new hotplates had such exact fingertip temperature control that very long and very slow simmering was easily attained. "A stew boiled is a stew spoiled" as the old wives words of wisdom have it. They know what they are talking about, those old wives. Pay attention to them. I set the stew/casserole/curry to barely bubble and when the vegetables in the oven finally caught up with the simmering feast, the result was scrumptious.

I've been practising a lot and I think I've got the hang of it now. So do you want to come to dinner? I promise to try and guess who you are (obligatory movie joke for all you media fans out there...

# Beer And Just Desserts

So there we were, sitting in the hotel at the SF convention and thinking about food, as you do.

"Let's go to Galbraiths," said Simon. Galbraiths serves beer brewed on the premises to traditional recipes. To accompany the beer, it serves hearty grub. Simon's suggestion was received with universal cries of appreciation and one very important question.

"How do we get to Galbraiths?" I asked.

"I'll consult a native guide," said Simon and he shot off to find one. Soon he returned, full of information. "It's fifteen minutes walk in that direction," he declared.

We gathered our hats and our coats and walked in that direction. An hour later, a certain amount of disquiet began to make itself felt.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" asked Robin.

"It's raining, and there's a hole in my shoe, dear Lisa, dear Lisa," I said.

"I recognise this street," said Simon. "Galbraiths is fifteen minutes walk in that direction."

Eventually this statement turned out to be true, and Galbraiths loomed large before us. Cold and wet and tired, we staggered gratefully into its welcoming warmth. I ordered a pint of Bitter and Twisted, a classic ESB style beer. Simon had a Grafton Porter, a pitch black ale, thick and hearty, one of the basic food groups, best drunk with a knife and fork. Robin had a Bohemian Pilsner, a full bodied lager tasting faintly of Czechoslovakia.

"How about some food?"

I ordered Bangers and Mash, sausages laced with Galbraiths Bellringers Best Bitter and served with savoy



cabbage and creamy mashed spud. Simon had Fish and Chips, fresh fish fried in Galbraiths Bohemian Pilsner batter served with tartare sauce and hand cut chips. Robin had Black Treacle Sponge Pudding.

"Why are you starting with dessert?" I asked.

"In case there's an earthquake before we finish the meal," Robin explained, giving me a don't be an idiot look. "I don't want to miss out on dessert."

"This part of the country doesn't have earthquakes," Simon pointed out. "It has volcanoes instead."

"All the more reason to start with pudding," said Robin. "Think how silly I'd feel if a volcano erupted through the floor and I hadn't had anything sweet yet."

Galbraiths used to be a public library. It's a beautiful old building with polished wooden floors and timbered walls. On cold wet days a hearty fire roars in the fireplace. I confess that I'm torn. In my opinion, libraries should stay as libraries. Books are precious. But on the other hand Galbraiths serves wonderful beer. In the days when I lived in Auckland, I sometimes visited Galbraiths alone and drank my beer while reading a book.

With my food I drank an Antipodean Pale Ale, much like the famous IPA but perhaps hoppier. The first mouthful is hugely bitter, requiring sausages to cleanse the palate. But after that the maltiness seeps through and leads to a dry, hoppy finish. Definitely a beer for the hop fanatic. Robin drank a Bellringers Bitter, claiming that the copper colour and fruity finish offset her treacle sponge perfectly. Simon had a Bob Hudson bitter, named in honour of the man who taught Mr Galbraith to brew beer. It is a tangy, refreshing bitter ideal for session drinking. I knew a man who drank a pint of this every day of his life. It killed him in the end.

Of course, he was 102 years old at the time.

Now it was time for dessert. I had black treacle sponge pudding, Simon had bread and butter pudding and Robin had the Fish Of The Day.

Then it was time to return to the hotel. There was universal agreement that walking back was not an option and so we called a taxi. The taxi driver was a Johnny Cash fanatic and he played "Ring Of Fire" at full volume throughout the journey.

"Oh listen," I said, "he's playing the vindaloo curry

# One Cat, Two Cats, Black Cat, Tabby Cat

Harpo The Stealth Cat is the master of a minimalist feline martial art called delayogami. When you approach him in order to give him a pat he will, if he is in a bad mood (which he always is), lash out with one lightning fast, razor tipped paw. The rest of his body doesn't move a muscle. Harpo does not believe in unnecessary effort. You withdraw your hand immediately, of course.

"Ha, ha! Missed me again," you chortle triumphantly and you go about your business. Harpo returns happily to sleep. He knows something that you don't, and five minutes later, just when you are least expecting it, the pain hits you like a hammer blow and the blood begins to flow, dripping redly onto the pages of your book and obscuring vital sentences. Stealth cat wins again! Cursing, you head off to the bathroom in search of antiseptic cream and sticking plaster. Harpo grins malevolently in his sleep.

He's lived with us now for about seven years. He's big, black, sleek, powerful and vicious; the lord of all he surveys. There's no trace left at all of the cold, wet, starving, flea-ridden bundle of desperate fur that turned up so pathetically on our doorstep all those years ago. He knows that he is in charge of the world and he isn't scared of anything in it except visitors and vacuum cleaners. Since the lady who comes once a fortnight to clean our house is a visitor *with* a vacuum cleaner he finds her doubly scary and she has never seen anything of him except his fluffy tail racing desperately for the undergrowth. She treats my sticking plastered fingers with scorn. "He's a scaredy cat, he'd never hurt you!"

Since Harpo is demonstrably scared of visitors and vacuum cleaners, I suspect that he may also be scared of violins, vibrators, volcanoes, Visigoths, vintage volutes and vegetarian vindaloo. Fortunately for his peace of mind he has not yet come across any of these. Once a year he definitely proves himself to be frightened of both vaccinations and vets. I shudder to think what might happen should he ever encounter a vampire or a Volkswagen. I have no explanation for his monomaniacal alphabetic neurosis. I asked him about it once.

"I find it valuable for ventilating voles when I'm hunting," he told me, leaving me none the wiser.

Sometimes, late at night when he is sure that nobody is looking and when there is a 'q' in the month, he turns into Harpo The Cuddle Cat. The claws retract, the red gleam in his eyes dies away and he climbs on to a lap, his motor revving loudly in top gear. He snuggles and wriggles, demanding to be patted. Because we are too scared of him to disobey, we stop whatever we are doing and do as we are told. He radiates bliss from every molecule. Occasionally he dribbles.

Harpo is a long haired cat. Long haired cats need regular brushing in order to keep their fur sleek. However Harpo hates having his fur brushed. People who try and brush him are immediately terminated with extreme prejudice. As a result of this policy, his fur is generally matted and tangled and full of dags. Every so often we have to take him to the vet to be de-dagged.

"Hello Harpo," says the vet. "How are you today?"

"Kill, kill!" says Harpo. The subtleties of delayogami are put to one side. Flesh is going to be shredded.

"I'll let the nurse do this," says the vet as his mangled fingers drip blood. "It's just routine."

The nurse is already dressed in a suit of armour. She is equipped with electric shears. The magic sword Excalibur, sometimes called the Scourge of Felines, is sheathed in a

scabbard on her back. The hilt peeks coyly over her left shoulder. She carries Harpo off into the back room. The spitting and swearing dies away into the distance. Eventually the nurse and Harpo return. He is now a short haired cat with bald spots and a bad mood. The nurse's armour hangs in shreds. Both she and Harpo are exhausted. Harpo glares at me.

"Just wait till I get you home," he threatens.

"I'm cooking a casserole tonight," I tell him. "How about I give you some raw beef?"

"I *might* forgive you eventually."

Now that Porgy is dead, Harpo is top cat. His Hairy Majesty takes this duty very seriously and he spends much more time at home than once he did. He sleeps on guard, one ear poised to listen for Bess who must periodically be reminded that she is bottom cat. Harpo is not currently aware that I have photographs of him and Bess curled up asleep together on the sofa, radiating peace and perfect harmony. One day, when the occasion demands it, I will embarrass him with these pictures and blackmail him into not ripping me apart.

Bess seems to know that something fundamental has changed in her life now that Porgy has vanished. It is hard to say whether or not she misses him (she paid very little attention to him when he was around, though she did bring him get well soon rats when he was sick). She has definitely grown more needy of late, constantly requiring laps and cuddles and reassurance. "Please don't send me to wherever you sent Porgy. I don't want to go. Please keep me here at home with you."

She follows us from room to room. She hates to lose sight of us. If I didn't shut the toilet door she'd even keep me company in there. Sometimes as I sit on the throne reading a book and contemplating the infinite, there are scratches at the door and pathetic whimperings from outside.

She insists on sleeping on the bed with us at night. Of course, it is winter at the moment and very cold, and the bed is very warm. Even Harpo, who is hard and tough and totally impervious to the extremes of wind, rain, sleet, snow and temperature, sometimes sleeps on the bed these days. It's easy to be cynical when you are owned by cats.

Both Bess and Harpo continue to supplement their diet with rats, mice, lizards and the occasional bird. Bess invariably brings her prey into the lounge so that we can properly admire her skills as a hunter. Robin, who is in charge of corpses, semi-corpse and vomit (all of which are closely connected to each other), has enormous fun chasing the semi-corpse round the room. There are an amazing number of hiding places in the average lounge and Robin is intimately familiar with all of them.

"Bess, Bess -- take it outside!"

Bess looks puzzled. "But it's yours now. I don't want it any more. Look! Quick! It has run underneath the stereo. Oh! You are hopeless!"

Robin arms herself with a long pokey thing and sweeps it back and forth beneath the stereo. The semi-corpse runs out and hides underneath the sofa. It's going to be a long night...

Harpo is a much more pragmatic hunter and all his trophies are immediately taken into the bath where he carefully dismantles them and arranges the bits and pieces artistically across the porcelain. This makes it very easy for us to clean up the mess, of course, though it does have a negative impact on our enthusiasm for taking baths. We have been careful not to tell Harpo how much we appreciate his hunting habits in case he stops doing it out of sheer feline perversity.

One cat, two cats, black cat, tabby cat. These are the cats today.

# Alan And Robin Go Troppo

Deep in the frozen Antarctic wastes, the Ice God stirred, yawned hugely and woke up. There was a cat sitting on his chest, purring and dribbling. It was so cold in the Ice God's bedroom that the saliva dripping from the cat's mouth froze as soon as it hit the icy air and the icicles hanging from the cat's mouth gave it the appearance of a sabre-toothed tiger. One of its ears was ripped and bleeding.

The Ice God scratched his shaggy armpit and said, "What are you doing here, Greymalkin? Why did you wake me up?"

"I've just come back from a trip to New Zealand," said Greymalkin. "I was having a talk with my cousin Harpo The Devil Cat."

"I remember him," said the Ice God and he shuddered with fear. "He's the utterly evil master of delayogami who lives with Alan and Robin."

"That's him," said Greymalkin, and he too shivered with fear, though he pretended it was just from the cold because he was a cat, and that's what cats do. "Harpo told me that Alan and Robin are about to go for a holiday on Rarotonga, a beautiful Pacific Island, and that means that he and his adopted sister Bess will have to go to the cattery at Purrrville. They don't want to go, so Harpo suggested that perhaps you might want to help them out."

"Suggested?" queried the Ice God.

"That's right," said Greymalkin. "And he lashed out at my ear, just to give me a reminder."

"Delayogami?" asked the Ice God.

"Indeed," said Greymalkin gloomily. "It didn't start to bleed or hurt until I was almost back here. He's good, that Harpo. Very, very good indeed."

"Well," said the Ice God, "I suppose we'd better do as he asked. I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Harpo."

The Ice God struggled out of bed, and with Greymalkin at his side, he walked down the corridor to the control room where the storm rheostats were kept. Starting from the left, he moved every rheostat up to its maximum setting. Outside the control room, the Ice God and Greymalkin could hear the rumbling birth of a huge winter storm. The Ice God adjusted the directional vector control and the storm headed North, straight for New Zealand.

"That should do it," said the Ice God.

"Crude," said Greymalkin, "but probably very effective. I think I might go to Rarotonga myself, just to keep out of its way." He slowly faded from view like a Cheshire Cat, but instead of leaving his smile behind, he left his icicle sabre teeth. They tinkled to the floor and the Ice God swept them under a bench. Then he went back to bed.

\* \* \* \*

By Saturday I was starting to worry. We were due to fly out of Wellington at sparrowfart on Tuesday. The flight from Wellington to Auckland connected with a flight from Auckland to Rarotonga at sparrowfart plus two. There wasn't a lot of leeway in the schedule. A delayed flight out of Wellington would be catastrophic. And it was starting to look as though delays were going to be inevitable. The weather forecasts were predicting blizzards throughout most of the country, and by Saturday morning the bottom of the South Island was completely covered in snow. All the airports in the South Island were closed and so were all the roads. The storm was heading inexorably for Wellington and was predicted to reach its peak ferocity on Tuesday morning. The view from my window was not looking good.

"Robin," I called, "come and look out of the window."



Robin was knitting something mysterious, seamless and tube-like on a circular needle. "Just let me finish this row," she quipped. After a few minutes of serious knitting she said, "OK. What can you see out of the window?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's snowing and the visibility is zero."

"What?"

"Snow is falling out of the sky in fluffy lumps and covering the lawn."

"But it doesn't snow in Wellington."

"It does now."

For the first time in living memory snow was falling on the capital city. The hill suburbs were soon white and shiny and there was even snow all the way down to sea level. Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. It dominated the front page of the newspapers and it was the first story on the television news. Who cared about trivial things like the financial crisis or wars in far off sandy countries? There was snow in Wellington. It was unprecedented.

Our lawn quickly vanished under several inches of snow and I could see cars slipping and sliding up and down the road. There would be black ice on the road by tomorrow as the overnight temperature plummeted. If the snow kept on falling, the road would soon be impassable.

"Even if the airport stays open," said Robin thoughtfully, "the taxi might not be able to get up the hill to our house. It won't take much more of this to cut us off completely."

I checked the airport web site. Flights to and from Auckland were still taking off and landing but there were long delays. All our travel arrangements were teetering on a knife edge.

Sunday lulled us into a false sense of security. The day was bitterly cold, but the morning sky was clear. Most of the snow had gone from the road and buses and cars appeared to be travelling up and down it with minimal skidding. However it didn't last. By the late afternoon the sky had clouded over again and more snow was falling.

"I didn't want to go to a tropical Pacific island paradise anyway," I said. "One and all, they are grossly overrated."

"There's still a couple of days to go," said Robin encouragingly. "It might have all blown over by then." She didn't sound convinced.

On Monday, Robin had a brilliant idea.

"Let's see if we can reschedule our flights and go up to Auckland today instead of tomorrow morning. That gives us a lot more leeway and a lot more chance of actually getting to Auckland before the Rarotonga flight takes off."

I hunkered down with a telephone and my Air New Zealand Koru Club card.

"Welcome to Air New Zealand," said a robot. "Please enter your Koru Club membership number."

I pressed buttons.

"Thank you," said the robot. "I see you are an important customer. I will transfer you to an operative immediately"

I said a silent prayer of gratitude as I imagined all the unimportant customers sitting in their never ending, never answered telephonic queues and loudly cursing my name as I elbowed my way to the front.

I heard a ringing sound and then an actual human being said, "Hello, this is Tanya. How can I help you."

I explained my predicament.

"No problem," said Tanya and I heard the clatter of a keyboard. "There you are -- I have you booked on flight 428 at two o'clock this afternoon."

"Thank you Tanya," I said. And then I started ringing Auckland hotels. If we managed to get up there at all, we'd need an overnight stay before our flight out on Tuesday morning. Thank goodness I have huge allowances on my various gold credit cards.

Because of the change of plan, we now had about four hours to get the cats to the cattery, pack our cases, and arrange with the neighbours to empty our mail box while we were away. Step one: find the cats. Ah! There they were,

curled up asleep on the bed which still retained a certain warmth from our occupancy. I closed the bedroom door so that they couldn't escape while Robin got the cages out of the garden shed. I donned a pair of leather welding gloves that went all the way up to my elbows, grabbed Harpo and poured him head first into the cage that Robin was holding vertically. Years of bitter experience have taught me that this is the only safe way to get him into it. By the time he re-orientates himself and attempts to tear me to shreds, the cage door is closed and he is helpless.

Shrieks of rage filled the air. "You bastards! I'll get you for this. And just wait until the next time I see the Ice God. Incompetent fool! I'll tear him asunder."

Bess went relatively quietly. "Oh no, not again," she said, doing her world famous impression of a bowl of petunias.

I bundled the cages into the car and we drove up the road to Purrrville, our favourite cattery. There were snowmen lining the road, one outside almost every house. All the neighbourhood children had obviously been having a wonderful time with the snow.

Now that the hardest part was over and done with, we did the easy things. Two suitcases were hurriedly packed, I left a message on the neighbour's answering machine about the mailbox and then I called a taxi. Snow fell steadily as we drove to the airport. The Ice God was still trying really, really hard to keep us at home.

There were long delays on almost every flight into and out of Wellington. The airport was marginal at best and the air traffic controllers were making the most of the very brief windows of opportunity afforded them by the ever changing weather. It was a miracle that the airport was operating at all. All flights to the South Island were cancelled of course. The departures board announced that flights to Dunedin were cancelled because of "...DUD weather conditions". Someone behind the scenes appeared to be enjoying

themselves. I was surprised that they hadn't finished the sentence with a smiley face.

Our Auckland flight took off shortly after 3.00pm on Monday 15th August just ahead of another flurry of snow. Our flight to Rarotonga was due to take off from Auckland at 9.30am on Tuesday 16th August. Because of the vagaries of the international date line, it would arrive in Rarotonga after a three and a half hour flight at 3.00pm on Monday 15th August. Who says time travel is a physical impossibility?

\* \* \* \*

We arrived in Rarotonga exactly on schedule, just as we were taking off from Wellington. Monday 15th August was brilliantly sunny and warm. We walked across the tarmac to the arrival hall feeling sweaty and overdressed. Customs and Immigration stamped our passports and welcomed us to Rarotonga with big smiles. Then we were met by the lovely Kimi, our shuttle bus driver, who would take us to the Sunset Resort Hotel where we would be staying for the next ten days. Kimi hung garlands of heavily scented flowers around our necks. She gave us each a chilled bottle of water and a cold cloth with which to wipe away the sweat. Then she drove us to the resort with all the windows open. "Air conditioning," she explained.

Once we were settled in, we took a little walk to explore our surroundings. There was a beautiful reef-enclosed lagoon just outside the hotel. There was deep blue, slightly angry water outside the reef. Waves crashed against the reef, and broke in roaring bundles of spray and surf. But inside the reef the lagoon was calm and green. Sunshine danced across it in sparkles of dazzling light. I've never seen a reef around a lagoon before, but it was just as I'd always imagined it from reading "Coral Island" when I was a child.

There was a big black dog fast asleep on the clear, white sandy beach. He woke up and blinked at us as we got close

to him, but he was really far too busy to pay us any prolonged attention, and he went straight back to sleep. The beach was so clear and clean because every morning seven maids with seven mops came out to sweep the sand for half a year. And Lewis Carroll was wrong -- they got it perfectly clear and smooth each and every day.

The sea inside the reef was shallow and full of multi-coloured fish which were obviously quite accustomed to having portly pakehas splash around them. They swam and shoaled so thickly that you almost felt you could walk on a living carpet of blue and yellow and stripy fish.

We left the coast and wandered up the road a little. A signpost pointed up a dilapidated side track. "Prison," it said. "And Craft Centre."

We walked past the Kikau Hut Restaurant. 200 metres further on we came across another sign. "Kikau Hut Restaurant", it said. "200 metres back".

We walked further along the road until we came to a dilapidated, tumbledown shack. A huge sign hung from it: "Ministry Of Infrastructure and Planning".

I think Rarotonga must have been settled by surrealists. I could tell immediately that I was going to enjoy myself here.

For many years, the Cook Islands (of which Rarotonga is the largest) were a New Zealand protectorate, and they still use the New Zealand currency. This makes Rarotonga a very convenient place for New Zealanders to go for a holiday of course. However the Islands also mint their own coins and print their own banknotes. As you might expect, these domestic coins and notes are extremely odd and also very attractive at one and the same time. They have a \$3 note with a picture of a bare-breasted lady riding a shark. They have a \$2 coin which is silver and triangular and a \$5 coin which is a golden dodecahedron. And, uniquely as far as I am aware, they have both a \$7.50 coin and a \$2.50 coin.

All these domestic notes and coins are so weird that if you ever receive them in your change you immediately

squirrel them away and refuse to spend them because they make such lovely souvenirs. Consequently shopping in Rarotonga becomes a much more expensive experience than it otherwise would be!

The island of Rarotonga is almost circular, with a circumference of just over 30 kilometres. The coastal road goes all the way around it, and two buses drive along the road, stopping to let people on and off wherever the whim takes them. The buses are known as the clockwise bus and the anti-clockwise bus. However, in the evenings there is only a clockwise bus. You can't go widdershins after dark. Cthulhu doesn't allow it.

We took the clockwise bus into Avarua, the capital city (indeed, the only sizeable settlement on the island). We could tell it was the capital city; it had two roads, two banks and a supermarket. It also had a most magnificent courthouse which was built for Rarotonga by the People's Republic of China. Unfortunately they built it to accommodate Chinese criminals. The Rarotongans, like all Polynesians, are very large people and they cannot get into the toilets in the courthouse unless they shuffle sideways through the door. I gather they have similar problems with the dock and the cells as well. Never mind -- once they get sentenced to time in prison, they can do lots of craftwork.

We took the clockwise bus back to the resort, which meant that we got to circumnavigate the island before returning. We got back just in time for happy hour. Cook Island Lager (brewed locally, of course) is \$5 a bottle during happy hour. Outside of happy hour it is \$6 a bottle. Happy hour is not hugely happy, but it has its moments, not least of which are the free peanuts.

There are nine breaks in the reef that surrounds the island and one of these, the largest, opens into the lagoon from which the original seven waka that colonised New Zealand sailed nearly a thousand years ago. None of the waka ever returned home and it wasn't until almost seven

hundred years later, when Europeans first came to the islands, that the islanders finally learned how successful their colonisation had been. There are still close ties between the Maori and the Cook Islanders, though the language has mutated slightly with the years. The Maori say *kia ora* as a greeting; the Cook Islanders say *kia orana*. The Maori refer to the original seven canoes (and canoes in general) as *waka*; the Cook Islanders call them *vaka*.

We took a trip on a four wheel drive jeep into the thickly jungled interior of the island. Bananas and paw-paws grow wild, free for the taking. Once you leave the coast, the island quickly becomes very steep and rugged. The guide took us up a track to the largest waterfall in the world. Unfortunately there was no water falling down it; someone had turned off the tap.

The jeep struggled up a steep incline and stopped on a plateau. We got a perfect view of "The Needle"; a thin spire of rock that stands tall at the top of a mountain, looking for all the world like the Tower Of Orthanc. Robin positioned me very carefully and took a photograph of me with The Needle growing out of the top of my head. It was a perfect partner to the photo she already had of me with a coconut palm growing out of my head. I think she might have a new hobby...

The guide showed us how to husk a coconut. "You need a special tool," he explained. "We call it a *ko*. In English, that translates to *sharp stick*."

He stuck the stick in the ground, pointy side up. Then he rammed the coconut down on to it so that the point came right through the husk and out of the other side. He prized off the husk as he pulled the nut off the stick, turned it round and jammed it down on the point again. He did that four times, splitting the husk each time so that it could be peeled easily away from the nut. Then, with the blunt side of a machete, he cracked the nut in two. He passed around the lower half which was full of clear juice. We all took a sip. It

was warm and sweet and very refreshing. He carved the flesh from the nut and passed that round as well. I found it rather tough and chewy and a bit tasteless. Robin had two helpings. "It's food, isn't it? It's been a long time since breakfast."

Saturday was cloudy and there was a breeze. The temperature dropped to slightly below the boiling point of lead. We visited the open air market in Avarua. The tourists were out in force, all dressed in t-shirts and shorts, enjoying the freshness. The locals were huddled deep into fur lined anoraks with the hoods up because they were freezing cold.

The market stalls sold local produce, brightly coloured shirts, pareus (sarongs) and jewellery made from black pearls. Lovely ladies wearing coconut bras and hula skirts danced seductively to the pounding, hypnotic rhythms of the drums. In the intervals between dances the sound system played traditional island music at skull splitting volume. CDs were for sale. I was tempted to buy them all so that silence would descend. I resisted the temptation. If I took the CDs home I might have to play them one day, and that would never do.

We went to Muri, about 20 minutes anti-clockwise from our hotel, and took a boat trip across the lagoon. The boat was glass bottomed and large curious fish peered up through the glass at the tourists. We stopped at a small island for a barbecue lunch of freshly caught yellowfin tuna. It was the most delicious fish I have ever tasted in my life -- partly because it was so fresh and partly because it was marinated in a secret island ingredient known only to the chef, who referred to himself as Captain Cook. He well deserved the name.

His Co-Captain, Captain Awesome, dressed in full Rarotongan warrior regalia, climbed a coconut tree and dropped several large nuts to the ground. He climbed the tree so fast that Robin, who was blinking at the time, completely missed it. He too was well deserving of his



name. Again we got to drink the fresh coconut juice and we learned how to use fabric made from the husk fibres to squeeze out the cream from the grated flesh.

Then it was time for the crab races! First prize a coconut, second prize \$20,000, third prize \$10,000. We all chose a hermit crab from a cup and let them wander over our hands for a time. We each gave our crab a name. Mine was called Harpo because it nipped me as it staggered across my palm. Then Captain Awesome drew two concentric circles in the sand. We placed our crabs in the inner circle, and Captain Awesome woke them up with a blast from a conch shell. The crabs scuttled hither and yon, cheered on by the crowd. The winner was the first crab to reach the boundary of the outer circle. Harpo came fourth; a valiant effort, he was only a small crab. Captain Awesome awarded the lady with the winning crab a coconut fresh from the tree. Unfortunately there are no pockets in a Rarotongan Warrior's costume and so he hadn't actually brought the second and third prizes with him. Oh, what a shame.

\* \* \* \*

All good things come to an end. Our flight home was scheduled to depart at 2.10am on 25th August so we had to be at the airport just after midnight on the 24th. That evening, we wined and dined for the final time at our local restaurant which was decorated with old posters advertising cruises on Cunard and White Star Line ships. The poster advertising *The Titanic* was hidden behind a pot plant so that you had to squint to see it at all. The clock was dated 1879, and it came from Kensington Station in London. It ticked away our final hours in paradise.

The delightful Kimi took us to the airport in plenty of time for our flight. She hugged us both and made us promise to come back; an easy promise to make and one we hope to

keep. A few hours later we were home. The snow had vanished and the day was cold and crisp and clear.

# Alan And The Bag Ladies

I was five hours early for my flight back to Wellington because my business in Auckland had finished sooner than expected. So I went to the Air New Zealand check in desk and said, "Can you transfer me to an earlier flight, please?"

The nice lady clicked keys on her keyboard and then frowned. "No, I'm sorry," she said, "but the ticket you have is not transferable." Then she brightened. "But I can check you in now and you can drop your bags off and go to the Koru Club lounge where strange and sybaritic pleasures await."

I was dubious. "Will my bag be safe if I check it in so early?" I asked.

"Of course it will," she said firmly. "They have a well organised system in the baggage handling room and there's a waiting area set aside for each flight. Your bag will be perfectly safe."

"Can you guarantee that?" I asked. "You've lost my baggage before under these circumstances. Once I flew from Wellington to Auckland and my bags flew to Sydney and we weren't reunited for many days. I ran out of underpants, a terrible fate."

"You've got nothing to worry about," she reassured me. "The luggage has a bar code on the label which gives the flight details and the bar code reader automatically assigns the bags to the proper pick up point. The luggage never gets lost these days. Trust me -- I used to work in baggage handling."

"OK," I said, convinced by her positive attitude. "Check me in and I will spend the time until my flight debauching myself in the lounge."

"You won't regret it," she said as she printed out my boarding card and baggage tag. "I hear that they have a new batch of chrome-plated dancing girls." The bar code on the baggage tag looked very authoritative. I dropped my bag on the conveyor belt and watched it move off into the baggage handling area. It would have a lonely time of it for the next few hours as it waited for more bags for its flight to arrive. I hoped it wouldn't get bored.

I made my way to the security farce checkpoint. I put my laptop, phone, coins, hat and coat into plastic trays and sent them through the X-ray machine along with my backpack. Then I walked through the metal detector gates. No alarms went off, which mildly surprised me because I was still wearing my watch and my Medic-Alert bracelet. I had a gold chain around my neck, rings on my fingers and a big metal belt buckle. No bells on my toes though, luckily. All of these items tend to set the alarms ringing in more paranoid countries, and I'm constantly getting wanded when I travel overseas...

I reclaimed my laptop, phone, coins, hat and coat and watched, bewildered, as my backpack came out of the X-Ray machine, stopped and then reversed direction and went back in again. A gaggle of guards gathered round the monitor, pointing at it and whispering to each other. Eventually the bag reappeared again along with a big, beefy, shaven-headed, cloven hoofed security man.

"Is this your bag, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Is there a problem?"

"No, not really," said the security man. "All the stuff in it has fallen down to the bottom and is just sitting there in a great big lump. The X-rays won't go through and all we can see on the screen is an amorphous blob. Can I take a look inside?"

"Feel free," I said. Not that I had any choice.

He opened the backpack and rummaged around in the collection of miscellaneous computer clutter that comprised

the amorphous blob.

"Thank you, sir," he said as he handed the bag to me. "That's all fine." I headed off to the Koru Club lounge. I felt an urgent need to debauch myself with forbidden pleasures.

The lounge was seething with people. Most of the free food had been eaten, though I noticed that the monkey-brain salad remained largely untouched. However the containers of curried huhu grubs had been scraped clean. I helped myself to cheese and biscuits. The cheese had a curious flavour.

A harassed looking lady bustled past with a trolley full of spaghetti invercargillia. "Excuse me," I said, "what kind of cheese is this?"

"It's made from giraffe milk," she said. "Have you never seen the Air New Zealand cheese factory at the back of the giraffe enclosure at the Auckland Zoo?"

"Oh yes," I said. "I remember now."

I helped myself to a pair of dormice stuffed with lark tongues and wandered over to the bar. I chose a glass of wine fermented from grapes fertilised with the dung of unicorns and the blood and bone of yetis. The Koru Club lounge was living up to its exotic reputation.

Nibbling a dormouse, I wandered over to the stage. The dancing girls were preparing themselves and struggling hard to fit their breasts into chromium plated brass bras. They all looked like extras from the cover of a 1938 edition of *Astounding Stories Of Super Science*. Immediately I felt right at home.

Five hours passed in the blink of an eye. Replete with wine and cheese and with a souvenir bra in my pocket, I boarded my flight to Wellington. We took off and, an hour later, we landed. I made my way to the baggage carousel.

Because I am a Koru Club member I am entitled to priority baggage handling. This means that my bags are always the very last to be unloaded from the aeroplane. So I wasn't too upset when my bag failed to appear on the

carousel. However when there was still no sign of my bag after I had waited for almost as long as the flight itself had taken, I began to worry a little.

I made my way to the baggage enquiry office. I presented my receipt to the nice lady behind the counter.

"Oh yes," she said. "I remember this one. It flew down three hours ago and it's been waiting here for you ever since. I've been feeding it biscuits and playing tag with it to stop it from pining for you."

She took my receipt and handed my bag to me. It seemed slightly chubbier than when I first checked it in. Perhaps the lady had fed it too many biscuits.

"So it travelled down here all by itself on an earlier flight?" I asked.

"Yes," said the lady.

"Doesn't that violate every security regulation under the sun?" I asked. "I thought unaccompanied bags weren't allowed on aeroplanes any more."

"That's right," she said. She didn't sound at all worried. "It's so cute with its little fluffy zips! Can I feed it another biscuit?"

"No," I said, "I think it's had enough."

My luggage was harmless. There was nothing dangerous in it apart from a week's supply of dirty underpants, so it really didn't matter that the baggage handlers sent it unaccompanied on an earlier flight. But I wonder how often they screw up like this?

I wonder if I've found a weak link in the security chain?

# Alan Alone

Robin was away in Australia visiting her family and the cats and I were considering how best to take advantage of the situation.

"Why don't we stay up after midnight and fall asleep watching the television?" suggested Bess.

"That's a good idea," I said, "and it sounds like a lot of fun. But we usually do that anyway. There's no novelty in it."

"Perhaps not," said Bess. "But we could do it together, just for a change. Normally I ignore the television by sleeping on the sofa where Robin sits. But this time I could sleep on the sofa where you sit and we could both lick our bottoms and snore through the second world war on the History Channel. How does that sound?"

"That's an excellent suggestion, Bess. Now Harpo, have you got any ideas as to what we should do?"

"I could rip your leg off and beat you to death with the soggy end," said Harpo. "That's always good for a laugh."

"You've done that far too often in the past," I protested. "It's getting boring. And anyway, I'm not a fan of pain."

"Aren't you?" Harpo sounded surprised. "I am! Particularly when it takes place in other people."

"But you're a long haired cat," I said. "Long hair means you're a hippy. You're supposed to get all mellow on catnip and espouse peace and love."

"Catnip is good," said Harpo reflectively. "Have you got any in the cupboard?"

"I think so," I said. "Why don't you go and have a look?"

"I can't open cupboards," said Harpo gloomily. "My fingers are all in favour and my thumbs aren't opposed. But nevertheless I can't manage the doors. You'll have to do it."

"Say please," I suggested.

"Just do it," said Harpo, "or I'll rip your leg off and..."

"...and beat me to death with the soggy end." I finished the familiar sentence and got up off the couch to investigate the cupboard where the cat treats live. "Here you are, Harpo. Here's the catnip."

"Thanks. You can keep your leg a bit longer." He rolled himself an enormous spliff and hid himself away in the bright orange tunnel that we got as a free gift from the vet when we bought entirely too many cat biscuits. It's his favourite place. He always goes there when he is doing, has done or is about to do something against the rules. He took a toke on his catnip. "Groovy..."

I turned the television on and switched to the History Channel. Explosions roared, Bess snored. Time for a rhyme. Thyme for a rime...

We fell asleep to the peaceful sounds of murder and mayhem.

Over the next few days, it became abundantly clear to Bess and to me that the very best way to celebrate Robin not being here was to carry on living just as we normally did, doing all the things that we normally do. After all, we enjoyed doing them; that's why we did them. What possible reason could we have to try doing other things?

Even Harpo eventually agreed that we were probably right though he himself isn't all that fond of the History Channel. He prefers the much more cerebral Arts Channel. Despite his addiction to violence and blood (preferably mine) he has intellectual pretensions and he enjoys shredding my flesh and committing mayhem with Mahler raving in the foreground.

And so our time without Robin passed agreeably. We cooked and we cleaned and we did the washing up. This was our only departure from normality. Robin is in charge of corpses, semi-corpses, vomit and washing up. I found I wasn't really enjoying taking over her duties and I wasn't very good at them. But I persevered.



"These cat biscuits taste soapy," said Harpo. "You used far too much washing up liquid when you cleaned my bowl, didn't you?"

"I might have done," I said casually. I never plead guilty to Harpo's accusations. He punishes me if I do. but if I refuse to admit to my crimes, he punishes me for lying.

The time went very quickly and, almost before we knew it, Robin was due back home. Her plane was scheduled to land at midnight. However I checked the arrivals website and discovered that the plane had a downhill wind and would therefore arrive twenty minutes early. I made sure I arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare. The plane landed exactly on time, twenty minutes early. But it was ages before any passengers appeared. Eventually Robin came through the doors with her suitcase following obediently behind her.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," she said. "But the plane was half empty, there were no other planes scheduled and the customs people were bored. So we all got searched. The drug dogs sniffed every case and the customs men poked around inside my dirty underwear."

"I hope they enjoyed themselves," I said.

"Oh yes," said Robin. "They were quite taken with the solar powered cockroach I brought as a present for the cats."

"A solar powered cockroach?" I was puzzled.

"Yes," explained Robin. "It's a life size plastic cockroach with a solar cell embedded in its back. And when the sun shines, it scuttles. The cats will love it."

"You didn't really buy it for the cats, did you?" I asked. "I know you. You bought it for yourself."

"Well, yes," she said. "But I couldn't tell that to the customs man. He'd think I was strange."

"But Robin," I said, you are strange."

"Oh yes. That's right. I forgot."

We walked out of the airport to the car and I began the short drive home.

"I got a solar powered praying mantis as well," said Robin.

# Sparkly

Are you a fan of *Twilight*? Have you ever wondered why the vampires sparkle? I know why. I stumbled upon the secret quite by chance. I was reading Harlan Ellison's massive anthology *Again Dangerous Visions*. And then I sneezed. Suddenly everything became clear to me...

I suffer from what the doctors call *chronic non-specific rhinitis*. For a long time I thought that meant that I had a rhinoceros stuck high up inside my nasal passages, but even though that is exactly what the symptoms feel like, actually the phrase just means that I sneeze a lot and nobody really knows why. It's obviously an allergy, but I've had all the standard allergy tests and they were quite inconclusive. So I sneeze and I drip and I sneeze some more. Now that the doctors have given a name to my condition, they feel that their job is done. The rest of it is up to me.

It's not a seasonal thing. Attacks come upon me out of the blue at irregular intervals throughout the year. There is no warning and no obvious cause. I just feel a gradually increasing sense of discomfort high inside my nose as the rhinoceros wakes up and starts to stomp around in there. I find that I am blowing my nose more and more frequently as the rhinoceros gets more and more lively. It pees and poos enthusiastically just behind my eyeballs. Obnoxious substances increase in volume and flood my sinuses. Soon I am sneezing uncontrollably and leaking foul fluids like a high pressure rancid hosepipe. Soggy tissues accumulate in the waste bins and I feel more and more exhausted.

A very bad attack can see me use five or more boxes of tissues in a day (I think my all time record was seven boxes) and it leaves me so tired and wiped out that I need to sleep for fifteen or more hours to recover from it. It can be

unbelievably debilitating. I get an attack of this severity once or maybe twice a year. But less severe attacks happen every month or two, always right out of left field when I'm not looking.

Returning now to the book I was reading -- in the introduction to *Again Dangerous Visions*, Harlan Ellison admits that there were some visions that were far too dangerous even for him to publish. He rejected a story from a writer called Barry Weissman because it was about a snot vampire, a concept that even Ellison found too vomitous for comfort.

Combining my recent rhinitis attack with Ellison's editorial prejudices gave me a great insight. It is quite obvious to me that Stephanie Meyer's sparkly vampires are actually snot vampires straight out of that unpublished Barry Weissman story, and they sparkle because they are covered from head to toe with a silvery film of dried snot that they've sucked up from the nostrils of their unsuspecting victims, all of whom, presumably, had a rhinoceros just like mine up their noses.

Trust me on this; the life I lead has made me an expert on all things mucous related. And keep this picture of snot-soaked vampires firmly in your head the next time you read the *Twilight* books or watch the movies; you'll enjoy them so much more now that you know the secret.

# Eat, Drink, Be Merry And Watch TV

Christmas Day was a lazy day *chez nous*. We spent the entire day doing our world famous couch potato impression as we watched all ten hours or so of the extended edition DVDs of **The Lord Of The Rings**. Despite the fact that we hadn't opened the DVD cases for at least two years, I was very impressed to find that the actors hadn't forgotten their lines. And they hadn't aged a day either. Quite astonishing.

We had awoken very early that morning. How early I cannot really tell because the clock in my bedroom is an undetermined number of minutes fast. The value of this number changes on an almost daily basis no matter how often I reset it. Electronic clocks are not supposed to gain or lose and I strongly suspect that my clock must have been assembled with cheap, possibly second hand, electrons in its components.

I turned the radio on. It was playing Christmas Carols.

While shepherds washed their socks by night  
All seated round the tub  
The angel of the lord came down  
And they began to scrub

We three men of Orient are  
One in a taxi  
One in a car  
One in a scooter  
Papping his hooter  
Following yonder star

I turned the radio off again,

"Bah Humbug!" said Harpo. "Where's my breakfast?"  
Then he bit me.

"I like Christmas Carols," said Bess. "Why did you turn it off? Oh, and where's my breakfast?" And she bit me.

"What time is it?" mumbled Robin.

"I don't know," I said. And so she bit me.

Bloody but unbowed, I made breakfast. A can of luxury cat food for each cat which, predictably, they hated because it was new, and smoked salmon, strawberries and champagne for Robin. Dry bread and water for me as punishment for doing something wrong. The weather was all my fault. The sky was blue, the sun shone warmly. Where was the snow, deep and crisp and even?

Good King Wences  
Last looked out  
On the Feast Of Stephen...

Probably his windows were extremely dirty so he didn't get to look out very often. Perhaps the last time was when Stephen, his next door neighbour, was having a barbecue and the Good King wanted to check out the guests in case the Bad King turned up. A quick spit and polish with the old windolene might be called for...

Distracted by such thoughts, I completely forgot that it was time to open the presents.

"Let's do it now," said Robin eagerly.

"Hurry up," said Bess. "I want to play with the ribbons."

"Do it immediately," said Harpo, "or I won't be answerable for the consequences. Remember that you aren't wearing any socks. Your toes are dangerously exposed."

And so there was a great unwrapping of paper and much untangling of ribbons.

"Oh darling," said Robin ecstatically. "That's just what I always wanted. Two front tyres for the car. How romantic!"

"And they are filled with nitrogen instead of compressed air," I pointed out.

"What does that do?" Robin asked.

"Absolutely nothing," I said, "but it costs an extra \$20 and you get sexy, fluorescent green valve tops. Can I open my presents now?"

"Of course you can," said Robin and she watched in eager anticipation as I tore the paper from my strangely shaped parcels.

"Wow!" I said, in happy astonishment. "Two rear tyres for the car. I couldn't have asked for anything better. What a lovely surprise."

"They too are filled with nitrogen rather than compressed air," Robin pointed out.

"Look at the really, really cute green valve tops." I said. "If we brake too hard when we've been travelling at Mach one there's absolutely no chance at all of the excess friction causing the tyres to burst into flames now that we've got an inert gas in them. It makes me feel so much safer than I felt in the old days when we filled the tyres with compressed air which is only about eighty percent nitrogen."

"Yes," agreed Robin. "I also feel a lot safer now than I used to. Is it time to start watching **Lord Of the Rings** yet?"

Boxing Day was a repeat of Christmas Day except that we watched Season Five of **Dexter**. Harpo stared at it entranced -- he loves stories about serial killers and he was particularly taken with the scene where a cat was lapping up the blood of a gruesomely murdered corpse.

"I'd like to try that," he said to me. "Just lie down here for a moment while I tear your throat out."

One of the delights of **Dexter** is that while it is gruesome and horrible and dark it is also very, very funny in a sick sort of way. I admit to a certain guilty pleasure as I watch it, which makes it perfect for the Christmas season of course for the Christmas season itself is nothing but twelve days of indulgence in guilty pleasures.

And champagne.



# Alan Pegs Out

When the weather is warm and sunny, wet clothes from the washing machine can be hung out to dry. My mother called it "pegging out" and she did it on Mondays. If the weather was unfavourable, she didn't peg out - instead she spread the damp clothes on a wooden frame she called a "clothes horse" which she opened up around the roaring coal fire in the dining room. Condensation caused by moisture evaporating from the drying clothes would stream down the inside of the windows and drip onto the floor, racing in matching patterns with the rain that streamed down the outside of the windows.

Sometimes my mother hung the clothes so close to the flames that they got scorched as they dried. That's why all my underpants had strange brown marks on them.

But whether she pegged out or whether she used the clothes horse, she did it only on Mondays. In Yorkshire, it is against the law to wash and dry the clothes on any day of the week except Monday. Yorkshire folk are deeply conservative and very suspicious of new-fangled ideas. Change is anathema in Yorkshire. My mother, ever the conformist, was scared that people might think her eccentric. So on Mondays she pegged out.

When Robin and I first moved into our house in Wellington, there was a twirly whirly framework in the back garden. A witch's hat sat on a pole and wires encircled it. Wet clothes that hung on the wires caught the breeze like sails and, if the conditions were right, the witch's hat spun in slow circles. Or not. Mostly not for it was old and creaky and its bearings had seized up.

"Oh, look," I said. "I can peg out."

"What a good idea," said Robin. "What's pegging out?"

I explained.

"But you go to work on Mondays," said Robin. "You won't have time to peg out."

"I have it all under control," I reassured her. "I'll peg out on Saturdays instead."

"They'll never let you go back to Yorkshire if you do that," Robin pointed out.

"I don't think I really care," I said. "There's nothing there for me any more. I've been away for so long now that I've even forgotten the words to the national anthem."

"God Save The Queen?"

"No - On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at."

"Ilkley Moor?"

"Baht 'at," I confirmed. "You can look it up on the internet. Mary Jane, worms, ducks and ritual cannibalism. Yorkshire folk have strange ways of passing the time..."

For a while, all went well. The Gods of Yorkshire failed to notice my ex-pat eccentricities and pegging out on Saturdays was a great success. But then, one day I hung a supersaturated solution of tee shirts on the contraption and the witch's hat, unable to take the strain, fell off its perch and shattered. Pegging out was no longer an option.

"What shall we do now?" I asked Robin.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Perhaps we should steamboat."

"Steamboat?"

"You know!" She struggled with the word for a while. "Headblock?"

"That's not quite right," I said. "Can you be a bit more precise?"

"Two syllables," she explained. "Means thinking hard. Earwig? No. Anyway, why do ears need artificial hairy extensions? That doesn't make any sense. All the very best ears are bald... I know! Brainstorm!"

"Yes!" I was enthusiastic. I went into the back room and picked up the favourite cardboard box belonging to Harpo The Cat, the one that is only half the size of his body. He

sleeps in it so often that the corners have torn away and now it is perfectly flat. Nevertheless it still looms large in his affections. I placed it carefully in the middle of the lounge floor.

"What's that for?" asked Robin, puzzled.

"Whatever you do," I said, "don't stand in it while we think this problem through. We'll only be able to solve it if we think outside the box, rather than inside it."

"Of course," said Robin. "Harpo will kill us if we stand in his favourite box."

"Well, yes," I said, "that is a point worth taking into consideration. But it is a well known fact that all traces of rational thought vanish when you step inside the box. You must have noticed how stupid Harpo looks when he climbs in and falls asleep. Boxes collapse brain wave functions. Everyone knows that."

"Everyone?"

"Well, cats and physicists anyway. Don't step in the box. Now, about this pegging out. We have a problem to solve."

"Maybe we need to move the paradigm," said Robin.

"No, we can't do that," I protested. "Shifting a paradigm around is dangerous. People might not notice that we'd moved it and they'd trip over it in the middle of the night on their way to the toilet. Anyway, I like the paradigm where it is. I think it looks pretty, standing on its plinth."

"I've got the answer," said Robin. "It's really very simple. All we have to do is string a bottom line between the boundary fences at the end of the day. That will add a synergistic improvement to the pegging out experience going forward. Problem solved."

"You're a genius," I said. "See? Thinking outside the box always works." I put Harpo's box away again before he noticed that I'd moved it.

It wasn't long before I had the back garden criss-crossed with a tangle of plastic coated string. Spiders built webs that joined the tangles together giving them extended walkways

on which they could bask in the sun while they sucked thoughtfully on a fly. Caterpillars festooned the lines with cocoons that swung in harmonic motion as the wind tickled their fancy. On sunny Saturdays I pegged out between the obstructions and the clothes soon dried.

And then one Saturday, while pegging out as usual, I turned away from the line to pick up something moist and squidgy from the basket. When I looked up again the tangle of lines had broken and there was washing all over the lawn. The constant friction between the sections of my complex construction had finally worn through one line and it had collapsed under the strain of my underwear. Who wouldn't?

I retrieved the fallen garments. They were covered in grass clippings and seeds. New Zealand seeds all come equipped with velcro-like hooks and they latch firmly on to any passing surface. Cats, tee shirts, knickers and bras - seeds don't care, they just like to hang on to stuff and never let go. Washing the clothes again would take care of the grass clippings, but all the seeds had to be removed one by one by hand. There had been a dozen things hanging on the line when it collapsed and each one had more than a hundred seeds firmly attached. I counted them all...

The Gods of Yorkshire are not mocked. Pegging out only works properly on Monday. Doing it on Saturday sows the seeds of destruction.

# Guarding The Garage

A year ago our garage was broken into and our car was stolen and trashed. Ever since then the Robson rituals for entering the garage and driving the new car to exotic destinations like the corner shop to buy a loaf of bread have become more than a little complex.

The first stage involves approaching the garage clutching a key whose size and shape suggests that it is best suited for unlocking a medieval portcullis. However that suggestion is very far from the truth. The key actually operates a primitive and rather rusty mortice lock on the side door of the garage. Once this door is unlocked and opened, the burglar alarm sensors detect the motion and the alarm begins a shrill whistle of warning. I now have about 30 seconds to remember my secret code and punch it into the keypad that is just to the left of the door. If I fail to remember the code in time, hideous klaxons split the welkin and drone missiles armed with atomic warheads take off from a secret base in Antarctica and zero in on the malefactors who stand paralysed with horror beneath the fearsome forces of my automated Jedi mind control rays.

Once I have turned the alarm off without releasing Armageddon onto an unsuspecting world I usually discover that I am in possession of the magic gadget for unlocking the car (because it is attached to my key ring and is therefore hard to forget), but I don't have the magic gadget for opening the garage door (because it isn't attached to my key ring and is therefore extremely easy to forget). So I head back to the house to get it.

"Don't worry," I yell to Robin as I re-enter the house. "I just forgot my thingy again." A year ago, Robin went out to the garage and came back into the house a few seconds

later to tell me that the garage had been broken into and the car was missing. Ever since then, we've made a point of reassuring each other if we have to come back to the house shortly after leaving it. Some traumatic events leave permanent scars on the psyche.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh," says Robin in acknowledgement as she burrows back down into the warm, dark nest she's created in the bed.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh," I call cheerfully to her as I retrieve the magic gadget and head back out to the garage. I now have two magic gadgets, one in each hand. When I press the appropriate buttons, the one in my right hand will open the car door and the one in my left hand will open the garage door. I begin to quiver with existential dread as dark choices fan out before me.

Making a decision, I press the button on my right hand magic gadget. The car doors unlock with a heavy thunk. The car flashes its indicators a couple of time to say hello. I open the driver side door and get in. I strap on my seat belt, adjust the mirror, turn on the engine and then press the green button on the left hand magic thingy I retrieved from the house. In my rear view mirror I watch the garage door rise majestically. When I judge that it is high enough, I reverse the car out into the road.

This is a procedure fraught with peril. To my right the road curves away from me out of sight and therefore I have absolutely no idea whether or not the local hoon is barrelling down it at his usual 100kph on the wrong side of the road. If he is, he will undoubtedly smash into my car before either of us even realises that I am in his way. The reason that he drives on the wrong side of the road is because he always takes the corner far too fast. Driving on the wrong side straightens his path a little and allows him to get round the bendy bit without losing control. I once saw him drive round the corner on the proper side of the road. Inexorable centrifugal forces pulled him off the tarmac and smashed

him into the grassy knoll that lurks in wait for such foolishness. He scratched his paintwork and dented a wing. Doubtless that was very painful and he has no wish to repeat it. So he has hit upon the simple solution of using the wrong side of the road instead. From his point of view, it works extremely well. Other road users are less convinced of the brilliance of his strategy.

Assuming that I get my car safely into the road, I now have a synchronisation problem to attend to. With one hand I have to change from reverse into drive, with another hand I have to steer the car and with my gripping hand I have to press the green button on the gadget again so that the garage door will close itself. Usually I manage to get all this right, but sometimes my concentration slips and I end up in neutral which means that the engine revs a lot but no forward motion is achieved. Of course this gives me even more time to check that the garage door is closing properly, so on balance it is probably a win-win situation. If it happens, I always pretend that I meant to do it. Then I lick myself very carefully, and rub my moist paws behind my ears. I purr a lot as well.

Once I feel that the world is convinced by my pretence, I find the proper gear and set off into the wild blue yonder, heading out on the highway, looking for adventure, for whatever comes my way. I am the steppenwolf driving to the magic theatre. Actually, I'm just going to the supermarket to do the weekly shop, but I'm a romantic at heart...

Returning home reverses the ritual. I drive up the street, slowing down as I get closer to my house. Once I pass the last turn off, I signal left, much to the puzzlement of the man who is tailgating me because he knows there are no more side streets to turn into. I go slower and slower and he goes slower and slower. The slower we go, the more angry he gets. I can see gestures in my rear view mirror. They are not friendly ones.

As soon as I have a clear line of sight to the garage, I pick up the magic gadget and press the green button. The garage door begins to open. Speedy reactions are now of the essence. I put down the gadget and turn the steering wheel hard left. The car swings towards the garage. With luck the door will be high enough not to impede my dramatic entrance and hopefully I won't have misjudged the angle and started heading for the edge of the door instead of the centre. This last is very embarrassing - it requires much reversal and re-alignment of the car together with a lot more washing behind my ears and possibly even a good licking of my bottom.

As I leave the road, my tailgater hoots his horn and accelerates wildly round the bend. I hope he'll meet the hoon coming the other way but that has never happened. Perhaps he is the hoon.

I get out of the car, close the garage door and watch the burglar alarm flash angry red lights at me. It dearly wants to tear me limb from limb, but it isn't turned on yet, so it can't. I lock the car and stand patiently by the small side door, portcullis key in hand. Eventually the red lights stop flashing and a green tick mark illuminates on the control panel. Moving slowly so as not to invoke the sensors again, I punch in the secret code. Sinister beeps start to sound as the atomic weapons arm themselves and the Jedi mind control rays begin creeping from their cabinets. I have thirty seconds to leave the garage and lock the door behind me. Usually I make it in plenty of time.

I go back into the house.

"Good news!" I call to Robin.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh?" she asks. Fortunately I speak Robin fluently. This time she is saying, "What's the good news?"

"I'm home!"

And so things stood until the curious events which took place on one particular Sunday not so very long ago...Eerie



music and wavy lines...Wavy music and eerie lines...

We were just sitting down to dinner. In our house sitting down to dinner means sitting in the lounge with our plates on our knees so that we can watch the television while we eat. That means we don't have to talk to each other – that's very important. Eating and talking at the same time is not polite. But we don't want embarrassing silences either, so we watch the television to fill in the gaps. Some conversation does occasionally take place of course. Groans of pleasure as the food is chewed and swallowed are always allowed as is yelling at any cat who takes a sudden sly interest in the knee that balances the plate.

Suddenly there was a banging on the front door. Rather resentfully, I put down my dinner plate and went to answer it. There was my next door neighbour Paul dressed in plate armour and brandishing a huge sword.

"Let me at the bastards!" he yelled.

In the background I could hear the burglar alarm in the garage howling away and in the distance was the faint sound of ballistic missiles on their way from the south pole.

"Oh," I said. "the burglar alarm in the garage is going off. I hadn't realised. I think the TV must be on too loud."

"I'm surprised you didn't notice," said Paul. "I heard it loud and clear and so I came dashing round immediately to see if you were OK. Your garage door is wide open. That's what must have set it off."

"Oh no!" I was horrified. "Is the car still there?"

"Yes," said Paul. "Whoever broke in must have got scared and probably ran away as soon as the alarm went off."

We went down to the garage and I turned the alarm off. Sure enough, the door was wide open but the car was still sitting safely inside. I closed the garage door and Paul and I examined it carefully. There was no sign of damage to the door or to the car. Whoever had broken in appeared to have done it without effort.

"I wonder if someone has a door opener that works on the same frequency as mine?" I said.

Paul was dubious. "I suppose it's possible," he said, "but the odds against it are astronomical. That's why these things are considered to be so safe."

I rechecked the door one last time, set the burglar alarm and went back to my dinner. I was just swallowing the last mouthful when Paul banged on the door again.

"Something's going on," he said. "The rat bastards have come back."

Sure enough, the garage door was wide open and the alarm was howling. I closed the door and reset the alarm. As before, there was no sign of damage.

"This is all very puzzling," I said. "Did you notice anyone running away as you came over?"

"Not a soul," he said.

We went back to our respective houses and I went into the bedroom to put the garage door opener back into my sock drawer, which is where it normally lives. As I put it away, I noticed that the spare garage door opener was sitting in plain view on the top of my dressing table. Oh...

Light bulbs went on in my head. It was time for an experiment. Without moving the door opener from its position on the dressing table, I reached over and pressed its green button. Sure enough the garage door opened and the burglar alarm started to howl.

I raced out to the garage just as Paul arrived.

"Where are they?" he yelled. "Let me at them. I need to kill somebody!"

I turned the alarm off and closed the door.

"I've got it sussed," I said. "The spare opener is lying on top of the dressing table. I just pushed the button on it and despite the fact that the gadget was deep inside the house and also pointing directly away from the garage, the garage door still managed to pick up the signal and open wide."

"Wow!" said Paul, impressed. "That's one heck of a strong signal. I didn't know those things worked backwards and through walls."

"Well it seems that they do," I said. "It took me by surprise as well."

"But how did the button get pressed in the first place. Weren't you and Robin both in the lounge?"

"Yes we were," I told him. "But there's a very innocent looking cat fast asleep on the bed at the moment. I suspect that he must have walked over the garage door opener on his way to his nap."

"Ah yes," said Paul. "That sounds exactly like the sort of thing that a cat would do."

"From now on I'm going to keep the spare opener out of sight in my sock drawer along with the usual one." I told him.

"Sounds like a good idea," said Paul.

So that's what I did, and the garage door has behaved perfectly ever since.

# Alan And The Weather Bomb

"Weather bomb! Weather bomb! Watch out for the weather bomb!"

The newspapers and the television were full of dire predictions for the next day's weather. Torrential rains and 150kph winds were forecast. Everyone was advised to hunker down and not travel anywhere unless it was absolutely essential. The weekend promised to be stormy.

On Saturday morning the weather bomb exploded. Robin and I awoke to howling gales and torrents of rain smashing furiously against the windows. The whole house was shuddering under the impact. Bess tied a knot in her bladder and refused to go outside. Harpo said, "Ha! It's only weather," and pranced out into it. His fur streamlined itself as the wind hit him and he staggered slightly under the impact. Then he vanished bravely into the bushes.

"Lunatic!" said Bess, and she tucked her nose firmly under her tail and went back to sleep.

"Alan," said Robin in worried tones.

"Mmmm?"

"There's a big pool of water in the kitchen."

I wandered into the kitchen. A large puddle looked at me. I looked at the large puddle. My first thought was to blame Harpo, with Bess a close second. "I wonder if it's cat pee?"

I squatted down next to the puddle and sniffed. Then I dipped a finger into it. Then I sucked my finger.

"Yuck!" squealed Robin.

"Watch closely," I said. "I'll do it again."

I did it again.

"Euuuurrrrggghhhhhh!!!!"

"You weren't watching closely," I said. "I'll do it slowly."

I dipped my first finger into the puddle, raised my hand towards my mouth and sucked my second finger. "See? It's just a trick to disgust the audience. Works every time. Nobody ever notices you change fingers."

"So what's the verdict?"

"I don't think it's cat pee." This time I sucked the proper finger. "No, it's just water. I wonder where it's coming from."

As the words left my mouth, something went *Plop!* on my head.

"I saw that," said Robin.

We both looked up to the ceiling. Slowly, a drop of water formed and then dripped down to the floor.

"Damn!" I said. "Looks like the weather bomb might have broken the roof."

Robin cleaned up the puddle and I fetched a bucket. We ate breakfast to the accompaniment of a rhythmic *plinking* sound as, one by one, drops formed and fell into the bucket.

Robin went towards the room where her computer lives. She wanted to play *Skyrim*. She had monsters to kill. But on the way there, she walked into trouble.

"Alan! There's another puddle outside the bathroom."

Water was dripping down from the trapdoor that covers the loft entrance. I got the stepladder and climbed up to the ceiling. The trapdoor isn't hinged, it's a box which sits in a little well. I lifted it up, turned it slightly and slid it out of its housing. Water poured out of it all over me. I climbed down the ladder and showed it to Robin.

"Water's been dripping into this for quite some time," I said. "Look, the weebix board that it's made of is absolutely saturated. And once it couldn't absorb any more, the water started dripping out onto the floor below. I wonder if I can see where it's coming from..."

We put the loft trapdoor into the bath to drain and dry and I climbed up the ladder again with a torch.

The loft stretched out before me, dark, gloomy and cobwebby. The torch cast small circles of light on the huge silver tubes of our dehumidifier system which snaked hither and yon, looking for all the world like alien caterpillars exploring the dark and hidden recesses of the roof space. The cold water tank, a tall copper cylinder, lurked just to my left. I examined it carefully in case it was the source of the leak, but it seemed sturdy and watertight. I shone the torch up towards the roof. Two damp tracks traced their way across the ceiling beams. Even as I watched, a drop of water formed at the base of one of them.

*Plink!*

I climbed down the ladder. Robin placed another strategic bucket beneath this second leak.

*Plink! Plink!*

Stereophonic drips. One for each ear, each drip slightly out of sync with the other, just for maximum annoyance.

"It's definitely coming from the roof," I said. "We'll have to get a roof man. It could be expensive..."

"Well there's no use calling anyone now," said the ever practical Robin. "The weather bomb is booming and it's Saturday. Nobody can do anything until things calm down, and even if they could they'd charge us several large fortunes to come out after hours. It will have to wait until Monday."

I resigned myself to two days of *plinking* noises. However by the next day the wind and the rain had died down. Small streaks of sunshine peeped shyly from behind thick, grey clouds. The drips from the ceiling died away. Dry silence descended on the house. On Robin's advice, I replaced the trapdoor into the loft even though it was still quite damp.

"It's really hot in the loft," said Robin. "That and the dehumidifier will dry it out a lot faster than anything else we can do."

Them there interweb tubes proved to be very helpful when it came to identifying people who fixed roofs. And so,

on the following Monday morning, I rang a local firm and spoke to a nice man called Simon.

"You were lucky to catch me," said Simon. "The phone's been ringing off the hook."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "I'm sure that I'm just one among many. Though I am, of course, the most important."

"Indeed you are," he agreed gravely. "I'll pop round in an hour or so to see just what the damage is."

He was as good as his word.

"Come in," I said. "Let me show you what happened."

First I showed him the buckets with a derisively small amount of water in them. "A lot of it has evaporated over the last couple of days," I said somewhat shamefacedly.

Simon nodded wisely. "It happens," he said.

I picked up a torch. "Let me show you what I found in the loft," I said.

I climbed up the stepladder and removed the trapdoor. It was bone dry. I shone the torch on to the beams that the water had been dripping from. They too were bone dry. There was not a trace of water in the loft.

"There's not a trace of water in the loft," I said to Simon. "This is embarrassing"

"Let me have a look," said Simon. He climbed up the stepladder and looked around, but he had no more success than me. "Nope," he said. "Nothing there. I'll have a look at the roof. It's probably loose nails or something."

He went outside and got his ladder. The cats and I listened to him clomping about on top of the house. "That sounds like a bloody big bird up there," said Harpo. "Can I go on to the roof and kill it?"

"No!"

Eventually Simon reappeared. "The roof is in quite good condition," he said. "But they've used lead nails to attach it to the beams and the nails have reacted with the roofing iron and it's started to corrode."

"Galvanic corrosion," I said. "I know about that. We studied it in my physical chemistry courses at university. Two metals in contact with each other generate small electrical currents which can accelerate corrosion."

"Simon looked surprised. "Most people have never heard of galvanic corrosion," he said. "They accuse me of making it up just to pad the bill. Anyway, you really should have the nails replaced with more modern screws which have an insulating layer on them to minimise the ion migration. The corrosion is particularly bad around the area just above where you saw the water coming in."

"How much will it cost to fix?" I asked.

Simon made a face. "Well, it's quite a long job," he said. "It will probably take most of a day. We'll have to extract the old nails, treat the rust and then put the new screws in. Hmmmm..."

He did calculations in his head and came up with a final total that was somewhere between 'wow' and 'boinggggggg'. I did a double take. "Can I have a discount for knowing about galvanic corrosion?" I asked.

He rounded down to the nearest dollar. I decided to put the 40 cents I'd saved straight into my piggy bank. "When can you start?"

"March 15th, weather permitting," said Simon.

The weather permitted and Simon knocked on my door early in the morning of the 15th.

"Can I plug this cable in somewhere?" he asked, proffering a dirty orange cord with a three pin plug on the end.

"Of course," I said and headed off to the laundry where there is a spare power socket and a small window to feed the cable through. Simon gave it the Simon seal of approval and clambered on to the roof, his body festooned with complex roofing tools. Soon the sounds of banging and power screwing began to echo through the house.



Harpo, the cat who isn't afraid of anything except the things that he is afraid of, ran out through the cat flap never to be seen again until tea time. Bess, the cat who isn't afraid of anything at all, stared curiously at the roof and then went back to sleep.

One by one, Simon pulled out each roof nail, cast a magic spell on any corrosion that he found, and then screwed a screw into the hole the nail left behind. On and on and on...

What a mind-numbingly tedious job.

There was a knock on the door.

"There you go," said Simon. "You've probably got the most securely fastened roof in the whole of New Zealand. I've never seen so many nails in a roof before." He showed me the box he'd been putting the nails in. At a rough estimate there were at least umpteen and three of them. "The original roofer must have been really worried about the high winds."

"Well this is Wellington," I said. "It's a notoriously windy city. And I do live on top of a hill."

"I suppose you are a bit exposed," said Simon. "Do you get the northerly winds or the southerly winds?"

"Yes," I said.

# Alan And Robin Have A Holiday

We were going to be away for six days. So I put my small suitcase on the bed, opened it up and put six underpants, six pairs of socks, six shirts and a spare pair of trousers into it. I closed the suitcase.

"I've finished packing," I said to Robin. "Now it's your turn." It had taken me less than five minutes to pack so there was plenty of time left over for Robin. I was sure she'd need every second of it.

Robin chose a much larger suitcase than I had. "The weather forecast says it's going to be warm and sunny all week," she said. "I'll just pack my summer clothes."

She put the left hand side of her wardrobe into the suitcase.

"But it might rain," she said. She sounded worried at the prospect. "Perhaps I'll take some winter clothes as well, just in case."

She put the right hand side of her wardrobe into the suitcase.

She frowned thoughtfully. "Nothing in there matches my Hannah Montana shoes," she said. "I need more purple." She began opening drawers. Soon there was plenty of purple in the suitcase. "Should I take my summer nightie or my winter pyjamas?" she asked.

"Yes," I advised.

"Good idea," she said. And in they went.

"What about your new trousers?" I asked. "Did you put those in?"

"Oh no! I forgot my new trousers!"

By now she had reached the bottom row of drawers in her dressing table. Empty drawers peeked down forlornly from the top. "I think I might have finished packing," she said. "Can you sit on the suitcase so I can close it."

"You have finished packing," I said. "There isn't anything left anywhere in the bedroom. It's all in your suitcase."

"Are you sure?" She didn't sound convinced.

"I'm sure," I said.

I took the suitcases out to the car which sagged noticeably on its suspension when I heaved Robin's suitcase into its boot. Now we were ready to go on holiday...

New Zealand is a long, thin country. It has lots of up and down. It has very little left and hardly any right at all. We were going to Rotorua and so today we chose the direction of up. We set off very early in the morning. The sun was scarcely over the horizon and there was almost no traffic. Patrols of self-important pukekos policed the side of the road, pecking the verges, shaking their feathered heads sadly as we sped past them and raising peremptory feet to emphasise the road rules that they felt honour bound to enforce.

We stopped for morning tea in Taihape, home to all the gumboot fetishists in the North Island. We admired the statue of a gumboot that graces the town centre. We ate at the Brown Sugar Cafe. I had gumboot soup and Robin enjoyed some rubber sole food.

Onwards!

The roads were still deserted. We sped northwards for mile after empty mile. The sun shone and the countryside glowed in the freshness of the brand new day. As we drove across the central plateau the volcanic cones of the mountains stood out clear and stark, grim silhouettes against a cloudless blue sky. Ruapehu, the actor who played Mount Doom in Peter Jackson's production of ***Lord Of The Rings***, was resplendent in his movie star sunglasses. There

was a large queue waiting for his autograph. We drove on by without stopping and he hissed his disapproval at us.

Lunch in Taupo. We parked by the lake which sparkled like liquid diamonds as the sun bounced off the wavelets. Wet black rocks were dotted hither and yon close to the shore. Each and every rock was being stood upon by one, and only one, preening water bird. Birds in New Zealand are not very good at sharing.

By now we were deep into the thermal areas. Mysterious steam spouted over the trees and as we got close to Rotorua we got hellish whiffs of fire and brimstone.

"I love the smell of hydrogen sulphide in the morning," I paraphrased.

"Can I fart now?" asked Robin.

"Please do," I said.

We checked in to our hotel and were shown to our room. I unpacked my case. I put my six shirts in a drawer together with my spare trousers, and I put my six underpants and six pairs of socks in another drawer.

Robin elected to have a horizontal wardrobe. She unpacked her suitcase on to the spare bed and surveyed the results with a sceptical eye.

"I haven't got nearly enough socks," she said. "And I need new shoes to match the socks that I did bring with me."

"We can go shopping tomorrow," I reassured her.

"And the four jackets I brought are all either too thick or too thin or the wrong colour."

"We can go shopping tomorrow," I reassured her.

"Okay." She smiled. "I'm having a wonderful holiday," she said. She hooked her arm through mine. "Let's go and have dinner."

The next day we went shopping. Robin bought socks and shoes and jackets; not too large, not too small, not too thick and not too thin. All were just right. Then, satisfied and satiated with shopping, we went on a trip on the duck bus.

This is a WWII vintage landing craft which has been painted bright yellow so as to resemble a bathtub rubber ducky. It takes tourists on scenic trips around and across the lakes that surround Rotorua. As we boarded the bus, we were each handed a duck call device.

"When we drive past people on the streets," said the tour guide, "I want you all to blow loudly on your duck call to give them some encouragement. Pay no attention to the sign language that they employ in return. It's just a quaint local custom."

We quacked our way through Rotorua until we reached a big blue lake.

"This is called the Blue Lake," said the guide. "There's a green lake further over that way. It's called the Green Lake. But we aren't allowed to explore that because it is a sacred lake and we don't want to desecrate it."

We drove out into the Blue Lake. A group of young men were playing with a small radio controlled speed boat. A stately swan swam past and the speedboat veered towards it. Suddenly all trace of dignity vanished as the swan, wings flapping and feet spiralling in a mad, splashing panic, ran away from the roaring monster. I began to feel as if I was starring in a Disney cartoon.

The water in the lake was clear and clean. We could see all the way to the bottom where weeds waved in the current. I might have seen a fish.

"The lake is stocked with trout," said the driver of the duck. "I often come fishing here and I've caught some wonderful fish. Nothing tastes quite as good as a freshly caught trout. Some of them grow very large - six pounds or more. Once I caught a nine pounder."

Someone quacked derisively.

"No really," said the driver. "I did. I've got photoshopped pictures to prove it."

There were holiday houses on the lake shore. "That one," said the guide, pointing out a special house, "is one of the

most luxurious lodges in the world. It costs \$10,000 a night to stay there and the minimum period you can book it for is three days. Stephen Spielberg stays there quite regularly and so does Peter Jackson. But you never find out they've been there until after they've gone. They value their privacy, and \$10,000 a night buys you a lot of privacy."

The duck bus resounded with quacks of amazement and quacks of jealousy as we all tried to imagine being rich enough to afford a lot of privacy. We drove back across the lake and up on to the shore. Then we quacked back into town just in time for afternoon tea.

The next day seemed to be ideally designed for getting lost in a maze and so that's exactly what we did.

"There are two entrances," explained the maze lady. "The first one is harder than the second one. But whichever one you choose, the rules require you to exit the maze from the same gate that you went in by."

"I see," said Robin.

"There are four interconnected mazes," said the lady, "and in the far corner of each one there is a chamber with a coloured roof. There's a red one, a green one, a blue one and a yellow one. You have to reach all of them before you are allowed to leave the maze."

"I see," said Robin.

"Don't worry if it takes you a long time or if you get thoroughly lost," said the maze lady. "We turn the lights on when it gets dark, so you'll always be able to see where you are going."

"I see," said Robin.

We chose an entrance. Mazes are Robin's speciality and so she led our little expedition. She chose a modified left hand rule strategy and it didn't take us long to find the red corner and the blue corner. I took photographs to prove that we were there. However the yellow and green corners proved particularly elusive and it took quite a while before

Robin's rigidly adhered to strategy finally succeeded in tracking them down. I took more photographs.

"Now all we have to do is find our way out," I said.

"I see," said Robin.

After much back tracking and track backing, we finally emerged from the maze. But catastrophe struck! We exited from the wrong gate!

"You broke the rules," shrieked the maze lady. "You'll have to buy an ice cream."

We soon discovered that this wasn't the only maze in Rotorua. The city itself is a maze; the streets are laid out in a sensible, regular rectangular grid, which is very confusing to those of us who come from cities where the streets meander on a whim through multiple dimensions (I'll swear the centre of Wellington is a perfect Klein bottle). But in addition to this grid of maze-like city streets, there is also a much more traditional hedge maze growing on the outskirts of the town.

"Your goal is to reach the centre of the maze," said the maze man. "If you get scared or lost or if you just want to come out for a rest, there's a series of red doors that lead straight out."

"Can we cheat and use the red doors to reach the centre?" I asked.

"Certainly not," he said. "They only open from the side you aren't on."

That seemed clear enough. So we set off to explore. Having used the left hand rule on our first maze, we decided to use the right hand rule on this one. The strategy worked perfectly except for the occasions when we had to turn left. Soon, after lots and lots of walking around gently curving hedgerows, we made it to the centre where we were rewarded by the sight of a genuine pirate boat flying the skull and crossbones.

After a rest, we left the maze through the red doors. There was one per hedge circle and I counted them on the

way out. I was astonished to find that we had travelled through a dozen hedgerows to reach the centre. It hadn't felt like nearly that many.

Close by the hedge maze was the Paradise Springs Trout Hatchery and Lion Park. Here both trout and lions are bred and possibly even interbred (the shaggy manes on the larger trout were a dead giveaway).

The river running through the grounds had a fiercely strong current. Ducks paddled madly against it, trying hard to stay in place and seldom succeeding. As they got tired, the current would whisk them away out of sight and out of mind. One duck was pretending it was a Pooh Stick. It allowed the current to sweep it under the bridge that Robin and I were standing on and then it struggled back upstream to do it all over again. We dashed from side to side of the bridge so as to join in the game properly. The duck gave us an exhausted quack of appreciation as it finally gave up and drifted away downstream.

Beneath the struggling ducks, gigantic trout all faced upstream, mouths wide open, letting the water flow past them and nibbling on any goodies that it was carrying past them. They were obviously completely full of yummy food because none of them showed any real interest in the trout treats that Robin and I tossed into the water ahead of them. But the ducks seemed very partial to the trout treats. They came racing in from all corners of the universe and squabbled loudly and fiercely over the manna that rained down from heaven. Ducks are partial to anything that will fit into their bills. I never met a duck that wasn't hungry.

Past the trout hatchery were some fenced in paddocks with goats and miniature horses, an alpaca, several pigs and the cutest wallabies you ever saw in your life. Robin fed the goats and the wallabies from the palm of her hand. The wallabies were beautiful, gentle creatures with soulful eyes and wistful faces. Robin immediately fell in love.

"Can we take them home with us?"



"No."

She went to feed the alpaca but was warned off by someone who seemed to know what they were talking about.

"Don't get too near the alpaca. They spit green slime at you."

Wishing to avoid green slime, we gave the alpaca a wide berth as we headed for the lion enclosure where we met two eight week old lion cubs. They were, of course, utterly delightful and completely irresistible animals. One was absolutely convinced that her right front paw was incapable of exploring by itself, and so she carried it around in her mouth to make sure that it wouldn't miss out on anything as she staggered around her enclosure on her other three legs. At first I thought that perhaps she had hurt her paw, but the keepers reassured me that this was perfectly normal behaviour for her.

The keepers picked up the cubs and cuddled them close and then we were allowed to stroke them. Their coats were quite rough and the fur was much coarser than I had expected it to be. But nevertheless I felt immensely privileged to be so close to such magnificent animals.

Everywhere in Rotorua is thermal but some bits are more thermal than others. The best of them, according to the Lonely Planet Guide, is Orakei Korako. As you drive up to it, the first thing you see is a huge toilet block labelled "Guysers" and "Galsers". Once you have finished splitting your sides with laughter at the multi-level puns, you wander down to a jetty where a ferry takes you over the lake to a boardwalk that winds through the thermal area.

Hot water cascades down silica terraces, depositing more stuff as it goes. These are the largest terraces still in existence in New Zealand. The famous Pink and White terraces were larger, but they were destroyed when Mount Tarawera erupted in 1886.

"It's the same principle that causes fur to build up in kettles," I explained to Robin, "only on a much larger scale."

"So what we are seeing here is really Nature's Own tea kettle," she observed.

"Yes," I said. "But I'm not sure I want to drink a cup of whatever brew it is that She is mashing."

Unexpected steam was everywhere. It rose in great clouds from the silica terraces and in small wisps from the side of the boardwalk. Rather to my surprise, there was life everywhere. Not only were plants growing right to the edges of the terraces, there were large green patches of algae on the terraces themselves. Dragonflies zipped and hovered through the clouds of steam and spider webs glistened in the foliage.

There was one large patch of sulphur gleaming bright yellow against the white silica. From a lookout point perched high above it we could see that it was ringed with green and brown and orange. This section is known as the Artist's Palette, for obvious reasons.

Pools of boiling mud played Bach Cantatas for us but the two major geysers in the area remained sullenly silent as we walked past them.

The boardwalk twists and turns and rises and falls for almost 3 kilometres. When you get back to the ferry landing you press a button and the ferryman in the cafe on the other side of the lake puts down his cup of tea and comes and picks you up. When we got back to the shore we had lunch on the verandah that overlooked the lake. We could still see steam drifting into the sky from the thermal region.

Suddenly, without any warning at all, a huge plume of steam and water roared into the air high above the treetops.

"Look," said the ferryman who was drinking tea at the next table. "Geyser!"

He was a man of few words but every word was important. One of the geysers that had ignored us so thoroughly just a few minutes before had now decided to

blow its top. I was sorry to have missed seeing it close to, but even at a distance it was magnificently impressive.

Robin and I drove back to Rotorua in silent amazement. The Lonely Planet Guide was absolutely right. Surely this thermal area must be one of the most stunning sights in the world.

Our holiday gave us six days of blue skies and sunshine. The weather gods were definitely on our side. They proved this by sending us torrential rain on the day we returned home. Rotorua was sad to see us go - even the skies were crying.

# Looking Backwards From The Year 2012

As I write this, we are just over a week away from New Zealand's 33rd National Science Fiction Convention. I have been asked to be on some panels to discuss the highs and lows of the conventions that I have attended in the past.

Actually, I'm not at all sure that I can tell the difference between the good bits and the bad bits. I don't think I've ever been to a convention that I didn't enjoy in some way, shape or form. But some people's high spots are other people's bad memories, and some stories are definitely in dubious taste. Let's just see where the memories take me...

I first started going to conventions in England in the 1970s. The most immediate impression they made on me was that here were people whose books I'd been reading for years, and they were ordinary people, just like you and me. I was mildly disappointed to find that Brian Aldiss didn't have two heads - I'd always assumed that such a brilliant writer must have had more brains than the average, and surely he'd need somewhere to keep them, wouldn't he? But it was encouraging to learn that he liked his beer and that, despite the lack of a second head, he was always witty and insightful.

James Blish, waspish and scholarly, already in the grip of the illness that would kill him a couple of years after we first met, was unfailingly charming. He was a literary polymath, interested in everything and he too was never far from a pint of beer.

Harry Harrison, striding up and down the stage and yammering into a microphone:

"I want to talk about two things. Something that interests you - sex! And something that interests me - my new book!"

refreshed his speaking voice with sips of beer. I began to spot a trend.

John Brunner, urbane, sophisticated and opinionated would drive his audiences to screaming fury as he said outrageous things with a supercilious sneer. It was years before I realised that he was doing it deliberately. He took great delight in winding people up.

I met Ken Bulmer, the man of a thousand pseudonyms. Fortunately he left a few spare ones lying around for John Brosnan to use. Between them they wrote almost every bit of pulp fiction that was published in England in the 1970s. Someone once asked Bulmer why he chose to write under the silly and very unconvincing name of Tully Zetford.

"Because I was completely fed up with Roger Zelazny always being at the bottom of every alphabetical author list," he said. "I thought somebody else deserved a turn."

Ken Bulmer told us a funny story. He'd just got married and he and his new wife were spending their honeymoon at a friend's cottage somewhere deep in the English countryside. The cottage was charming and picturesque and their host was warm and welcoming. He showed them to their room. They dumped their suitcases onto the bed to start unpacking, and they immediately discovered that the bed squeaked very loudly. Ken had a brilliant idea which he whispered to his wife. She giggled and agreed.

And so they spent their wedding night taking it in turn to jump rhythmically up and down on the bed. Slow, slow. Quick! Quick! Slow...

When one got tired, the other took over. Hour after squeaky hour. At breakfast the next day, his host shook Bulmer's hand admiringly.

I met Anne McCaffrey in a lift. She was painted green from head to toe. James Blish had written a play which was

being staged as a convention highlight. Anne was cast as a witch and she was anxious to do a good job. As the lift descended, she practised cackling. She was extremely good at it.

At various conventions, random members of The Deep Fix, Michael Moorcock's backing band, would play for us. Usually without Michael Moorcock, who'd largely given up coming to conventions. But sometimes he turned up and once he autographed a book for me. He scribbled his name on the title page and then he drew a cartoon of a rather dyspeptic looking chicken.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a moor cock!" he said, nearly laughing himself into a seizure.

But the highlight of every British convention in the 1970s was Bob Shaw's Serious Scientific Talk. About half an hour before Bob was due to speak, the bars would begin to empty and everybody would crowd into the room hoping for a good seat. Bob, completely stone faced, would read from a prepared speech in his soft, lilting Irish voice. The speeches were always full of utterly demented science, excruciating puns and running gags that just went on and on. And when you were sure the gags couldn't run any further, he'd force them to take one more step. And then another. And another.

It was very important to be sitting down for Bob's Serious Scientific Talks. Those people who were too late for a seat were in grave danger of falling over as they lost control of their motor functions from laughing too much. I have seen people literally sobbing with laughter at Bob's presentations, so weak with hysteria that it was a good five minutes after the talk ended before they were able to leave their seats in search of a reviving beer or three. And all through his presentation, Bob's face never once slipped. Indeed, he usually managed to look puzzled, even slightly annoyed that

these people were taking his serious scientific ideas so lightly...

"I had a terrible hangover from all the room parties I attended last night," he said, opening one of his talks. "But one of the convention committee brought me a guaranteed cure from the chemist's shop next door to the hotel. It's a local anaesthetic..."

At one convention, my friend Howard decided that he would spend the entire four days both completely drunk and wide awake.

"Sleeping", he declared, "is not an option."

None of us could persuade him that these were mutually incompatible ambitions.

"No - it's all quite logical," he said. "Since I won't need a hotel room to sleep in, I'll have heaps of money left to spend on beer."

By the third day of the convention, he was more than a little the worse for wear, noticeably fraying around the edges. We went to a room party where he saw a slim young man sitting alone by a window. He staggered over and introduced himself. "Hello, I'm Howard," he said. "And you look just like Donny Osmond!"

Then he opened the window and vomited copiously out into the street.

The young man seemed most impressed by this conversational gambit and he and Howard were soon fast friends. He spent the rest of the convention with us and we discovered that he was the son of a writer called Edmund Cooper. Cooper is largely forgotten these days. He died in 1982 and his books are all out of print, but at the time of which we speak, he enjoyed a modest reputation. I was very fond of Cooper's books, and I had long been hoping to meet him at some convention or other, but I never did. He was quite reclusive. He didn't like the gross immaturity of the fan community very much, and so he never came to conventions.

However Howard's unique social skills opened up a private channel of communication with Edmund Cooper for us, and as a direct result of the wonderful time his son had at the convention with us, Cooper agreed to come and give a talk to the Nottingham Science Fiction group that Howard and I both ran. He proved to be a fantastic speaker – he was loud, opinionated and argumentative and we all had lots of fun. It was one of our most successful meetings ever.

My favourite of Cooper's novels is **Kronk**, which was also published under the title **Son Of Kronk**. It turned out to be Cooper's favourite novel as well. He autographed a copy for me. In it he wrote:

For Alan, who actually bought it!  
In this one I worked out all my pet hates.

Sometimes low moments can lead on to good things.

By the early 1980s I was living in New Zealand and I helped with the organisation of some conventions here. The first one with which I was closely involved had Harlan Ellison as the guest of honour. I was a little worried about this for Harlan had the reputation of being difficult to get on with. Almost everyone who met him had some sort of Harlan Ellison horror story to tell.

Anyway, the great day arrived and we met Harlan at the airport and brought him to the hotel where he would be staying. Almost his first words to us were:

"I'm the guest of honour – make sure to use me!"

And he meant every word of it. He was very conscious that a guest of honour can make or break a convention. He was enormously flattered to have been asked to come to the bottom of the world and he was determined that this convention was going to be a success. He insisted on being involved in absolutely everything that was going on. He made himself very visible and very approachable. I found him to be pleasant, polite and charming. I have no Harlan Ellison horror stories to tell.

But I do have a Harlan Ellison story.



The con committee took him out to dinner. We had a wonderful time. The food was beautifully cooked and impeccably served, the conversation flowed, a good time was had by all. As we left the restaurant and started wandering back to the hotel Harlan said, "That was a truly superb meal. I hope you left a good tip."

"No," I said. "We didn't leave a tip at all. We don't tip in New Zealand."

"Oh my God!" Harlan was horrified. "You didn't leave a tip!"

He raced back into the restaurant and started handing out fistfuls of money to any staff member who wandered into view. "Fantastic meal, thank you. Thank you so much."

I have no idea how much money he gave in tips, but it definitely wasn't a small amount. I won't hear a bad word said about Harlan. He was a joy and a delight.

Actually I think all convention guests are good guests. I don't think we've ever had a disappointing guest though some have certainly had their idiosyncrasies.

One charming and delightful guest insisted on being supplied with prostitutes and marijuana. Once the committee had arranged that to his satisfaction, the rest of the convention went fantastically well.

Another guest claimed that he was using the trip as a tax write off. He was researching a novel, part of which would be set in New Zealand. He asked us lots of questions and took copious notes so that he would have something to show the tax department when it came time to fill in his return. I'm sure he got a huge tax refund from his notes. What a shame he didn't use any of them in the book that he wrote. The New Zealand sequences in it were thoroughly unconvincing.

Alan Dean Foster also wrote a novel set in New Zealand. It's called **Maori** and it's about the eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886. It's a brilliant novel which I recommend unreservedly. Foster had spent his honeymoon in New

Zealand and he fell in love with the country. The novel was a direct result of what he learned during the time he spent here, and there's no doubt that he did his homework well.

He was absolutely thrilled to be asked back many years later as a guest of honour at a convention. And he enjoyed himself just as much the second time around. It goes without saying that he proved to be a perfectly wonderful guest.

Joe Haldeman has been a guest of honour at three New Zealand conventions. At two of those conventions I was the corresponding fan guest of honour, so between the both of us we had the convention sewn up.

Joe and his wife Gay have a huge number of friends in New Zealand and it was very noticeable that at the last convention where he was a guest many people who had not been to a New Zealand convention for years and years made a special point of coming just to see Joe and Gay again.

In 1995 Roger Zelazny and Vonda McIntyre were joint guests of honour. And true to form, they were wonderful guests. Accompanying Roger was Jane Lindskold, then just starting out on her writing career. She won the heart of everyone she met. We always claimed that she was our special, secret guest of honour. She has since had a successful career as a science fiction and fantasy novelist, and we are all enormously proud of her.

Jane and I have kept in touch, and over the last year we have written a book together. So from a purely personal point of view, I have to say that the Norman ConQuest of 1995 was the best ever New Zealand convention.

Conventions have high points and they have low points and sometimes those points coincide. The masquerade at one British convention is a perfect example. The high point was a woman who was dressed as the viewpoint character from Robert Silverberg's novella **Nightwings**. She was stark naked, apart from her wings, and she was the most

beautiful person I have ever seen in my life. The whole room reverberated to the distinctive sound of jaws dropping *thunk!* to the floor. She got huge ovation, and she won every prize in sight.

And then came the low point. Brian Burgess came on stage. Brian was an English fan who had been coming to conventions for years. He always had a secret supply of pork pies and milk which he sold at outrageous prices to desperate, starving fans in the small hours of the morning. Many a fannish life has been saved with pork pies and milk at 4.00am. Everybody knew Brian. He was an institution.

Brian was a large and wobbly man and he too came on stage (almost) stark naked. He was wearing only shattered underpants and a ray gun. He stomped furiously around the stage, waving his ray gun and shouting incomprehensible threats in lower Middle-Martian, jowls and belly undulating in unison. Only sheer willpower kept the remains of his underpants in place. The judges awarded him a special prize for Skimpiest Costume Ever.

Of course the fans are the life and soul of any convention. And just as conventions succeed or fail with the guest of honour so too they succeed or fail with the behaviour of the fans...

Once there was a room party, and in the small hours of the morning it dawned on someone that all the married men in New Zealand fandom were together in the same room. It was quite clear what had to happen next. A new world record needed to be set.

"Let's see if we can get all the married men in fandom peeing simultaneously into one toilet bowl."

This required much logistical organisation. The toilets in hotel rooms are not noted for their wide open spaces, and just getting that number of men into the room was fraught with difficulty. But somehow we managed. Our next problem soon became clear. How could we aim accurately when we were so crowded? Even under the best of circumstances,

men are notoriously inaccurate, and these circumstances were not of the best.

An English actress once remarked on Michael Parkinson's television chat show that she was constantly amazed at how men ever managed to get women pregnant. After all, she pointed out, toilet bowls are quite large comparatively speaking. And if a man can't hit a hole that big with the light on and both hands free...

So there we all were, jammed together around the toilet bowl, barely able to move.

"Perhaps we should have had our willies fitted with gun-sights before we started this," I suggested. There was much nodding of heads. Why hadn't we thought of that first? Oh well - in for a penny, in for a dollar.

"On the count of three..."

We all nodded agreement.

"Three!"

There was the sound of much unzipping and then a new world record was set. It remains unbeaten to this day. Surely that's something to be proud of?

# Alan Eats A Toad

In my capacity as President of SFFANZ (the Science Fiction and Fantasy Association of New Zealand), I constantly receive requests to review self-published novels. Indeed, some people even want to send me their unpublished manuscripts under the delusion that SFFANZ can arrange to have the things published for them. Considering that these people think of themselves as writers, they show a disturbing lack of comprehension of the written word. I would have thought that the descriptions of SFFANZ on our website would have made it abundantly clear to the meanest intellect that we are not publishers and we are not affiliated with any publishers and we have no influence on any decisions made by publishers. It even says, in big bold letters on the front page of our site:

Please do NOT send us your manuscripts. SFFANZ is not a publisher.

But that makes no difference. The information just zooms past the eyeballs of these cretins without sinking in at all.

I consistently refuse to accept or review unpublished material. But my SFFANZ book reviewing colleagues and I do feel that we have some obligation, albeit a small one, to at least look at the self-published material. We refer to this as "...eating a live toad" and we take it in turn to consume these sometimes less than savoury meals...

Just occasionally the meal actually is truly tasty. One of the nominations for this year's Sir Julius Vogel Award for best novel slithered in, hopping and croaking at us. Rather to our surprise, that particular toad turned out to be a well-disguised handsome prince. But this is the exception - almost always the books are dire.

The less tasty toads all have several things in common. Invariably the books are the first volume of a trilogy or greater (nobody EVER writes stand alone novels any more) and the books are always very, very fat. In other words they look and feel exactly the same as the majority of books from commercial publishers. So why, you may ask, haven't the toads been published commercially?

I think there are several reasons. One very obvious one is that the books are often extremely derivative. They consist of page after turgid page of what some critics have called extruded fantasy product (or EFP for short) and show little or no trace of originality at all. When nothing distinguishes one book from another, when nothing leaps from the page to grab you, when characters, plot and sometimes even geography can be moved unchanged from book to book and author to author then whether or not you win the lottery and get a professional publishing contract becomes simply a matter of chance. And the chances of success are vanishingly small. Publishers spend all day sliding between tottering stacks of slush pile paper - well actually these days the piles are probably made of electrons rather than paper, but the same image applies. If nothing makes your book stand out from the rest, if your characters and your plots simply make the reader's eyes glaze over with boredom, then you are unlikely ever to be noticed by the wheelers and the dealers, the movers and the shakers of the publishing world.

And the very best way to not get noticed is to write what everybody else is writing.

Another reason why the toads taste so foul is that many of their authors can't write a simple declarative sentence to save their lives. Often the books are so large because every noun is qualified by six mutually exclusive adjectives and every verb is pinned quiveringly in place with endless adverbial lists. Metaphor and simile are strained to breaking point with grotesque images that add nothing whatsoever to

the sense. One author described a lady attending a formal dance like this:

In the sea of dancing, she glided like a bird inches from the waves...

Since when was a formal dance like the sea? And what's the lady doing hovering just above the dance floor? Do the other dancers push her to one side if she gets in the way? Is she a frictionless bearing or does her mass impart too much inertia to make her easily moveable? If we assume a perfectly spherical dancer of uniform density could we derive some useful equations of motion...

Another very common besetting sin in toad after toad is that whenever a new character appears on stage the action stops and we get a six page potted biography of the character from the moment of his birth to the present. If we are really unlucky we'll also get ten pages on his ancestry, his family's social position, his hobbies and interests, the clubs he belongs to and the names of his pets. Then, once every backstory I is dotted and every backstory T is crossed, the action of the novel resumes, a door opens, another spear carrier walks in and... lather, rinse, repeat.

It is also quite clear that many of the toad authors have a tin ear for language and simply don't realise how strange and silly some of their sentences appear. One sure way to test out the language of the story and to zero in on the more egregious stupidities is to read it out loud. It is sometimes quite obvious that the toad writers have never, ever let a word of their stories slip past their lips into the real world.

One of our toads had two characters, brothers I believe, who were called OHRL and FAERL. If you say those words out loud, no matter where the emphasis in your voice falls, it soon becomes clear that the two names are homonyms for ALL FAIL. Somehow I don't think that these two brothers are going to succeed in their quest, do you?

Another toad of my acquaintance managed the incredible feat of giving every single character in the book exactly the

same tone of voice and speech pattern. Elf, dwarf, troll or hideous, ravaging fire-breathing monster, it made no difference - all of them spoke in the same way, with the same cadences and word choices. The dialogue was quite impossible to follow.

Furthermore, every single character in the book, no matter what their race, had the same moral imperatives, the same ethical view of the world, and the same political opinions. The only way you could tell the characters apart was when they went to a bar - they all liked different things to eat and drink. Aha! Could this be a character trait at long last? Well, no not exactly. The comestibles all had weird, made up alien names. So who knows what was slithering down which gullet? Not me...

Urban legend claims that you can get high by licking toads. Not with these toads you can't. With these you can only get very, very low.



# Alan And The Restaurant Fly

“Waiter, there's a fly in my soup!”

The waiter glanced lugubriously at my soup bowl, “Yes sir,” he said. “That's Alfred.”

“Alfred?” I was puzzled. Why would a fly have a name?

“Yes sir,” explained the waiter. “Alfred is the restaurant fly. Every restaurant in New Zealand is obliged by law to employ a fly. You must have seen restaurant flies before.”

“Well yes,” I said. “I have noticed that I do seem to come across a fly every single time I eat in a restaurant. But I was not aware that the employment of these flies was a legal obligation. When was the law passed? I don't recall any discussion of it in the newspapers.”

“Oh it's not a new law, sir. It's been on the statute books for more than 150 years. It was one of the very first laws passed by the New Zealand Parliament after the Treaty Of Waitangi was signed.”

“So Alfred the Fly is an employee of the restaurant?” I asked, trying to get my head around the idea.

“Indeed he is,” said the waiter. “And his duties are quite onerous. He actually earns a larger salary than I do.”

“But I don't suppose he gets as many tips as you do,” I said. “Surely that cancels the larger salary out?”

“Well,” said the waiter, “in most countries of the world it would. But since nobody in New Zealand ever leaves a tip, the point is moot.”

“So what are Alfred's duties?” I was intrigued.

“Mainly he has to take a swim in every glass of wine. That's quite exhausting when you are as small as Alfred. We've been trying to persuade him to conserve his energy

and use the breast stroke. After all, he's not as young as he used to be. But he insists that breast stroking is for wimps. Real flies use the Australian Crawl. By the end of the evening he's often quite tuckered out.. Sometimes he barely has enough strength left to shit in the salads. That's his other major job and I think it's his favourite.”

I watched Alfred doing the Australian crawl up and down my soup bowl. “So presumably it isn't only the wine that he swims in?”

“Oh no sir – any and all liquids are available to him, though wine is to be preferred because it is the most expensive of our liquid refreshments. However he has complete discretionary access. I think his choice of liquid depends on his mood. Possibly he was feeling chilled after his last marathon effort in a glass of Chardonnay. Your soup represents a perfect opportunity to warm himself up.”

Alfred swam lazily to the side of my soup bowl and hauled himself up onto the rim. He brushed himself down with each and every leg, one by one, and shook little drops of soup off himself back into my bowl. Then, after a brief rest, he launched himself into the air heading determinedly for the other side of the restaurant.

“Ah,” said the waiter, “I see that one of my colleagues has just served a salad to the diners on table number ten. Alfred must heed the call of duty. He's very conscientious. He seldom takes a rest. But don't worry, sir. I'm sure he will eventually make his way back to you. Would you care for another glass of wine?”

“No thank you,” I said. “Not just at the moment.” I put my soup spoon down. “Perhaps you could clear my soup away,” I said. “I feel that I've had enough.”

“Was everything to your taste, sir?” enquired the waiter.

“Indeed it was,” I replied. “But I'd like to leave room for the next course. However I have a question for you.”

“Yes sir?”

“Outside in the street it is the middle of winter. Why isn't Alfred hibernating, or whatever it is that flies do in the winter? Generally speaking they are seldom if ever seen at this time of the year.”

“Alfred doesn't know that it is winter,” said the waiter. “We have a lovely temperature controlled tropical rain forest in an alcove just off the kitchen and that's where Alfred lives. He seldom goes outside and so the changes of season remain unknown to him. Please don't inform him that it is winter. We wouldn't want to lose him, he's a valuable and popular employee.”

“Perish the thought,” I said.

“Thank you sir,” said the waiter. “By the way, I notice that you are reading an ebook while you enjoy your meal,”

“That's right,” I said. “I find ebook readers to be very convenient gadgets. And the touch screen is a joy and a delight to use.”

“Hmmm,” said the waiter. “I feel I should let you know that Alfred recently got a substantial pay rise because a new task has been added to his job description.”

“Oh yes?” I said. “What's that?”

“He is required to walk left and right across the screen of every customer's ebook reader, thus causing the pages to turn in rapid succession and making the customer lose his place in the book he is reading.”

“I would imagine that would be very annoying,” I said.

“Indeed it is,” said the waiter, “and Alfred is particularly proud of his skills in that area.”

“I think I'd like to order a salad,” I said, “and a glass of wine. Perhaps Alfred might find them distracting enough to allow me to finish my chapter.”

“Certainly sir,” said the waiter. “I'll fetch them immediately.”

# Alan And The Clockwork Man

“What's the time?” asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Well the big hand is pointing at the II and the little hand is pointing at the IX so it must be ten past nine.”

“That can't be right,” said Robin. “*Midsomer Murders* has just started on the TV and that always starts at 9.30.”

“You're right,” I said. “Perhaps the clock needs a new battery.”

I changed the battery and adjusted the time. We settled down to watch the television.

Time passed. The clock ticked. Almost without us noticing, today turned into tomorrow.

“What's the time?” asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Well the big hand...”

“We've already done that,” said Robin.

“Sorry.” I compared the time on the clock to the time on my watch and the time on my computer. “The clock's about ten minutes slow,” I said. “The new battery doesn't seem to have helped. I think the clock might be broken.”

“How can we get it fixed?”

“There's a shop in Wellington that specialises in fixing clocks,” I said. “I'll take it there.”

The next day I went into the clock shop clutching my clock. The walls of the shop were covered in things that went *tick* and things that went *tock*. Occasionally, much to my annoyance, one of the things went *cuckoo*.

“Yes?” said the man behind the counter.

“I have a clock that is greatly in need of repair,” I explained.

“Well you've come to the right place then,” said the man. “That's all I do, day in and day out. I fix broken clocks. I don't do anything else. Let's have a look at it.”

I laid my clock on the counter and explained my problem. The man sneered at it.

“It's got one of those battery driven movements,” he said contemptuously. “Modern rubbish. They're always breaking down. It can't be repaired. I'll have to throw the old movement away and replace the whole thing. Not that it's worth bothering. Cheap, nasty things. Can't be relied on.”

I started to get the feeling that he didn't approve of clocks with electronic cogs. “But you can fix it?” I asked.

“Just said that, didn't I? Not that I really want to. Waste of time if you ask me.”

“But we really like it,” I said. “It was one of the first things we bought ourselves after we got married. It has great sentimental value. And besides, the face is really rather attractive. We like that fact that the clock is oval rather than round and the Roman numerals are particularly elegantly presented.”

“Alright! Alright! Leave it with me and I'll see what I can do. But it will take at least two weeks, I've got a huge backlog. And it will cost a fortune.”

“How much?” I asked.

“\$70,” he said, obviously pulling a figure out of thin air in the hope that I would go away and stop bothering him.

“Righto,” I said. “Let's do it.”

He sniffed and sneered and tore a couple of inches of paper off a pad that was lying on the counter. He picked up a green felt tipped pen. “What's your name and phone number?” he asked.

I told him my name. He wrote it down wrongly, as everybody always does.

“No,” I said, “that's not right. The name is R-O-B-S-O-N not R-O-B-E-R-T-S-O-N.”

He scribbled over the E-R-T. “And the phone number?”

I told him my phone number. He wrote it down wrongly.

"No," I said, "that's not right. The last four digits are 6-3-3-5 not 6-3-5-5."

He changed the first 5 to something that might have been a 3 if you squinted at it just right, and the wind was from the west. But we only get northerly winds in Wellington, except when we get southerlies. I was not hopeful that future communications would be fruitful.

"I'll ring you when it's ready," he said as he sellotaped the scrap of paper to the clock face. I left him to his *ticks*, *tocks* and *cuckoos*.

Time passed. Three weeks to be exact. I went back to the shop.

"Three weeks ago, I left a clock for repair," I explained. "You said it would take two weeks. But since I haven't heard back from you, I thought I'd come and see what was happening with it."

"I've been phoning you, but nobody answers. The phone just rings and rings and rings."

"Funny," I said. "We've not had any calls at all."

"I've been ringing and ringing. You're never bloody there. Anyway, what does your clock look like?"

"It's sort of oval shaped..." I waved my hands vaguely and looked around the shop for inspiration. "There it is! That one over there, hanging on the wall." I pointed at my clock and he unhooked it from the wall and brought it over.

"Here you are." He plonked it down on the counter. There was a scrap of paper sellotaped to it. I looked at the paper and read the green felt tipped words.

"My name isn't Mr Carruthers," I said. "And that's not my phone number."

"Well no wonder you never answered the phone if it isn't your number," he said. He didn't sound very surprised.

"But who is Mr Carruthers and why didn't he answer?" I asked.

"I've no idea who Mr Carruthers is," said the man. "I imagine he's someone who wanted a clock repaired." He looked around the dozens of clocks hanging on the walls. "I wonder which one is his?"

"Probably the one with my name on it," I suggested.

"I doubt if it's that simple," he said scornfully. "Oh well, it'll sort itself out. He'll come in one day asking for his clock. I'll find it for him then."

"Does this sort of thing happen often?" I asked.

"Oh yes, all the time. You get used to it. That'll be \$70."

I took out a credit card.

"I don't do credit cards or eftpos," he said. "Nasty, modern electronic ideas. They'll never catch on. Cash or cheque only."

"I'll be back in a little while," I said. "I'll have to go to a money machine. I don't usually carry that much cash on me."

"Hurry up," he said. "If you're not back here in five minutes I'll give your clock to Mr Carruthers."

Fortunately there was a money machine just across the road and I was back in the shop very quickly.

"Here you are," said the clockwork man. He put my clock in a plastic bag and I took it home.

"What's the time?" asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "Well the big hand..."

# Alan Stays In A Hotel

The first hotel I ever stayed in was The Bay Hotel in the small seaside village of Cullercoats, which is on the Northumberland coast in the far North of England. For most of the 1950s, my family went to Cullercoats every July for our annual summer holidays. We'd spend the time visiting relatives and playing on the beach. Merchant ships with cargoes of coal flowed out of the port of Newcastle. On their return journey they would wash out their empty holds just off the coast and consequently the beach at Cullercoats was always black with the coal dust that the tide brought ashore. All the sandcastles that I built there were speckled black and yellow, and I would return to the hotel at the end of the day, tired and triumphant, looking rather like a coal miner who had just emerged from a hard shift in the pit.

By modern standards, The Bay Hotel was rather primitive. None of the bedrooms had washing or toilet facilities; we all had to use the communal bathroom at the end of the corridor and it was furnished and equipped with the grim post-war austerity that typified 1950s England. But I had nothing to compare it with. The Bay Hotel was my first hotel, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. Every year I looked forward to re-visiting its shabby, greasy furniture and its frayed carpets. I have very fond memories of our summer holidays in Cullercoats.

Since then I have stayed in hotels large and small, both luxurious and slummy, all over the world. I have learned many things about hotel cultures and I have found that it isn't the condition of the building that matters, it's the ambience that is important and that ambience is a combination of many things, most of them quite intangible.



The So Hotel in Christchurch had ambience down to a fine art. Run by unregenerate post modern hippies, it was the practical personification of new age philosophy. It had homeopathic mood lighting in every room and meditative visual mantras on the television. It was so laid back that it lost its balance in the earthquakes and sadly it no longer exists. That is So upsetting.

Another very ambient hotel, and one of my very favourite hotels ever, now also sadly demolished, was in Suva, the capital city of Fiji. The hotel was an old colonial building and the bar and restaurant area were decorated like a stage set from a 1920s play. I kept expecting Somerset Maugham to wander casually into the bar and order a pink gin. The chef was truly inspired and the meals, full of fresh local produce, were mouth-wateringly delicious.

My bedroom was old and shabby but the sheets on the bed were spotlessly clean and the ladies who did were all terribly proud of their high standards. Every bit of crumbling chrome in the bathroom shone, every stain in the shower was polished to perfection. I would lie in bed at night soothed by the rustling sounds of cockroaches scurrying hither and yon across the floor. Sometimes I'd turn the light on just to watch them run away and hide. Most mornings there were several cockroaches trapped in the toilet. I quickly learned that cockroaches are flush-resistant and I never felt truly comfortable lowering my bottom onto the seat while the cockroaches waited beneath me, eagerly anticipating the treat to come.

It wasn't long before the cockroaches and I were on first name terms. Like all the hotel staff, they were friendly and obliging creatures. One morning, about 4.00am, I was nudged awake by Derek, the largest of the cockroaches. He had huge antennae and was the best scuttler I'd ever met.

"Alan," said Derek urgently, "something's going on."

Outside the hotel, there was a lot of raucous shouting and rhythmic chanting. These sounds are not commonly

heard at 4.00am in Suva and Derek was worried.

“Do you think it might be a coup?” he asked. Fiji is famous for its coups. They are a national sport. When there's nothing worth watching on the TV, they have a coup. And there's never anything worth watching on the TV...

“No,” I said. “It isn't a coup. There's an important rugby match this weekend and the team are out training on the rugby pitch next door to the hotel. When I had dinner last night, the waiter warned me that this would happen. He's on the team. I'm sorry - I forgot to pass the message on to you.”

“That's all right,” said Derek. “But why are they training at 4.00am?”

“Because the temperature hasn't got uncomfortably hot yet,” I explained. “It's still lovely and cool outside, just perfect for chasing a rugby ball. And anyway, they've all got jobs to go to during the day so they'll be too tired to train in the evening after working hard all day in the sun.”

“I see,” said Derek thoughtfully.

The cockroaches and I opened the curtains and peered outside. On the rugby field, golden moonlight shone on massive men built like tree-trunks who chased and tackled each other with enormous enthusiasm. Crowds of excited spectators urged them on.

“This is fun,” said Derek, and all the cockroaches nodded their heads in agreement. And so did I.

Some hotels go out of their way to make you feel unwelcome. There is a hotel in Auckland which has this down to a fine art. The reception desk is officially closed during normal check-in and check-out times. If you are ever unlucky enough to find someone at reception during the weird hours when it is actually open, they are invariably surly and uncooperative. Every room has a compendium describing the hotel facilities. Every sentence in the compendium begins with the words “You will not...” and goes on to describe the dire consequences that will ensue

should you dare to commit any of the enumerated sins. Crucifixion is strongly hinted at and impalement is implied. Guests at this hotel suffer permanent scars to the psyche. The ambience is negative.

Most rooms look out over a building site where large yellow machinery makes loud industrial noises at all hours of the day and night. Ear plugs are an extra charge on the room.

After all that it comes as something of an anti-climax to find that the rooms are the size of broom cupboards (but that's all right - there's a rule against cat swinging, those caught indulging in the practice are condemned to be nibbled to death by mice).

It is also less than surprising to find that the shower fitting is pulling away from the wall and that it leaks through so many orifices that there is barely any pressure in the shower head itself. But this, being the fault of the hotel rather than the fault of the guest, is not subject to any punishment at all.

Somewhat to my surprise, I found a person sitting in reception.

"The shower leaks," I said, "and the soap tray is broken and hanging by a thread. Can I move to a room where the fixtures and fittings actually work?"

"No," he said, and then he nailed my feet to the floor as punishment for my temerity in asking for another room. "Anyway, all the rooms are the same. Moving won't change anything. None of the showers work."

I haven't stayed in a hotel since then. It's hard to go anywhere else when your feet are nailed to the floor.

# Lurgi Strikes Alan

In 1954, according to contemporary accounts authored by Spike Milligna and Eric Sykes, Great Britain suffered from its first and greatest epidemic of the lurgi, the most dreadful malady known to mankind. Symptoms include knee trembling and an uncontrollable urge to cry 'Yack-a-boo!' at crucial moments.

As the epidemic took its fearsome toll, it became abundantly clear that nobody who played a brass-band instrument ever caught the lurgi, thus clearing the way for Count Jim "Thighs" Moriarty and the Honourable Hercules Grytpype-Thynne to dispose of their hoarded instruments at a huge profit.

Soon Britain was safe again, and the Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band had so many new members that they had to hire an extra forty two halls for the annual championship play off with the Grimethorpe Colliery Band. Brighthouse and Rastrick won by three goals and a minor key touchdown, though some people claim that their use of the double reverse sousaphone manoeuvre in the closing minutes of the second half gave them an unfair advantage.

The dreaded lurgi soon spread throughout the English speaking world, except for America of course, where it seemed to manifest as the much less dreaded cooties. It became quite common for people to ring the office and explain that they wouldn't be coming in today because they had the lurgi. Milligna and Sykes now found themselves in very distinguished company. Along with Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll (with both of whom they had a lot in common), they had invented a new word which quickly became part of common usage.

In August 2012, lurgi struck me down. I was marooned in Auckland at the time and bereft of brass instruments. Not a trombone was to be had, scarcely a trumpet. Oh goodness me, there was nothing for it - the dread disease would have to run its full course.

It began on the Monday morning. I awoke with a sore throat and a fever. I don't know about you, but when I have a fever my skin becomes very sensitive. The slightest touch is almost, but not quite, horribly painful. My legs are particularly prone to this nasty sensation and pulling a pair of trousers over them is decidedly unpleasant. The hairs curl and wriggle excruciatingly under the press of the fabric. I began to contemplate the advantages of trouserless teaching. Would my students be able to cope? Reluctantly, I decided not to put it to the test. They'd already be nervous about all the high-powered things they'd have to study. I could see no point in reinforcing that inferiority complex by appearing before them with naked legs. And so, covered in trousers, I made my sick and shaking way to the classroom for my first day of torture.

"I have the lurgi," I explained to my students. "And by the end of the week you too will probably have the lurgi. But in between those two events I will endeavour to teach you all I know about computers. You will be pleased to hear that I have a degree in chemistry, and I am therefore fully qualified to teach computer courses."

The students were duly sympathetic to my plight. I coughed and sneezed my way through the day, explicating esoterica as I went. String quartets, those saccharine structures, slid through my nasal passages and slithered down my throat which itself was getting more painful by the minute as the catgut and horsehair tangled around my tonsils. My leg lagging became progressively more irritating and I could feel my knees turning blue. By the end of the day I had lost my voice and I had spots before my ankles.

" ", I said to the class when it was time to go home.

"Bye, bye. See you tomorrow. I hope you soon feel better," said the students.

" ", I replied and made my way back to the hotel where I collapsed into bed and, pining for a flugelhorn, fell asleep.

As the week progressed, so did my lurgi. Entire orchestras died unpleasant mucoid deaths as they smothered in the amazonian flow of a foul and slimy liquid that leaked constantly from my nose and throat. I changed my surname by deed poll to Phlegming because it seemed as if I was spending all my time doing exactly that. But at least I was being green - and that's about as politically correct as you can get in this best of all possible worlds!

Feeble trumpeters had little success in keeping the holocaust at bay. Lurgi enveloped my classroom. "Yack-a-boo! Yack-a-boo!" Students writhed in intellectual agony. Kneecaps succumbed to the esoterica of the linux command line.

" ", I explained.

"So lucid!," exclaimed my students. "Such elegance of expression."

Somewhere the haunting sound of phantom cornets played. Nothing else could save me from ignominious tragedy. Early to bed and early to rise showed no signs whatsoever of making me healthy, wealthy or wise. All I got was lots of sleep and a deep appreciation of raucous music.

Somehow the terrible week dragged its way to a conclusion and eventually it was time to go home. First step - get a taxi to the airport.

" ", I said to the taxi driver.

"?", he replied.

I quickly acquired a euphonium from the Black Dyke Mills Band, and with it I honked the opening bars of "Leaving on a Jet Plane". Peter, Paul and Mary, who happened to be passing, sang harmony and strummed their trombones. The lurgi relief was immediate. My kneecaps settled down to a

normal rate of spin and my deep throat ache eased into a shallow throbbing.

"!", said the taxi driver. "Yack-a-boo!"

Oh dear...

Checking in at the airport was a trivial exercise. It's all done automatically by magic machines these days; no cut throat work is required at all. But my double bell euphonium caused some consternation when I took it through security.

"It's essential medical equipment," I croaked. "I have a prescription signed by the famous, not to say infamous, Doctor Eccles himself."

"Infamous?" said the security man.

"I told you not to say infamous!"

"You can't take that thing on an aeroplane," said the security man. "It's far too sharp."

"Will it be safe enough if I promise only to play it flat?"

Robin welcomed me home with open sackbuts. The cats put their paws in their ears.

"That noise is far too horny," said Harpo. "I might be forced to throw a bucket of water over you."

"Oompah, oompah, stick it up your joompah," I replied.

# Tooth Is Stranger Than Friction

Robin had been away for a week, visiting her parents in Australia. The cats and I were looking forward to a weekend of incredible debauchery.

"Will there be creatures?" asked Harpo, flexing his claws. They slid in and out of their sheaths like evil stilettos.

"Things to kill?"

"Yes there will," I said. "There's one quivering in fear behind the fridge even as we speak."

"Is there?" Harpo sounded doubtful.

"Yes - it sneaks out at night when nobody is around and eats the remains of your dinner. Haven't you noticed how fast the food has been disappearing lately?"

"We'll see about that!" declared Harpo and he went and sat to attention by the fridge, waiting for action.

Bess was less certain about the weekend of sin. "I'd really rather just sleep on my new cushion," she said. "Is all this really necessary?"

"If that's what floats your boat," I said, "then sleep away. This weekend is all about doing what makes you feel good."

"What are you going to do?" Bess asked.

"I've got a book to read and a DVD to watch," I said, "and I'm cooking a curry. It's going to be the most debauched weekend ever."

"Oh YES!" said Harpo, and all three of us gave each other high fives. As we did that, one of my teeth gave a little twinge. I ignored it.

The Saturday of our weekend of unalloyed pleasure arrived. There was a mild, throbbing pain in my tooth now, but I paid it no attention. I had far more important things to



concentrate on; I had a curry to cook. Shortly after breakfast, I began to concentrate on frying onions and adding pinches of this and that to the increasingly savoury sauce that the lamb was simmering in. Curries are best cooked the day before they are eaten. The longer they rot in the fridge before you re-heat and serve them, the tastier they become. It's never too early to cook a curry. The cats watched anxiously.

"Don't you think you should add a bowl of mice?"

"How about a dried lizard to give it some body? I've got a spare one under the sofa."

I took their advice very seriously. Always listen to your cats. They are wise in the ways of the world. Then the phone rang.

"Hello, Laurie here," said Laurie.

"Hello, Laurie Here," I said, "this is Alan There."

It's our little ritual. We find it amusing. Nobody else does. I can't think why...

"What are you doing this evening?" asked Laurie.

"I have a curry, a book and a DVD," I said. "The cats and I are planning some decadence"

"No you aren't," Laurie hinted.

"Aren't I?"

"No," suggested Laurie gently. "You are coming round here for dinner."

If Laurie ever invites you for dinner, you should always accept. The man is a kitchen god, similar to, though considerably less shapely than, the Nigella herself. However he compensates for his lack of shape by singing in a much higher register than the comparatively husky Nigella - he sings counter-tenor with the Orpheus choir.

I took my twinging tooth to Laurie's where I was pleased to find that the food was soft and delicious. I was starting to doubt my ability to bite anything hard. My tooth was feeling very sensitive, and so was I.

By the time I left Laurie's to go back home, my tooth was really the only thing I could think about. I was in quite a lot of pain and when I got home I collapsed straight into bed. But I didn't sleep very well. A blacksmith had moved an anvil just behind my tooth and a never ending procession of dwarves were rhythmically beating swords into ploughshares on it. I dosed myself with pain killers. They didn't kill any pain.

The following day being Sunday, all the dentists in the country were out playing golf. I lay in bed with a throbbing jaw. I drank lots of tea - the warm liquid helped a bit and I chewed on the hot tea bags. That also helped a little. Eventually I had a bright idea and I put a wet rag in a plastic bag and warmed it in the microwave. I spent the rest of the day and most of the night holding it to my cheek and jaw.

As soon as the dentist opened for business on Monday morning, I rang and asked for an emergency appointment.

"Come round immediately," said the nurse, so I did.

The dentist sat me down in his torquemada chair. "So," he said, "let's see what's going on here. The first order of business is to find out just which teeth are causing the problem."

He picked up the silver hammer that he had bought from Maxwell's Dental Supplies. Bang! Bang! Maxwell's silver hammer came down upon my tooth. Bang! Bang! Maxwell's silver hammer went seeking for the truth. "Does that hurt?"

I shook my head. Wrong tooth. He tried again.

Once he and the nurse had pulled me down from the ceiling, he said, "I'll take that as a yes."

Eventually we determined that two teeth in my upper jaw were very sensitive. X-Rays were called for.

"Aha!," he said. "There's an abscess under one of the teeth, but I can't see any reason for the other one to be hurting. Perhaps it's just a sympathetic pain. Well, let's work on the obvious things first. I'm going to drill down through

the root and let the abscess drain. I'll just numb you a bit before I start."

He produced the needle of necessary things and pumped several gallons of paralysing fluid into my gum. All sensation fled from my face and for the first time in several days I was feeling no pain.

"That'll do," I said. "Let's leave it there. I'll just come back every couple of hours for a top up."

"Sorry," said the dentist. "It doesn't work like that." He began to call for the tools of his trade and the nurse handed them over, one by one. Black and Decker drills whirred, dynamite was packed in the holes and titanic explosions rocked my jaw.

"Gosh," said the dentist, "that's the longest root I've ever seen. I wonder how far it goes? I think I need another X-Ray."

Another X-Ray later, the dentist said thoughtfully, "What's the longest drill we've got?"

"42mm," said the nurse.

"That should be long enough," said the dentist as he resumed drilling. "I might even reach the brain with that one. I always wanted to drill into a brain."

Eventually he seemed satisfied with his progress. He packed the enormous hole in my tooth with a temporary antibiotic soaked filling and sent me on my way. My wallet was so light after paying his golf club membership fees for the next three years that I almost floated out of his office.

Overnight the left side of my face swelled up to the size of a football. The swelling was so huge that I could barely open my left eye and my nose was twisted several millimetres off centre. I rang the dentist. The nurse answered the phone and I explained my symptoms.

"Oh gosh, that's not normal," said the nurse. "You'd better come back straight away." So I did.

"That's rather impressive," said the dentist when he saw my face. "Looks like the infection from the abscess has

spread into the soft tissues. I think we'd better put you on a course of antibiotics. Meanwhile let's see what's going on with the teeth."

Maxwell's silver hammer revealed that the second tooth was still sensitive. "That worries me," said the dentist. "There's no obvious reason for it. There's nothing on the X-Rays. I think I'd better drill into it and see what's going on."

Drills drilled. Have you ever noticed how good drills are at drilling? You'd almost think they were designed for it...

"Aha!" exclaimed the dentist triumphantly. "There's an infection actually in the root itself. No wonder it didn't show up on the X-Ray. I think I'd better drill the whole root out."

"OK," I gulped.

"Nurse," he thundered, "fetch me a size 84 Ryobi and Makita with the patented left hand twist reverse power screw."

Afterwards, I staggered off clutching a prescription for massive doses of antibiotics. I wondered if I had enough money in my wallet for the prescription charges. My dentist now had a lifetime membership of his golf club, and as I left the surgery, I overheard him on the phone booking an extended cruise to the Solomon Islands.

I returned to work. Since the swelling had closed my left eye, the monocular vision from my right eye left me with no depth perception whatsoever. This had strange and interesting results when I tried to draw diagrams on the white board. I couldn't tell how close the marker was to the board and I made lots of squelchy squiggles as it constantly took me by surprise. Fortunately my students were very understanding and they only laughed at me when I wasn't looking.

Over the next few days the swelling started to die down as the antibiotics kicked in. I had binocular vision again and my nose straightened up. There was no pain any more, thank goodness, but there were extremely high levels of discomfort, which was almost as bad. The dentist couldn't

put permanent fillings in yet because of the infection. He put another set of temporary fillings in and gave me a prescription for more antibiotics.

"Let's see how it looks in a week," he said presenting me with yet another enormous bill.

The following week I was pleased to see a new Rolls Royce parked in his private space when I arrived for my treatment. "Nice car," I said.

"Thank you," he said, rubbing his hands gleefully. "How's the tooth?"

He had a good look around inside my mouth and decided that it was time for the permanent fillings at last. "I'm going to use a rubber dam," he explained. "It stops nasty tasting things falling into your mouth and it keeps the saliva away from the holes in the teeth. Horrible stuff, saliva. Full of germs. We'd all be better off without it."

He stretched a thick green condom-like object around my teeth and hammered some wedges in to hold it in place. Then he drilled out the old fillings.

"Cement," he said to the nurse.

She turned on the cement mixer and it churned away for a while. "We're running out of sand," she observed.

"Better order some more after we've finished this job," said the dentist. He shovelled cement into my tooth and pounded it flat with a pneumatic jackhammer. "There," he said in tones of deep satisfaction, "that should do it."

I paid the final bill.

"Thanks," he said as he showed me to the door. "Any idea what's involved in gold-plating a Roller?"

"No," I said. "But I'm sure you'll tell me all about it when I come for my routine check up next month."

I went home feeling glad it was all over and things were back to normal. As I opened my front door, I saw Bess looking anxiously at me.

"Are you OK now?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh good," she said. "So is it time for my debauchery at last?"

# Alan And The Change Of Life

I was in the pub sipping a beer and reading a book, as one does, when a voice said, "Are you Alan Robson?"

I looked up, still half lost in the story I was reading. A man was staring at me. "Yes," I said tentatively.

He smiled. "John Simeon," he said.

Three decades of my life raced across the room and walloped me around the head. "John," I said, delighted. "It really is you!"

And it was. We spent the rest of the evening swapping scandal and playing catch up on each other's lives.

So now let me tell you all about John Simeon, the man who brought me to New Zealand in the first place, the man who completely changed my life.

\* \* \* \*

England in 1980 was a pretty depressing place for me. Ian, my best friend, had just moved to Holland, my family was being more than usually poisonous, and there were rumblings of big changes in my job. I'd survived one round of layoffs. It wasn't clear whether or not I would survive another. I wasn't even sure if I *wanted* to survive another. So I was fed up and more than half looking to move somewhere new. Preferably somewhere a lot further away from my immediate family.

Then one day Ian rang me all the way from Dordrecht in Holland.

"Have you seen today's *Times*?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Should I have?" I didn't normally read the *Times*, but Ian had it air-freighted to him every day at vast

expense because he was addicted to the crossword puzzle.

"Yes you should," he said. "The New Zealand Dairy Board is recruiting programmers and they are holding interviews in London. You need to apply."

"Why?" I asked. "I don't want to go to New Zealand."

"Yes you do," explained Ian. "I want to come for a holiday and I'll need to sleep in your spare room."

"Oh, I see," I said. "You'd better give me the details then."

He read out the contact details and I scribbled them down. Interviews were being held in a posh London hotel and the advert said that all the candidates who were invited for an interview would have their travel expenses to London refunded. Suddenly I got interested. London was full of science fiction bookshops and I was running short of my favourite recreational drug. Here was a perfect opportunity to get a free trip to my dealers so that I could top up my bookshelves. There'd be a boring half hour in the middle of the day while I answered interview questions, but I was sure I could cope with that.

I polished up my CV and posted it to the address that Ian had given me. A few days later a letter arrived inviting me for an interview. Apparently I would be interviewed by John Simeon, the IT manager at the Dairy Board. I packed an empty suitcase that I intended to fill with books and set off for London.

I arrived at the hotel where I was greeted by a tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice. "I'm John Simeon," he said. "Come in, sit down, make yourself comfortable."

He had papers spread out on a desk. He picked up my CV and we went through the details of my life and career and he scribbled some notes as we spoke. John told me all about life in New Zealand and about what the Dairy Board did. I found him very easy to talk to, and because I was really there just to visit the bookshops, and because I wasn't all



that bothered about the job itself anyway, I was very relaxed as the interview progressed. I just answered John's questions with the plain, unvarnished truth. I made no attempt whatsoever to bullshit or to gild the lily. In retrospect, I think that must have made a big impression on him. I remember one question that he asked.

"What do you know about indexed-sequential files and ISAM?"

"Nothing at all," I said. John made a note.

The interview proceeded and eventually we got to the point where John said, "And have you got any questions for me?"

"Yes," I said. "Why have you come all the way from the far side of the world just to recruit programmers?"

"Oh there aren't any programmers left in New Zealand," said John airily. "They've all gone overseas, mainly to Australia. So we decided to look further afield."

"But why come to England?"

"Because I want to go to Wimbledon," said John. "I just love tennis!"

I was beginning to understand how John's mind worked. We may have been from opposite sides of the world, but nevertheless we were very similar people.

"Can I take a photo of you?" asked John. "Just so I remember what you look like. I'm interviewing a lot of people and there will be many different faces sitting where you are over the next few days. I don't want to get confused."

"Yes of course," I said. John produced a polaroid camera. He pointed it at me and pressed a button. The flash went off and a small piece of paper slid out from the bottom of the camera. We waited while the image developed and then we examined it and we both agreed that yes, it did look a little bit like me. John stapled the photograph to my CV, together with the notes he had made.

"What did it cost you to get here for the interview?" John asked. I told him, and he gave me the money. We shook hands and I left to buy my books. It had all been a very successful day.

A week or so later a letter arrived from John. He was offering me a job. Goodness me!

Without pausing to think, I immediately wrote back accepting the offer. I knew that if I thought about it too much, I'd chicken out because the idea of uprooting myself and going so far away was very scary. But once my letter of acceptance dropped into the post box, I felt I was committed. I couldn't back out now.

The bureaucratic wheels began to grind. I had to have a medical exam. I had to apply for permission to come and live and work in New Zealand. I was invited to come for an interview at New Zealand House so as to determine my fitness to live in the country. I was greeted by another tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang in his voice. Good heavens! Did they all look and sound like that?

He sat me down and gave me some leaflets and we chatted a bit. I flipped through the leaflets and was appalled to find that New Zealand didn't have colour TV yet and that when I arrived in the country I would be eligible to be conscripted for military service. I asked the man about those two rather worrying details.

"Oh, no," he said. "Don't bother about that. We've had colour TV for donkey's years and we got rid of conscription ages ago. But unfortunately we printed far too many of those leaflets and my boss won't let me update them until we've run the stock all the way down." He looked mildly embarrassed, and he blushed slightly through his sun tan.

"There is one formal question I have to ask you," he said in his official voice. "Do you have a criminal record?"

"No," I said.

"Oh come on," he said, relaxing again. "Surely you can do better than that? Look, it's Friday. I've had a really slow

and boring week. Can't you be an axe murderer or something?"

"I got a speeding ticket about five years ago," I offered.

"No, no," he said. "That won't do at all. Damn! I suppose we'd better let you come to New Zealand then. I can't see that I have any other choice." And he stamped several bits of paper rather viciously with a large rubber stamp. It looked as if I was on my way.

A few weeks before I was due to fly to New Zealand, John Simeon left the Dairy Board to start up his own software and consultancy company. So when I finally arrived in the country I was met at the airport by yet another tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice. Yes, they really were all like that. Goodness me! "Hello," he said. "I'm Mike. I'm your new boss."

Mike got me settled in and introduced me around. "Because you are new," he said, "and because you don't know much about how the Dairy Board operates, we are going to start you off in our maintenance section. The Dairy Board was one of the first companies in New Zealand to get a computer and we started developing our systems in the 1960s. You'll be looking after those older programs, fixing bugs and adding new features. Once you get really familiar with how everything works, we'll see about moving you to the development area where you can start writing new stuff."

In the 1960s, everyone involved with computers was an amateur. Computers were very new and nobody fully understood how to program them properly yet. Everybody was learning together on the job. I found myself trying to understand and tweak stuff which, by modern standards, was the most appalling junk.

"Who wrote this nonsense?" I demanded. I looked at the name of the author at the top of the program listing - John Simeon! I called down curses on his name as I struggled to cope with his legacy.

Actually, I quite enjoyed the technical aspects of my job at the Dairy Board, but the office politics were byzantine, distinctly unpleasant, and sometimes quite vicious. The staff turnover was enormously high and I quickly came to understand that the real reason they had been recruiting programmers in England was because they'd used up all the programmers in New Zealand and Australia, and nobody wanted to work for them any more. So now they recruited their staff in places where their reputation hadn't spread to yet.

It wasn't long before I too handed in my notice and so found myself at a bit of a loose end. I went to talk to an employment agency where a tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice said, "There's a small software and consultancy company looking for a programmer at the moment and I think you might fit the bill. I'll arrange an interview for you with the company's owner. He's called John Simeon. I'm sure you'll like him."

Somewhat to my surprise, John remembered me from that interview in London all those years before. We chatted backwards and forwards, reminiscing a bit and contemplating the future. It was all very informal and comfortable and, just as before, I found him very easy to talk to. We laughed at each other's jokes and we had similar opinions on many things. John backed his original judgement and offered me a job for the second time. I accepted immediately.

The next few years were very happy ones as I worked directly with John on a variety of projects. We both had a lot of fun and we enjoyed each other's company. But the late 1980s were a time of great change. Sharks swam in the business seas. Big companies gobbled up small companies and grew fatter as a result. Eventually time and circumstance caught up with John. His little company vanished from the scene, and each of us went our separate ways.

It was quarter of a century before John and I met each other again. But then one day we both chose to go to a certain pub in Auckland at exactly the same time...

Only one thing worries me now. In the past, every time I've bumped into John after a few years of separation, he's profoundly changed the course of my life. So now, of course, I'm starting to wonder just what's going to happen to me next?

# Worming Robin

Last Christmas I bought Robin two new front tyres for the car. This year I decided that she needed a present that was much more romantic than that. So I bought her 1000 worms.

She was thrilled. "Just what my worm farm needs!" she declared and she went out and bought a bucket.

"What's the bucket for?" I asked.

"It will live in the kitchen," explained Robin, "and you will put all your vegetable scraps into it as food for my worms."

"OK," I said.

"Don't give them fruit or anything with seeds in," she said. "I had a worm farm back home in Australia and I gave my worms far too much fruit. They left home in protest and moved next door. They made a lovely den for themselves under the canopy that covered the swimming pool. My neighbours were very impressed when they removed the cover so as to go for a swim. Worms everywhere! The children used to dive into the water, come back up to the surface and then spit out the lumpy bits."

"OK, no fruit," I agreed solemnly, even though our next door neighbour doesn't have a swimming pool. "Why can't I feed the worms seeds?"

"Because the seeds germinate and grow inside the worm farm and soon there's no room for the worms. That makes them want to leave home as well."

"Oh, that would never do," I said.

The worms came in a small cardboard box which Harpo the Terror Cat immediately wanted to sit in. We strongly discouraged him. "It's full of slimy wriggly things."

Harpo looked puzzled. "What's wrong with that?" he asked. "As far as I'm concerned, it just adds to the

attraction."

"Cats don't like worms," I said firmly.

"Oh don't they?" asked Harpo. "OK. I'll go and sit on an early bird instead."

Robin took the box outside and unpacked it on the lawn. She laid all the worms out in order, smallest to largest. "Stop wriggling!" she ordered firmly. Then she counted them. "One, two, three, four... Oh no!" she said. "What a catastrophe! There are only 999 worms. You've been short changed by the shop - you'll have to take them back immediately." She looked inside the box again. "Oh, it's OK. There are 1000 worms after all. There's a dead one in the corner. Poor thing. Perhaps we ought to have a funeral for it."

Robin dug a deep hole in the garden and we buried the worm with full pomp and circumstance. Robin wiped away a tear, and then she took her worms to their new home, a purpose built, architecturally designed worm farm with a tap on the bottom for draining dubious fluids. Robin introduced the worms to their new home one by one and as she put each worm into the farm, she gave it a name. "Arbuthnot, Abigail, Alan, Anne, Andrew ... Zacharia, Zamorah, Zan."

"Why are you giving them names?" I asked.

"So that they can tell each other apart," explained Robin, "and so that they can introduce themselves to each other when they have sex. You can't have sex with someone whose name you don't know." She sounded quite shocked at the idea.

"So you expect the worms to have sex a lot?" I asked.

"Oh yes," said Robin. "That's what worms do. You know how people shake hands when they first meet each other?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Well worms don't have hands," said Robin. "So whenever they meet, they have sex instead. And what's more, they are hermaphrodites, so they do it both ways at once. They all have twice as much fun as anyone else does

- I suppose there have to be some compensations for being a worm."

"So worms are all actually hippie refugees from the Summer of Love?" I asked.

"That's right," said Robin. "Didn't you notice their long hair and the faint smell of marijuana when I took them out of their box?"

"So we'll soon have a lot more than 999 worms?" I asked.

"I expect so," said Robin.

"What happens when the worm farm is so full of worms that they can't even wriggle any more?"

"That's when they stop having sex and start eating each other instead," explained Robin. "Life in a worm farm is just one long, decadent orgy."

The next few days were anxious ones. I put vegetable peelings, tea bags and coffee grounds into the bucket. I even put in some cat biscuits that Harpo and Bess turned had their noses up at. Robin kept emptying the bucket into the worm farm and she'd come back with a very long face.

"They aren't eating," she reported gloomily. "I think they must still be traumatised by the move."

"Never mind," I soothed. "I'm sure they'll recover and start eating soon. Perhaps they are having trouble remembering their names. Once they get that sorted out, I'm sure everything will be fine."

And then one day Robin came back from her worm farm beaming all over her face. "They've started eating," she declared. "And look at this!" She held up a small bottle full of black goo.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's my first bottle of worm wee," she said. "Isn't that just fantastic? The instructions say I've got to dilute it to the colour of weak tea and pour it on the flowers."

"What happens then?"

"You step back quickly before the rapidly growing flower hits you in the eye," said Robin. She diluted her worm wee



and spread it liberally around the garden.

*Sproing! Sproing! Sproing! Sproing! Sproing! Sproing!*

"I think that chrysanthemum just punched a hole in a passing aeroplane," I said.

"Hmm..." said Robin, thoughtfully.

# Summoned By Shoes

Most mornings, when the sun has barely had time to clear its throat and have a cough and a spit, Harpo the Cat comes into the bedroom demanding breakfast. This is not unusual – sooner or later most cats learn that the best way to get breakfast is to nag their slaves until they get up and provide food. But Harpo has found a unique way of attracting my attention and forcing me out of bed.

He throws my shoes around the bedroom.

Clatter! Clatter!

Bess may be asleep on the bed or she may be curled up on her favourite cushion in the lounge. Either way, she completely ignores the noise that Harpo makes. She regards him as a hopeless case. She will join us for breakfast when the fuss has died down and the shoes have all been put back in their proper places. It would be terribly bad-mannered of her to trip over a shoe on her way to the kitchen. She'd die of embarrassment at such a faux pas and then she'd have to wash herself all over at least twice before she could possibly eat a thing. Oh dear, that will never do.

Robin sleeps calmly through all the noise. They aren't her shoes. Her shoes are hiding in her wardrobe in a mountainous and rather scary pile. Every so often, while dressing for dinner, she will screw her courage to the sticking place and burrow deeply into it. Eventually she will re-emerge, panting and frazzled, with a shoe. Just one.

"These will go perfectly with my new trousers," she says. Then she scratches her head. "I wonder where the other shoe is?" she asks thoughtfully.

"Who knows?" I reply. "Perhaps it is inside a cat." Actually I consider this to be extremely unlikely. Both cats have far

more sense than that. Robin's shoe mountain even manages to scare Robin! Goodness knows what it does to a cat. The missing shoe is probably still cowering somewhere deep in the recesses of her wardrobe.

"I think I'd better buy another pair of shoes, just in case," Robin decides.

And so, bit by bit, her shoe mountain grows to even more terrifying proportions. Therefore every morning Robin can sleep the sleep of the just don't care, in the sure and certain knowledge that Harpo the Cat will never go anywhere near that scarily unstable pile.

Clatter! Clatter!

I pull myself gloomily awake and peer short-sightedly at the world. I know exactly what I will see. The three pairs of shoes that I own are no longer neatly lined up against the wall. They are scattered around the room and Harpo is busy killing one of them. The others stare in horror as the poor victim expires beneath Harpo's claws and fangs. I can hear a faint whispering:

"Oh no! Not again!"

The chosen victim groans in agony. I climb out of bed and, leaving my whimpering shoes behind, I go into the kitchen to prepare breakfast for Harpo and for Bess. As I walk past Harpo, he swipes my leg with his paw. If I've waited too long to get up, there will be severely protruding claws. Most mornings I find that I have waited too long to get up.

"You need more shoes," says Harpo. "I've killed all three pairs at least a dozen times. I'm getting bored. I need variety in my killing sprees."

"Three pairs of shoes is enough for anyone," I explain. "I've only got two feet you know. Actually, three pairs of shoes is probably at least two pairs too many."

Since shoes are such an integral part of the breakfast ritual, I consider it important to keep my supply topped up. There generally comes a time when work colleagues can be

heard whispering scandalously to each other about the tooth holes that decorate some of my older shoes. Mortifying glimpses of sock can occasionally be seen. The most severe wounds drip polish in a steady stream, staining the carpet. In winter the rain gets in and I squelch. Perhaps I ought to do something about that?

When a shoe gets completely beyond all hope of redemption I give the pair a decent Christian burial and then go off to The Warehouse, where everyone gets a bargain. That's what the adverts sing, so it must be true. I spend \$20 on a size 8 pair of black shoes which are identical in every respect to the size 8 pair of black shoes that I have just disposed of. I am a creature of habit.

Sometimes, if I'm really lucky, the shoes will be on sale and will only cost me \$10. When this happens, I always make sure to buy an extra pair so that I still spend my accustomed \$20. Did I mention that I am a creature of habit? This occasional Warehouse bargain is the reason why I now have three pairs of shoes rather than the requisite single pair.

Because the shoes are so cheap, there is a strong probability that they will disintegrate before I get them out of the shop. However, mostly I am lucky, and I manage to arrive home with my new shoes in one piece. Harpo looks at them in disgust.

"These are identical to yesterday's corpses," he says. "Couldn't you do better than that?"

"No," I explain. "I am a creature of habit."

"You already mentioned that," says Harpo.

This year, Christmas morning chez Robson began just like every other morning. As usual I was summoned by shoes and I wandered off into the kitchen with torn and bleeding legs to give the cats their Christmas breakfast feast. Bess, who is always a very polite lady, was sitting quietly to attention by her bowl. Harpo teleported from the bedroom

to the kitchen and was waiting for me when I arrived. He paced back and forth menacingly.

"Get a bloody move on!"

Normally breakfast consists of a bowl of biscuits. But today being Christmas, breakfast was a can of sliced beef in rich gravy. Both cats love gravy. They like to lick it up before they attack the meaty chunks.

"Oh, wow!" said Harpo as he inhaled the whole bowlful in an instant. "It must be Christmas." He licked his bowl as clean as clean could be and then he clattered off through the cat flap to go and mug a reindeer.

Bess ate her breakfast in great gulps.

"This is lovely," she said. "Thank you so much."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I told her.

"Sorry, I forgot."

She finished the bowl of food in record time and then wandered off into the lounge where she threw up her entire breakfast all over the rug. The clash of colours made an interesting contrast. None of her meal appeared to have been chewed at all. Even the gravy was still intact and of the proper consistency.

"That was a fantastic breakfast," said Bess contentedly as she licked her lips. "Why don't you gather it all up and put it back into my bowl? I'll have it again for lunch."

"No, Bess," I said as I went to get a cloth, "that's not how it works. In this family we eat each meal once, and once only."

"That's because you are silly creatures of habit," said Bess. She went back to sleep on her cushion.

# No Flies On Robin

We have patio doors which give access to the back garden. The cats love to sit by them, and gaze through the glass at all the exciting things going on outside. Leaves move in the breeze, birds hunt worms on the lawn and shriek insults to each other. The cats find these things utterly fascinating.

"Wow!" said Harpo, the mathematical cat, as he stared out into the garden. "Just look at the singularly attractive catenary curve that the washing line makes as it stretches from fence to fence. I could watch it for hours. And see! There! A leaf just twisted past in a perfect Fibonacci spiral. You don't see that very often - I think it got the golden ratio exactly right; what a talented leaf. This is the best garden *ever!*"

Bess is much less of a geek than Harpo and has quite different aesthetic values. After a hit of really good catnip her eyeballs rotate as she grooves on the garden's pretty colours. "Oh man," she mutters just before an attack of the munchies sends her off to her food bowl.

When we first moved in to the house, friends came to admire. "Gosh," they would say as they passed by the patio doors, "look at the leaves moving in the breeze. And see all the birds hunting worms on the lawn. Could that one possibly be a lesser spotted humming thrush?" People bear a remarkable resemblance to cats. But people are nowhere near as intelligent as cats. No sooner had the words left our visitors lips than, one and all, they would attempt to walk out into the garden, straight through the solidly closed patio doors, severely bruising their noses, their foreheads and their egos. Robin got really good at mopping up the blood

that dripped from shattered noses, applying arnica cream to bruises and rebuilding fractured pride.

"This has to stop," she decided.

"OK," I said. "Why not attach something to the glass so that people get a visual clue that it is there? That might stop them trying to walk out into the garden when the doors are closed."

"Good idea," said Robin, "I'll get some stickers."

Within days some rather authentic looking bullet holes appeared, scattered at random across the glass. Not long after that I noticed that each door now had a screw in every corner - none of this modern Phillips head screw nonsense either, these were good, solid old fashioned screws with a single deep slot for the screwdriver to get a good grip on. And then, for extra support, Robin put a row of Phillips head screws across the middle of each patio door.

"They stop the glass falling out in high winds," she explained.

"So they do," I said. I pushed hard against the glass. "It's extremely firm and solid now, just like it was before. You've done a really good job there!"

It was clear that we had perfect patio doors. Nobody ever walked into them again. Problem solved!

But there was more to come.

If Robin has a fault, which she does not, it is that she has no idea how to finish her projects. Once she starts, just like the energiser bunny, she goes on and on and on and on...

"Look what I've got!" announced Robin one day.

"Show me," I said.

She held up a bag full of quivering things. Once they stopped shaking I could see that they were all twenty six letters of the alphabet.

"Why are they quivering?" I asked.

"Because they are made out of wobbly with sticky on the back," she explained. "They'll be perfect for the patio doors."

Soon after that, I noticed that the alphabet had been joined by a car, several dinosaurs, a self-satisfied cat, three rainbows, several musical notes and a rugby team. All were made out of wobbly with sticky on the back. They shimmered and shivered when people or cats walked past and, if you squinted at them from just the right angle, they refracted the sunlight in pleasing patterns. But we were starting to run out of space on the patio doors. They were looking awfully crowded.

"Do we really need all these extra decorations?" I asked. "Nobody's walked into the door for ages."

"They aren't for stopping people walking into the door," said Robin. "That's just a side effect. They are mainly for being pretty to look at."

"Oh," I said. "That's different."

"Yes it is," explained Robin firmly.

And then, quite by chance, we had summer. We weren't planning on summer - it doesn't happen very often and even when it does happen it mostly can't be seen. But this year, against all expectation, we had summer and so we opened the doors and windows to let the flies in - I feel so sorry for them as they bang their heads against the window, begging to be let into the house.

The flies buzzed around for a bit, making nuisances of themselves as they crawled over every exposed surface. Occasionally they landed on my ebook reader and very helpfully turned the page for me, thereby saving a lot of wear and tear on my fingertip. However I soon discovered that flies are almost completely illiterate, and they were just making random guesses about when I'd reached the bottom of page and it was time to turn it for me. Flies aren't very good at guessing games, so I soon got tired of their helpfulness.

The cats chased the flies for a while, but it wasn't long before they got bored with the game and they left the buzzing nuisances to their own devices.



"You're falling down on the job," I told the cats. "To earn your daily biscuits, you have to kill all intruders. Start killing!"

"But this cushion is so comfortable," said Bess, and she put her tail over her nose and went to sleep.

"I don't do flies," said Harpo. "Union regulations, and I'm a Union cat - solidarity in all things brother. I do rats and mice and sparrows. Sometimes I do butterflies and moths, even though they make me throw up copiously. But I don't do flies. Oh -- I do Alans as well." And he bit me on the leg, just to reinforce the point.

Then, one day, I noticed that I seemed to have spent an inordinate amount of time turning my own pages on my ebook reader. Where were all the helpful flies? Summer was still here, the sun was still shining, the sweetcorn in Robin's veggie garden was as high as an elephant's eye. So where were the flies? It was a puzzle. I mentioned the anomaly to Robin, because she likes puzzles.

"Oh, I know where the flies are," said Robin. "I'm surprised you haven't spotted them yet. Come with me." She led me to the downstairs room where the patio doors give access to the garden.

"There!" she said triumphantly. "That's where all the flies have gone."

All the bits of wobbly on the patio doors had melted into an amorphous mass in the fierce rays of the summer sun, and they'd spread a layer of sticky all over the glass. The flies, attracted by the large areas of light, had flown straight into the patio doors and glued themselves firmly to the glass. Unable to escape, they had slowly starved to death. One or two of the larger and hairier flies were still buzzing feebly as they struggled against the inexorable grasp of the sticky.

"Nobody is ever going to walk into these patio doors by accident again," said Robin in tones of deepest satisfaction.

I looked at all the myriad black blobs of fly corpses that festooned the glass and I had to agree with her. I was absolutely certain that now we had the most visible patio doors in the country. It seems that flies have their uses after all.

# Flushing Alan

I came back to my hotel suffering from severe hydraulic overpressure caused by the drinking of lashings and lashings of ginger beer (the Famous Five and I had been having a party). I took the lift up to my room and then had a very satisfying wee wee. Once I was finished, I pressed the button to flush the toilet. To my consternation, absolutely nothing happened – there was no comforting sound of rushing water to be heard. I pressed the button again and exactly the same thing didn't happen. Oh dear...

I closed the toilet lid and rang reception.

"Reception – how can I help you?"

"My toilet doesn't flush any more," I said.

"Oh no!" said reception. "That's not good. I'll send someone up."

About 10 minutes later there was a knock on my door. I opened it and standing there was a svelte and handsome young man dressed in the standard hotel uniform. Behind him was a young woman, also dressed to the nines in a beautifully ironed skirt and top. Neither looked at all like a plumber, but I let them into the room anyway.

"I gather your toilet doesn't flush," said the svelte young man.

"That's right," I said.

The young woman said nothing at all. Her presence remained unexplained. Perhaps she was a chaperone, there to guard the honour of the svelte young man in case I should be overcome with carnal lust at the sight of his sveltness.

We all went into the bathroom and the svelte young man pressed the flush button on the toilet. Nothing happened.

"Your toilet doesn't flush," he said.

"How clever of you to notice," I said. "It took me ages to figure that out."

The svelte young man didn't react, but the chaperone turned pink and started to vibrate. I winked at her, and a distinct giggle escaped before she gained control of herself again.

The svelte young man removed the top of the cistern and played with the ballcock. Flushing noises happened and he smiled in triumph. The cistern refilled and he smiled even more triumphantly. He put the top back on the cistern and pressed the flushing button with an exultant flourish.

Nothing happened.

The svelte young man stopped smiling and took the top off the cistern again. A previously unnoticed piece of plastic was dangling forlornly from the flushing mechanism. It gave every indication of having once been connected to something important, but now the connection was irretrievably broken, no matter how hard the svelte young man tried to reattach it. It was quite clear to all of us that I would have to do a lot of manual ballcock manipulation to satisfy my bodily needs.

We all contemplated that thought in silence for a moment. Hmmm...

"I'm very sorry about this, sir," said the svelte young man. "We really should move you to another room, but unfortunately we are fully booked at the moment."

"Oh, that's a shame," I said. "But never mind, I can always pee in the wash basin." Out of the corner of my eye I could see the chaperone starting to vibrate again. I decided to see how far I could take this. Would I be able to make her lose complete control? "However by tomorrow morning," I continued, "I will be full to the brim with unsavoury substances, and I am going to require something which has a much larger aperture than the wash bowl to take care of the problem. In order to prevent that catastrophic

occurrence from taking place, I think it will be necessary for you to supply me with a cork."

By now the chaperone was making ominous rumblings, but the svelte young man remained stony faced.

"Perhaps you could get me a free bottle of fine wine," I mused. "I could use the cork from that." But then I was struck by a sudden thought. "Oh no, that won't do - wine bottles come with screw tops these days. And they are most unsuitable for the purpose I have in mind. You will have to supply me with champagne instead. Champagne bottles have lovely corks. And the corks come with a nice lip on the top so that they don't go in too far. Ordinary wine bottle corks are smooth all the way up and tend to disappear, never to be seen again. Yes, champagne will do nicely, thank you very much. How about you send a bottle of Moët & Chandon up to my room, compliments of the hotel of course."

The chaperone couldn't stand it any more. She rushed out of the room with her hand over her mouth. Hysterical shrieks could be heard from outside, together with the distinctive sound of heels drumming on the floor. Eventually she regained control and came back to us, looking slightly dishevelled.

"I'll see what I can do," said the svelte young man, completely stony faced. I admired his self-control. Obviously he had recently attended a Hotel Management Training Course. Those courses must be worth their weight in gold. He turned away and picked up the phone. He had a quiet conversation with reception. Then he hung up the phone, turned back to me and said, "We'll move you to another room sir."

"I thought you were fully booked," I said, somewhat surprised. The chaperone nodded in puzzled agreement.

"The Queen has a tummy bug," explained the svelte young man, "and she had to cancel her booking. So now we have a room."

The chaperone began to turn pink again. I awarded the svelte young man ten points out of ten – a perfect score. "Thank you," I said. "I'll just need a few minutes to pack my things."

"I'll send someone up in about quarter of an hour sir," he said, then he and the vibrating chaperone left me to my own devices.

About fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door. Another svelte young man stood there. "I come to take you to room," he said with a strong Slavic accent. "Where is bags?"

I gestured at my suitcase and he extended the handle and trundled it down the corridor. I followed. "Where are you from?" I asked him.

"From Ukraine," he told me.

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

"Since three years I have lived here," he said.

"Do you like New Zealand?"

"Yes. Is lovely country. Very quiet, very peaceful. Nobody shooting at me every day."

I didn't really know how to reply to that, so I said nothing. We trundled down the corridor to the lift and travelled up for several floors. Then we trundled along another corridor which was absolutely identical to the first one. Eventually we stopped outside a door which was indistinguishable from all the others except for the number on it.

"Here is new room," said my escort.

He gave me the key and my suitcase. I opened the door and went in. I was not completely astonished to find that the new room looked exactly like the old room. I went into the bathroom and pressed the flushing button on the toilet. I heard the very satisfying sound of running water. I flushed it once more for luck and then I went to bed.

In the morning I did everything I needed to do. The toilet did everything it needed to do. What a perfect start to the day. I hopped in the shower and turned on the tap.

Nothing happened.

# Rubbish!

How does one deal with a corpse? Sometimes dead bodies litter the house – there are birds in the bathroom, and mice in the kitchen. Every so often rats go squish crunch as you walk to the toilet in the tiny, tiny morning hours. Lizards lie in wait, skinking beneath casual feet. Feathers tickle, but nobody shrieks with laughter, they only shriek with horror. Semi-corpuses are even worse. They skittle and scuttle and hide under the fridge. Sometimes they scream. Mostly, Robin and I inhume dead things in plastic supermarket bags and deposit them in the kitchen rubbish bin. Over time bacterial decomposition releases clouds of noxious gases and the bags containing the corpses swell to such enormous volumes that there is no more room in the rubbish bin for potato peelings or broccoli stalks. Then we have a rubbish crisis. But never mind, it will soon be Sunday...

Every Sunday evening there is much hustle and bustle in our household. Rubbish must be carefully collected and collated, for tomorrow is collection day. The rubbish collectors come at an obscenely early hour on Monday and therefore the rubbish has to be put out on Sunday evening so as to avoid the stench of farting sparrows in the morning. But we are not allowed to put the rubbish out too early on Sunday evening – the council leaflets warn of dire consequences for anyone who litters the streets with rubbish prior to 7.00pm. Hanging, drawing and quartering are among the least of the penalties that may be imposed. Consequently the window of opportunity for getting the rubbish safely to the kerbside is small. It can only be done after dinner time and before bed time. All too often the gap between these events is tiny – Robin and I are both old and



ugly. We require lots of beauty sleep. The house commonly resonates with the sound of snoring by 7.15pm. Sometimes the snoring is so loud that we have to wake the cats up because they are drowning out the dialogue on the television.

This particular Sunday, the cats were helping me with the rubbish ritual. They were anxious to get everything done as efficiently as possible.

"Where are the council rubbish bags that you empty the kitchen bins into?" asked Harpo. "I really enjoy their yellow crinkliness. It feels so good beneath my claws when it splits and shreds."

"And then it spills all that yummy stuff on the floor," said Bess, licking her lips in anticipation and flexing her claws.

I filled the yellow council rubbish bag with rubbish from the kitchen bin while the cats watched me fill it with treasure. I considered piercing the ballooning corpse containers in order to make more room but I decided against it. The cats peered with interest at the exhumed remains of their prey.

"I remember that mouse," said Harpo reminiscently. "I had lots of fun with it on the lawn before it stopped moving. That's when I brought it in for you and you made it vanish into thin air. So that's where it finally ended up. Well I'll go to the foot of our stairs!"

"Is there a rat in there?" asked Bess. "I distinctly remember a rat."

"Never you mind," I said. "Just help me carry this lot out to the kerbside."

We carried the rubbish bags outside and deposited them by the kerb. Harpo shot across the road to go exploring, narrowly missing a car along the way. His great bushy tail spread out behind him, giving the impression of a feline fox. He vanished into the darkness, a black cat out in the black night. Bess watched him go.

"He's always out having adventures," she complained. "Why can't I do that?"

"You can," I said. "The door is always open for you to come and go as you please."

"But the sofa is so warm and comfortable to sleep on all day and all night long. Apart from your bed, of course. That's the most comfortable of all."

"You do go out sometimes," I said. "At least once a day you go for a shit, a shave, a shower, and a shampoo in the garden."

"And it's fun," said Bess. "There are lots of rats in the bushes at the bottom."

"Oh. So that's where they come from. Tell me, why do you always make a point of bringing them to me on Monday evening after the rubbish has been collected? I really don't like it when they have to rot in the rubbish bin for a whole week."

Bess looked puzzled. "But Monday is rent day," she said.

"Rent day?"

"Yes," she explained. "You don't expect me and Harpo to live here without paying our way, do you? You provide board and lodging and in return we pay you for it. Fair's fare, so to speak. Monday is rent day."

"Couldn't you pay the rent on Saturday instead?"

"Oh no, that would never do. Cats are very conservative you know. We don't like change. Monday is rent day, and that's all there is to it."

Bess cut the conversation short by going over to the cushion that's always been her for ever favourite place for at least three weeks now. She curled up on it, wrapped her tail around her nose and fell asleep.

The next day, I lay in bed like the meat in a cat sandwich. Harpo was curled up close on one side of me and Bess was snuggled up on the other. I listened to the rubbish collectors outside as they tossed the bags into their truck and then moved on to the next house. Today was rent day. Hmmm...

Eventually the cats decided it was breakfast time and I was permitted to move. I poured biscuits into their bowl then I thought for a moment and took about half the biscuits out again and put them back in the packet.

"Yum," said Harpo, who doesn't quite understand quantitative measure. He dived in and began chewing but Bess looked suspicious.

"There aren't very many biscuits in my bowl," she said. "What's going on?"

"The vet says you are a bit overweight," I explained. "It's your sedentary lifestyle. And that's fine, it's your choice. But I'm cutting down on your food a little to make allowances for it."

"That's not fair," protested Bess. "Is it my fault that the house is full of comfy cushions?" She nibbled unenthusiastically at the slim scattering of biscuits in her bowl.

Once the cats had finished their breakfast, they both went out for their morning constitutional. Because today was rent day, I made sure to lock the cat flap behind them. Chortling with glee at my cleverness, I toddled off to get breakfast for myself.

Later in the day I heard Harpo howling outside the people door. Obviously he wanted to come in. I checked carefully through the window and as far as I could see, he didn't have the rent with him, so I opened the door to let him into the house. He stalked haughtily inside.

"What took you so long?" he demanded. "I told you to open the door at least thirty seconds ago."

As he walked past me he lashed out with a claw at my ankle and I bled a little onto my sock. Bess took advantage of the ensuing chaos to race in from beneath the bush where she'd been hiding.

"Thanks for distracting him, Harpo," she said.

"No worries," said Harpo, and he sauntered off in search of a nap.

Bess deposited a rat head, a bird beak and two weta legs at my feet.

"Rent," she announced. "The rat head is my payment for the week, the bird beak is Harpo's and the weta legs are because weta legs are horrible and I couldn't think what else to do with them."

I was puzzled. "Where's the rest of the rat, the bird and the weta?" I asked. "Normally you bring me entire corpses."

"Harpo and I took a unilateral decision," she explained. "You reduced the amount of food you give us, so we decided to reduce the rent that we pay."

I couldn't fault her logic. I began to anticipate lots of extra space in the rubbish bin. What could I possibly fill it all with?

### **Acknowledgement**

Many thanks to Jane Lindsfold who carefully explained to me the subtle rules of how and why cats pay rent.

# More Rubbish

Our weekly rubbish collection alternates between glass recycling and paper, plastic and tin can recycling. Once every other week we put our glass into a derisively small turquoise crate, and the following week we put our paper, our plastic and our cans into a massively large wheelie bin with a yellow lid. The wheelie bin with a yellow lid has enough room in it for the recycling of appropriate rubbish from at least a dozen households like mine. I'm not sure how the council came up with the relative sizes of their containers, but if they based it on any significant statistical studies, it seems plain that I must be an outlier who consumes far too many things that come in glass bottles and not nearly enough things that come wrapped in plastic or cardboard. Perhaps I should drink more Coca Cola (yuck!) and less beer, but I'm not sure I could afford the dental treatment.

The last time we had a wheelie bin with a yellow lid week, I was away from home on business. I spoke to Robin on the phone.

"I've lost the wheelie bin with the yellow lid," she said.

I was astonished. "How can you lose a wheelie bin with a yellow lid?" I asked. "Have you checked underneath the glass recycling bin?"

"The glass recycling bin is much smaller than the wheelie bin with the yellow lid," Robin pointed out. "The wheelie bin with the yellow lid can't possibly be underneath it."

"It would fit underneath the glass recycling bin if it shrank in the rain," I pointed out. "I read in the paper that there had been lots of rain in Wellington."

"I don't think it was the rain that caused the loss of the wheelie bin," said Robin thoughtfully. "Surely the yellow lid

would have protected it from the rain? It's far more likely to have been the wind that blew the wheelie bin away."

"Wind?" I asked. "In Wellington? How unusual."

"I know," said Robin. "But the wind was gusting up to 180 kph last night and this morning there was no wheelie bin. No yellow lid either."

"I'm surprised," I said. "Yellow lids are just as well known for their wind resistance as they are for their waterproofing properties. The weather must have been truly astonishingly bad if the wheelie bin with the yellow lid failed to survive it."

"It was," said Robin. "There were reports in the paper of low flying clouds which knocked over power poles and garages. Then, when darkness fell, I noticed that the Moon is now noticeably further away from the Earth than once upon a time it was. We really did have enormously strong winds last night."

"Perhaps you could walk down the road to see if the wheelie bin with the yellow lid has been blown into someone's garden?" I suggested.

"I took a brief investigative walk," said Robin, "though I find the concept of down the road somewhat hard to come to grips with. All the roads in our suburb go upwards, as well you know. There isn't any down anywhere at all that I can find. Sometimes I think that we have far too much geography for our own good."

"That does present some practical difficulties," I admitted. "In most suburbs people take a walk to get fit. In our suburb people get fit so as to be able to take a walk. Did your investigations prove fruitful?"

"All I saw were wheelie bins with red lids," said Robin. "And they are collected by a private contractor who has nothing at all to do with the council collections. Wheelie bins with yellow lids were quite noticeably absent everywhere I looked."

"I'm surprised there were any wheelie bins with red lids left out," I said. "Red lids are notorious for their failure to

protect the bins they are attached to from the forces of nature. I read about it in *Physics and Biology For the Utterly Brain Dead*. The authors posited a clear connection between wheelie bins with red lids and the socks that fail to emerge from the washing machine every week. It seems likely that socks are the larval form of wheelie bins with red lids and that wheelie bins with red lids mature into multi-dimensional, gossamer winged creatures that fly away into the interstices of Hilbert Space when the wind blows from the North. Or when it blows from the South. Yellow lids suffer none of these disadvantages and are therefore much more suitable for wheelie bins."

"That's common knowledge," said Robin. "But nevertheless, there were the wheelie bins with red lids all along the street, just waiting to be emptied."

"Extraordinary," I mused. "I wonder where the wheelie bins with yellow lids went to? Perhaps the strange weather took advantage of a bug in the yellow lid operating system of which we were previously unaware?"

"That must be the case," said Robin. "I'll keep you posted."

We hung up our phones and I spent the remainder of the day and much of the next quite bewildered about the mysteriously disappearing wheelie bin with the yellow lid.

Later that evening, Robin rang me again.

"The wheelie bin with the yellow lid is back," she said.

"Oh, thank goodness," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"A man from up the road returned it. He'd found it in his garden."

"Did he wheel it up to us?" I asked.

"No," said Robin. "He put it in the back of his four wheel drive along with a dozen or so others that he'd collected. He was driving around delivering them to their proper houses."

"Wheelie bins with yellow lids are well known for their gregarious nature," I said, "unlike the more stand-offish wheelie bins with red lids. But having a dozen or more of

them gathered together in one person's garden seems a little over the top."

"It was all the fault of the man's children," explained Robin. "They'd baited the garden with a succulent selection of squashed cans, empty shampoo bottles and flattened cardboard boxes. The wheelie bins with yellow lids were quite unable to resist the temptation of a really good free feed, and so they gathered together in his garden for a raucous party."

"Ah, that would explain it," I said. "I hope he imposes a cruel and unusual punishment on his children."

"He caught the wheelie bins dancing widdershins around an empty cardboard box that used to have a cat in it," said Robin. "They were clashing their yellow lids in a punk rock rhythm."

"Sounds like quite a party," I said. "But at least it's back home where it belongs now."

"Indeed," said Robin. "And I think it's quite hung over after its celebrations. It looks quite sorry for itself. Thank goodness we don't have to use it for another couple of weeks. It really does need time to recover from its excesses."

"Self inflicted wound," I said. "I have no sympathy."

"Maybe it's learned its lesson," said Robin. "Perhaps it will be better behaved from now on."

"Let's hope so," I said and I hung up the phone.



# Soothing Savage Breasts

I don't play a musical instrument and I'm utterly ignorant of the meaning that lies behind those little black dots that are connected to each other by slanting lines. They hang there on the telegraph wires of the sheet music, looking just like the flocks of birds that I see through my window, perched insouciantly on the power cables. What does it all mean? I have no idea. But though I may be unskilled as a practitioner, nevertheless, music has always been a hugely important part of my life.

It all began in the 1950s, as so many things do. I was a small child surrounded by a strange new world and looking to try and find my place in it. There was always a radio burbling in the background. I remember that radio well - it sat in pride of place in the lounge, a huge great monstrosity, a cabinet of highly polished wood with a fabric overlay in front of the speaker. It took several minutes to warm up and start working after it was turned on and it filled the air with the faint perfume of burning dust as it reached its optimum operating temperature. And then we were rewarded with the sound of a BBC announcer playing "Family Favourites" -- a record request programme through which lonely wives sent messages of love to their husbands serving overseas in the army, all wrapped around saccharine songs that were mostly sung by Doris Day and Frank Sinatra, Vera Lynn and Dean Martin.

The second world war was long over, but as the 1940s rolled over into a new decade the world was again going through a time of great political turmoil. When the politics turn sour, the armies move in. The British Army was a conscripted army, and it was fighting in trouble spots all over the world. In the Middle-East, Irgun and the Stern Gang

were slaughtering British troops in the deserts of Palestine as the new state of Israel struggled to establish itself, and war was brewing in Korea.

I don't actually remember those incidents – they happened just before, during and just after I was busy being born. But I do remember the struggles that followed on from them. I remember the small wars that were fought against the communist guerillas in Malaya and Aden, and I remember the atrocities committed by the EOKA terrorists in Cyprus where Archbishop Makarios preached the gospel of what later came to be called ethnic cleansing, as he exhorted the indigent Greeks to expel the Turks from the island that they'd lived in for generations. I remember the Mau-Mau fighting in Kenya to overthrow the dying remnants of the Empire and I remember the tragi-comedy of Suez that made Britain a little bit of a world wide laughing stock.

And all of those grim conflicts were surrounded by music as the radio played heartfelt wishes of love to our brave troops overseas. I absorbed it all. It was ubiquitous, it was all around me.

But subversive elements were starting to creep in. Sometimes that old radio pumped out strangely exciting rhythms in between the standard fare of Vera Lynn and Dean Martin. Somebody called Bill Haley was singing something called Rock and Roll...

*One, two three o'clock, four o'clock rock  
Five, six seven o'clock, eight o'clock rock,  
We're gonna rock around the clock tonight...*

It made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Even as a small child, I knew that it was complete rubbish. But my goodness me, it was *exciting* rubbish. Sometimes I'd see Bill Haley on the television – he was at least as old as my parents, possibly even older, and an utterly ridiculous kiss curl of hair hung greasily over his forehead as he raved with artificial

excitement through his strangely attractive song. Naturally, my parents hated him and they hated all the many imitators that sprang up in his wake. That's what parents are for. But he was very hard to ignore, and his rock and roll was broadcast at such unpredictable intervals on the radio and television that you couldn't help but hear it. I listened in swooning amazement while my parents grumbled and groaned as they waited impatiently for the next bit of Frank Sinatra's crooning.

But rock and roll wasn't going to go away any time soon. Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Eddie Cochran roared across our airwaves all the way from America. But they were soon completely eclipsed by Elvis Presley, who was indisputably the uncrowned king of the new music. Pale British imitations followed in the wake of these musical giants - Joe Brown, Marty Wilde, Billy Fury, Tommy Steele and, of course, Cliff Richard who, at one point in his career, was actually regarded as a serious contender for the crown that Elvis wore, hard though that may be to believe today.

Teddy Boys stalked the streets of England wearing crepe soled brothel-creeper shoes and sporting heavily brylcreemed duck-arse hair styles, with outrageous quiffs sticking out stiffly into the sky; black and greasy phallic erections - proud boasts about the endowments that may or may not have been hiding behind the socks in their crotches. The teddy boys wore tight trousers and long jackets and thin ties and, when the mood took them, they beat up passers by and used their flick knives to carve each other up and to slash the seats in the cinemas where they watched crappy Hollywood exploitation films about their rock and roll heroes. Everyone was afraid of the anarchy espoused by the teddy boys and the newspapers were full of outraged editorials - hang, draw and quarter them! Put them in the army! And of course that's where most of them ended up. Conscription was in all their futures, and the army

shaved their heads, put them in uniform and sent them off to die in the steamy Malayan jungles and the dry Middle-Eastern sands. Their sweethearts, still at home, sent record requests to “Family Favourites” and slowly the radio began to play more and more rock and roll. I loved it all.

The great British heroes of this new sound were The Shadows. Originally they were just Cliff Richard’s backing band, but they made some hugely influential records of their own. They played instrumentals – after all, Cliff was the singer; trying to replace him would have been *lèse majesté*. Their music was thrilling – The Shadows did things with their guitars that nobody had ever done before and that nobody would ever do again until, a generation later, Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix showed the world how a guitar *really* ought to be played. But Clapton and Hendrix were standing on the shoulders of giants – Hank Marvin paved the way for that later musical revolution and The Shadows reigned supreme in British rock music until the Beatles pushed them to one side in the 1960s. The first LP record I ever bought was *The Shadows Greatest Hits*. I still have that record sitting in pride of place on my shelves and I still listen to it regularly. The tracks on it are just as exciting now as they ever were – *Apache* still sends shivers down my spine and I think it always will, even though these days I know I’m listening to it with rose coloured glasses over my ears, if I may be allowed to mix my metaphor a little bit. I knew the names of the people who played in The Shadows long before John, Paul, George, and Ringo usurped their throne and I still know their names today. But somehow the names of Hank, Brian, Bruce and John don’t have quite the same ring about them as once upon a time they did...

As the 1950s came to an end the communist guerillas retired in defeat, EOKA went quiet and the last traces of Empire turned quietly into the Commonwealth. The Israeli thugs legitimised themselves and one of them even managed to get himself elected as Prime Minister. But his

past came back to haunt him when, some time in the 1970's, he came to England on a state visit, full of pomp and circumstance. Unfortunately he was still under sentence of death in Britain after a trial *in absentia*, and a special act had to be passed in the British Parliament to pardon his crimes. Without that act being passed, the law would have required him to be hanged as soon as he stepped on to English soil - not the most diplomatic reception for a visiting head of state. He had the blood of far too many British soldiers on his hands and not everybody felt comfortable about welcoming him. But the reality is that yesterday's terrorist is all too often tomorrow's revered politician. The only difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter is whether or not you manage to win your battles...

The British Army mostly came home as the 1960s began, though there were still some overseas bases, most notably in Akrotiri, Cyprus and in Berlin. Conscription was abandoned. The Teddy Boys all got jobs as stockbrokers and something very special was starting to happen in Liverpool.

The history of rock and roll divides quite neatly into three distinct periods. Before the Beatles, during the Beatles and after the Beatles. Nothing else matters. The Beatles were the ones who made the new music grow up, and in its maturity they showed us that even though the music's beginnings had been crude and possibly even simplistic, it was nevertheless capable of displaying subtlety and sophistication. Both musically and lyrically the Beatles turned rubbish into art and nothing was ever quite the same again.

Meanwhile, the brief tranquility that started the new decade didn't last very long. Soon there was another war going on behind the scenes. But this one was fought in the jungles of Vietnam and it wasn't our war, it was America's war. We still had the moral outrage that almost any war engendered in us in those days. At that time and in that place it seemed axiomatic that war was immoral, and the

Vietnam war was perceived as more immoral than most. But that moral outrage was tempered perhaps by the lack of a physical outrage. None of our soldiers were coming home dead in boxes. The same could not be said of America - there the war was extremely divisive, there was revolution in the air and sometimes even in the streets and amazingly the voices of the people were heard and they actually managed to bring down a government. President Johnson listened to to what was being said, realised what was likely to happen if he ignored those words, and wisely he refused to stand for a second term. He disappeared into obscurity and a bitter retirement.

And all the time the music played. It was hugely important for after all it was the chronicle of the times.

As the 1960s drew to a close, I was studying science at university, but only on the outside. On the inside I had an artistic soul. I was blotting paper soaking up cultural ink. Bob Dylan's incomprehensible songs moved me almost to tears. Considered objectively his lyrics made no sense whatsoever. But that was never the point - they weren't meant to be analysed. They could only be understood subjectively and emotionally and on that level their impact was huge. "Country Joe" McDonald taught me that political protest could be bitter, harsh and hilariously funny at one and the same time. There will never be a better anti-war song than his *Feel Like I'm Fixing To Die Rag* - Whoopee! We're all going to die! And Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, Buffy Saint Marie, Neil Young and Paul Simon proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that lyric poetry was still alive and well, albeit in a slightly altered form.

In England, this new sophistication manifested itself on John Peel's radio show. Peel was a man of eclectic taste. Avant garde atonality rubbed shoulders with experimental jazz, traditional folk music and the heavy thumping rhythms of hard core rock, sometimes all at once in a single song!

It was John Peel who introduced me to Marc Bolan and Peregrine Took (yes, really!) in the guise of Tyrannosaurus Rex. Of course this was long before Bolan metamorphosed into T. Rex, sold his soul to the devil, and died young, handsome and rich, a casualty of, and the epitome of, glam rock!

It was on John Peel's programme that I first fell in love with the inane caterwaulings of The Incredible String Band, and it was there that I followed the bewildering array of lineups who always called themselves Fairport Convention and/or Steeleye Span despite the fact that they were made up of completely different people almost every time they appeared.

It was starting to become clear to me that I was looking for two things from my music - I was falling increasingly in love with lyrical sophistication but at the same time I wanted the accompanying music to be as subtle as the lyrics. I was losing patience with musical simplicity. I was becoming bored by the banal. I certainly understood the crude attraction of the hard core rock and roll that evolved from Bill Haley's small beginnings - and those savage rhythms could still get under my skin in small doses. But all too soon my attention would begin to wander. The sound and the fury signified nothing to me any more. I wanted something other than sheer raw exuberance.

I found what I was looking for in folk music. The British folk heritage is a very rich one. Some of the songs tell stories (and we all love stories), some of the songs are bawdy jokes and some are sad refrains. Some are full of bizarre surreal images and some are straightforward dance tunes. That's a very large pool to splash around in. No matter what your mood, there will always be some music to suit it. Political statements sit comfortably alongside love songs and the events taking place in the world are encapsulated in wry couplets.

Many of the contemporary musicians that I was coming to love seemed to feel quite at home in that tradition. Paul Simon had a huge reputation in British folk music circles long before he hit the big time in the world at large. Even Bob Dylan, who was just embarking on the very first leg of his perpetual world tour, would occasionally pop in to some of the larger clubs when he happened to be in town. I found I was listening more and more to people who described themselves as folk-rock musicians; though sometimes they got pompous and called themselves progressive-rock musicians instead. But I found it always amounted to much the same thing in the end.

I spent the 1970s travelling the wilds of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire seeking out folk clubs in the small back rooms of dingy pubs in tiny villages. The folk clubs were a young man's paradise. There was always lots of beer of course, and there were always lots of girls as well. Unfortunately most of the girls wore knitted jumpers and seemed to think that the answers to life the universe and everything could be found in astrology and homeopathy and if all else failed, they could always go and hug a tree. But you can't have everything and, on the positive side, they generally showed a very pleasing willingness to take their knitted jumpers off for me with the absolute minimum of persuasion on my part. And there was music as well! Icing on the cake!

Well, that was then and this is now. These days I'm older and more cynical. These days it seems to me that, by and large, all art aspires to the condition of muzak, to mildly mis-quote Michael Moorcock, and certainly when I hear soppy strings playing Beatles music in hotel lifts I do sometimes wonder if it was all worth while.

What once seemed new and dangerous, and even revolutionary now seems to be mainstream and harmless. The times are just as turbulent today as ever they were in the past. New armies are fighting the old wars all over again



on some of the same old battlefields, and the same propaganda is generating the same kind of headlines that I was reading in my newspaper fifty years ago. It seems that nothing much has changed in any fundamental way.

That doesn't invalidate the music of course. But perhaps the music is diminished by what some might perceive to be a failure of intent. Or, more likely, perhaps it never was as important or as clever as once upon a time I thought it was. It seems clear that neither I nor the world ever really learned anything that mattered from it.

I've never stopped listening to music of course, and I never will stop listening to it. Old music, new music even Morris Dancing music; it all has its place in the pantheon. I still love it just as much, and it's still very important to me. But I no longer think it's important to the world, and nowadays I get the sense of things passing me by.

Perhaps I'll let Jethro Tull have the last word. It's very hard to express what I've been trying to say succinctly, but I think that Ian Anderson beautifully summed up the decades of my life, the songs that I listened to and the contradictory, turbulent times that generated the songs, when he stood up on one leg, tootled his flute and sang:

*So you ride yourselves over the fields  
And you make all your animal deals  
And your wise men don't know how it feels  
To be thick  
As a brick.*

# Alan Upgrades His Unmentionables

Once every thirteen years I buy new underpants whether I need them or not. And every quarter century I buy new socks. It's a timetable that I stick to quite religiously because I strongly suspect that the universe will come to an end if I don't. After all, my gradually shattering underwear is living proof that I am single-handedly making a massive contribution to the increasing entropy of the universe. This makes me feel warm inside. The universe needs me...

Most mornings the cats watch me get dressed and sometimes they are moved to make comments. I was pulling on a particularly raggedy pair of pants one day when Bess said, "You appear to be wearing a hole with an elastic waistband. And the elastic has perished. Why would you want to do that?"

"There's not much I can do about it," I said. "I won't be able to buy new underpants for at least another three years. So meanwhile, I've just got to put up with the general disintegration. However I must admit that the erotic holes in these particular pants are leaving less and less to the imagination."

"I don't think you need to do anything," said Harpo. "Those underpants make it so much easier for me to bite you on the bum. Let me show you." He bit me on the bum.

"Ow!" I said. Drastic action appeared to be called for and so I ignored my schedule and headed straight for the underpants shop where I bought a packet of six.

When I got my new underpants home, I unpacked them and attempted to put a pair on. To my horror I discovered that the operating system had been significantly upgraded

since I last bought any underwear and the new user interface was completely non-intuitive. Since the documentation was conspicuous by its absence - there was no operating system manual included with the garments - I simply couldn't think what to do with them.

Earlier releases of the operating system had the label on the outside front of the mechanism. Orientation was simple - just point the label at the wall, step into the underpants, pull them up and Robert's your avuncular relative! But when I tried that with the newly purchased pants I experienced a sickening trans-dimensional hyperspatial shift and it quickly became clear both to me and to my audience that I was now wearing my underpants back to front.

"Oops!" I said.

"What's wrong?" asked Robin.

I explained the counter intuitive nature of the user interface and the serious lack of documentation.

"Hmm," said Robin. "Perhaps they've shifted the paradigm and adopted the female use-case."

"I've always hated paradigm shifts," I said. "Somebody once shifted a paradigm into the doorway at the office. I tripped over it and bruised my deliverables when I arrived at work. Tell me, how does the female schema leverage the strategic synergy of the dressing experience?"

"Ladies underwear always has the outside label on the side rather than on the front," Robin explained. "It reconceptualizes a holistic but, nevertheless granular, adaption of transformational theme areas that enhances the performance based mechanistics without having any adverse effect on the integrity of the model-based client-focused core competencies."

"Really? I didn't know any of that. I seldom wear ladies underpants. They don't have enough willy room."

"The lack of bandwidth in the organ space is indeed a disempowering metric of deleterious cross-functional performance related matrices," agreed Robin.

“I wonder which side the label is supposed to be on?”

“Dexter focused informational embroidery is seldom implemented as an infrastructural mechanism,” Robin explained. “I suspect that sinisterial methodologies are most likely to succeed as an enterprise-wide strategic implementation of service schemas.”

I followed her advice to the letter. Lo and behold! I was successfully wearing underpants again. And the moral is: always minimise your therbligs.

Once I was dressed, I began to consider the problem of packing a suitcase for the weekend. Robin and I were planning on attending a science fiction convention and it was necessary to decide what to take with us. I threw things into a suitcase and so did Robin. We set off and checked ourselves into the convention hotel. Arriving safely in our room, we began to unpack again and that was when I made a terrible discovery.

“Oops!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Robin.

“I think I must have been traumatised by my underwear experience,” I said. “I completely forgot to pack any underpants. And what’s more, I didn’t pack any socks either.”

“Well the shops are still open,” said Robin. “Why not go out and buy some more underwear and socks?”

“But I’ll be thirteen years too early,” I pointed out. “And I’m not due for new socks for at least another two decades.”

“I think the universe will forgive you,” said Robin soothingly. “Just this once. After all, your only other alternative is to spend the entire weekend wearing the same underpants and socks that are currently adorning your nether regions.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” I said. “I can enter the masquerade as a mobile aromatherapy machine. Come one, come all; fix anything that ails you with the healing power of AlanSmell(TM).”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea at all,” said Robin gently. “Not everybody has as poor a sense of smell as we do. The aromatherapy you will be offering could easily be construed as a less than delightful experience.”

“Good point.”

Robin and I discovered many years ago that neither of us has much of a sense of smell. This, we are firmly convinced, is the secret of a happy marriage. We are seriously considering setting ourselves up as marriage guidance counsellors. We could make a fortune out of nasalectomies.

Meanwhile, underpants and socks were calling to me from the shops in the central city. I went exploring and it wasn’t long before I found a packet of pants and a clump of socks. I paid \$46 to a bored cashier by simply waving my credit card in front of the machine – it’s called payWave. Note the trendy capitalisation – what could possibly go wrong? PINs are not required with payWave and neither are signatures. All you do is pass close to the machine and money is automatically debited from your account. Several people walked past me while I paid, and presumably they too were charged the cost of my underpants and socks as the cards in their wallets came within the sphere of influence of the active payWave machine. I began to contemplate the advantages of building a Faraday Cage around my hip pocket. Or perhaps a tinfoil condom would be more effective...

I returned to the hotel and examined my purchases. The underpants proved to be old stock which still had the original Mark I operating system, the one with the forward facing label on the front. I was much relieved. The socks, however, were something else again. They appeared to have been born with a genetic defect in that their lower leg area was completely absent. Each sock was simply an ankle attached to a foot. I put them on gloomily – it appeared that I was doomed to suffer a weekend of nether area chills as

the draughty weather took advantage of my lack of limb protection.

“They look just like the things that my dad puts over the business end of his golf clubs,” said Robin. “They keep the clubs safe and warm and protect them from scratches and predatory insects.”

“Perhaps I could pretend I’ve got a club foot?”

Robin regarded the short ankle socks thoughtfully. A slow smile spread itself all over her face. “I think we are seeing another paradigm shift,” she said with a mischevious grin. “Socks are the new willy warmers.”

# Alan's Adventures With Arthropods

“What can I get you?” asked the lady behind the bar.

“I’ll have a pint of your best quaffing ale, please” I said. She reached for a glass and began to pour my beer, being careful to put a nice head on it so as to trap the full flavour in the glass. My dry throat ached with anticipation as I watched the golden fluid rise up through the pint pot. My fingers twitched, eager to hold the glass. She shut off the tap just as the foam began to crawl over the edge. Beads of moisture glistened and ran down the side of the glass. I reached thirstily out for it, but she put it to one side, picked up another and began the whole operation all over again.

I stared in horror at my abandoned pint. “What was wrong with the first one?” I asked.

“Just as I finished pouring it, a fly flew in from nowhere at all, dived head first into the glass, splashed around for a little bit and then drowned. Didn’t you hear the pathetic gurgles as it splashed around in its death throes?”

“No,” I said. “I was concentrating too much on the perfect pint you were pouring for me. Can I see the fly?”

She handed me the original glass. A small black speck floated forlornly in the foam. She handed me my fresh, flyless pint and I took a deep and extremely satisfying swallow. “What will happen to the original?” I asked.

“Oh I’ll give it to the landlord,” she said. “He’s not fussy and if I don’t tell him about the fly, he’ll probably never even notice it. He tends to close his eyes and drink his beer in one continuous gulp. He’s a philistine. As long as the fly doesn’t tickle his oesophagus on the way down and make him cough he’ll be perfectly OK with it.”

“I really think you should tell him about the fly,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” she retorted and trotted off in search of her thirsty boss. I sipped my pint and mused about the idiosyncrasies of arthropods.

Wavy music and eerie lines...wavy lines and eerie music...wavy music and eerie lines...

I don’t use my microwave oven very much. Mainly I consider it to be just a convenient mechanism for defrosting frozen stuff and for re-heating already cooked stuff. However it has one indispensable feature – it has a countdown timer buried somewhere in its complicated controls. I use that almost every day in order to keep track of the savoury sauces simmering on the stove.

One day I walked over to the microwave to press the timer button. As my finger floated towards the control panel I noticed that I could no longer see the glowing digits that told the time and which helpfully decreased themselves sequentially when the timer was activated. There was a blob obscuring the digits and several thin wavy lines spread out from it. My first thought was that the glass over the digits was cracked. I diverted my finger from its journey to the timer button and rubbed it across the glass. I couldn’t feel any cracks so I looked a bit more closely and counted very carefully. There were eight thin lines radiating out from the central blob. And now one of them was waving at me...

Oh my goodness.

“ROBIN!!!”

Robin wandered into the kitchen. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Too overcome for words, I just pointed at the microwave. Robin squatted down and examined it closely. “Well I never,” she said. “There’s a spider trapped behind the glass. It looks like it’s sunbathing in the glow of the clock digits. I wonder how it got there?”

“More to the point, can it get out and start nibbling on whatever I’ve got going round and round in the chamber?”



I'm not sure I fancy eating spider leftovers for tea."

"I doubt that," said Robin. "The chamber is all sealed off. Look how thin the spider is. The poor thing is probably starving to death. There can't be very much for a spider to eat deep in the bowels of a microwave machine. Can't you be a good Buddhist and unscrew everything so you can let it out?"

"No," I said. "I'm not dismantling the microwave just to release a skinny spider. It got itself in there, it can get itself out or die in the attempt."

"Perhaps it crawled in through one of the ventilation holes in the back when it was a baby," suggested Robin. "But now it's grown too big to get out of the holes again."

"And just what do you suppose it lived on while it was growing so big?" I asked.

"I imagine it probably fed on its brothers and sisters," said Robin. "It's very unlikely that it went in there alone. Doubtless it's an extremely persuasive spider, and it must have convinced its whole family that they would all have a great adventure if they went exploring inside the microwave. And because they all came along, it knew that it would always be home in time for tea. What a cunning spider!"

"Yes," I said, "now that you come to mention it, I vaguely recall hearing faint screams of agony coming from deep inside the microwave for the last couple of weeks. I think you've hit the nail right on the head. Those screams must have been the sound of the spider feeding."

I decided not to use the microwave timer any more. There's also a mechanical timer built into the cooker. It's not as accurate as the timer in the microwave because its cogs are clogged with grease but it will do in an emergency, and there was no doubt in my mind that this was an emergency. I refused to go anywhere near the microwave oven as long as the spider was living in it. I was scared that the microwaves might have given it super powers and that

when it saw my finger approaching for a quick poke at the controls it would shatter the glass and come roaring after me, eager to suck the marrow from my bones. No thank you very much.

For the next day or so the spider hung around and bathed in the eerie glow of the clock diodes. Then it crawled back to wherever it had come from and vanished from view deep into the bowels of the machine where presumably it eventually starved to death. It wasn't long before the faint but unmistakable smell of rotting spider permeated the kitchen. Robin sniffed appreciatively.

“Are you cooking curry for tea?” she asked.

# Alan Mixes Water And Electricity And Survives

For quite a long time my washing machine has been making extremely strange noises. At various important points in its cycle, it sounds just like Satan sucking up the last dregs of his lava milk shake through a very narrow straw. Slurrrrrp!! Slurrrrrp!! Slurrrrrp!!

On a particular washing day not too long ago, I dumped the dirty clothes into the machine and pressed the necessary buttons to set it going. It chirped cheerfully, and began to suck water through its pipes. I retired to the lounge and left it to itself. Every so often I heard it slurrrrrp as a new point in its cycle was reached. All was as it should be.

After a couple of hours or so it gradually occurred to me that I'd heard no noises from the laundry for quite a while. Normally when the washing machine completes its duties it sings a happy song to let me know it's finished. This time there had been no song, only a depressing silence and a complete absence of slurrrrrping. I went to investigate.

I examined the washing machine closely. No lights were flashing and no noises were being made. I pushed its power button, but absolutely nothing happened. The lights stayed stubbornly off. It seemed that the dreadful horror of the Robson underpants had finally proved to be too much for the poor thing. I opened the lid and stared at the wet, soapy clothes. The wet soapy clothes stared back at me.

"ROBIN!!"

"Uh?" Robin was still in bed and three quarters asleep. Communication is not her strong point in that state.

“The washing machine’s dead. Shall we go shopping for a new one?”

“Ugh.”

“I don’t really know what to do with the wet, soapy clothes. Have you any suggestions?”

Robin made a visible effort to think. Even fast asleep, her brain still works. It just finds problems connecting itself to her mouth. Furrows etched themselves into her forehead as she struggled to put herself in gear. “Rinse them in the sink that the washing machine empties itself into,” she suggested.

“But the sink’s absolutely filthy,” I said.

“Perhaps you could clean it first?”

I couldn’t fault the logic. Armed with cloths and cleaners and feeling very depressed, I went back into the laundry. I pressed the power button on the washing machine just in case the repair fairies had visited while I was away talking to Robin, but nothing happened. Maybe the power socket has blown a fuse, I thought desperately. Let’s plug it in somewhere else and see if that makes a difference. I reached out for the plug.

Oh.

The plug was barely making contact with the socket at all. Somehow it had been pulled almost all the way out. Possibly the recent earthquakes combined with the worst storm in half a century had made the house vibrate so much that the plug had been shaken out of its socket. Or maybe the cats had decided to play a practical joke on me. I’d been wondering why Harpo was sniggering so much...

I pushed the plug all the way in again, made sure that it was firmly seated, and then pressed the power button on the washing machine. Red and green lights flashed merrily as electricity flowed through its circuits again. Hey presto! I’d fixed it.

“ROBIN!”

“Uh?”

“The washing machine isn’t broken. We don’t have to go shopping for a new one.”

“What happened?”

I explained about the power plug.

“Didn’t you check that first?” she asked.

“Well I looked at it.”

“Didn’t you push it, just to make sure that your eyes weren’t deceiving you?”

“No.”

“How many times have I heard you tell people to push the cables firmly when their computer dies?”

“This is a washing machine,” I said sullenly. “That technique only works with computers.”

Robin was unconvinced. “Are you sure about that?” she asked. “I thought it was of quite general applicability.”

“I’m quite sure,” I said and I raced back to the laundry so that she wouldn’t see me blushing with the shame of it all. I set the washing machine to do a final rinse and spin. Slurrrrp!! Slurrrrp!! Slurrrrp!!

By now Robin, annoyed at all the interruptions, had staggered out of bed. “Coffee!” she moaned as the sunshine seared her eyeballs.

“Good idea,” I replied. “I’ll make a pot, shall I?”

“Don’t forget to push the coffee filter machine’s power plug firmly into place,” said Robin. I could tell that today was going to be a long day, full of power cable mockery. But perhaps I deserved it.

Once the washing machine had completed its cycle and sung its happy song, I went into the laundry to get the newly cleaned clothes. I balanced the basket on the dirty sink and began to transfer the clothes from the washing machine to the basket, a job I had done a thousand time before. But it seemed that my stupidity with the plug had honed my senses, for this time I noticed something I’d never noticed before. The pipe that connected the hot tap to the washing machine had come adrift. The pipe was just lying

on the floor and the fitting that attached it to the tap was broken. Fortunately the tap was turned off so there was no water spraying all over the laundry.

“ROBIN!”

She came into the laundry. “Now what?”

I pointed at the dangling pipe.

“So,” said Robin, “all the time we thought we were doing a warm wash we were actually doing a cold wash because there was no hot water going into the machine?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I wonder how long it’s been doing that?”

“Goodness knows,” I said. “I’ve not noticed the broken hose fitting before, but that doesn’t mean anything. My powers of observation, as we have proved today beyond a shadow of doubt, are not the best in the world.”

“Well,” said Robin, “it should be easy enough to fix. Let’s go to a hardware store and get a new hose fitting.”

To think is to do (doobey, doobey doo). It was the work of but a moment to purchase a new hose fitting. The hardware store had lots of them. Perhaps broken washing machine hoses are a common problem.

The new hose fitting screwed on to the tap with no trouble whatsoever. A grooved prong stuck out from it, throbbing with eagerness to insert itself deeply into the moistly waiting hose. However the prong was too well endowed, and entry into the narrow orifice that the hose presented proved to be impossible to achieve. Taking my sharpest knife firmly in hand, I shaved off some the more protuberant bits. The unkindest cut of all!

Eventually I managed to get the prong about half way into the hose at which point it refused to go either forwards or backwards. It was solidly stuck, which I assumed to be a good thing. I tightened the clip that held it in place and the job was done. I turned on the hot tap. Nothing leaked. Everything seemed to be working as designed.

“Now,” I declared, “I’ll do the first load of warm washing in goodness knows how long.”

“Good idea,” said Robin.

I put unsavoury garments into the washing machine, added detergent and switched everything on. I watched anxiously as the machine filled with water, but nothing leaked from the hot tap. The join seemed to be well watertight. Soon I was soothed by gentle chug, chug noises as the the machine soaked foulness from the clothes into the warm and steaming water. Somewhat to my surprise it progressed through its whole cycle making only the same gentle noises I remembered it making when it was new. The terrible satanic lava-shake slurrrrrping noises were now completely absent.

“ROBIN!”

“What?”

“It’s done the whole wash without making any of those horrible noises.”

“Hmmm,” said Robin thoughtfully. “So that probably means that the slurrrrrping noises were actually caused by it trying to suck water through the hot pipe and failing miserably. Probably the noises were just the sound of air being sucked into the pipe and then bubbling loudly all through the washing machine’s internal mechanisms.”

“Yes, that’s almost certainly the reason,” I agreed.

“How long has it been making those slurrrrrping noises?” asked Robin.

“About two years,” I said.

“So for two years we’ve been sucking air instead of water through the hot pipe?”

“Yes.”

“The hose fitting has been broken for two years and we never noticed it until now?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, we definitely get zero marks on our final exam for our observation certification,” said Robin. “However there’s

one thing that's still puzzling me."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Who turned off the hot tap when the hose fitting broke two years ago?"

I stared blankly at her. I had no answer to that question.



# Dag Day Afternoon

I looked at the rulers of the universe and the rulers of the universe looked back at me, with disgust and contempt in their eyes.

“I’ve made arrangements for you to go to the vet next week,” I said.

Harpo the Cat, co-ruler of the universe along with his adopted sister Bess, said “What’s the point of that? We don’t need no stinking vet!”

“It’s time for your annual warrant of fitness checkup,” I said. “And you Harpo need to have your dags removed.”

“Oh, no!” said Harpo. He sounded quite horrified. “Not my dags! I spent all winter cultivating those. They’re the best ones I’ve ever had.”

Over the long winter months Harpo’s long black fur had become extraordinarily shaggy, to the extent that it almost dragged along the ground. The fur had matted together into hard, compact lumps that felt quite horrid on the rare occasions that he allowed us close enough to stroke him. There were also many distinctly unsavoury dags clustered thickly around his bottom, to such an extent that we had grown quite used to determining which room he was sleeping in by the intensity of the stench that greeted our nostrils when we walked into it.

“It’s your own fault,” I pointed out. “Robin’s tried to attack some of the worse ones with a pair of scissors, but you simply won’t let her at them. She’s got horrible scars all down her arms where you’ve used your claws and teeth to stop her from de-dagging you.”

“She shouldn’t have the temerity to do that,” said Harpo, grumpily. “I am the ruler of the universe after all. She should have more respect.”

“But you are getting quite smelly,” I pointed out. “If your majesty forbids us from attending to your dags, we’ll just have to get someone else to do it.”

“Humph,” Harpo humphed. And we left it at that for a week.

When the day of the vet appointment dawned, we quickly bundled Bess into her travelling cage. She glared laser beams of hate at us, but we are immune to such things - we laugh at third degree burns from the eyes of felines. Ha, ha! However a crisis threatened when we discovered that Harpo the Cat Who Isn’t Afraid Of Anything Except The Things That He’s Afraid Of Like Vets was nowhere to be found.

“No problem,” said Robin. “I’ll just have a sniff around. He must be in the house somewhere because we locked the cat flap yesterday, so he can’t have run away. You go and get the Harpo gloves while I investigate.”

The Harpo gloves are steel reinforced, leather lined welding gloves that stretch from my hands to my elbows. I use them to protect myself from the deadly weapons that Harpo launches from his fingertips when I try and make him do something he doesn’t want to do. I learned my lesson the hard way. I used to be polydactyl, but Harpo soon cured me of that.

“I’ve found him,” called Robin. I followed the sound of her voice into the room where we keep the deepest and darkest cupboard in the whole world. It is impossible to hide when you have dags - a distinctive aroma was swirling around the cupboard. You could almost see it as well as smell it, and when we looked more closely, there was Harpo scrunched up in the corner with his eyes closed. I manoeuvred him out with my Harpo gloves, plonked him in the travelling cage, and off we went to the vet. Both cats howled miserably all the way.

Bess went first. The vet poked, prodded and weighed her.

"Bess is looking really good," said the vet. "She's pretty much the ideal weight for her size. She's lost a bit of weight since last year."

"That's because we feed her fish," said Robin. "She doesn't approve of fish, so she punishes us by not eating it. Sometimes she doesn't eat for days on end until Harpo has finished all the fish and it's time to eat chicken."

"That would explain it," said the vet. "I suggest you keep feeding her food that she doesn't like. That way she's likely to live at her ideal weight for years!" He gave Bess a clean bill of health and put her back in her cage ready to go home.

Then it was Harpo's turn. We decanted him onto the examination table and the vet approached him cautiously.

"Go away," said Harpo. "Gerroff!"

"Nice dags," said the vet, wrinkling his nose as the full funky Harpo aroma slithered up his nostrils. "Why don't you brush him more often? You're supposed to brush long haired cats, you know."

Robin pulled up her sleeves, exposing a criss-crossing network of scar tissue running up and down both arms. "I'm running out of flesh to sacrifice," she said. "Harpo doesn't like being brushed."

"Ah," said the vet, "looks like a general anaesthetic will be required."

"Bugger off," said Harpo.

"You can pick him up tomorrow," said the vet.

The next day, a distinctly subdued and much sweeter smelling Harpo gazed at us from the depths of his cage.

"The dags were the daggiest I've ever seen," said the vet. "I've brushed out as much as I could, and I've cut off the ones that resisted the brush. I've also shaved all around his bottom, so you might find him a little less fragrant from now on."

We took Harpo home and let him out of the cage. The fur on his right side was very thin, and pale expanses of skin

could be seen between the thin strands of black hair. He was piebald, verging on bald.

“You look like a football player with a comb-over,” I told him. “Don’t go out in the wind!”

“I fart in your general direction,” said Harpo in his best Monty Python voice. The house filled with familiar smells again. Everything was back to normal.

# Heads With Tales

Robin and I have two extra heads.

The first head came from Vanuatu. We were at the airport ready to fly back home at the end of a holiday. Our tummies were full of coffee and kava and our wallets were full of vatu, which is what the Vanuatuans call the cowrie shells that they spend in their shops.

“Perhaps we ought to change all these vatu back to New Zealand dollars,” said Robin, “since we are on our way home, and we do seem to have rather a lot of them.”

“Good idea,” I said and trotted off to the airport bank. The lady behind the counter looked at me with horror.

“You want to do *what?*”

I proffered a fistful of vatu. “I’m the man with no name,” I said, making a subtle Clint Eastwood reference – perhaps it would frighten her into compliance with my wishes. “And I want to be the man with no vatu. Can you turn these into New Zealand dollars, please?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why not?” I was puzzled. I’d been spending vatu in all the local shops and hostelries for two weeks now. I’d even gone to a money machine and shown it a credit card whereupon it happily spat out vatu for me. But now it appeared that the process didn’t work in reverse...

“Because they are vatu,” explained the lady in the bank. “We can’t exchange them for other currencies. It doesn’t work like that. We can turn dollars into vatu, but we can’t turn vatu into dollars. The magic spells don’t work backwards.”

“Well what can I do with all my vatu?” I asked in despair.

She thought hard about the problem. She obviously wanted to be helpful, but she'd never been asked to turn vatu into dollars before. "Well you could take the vatu notes home and frame them and hang them on the wall as souvenirs of a wonderful holiday," she suggested.

I did not find this thought appealing. "Do you have any other ideas?"

Her forehead crinkled with the effort of hard thinking. "Perhaps you could spend them?"

"Spend them?"

"Yes," she said. "I know it's a novel idea, but vatu are currency and you can spend them on things."

"Can I spend them on New Zealand dollar notes?" I asked hopefully.

"No, you silly boy," she said. "New Zealand dollar notes aren't things you buy, they are just slightly mutated vatu; different colours and sizes, but basically the same thing. What you need to do is take your vatu to that souvenir shop over there in the corner of the airport and spend them on delightful island gifts and mementos."

I returned to Robin and reported the slightly depressing results of my conversation with the bank lady. Robin sighed. "Sounds like a rip off to me," she said. Why didn't they tell us that *before* we went through customs and got trapped here in the purgatory of a no man's land with only one shop in it?"

We went over to the souvenir shop and examined the souvenirs. All the usual tat was on display. Brightly coloured fabrics made in China, grass skirts and loincloths made in Japan. Genuine plastic coconut shells for drinking kava out of, bottles of coconut oil for greasing your hair imported at great expense from the Phillipines. And some native carvings which actually looked as if they might be local.

We examined the carvings. They were really rather well done and quite attractive. And they only cost twice as much as the native carvings we'd seen on display in the souvenir

shops in the capital city, Port Vila. What a bargain! Who could possibly resist?

“It is a rip off,” said Robin. “It’s a conspiracy. They trap us in here with currency they refuse to exchange and they force us to spend it in the only shop available to us where the prices are sky high. Think of the profit they must be making!”

“Yes,” I agreed. “It’s definitely a rip off. But we don’t really have much choice do we?”

“No, I suppose not.”

We examined the native carvings carefully and made our choices. We bought three gods on sticks, and a rather chunky head with mother-of-pearl eyes and an evil, grumpy grin.

“I think I’ll call him Cuthbert,” said Robin.

When we got home, we put the gods on sticks and Cuthbert on top of the downstairs bookcases so that they could supervise our guests when they browsed the bookshelves. I also entertained vague hopes that the gods on sticks would smite the cats with great and godly smittings when they scratched and bit the books on the bottom shelves. This last proved to be a vain hope and the cats remained unsmitten. The only thing the gods on sticks were good at doing was falling over every time the wind or an earthquake shook the house. We were constantly having to pick them up and put them back, and one of them broke an ear off when he fell over particularly forcefully one day. We referred to him as the lopsided god from that time on. He paid no attention. By now he’d had so much practice that he was really good at falling over, so we just left him to it. His missing ear didn’t seem to bother him at all.

Cuthbert himself proved to be remarkably stable. Year in and year out he sat there on his bookshelf glaring at the world, and he never fell over, not once. Some people (though not the cats) found him quite intimidating.

Cuthbert was our first head.

A few years after we acquired Cuthbert, Robin went to Oz to visit her mum. She's my favourite mother in law and her name is Phyll.

"I have a head," said Phyll. "I'd like you to have it."

Robin was puzzled. "Yes," she said, I can see that you have a head. It looks like you've recently had the hair on it permed. Very stylish; it suits you."

"No, no," said Phyll. "You misunderstand me. I'm rather attached to this head and I intend using it for quite some time to come. You can't take it away with you yet. But I have a spare one in the cupboard that I'd like you to have."

"OK - show me," said Robin.

Phyll rummaged in the cupboard for a while and then emerged holding a carved wooden head that gleamed darkly with ancient polish. He was a gentleman with slightly oriental features. He was wearing a complex headdress which was almost but not quite exactly like a turban. He looked proud, and somewhat aloof.

"I don't know where he comes from," said Phyll, "but he's been in the family for generations."

"He looks vaguely Javanese," said Robin. "Did we have any family connections to the East India Company?"

"Not that I know of," said Phyll. "But we do have several missionaries in our family tree. One of them might have brought him back from an expedition."

The head smirked at her. It knew where it came from, but it wasn't going to tell.

Robin returned home with the head, quite excited by her new acquisition. "We need a special head display area," she declared. Cuthbert would really look rather distinguished if he was sitting side by side with this new head."

I couldn't help agreeing with her, and looked around for inspiration. We have a rather ornate and handsome bookcase in the lounge which is full of autographed books. There's a recessed lip at the top which, as far as I could see, was just begging for a head. So I put the new head up there.



He gazed regally around, Lord of all he surveyed. It definitely suited him; his personality shone through. He smiled contentedly.

“I’ll go and fetch Cuthbert,” I said and I went downstairs and rescued Cuthbert from his old position and brought him into the lounge. The gods on sticks grumbled a bit when I took him away, but I ignored them. They’d long ago proved their impotency and I no longer paid much attention to them. I put Cuthbert up on the lounge bookcase side by side with the new head. They looked warily at each other.

“Hello, I’m Cuthbert,” said Cuthbert.

“Hello,” said the new head. “I’m the new head. I’d offer to shake hands, but I haven’t got any hands to shake with. I’m only a head.”

“That’s all right,” said Cuthbert. “I’m in much the same position myself. But I’m pleased to meet you, all the same.”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” said the new head and they settled down together quite happily.

“They look good,” said Robin, “but that’s rather a large display area and I think it’s a bit empty. We need more heads so that they can take it in turns to supervise.”

“You’re right,” I said, “but I’m not sure how we could go about acquiring more.”

“I have an idea,” said Robin. “Come with me...”

She took me out into the back garden. Washing lines lay in lazy catenary curves between the fences. “See?” she asked.

“No, not really,” I said. “What are you suggesting?”

“We’re having a party next week,” said Robin. “The house and the garden will be thronging with guests. Many of them will come out into the garden in order to smoke cigarettes and possibly to indulge in other unsavoury substances. They will wander around admiring the weeds and enjoying the prickly bits in the lawn. Perhaps they’ll indulge in their secret vice of squeezing cat poo between their toes as they explore the flower beds.”

“Yes,” I said. “So?”

“Many of them will have over-indulged in spirituous liquors. Wine is a mocker and strong drink is raging. All will rage, all will stagger, all will be mocked.”

“Yes,” I said. “So?”

“The washing lines are all at head height,” said Robin. “Let’s replace them with razor wire. I bet we’ll have a lovely collection of heads by the time the party finishes.”

“Cuthbert will be pleased,” I said.

“So will the new head,” said Robin, and we smiled at each other.

# Humbug!

On the twelfth day before Christmas, Harpo the Cat said “Merry Christmas!” to me. He doesn’t really understand the difference between the Julian and the Gregorian calendars and so he gets the date wrong every year.

“Bah! Hard-boiled, stripey, peppermint sweet!” I said back to him. He looked puzzled, as well he might. He’s never seen a humbug, and even if he had, I doubt if he’d be very interested in it. Though I suppose I could sprinkle it with catnip...

Neither Bess nor Harpo bought me a Christmas present this year, unless you count the extremely small baby mouse I found in my left shoe one morning. I was mildly displeased by their lack of generosity since I’d already done a special shopping trip to buy them a packet of cat treats and a tin of sliced beef in gravy, which they I was sure they would hate because it was new.

Now that we were on the countdown to Christmas, Robin and I began to formulate our gastronomic plans for the festivities. “Perhaps we could turn the whole house into a drinkerie and eaterie establishment,” I suggested.

“Good idea,” said Robin, “but we need a name for it so that we can put up a sign.”

“Oh, I’ve already thought of a name,” I said. “I’m going to call it the *Bar Humbug*.”

“Will it be open to the public?” asked Robin.

“Of course it won’t be open to the public,” I said. “The only customers will be you, me, Bess and Harpo. And Santa Hats are banned.”

“What food shall we prepare and serve in the *Bar Humbug*?” asked Robin.

“How about smoked *dascyllus aruanus*?” I said, showing off my googling skills.

“What’s that?” Robin looked dubious. “Is it anything like salmon?”

“It’s very like salmon,” I said, “only completely different. It’s a small stripey fish found throughout the tropical waters of the Pacific and Indian oceans. It’s commonly known as the Humbug Damsel fish, presumably because it looks rather like the boiled sweet.”

“Sounds appropriate,” said Robin, “but I think I’d rather have salmon.”

“OK – salmon it is,” I agreed. “But we’ll call it *dascyllus aruanus* anyway. Nobody will be able to tell the difference. Now, what about drinks?”

“The humbug cocktail sounds interesting,” said Robin who is also a good googler.

“What are the ingredients?”

“One part white crème de cacao, one part crème de menthe and four parts of milk.”

“That sounds a bit unhealthy,” I said. “All that milk is bad for the cholesterol levels.”

“You’re right,” said Robin. “Let’s be healthy, and have it without the milk. We could also try the Wychwood Bah Humbug beer which is a 6% alcohol by volume strong ale brewed by Marstons, in the English town of Witney.”

“Jolly good. Now that we’ve got all that settled, I think I’d better go shopping for supplies before someone else snaffles them all.”

The local supermarket opens at 6.00am, at which time it mainly sells worms to early birds. I quickly filled my shopping trolley with goodies and baddies, paid for them and took them home. I managed to do it all in less time than it takes to tell. Feeling extremely smug, I arrived home with a car full of frivolities only to find a gloomy Robin who had just been struck with a Christmas insight.

“We need to go shopping for presents,” she said. “Dylan needs a thesaurus and Ashleigh needs a teddy bear...”

Dylan and Ashleigh are children who live just up the road from us. Dylan has ambitions to be a writer. He adores words and takes great pleasure from joining them together in interesting patterns. Someone at school told him that there was something called a thesaurus which would let him explore these patterns more flexibly, and now he knows that this is exactly what he needs.

“Well a thesaurus should be easy enough to find,” I said. “But we might have a bit of a problem with Ashleigh’s present.”

A couple of years ago, Robin gave Ashleigh a teddy bear called Horace, and he is Ashleigh’s pride and joy. Horace goes everywhere with Ashleigh. He even went on a winter holiday with her last year. Ashleigh was concerned that he might get cold, and so Robin knitted him some clothes with a special hole in the trousers for his tail. Horace loved his new clothes. Apparently they kept him very warm. But Ashleigh is now concerned that Horace might be feeling lonely. “He needs a sister,” she said solemnly to Robin as she sat on her bed, which was so covered with soft toys that there was barely room for Ashleigh herself. Fortunately Ashleigh is too young to understand irony. “His sister’s name will be Horacetta,” she announced.

We had our instructions. We knew just what to do.

There are three problems with Christmas shopping for presents at peak times. They are car parking, car parking and car parking. Full of trepidation, we drove to the mega-shopping centre, and headed into the car park, driving past a sign that said:

Car Park Full

along the way. Inside, we joined a queue of slowly moving vehicles trundling round and round in ever decreasing circles, hoping vainly for a space to appear as more fortunate shoppers than ourselves packed up their

cars and departed. Suddenly the car ahead of us had a stroke of luck. There was a space! Now all that the driver had to do was reverse into it. No problem!

He reversed and straightened, reversed and straightened again, and then again and then one more time. But it did him no good whatsoever. He couldn't get his car into the parking space no matter how hard he tried, and tried and tried again. Back and forth, forth and back. Nothing worked and he was getting more and more flustered. Eventually he gave up, and got out of the car. His girl friend got out of the passenger side and walked round to the driver's side. He held the driver's door open for her, she hopped in and he closed the door.

Vroom, vroom!

With one immaculate manoeuvre, she reversed straight into the parking space. Just like that. Her less skilful boyfriend tried to save face by standing and waving his arms as if giving her directions, but he didn't fool anybody. We all knew that she was the brains behind the wheel. She got out, locked the car, and off they went to shop. He looked very shame-faced, and she looked triumphant.

Meanwhile we continued to play the circle game. Round and round and round...

"There!" said Robin. "That's a space!"

She was right. Unfortunately it was only accessible backwards. My turn to reverse...

"Well done, darling!"

Robin understands exactly how to be a perfect wife. We left the car and went off to shop.

The thesaurus proved to be as easy to find as I had suspected it would be. We went straight to the book shop and bought a very handsome volume which was almost the same size and shape as Dylan himself. There was no doubt that he'd find it both thrilling and useful in equal measure once he developed sufficient muscles to both lift and open

it. But the teddy bear proved to be a horse of a different colour.

So to speak.

“Where do you buy teddy bears?” I wondered.

“Duh!” said Robin. “In a teddy bear shop of course.”

“Where’s the teddy bear shop?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Robin. “Why don’t you go and ask the lady in the information booth over there?”

“I can’t do that,” I said, horrified at the very idea. “Men are genetically incapable of asking for directions. You go and ask.”

“Oh all right.”

The information booth in the shopping centre was occupied by a woman who appeared to be answering queries largely in gestures. “Where’s the teddy bear shop?” asked Robin.

“Up,” she said, making a corkscrew motion with her left arm, to indicate a transition to the next level, “and then over that way.” Her prehensile and multi-jointed arm, which was now high over her head, turned abruptly through 180 degrees and a sharp finger pointed the way to the teddy bear shop. We followed her instructions and lo and behold! There was the teddy bear shop.

The first thing that met our eyes when we entered the shop was a huge, noisy machine. A gigantic, transparent plastic cube sat on top of a red mechanism. A loud fan continuously circulated shredded polystyrene up and down and round about inside the cube. It was a fascinatingly hypnotic display, and after a while my eyeballs started contra-rotating in sympathy with the flying particles.

On one side of the red mechanism was a plastic protuberance with a fat, red cover protecting it. A notice on the machine exhorted members of the public to refrain from stuffing teddy bears. This, it proclaimed, could only be done by official teddy bear shop staff, all of whom were certified in advanced stuffing techniques.

Boxes of flaccid bears sat on the floor. It seemed that one had to adopt a bear and then the shop staff would use the machine to stuff it to the required degree of rigidity. How intriguing! I couldn't wait to see it all happen.

Samples of pre-stuffed bears were pinned to the walls and Robin surveyed them carefully. None of them looked like Horacetta and so we examined the boxes of flaccid bears more closely. They looked and felt quite grotesque, and corpse-like as they flopped loosely in our hands. It was clear that, one and all, they needed reviving with a really good stuffing.

"Horacetta!" With a cry of triumph, Robin selected the perfect sister for Horace. An eagle-eared teddy bear shop staff member immediately materialised by Robin's side.

"Well chosen," she said. "And for an extra \$2 we will put a heart into her before we stuff her."

"Oh yes," said Robin, "that sounds like a good idea."

The lady produced a red, fabric heart and gave to Robin to hold. "Make a wish on the heart," she said. "And when you've done that we'll put it into Horacetta and then bring her to life with the magic machine."

Robin concentrated hard on the heart and made a deeply important wish. The lady opened up Horacetta's back and put the heart deep inside her chest. Then she removed the cover from the protuberance on the red mechanism, revealing a slim pipe which she inserted into the hole in Horacetta's back. She pressed a button. A pump throbbed and Horacetta began to fill up and fill out with shredded polystyrene. When Horacetta was sufficiently shapely, the lady removed her from the red mechanism and sewed up the hole in her back with quick, expert stitches. "There you are," she said triumphantly as she handed Horacetta over to Robin.

Christmas was now complete.



# Wot Alan And Robin Did On Their Hols

It was the day that our holiday started. The plan was to drive to Hastings which is in Hawke's Bay on the East coast of the North Island. There we would spend three days in a holiday home, together with several friends.

The area is known as Hawke's Bay, but the actual bay from which the district takes its name is called Hawke Bay. This is not untypical of New Zealand geography.

It was the work of but several hours for us to pack our cases and and arrange them carefully in the car. Nevertheless, as we quickly learned through the magic of text messaging, Robin and I were still the first of the group to leave Wellington. Traffic was light and the drive was pleasant but, as with so many journeys in New Zealand, it tended towards the surreal.

The ladies public toilet in Greytown had a toy soldier painted on the outside. He was standing firmly to attention with his weapon shouldered.

A huge sign in the middle of absolutely nowhere said:

Papatawa Realignment

but it gave no clues as to who (or what) was being realigned.

The town of Woodville had a signpost pointing to an:

Antique Organ Museum

"Perhaps you could donate yours," suggested Robin. "It is very old now and you don't use it much any more. It's quite out of tune."

“I’ll send them a selfie of me playing on my organ” I said, “and see if they are interested.”

Dannevirke, a tiny town originally settled by immigrants from Denmark, had a large billboard on its outskirts which displayed a picture of a fierce Viking warrior wielding a double-headed axe – at best an ambiguous welcome to the town. Dannevirke also had an:

### International Police Museum

which was housed in a minuscule building. Possibly, like the Tardis, it is much larger inside. There was an old New Zealand Highway Patrol car parked outside the museum. The car was longer than the building...

I haven’t seen one of those patrol cars for more than 20 years, which was when the Highway Patrol merged with the police and the cars disappeared overnight. I came over all nostalgic, but then I blinked and Dannevirke was suddenly many miles behind us.

In a town with no name, right in the middle of deepest farming country, a store offered:

### TLC

### Tractors, Lawnmowers and Chainsaws

On a long, straight stretch of road, I was overtaken by six cars all of which had number plates that started with G. “Why do all the cars that are overtaking me have number plates starting with G?” I asked Robin.

“Coincidence?” she suggested.

“No, it’s a rule,” I said. “You will notice that the car behind me whose number plate does not start with G is making no attempt whatsoever to overtake me. So it must be a rule.”

“Perhaps G is today’s letter of the day on Sesame Street,” suggested Robin. I was happy with that. It explained

everything. Nevertheless, for the rest of our holiday, I couldn't help noticing that all the cars that overtook me had number plates starting with G, except for the ones that didn't - and these last were very few and far between. Clearly they were statistical anomalies, together with the occasional cheater. My favourite overtaker had the number plate APP947. I was of the opinion that he had every right to zoom past me and I felt no resentment at all. Clearly he knew that there was an app for that.

Despite the fact that all of us left Wellington at very different times, we each arrived at the holiday house in Hastings within three minutes of each other in our three different cars. One was an Audi A4, one was a Subaru B4 and one was a Citroën C4. ABC4 - it became imperative to park them in alphabetical order.

We explored the house and did a baggies for the bedroom we desired. You can't break a baggies.

Once that was sorted out we investigated the other rooms. There was a huge kitchen, a dining area, a lounge and a breakfast nook. The bathroom was frighteningly modern and elaborate. There was a laminated A4 sheet of paper stuck to the wall with instructions on how to use the shower. It all looked quite scary and much more complicated than the instructions for the zero-G toilet in the movie 2001.

There was a control panel in the shower with buttons to press and a digital display window for error messages and the like. Perhaps I'd be able to send and receive email while rinsing my beard. Maybe I could post real time movies of my ablutions to YouTube...

Some of the buttons on the control panel turned on and tuned in the radio. One button activated the telephone - presumably the numeric keypad was for dialling phone numbers. One button controlled the light and a particularly complicated looking chorded keyboard controlled the sauna. The instructions on the wall were full of dire warnings about careful placement of the feet when turning the sauna on, so

as to avoid terminal scalding of the extremities. Since there were no birch twigs, Alan for the thrashing of, and no snowdrifts, Alan for the jumping into, I resolved not to try the sauna. I wasn't all that certain of my ability to turn the radio on or to make telephone calls either. I could clearly see that all my available brain power would be needed just for coaxing water from one of the many nozzles that poked out of every curve and crevice of the shower cabinet.

The next morning was the moment of truth. I approached the huge, plastic shower cabinet with some trepidation. I read the instructions one more time and then began some practical experimentation. It turned out that there were four separate showers built into the unit. There was an overhead shower in the ceiling, a detachable shower on a flexible hose for cleansing those hard to reach places, and two showers built into the walls on the left and right of the cabinet. The showers in the walls sprayed water horizontally rather than in the more conventional vertical direction. Small seats were moulded into the plastic below the wall showers and when you sat in them, high pressure jets of water pummelled you unmercifully on the back. A chromium plated control knob directed water through each of these shower heads in turn as you twisted it. My courage failed me at that point. I wimped out and showered conventionally. I decided to postpone my investigation of the shower seats - perhaps they would be best experienced in company...

"Show me how the shower works," demanded Robin, "so that I don't have to read the manual."

Once our shower adventures were over, we decided to head out into the wild blue yonder. Havelock North beckoned so that's where we went. It proved to be a pretty place, full of foodie shops. I found myself tempted by a 2kg jar of capers, an ingredient that I use so rarely in my cooking that I would certainly be able to leave at least 1.98kg of capers to my great-grandchildren. I felt pleased about being able to make such a substantial bequest to my

descendants. However Robin dissuaded me from purchasing it.

“You have no children,” she pointed out, “so the likelihood of having great-grandchildren is small.”

Convinced by this logic, I put the jar of capers back on the shelf.

Like all the towns in this holiday area, Havelock North was full of signposts telling you what you could and could not do on the streets of the town. The signposts were all pictorial. There were no words to be seen on any of them. Presumably this was for the sake of the tourist hordes. Even people who cannot read English can understand pictures. Everyone understands pictures; they are a universal language. That’s why graphical user interfaces on computers are so successful, so intuitive and so completely unambiguous.

As we walked along the footpath, I found myself puzzling over a distant sign that showed a stick figure standing legs akimbo on a horizontal black line. There was a firm diagonal drawn through the stick figure, suggesting that whatever action the figure was doing on the black line was strictly forbidden. The black line was clearly the footpath and the stick figure was clearly a person walking along it. Obviously there was only one possible explanation.

“Oh look,” I said, “pedestrians are not allowed on the footpath. Perhaps we’d better start walking in the road.”

“Huh?”

Everyone stopped and stared at the sign.

“Don’t be silly, Alan. It means no skateboarding.”

As we got closer to the sign I realised that the black line the figure was standing on was indeed a stylised skateboard rather than the footpath I had initially assumed it to be. Oops! Nevertheless I was still completely correct. There was indeed only one possible explanation...

Obviously I was sorely in need of coffee and a cheesy muffin.

Over coffee, we discussed where to go next. We decided that the Te Mata Winery was in need of a visit, so that's where we went. Much wine bluffing was indulged in, together with lots of spitting and not a little swallowing. I was sorely tempted by a huge, multi-gallon bottle of red wine. I could not reach around its circumference, and while I could peek over the top of it, I had to stand on tip-toe to do it. The whole thing was a bargain at only \$1,342.98.

"It won't fit in our wine rack," said Robin firmly.

Damn! Yet again I was foiled in my quest to buy gigantic comestibles. Clearly it was time to drive to Napier for lunch. We parked on Wine Street, near The New Zealand Wine Centre which sold wines from all over the Hawke's Bay area and beyond. A sign outside the shop told us that this was a liquor ban area...

Napier has art deco everywhere you look. I embraced a statue of a 1920s flapper who was walking her dog and Robin took compromising photographs of us. The statue blushed and her dog peed streams of concrete on my leg.

Unfortunately there was no big food to be found in Napier and so, after indulging in a small lunch, we decided to drive back to Hastings.

"Let's go the pretty way," said Robin.

I turned left onto the back country roads. We drove through lots of scenery, interspersed with tiny clusters of buildings which were closely followed by lots more scenery. Somewhere between Napier and Hastings we passed a large hospital which was directly across the road from a cemetery and crematorium. It was unclear whether this juxtaposition was a coincidence or a manifestation of efficient business management. I inclined towards the former on the grounds that there is no such thing as efficient business management.

Later, in the middle of nowhere, we passed a home-made billboard which proclaimed:

## Leaving the mundane

and entering  
the uneventful!

We were home in time for tea.

The next day we went to the beach at Waimarama, as one does. We drove past Waimarama Heights which was at the bottom of a high cliff. Along the way we noticed a large paddock full of de-horned unicorns that were pretending to be white horses, but they didn't fool us for a minute.

The high spot of the trip was undoubtedly the road works that we came upon next. Large men driving large machines were busy laying steaming tarmac and grit. They had carefully obliterated most of the information on the road signs that set the speed limit in the area at 70kph, and now all that was left on the signs was an urgent instruction to travel carefully forward at 0kph. Frustratingly, further down the road I could clearly see a sign which allowed speeds of up to 30kph, once that point was reached. But if I obeyed the rules and travelled at 0kph up to the sign, our holiday would be infinitely extended - no bad thing in itself, but I could envisage it causing problems on the day I was due back at work. Fortunately my car had a special Japanese gear setting that allowed it to travel slowly forward at very large values of zero kilometres an hour. Phew! Problem solved.

Once past the road works, we speeded up again and it wasn't long before we reached the coast. Large waves crashed against the yellow sand and marched in step up the beach.

"Oooohhh!!!" shrieked Robin in delight. She raced into the sea, caught a particularly powerful wave and body surfed elegantly back to land. "I'm an empowered woman," she yelled. "Even after all these years, I can still body-surf. I'll show the young whippersnappers a thing or two."

And she did it again, and again and again to rapturous applause.

Since Robin was now empowered, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to visit Te Mata Peak. From a distance, the peak could be clearly seen as a dragon-spine ridge spanning the horizon. We drove slowly up a long and winding road. Signs urged us to take extreme care. The road got narrower and narrower and there was a sheer drop on each side. I drove more and more slowly, but eventually, no matter how hard I tried to stop it happening, we reached the top and parked the car. Way, way below us, Hawke's Bay stretched out as far as the eye could see and sometimes even further than that.

"Look, there's the winery that we went to." It was a tiny dot far below us. We got out of the car and braced ourselves against the fearful wind that seemed intent on blowing us over the edge and tumbling us out into space. There was a sturdy fence all around the peak with firm rails to grasp on to, but nevertheless I was completely unable to force myself to go that close to the edge. I was particularly unnerved by the hang-glider launching pad that was cunningly placed over the sheerest drop of all.

Extreme Danger

said the sign on the hang-glider platform.

Keep Off!

I felt that this was very good advice.

Robin, still empowered, overcame her usual vertigo and got right up to the fence, much closer than I could manage. She slowly turned around and around, soaking up the whole panorama.

"Oh, wow!"



On the way back home, we stopped and took photographs of the unicorns.

That evening we ate out at 1024, a very posh restaurant which is owned and operated by an old friend of one of our party. We had a reservation for 7.00pm and when we turned up we found, somewhat to our surprise, that we were the only patrons. That was when we discovered that 1024 is not normally open for dinner – they only do lunches. But they'd opened the restaurant as a one off special, just for us. We felt suitably honoured.

The owner came and talked to us. "Since I last saw you," he said proudly, "I've opened sixty-one restaurants."

There was a pause while we did the mental arithmetic. That averaged lots and lots of restaurants a year. We were suitably impressed.

The food was simply, but inventively, cooked from locally sourced ingredients and served with smooth local wines that matched the dishes perfectly.

"I never know what will be on the menu until I see what's available that day," said the owner. "And even then I often change my mind about how to prepare it once I get going."

The food was, of course, absolutely superb in every way and it wasn't long before we were all suitably stuffed and suitably satisfied.

In the car on the way back, Robin said, "That was a wonderful meal and it still is. Every time I burp I get a different flavour."

We all tried her suggestion out, and she was right! What a bonus! We were suitably impressed by the meal all over again.

On the last day of our hols, we went to the museum in Napier. In the basement was a display detailing the hugely destructive earthquake that had devastated the region in 1931. There were photographs of the rubble strewn streets, quotes from survivors describing their ordeal, and a transcription of the messages that went backwards and

forwards as the rescue effort was slowly put together. The rescue teams were overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that faced them. The city's infrastructure was completely destroyed. There was no water to fight the fires that broke out and what little was left of the city just burned away.

It was a distinctly moving display and, given recent events in the country, quite disturbing. In a very sombre frame of mind, we spent the rest of the day just looking at the sea. There's something very soothing about the stately march of the waves upon the shore.

The beach had lots of stones. Robin sorted them all by size and by colour. Then she put the very best ones in a bag and brought them home.

# Alan And Robin Throw Stuff Away

“Rubbish!” said Robin.

“?” I said.

Robin closed the door of the cupboard that she was staring into and opened another one. “Rubbish!” she declared, and moved on.

We have fifty seven cupboards in our house. I counted them one day when I had nothing better to do. I think the previous owner was a cupboard fetishist.

Robin went down to the dining room and opened the Harry Potter cupboard that lives under the stairs. I’d forgotten about the Harry Potter cupboard that lives under the stairs because we so seldom open its door. We have fifty eight cupboards in our house...

“Rubbish!” said Robin.

“Perhaps it’s time for a trip to the tip,” I suggested. “We seem to have a lot of rubbish.”

Robin pulled a face. “Where’s the fun in that?” she asked. “It’s just there and back again.”

“We could stop somewhere for coffee,” I said. “As a special treat.”

“Oh yes!” said Robin, thrilled. “An outing. I like outings.”

She went down to the rumpus room. Faint cries of “Rubbish!” floated through the door as she explored long forgotten and seldom visited outposts of the house. She came back upstairs and headed for the front door. There was a gleam in her eye that boded ill for anything that got in her way. She stared hard at the tangle of trees long the fence line.

“Rubbish!”

She opened the small shed and looked inside. "Rubbish!" Then she moved on to the big shed where Harpo the Cat hides in the summer. "Rubbish!"

Harpo was horrified. "That's not rubbish. I sleep on that. Look at all the black fur I've covered it with. It's really comfortable."

"Rubbish!" declared Robin firmly, and Harpo slunk away in defeat.

I began emptying cupboards into the car. The boot and the back seat were soon filled to overflowing with bags and boxes of junk; cameras that took the kind of film you can't buy any more, old VHS tapes, a broken typewriter, ancient bank statements, photographs of people I didn't know taken in places I'd never been to, jigsaws with some missing pieces, jigsaws that might have had some missing pieces, jigsaws that didn't have any missing pieces but the pictures were ugly. And lots and lots of branches from the fence trees, all of which were carefully sorted by size, weight and colour and neatly arranged in cardboard boxes. Robin's major passion in life is the sorting of sticks. "I think I might have been over-indulging in my hobby of late," she said ruefully. "Never mind, they are going to a good home."

Eventually Robin pronounced the car full.

"Which tip shall we go to?" she asked. "Hutt City or Happy Valley? They're both about the same distance from here."

"Let's go to Hutt City," I suggested. "We do most things in Hutt City."

"OK," said Robin agreeably.

We settled ourselves in the car and Robin took the map book out of the door pocket so that she could look up the route to the tip.

"I am Robin," she announced, "and I will be your GPS for today."

"That's good of you," I said. "I'm glad I remembered to turn you on this morning. Do you need a reboot before we

set off?"

"No thank you, I've given it up for Lent. Just reverse out of the garage and turn left towards Black Rock Road," said the GPS.

I followed the instructions and soon we were driving along the motorway heading into the Hutt Valley.

"How long have you had this map book?" asked the GPS.

"About fifteen years," I said. "Why?"

"We've just driven through two suburbs that aren't on the map," said the GPS. "Don't you think it's about time to buy a new map book?"

"Nonsense!" I declared. "The ink on this one is scarcely faded at all. There's years of wear left in it yet."

The GPS heaved a deep sigh and bent its head back to the map, trying hard to match the roads and signs that we were seeing with the squiggly lines on the paper.

"Should I take the right hand fork that's coming up?" I asked.

"No," said the GPS firmly. "That's not the one we need."

A few kilometres went by in thoughtful silence and then the GPS said, "I think we should have taken the right hand fork that you asked about."

I surveyed the median barrier that stretched from here to eternity. "I don't think I can make a U-turn for a while," I said.

"Never mind," said the GPS, "I think I have an alternate route plotted out."

I followed the detailed directions that the GPS gave me and it wasn't long before we began to see signs pointing to the "Landfill" - the colloquial term is tip, the official term is landfill and there are moves afoot to change the name to the more pompously PC phrase Reclamation Centre. Pompous it may be, but the phrase is much more descriptively accurate. The tip had different areas dedicated to different kinds of waste and was sincerely trying to recycle as much as it could.

“Oh, look,” said Robin. “They've got an area for electronic waste. We need to make another trip. We've got lots of electronic waste in the cupboards at home.”

“Let's get rid of this load first,” I said.

I backed the car up to the rim of a large, concrete-lined trench and we spent a happy ten minutes throwing stuff into it. The stuff crashed noisily and very satisfyingly as it landed.

“Coffee!” suggested Robin. “Now!”

“What a shame they don't have a coffee shop at the tip,” I said. “Somebody's missing a great business opportunity. Just think how easy it would be to dispose of the used up coffee grounds.”

“Not much ambience though,” said Robin.

As we drove away from the tip, we could see hordes of seagulls circling in formation and screaming their heads off. “Somebody must be having a party,” said Robin.

The GPS got me back home and we investigated more cupboards. A radio with built in cassette player, several dead VHS players, cassette tape players, an entire dead stereo unit, a television set that the cat had peed on, a television set that the cat hadn't peed on but which didn't work anyway, and lots of speakers.

“I don't remember us having this many speakers,” said Robin.

“I think we must have had a breeding pair locked away in the Harry Potter cupboard,” I said. “The twins over there are very small. I'm sure they are newborns.”

“Ahh!” said Robin. “Aren't they cute?” She tickled them under their woofers and they wriggled with pleasure. “Seems such a shame to throw them away.”

“Rubbish!” I reminded her, and she agreed.

One cupboard disgorged a turntable. “That's not rubbish,” I said.

“Why not?” asked Robin.

“It still works perfectly,” I said. “I don't have it hooked up at the moment because I've digitised all my vinyl LPs. But I still have the LPs and, you never know, I might get some more one day. No - it's definitely not rubbish.”

“I'm not convinced,” said Robin. “But I'll let you get away with it just this once. Don't do it again.”

“I won't,” I promised.

We loaded the back of the car with surplus electronics. Everything fitted very snugly, but the boot was still completely empty.

“What else can we take?” I asked. “The landfill charges \$15 a car, so we don't want any unfilled space.”

“I've got a lot more sorted sticks in the shed,” said Robin. “And I can easily sort a few extras if we need them.”

We filled the boot with sorted sticks, and then we were ready to go. The GPS told me exactly which route to take. “I suggest you take the right hand fork that you didn't take last time,” it said, so that's exactly what I did. Sooner than I expected, we were back at the landfill. I pulled up by the shed where the electronic waste lived. A gloomy man with a screwdriver was dismantling old televisions and rescuing their cathode ray tubes. Then he remantled them again, heaven knows why.

I began unpacking my electronics from the car. “Oh look,” I said to Robin as I spotted something lurking at the back of the shed, “there's a turntable which is exactly the same model as the one we didn't bring with us. Isn't it a good job we didn't bring it? They might have got them mixed up, and that would never do.”

A landfill man wandered across to check out our goodies. He was vaguely spherical, with a lot of facial piercings. I couldn't help wondering if the landfill atmosphere ever tarnished his metal and if he got any infections in the holes. But at the moment he was bright and shiny and completely pus free, so I supposed that I was wrong.

“Good, good,” he said as he stroked the television set that the cat had peed on. He tickled the baby speakers behind their tweeters. They lapped it up. “One man's rubbish is another man's treasure,” he clichéd.

We left him to his electronic fantasies and drove over to the other end of the landfill where we unsorted the sticks by throwing them into a deep hole.

“Bye, bye sticks,” said Robin sadly and we went home to a much emptier house.



# Alan and Robin Meet the Ghost in the Machine

“What shall we do to celebrate your birthday?” asked Robin.

“Let's go out for dinner,” I suggested.

And so that's exactly what we did. We booked a table at our favourite restaurant and we invited several close friends to help us celebrate.

When the great day arrived, Robin and I got dressed in our very best clothes, none of which had any significant pockets because they were our very best clothes. People put things in pockets and the pockets bulge. That destroys the sleek and sexy outline that a body dressed in its very best clothes presents to the world. And therefore, because I was lacking in significant pockets, I loaded my man bag up with tissues, my mobile phone, my wallet and my keys. Then we threw the cats out of the lounge, closed all the doors, turned the burglar alarm on and got ready to leave the house. Robin, who was driving, held her keys in her hand as we left the house. She opened the garage door, turned off the burglar alarm and pressed the magic gadget on her key ring to unlock the car. We got in and made ourselves comfortable. I opened the garage door with the garage door opener gadget, and Robin drove the car out of the garage and into the street.

We drove down the street, chatting of this and that. Robin signalled a left turn.

“Did you know that in English a double negative actually means a positive rather than a negative?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” said Robin. “When Mick Jagger sang that he couldn't get no satisfaction, grammatically speaking he was

boasting about the number of his conquests even though idiomatically he was complaining about how he hardly ever managed to get his end away."

"That's right," I agreed. "Apparently it's quite a common construction in a lot of languages. But the interesting thing, according to this article I read, is that the reverse isn't true. There are no languages, absolutely none at all, where a double positive actually means a negative. Isn't that fascinating?"

"Yeah, right," said Robin.

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the locks on all the doors slammed shut and the hazard lights started to flash. The God of Travel, it seemed, did not approve of linguistic discussions.

"Expletive deleted," said Robin and she pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car. She turned the engine off, but the hazard lights continued to flash and the doors remained locked. Robin played with the lock and unlock buttons on her magic gadget and eventually normality returned.

"That was a bit worrying," she said. "I hate problems with a car's electronics. They are always so hard to track down and repair. I hope this isn't serious - I'd hate to get stranded in the middle of nowhere on the way to the restaurant. We might actually starve to death!"

"Fingers crossed that it doesn't happen again," I said. "Perhaps it's just a one off."

Robin started the car and, signalling right, pulled out into the stream of traffic. Soon we were cruising happily at exactly the speed limit. Angry drivers roared past us, furious that we were travelling so slowly.

"How many Freudian psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?" I asked Robin, hoping to distract her with humour.

"I don't know," said Robin, playing the game. "How many Freudian psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?"

“Two,” I explained. “One to change the bulb and one to hold the penis... I mean the stepladder.”

Robin laughed, and the door locks slammed shut and the hazard lights started to flash again. Obviously the God of Travel didn't like willy jokes either. There was a large and empty car park just to our left. “Pull in there,” I suggested.

Once we'd safely stopped, I took my keys out of my bag and we both manipulated our gadgets until the doors unlocked and the hazard lights stopped flashing. We got out and walked round the car, peering suspiciously here and there. Neither of us could see anything obviously wrong, though neither of us had any idea what we were looking for. But there were no dangling wires and no obviously missing bits.

“You drive around the car park,” said Robin, “and I'll watch and we'll see if we can make it happen again.”

To hear is to obey. I drove around the car park for a while but absolutely nothing out of the normal happened. “Try going a bit faster,” suggested Robin, “and slam on the brakes – see if that jogs anything loose.”

I drove faster. I braked hard. Nothing happened. I put my keys back in my bag and settled down in the passenger seat. Robin started the car and pulled out into the traffic again. Third time lucky.

“Have you heard about Bobby Fischer?” I asked Robin.

“You mean the man who was the eleventh world chess champion?” asked Robin.

“Yes, that's him,” I said. “He was really dedicated to chess. There seemed to be very little room in his world for anything except the game. Anyway, one day he was being interviewed by a reporter who was intrigued by Fischer's monomaniacal obsession. The reporter asked him if he'd rather play chess or have sex.”

“That's quite a question,” observed Robin. “How did Fischer answer it?”

“He thought carefully for a while and then he said, 'It depends on the position...'"

“Why is that car flashing its lights at us?” asked Robin.

“I don't know,” I said. And even as the words left my lips another car travelling in the opposite direction to us, flashed its lights. So did the next car. And the next...

“I'm not speeding,” said Robin, “and I've got my lights on. What else can it possibly be?”

“Perhaps there's something showing on the front of our car,” I suggested. “It might be something connected with the problems we were having earlier? Maybe we're about to lock the doors and flash the hazard light again. Perhaps the God of Travel doesn't like chess jokes either?”

“Should I pull over so we can check the car again?” asked Robin.

I was about to say yes, when we turned a corner and all was revealed. The police had set up a check point and they were breath testing all the drivers. Witch hat traffic cones constrained the traffic to one lane and a long queue of policeman made vague gestures at us.

“What are they wanting me to do?” asked Robin, confused. “Should I stop? Should I slow down and drive to the front of the line?”

“I don't know,” I said, equally confused by the long line of wobbly policemen.

Robin slowed down and the policemen speeded up, arms waving in a semaphore of incomprehensible instructions. Eventually we reached the very last policeman. He was standing stock still in the middle of the road holding up his right hand. “I think I'll stop here,” said Robin. “I don't want to run him over.”

She opened her window and the policeman came over to us. “Good evening, madam,” he said.

“Hello,” said Robin. “I wondered why all the cars were flashing their lights at me. Now I know.”

“Quite,” said the policeman dryly. He presented a small black box. “Please count down from ten into this device.”

“Ten,” said Robin. “Nine. Eight...”

When she reached zero I half expected the policeman to zoom up into the sky on jets of fire. But instead, he simply frowned at his device for a while, then he turned it round so that Robin could see the screen. “NO ALCOHOL” it said.

“Thank you madam,” said the policeman. “Have a good evening.” He waved us on and turned his attention to the car behind us.

“Well, that was fun,” said Robin as we drove away.

“I’m surprised he made you count,” I said. “Every time I’ve been stopped at these checkpoints I’ve had to say my name and address.”

“Perhaps it’s a test of brainpower as well as a test of sobriety,” suggested Robin. “I was half tempted to count inside out for him. I’m sure that would have impressed the socks off him!”

“What’s counting inside out?” I asked. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Really?” said Robin, surprised. And then she counted to ten inside out. “Five, six, four, seven, three, eight, two, nine, one, ten.”

“Wow!” I said. “That’s impressive.”

“I can count inside out to twenty as well,” said Robin smugly. “Would you like to hear me?”

“No,” said. “We’ve arrived at the restaurant.”

“Pity,” said Robin as she parked the car. “It’s really difficult to count inside out when the numbers get large.”

“I imagine it is,” I said. “What’s the largest number you’ve ever done?”

“I think I managed fifty once. But I had to concentrate really hard.”

She turned the car off and took the keys out of the ignition. I leaned forward and picked up my bag from the

floor. The locks slammed shut and the hazard lights started to flash. We stared at each other in wild surmise.

"You've got your keys in your bag, haven't you?" Robin asked.

"Yes," I said.

"And your key ring has the car locking gadget on it, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Something in your bag is pressing against the gadget, and that's what caused all our problems as we drove here," she said.

"Yes," I said.

We got the car settled down and then we went into the restaurant.

"After all I've been through tonight," said Robin, "I think I deserve extra chocolate for dessert."

"Yes," I said.

"Happy birthday," said Robin.

# Alan and the Wet Spot

*Plink!*

What? Was that a plink I heard? Surely not. It must have been on the radio. I hunkered down and listened to the music that the radio was playing, trying to distract myself from the weather that I could see through the window. Outside, the remains of Cyclone Ita tormented down from the sky. Ita had flooded the Solomon Islands and much of Queensland, and now it seemed hell bent on doing the same thing to New Zealand. Solid sheets of water flung themselves around with gay abandon as high winds blew the rain hither and yon, flattening the flowers in the garden and saturating the street. Rivers of storm water ran gaily into the drains. The radio told me that the farmers, who had been complaining about the drought, were now complaining that there was far too much water in their fields. Farmers are never satisfied...

*Plink! Plink!*

Strange how the radio was making that curiously metronomic noise. It didn't fit the rhythm of the music at all. Harpo the Cat wandered into the lounge shaking his paws as if they were wet. "Hello, Harpo," I said. "Have you been outside?"

"In this weather?" asked Harpo incredulously. "Don't be daft. Who'd want to go out in rain like that? By the way, did you know that there's a huge pool of water just by the front door?"

"No, I didn't know that. I'll go and look."

I went out into the hall to see what was going on and there, by the front door, was a large puddle. My first thought was that Cyclone Ita had blown rain into the house through gaps underneath and around the door. It had always been a

little loose in the frame. But as I bent to examine the door more closely, a drop of water fell on my head, right on the bald spot. Ouch! I looked up and all was revealed. Water was dripping regularly from the ceiling and plinking itself into a puddle. Damn! The roof was leaking. Bloody cyclones!

I mopped up the puddle, much to Harpo's annoyance because he was drinking from it, and then I placed a bucket under the drips.

*Plink! Plink! Plink!*

The sound was getting on my nerves, so I lined the bucket with a towel. At least the drips were falling silently now. I went to my computer and examined the internet for roof experts. I found a man called Peter the Plumber who claimed to be a roof specialist. He lived just down the road from me. How convenient. I rang him.

"Hello. This is Peter."

"Hello Peter. My roof has sprung a leak and I'm not sure what to do about it."

"That's not surprising," said Peter. "It's absolutely evil out there. I've just come home from my last job to get changed. I'm completely saturated. I squelched in my van all the way home. Good job it doesn't have absorbent seats."

"I can imagine," I said. "I've never seen rain like this. It's obviously exploiting a weak spot in my roof."

"What's your address?" asked Peter. "I'll try and get round some time today."

I gave him the necessary details.

Outside, Cyclone Ita carried on doing just what cyclones do best. The guttering on the house across the road was unable to cope with the influx of water and had overflowed, spilling dramatic torrents everywhere. Harpo the Cat and Bess the Other Cat sat on the windowsill watching the rain as it pounded the garden and smashed itself vainly against the windows..



“Make it stop,” said Bess. “I want to go out for a pee and a poo.”

“For once,” said Harpo, “she’s talking sense. You really ought to do something about it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but there isn’t anything I can do. I can’t control the weather.”

“Bloody useless, you are,” said Harpo, and he turned his back on me.

“I can’t wait,” said Bess. “Sorry, gotta go.”

She raced off to the cat flap and shot outside. About five minutes later she came back, looking very pleased with herself. “There,” she said, “that’s better. I’m pounds lighter now.”

“You’re also soaking wet,” I pointed out. “You must be the wettest cat in the whole universe. I can get a towel and dry you, if you’d like.”

“Don’t bother,” said Bess. “I’ll just climb up on your lap and saturate your trousers.”

*Plink! Plink!*

What? I went out to the hall to investigate. Water was still dripping from the original place in the ceiling, but there was now an extra drip a bit further along from the first. There was no bucket under this second drip and so it was plinking steadily onto the floor again. Heaving a deep sigh at it, I went and fetched another bucket and towel, and I mopped up the new puddle.

I pottered around the house doing this and that. The radio took a gloomy delight in telling me about the many horrible things that were happening all over the country as Cyclone Ita wreaked havoc here, there and everywhere. Trees blown down, roofs ripped off, power cuts, landslips and flooding. A few drips from my ceiling started to seem quite minor in comparison.

*Plink! Plink!*

Oh, no. Not again? Out in the hall, a fresh drip had appeared. Another bucket and another towel. Perhaps it

wasn't a minor thing after all. I telephoned Peter and explained the situation. "I'll be round about five o'clock," he said, and he was as good as his word.

He was carrying a stepladder. "How can I get inside the roof?" he asked.

I showed him where the trapdoor into the roof was, and he adjusted his ladder, climbed up it and shone his torch around. "I can see the leak," he said triumphantly. "Do you want to see it?"

He got down and I clambered up and pointed myself towards the front of the house. "What am I looking for?" I asked.

"There's a dark brown patch on the beam," he said. "That's the water soaking into the wood."

I saw it. "I can see it," I said. "What do we do now?"

"I'll have a look outside," said Peter.

He wandered around the house looking up at the roof and shaking his head gloomily. "It's a steel roof, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"There's nothing I can do while it's still raining," he said. "Steel roofs are very dangerous when they are wet. They get very slippery. One wrong step and you slide off and crash down. Then you have to start looking for money as a down-payment on a wheelchair. We'll just have to wait for the sun to come back."

"I checked the weather forecast," I said. "It looks like it's going to be raining for forty days and forty nights."

"Well, for the moment just keep collecting the drips in the buckets," said Peter. "She'll be right. But you might want to consider building an ark. I'll be in touch when and if the sun comes back." He squelched out to his van and drove off into the storm.

*Plink! Plink!*

Another drip, another bucket and another towel. I was rapidly approaching a bucket crisis. The rain continued to fall in Niagara-like torrents. The street looked more and

more like a river and less and less like a street. The inter-islander ferry chugged slowly up the street against the current. A dead elephant and Russell Crowe floated past in the opposite direction. I stared suspiciously at my coffee - what on earth was I drinking? Once the hallucinations went away, I turned on the television. There weren't enough pictures on the radio for my liking...

However the reality reported on the television was even more unbelievable than the visions I'd made up for myself. A farmer driving a 14-tonne digger rescued a woman trapped by flood waters on the roof of her car. He stretched the digger's arm out to her and she scrambled into the bucket which then swung her ignominiously to safety. She and the farmer both took selfies as the rescue progressed. If there aren't any films and photographs then it never happened.

*Plink! Plink! Plink!*

Oh no! Not another drip? Yes, another drip. The only remaining drip catcher that I could lay my hands on was a dirt tray which the cats didn't use any more because they preferred to go outside. We'd long ago thrown away the kitty litter that was in it and stored the tray safely in the laundry in case we ever needed it again. I took it out, lined the tray with a towel and positioned it carefully. Harpo watched closely.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I explained.

"Why are you using my dirt tray?"

"Because you don't."

"But I might," said Harpo. He walked widdershins around the tray a couple of times and then he climbed in, curled up and went to sleep. He didn't seem to care that Chinese Water Torture drips were falling on to him with monotonous regularity. Bess and I went to our more conventional beds and slept the night away. When I got up the next day, Harpo was still soggily asleep in his dirt tray.

Amazingly, the rain had gone away overnight and a weak sun was peering shyly through the heavy clouds. I checked the weather forecast. Today appeared to be an oasis of meagre sunshine which would quickly turn back into rain on the following day. I rang Peter the Plumber.

“It’s not raining,” I pointed out.

“I’ll be there in an hour or so,” he said and once again he was as good as his word.

He climbed up on the roof and spent a couple of hours loudly hitting things, then he climbed down again. “I’m about eighty percent sure I’ve fixed it,” he said. “You can never be completely certain with leaks, but I think I’ve got it. I’ve re-sealed some bits where the sealing seemed to have perished and I’ve fastened the leaky area down a bit more securely. But I suggest you keep the buckets there for a while just in case.”

He packed his gear away and drove off.

Despite what the weather forecast said, since Peter repaired the roof there has been no significant rain to speak of at all and consequently I haven’t heard a single plink for several days. Therefore the current state of the roof remains undefined. Fixing the roof guarantees sunshine for exactly the same reason that washing the car guarantees rain. Clearly the weather gods were insulted by what I did, and they have gone away to sulk. Because it is uncertain as to whether or not the repair has solved the whole of the problem, the buckets remain in place for the time being. Harpo has slept in the dirt tray every single night. He at least is very pleased with what I have done. When I finally come to remove all the buckets and wash all the towels, Harpo’s wrath will be terrible to behold. I do not expect to survive it unscathed.

# Alan On Board

I took a taxi to the airport. Another trip to Auckland, another course to teach, another dollar to earn. I approached the prettiest looking check in machine. "Lo! Here am I," I declared. "You can stop worrying now. Pray, check me in and issue me with a boarding pass. The luxurious Koru Club lounge is calling to me with a siren song of decadent promise."

"Hello, Alan," said the machine. "It's lovely to see you again. Where are you heading to this time?"

"Just Auckland," I said.

"Hang on a sec," said the machine, "I'll have a wee rummage through my unmentionables and see what we've got you booked on."

There was a short pause and then the machine emitted a cry of triumph. "Got you!" it said. "Here are your details." It displayed them on the screen. "Is that OK?"

"Not really," I said. "You've got me sitting in 3A which is a window seat. I much prefer an aisle."

"Oh, sorry about that. I've been coughing a lot for the last couple of days. I think I might be coming down with a virus. Plays havoc with the concentration, you know. Here's all the free aisle seats. Which one would you like?"

"I'll have 3C, please," I said. "It's always been my favourite."

"Righto," agreed the machine and with a hiss and a roar and a shimmy it printed a label for my luggage and a boarding pass for me.

"Thank you," I said, as I fastened the label onto my somewhat disreputable looking case.

"You're welcome," said the machine and as I carried my bag over to the conveyor belt I heard the machine yell,

“Next, please!” in strident tones.

I wended my way to the Koru Club lounge. In Wellington, you get to the lounge before you go thorough security, so there is plenty of time to relax before enduring the probing, eldritch horror and humiliation of having electromagnetic radiation peer deeply into your secrets. In the lounge I suffered a sudden attack of puritanism and I decided against indulging myself in the Albarragena Jamon Iberico de Bellota, a curiously flavoured ham that is made from pigs fed only on acorns and succulent roots, which gives the flesh a distinctive taste. The ham is cured for three years, and is wrapped in an apron hand made by a Spanish tailor, and then placed carefully in a hand-carpentered wooden box. Each and every Albarragena ham comes with its own DNA certificate to confirm its authenticity. It retails at about \$1500 a kilo. The lounge was full of happily munching commuters, several of whom were wearing the aprons that had once adorned the ham. One person was trying hard to get a highly polished wooden box into his hand luggage. I decided to have crackers and cheddar cheese instead.

In the fullness of time my flight was called and I wended my way downstairs and strode through the metal detector which found much to disapprove of, and which beeped furiously at me. A nice lady confronted me and asked me to hold out my arms while she waved a magic wand back and forth.

“What’s on that wrist?” she asked.

“A watch,” I said, and I showed it to her.

“What’s on that wrist?” she asked.

“A medic-alert bracelet,” I said, and I showed it to her.

“What’s on your neck?” she asked.

“A gold chain,” I said, and I showed it to her.

“What’s on your willy?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Shall I show it to you?”

“Don’t bother,” she said and she waved me through.

And then, as I joined the queue at the departure gate, a horrid truth dawned on me. I had left my boarding pass behind in the lounge where doubtless at this very moment it was indulging itself in massive slices of Albarragena ham and wearing an apron. There was no way that the fierce lady was going to let me back out through security to go and pick it up. So how on earth was I going to get on the plane?

I confessed my dilemma to the lady who was checking the boarding passes. "See the gate marshall," she said briskly and pointed to a man who was hunched over a keyboard and staring with fixed concentration at a screen.

I cleared my throat to attract his attention. "I've left my boarding pass in the Koru lounge," I said.

"No problem," he said. "What's your name?"

"Robson," I said. "Alan Robson."

He poked a few keys and a passenger manifest manifested itself on his screen. "I can't see you here, Mr Smith," he said.

"Robson," I corrected him.

He looked surprised. "How do you spell that?"

"R-O-B-S-O-N."

He hunted around his keyboard for a while and then pecked a single key on the top row of letters. I hoped it actually was the letter 'R'. He pressed enter and blinked at the display that popped up. "Here you are," he declared triumphantly. "Can I see some identification, please?"

I showed him my drivers license. He sniggered at the photograph and then printed a new boarding pass for me. I wandered down the corridor, boarded the aircraft and plonked myself down in seat 3C. Phew!

The flight to Auckland was uneventful. I stayed there for a week and then took a taxi to the airport so as to fly home to Wellington.

As soon as I walked through the door into the foyer of Auckland airport, all the check in machines yelled "Hello, Alan. Great to have you back with us."

As always, I chose the prettiest machine and ran my fingers seductively over its touch screen. "Oooh! Do that again," said the machine, and then it sneezed.

"Bless you," I said. "I think that your virus is getting worse."

"Yes," said the machine. "And I've been leaking foul fluids all down my data channels. Never mind. I've booked you into your favourite seat. 3A."

"No, no," I said. "You've got it wrong again. I want an aisle seat. I want 3C, please."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure."

"Oh all right. 3C it is." The machine sniffed snottily then printed out my luggage tag and boarding pass. I took my luggage to the conveyor and then made my way up to security. At Auckland airport, you can only get to the Koru lounge after you have been electromagnetically probed and vetted. Somewhat to my surprise, the metal detector found absolutely nothing suspicious about my watch or my medic-alert bracelet or my gold chain, and it passed me through without a sound. A lady with a magic wand smiled sweetly at me, but otherwise paid me no attention at all. It seemed I'd had a narrow escape. I headed off to the lounge.

In order to get in to the Koru lounge, you have to present your boarding pass to a bar-code scanning machine at the entrance. If it likes you, it flashes green and you are allowed in to indulge yourself in sybaritic luxuries beyond your wildest dreams. If it hates you, it flashes red and large gentlemen escort you outside and beat you severely with model aeroplanes so as to punish you for your temerity.

I presented my boarding pass. The machine ignored me completely. I tried again, and once again absolutely nothing happened. I tried a third time. No green, no red. Nothing at all.

A cloud of smoke poured from a nearby lamp and coalesced into a lady. "Can I see your boarding pass?" she



asked. I showed it to her. "Oh look," she said, "the bar code is all smeary. No wonder the scanner couldn't read it."

"The check in machine was feeling rather ill," I said. "I suspect it might have scrambled some bits. That could account for it."

"Very likely," agreed the lady. "There's a lot of it about at the moment."

She printed a new boarding pass for me. This was getting to be a habit...

I gave it to the scanning machine which flashed all its green lights at me. I entered the gates of paradise and the lady smoked herself sexily back into her lamp.

Time passed, as it has a habit of doing. Have you ever noticed that? Debauched and debilitated, I staggered to the boarding gate, got on the plane, and collapsed into seat 3C. The lady in charge of the plane picked up a microphone and made an announcement.

"Kia orana," she said. "Welcome to Air New Zealand flight 479. We're all going to Wellington, so I hope that you are too."

Fortunately, I was.

# Early Morning Logic

3.30am is the very best time of day for cats to have a squalling, hissing, spitting, full volume fight on the bed. The human slaves are deeply asleep and they respond with extremely satisfying noises to their abrupt awakening. With any luck, pillows, lamps and even shoes might get thrown, which can then be chased down, tortured and killed. Also there will inevitably be a lot of flesh on view, and much of it can be bitten.

And that was why I awoke to sensations of extreme pain.

“Ow! Harpo, you bastard! Stop that immediately!”

“I see he still isn't mistaking you for somebody that he likes,” said Robin.

“No. He certainly isn't. How about we give them breakfast so that they will leave us alone?”

“OK,” said Robin. “I'll do it. I need to get up anyway so that I can watch the world cup soccer on the TV.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But I really can't understand why you don't just record the matches that take place in the small hours of the morning. That way you could sleep in, and then watch them at your leisure at a more civilized time of day.”

Robin was shocked. “That will never work,” she explained. “If I watch the match after it's all over and done with, I won't be able to affect the outcome by shouting at the screen!”

“Sorry,” I said. “I hadn't thought of that. You're absolutely correct. Pay no attention to me.”

“Anyway,” Robin continued, “you are forgetting the reason why we actually went out and bought a device for recording TV programmes in the first place, aren't you?”

“No,” I said, puzzled. “I don’t think so. Remind me. Why did we buy the recorder?”

“Recording machines watch the television for you,” explained Robin patiently. “They record the programmes, and they watch them all the way through on your behalf. Since the programmes have already been watched, you don’t actually have to watch them yourself at all!

“They really are wonderful time-saving devices. And they even watch the adverts for you, which is extraordinarily helpful because nobody likes watching adverts, of course.”

“Huh?” I found Robin’s reasoning dubious. “So you are telling me that watching a pre-recorded programme is like eating someone else’s left-over food? The food is still nutritious, but nevertheless...”

“That’s right,” said Robin. “I’ve recorded about a hundred hours of Dr. Who programmes, and I haven’t watched any of them. I don’t need to. The recorder watched them all for me.”

“I see,” I said, scratching my head. “At least I think I do. There’s a certain superficial appeal to your thinking on the subject. But nevertheless, I suspect that your logic might be flawed somewhere.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Robin. “It works for me.” She toddled off to feed the cats.

As I lay there, half awake and half asleep, bleeding gently onto the sheets, I could hear vague biscuit rattling noises coming from the kitchen.

“Get a move on!” insisted Harpo. “Gosh, you are so slow!”

“Please – is it my turn for food yet?” asked Bess anxiously.

It wasn’t long before the sounds of happy munching filled the house and Robin came back into the bedroom to report on progress. “I’ve punished Harpo severely,” she said in deeply satisfied tones.

“What have you done to him?”

"I gave him breakfast in the yellow bowl," she said. "That'll teach him to wake us up so early in the morning."

"Indeed it will," I said. "It was very clever of you to think of such an excruciating punishment at this terrible hour of the day."

"Thank you," said Robin, and then she went off to watch the soccer. I lay in bed, wide awake by now, wondering what to do next. Eventually I couldn't stand the mingled sounds of gobbling and goal kicking any more, and so I got up to face the rest of the day. In the kitchen, Harpo was just finishing off the last of the biscuits in his yellow bowl.

"Serves you right," I said. "You shouldn't have bitten me."

He looked up from his breakfast. "Bastard!" he muttered.

Meanwhile, Bess took a final swallow from her blue bowl and said, "I'm going to go and snooze in the warm spot that Robin left on the bed. I feel sleepy."

"OK," I said. "Sleep tight. Don't let the bugs bite."

"You killed them all last week," said Bess, "when you squirted that nasty anti-flea liquid on the back of my neck. I've been really lonely since then. All my best friends died in agony."

"Sorry."

I made some breakfast for myself. No yellow bowls for me because I'm a good boy! I chose a plain white bowl, with a subtle blue ring around the rim. And coffee, also in a plain white mug with a slogan printed on it. "If you want the best seat in the house, you'll have to move the cat." Obviously the author of this slogan has never met Harpo. Nobody moves Harpo out of the best seat if he doesn't want to be moved. Even the threat of the yellow bowl will generally fail to shift him from his chosen spot, except at meal times.

"You must be blind, ref!" yelled Robin. "Mark him! Mark him! Mark your man! Oh no-o-o-o-o-o! You moron! Shoot! Shoot! Pull his arm off and beat him to death with the soggy end! YES!!!"

Clearly Robin was enjoying the football.

I sipped my coffee and began to think about what to prepare for us to have for dinner. Reflecting on my conversation with Robin about the purpose of TV recorders, I decided that cooking leftovers would probably be a good idea. Deep within myself I discovered a hankering for bubble and squeak. Yum! So that was settled.

All I needed now was a selection of leftovers. I examined the fridge closely, but unfortunately I appeared to have completely run out of leftovers. Oh well, perhaps I could use the extra hours that the cats had given me to make some more.

I set some potatoes to boil and I finely sliced some cabbage which I braised with red onions in olive oil. I put a leg of lamb into the oven to roast. I chopped some carrots and parsnips and added them to the roasting dish.

I checked my bubble and squeak recipes. Several of them called for Brussels sprouts. I decided to pay no attention. Brussels sprouts are not food. Brussels sprouts are the reason why the British won the battle of Waterloo. The battle took place just outside the city of Brussels. What do you think the soldiers loaded their muskets with? Brussels sprouts, of course!

Mushrooms, I decided, would serve very well in place of Brussels sprouts. Magic!

When the potatoes were thoroughly cooked, I mashed them with milk and margarine and then set them aside to cool. I chopped the carrots and parsnips into julienne slices and mixed them with the braised cabbage. I carved the roast lamb. I thinly sliced a selection of mushrooms. I put all these things into separate bowls and I put the bowls into the fridge where they would be safe until dinner time.

So now I had a wonderful selection of leftovers just waiting for me to perform culinary magic with them. When dinner time arrived this evening, it would be really simple to make bubble and squeak.

“Y-e-s-s-s!” yelled Robin. “Two-nil! Two-nil! Take that you bastards! Owwww!!!!”

“What happened?”

“Harpo isn’t a football fan,” explained Robin, “and he brought persuasive arguments to bear requesting me to curb my enthusiasm so that he can indulge himself in a session of postprandial snoozing.”

“You mean he bit you?”

“Well, if you must put it like that... Yes!”

# Underwear of the Goddesses

Another Sunday and another business trip to the far off city of Auckland. I got my suitcase ready for five days away from home. I'd packed the thing so often that I had it down to a fine art. I could, and often did, pack it with my eyes closed. A toilet bag, a pair of trousers, five shirts, five pairs of socks and five pairs of underpants. Five minutes to finish packing. Done.

"Oh, no!" cried Robin. "You're not taking the toilet bag again, are you?"

"Yes," I said, puzzled. "What's wrong with that?"

"I hate it when you take the toilet away with you," said Robin. "I have to walk around all week with my legs crossed."

"But look how nicely it fits in the special bag that your mum made for me," I said. "The embroidery on the bag is just amazing – toilets of the world. I get lots of envious looks when I load it into the overhead locker on the aeroplane. All the other travellers have their toilets in plain and very dull bags."

"Oh, all right," said Robin grumpily. "I suppose that showing off my mum's embroidery is a reasonable excuse to take a toilet bag with you. Don't worry about me. I'll survive."

The flight to Auckland was uneventful. There were lots of rattles and clanks as some mild turbulence tossed the toilets around in the lockers, but nothing that the pilot couldn't cope with. We landed safely and I took a taxi to my hotel. Unpacking my suitcase took less than five minutes. Hang the trousers and shirts in the wardrobe, toss the socks

and underpants into a drawer, take the toilet bag into the bathroom and attach the toilet to the local plumbing. Easy peasy.

The days quickly fell into a dull routine. Get up in the morning, test the toilet, have a shower and clean my teeth. Stumble around half-asleep. Open a drawer, grope around inside and take out randomly selected socks and underpants. Put them on. Unhang a shirt and clamber into it, snuggle my trousers around my waist. Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go.

“Good morning, Alan.”

“Morning!” I said.

Work all day then go back to the hotel. Have an evening meal and test the toilet again to make sure that it still worked. Get undressed. Throw the dirty clothes into a drawer so that they are out of sight and therefore cannot frighten the ladies who clean my room during the day when I am at work. Climb into bed and read a book until I fall asleep. Once I'm asleep, put the book down, turn off the light and wait patiently until morning. Rinse, lather, repeat.

The catastrophe happened on Wednesday morning. That was when the randomly selected underpants that I grabbed looked and felt rather peculiar as they dangled from my hand. Close examination revealed that what I was holding was a pair of Robin's finest knickers that had somehow sneaked themselves into my underwear drawer and got themselves packed in my suitcase by mistake. Now what?

It seemed to me that I now had two choices, though neither attracted me very much. Either I spent my day re-wearing yesterdays shattered underpants or I indulged myself in some mild cross-dressing fetishism. On balance, the latter seemed to offer more exciting possibilities so I pulled Robin's knickers slowly and sensuously over my trembling thighs. Initially they felt rather odd – somewhat snug and constricted around the front and overly loose and floppy around the back. But once I got used to them, they



began to feel more and more natural and more than a little bit empowering.

I finished dressing and then went off to work, trying very hard not to walk with a lisp. I knew that today I would have to be extra careful when I crossed the road. A friend who is a nurse tells me that a significantly large number of men who are run over and taken to hospital turn out to be wearing their wife's knickers. The nurses snigger about it in their coffee breaks. Clearly male pedestrians who wear ladies underwear are a major cause of traffic accidents. I did not want to become an object of derision to the local nurses and so I looked both ways. Twice.

I arrived safely at the office.

“Good morning, Alan.”

“Morning!” I said.

I bet you can't guess what I'm wearing underneath my trousers, I thought to myself as I headed off to my classroom. I don't know what Robin's knickers were made of, but rubbing my legs together as I walked had generated lots of static electricity and the hairs on my legs were now sticking straight up and poking holes through my trousers. I was beginning to understand why women made such a fuss about shaving their legs.

As the day progressed, I began to feel extremely fond of my new underwear. The silky, sexy smoothness next to my skin was amazingly comfortable and it filled me with confidence in my own abilities and defined my Alan-shaped place in the world. I am (wo)man, hear me roar. My students clearly detected a change in me and basked in the security of my authoritative aura.

I took lunch at a restaurant close to the office and because I was now brimming over with self-confidence, I ordered a dish I'd never eaten before. It was yummy and I decided to eat it for lunch every day from now on.

Being now fully empowered and wanting to make some practical use of the huge boost that Robin's knickers had

given to my ego, I went back to the office prepared to work miracles. Clearly I was now a super hero. I mentioned my astonishing transmogrification to a work colleague. He looked me up and down and shook his head sadly.

“No,” he said, “you can't possibly be a super hero. Real super heroes wear their underpants outside of their trousers for all the world to admire. It's something to do with showing off your masculinity, I think. Superman (TM) does it all the time.”

“Ah! Perhaps I'll take a pass on that aspect,” I said as I considered the flowers embroidered in the waistband of my sexy knickers and what they might say about me if I showed them to the world. “When did Superman change his surname to (TM)? I thought his real name was Superman Kent.”

“When the movies got popular,” explained my colleague. “I think he had to do it for tax reasons.”

I went back into the classroom ready to face any computer-related questions that my students might have for me. One of them called me over. “How does this work?” he asked. “I'm very puzzled. The program keeps telling me it can't find the data that it needs.”

“Ha!” I said. “Watch this!”

Long ago I learned that when you are showing things to students you never say anything more detailed than “Watch this!” Then it doesn't matter what happens next, you can always pretend that you expected it to happen.

I cast a magic spell and suddenly the student's program began to work properly.

“Gosh,” he said, impressed. “How did you manage to do that?”

“Easy,” I explained. “I'm wearing my wife's knickers.”

He gave me a spot-the-loony look. I suspect he thought I was teasing him.

I was almost sorry when the training day came to an end. Seldom had a course run so smoothly, seldom had I had so

many brilliant answers to so many detailed technical question. Some of the answers I gave were even correct. I found this astonishing.

I walked back to the hotel in a euphoric frame of mind. Again, none of the cars that roared past me noticed my unusual underpants and I arrived unscathed. I dined at my favourite restaurant and read an enthralling book. I tested the toilet. It still worked. Reluctantly I got undressed and went to bed.

Bye, bye knickers. I found myself dreading the approach of Thursday and the mundane normality of my underwear.

Both Thursday and Friday were anti-climactic in exactly the same way as each other, and then it was time to go home. I packed my suitcase with dirty clothes and rammed my toilet bag into whatever space was left over. I wended my way to the airport.

“Oh thank goodness you're back,” said Robin, hopping up and down with eagerness. The adoration in her voice was thrilling to hear. “Hurry up and get unpacked. I desperately need to go to the toilet.”

“Air New Zealand lost my luggage,” I said. “My toilet bag has gone for a holiday in Honolulu. We should get it back next month.”

# Alarums and Excursions

It's never a good sign when the phone summons you in the small hours of the morning. Invariably the news is bad. I struggled sleepily awake as my cell phone yodelled at me from across the room. What mad impulse had made me choose that particular sound as a ringtone?

"What's that noise?" grumbled Robin whose rage at being awakened prematurely is often homicidal.

"Someone's sent me a text message," I said. "It's probably important, considering what time it is. I'd better check." I hauled myself out of bed.

"Where are you going?" grumbled Harpo the Cat whose rage at being awakened prematurely is always homicidal.

"Just checking my phone," I told him. "Stay awake and watch." Being a disobedient cat, he immediately went back to sleep.

My phone sat glowing smugly on top of the chest of drawers. I staggered towards it through the deep darkness of the bedroom and opened the cover. I was nearly blinded by the explosion of light from the screen. Squinting carefully, I determined that yes - there really was a text message. I opened it up.

It was an automated message from my burglar alarm which had noticed that its back up battery was pretty much dead. The battery was refusing to charge itself up any more and the alarm was now very concerned that it would no longer be able to protect me in the event of a power cut. The alarm felt that it was very important to let me know all this while the facts were fresh in its mind.

I went out into the hall and checked the panel on the alarm. Sure enough, a red light glowed at me. I pressed a button and a different light started to flash. I checked the

manual and learned that the flashing light did indeed mean that the battery power was too low. It seemed that the alarm had good reason to be concerned. But did it really have to send me a text message at such an ungodly hour?

“You could have waited until a more civilised time,” I told it.

“Sorry,” said the burglar alarm, “but I felt quite strongly that I should let you know as soon as I detected the problem. I’ll try and do better in future.”

“See that you do,” I said and I went back to bed. Robin and Harpo were fast asleep. Harpo was sprawled all over the space I’d left and there was no room in the bed for me. I was far too scared of him to wake him up again, so I pushed Robin to one side and clambered back under the sheets.

“Grrrruummmmmpppppphhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!”, said Robin as she turned over.

“Quite right too,” I said.

An hour later my phone yodelled at me again, dragging me out of a delicious dream that seemed to involve naked nuns covered from head to toe in curry sauce. Hot stuff!

This time the message from the burglar alarm told me that the back up battery was now completely flat. If there was a power cut, my home would immediately be invaded by all the burglars in Wellington and the alarm wouldn't be able to do anything about it. This being a less than optimum situation, the alarm recommended that I take immediate steps to get the battery replaced.

“How am I supposed to do that at 3.00am?” I asked it.

“Not my problem, squire,” said the burglar alarm smugly. “I’m just reporting the facts.” I went back to bed and the rest of the night passed silently.

In the morning, when the streets were nicely aired, I rang the burglar alarm company and explained the problem to a nice lady.

“When did all this happen?” she asked.

I explained about my rude awakening.

“Oh good,” she said. “It's a relatively recent event then. I presume the alarm hasn't started an incessant beeping yet?”

“No,” I said. “I didn't know they did that.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “If the battery stays flat for more than a couple of days the alarm starts beeping and beeping and beeping and beeping and beeping...”

“No, nothing like that has happened,” I said, interrupting her incessant beeping.

“Good,” she said. “I suggest you get the battery replaced as soon as you can, before the beeping starts. I can make an appointment for a technician to come and do it - he's got a free slot in about six months. Oh, by the way, there's a \$90 call out fee, and the technician charges \$40 for every fifteen minutes he's on site. And then there's the cost of the materials as well. But the good news is that he usually manages to get a job like this done within the first fifteen minutes. It's rare for battery replacements to drag on into the second charging period.”

“That's a lot of money,” I said, somewhat shocked by the fees. “And it's rather a long time to wait. Surely I'll be enduring incessant beeping long before the technician arrives?”

“Probably you will,” said the nice lady. “And you're right, it is a lot of money. Personally, I'd call a local electrician. They'll do the job for you for a fraction of the cost.”

“That's good advice,” I said. “I think I'll take it.” And I did...

I rang the local electrician. He was very helpful. “My man Steve's in your area at the moment,” he said. “I'll pass your details on to him and maybe he'll be able to fit you in.”

I rang off. About five minutes later the phone rang.

“Hi, this is Steve,” said Steve. “I'll be there in about 10 minutes, if that's OK?”

“Perfect,” I said. “See you soon.”

Steve arrived with a replacement battery and a belt full of tools. "These things usually need replacing every five years or so," he said. "When did you last have it done?"

"I've never had it done," I said. "I didn't know I had to."

"How long have you had the alarm?" he asked.

"About fifteen years."

Steve was impressed. "Must have been a really good battery," he mused. He examined the burglar alarm box carefully. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully. "There's an anti-tamper device attached to it. So when I open the box up, the alarm will go off. Can you stand by the control panel and type your code in to turn it off again?"

"OK," I said.

Steve clamped a huge pair of ear muffers on to his head and went to work on the box. Sirens shrieked. "Help!" yelled the alarm. "Burglars! Rape! Robbery and Pillage!"

"Oh, shut up," I said as I tapped in my magic number. Obediently the alarm fell silent. And then, *mirabile dictu*, all its lights went off and it lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Have you disconnected the power?" I asked Steve.

"Yes," he said. "I've pulled its fuse off. It won't give us any trouble now."

It took Steve about five minutes to replace the battery and put the fuse back in. The alarm woke up and immediately became alarmed. "Oh, no! I've been interfered with!"

It began shrieking complaints again, so, once more, I keyed in the magic number to shut it up. Sullenly, it flashed a red light at me. "It's still complaining that its battery is in trouble," I said to Steve.

"And I've forgotten what time it is," interrupted the alarm. "You pulled my fuse out and made my clock stop. It's flashing 00:00 at me and I don't like it. It's very upsetting."

"Where does it say that?" I asked. "I can't see anything."

"Reality is all in the mind," explained the alarm. "It's a private thing..."

“Don't go getting philosophical on me,” I said. I entered the current time into the keypad. “Phew! That's a relief,” said the alarm. “You've no idea how disorienting it is when you don't know the time. It always makes me want to start shrieking.”

“Don't do that,” I said. “Now, tell me what's up with your battery.”

“Dunno, squire,” said the alarm, and it flashed a sullen light.

“Funny about that battery,” said Steve. “I think it's brand new. But on the other hand, it was just sitting there on the bench when I swung by the workshop to pick it up. I'll see if I can lay my hands on another one, just in case.”

About two hours later, the alarm sent me another text message.

“Whoopee!! Just in case you hadn't noticed. My battery is now fully charged.”

I checked, and the sullen red light had gone out all by itself. I rang Steve and gave him the good news. “Oh good,” he said. “Obviously the battery wasn't quite fully charged when I picked it up. I'll cancel the order for a new one.”

“Thanks,” I said.

The alarm said, “I feel a lot better now that everything's back to normal.”

“Let's hope you stay that way,” I said. “I don't want any more rude awakenings in the small hours of the morning just because you feel a little bit off colour.”

“But that's my job!” The alarm sounded defensive. “I have to keep you informed about everything that's going on in the house.”

“I only need to know about important things,” I told it. “I don't need to know about trivialities.”

“I'm only a burglar alarm,” it said. “How am I supposed to know what's important and what isn't?”

“If it doesn't require you to turn your siren on and start shrieking then it isn't important,” I explained, “so you don't



have to tell me about it in the small hours of the morning. You can wait until a more civilised time.”

“Quite frankly I'd rather just shriek,” said the alarm. “Nothing like a good shriek to get the cobwebs out of the siren. Everyone needs a good shriek now and then. Perhaps I'll start doing that instead of just sending you a text message. That way everyone in the whole street will know that something's wrong and they'll all rally round to help you. Won't that be wonderful?”

“If you start doing that I'll replace you with a more cooperative device,” I threatened.

The alarm didn't say anything, but a few seconds later my phone yodelled at me. I checked the text message.

“OK. You win.”

# Alan and the Painter Man

Before you can sell a house you have to make it look attractive. Nobody wants to live in an ugly dwelling. Extreme cosmetics provide the best solution to the problem. An effective approach generally involves giving the house a fresh coat of paint so that prospective buyers are not immediately repelled by the peeling, grubby and sadly dilapidated face that it shows to the world. Beauty is always skin deep as far as houses are concerned.

The first step in the painting of a house involves the construction of lots of scaffolding. Jimmy the Painter came and drilled large holes in my weatherboard cladding. Then he bolted some rusty pieces of angle iron into them. He laid some long grey planks over the iron frames. Lo and Behold! Scaffolding!

Once the scaffolding was arranged to his satisfaction, Jimmy dressed himself in a Darth Vader costume, plugged his combination ray-gun and water blaster into a convenient power point, and then clambered all over the scaffolding planks, shooting jets of high pressure water at the house as he went. Grimy, dried out sheets of white paint flaked off the walls exposing large swathes of orange clad wood beneath - it would seem that at some time in its long life my house had been much more vivid than it was now. Since the house had been built in the 1960s, perhaps it had once been owned by a hippie. Maybe there were bright, swirling, psychedelic patterns hiding behind the conservative off-white that it now displayed to the world. I got quite excited at the thought and discussed it with Harpo and Bess.

“What's psychedelia?” asked Bess. “Can you eat it?”

The more worldly-wise Harpo took a toke at his catnip mouse. “Groovy, baby,” he said in a mellow tone. “Far out,

man.”

The catnip mouse was soon joined by the catnip snake that Harpo keeps for emergencies. “Don't Bogart that join,” said Bess, and then she ruined the moment by bursting into hysterical laughter. Harpo gave her a withering look. “Don't bring me down, man,” he complained in a mellow tone. “That isn't cool.”

When Jimmy's high pressure water reached the window frames it tried hard to insinuate itself inside the house. But I've been on the receiving end of water blasting before and, being wise in the ways of soggy jets, I made sure to block as much of the wetness as I could with large piles of super-absorbent towels. Nevertheless some moisture still got through and I ended the day with dripping towels, damp floors and suspicious wet spots on my trousers. Fortunately, apart from the areas immediately adjacent to Jimmy's Portable Storm, it was a warm and sunny day outside. The water would soon evaporate.

Jimmy de-Darth Vadered himself, emerging pinkly flushed, moist, slightly shrunken and wrinkled from his shell. He packed away his fearsome weapon. “I'll leave the house to dry overnight,” he said. “I'll be back tomorrow to start sanding it down.”

The next day Jimmy arrived with a huge Swiss Army knife that was stuffed full of useful gadgets. Holding it carefully, Jimmy pulled, pushed and wriggled its mechanisms backwards and forwards finally revealing a Tom Swift Atomic Sander, and an ingenious device for de-scaling fish.

He spent an energetic few hours scraping away at the fishiest planks on the house, and then he dressed up in a space suit of heroic proportions so as to protect himself from the dangers of the next stage. He turned on his Atomic Sander and began to smooth down the rough edges on the borders of the old paint patches, generating vast clouds of radioactive dust that settled on him like a second skin. Trees and bushes withered and died for miles in every direction as

the evil cloud spread its baleful influences far and wide across the suburb. The maleficent fumes caused serious mutations in the hordes of tusked wetas that lurked in the undergrowth. They grew to ten times their usual size and thundered up and down the street hunting down, killing and eating their natural prey – the roaming herds of harmless, herbivorous courier vans, and stray packs of feral children who were returning home from school.

“I need to go outside,” said Bess at the height of the infestation. “I want to kill one of those science-fictional wetas.”

“You know where the cat flap is,” I said. “You don't need my permission to use it.”

She gave me a “spot the loony” look. “The cat flap's for coming in through,” she said in withering tones. “I need to go out through the people door. Open it for me. Now!”

I opened the front door for her. Jimmy was sitting happily on a plank half way up the left hand wall, giving it a good grind. He looked round curiously as the door opened. Bess took one horrified look at this mid-air monster surrounded by billowing clouds of dust and then she turned tail and fled to the other end of the house where she went outside through the cat flap.

Once Jimmy had finished sanding down the house he went off to a decontamination unit to re-purify himself for the next day's tasks. The enormous tusked wetas followed him hopefully, apart from the one that Bess was munching on. I was glad to see them go. They were not a selling feature.

The house now looked even more hideous than it had when Jimmy first started his massive reconstruction efforts – it was blotchy and freckled and spotty. It appeared to be in the terminal stages of some horrible pox. I was almost ashamed to be seen living in it. Now was obviously the time for a complete cosmetic makeover. I looked forward eagerly to the next stage of the project.

Jimmy came back the following day with a brush and a pot of paint. This was a hopeful sign. Perhaps now we'd see some constructive action to cure my raddled and poxy walls. It would all be down hill from this point onwards.

I was in the kitchen boiling a jug to make myself a coffee when I heard an enormous *crash!* I raced outside and found Jimmy contemplating the empty space where a major part of his scaffolding had once been.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The long plank across the front of the house snapped in two," he said. "It was creaking a lot yesterday when I was sitting on it, so this morning I thumped it a bit with a big hammer before I climbed up on it, just to see what would happen. And the plank broke in the middle."

"Good job it didn't break while you were up on it," I said, "or I'd be calling an ambulance for you now. The concrete down there is quite hard and unforgiving."

Jimmy nodded agreement. "Lots of broken bones, I shouldn't wonder," he said contemplatively.

"Even worse," I said, "you might have had to stop painting the house."

"That would indeed have been the worst aspect," agreed Jimmy. He poked moodily at the two halves of his shattered plank. "Yesterday I had one long plank," he said. "Now I've got two short planks."

"Thick as!" I said admiringly.

Jimmy rearranged his scaffolding so as to make the best possible use of his new planking facilities. He opened his tin of paint and stirred it a bit, then he climbed up on the planks and began slapping paint everywhere. The scaffolding bent alarmingly beneath him, but Jimmy didn't seem worried so I went back inside and finished making my coffee.

By the end of the day the lawn was white, and so was some of the house. Jimmy was an enthusiastic, and very

efficient, painter. He worked to a simple rule: if it moves, paint it. If it doesn't move, kick it until it does.

As the week progressed, the house grew whiter and shinier. It took on all the airs and graces of a delicate and very pretty lady dressed to the nines and on her way to a formal ball. Jimmy provided her with the final touch of powder and lipstick by giving the window frames a dark blue trim. The job was finished.

The house stood tall and proud and pretty, dominating the street with elegant insouciance. It looked very enticing and pleasing - an attractive house in which to live. I couldn't see any reason for wanting to sell it and move elsewhere.

"You are wrong!" Robin explained firmly. I found myself unable to fault the logic.

# Look Back In Tranquillity

I'm retired now, but in the days when I was a real person I spent almost twenty five years as a teacher. I like to think that in some ways teaching is a sacred calling – in theory at least, the teacher can have a hugely significant effect on the lives of the people listening to him burble. Which means you really do need to burble responsibly. Most of the time.

I've been very lucky in my educational life. When I was at school I had two truly inspirational teachers, so I do have some sort of a handle on how these things work.

Mr Ludlum taught me mathematics. He's the only maths teacher I ever had who was able to make me understand, appreciate and make significant use of the beauty and elegance that underpins the mathematical world. His passion for the subject, and his constant search for ways of explaining that passion raised my performance as a mathematician from the barely adequate to the really quite good, and it is entirely due to him that I managed to take and pass three quite advanced maths exams in my GCE years. They were, if I recall correctly, Mathematics, Special Mathematics and Advanced Mathematics. I don't think I could get anywhere near a passing mark on any of those exams today – but between the ages of 14 and 18, when I was studying this stuff quite intensively, I knew a lot more than I know now.

Perhaps an example will help to put this in context. There's an excellent science fiction novel called **The Black Cloud** by Fred Hoyle in which the eponymous cloud is discovered flying through interstellar space on a course that will take it close to the Earth. There is some speculation about what the cloud is and why it is heading so directly for us, and the ramifications of those speculations make up the

plot of a very thoughtful and entertaining book. At one point a group of astronomers try to make an estimate of just how fast the cloud is moving so as to be able to predict when it will arrive. Calculations are scribbled on the traditional blackboard and a conclusion is reached. In a footnote (so as not to interrupt the flow of the story) we are given the complete mathematical justification for the result. The proof involves a rather elegant application of the differential calculus and, in order to obtain some actual figures to plug into the final equation, an approximation by finite intervals.

I first read this novel at about the age of 14 and the mathematical proof was complete gibberish to me. I re-read the book about five years later and I vividly remember thinking, as I read the proof, "Gosh, that's clever. And it's so simple as well!" The level of understanding that I was able to bring to bear on this example of deductive reasoning is directly due to Mr Ludlum's teaching.

Just today I went back to the book and re-read that proof so as to see how well my understanding had survived the test of time. I won't say the proof has returned to complete gibberish again because it hasn't - but now I only vaguely understand it, and I certainly couldn't reproduce it if asked to in an exam. Unused skills tend to atrophy. What a shame.

The other inspirational teacher in my life was Mr Tennant, who taught me English Language and English Literature - in other words, grammar and books. Yes, in those dim and distant days English Grammar was a formal course of study in its own right. Most people found it dull, and I suspect that even Mr Tennant might have found it dull, but nevertheless somehow he managed to enliven the subject to the extent that I consistently got extraordinarily high marks in the grammar exams. But it was in the teaching of literature that Mr Tennant really shone.

His doctorate was on the novels of Sir Walter Scott. I found this more than a little surprising since to me Scott's novels are among the most boring books ever written. But



Mr Tennant was an enthusiast and eventually I did manage to find some small shreds of merit in **Ivanhoe**...

Mr Tennant was a traditionalist who was highly suspicious of twentieth century literature - he felt that it was too new and the verdict of history was not yet in. Maybe it needed another couple of hundred years or so to mature. Perhaps that was the reason why we studied Dickens for our GCE exams. However despite Mr Tennant's lack of sympathy with twentieth century artistic movements, he did play clarinet in a trad jazz band, so obviously the century wasn't all bad.

I didn't always agree with Mr Tennant's opinions. Where he was content to regard Shakespeare as the only playwright worthy of study, I was much happier with John Osborne and Harold Pinter. We had long discussions about it. These days I'm inclining more towards his point of view - I find Osborne and Pinter shallow where once I thought them profound. Maybe the test of time really is an important one.

We agreed on poetry though. Neither of us had much time for the moderns and though I read Eliot and dipped into Pound, I never really felt comfortable with either of them. And Auden was just incomprehensible. Both of us enjoyed Betjeman, though we agreed that he certainly wasn't a major poet. I suspect that if either of us had known about Philip Larkin we'd have both enjoyed the sardonic humour of his insights as well. But it was long after I left school that I finally discovered Larkin and when I did, I rather regretted no longer being able to discuss him with my favourite English teacher. But in class, we stuck with Browning and Tennyson. They seemed safe (and safely dead).

Mr Tennant always encouraged me to write and he was always kind to my juvenilia. He encouraged me to find my own voice in my prose and to stop imitating the style of whatever novelist it was that I was reading this week. At the time, I wasn't sure what he meant by that remark, but strangely he did always seem to know exactly what books

I'd recently got out the library. Personally I just assumed that he did it by using the super powers that he got when he was bitten by a radioactive schoolboy,...

Mr Tennant awakened a life-long love of literature in me. He taught me to understand the internal construction of the sentences that are themselves the building blocks of literature. He taught me rhetoric and dramatic structure, and how to recognise an iambic pentameter when I tripped over it in the dark on my way to the toilet. He convinced me that there can be many different ideas hiding inside the words of even the simplest of sentences. I don't think a day goes past when I don't use something that he taught me and sometimes I still hear his dry, sarcastic voice inside my head. Usually he's saying, "See? I told you you'd find that useful one day!"

It is clear that truly inspirational teachers have had a profound effect on my life. So now, after nearly quarter of a century of teaching, I start to wonder whether or not I have had a similarly profound effect on any of my students. Well, I do know of a couple of students that I have inspired, and I have indirect, second-hand evidence that there have been others. Mind you, the reverse is also true - twice after introducing myself to the class on Monday morning, I've had students say to me, "Oh! You must be the Alan Robson that [so and so] says such horrible things about!"

Perhaps each of these cancels the others...

Nevertheless the positive examples still stand out. I have a good friend who I don't see nearly enough of these days because we live in different cities. He trained as a librarian, though now he works with computers, mad impetuous fool that he is. He came on one of my courses many years ago and as I recall, we both enjoyed the experience. Recently he was passing through Wellington, so he called round to say hello and during the general chit-chat, he mused about the course that he'd attended lo! These many years ago.

“You know,” he said, “what you taught me about networking in general and TCP/IP in particular was just fantastic. It clarified so many things. Stuff I'd been doing without really knowing why I did it suddenly started to make sense and I've been applying that knowledge almost every day ever since. It's solved so many problems for me and it's got me out of so many holes. I don't know what I'd have done without it.”

I got a warm glow inside. “Have another beer,” I said.

I always enjoy having a friend come on a course, and it's good to think that I've had a positive effect on their career. Mind you, another friend who attended one of my courses is currently in prison, serving a life sentence for murder...

Teaching is an opportunity to give something back to the world. This was brought home to me very strongly once when, quite out of the blue, I got a phone call from one of the Powers That Be. “Alan,” said the voice, “we've had an enquiry about Red Hat Linux training from a seventeen year old. He wants to take the certification exams, but I'm a bit dubious. How can he possibly have the necessary experience when he's so young?”

“Let me talk to him and I'll get back to you,” I said. “What's his phone number?”

I rang him up and we had a long friendly chat. He was extraordinarily knowledgeable and very mature. If I hadn't already known he was seventeen, I'd have assumed he was at least twice that age just on the basis of our phone conversation. Having been a precocious kid myself, I knew exactly how he must be feeling and naturally I was on his side. His physical age was, I felt, a complete irrelevance.

“He needs to come on the course,” I said to the Powers That Be.

“But he's only seventeen...”

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “Trust me, he already knows more than most students who come on these courses. He just needs a little bit of a spit and polish to put what he

knows on a more formal basis and fill in some of the gaps. He'll sail through the exams.”

“OK...”

The Powers That Be remained uncertain, but they reluctantly went along with my insistent advice and the course was booked. The student flew up from Christchurch with his parents. He had a week of hard work in front of him and they had a week of shopping! Being only seventeen, he had no money and so his parents were paying the hideously expensive course and exam fees for him. They were happy to do so because, being supportive parents, they wanted to give him every opportunity to get a good start in the career that he so obviously loved. But naturally they were anxious for him, and we had long, private conversations about his progress when he wasn't around.

He found the course hard, but enjoyable. He soaked up information like a sponge and he passed his exams with flying colours. He was thrilled and so was I.

But best of all was the email I got from his parents thanking me for believing in him, and for working so hard with him. That was just wonderful.

After he passed his exams, he applied for (and got) a job as a programmer with Red Hat in America. He used me as a referee. His career was off to a stellar start. To this day, I am fiercely proud of him, and quietly pleased that I gave him his opportunity.

That's the kind of thing that makes teaching worthwhile.

# A Game Of Phones

On the 4<sup>th</sup> November I rang Yodafunk to tell them that I was moving house at the end of the month. As is usual when anyone rings Yodafunk, I was immediately put on hold, and I spent 45 minutes or so listening to a music tape with only three songs on it that repeated and repeated *ad nauseam*. You push the phone button down, the music goes round and round, (woh, woh oh, oh) and it comes out in your ear. It wasn't long before I felt like screaming because I had every note and every word of every song permanently etched into every single cell of my brain and my IQ had dropped by 50 points. Then, finally, I got a human being to talk to. Whew!

"I'm moving house," I said to Yodafunk.

"I'll arrange for a relocation expert to contact you some time during the next seven to ten days" said Yodafunk.

"Can't you be any more precise than that?"

"No, sorry." Yodafunk rang off and I began to wait. I indulged in much thumb-twiddling, and three days later, on 7<sup>th</sup> November, the phone rang.

"Hello, I'm Chris, your relocation consultant. I understand you are moving house and need to have your services moved to the new address?"

"That's almost right," I said. "I only need a phone line and internet access at the new address. You can cancel the TV service, we've decided we don't need it. Also the internet connection I currently have is through your cable service but I know that doesn't apply at the new address, so what alternative can you offer me?"

I gave him the address of the new house.

"Just a minute while I check the location," said Chris. I heard the clatter of keys as he typed stuff at his computer.

“There we are,” he said at last. “ADSL broadband, phone line and TV.”

“No TV,” I said.

“No TV? Are you sure?”

“No TV,” I confirmed.

“No TV,” said Chris reluctantly. “Now, when should all this be done?”

“I'd like the current services cancelled on 27<sup>th</sup> November and the services installed at the new address on 3<sup>rd</sup> December. Oh - and you'll need to arrange for a technician to come and pick up your equipment from my old house. I've got a cable modem and two TV decoders which belong to you.”

“I'm not sure we can pick the equipment up,” said Chris.

“You have to,” I said. “It's connected with some rather complicated cabling that requires a special tool to dismantle. A technician had to visit to install it and a technician has to visit to de-install it as well.”

“I'll see what I can do,” said Chris, “but I can't promise anything.”

“I suppose I could always cut the cables and take the gear to the tip,” I mused.

“No, don't do that,” said Chris. “I'll arrange for a technician.”

“And you'll need to arrange for an ADSL modem to be delivered to the new house. Since the services go live on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, how about you deliver the modem on 2<sup>nd</sup> December?”

I heard more keys clatter as Chris made complex notes to himself.

“All arranged,” said Chris.

“Thank you. Can I have a phone number for you in case I need to ring you again?” I asked.

“I'm sorry,” said Chris, “but company policy prevents me from giving you my phone number. You will have to ring our

usual toll free number if you need to talk to me again.  
Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I said with my fingers crossed.

Crossing my fingers made not a blind bit of difference.  
From that point on, everything started to go wrong...

On 11<sup>th</sup> November I got a text message from Yodafunk. My ADSL modem would be delivered overnight to the new address. Please make sure someone was present to sign for the modem. Since I hadn't moved to the new address yet (indeed, I didn't even own it yet, settlement not having happened) I was faced with a bit of a quandary...

The first thing I did was ring the estate agent who was handling the sale. I asked him to tell the current owners of the house about the modem and, if they happened to be in when it arrived, to refuse to accept it. He promised to do that.

Then I rang Yodafunk and settled in for the usual interminable wait. However this time I was lucky - I only got the Yodafunk Song Cycle for a mere 20 minutes. How lucky can a person be? I was connected to a charming lady who confessed to be greatly puzzled by the early delivery of the modem. She promised to adjust my notes and have it delivered properly on 2<sup>nd</sup> December as I'd originally asked for it to be. On the face of it, things were now under control. Little did I know that I was living in a fools paradise...

A week later I got another text from Yodafunk confirming my new telephone number would be 09... That couldn't be correct! The 09 area code is Auckland and I was moving to Hawke's Bay which is area code 06. Time to ring Yodafunk again. Nearly an hour later I got to talk with a man who had a delightful Scottish accent. I explained my dilemma.

“Oh, joy!” he said gloomily. “There's no way that is going to work. I'll pass you on to our accounts people.”

He pressed some buttons and I went back on hold and the Yodafunk Song Cycle played its stunningly banal notes

repetitively at me until eventually, after geological aeons...

“Hello, how can I help you?”

I explained it all over again. I was getting very bored with explaining it all over again.

“Ah yes,” said the lady. “I'll pass the request on to Provisioning Services. They'll fix it, no problem. Goodbye.”

On 27<sup>th</sup> November, somewhat to my surprise, a Yodafunk technician actually turned up at my old house to disconnect and collect the equipment. Wielding his special multi-purpose tool, he finished off so fast I barely felt a thing! Finally they got something right. Could this be an omen? No, it couldn't...

Initially things looked good. At the end of November we moved to our new house and, just as promised, the modem was delivered on 2<sup>nd</sup> December. The courier who delivered it banged on the front door and demanded a signature from me at the ungodly sparrowfart hour of 6.30am. But fortunately I am an early riser, so that didn't worry me at all. I looked forward eagerly to 3<sup>rd</sup> December when everything was scheduled to go live.

About half way through 3<sup>rd</sup> December I got a text message from Yodafunk. Apparently my connection was now scheduled for 4<sup>th</sup> December and could I please make sure that I was home all day so that the technician could have access. There was no explanation for the delay but since it was only for a day, I didn't worry too much and I duly made sure that I was home on the 4<sup>th</sup>. No technician ever appeared, and the phone line remained stubbornly dead as a dodo. The next day I re-entered the fray and rang Yodafunk on my mobile phone. The hold music hadn't changed since the last time I'd rung and I welcomed it back like an old friend. After about 40 minutes or so a voice said, “Hello?”

I explained my problem.

“Do you have a dial tone?”



“No,” I said again. “There is no sound whatsoever on the line. Nothing, zilch, total silence.”

“Hmm,” said the human being. “Everything looks correct at this end. The line is active and the number is 09...”

I explained again about the original 09 vs 06 mistake.

“Oh!” he said, sounding very surprised. “That's odd. You're right, the place where you live is in the 06 area code. I wonder how you got an 09 number? That's never going to work. I'll get Provisioning Services to change it. Now, what about your broadband? Does that work?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I haven't connected the modem. Since the phone line is dead I assumed that broadband would also be Yodafunked up.”

“Oh no,” said the voice. “The one doesn't depend on the other. I'm sure you'll find that broadband works. Meanwhile I'll see what I can do about the phone. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I said, but I was wasting my time. He'd ended the call.

I unpacked and connected the modem. Rather to my surprise, it detected a signal and declared itself ready to give me internet access. The speed was terribly slow, but at least the connection was there. Whoopee!! Welcome back world. I spent some time catching up on my email and checking out my favourite web sites.

The following day I still had no phone line. I sent an email to Yodafunk but without any real hope of anything happening. Over the years I've sent dozens of emails to their support services but none of the emails have ever been replied to and no action has ever been taken on any of the subjects I raised. So as a backup to their write-only email service, I rang them from my mobile phone again. I sat in the usual queue and listened to the usual inane music for an hour and a half whereupon the robot voice said, “We are experiencing difficulties connecting you to Customer Services. Please try again later.” Then it hung up the call.

An hour later I tried again with exactly the same results. Obviously everyone in Customer Services had gone home for the day even though it was only lunchtime.

The next day I tried again. After sitting in the queue for about 40 minutes this time, I again got a human being. I explained that I still had no land line. The human being brought up my case records.

"I've found your number," said the voice. "It's 09..."

Wearily I explained yet again about the 09/06 Yodafunk up.

"That's odd," said the voice. "There's no mention of that in the notes. I'll pass it on to Provisioning Services and they'll sort it out for you."

"It's been passed on to Provisioning Services several times now," I said. "And quite a few people have assured me that they've updated my notes with that information. However as yet everyone involved has utterly failed to take any action whatsoever. Why should things be any different this time? All I want is a telephone line. How hard can it be? It's your basic business after all. That's what you do - you install telephone lines for people. Why can't you install one for me?"

"Leave it with me sir," said the voice. "I'll chase it up for you. Goodbye."

Two days passed and still I had no telephone. Neither had I received any reply to my email bemoaning the situation - which did not surprise me in the slightest. So yet again I girded my loins and joined the queue waiting for someone to deign to talk to me. A mere 50 minutes later, someone did.

I explained it all yet again. And once more the person I was talking to expressed complete surprise that I'd been given an 09 number when it should have been an 06 number. Strangely there was no mention of this error my notes. Perhaps someone ought to tell Provisioning Services, they'd be able to sort it out for me

“Could I talk directly to Provisioning Services?” I asked.

“Sorry sir, they are an internal department.”

“Can you talk to Provisioning Services and get them to put a technician onto solving the problem?”

“I'll do my best sir. Goodbye.”

Later that day I got a text message from someone at Yodafunk. A technician had been assigned to my problem and was scheduled to start work on it at 4.00pm. I would have a phone line by close of business that day. No mention was made as to whether or not the technician would need physical access to my house, but just to be on the safe side, I determined to stay in.

From about 4.30pm I checked my phone every hour. It remained completely dead and no technician came to knock on my door. Late that night I went to bed, still without a phone. The next morning the line was still dead, so I rang Yodafunk again from my mobile. Because it was very early and nobody was up yet, I only had to sit through quarter of an hour of musical banalities.

Once again I explained the situation in detail. Once again the operative expressed surprise at my 09 phone number. Once again Provisioning Services was invoked as the only department who could possibly address my problem. Once again promises of speedy action were made and the operative rang off.

I have no idea whether my last phone call had any practical effect or not, but an hour or so after I made it, I picked up the phone in a moment of idleness and, wonder of wonders, I had a dial tone. Whoopee!! Obviously the technician had fixed the problem without needing access to anything in the house. It would have been nice if I could have been told that...

“Robin,” I yelled excitedly, “we can call people! We have a phone line at long last!”

“That's nice dear,” said Robin. “But can people call us? What's our number?”

“I don't know,” I said. Yodafunk haven't told me what the number is.”

“Why don't you ring my mobile?” suggested Robin. “That always reports any numbers that ring it, so it's a good way to find out who we are.”

“What an excellent idea,” I said, and I dialled her mobile. It rang and rang and she squinted at the screen. “Here we are,” she said. “06...”

“A last!” I said. “Finally Provisioning Services have got their thumb out of their bum and done something about the situation. Phew!”

And so we had a phone line at long last.

I note in passing that at no point during this dreary saga have I received any apology from Yodafunk about the hoops they forced me to jump through. They still haven't informed me that I have a phone line (they just left me to discover it by accident) and they still haven't officially told me what my number actually is. Indeed, they've barely spoken to me at all of their own volition. I've initiated almost all of the calls. Mostly I've just been left hanging in limbo.

It is well known that Yodafunk is currently losing money hand over fist, and I'm really not very surprised by that. Not only are they technically inept, their communications with their customers are really quite abysmal. Waiting times in excess of an hour are very common, and they completely ignore any emails that are sent to them. Nobody ever seems to want to take ownership of any problem and, despite promises that they will follow through on the customer's concerns, that rarely seems to happen. Positive action to address a problem seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Once the operative has said goodbye to the customer, they just move on to the next call in the queue, and the problem is forgotten about.

My only solace, such as it is, is that the other major telecommunications company in New Zealand is equally as inept. Perhaps that's why Yodafunk manages to remain in

business - their only "competition" is just as efficient as they are, for very small values of efficiency of course.

# The Day Of The Cat Astrophe

“OK Harpo,” said Diane, the Purville Cattery lady, “today's the big day. Today you and Bess are travelling to your new house in the Hawke's Bay. Alan and Robin are waiting for you there.”

“N-o-o-o-o,” howled Harpo. “I don't want to go. I want to stay here at Purville and have fights.”

“You can't,” explained Diane. “Alan has made all the arrangements and the person from VenturePets has brought your travelling cage. Now be a good boy and get into the cage.”

“N-o-o-o-o,” howled Harpo. “I won't!”

“You will,” said Diane firmly, and she picked him up and poured him into the cage.

“You cheated,” shrieked Harpo, and he hissed and spat.

“OK Bess,” said Diane, “it's your turn now. Be a good girl and get in your travelling cage.”

Bess heaved a deep sigh and got into her cage. She turned around three times to get comfortable and then she fell asleep. That's her favourite mechanism for making the world go away when it all gets far too much for her to bear. Her snores rumbled a deep counterpoint to Harpo's howling as the person from VenturePets carried the cages down the path from the cattery to the van that was waiting to take them to the airport.

Harpo found Wellington airport to be a scary place, full of machines that went *ping* and stern men in uniforms who checked his shaggy fur for concealed bombs. He didn't like it a bit. “N-o-o-o-o,” he howled and the stern men flinched and covered their ears with their hands. They hurriedly

waved him through into the boarding gate. "How did you manage to wave me through?" asked Harpo, intrigued. "Both hands are occupied covering over your ears... Oh well, I think I'll just have another howl. N-o-o-o-o!"

The travelling cages were loaded into the first class hold. There were no windows for the cats to see out of in case they got vertigo and threw up all over the nice clean aeroplane. All the cats could do was peer at each other through the bars on their cages as the plane rumbled down the runway and dragged itself up into the air.

"That's a funny feeling," said Bess as the G-forces pushed her to the back of the cage. "I wonder what it means?"

"N-o-o-o-o," shrieked Harpo. "Make it stop."

Bess went back to sleep.

In the passenger section of the plane, coffee and biscuits were being served. "What's that funny noise?" asked the man in seat 11C.

"I don't know," said the hostess, "I've never heard anything like that before."

"Are we going to crash?"

"I'll ask the pilot." She trotted to the front of the plane and picked up the phone that connected her to the cockpit. "What's that funny noise? Should I start telling people to brace themselves for an emergency landing?"

"I don't know," said the pilot. "All my instruments indicate that everything is perfectly fine, but that horrible noise is anything but normal. Are the passengers worried?"

"Yes," said the hostess.

"OK," said the pilot, "I'll make a soothing announcement over the intercom."

There was a click and a hum as the cabin speakers switched on. "Some of you may have noticed a funny noise in the background," said the pilot. "There's nothing to worry about, it's perfectly normal. We've just got a swollen capacitor in the high gain thermofilament, but we are

equipped with four spare thermofilaments that can easily handle the load. So just sit back, relax and enjoy the flight and our special Air New Zealand cabin service.”

“N-o-o-o-o,” howled Harpo.

“This is the purser,” said the purser, as she took over the microphone from the pilot. “In order to take your mind off the horrible noise which we promise is definitely not going to make the aircraft crash and burn up, we will be serving you all a complementary plastic glass half-full of lukewarm orange flavoured sugar water.”

Eventually the plane began its approach to Napier airport. The pressure changes as it lost height made Harpo's ears go pop. This was a new sensation and, just as with all the other new things that had happened to him today, he didn't like it at all. He redoubled his howling. “N-o-o-o-o! N-o-o-o-o!”. The plane made a rather bumpy landing because the pilot was distracted by the noise and he misjudged the landing speed and the angle of the flaps. “N-o-o-o-o!” howled Harpo as the plane taxied to the gate and the passengers prepared to disembark. One and all, they looked relieved to be leaving the scary noise behind.

The VenturePets representative stood by the arrival gate holding a large cardboard sign that said “Harpo and Bess”. Eventually someone brought her the two travelling cages.

“N-o-o-o-o!” howled Harpo as he was handed over to the care of the VenturePets lady. Passengers all over the airport flinched and shrank back in fear as the horrible noise reverberated across the terminal building.

“Come on,” said the lady, “let's go and see Alan and Robin.”

“N-o-o-o-o!”

She loaded the cages into her van and drove off towards Havelock North. Bess began to shiver with fear and Harpo continued to howl. “N-o-o-o-o!”

“Calm down,” said the lady soothingly. “Everything's going to be all right.”



She began to sing nursery rhymes in the hope that they would calm Harpo down. Instead, he redoubled his howling. "N-o-o-o-o! N-o-o-o-o!" She sang more loudly, but it didn't help.

Meanwhile, Robin and I were waiting nervously for the cats to arrive. We'd spent the morning making the house as cat-attractive as we could. We put biscuits and water in their bowls and set their climbing frames by the windows with the best views. We put fresh litter in their dirt trays. I re-checked the instructions from the vet - keep them indoors for at least two weeks before you let them out so that they get used to the place. If you let them out too soon, they might get scared and go too far and not be able to find their way back again...

"Listen," said Robin. "Is that our cats?"

Faintly in the distance I could hear "N-o-o-o-o!". It got louder and louder as the lady carried the cages to out front door. "N-o-o-o-o! N-o-o-o-o!" I didn't wait for her to knock, I opened the door straight away.

"Hello Harpo," I said. "Hello Bess."

"Hello," said Bess. "What's all this then?"

"N-o-o-o-o!" howled Harpo.

We carried the cages into the room where the food bowls were, and we opened the cages. Bess came out straight away and had a quick nibble on some biscuits. She looked around wide-eyed and amazed. "I didn't know there were places like this in the world," she said. "Neat! What do the rest of the rooms look like?"

Harpo point blank refused to leave his cage. The world was far too frightening to go out into. Eventually we had to turn the cage upside down and shake it hard so that gravity forced him out. He landed on the carpet with thump, gazed around in horror and then fled to the furthest corner. "N-o-o-o-o!"

Bess was obviously frightened by all the strange new geography that she found herself trapped in. But

nevertheless there was familiar furniture in the rooms and Robin and I were never far away. By the end of the day, she was starting to settle down a bit and she slept with us on the bed that night.

Harpo, on the other hand, wasn't happy at all. He did eventually make his way into every room in the house, but all he did in them was seek out the safe, dark spaces where he could huddle down out of sight. Unfortunately he was never out of hearing and cries of "N-o-o-o-o!" echoed all over the house.

"Do we really have to keep them both inside for a fortnight?" asked Robin. "I'm not sure my nerves will stand it."

"It could be an interesting two weeks," I admitted. "Perhaps we should buy some earplugs?"

"N-o-o-o-o!" howled Harpo.

After a couple of days, Harpo graduated from dark corners to the highest windowsill. He stared mournfully out onto the garden where he could see the shrubbery. It was obviously a fierce and frightening shrubbery because every so often he would howl "N-o-o-o-o!" and jump down from the windowsill to go and shiver in one of his corners again. Hunger and thirst drove him to the food and water bowls, but the wide open spaces of the room were still scary and he was very unhappy exposing himself so much. After a few nibbles and sips he'd slink back to his corner. "N-o-o-o-o!"

"I've had enough of this," said Robin. "I keep waking up in the night when he howls. I'm exhausted. Let's open a door and put him in the garden. If we're lucky he might run away and hitch-hike back to Wellington."

"OK," I said. "But we'll walk round the garden with him just in case. It might reassure him."

We opened the door closest to his current hiding place. After a few minutes he ventured out into the garden. Immediately he perked up. "Hey! This place is cool! Look at the hedge, and all those leaves. I wonder if there are mice?"

He trotted around the garden and we did our best to keep up with him. He quickly found all the comfy hidey holes and all the best places from which to sneak up on unsuspecting birds. Then he jumped over the fence into next door's garden.

"Ooops!" said Robin. "I wasn't expecting that."

"I hope he comes home for tea," I said. "Let's go and see what Bess makes of it all."

Bess ventured out a few steps on to the deck and looked around in wide-eyed wonder again. "Gosh, the world is big, isn't it?" she said. "I never knew there was so much of it." A leaf spiralled down from a tree and spooked her. She ran back inside and had a soothing snack.

An hour or so later Harpo swaggered back home, lord of all he surveyed. "Mine!", he gloated. "All mine! I'm in charge!"

Bess looked at him, amazed. "What's it like out there?" she asked. "Is there much to see and do?"

"Best place ever!" said Harpo. "Go and have a look, you'll like it."

Bess went out to see what the garden had to offer. She stuck close to the house and refused to go over the fence. She was nervous, but not unhappy. She paused every so often to smell the roses. Then she stretched out on the deck in the sunshine and fell asleep.

"I think she likes it," I said.

"I think so too," said Robin. "That's a bit of luck."

And it was as simple as that. Both cats are now perfectly comfortable and are quite convinced that they've never lived anywhere else, although every so often Harpo does stumble across something new which spooks him all over again and forces him to go and hide in his dark, safe place again. But the difference is that it is now *his* dark, safe place in *his* home, so that's OK.

# A Road By Any Other Name...

Robin and I live in a village called Havelock North. While it is largely self-sufficient, the fact remains that sometimes we need to do things that require the facilities of a larger town. The closest such town is Hastings. Periodically Robin and I drive there. Robin sits in the front passenger seat with a map and does her word perfect imitation of a GPS system.

Eventually the GPS tells me to, "Turn left onto Saint Aubyn Street."

I turn left. Sometimes after I've turned left the GPS says, "No. The *other* left..."

"Sorry. I don't do geography very well..."

Once we get ourselves sorted out, we drive along Saint Aubyn Street. Every so often we pass a sign that identifies the street. In order to keep the signs small and thereby reduce the construction expenses to an absolute minimum, the signs all say: St. Aubyn St. This looks nicely symmetric to the eyeballs but it is rather confusing to the brain since the same abbreviation (St.) has two completely different meanings in the phrase as written. We both find this highly amusing and, just for fun, we have decided deliberately to mispronounce it.

"Which way shall I drive today?" I ask the GPS.

"Turn left onto Street Aubyn Saint," says the GPS.

Or, to be more accurate, the GPS tries to say that. It has proved to be a surprisingly difficult thing to say and again and again the GPS finds herself saying "Saint Aubyn Street" instead.

Sometimes Robin drives us to Hastings and then, of course, it becomes my turn to be the GPS and I have to say,

“Turn left onto Street Aubyn Saint.” Not surprisingly, just like Robin, I have enormous difficulty stringing those odd syllables together. There seems to be something hard wired into both of us that requires that all the things we drive or walk along should always be called a Road (Rd), a Lane (Ln), an Avenue (Ave), a Boulevard (Blvd), a Drive (Dr), a Street (St) or a Mews (Mews). Or, in the case of the cul de sac that we actually live in, a Place (Pl). Our brains insist that Street Aubyn Saint is a completely forbidden combination for the name of a drivable surface. Our speech centres just *know* that it's wrong and they lock themselves down rather than let such an abomination slip past them, thus rendering us briefly mute.

I find myself puzzled by the plethora of names we give to the things we walk and drive along. Just what is it that distinguishes a Street from an Avenue, an Avenue from a Road, or a Lane from any other descriptive suffix? The designations all seem to be applied rather arbitrarily. The interwebs are no help here. They give a lot of definitions of the various terms, many of which, not surprisingly, contradict each other. From this I can only conclude that, for all practical purposes, the terms really are synonyms. However that does not mean that they can be used interchangeably – the names are assigned arbitrarily, but once assigned, they are fixed forever. Therefore it is more than likely that in any given town (or city) you will find that XXX Road is on the opposite side of the city (or town) to XXX Street and that XXX Avenue is nowhere near either of the other two! And let's not talk about XXX Lane...

“What about XXX Lane?”

“I told you that we're not going to talk about XXX Lane!”

“Sorry. I wasn't paying attention...”

Many Americans (at least, those who are fortunate enough to live in a well planned city) are actually much more sensible than the rest of us when it comes to naming these things. Cities such as New York and Washington D. C.

try very hard to impose some sort of order on the chaos. These two cities are both laid out on a rectangular grid. In New York, the rules require that all the roads running east-west must be called Streets and the roads that run north-south must be called Avenues. Washington D. C. has a similar scheme though there the roads are all Streets with numbered Streets running north-south and lettered Streets running east-west. Avenues run diagonally and are named after states (thus Pennsylvania Avenue where the White House squats in solitary splendour). However I am told by people who have lived in those places that chaos descends again once you move away from the central city. And of course there are quite a lot of American cities (Albuquerque springs to mind) that like topsy, just grew when nobody was looking. So the solution is patchily implemented at best and is not ideal.

People who have grown up with the regularity of these kind of schemes generally have no real difficulty orienting themselves to the cardinal points of the compass and, of course, they seldom get lost. Unfortunately, this geometrical symmetry encourages the assumption that if you walk up any given street and take the first left turn and then do it again and then do it one more time, you will end up back where you started. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption to make if the roads really are laid out on a rectangular grid. But if you try taking three left turns in succession in most European cities (or in Albuquerque) you will generally find yourself miles away from your starting point since very few of these places are laid out on a grid. The roads, streets and avenues just wander randomly all over the place as the whim takes them, and almost nobody can tell you which direction is North...

As it happens, Hastings itself is actually laid out on a rectangular grid and consequently three left turns in succession will indeed put you back to where you started. However there are no nomenclature rules relating the

names to the direction of travel, and therefore the Streets run both north-south and also east-west. Consequently it is unwise to use street names as a clue to the compass rose. Street Aubyn Saint itself runs east-west and intersects with a multitude of north-south saints – Market Saint, King Saint, Queen Saint, Nelson Saint...

Once Street Aubyn Saint reaches the boundaries of Hastings proper, the fun continues unabated. The main street that runs right through the centre of the city is actually Heretaunga Street (or Saint, if you prefer). Despite it being the main street that goes from one side of the city to the other, you can't actually drive down it to get all the way across because, right in the heart of the city, somebody has plonked a pedestrian precinct down on to Heretaunga Street and all motorised traffic must therefore screech to a halt upon reaching it. Heretaunga Street itself does continue to run through the town on the other side of the precinct, and as the frustrated drivers peer through the fog of random pedestrians, it beckons temptingly.

There is no immediately obvious way to bypass the precinct once you reach it. But a study of the map quickly makes it clear that detours do exist. Street Aubyn Saint is particularly useful for this purpose...

Hastings also takes advantage of the best of all nomenclatural worlds by having another major thoroughfare which rejoices in the name Avenue Road. I've searched all the map indexes, and unfortunately there does not appear to be a corresponding Road Avenue, a Street Road, an Avenue Street or any other interesting combination of suffix names. Pity really. Nevertheless, I remain very fond of Avenue Road.

After a lot of practice I have now (mostly) managed to train my vocal chords to say Street Aubyn Saint without stumbling. Consequently it seems appropriate to try the same game with all the other abbreviations I find on the signposts that pass me by. I particularly enjoy the drive

home from Hastings because then we drive along Napier Rural Delivery, turn into Street Hill Natural Logarithm (my very favourite) and then into Brookvale Rural Delivery and finally along Woodlands Doctor. Unfortunately our journey has no *Ave Caesar - morituri te salutamus* on it. Perhaps that's just as well.

### **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to say a big Thank You to Jane Lindsfold who straightened out my initially rather twisted ideas about the design of American cities and the nature of American thoroughfares.



# Alan Becomes An Old Age Pensioner

Old age pensioner probably isn't the politically correct terminology, but that's what we used to call the crusties when I was young, and I see no reason to change the nomenclature just because I'm now a crusty myself. So yes, I am officially old – I receive a pension and I have both a gold card and a community service card. Each card gives me discounts on this, that or the other thing or service because they define me as legally poor, and therefore in need of all the financial help that I can get. Additionally, the gold card entitles me to free bus trips during off peak hours. However since I live in a place that does not have a bus service, I suspect I will find this gold card feature to be less than useful...

There are bureaucratic wheels to be set in motion before you can collect a pension. It isn't automatic. I always assumed (if I thought about it at all, which I didn't) that there was a dusty clerk buried deep in a dusty government office who had a huge filing cabinet full of information about the birthdays of everyone in the country. As soon as an individual had clocked up sixty-five birthdays, the dusty clerk in his dusty office would sit up and take notice and start sending out dusty cheques. But that's not how it works. The government doesn't monitor you that closely (thank goodness). Instead, the onus is on you to tell them when you have reached the age of eligibility. You have to say, "Please, pretty please with knobs on, can I have some money?". And if all the i's are properly crossed and all the t's are properly dotted, the money just rolls in.

It starts, as these things invariably do, with a form to fill in.

You can get printed forms from your friendly neighbourhood WINZ (Work And Income New Zealand) office or, if you are feeling sufficiently hi-tech, you can fill the form in on-line. Since there are at least a dozen computers scattered around *Casa Robson*, I elected to go the hi-tech way. What could possibly go wrong?

The form was long and boring but I strongly suspect that it was quite streamlined, in the sense that the answers I gave determined what I would be asked next, so that I didn't have to wade through the piles of inapplicable irrelevancies that would have faced me had I filled in a paper form instead. Nevertheless I was still presented with about a dozen screens full of questions about the minutiae of my life. Finally I reached the very last screen. It helpfully informed me that once I clicked on the button marked "Next" my application would be submitted and I would no longer be able to edit any of the information I had supplied.

I clicked the button marked "Next" and the next thing I saw was:

Online Services

HOME

An error occurred while displaying the page.  
Please use the browser back button to go back to the previous page  
or select the Home button above to start over.

An un-handled server exception occurred.  
Please contact your administrator.

I can't say that I was very surprised when the error occurred. These things happen all the time with computer systems (particularly governmental computer systems)

since most of them are designed and implemented cheaply rather than properly. Nevertheless, I was mildly annoyed. Fortunately one of the clever things about this particular form is that as long as you *don't* click the button marked "Home" you can simply log off and come back to it a few days later and you will find that your information is still there waiting to be submitted. (If you click "Home", you will indeed have to start again from the beginning - so despite what the instructions say, don't ever click the button marked "Home". Trust me, you will deeply regret it. Would I lie to you?).

I waited for about three days and then I tried to submit the form again in the hope that they might have fixed the error. No such luck. It still failed on the final step. Clearly nobody at the other end was paying any attention to their system logs. I did not find this at all surprising.

I was now faced with a bit of a quandary. Since I couldn't submit my application for a pension, Catch-22 said that I would never be able to convince the government to give me one. Perhaps it was all part of a deliberate ploy designed to save the government money by refusing to accept pension applications in any form at all. I began to consider the purchase of a tinfoil hat.

Fortunately, in the very small print on a very small web page on the WINZ site there was a link that took me to the bottom of a locked metaphorical filing cabinet that was itself stuck in a disused virtual lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard'. And there I stumbled across an email address which could be used to report problems with the site. So I reported the problem and sat back to see if anything would come of it.

Rather to my surprise, I got a reply about a week later. It said, in part:

Thank you for taking the time to email us.  
We sincerely apologise for the fault you are experiencing.

The error message displayed relates to a fault which has now been resolved.

You should be able to log back in to your application and complete your form online.

Full of hope, I went back to the form and submitted it. This time it worked (wonder of wonders) and a page appeared telling me to ring a particular phone number and arrange an appointment for an interview. There were intricate instructions on how to hack my way through the jungle of the voice mail system that the phone number would connect me to. When I was six levels deep in the maze I was instructed to say the word "appointment" to the robot that was questioning me. So I dialled the number, navigated the maze and said "appointment". The robot vanished, a phone began to ring and an actual human being said, "Hello, how can I help you?"

I was astonished. I can't remember the last time I got a human being on the other end of a business phone call.

"I need an appointment to discuss my application for a pension," I said.

"Have you filled in the application form?" asked the human being.

"Yes," I said. "I did it on line."

"Did you print out the form so that you can sign and date it?" asked the human being.

"No," I said, puzzled. "I didn't realise that I had to. Nothing on the web site told me to do that."

"There's a button," said the human being. "You click on it and the form with all your answers filled in gets printed. There's a space at the end for your signature and the date."

It's marked with an 'X'. You can't have a pension if you haven't signed the form."

"There wasn't a button," I said.

"It's not valid without a signature," said the human being.

"There wasn't a button," I insisted. There hadn't been a button.

The human being heaved a deep, long-suffering sigh. "I'll see if I can pull it up on my screen. When did you submit the form? What's your name, address, date of birth and inside leg measurement?"

I supplied the necessary information.

"Do you dress to the right or the left?"

"Hang on," I said. "I need to look in a mirror."

"Never mind," said the human being. "I've found your details. I'll print the whole thing out on your behalf and post it to you. Don't forget to bring it with you when you come for your interview."

"That's right," I said. "In all the excitement, I quite forgot that I rang to make an appointment for an interview. Can I have an appointment, please?"

"The first available appointment is with Mr Bond on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February at 2.00pm."

"But that's a whole month away," I said.

"They are all very busy people," said the human being. "Do you want the appointment or not?"

"Yes please," I said.

"I've put it in his diary," said the human being. "Goodbye."

The phone went dead as the human being hung up. One more hurdle out of the way.

A week or so later, a very fat, official looking envelope arrived from WINZ. Inside was my filled in form with a space for my signature. As the human being had said on the phone, 'X' marked the spot. There was also a letter

confirming my appointment with Mr Bond. I was instructed to bring my birth certificate, citizenship certificate, passport, a bank statement to confirm the details of the account the pension was to be paid into, and a letter addressed to me with my postal address on it to confirm that my house actually existed. Nobody seemed to have noticed that these requirements overlapped – possession of a passport confirms both my citizenship and my date of birth. So why do I have to provide a birth certificate and citizenship certificate? But bureaucrats are not noted for their logic...

The WINZ office where Mr Bond lived and worked was a little bit of a surprise to me. I walked through the entrance and found myself in an anteroom with no indication of what to do next. There were no signs and no reception desk. The only available door was locked. I was starting to wonder if I really was in the right place when the locked door opened and an enormous security guard stuck his head out.

“Yes?” he asked. “What do you want?”

I explained why I was there and he opened the door wide. Behind him was a huge open plan office full of desks with nobody sitting at them and a counter with several hatches. All the hatches except one had their grilles closed. A gigantic queue of people stood at the only open slot, chatting among themselves as they waited to be served. Bored toddlers ran shrieking around the room. Several people were carrying takeaway coffees. Obviously they were old hands who knew just how long everything was going to take.

“Over there,” grunted the security guard.

“?” I asked.

He waved vaguely towards the other side of the room. “See that sign that says Senior Citizens?” he asked.

“I can see something,” I said, “but I have no idea what it says. It's too far away for me to read it.”

“There's a waiting room there,” said the guard. “Go and sit in it and Mr Bond will be with you soon.”

I walked towards the senior citizen area. Along the way I passed several more security guards standing alert with their hands poised, ready for instant action should it prove to be necessary. I felt both reassured and slightly perturbed. Over the last year or so there have been several violent attacks on staff in WINZ offices as angry beneficiaries took out their frustrations with their fists and sometimes with weapons. I was pleased to see that WINZ were obviously reacting positively to the potential threat. But today there were no angry vibes. Everyone seemed calm and good humoured.

Eventually I reached the senior citizen waiting room. It was the first time I'd been referred to as a senior citizen and it made me feel rather odd. I sat down and stroked my silver beard. A man came into the room and looked at me. "Mr Robson?" he asked.

"Yes."

We shook hands. "My name is Bond," he said. "James Bond. Come with me."

Doo diddley oo doo doo doo do. Doo diddley oo doo doo doo do. Doo doo doo doo dum.

I hummed the familiar theme music under my breath as we walked over to one of the empty desks. (Bang! Bang!) Mr Bond logged himself in to the computer that was sitting on it and clicked on a few things. All my details appeared on the screen. I was mildly disappointed that no blood trickled down it. Maybe he wasn't the real James Bond after all...

"Now, let's see what's what," he said. "Have you got your documents with you?"

I gave him my passport and the various certificates and letters. He fed them into a photocopier that scanned them and sent him a pdf file of the results. He displayed them briefly on his screen and then attached them to my file.

"Are you employed at the moment?" he asked.

"No," I said. "It's wonderful to have all that leisure time."

"Are you intending to get a job?" he asked.

“No,” I said. “Well maybe in a few months time, just as a hobby.”

He snorted with laughter. “Having a job as a hobby,” he said. “That sounds like a good idea. I wish I could afford to do that.”

He checked the signature on my application form and he scanned that as well. “It all seems quite straightforward and routine,” he said. “You will be eligible for the pension from your next birthday. Unfortunately that's half way through a pay period, so your first pension payment will only be a part payment, proportional to the length of time you've been eligible. But from that point on, you'll get a full payment every two weeks.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Do I need to do anything else?”

“No, that's it,” he said. “I've verified and confirmed all your details. It's all automatic now. Just sit back and wait for it to happen.”

We shook hands again and I got up to leave. There was an exit door on the other side of the Senior Citizens waiting room. Another enormous security guard opened it for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“My pleasure sir,” he said. “Enjoy the rest of your day.” I went out into the sunshine and he closed the door firmly behind me.

Then suddenly, just like that, I turned into an old age pensioner.



# The Man Who Was Tuesday

Now that I am retired, I find that my days are indistinguishably identical. I get up in the morning, I feed the cats, take last night's dishes out of the dishwasher and then I potter around. In the evening, I cook the dinner, I put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher and then I go to bed.

Rinse, lather, repeat.

Since I am no longer able to reliably distinguish one day from another, I eventually decided to stop making the effort altogether. Every day can be Wednesday, I thought to myself. That way I will no longer even have to try and work out what day the rest of the world thinks it is. It's a brilliant scheme that I am sure will save much wear and tear on my brain cells.

However, once I put my cunning plan into practice, it proved to have hidden flaws. My pension payment day always falls on Tuesday. Consequently it seemed clear to me that there was a very real danger that my pension would never arrive in my bank account if every day was Wednesday. Therefore I've now agreed with myself to make every day Tuesday instead, and after trying it out for several Tuesdays in a row, I am tentatively of the opinion that the problem has been solved. Robin is very happy with it as well.

"Tuesday is my favourite day," she said. "I was born on a Tuesday, and I know all the words to The Mickey Mouse Club Tuesday Song. Would you like me to sing it to you?"

"No thank you," I said.

So she sang it to me.

One particular Tuesday, about three-quarters of the way though the week, I went to our favourite café. Its name is Jolt. It has friendly, welcoming staff and it serves good

coffee and good food. What's not to like? So that particular Tuesday I was in there drinking a cup of coffee and nibbling a comestible when Stephanie, the manager, came over for a chat.

"I'm thinking of having a quiz evening once a month," she said. "Would you and Robin be interested in coming along to it?"

"Yes, we're up for that," I said. "What sort of quiz?"

"A Music quiz," she said. "Everybody else always has general knowledge quizzes, so I thought I'd do something different. What do you think?"

"Good idea," I said. "I'm sure that people will enjoy the novelty. When are you planning on holding this quiz?"

"Once a month on a Monday," she said.

"Monday?" I asked, puzzled. "What's Monday? Is it anything like Tuesday?"

Stephanie gave me one of *those* looks. "No," she explained patiently, "Mondays aren't anything like Tuesdays. For one thing, Jolt doesn't open on Monday so this seemed like a good way to make use of an idle evening."

"I see," I said. But I was lying. I didn't see at all. I was completely bewildered.

"Can I put you and Robin down for a team?" Stephanie asked.

"Of course you can," I said.

When the relevant Tuesday arrived Robin and I joined the rest of the teams at Jolt, all of us keen and eager to take part in the café's first Monday Night Quiz. Because it was a music quiz, we decided to call our team "The Show and Tell Overture".

We failed to cover ourselves in glory. We answered "The Bay City Rollers" to every question except when we answered "Iron Maiden" (for the sake of variety, you understand). It turned out that we were almost always wrong and I think we came last. The real answers, we learned at the end of the quiz, were "Wayne Fontana and

the Mindbenders” except, of course, for the occasional question where the answer was “The Osmonds”. But despite all that, we enjoyed ourselves a lot, and Robin won a magnificent spot prize by standing up in front of the crowd and singing a song *con brio*. Her prize was a biography of Jerry Lee Lewis, a rock'n'roller who we both admire.

“Thank you,” she said as she accepted the book. “You've really made my Tuesday.” She got several puzzled looks and a round of polite applause.

We had no chance to rest on our laurels once the quiz was over. Not long after the quiz night, we were booked to go to a Science Fiction convention. These things, as any fule kno, always start on a Tuesday and finish three days later on Tuesday. This year, New Zealand's national convention was held in Rotorua, The City of Terrible Stenches. It's built on an active thermal area, and the delicate aroma of hydrogen sulphide is its most distinguishing feature. It's a place that Robin and I both love to visit. Therefore we booked ourselves in to the convention hotel for an extra long stay, leaving on Tuesday, four days after the convention finished.

As conventions go, it was pleasant enough. But the real purpose of our trip was the exploration of Rotorua and its environs. Some friends of ours were also staying on for exactly the same purpose and so, one bright Tuesday morning, we all set off to visit Hell's Gate, one of the most active and dramatic of the region's thermal parks.

Hell's Gate is a perfect place to visit on the Tuesday after a science fiction convention. The landscape is appealingly alien. It has boiling hot pools and erupting waters, with temperatures well in excess of 100 degrees Celsius. In places, the crust over the magma is extraordinarily thin and it is an eerie experience to think that you are standing only a kilometre or so above boiling rock.

There are steaming fumaroles, huge deposits of sulphur crystals and New Zealand's largest mud volcano. The volcano is very active and is constantly changing its shape

and size as it erupts. At the moment it has two grumbling cones, though this is subject to change without notice

There's even a huge hot water waterfall just in case you fancy a shower!

"How about it?" I asked Robin, but she declined.

"I don't shower on Tuesdays," she explained gnomically.

"Ah!" I said. "That would explain the fragrance."

She hit me with a calendar. A big X marked the spot on Tuesday.

Most of the thermal features were named by George Bernard Shaw when he visited the place early in the twentieth century. Although he was a professed atheist, many of the things that he saw struck him as being of genuinely biblical proportions. He felt that the area truly matched the descriptions of the gates to Hell and so he named it accordingly.

We spent a very happy Tuesday inhaling sulphur fumes, sneezing a lot, and being bitten all over by the swarming sandflies which seemed to flourish in the hellish conditions. I was sure that I spotted Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, peeking out at me from between the foggy inferno that enveloped the two erupting pools known as Sodom and Gomorrah...

The next day being Tuesday, we decided to visit Hobbiton. It's a drive of an hour or so from Rotorua.

The original Hobbiton set that was built for the *Lord of the Rings* movies was only a temporary structure and it was demolished when the filming was over. But that didn't stop the fans! They came to New Zealand in droves, seeking an authentic Middle Earth experience, and every Tuesday saw hundreds of them staring rapturously at the empty pastures where once the movie sets had been, much to the bewilderment of the cows and sheep cropping the grass.

When the set was re-built for the filming of *The Hobbit*, the owners of the land insisted that it be a permanent structure so that they would have a legitimate reason for

charging the tourists an arm and a leg to come and gaze upon the round doors of the hobbit holes.

Before our tour of the village began, we went to The Shire's Rest Café for refreshments.

"Oh look," said Robin with delight. "the first item on the menu is second breakfast. I'm having one of those!"

"I always knew you were a hobbit in disguise," I said. "The extraordinarily hairy toes are a dead giveaway."

Downstairs from The Shire's Rest Café is The Shire Store, a souvenir shop full of hobbitiana. "I wonder if they sell hobbit feet slippers?" mused Robin.

"Only on Tuesdays," explained the lady behind the counter.

After two consecutive very active days, we decided to reserve the next Tuesday for more leisurely activities. All the wives in our party went to a spa for a gloriously hedonistic mud bath and a massage, while the husbands retired to a pub that sold locally brewed beers where we intended to do a lot of quaffing and to put the world to rights. I was astonished at the number of carefully crafted beers that the pub had on tap. It seemed clear that a system would be required so that we didn't lose track of what we were drinking. How would a hobbit solve this problem, I asked myself? The answer was obvious. I started with the beer from the tap on the far left and gradually worked my way towards the right. John, my companion for the day, started with the beer from the tap on the far right and moved towards the left. We bought alternate rounds for each other and only once did we drink the same beer simultaneously. Perfect!

Eventually the wives turned up, pink and glowing and overflowing with euphoria.

"That was a fantastic massage," both the Robins said to me as they came through the door. "I do enjoy going to the spa. What are we drinking?"

“I've no idea,” I said to them. “The next beer for me has to come out of the second tap from the right. Or possibly the fourth; there seem to be twice as many taps as there were when we first arrived. Either way, it's your round.”

“OK,” they said. “What a perfect way to spend Tuesday.”

# The Jake's Progress

After several clandestine conversations with people in the know, I obtained a secret phone number, which I rang.

"Hello?" said a tentative voice.

I said the password that would unlock certain savoury secrets, "I want a dog,"

"That is indeed the correct password," said the voice.

"Welcome to Adopt-A-Dog."

"I'm glad I got it right," I said, "but technically it's called a passphrase because there's more than one word in it."

"Errmm..." said the voice.

"Though since it has a verb in it, it's actually more like a passclause than a passphrase," I mused.

"But..." said the voice.

"Though since it makes sense as a stand alone object, it probably ought to be called a pass-sentence," I said, following my train of thought to its logical conclusion.

"Never mind all that," said the voice. "Tell me what kind of dog you are looking for."

"A grammarian," I said firmly.

"That's a very rare breed," said the voice, "and we don't have any at the moment. Will anything else do?"

"I want a dog who understands that cats are in charge of the universe," I said. "We have two cats and they are not going to take kindly to a dog moving in. So respect for cats is essential. Also we don't want a puppy - we want a grown up dog who knows what's what. And it needs to be a proper dog, not a rat with a fancy hairdo."

"I have just the dog for you," said the voice enthusiastically. "Jake is a huntaway cross who is currently being fostered in a house that is owned by a cat called Shumba. Shumba is a thug, and Jake has quickly learned

respect for all the feline race. You can see the training scars on his nose."

"A huntaway?" I asked. "Aren't they normally working dogs on farms?"

"That's what they were originally bred for. But they make lovely pets as well."

"OK," I said. "That sounds good. What's the next step?"

"Here's the phone number of Jake's foster parents," said the voice and it gave me a number which I wrote down. "I'll tell them to expect a call from you."

I rang Jake's foster parents and we agreed a date and time for them to bring Jake round to meet us so that we could see how we were all going to get along with each other.

And that's how we met Jake for the first time.

"Hi," said Jake, wagging his tail and licking my face.

"Hello, Jake," I said. "Sitting over here is Robin. Say hello to her."

"Hello, Robin."

"And the cat on the sofa is called Bess," I said. "Be wary of her. The cat who is nowhere in sight, because he ran away outside as soon as you arrived, is called Harpo. You probably ought to be wary of him as well."

"Hello, Bess," said Jake, and he stretched his head out and sniffed her.

"Piss off!" hissed Bess, and she threatened him with a claw.

"Careful Jake," said Jake's foster mum. "She'll give you a snotty if you get too close. You know what cats do. She's just like Shumba."

"OK. Got it," said Jake and he returned his attention to me. "What are you like at giving tummy rubs?" he asked. He rolled over on his back and his paws became extremely limp-wristed. I gave him a tummy rub and he went into a trance.



"Well, you two seem to like each other," said Jake's foster mum. "Before we let a dog move into a new home, we always like to meet the people and inspect their property, just to make sure that it's suitable for dogs. We look for a secure, fenced area for the dog to run around in which is definitely important for the dog's future happiness. But actually I think it's much more important to see just how the dog reacts to the new people. Dogs can always tell if they are going to be happy or not in a new place, and sometimes when we visit a potential home, the dog just falls asleep without interacting much at all with the people. I'm pleased to see that we don't have any problems like that here. Jake seems quite at home already."

"He's a lovely dog," I said. "What's his background?"

"He's a failed huntaway," said his foster mum. "He's not very good at herding things because he's got the attention span of a gnat - he's always getting distracted by something new. And he's afraid of sheep, which is a big disadvantage when it's your job to herd them. But the farmer put him up for adoption instead of just shooting him because he's got such a lovely temperament."

"So, Jake - you're scared of sheep, are you?" I asked him, and I stopped rubbing his tummy for a moment.

He briefly came round from his trance. "Nasty, woolly horrors," he muttered. "They kick without warning you know. I don't like that. How about you steer your left hand down a bit and start rubbing there?"

I did as instructed. His head fell back and his eyes glazed over as he relapsed into a coma again.

"Well it's beginning to look like a done deal," said Jake's foster mum. "Let's start the administrative processes and get the paperwork out of the way. I should think that he'll be able to move in with you next weekend. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good," I said.

"Yes, indeed," said Robin.

"Oh, goodness me. No! Don't do it!" said a horrified Bess.

"See you next Saturday," said Jake as he trotted off with his foster mum.

We spent the next week stocking up with dog stuff. We bought a kennel and put a cushion in it. We bought a bucket and filled it with water so that he'd always have something to drink. We bought an enormous bag full of dog biscuits for him to eat, and we bought a rope so that we could play tug'o'war with him. We bought dog chews for him to gnaw on, and dog treats to surprise him with when he was extra-specially good.

The next Saturday Jake came back to our house. "Oh, hello," he said. "It's you again."

"We probably ought to make this quick," said his foster mum. "So I'll go back home straight away and leave Jake to make himself comfortable with you."

"Welcome home," I said to Jake. "You live here now."

He shook himself, then he sat down and scratched. "How about we go for a walk?" he asked.

The days passed, and we quickly fell into a routine. Jake gets a walk on the lead in the morning and another one in the evening. Round about lunch time we drive to a local park that is very dog friendly, and he gets to run around off the lead. He plays with all the other dogs, chasing them, herding them and barking loudly at them. Then they chase him for a while. Luckily, all this exercise tires him out so that when he's at home he generally just sleeps. On the rare occasions when he's not sleeping, he passes the time by licking his willy, making loud, satisfied slurping noises as he does so.

"Why do you keep doing that?" I asked him one day.

"Because I can lick my willy, but you can't lick yours," said Jake. "I'm trying ever so hard to make you jealous. Licking your own willy is the best way that a dog has for proving his superiority."

Looked at in that light, I had to admit that everything he said made perfect sense. So now I just let him get on with it while I look on and listen. Enviously.

"Why do you have to slurp so loudly when you're doing that?" I asked him. "Sometimes you drown out the sound of the television."

"I slurp loudly to attract your attention, so that you are in no doubt at all as to exactly what's going on" he said. "I also do it for the same reason that you slurp the last drops of your milkshake up through a straw. These things are so much more fun when they are noisy."

Whenever we go for a walk, we always take our cellphones with us so that when Jake discovers a dead body we can call the police straight away. Jake and I are both addicted to detective novels and so we know that almost all murder victims are found by dogs who are being taken for a walk. We haven't found any human bodies so far, but it's early days yet. We have found a dead rabbit and a dead bird, but they had both been corpses for such a long time that most of their interest had vanished, and thankfully they didn't need to be rolled in. I was very grateful for that.

To begin with, Jake wasn't very good when he was walking on the lead. He was so eager to race ahead that he pulled and pulled and pulled, and then he pulled some more. Because he's a very big and very strong dog, I spent most of our first few walks lying face down on the ground being dragged along by an enthusiastic Jake who was super keen to follow a brand new, fascinating smell that he'd just discovered. Every day I came home with grass in my hair and scorch marks on my jacket from the friction. Something would have to be done.

"OK, Jake," I said, "this is how it works. Every time you start pulling we will come to dead halt. And we won't move until you sit down and calm down. Then you get a treat and we start walking again. As long as you walk without pulling everything will be fine. However every time you pull hard,

all the fun stops because the walk stops. Of course, as long as you walk nicely, the fun will never end. How about it?"

"I don't know about that," said Jake dubiously. "But you're the leader of the pack, so I suppose we'd better give it a try."

Huntaways have the reputation of being extremely intelligent dogs. It only took two training sessions before Jake got the idea and by our third outing, he was behaving perfectly on the lead. So it seems that the reputation the dogs have for intelligence is very well deserved. Next week I'm going to start teaching him Relativity. The Special Theory, of course, not the General Theory. It's important always to start with the simple stuff.

Although Jake is well aware of the behaviour expected of him, he is a boy and therefore he is not able to multi-task. When something interesting happens, all his training vanishes, and he starts pulling hard on the lead again. "Something interesting" is best defined as "anything at all". Pedestrians passing by need to be chased down and said hello to. Groups of children on their way to and from school have to be herded onto the edge of the footpath furthest from the road. Other dogs have to have their bottoms sniffed. Interesting smells have to be followed as far as they go. And all these things have to be done at maximum speed. So he continues to drag me around on our walks. So far only one jacket has actually burst into flames, but Jake peed on it to put the fire out, so that was all right.

One of the parks where Jake can run off the lead to his heart's content has a lot of streams flowing hither and yon through it. Many of the dogs who run there will happily dive into the water and swim after sticks. Jake, however, is not a swimmer; he's much more of a paddler. He fastens a knotted handkerchief onto his head, rolls up the legs of his trousers, and splashes happily in the shallows. Other dogs call him a wimp, but Jake doesn't care. He's bigger than they are and he can bark louder and longer than they can.

We've been together for several weeks now, and we have a well defined path that we always follow on every walk that we take. I think it's important for a dog to have a settled routine so that he can get used to the way things slowly change from day to day as we walk around our well-trodden tracks. This became very clear to me when, out of boredom, I went round the circuit in the opposite direction one day. Jake wasn't impressed at all. "What's happened?" he complained. "All the smells are upside down!"

"Sorry," I said. "I won't do it again."

And so far I haven't.

**Acknowledgements:** I'd like to thank Jane Lindskold, whose comments on an early draft of this article gave me the idea for several extra jokes.

# Food, Drink and Toys

Jake the Dog has been living with us for a couple of months now and we are slowly getting used to each other. I have discovered what things he most enjoys eating, and he has discovered what things I least enjoy having him eat. Strangely, these two lists are almost identical to each other.

In the house, Jake likes to eat cellphone chargers, torches, cookery books and rugs. In the garden, he likes to eat solar powered lamps, wheelbarrows, plant pots, buckets, hosepipes and Robin's favourite bamboo plant. He also seems to get quite a kick out of turning on the outside taps and watching gallon upon gallon of water flow into the foundations of the house. Thankfully our water usage is not on a meter...

When we go for our morning and evening walks, Jake enjoys eating crab apples that have fallen from the trees and lemons from a lemon tree that has had the temerity to grow out through the fence that surrounds its garden. Our walk takes us along a route that children use when they are going to and from school and we often find treasures that the children have emptied out from their lunchboxes in disgust. One memorable day we found that the lunch packed with loving care for one particular child clearly did not meet with that child's approval at all. The entire contents of the lunchbox had been emptied out on to the ground, so that day Jake got to eat an apple, a ham sandwich and a slice of cake. Best walk ever!

Jake's favourite drink is water. He drinks cloudy water from the birdbath in the garden and he drinks copiously from both our toilets. In a vain attempt to discourage this habit, I have experimented with not flushing, but that just appears to make the water even tastier. In fact, Jake drinks

water from absolutely everywhere except from his water bowl. That's what the cats drink out of.

On our lunchtime walks we go to a park where Jake can run free from the lead. There's a lovely river that meanders and trickles through the park. It passes through a lot of farming country before it reaches the park and the water is often cloudy with accumulated nasties. Jake loves the water in the river and always drinks lots from it. I enjoy watching the water level in the river drop dramatically when he fills his belly from it. One day we spotted a dead sheep floating in mid-stream. Jake drank twice as much water as usual that day. It seemed to have added body...

On Monday evenings we go to Dog Disobedience lessons. These are held at a local riding school and the dogs are taught their lessons in a large enclosure that has a floor covered in wood chips which the horses have spent all day peeing and pooing on. Jake finds Disobedience lessons very boring, mainly because he already knows everything there is to know about disobedience. So, in order to relieve the boredom, he spends most of his time at the class eating the floor.

Sometimes, particularly at mealtimes, I feed him dog food. He clearly disapproves of this and he will only eat it under supervision. As long as I am watching him closely, he will condescend to nibble at the stuff in his bowl. But if my attention wanders, so does Jake, and he trots off to snack on a sofa or dine on a duvet.

Like all dogs, Jake loves his toys. Because his major joy in life is putting things in his mouth and biting down hard on them, toys that can be chewed are always high on his favourites list. And since, as far as Jake is concerned, absolutely anything can be chewed, then clearly anything and everything can be a toy. The logic cannot be faulted. In a vain attempt to keep our furniture safe, we've tried several official dog toys on him, but most of them are made of plastic and so they do not survive his fearsome jaws of

death for very long. By now I think all his internal organs must have a plastic lining.

Being good citizens, we always make sure to pick up and properly dispose of anything that Jake poos out. His excretions are always exciting to examine - they are a positive treasure trove of novelty. We have found lumps of pink plastic and blue plastic, miscellaneous electronic components such as transistors and capacitors, and several lengths of yellow string. Worryingly, we have never found any trace whatsoever of the purple plastic ball that he feasted on for several days.

The most long lasting toys are those made of rope. Not only can he use them to play tug'o'war with us, their flexibility seems to protect them from the constant gnawing and they quickly rebound and stay roughly in shape. Some robust fabrics share the same desirable property as long as the seams are securely stitched and the stuffing is substantial. Knowing this, we bought him an elephant made out of corduroy. It had all the desirable properties, and, as an added bonus, it was very lifelike with a pink tummy and a multi-coloured fringe made of twisted cotton. Jake absolutely loved it. He threw it around the room, indulged himself in an orgy of self-flagellation with it, jumped on it from a great height, chewed on it and generally beat seven kinds of brick dust out of it.

Then, quite unexpectedly, it squeaked!

Jake jumped back in shock. Oh my goodness - the elephant squeaked! Jake slowly backed away from it, never taking his eyes off it in case it squeaked again. When he was at a safe distance from the elephant, he examined it carefully. After a few minutes of silence, he walked all the way round the room, sticking close to the walls for the sake of safety, and then he examined the elephant from the other side. Luckily it just lay there and didn't squeak.

We left the elephant on the carpet where Jake had dropped it, but for the next few days he refused to go



anywhere near that part of the room, so we picked the elephant up and put it away in a cupboard. Two weeks later we took it out again and presented it to Jake as if it was a brand new toy. But he wasn't fooled for a moment. The trauma had clearly scarred him for life and now, deep in the throes of PTSD, he wasn't having a bar of this utterly scary elephant. His ears drooped, his tail went between his legs and he backed away from the terrible toy in total terror.

We have accepted the *fait accompli* and now the elephant sits on a chair in our second lounge, lord of all it surveys. Every so often, as he passes through the room on his way to the toilet for a drink, Jake notices it and he sneaks past on tiptoe. Fortunately it has not yet squeaked again.

But one day it might...

# Jake and his Rope - a Sad and Poignant Tail

Every day Robin and I take Jake the Dog to a park where we can take his lead off and let him run free to play with all the other dogs. He enjoys this a lot, but we sometimes find it a little traumatic.

"Jake!" I yelled at the black and tan dot that was vanishing out of sight over the horizon. "Jake! Come back here!"

Jake paid no attention to me whatsoever. He was in hot pursuit of what he hoped would turn out to be a delightfully smelly dog bottom that he urgently needed to sniff, and nothing was going to distract him from that essential task.

"I think his ears are just painted on," said Robin. "They certainly don't appear to be functional at the moment."

"Sometimes I think they are only ornaments," I said. "Perhaps we should talk to the dog man about it the next time we take Jake to the Disobedience Class."

So that's what we did.

"The trick," explained the dog man, "is to give him some motivation to return to you. You've got to make yourselves more attractive than whatever it is that is distracting him at the moment. He needs a good reason to come back to you."

"How do we do that?" I asked. "Should I spray myself all over with essence of dog bottom?"

"That's probably a little extreme," said the dog man. "But we do need to discover something you can do that will get him excited. Is he motivated by food?"

"Not really," I said. "Most dinner times he won't even finish his meal unless I'm there supervising him, and he

doesn't seem to care at all when the cats sneak in and steal some of it."

"Hmm." said the dog man. "So the treats you have in your pocket that you reward him with when he's a good boy aren't sufficient in themselves to grab his attention?"

"Indeed not," I said. "They are just icing on the cake of his day - nice, but not at all necessary."

"What about toys?" asked the dog man. "Does he like to chase a ball?"

"No, he doesn't. If I throw a ball for him he'll chase it once out of politeness, but then he loses interest. And he doesn't have an ounce of retriever in him. He never brings anything back. If I go and get the ball and throw it a second time he just looks at it and says, 'I already chased that once. Why do you want me to do it again?' Then he'll probably eat it, which is a really good way of making sure we can't play that game again."

"What about sticks?" asked the dog man. "Sticks are always good."

"He's not really a stick dog," I said. "Sometimes he'll be in a stick mood, and then he'll carry one around for a while, but his interest doesn't usually last for very long. He soon gets bored with it, and then he settles down and eats it. Sometimes he uses the splinters to pick his teeth. But if a leaf falls from a tree or a blade of grass waves in the wind, he will easily get distracted, and then that's the end of the stick - he just abandons it and chases off after his new interest."

"How odd," said the dog man. "I've never met a dog that couldn't get interested in toys and sticks. But of course he is a huntaway. What they want to do most of all is herd things. I once met a huntaway who was so frustrated at not having things to round up every day, that he tried to herd a flock of ants in his back garden. He wasn't very good at it. He just couldn't get the ants to pay any attention to him no matter

how loudly he barked at them. He clearly found that very frustrating and he was not a happy dog."

"Oh yes," I said. "Jake certainly has very strong herding instincts. He's particularly good rounding up schoolchildren."

"That's impressive," said the dog man, "but it's a bit impractical. You can't carry schoolchildren round in your pocket when you go to the park. People might talk. Is there anything else that he likes?"

"He quite fond of his tug'o'war rope," I said. "We sometimes play with it in the garden. He seems to look forward to that."

"And where does the rope live?"

"It's just lying in the garden," I said, "so that he can play with it and chew on it whenever he wants to."

"I see," said the dog man. "Right - this is what you have to do. Put the rope away somewhere out of sight and take it with you to the park. Let him play with it there and nowhere else. Make the rope a special treat that only happens at the park, never at home. That way he'll really feel motivated to come back to you so that he can play tug'o'war."

Robin and I were both dubious, but we agreed to give it a try, and so the next time we went to the park, Robin carried the rope in a plastic bag. We let Jake off the lead and, as usual, he went racing off into the middle distance. But before he got out of sight, Robin pulled out the rope, waved it around and yelled, "Jake! Jake! Look what I've got."

Jake glanced casually back, did a double take and put on all his brakes. He skidded to a stop, scattering mud left and right (it had been raining hard earlier in the day and the ground was saturated). Wow! A rope! He came racing back and grabbed hold of it. "Tug! Tug! Tug!" cried Robin as Jake braced himself and pulled for all he was worth. "And... Let go!"

Robin released the rope and Jake tumbled briefly backwards. Then he recovered himself and, with the rope clutched proudly in his mouth, he did a happy-dance,

leaping and prancing, shaking his head from side to side and making the rope swing backwards and forwards. The rope ends with their heavy knots shook all over his face and body, whipping him into a frenzy in a magnificent orgy of self-flagellation. Jake was clearly in doggy heaven.

"Yeah!" he said. "What a wonderful rope. Best rope ever!"

Then he glanced up and saw another dog. He dropped the rope and left it lying forgotten and forlorn in a puddle of mud as he dashed off to greet the new most important thing in his life. Robin picked up the muddy rope. "Well, that didn't last long," she said.

"Perhaps he'll get interested once he's finished sniffing the other dog. Try him again."

"Jake! Come here!" yelled Robin as she waved the rope enticingly at Jake. Drops of muddy water sprayed over her, leaving her fetchingly spotted in grey. Jake came racing back and grabbed the rope from her, and then he danced his happy-dance again.

"It's a rope! It's my rope! It's got mud and everything! Look how elegant the knots are."

Robin and I started to feel cautiously optimistic. Jake was being much better behaved. The dog man was right. The secret was definitely in the rope...

Robin, Jake and I walked further along the riverbank and we met a very wet dog called Cynthia who had just been for a swim. She was a singularly ugly pit bull, but she had a lovely slobbery personality and she was happy to say hello to all of us. Because she was a pit bull, she was wearing a studded collar. But because she was a girl, it was pink. It was really quite fetching, and Jake was clearly besotted with her.

"Hey Cynthia," said Jake, "you're a pretty thing. Would you like to sniff my bottom?"

"I don't mind if I do," said Cynthia, and they both went through the usual doggy ritual.

"I've got a rope," said Jake proudly.

"Show me," said Cynthia.

Jake picked up his rope and shook it a little and he did a little happy-dance around Cynthia. The ends of the rope whipped both of them a bit and Jake grinned. Surely this would make him irresistible.

"Huh," said Cynthia. "Call that a rope? That's not much of a rope."

She turned her back and trotted away to her mum and dad, leaving Jake alone and bereft. He was utterly disconsolate. "Typical," he said. "You show a girl your best rope and all she does is spurn you." His ears drooped and his tail went down between his legs. He was a picture of misery. He picked up his rope and walked slowly down into the river. He dropped the rope into the water. It floated off downstream, gradually sinking slowly as it got more and more waterlogged. Eventually it sank out of sight; the current carried it away, and we never saw it again.

"Oh well," said Jake gloomily, "I suppose that's that." Then he perked up a little. "Have you got treats in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?"

# That Was the Year that Was

ROBIN: Well Alan, you've been a retired gentleman of leisure for a year now. I've had you under my feet for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for three hundred and sixty five days and we haven't killed each other yet. How about that?

ALAN: Yes -- that must be some sort of a record. By and large, retirement has been a wonderful experience and I'm enjoying it heaps. Let's hope the next few years are just as much fun as the last year has been.

ROBIN: Do you miss not going to work every day?

ALAN: Certainly not. I've always regarded work as an irritating intrusion into my hobbies. I'm glad it's out of the way now, and I really don't miss it at all. Interestingly, just a few weeks ago I got an email from someone at the office asking me to come out of retirement for a few days and do some consultancy work for them. I had no difficulty whatsoever in turning them down.

ROBIN: So what have been the highlights of the last year?

ALAN: Moving house was the first thing. I think we both found it very stressful, though the end result has been well worth while. Even the cats seem to have settled well into their new home.

HARPO: I didn't like it at first, but it's definitely grown on me. There's long grass to hide in next door and sometimes small creepy creatures scuttle past.

BESS: It's warm. I like that. Lots of sunshine to curl up in.

ROBIN: And then, of course, we got a dog called Jake.

JAKE: Hey! That's me!

HARPO: Now that was a definite lowlight of the year. Who needs a dog? Nasty, smelly things. And he keeps eating my breakfast biscuits, damn him. I don't approve of that.

ALAN: Yes, but you sneak up and eat his biscuits when he's not looking. And you drink out of his water bowl. Fair do's!

HARPO: That's different!

BESS: And he keeps stealing our toys and chewing them to bits.

ALAN: But you don't play with those toys. They've been sitting untouched in your toybox for the last twelve years, ever since we bought them for you.

HARPO: That's got nothing to do with it. They're OUR toys.

JAKE: Great toys! They've got all this fluffy stuffing in them which expands to fill up most of the room when I rip them apart. Some of them have got bells on, which is a bit scary, but on the positive side, none of them squeak.

HARPO: That can be arranged...



ROBIN: But at least we gave you somewhere safe to escape from Jake. Both you and Bess made nests for yourselves in my office and you come in and out through my window as the mood and hydraulic pressure takes you. That was wonderfully bracing in the middle of winter. There's nothing I like more than an ice blast through an open window to wake me up in the morning.

BESS: I thought it was really good that you built a dog proof door across the entrance to your office so that we could stand there and hiss at Jake from a position of perfect safety.

ROBIN: Yes -- it is only a sheet of cardboard with a small hole cut in it to allow you and Harpo to come and go at will. But somehow Jake knows that it is utterly impossible for a dog to jump over it or knock it down.

JAKE: Looks like a force field to me. Feels like one too. I don't trust force fields.

HARPO: You've been reading too much science fiction.

JAKE: There's no such thing as too much science fiction.

ALAN: That's my boy!

JAKE: Hey! Isn't it time for a walk? Let's go somewhere with lots of babies in prams. I like babies in prams. They are usually smeared with peanut butter and vegemite and they taste really yummy when I lick their faces.

ROBIN: And have you learned any life lessons from your first year as a gentleman of leisure?

ALAN: Yes I have. I've learned that picking up dog poo is a great way to keep your hands warm on a cold and frosty winter morning. When it comes to plumbing the secrets of the universe, I don't think you can get any more profound than that.

# Fast - Faster - Fastest

Shortly after I attached a bell to my front door, somebody rang it.

"That's the disadvantage of a doorbell," said Robin. "You no longer have an excuse for not answering the door."

"Damn!" I said. "I suppose I'd better go and see who it is."

"Yes," said Jake the Dog. "Answer the door. Go on - answer the door. I want to lick whoever it is all over. I'm sure they'll taste wonderful. New people always do."

"I'll take care of Jake," said Robin. "You go and see who's at the door."

I opened the front door to reveal Bill, my next door neighbour.

"Hello," he said. "I've had a letter from Chorus, the people who are in charge of laying the fibre cables for UFB - that new ultra-fast broadband service they are starting to deploy. They say that they will have to dig up the driveway to get the cable to my house, and they need my permission to do that. Since you and I own the driveway jointly, I thought I'd better check with you."

"That's interesting," I said. "Have you ordered ultra-fast broadband?"

"No," said Bill. "The letter just came out of the blue. I didn't even realise that I could have the service connected to my house, so the whole thing came as a bit of a surprise to me."

"How strange," I said. "You see I have ordered ultra-fast broadband. Just the other day I signed up with the broadband service that 2degrees have started offering. They've taken my money and scheduled a day for Chorus to come and check the house out. But nobody has said

anything to me about digging up the driveway. I wonder if they mixed me up with you because of the joint ownership?"

"I suppose that's possible," said Bill. "But the whole thing seems a bit like overkill to me - the copper phone lines all converge in that hole in the ground over there." He pointed to an enigmatic elliptical manhole cover midway between both our houses. "Surely they should just be able to drag the fibre through the same channel that the phone lines already use, without having to dig the driveway up. And then it's a simple matter of following the individual cables from there to each house and pulling the new UFB cable through the same ducts."

"I'd have thought so too," I said. "As far as I know, they always design those things with plenty of room so as to be able to lay new cables without having to do any digging. Underground cables would be impossible to maintain if they didn't do things that way."

"Well, I don't know what's going on," said Bill. "Let me know what happens when Chorus comes to check things out for you."

"I certainly will," I said. I shut the door and went back to Robin and Jake.

"What did he taste like?" asked Jake. "Did he taste yummy when you licked him? Why didn't you let me lick him?"

"He's Scottish," I said to Jake. "He tastes of haggis. Dogs don't like haggis."

"Don't they?" said Jake, clearly disappointed. "Oh that's so sad. Let's go for a walk to make up for it."

A couple of weeks later the doorbell rang again.

"Where are all these people coming from?" said Robin peevishly. "And why do they keep ringing our doorbell? Two people in two weeks! Come on!"

"But it might be someone tasty," said Jake, ever the optimist.

This time the door revealed a man with a bright orange jacket and a badge that said Chorus. "Hello," he said. "I'm John. I've come to do a site survey for the proposed UFB installation to your house."

"Hello John," said. "What do you need to know?"

"Do you happen to have any idea where the current phone lines come in to your house?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's that little white box on the side of the house over there."

We walked over and looked at the box.

"That's odd," said John. "There should be a pipe leading up into the box. The phone cable threads through that pipe into the box. Internally, the box is connected to the jack points inside your house."

We both looked at the box. No pipe.

"Interesting," said John. He produced a screwdriver and took the top off the box. Coils of cable were revealed. "Well, there it is," said John, sounding rather puzzled. "It looks like the cable comes up through the foundations of the house and then out through a hole in the wall into the rear of the box where it attaches to the internal wiring and goes back into the house again. I wonder why they did that. I've never seen a phone cable connected that way before."

"Is it going to be a problem?" I asked.

"Not as long as we can find how the cable gets through the foundations in the first place," said John. "It must feed through a pipe somewhere underground. If we can find that, we should be OK. I'll go and get my shovel."

He went off to his van and returned with a huge spade. He started to dig a big hole in my lawn. He dug and he dug and he dug and then he dug some more. "Gosh," said John, "the pipe must be a long way down." The hole got deeper and deeper. Every so often John would stop and poke the ground gently with a trowel, then he would shake his head, say "No - that's not it," and start digging again.

"Shall I fetch Jake the Dog?" I asked. "He's really good at digging. Our back garden looks like a World War I battlefield after a serious artillery shelling. Unplumbed cavernous craters everywhere. He'd love to help you dig."

"No," said John. "That won't be necessary. I've finally found the pipe. Goodness me, it's a deep one. I wonder why they put it so far down." His voice had a hollow echo as it bounced off the crater walls from the bottom of a huge shaft that extended all the way down into the unfathomable chthonic depths of my lawn. He clambered out, covered in mud and smiles. "OK - all we have to do now is find where the main cable is, the one that the individual houses feed off."

"Oh, that's easy," I said, and I showed him the enigmatic ellipse that Bill had pointed out to me. John took the manhole cover off and peered into the elliptical hole that it revealed. "Yes, that's it," he said. "That's the main cable junction. I wonder which one of these feeder cables goes to your house." He tugged one, and the small white box on the side of Bill's house rattled. "Nope. It's not that one. That one's your next door neighbour." He tugged another one. Nothing happened. He tried another one and the same nothing happened again. "I'm not sure where those go," he said. "They must go to these other houses, but it's hard to see which cables belong to which house. I'll tell you what, I'll go and tug the cable where it goes into your house and you stay and watch here and tell me which cable in this rats nest moves when I do it."

"OK," I said.

John went to the house and tugged hard on the cable. I spotted movement and fixed my gaze on the relevant bit of wire. "Got it," I called. John came back and I pointed it out to him. He attached a tag so that it would be easy to find in the future.

"There," he said. "All done. They'll pull the UFB fibre cable from the junction box on the main road through to

here and then they'll pull an extension through the pipe I've found into your house. Easy peasy."

"So what about digging up the driveway?" I asked.

"?" said John.

I explained what Bill had told me. "Nonsense," said John. "The duct from the main road to the junction box here is extra wide so that new cables can easily be dragged through. The only possible problem is getting it from here to your house, but now that I've found the pipe into your house, it's all routine."

"Will they need to dig up my lawn again?" I asked.

"Hmmm," said John. "I'm just supposed to do a site survey to assess the feasibility. I'm not supposed to do any actual work at all. But now that I've got this far, it would be a shame to leave it half done and force them to start all over again. So I'll tell you what I'll do - I'll use the existing cable to make a pull through from your house to this elliptical junction and I'll also join the pipe up properly to the box on your house. Then I'll fill the the hole in the lawn. All they'll have to do when they come to connect you is use my pull through to get the cable into the house. A simple, five minute job."

He was as good as his word. He attached some blue plastic string to the phone cable by the house. Then he went to the main junction box and pulled my phone cable all the way through the underground pipe until the blue string attached to it arrived at the junction. Next, he doubled the string over and used the far end of the string to pull the cable and its attached string back through the pipe again and up to the house. This left a length of string threaded all the way through the pipe between the house and the junction box ready to be pulled through again when the UFB cable arrived.

He attached a flexible extension to the underground pipe he'd discovered and led it up the side of the house into the white box, where it should have been in the first place. Then

he put all the dirt back into the hole. "OK," said John, "everything's ready for the cable guys now. It shouldn't take them any time at all to run the new cable. So now all I have to do is see what needs doing inside the house. Can you show me where you want the modem to go?"

"Of course," I said. "Come in."

Predictably, Jake licked him all over as soon as he came into the house. "Yum!" he said. "You taste of brussels sprouts. Are you by any chance English?"

"Yes," said John. "Brussels sprouts are forever, aren't they?"

"Indeed they are," said Jake. "They're my favourite. Today must be my lucky day."

I showed John to the room where the modem would live and he took some photographs for the work sheet. "Simple," he said. "We'll take the cable from the outside box up into the roof and then down into this cupboard. We'll attach the connector to this wall, and all you'll have to do is plug the modem in and turn it on. Everything will look quite neat. All the cabling will be hidden."

"Sounds good," I said.

John produced a tablet with the work sheet details displayed on its screen. He attached the photographs he'd taken and made some notes about how the job should be handled. Then he passed the tablet and a stylus to me. "Just sign here," he said, "and we're good to go." I signed the work sheet with the stylus and John tapped a button on the screen. "There," he said. "I've emailed the details to head office and sent a copy to you. They'll come to do the job next Friday. There'll be two teams of people - one to lay the cable outside the house and one to do the work inside the house."

"Thank you," I said.

"Can I have another lick?" asked Jake.

"Of course you can," said John and he scratched Jake under the chin.



"You've got gritty bits," said Jake. "But they are yummy too."

"That must be mud from where I was digging," said John.

"Ah! I see," said Jake. "That happens a lot to me as well."

The following Friday the door bell rang again.

"If this keeps happening, that bell will soon wear out," said Robin. "Three visitors in three weeks. Who on Earth is it this time?"

There was another Chorus man at the door. "Hello, I'm Michael," he said in a strong Seth Efricen accent. Like New Zealanders, South Africans only have one vowel. They use the letter 'e'. We use the letter 'i'. Both of us keep the other four vowels as spares for emergency use only, and sometimes not even then. It makes for interesting, though often confusing, conversations.

"You must be the inside team," I said. Over his shoulder I could see the outside team making full use of the pull through that John had left for them. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. UFB cable slithered underground and reappeared by the house in record time. "Come in, Michael," I said.

"Hello," said Jake enthusiastically as he draped yards of wet tongue all over Michael. "Oh wow! *Biltong!* I love biltong. Today's another lucky day."

I showed Michael around the house and he compared what he was seeing with the photographs on his work sheet. When he was happy with what needed doing, he attached a cable to the white box outside the house, took it up into the roof and then down into the cupboard. He attached another white box to the cupboard wall. "Thes es where yer medem plegs en," he said.

I unpacked the modem that 2degrees had sent me. I powered it up and plugged an ethernet cable into it. The other end of the ethernet cable plugged into the handsome new box on the wall. Lights flashed and, just like that, I had

a blindingly fast internet connection. It all seemed quite anti-climactic.

My internet connection is four times faster than it used to be. Everything seems to happen instantly. Massive files download in nothing flat. Blink and you miss them. Robin and I are both thrilled to bits with it. Jake is not so sure.

"Why won't it download a bone?"

# This Is Not A Story

"Why haven't you written a story this month?" asked Jake the Dog. He looks forward to my monthly articles and the stories are his favourite bits, though he likes it better when I put book reviews in as well. He claims that he uses the reviews as a guide to tell him which books he can pull off the shelves and munch on with impunity. He never chews the books that I praise.

He gets to see my articles before anyone else does. I always take careful note of his cogent criticisms and adjust the articles appropriately before I send them out. He is, if you like, my target audience. If he's happy, I know that everybody else will be happy as well.

"Well," I said, "neither you nor I have done very much of anything this month, so I didn't really have anything to write about."

"That's not quite true," said Jake. "I got a trip to the vet who gave me some nasty tasting medicine. Surely that's worth a mention?"

"Do you really want me to tell the world that you had to go to the vet because you got a rash on your willy?" I asked.

"Why not?" said Jake. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. It was only an allergic reaction to pollen. It serves me right for lying down on the grass to chew those yummy bones that you keep giving me. Actually, in some ways I miss it now that it is cured. The dogs at the park claimed that it gave me an interesting, mysterious and somewhat sexy aroma. There was an awful lot of good sniffing going on there before it finally got fixed."

"So that's why our daily walks were taking longer than usual," I said thoughtfully.

"The ball dogs didn't notice anything different though," said Jake. "But what else would you expect from a ball dog?"

"Ball dog?" I queried.

"Yes," said Jake. "Those complete and utter obsessives who only want to chase tennis balls. They are so totally single-minded about it that they never notice anything else that's going around them. They have no social skills whatsoever. Couldn't sniff a bottom if their lives depended on it. Their whole world is just balls!"

"Yes, they do seem somewhat narrow in their interests," I said. "I've tried giving them treats and I've tried scratching their ears, but I never get anywhere. If it's not round and bouncy they just don't want to know."

"Us dogs have a special word for them," said Jake.

"Really?" I said. "What is it?"

"We call them geeks," said Jake. "Or nerds."

# Under Pressure

When you move to a new town you will, if you are wise, register yourself with a doctor. The only downside to doing that is that sooner or later you will actually have to go and see your new doctor. New doctors won't issue repeat prescriptions without examining you first. And so, one fine day, I found myself in the doctor's surgery.

He donned a stethoscope and listened to me breathe.

"Say Ah!" he said.

"R!" I replied. "S, T, U, V, W. Arrr, Jim lad. Polly wants a nut."

"That's enough of that," he said. "Nice clear tubes. Steady heartbeat. No problems there."

He poked and prodded me hither and yon and then he took my blood pressure. He frowned, and then he took my blood pressure again. "I think I'll stop poking you," he said thoughtfully. "The stress might cause you to explode and that would leave nasty stains on the carpet."

"Is it a bit high?" I asked.

"Yes, rather," he said. "I think we'll monitor it for the next month or so and see how things go. Make an appointment to see the nurse once a week and then come back and see me when we've got enough data to see what the trend is."

To hear is to obey. Over the next month I watched gloomily as the nurse wrote down lots of high blood pressure figures in my file. I went back to see the doctor.

"Hmmm," he said. "It seems to be consistently high. Although there is one anomalous reading which is absolutely normal. I wonder what caused that?"

"That was the day I got my tetanus booster injection," I said.

"That's odd," said the doctor. "Most people's blood pressure goes up under the stress of having an injection. How strange that it caused yours to drop."

"Perhaps I should have an injection every day," I suggested.

"That might work," said the doctor, "but it does sound a bit extreme."

"Simple physics suggests that if we remove some of the blood from my body, the pressure in the body will drop as well," I said. "Boyle, Charles, Gay-Lussac and friends, not forgetting Avogadro the mole man. Of course they were talking about gases rather than liquids, but since a liquid is only a cold, incompressible and somewhat stodgy gas, the equations should still sort of work. For small values of work. Perhaps I could get a pet leech."

"That sounds a bit medieval," said the doctor. "We haven't used bleeding as a treatment for the last couple of hundred years or so. Mind you, I've always been a fan of the good old ways, so there may be something in what you say."

"Or perhaps I could have a tap attached to my wrist," I said. "Then every so often, as the mood took me, I could open it up and drain some blood away. I'd have to do it in private, of course, so as not to upset those of a delicate disposition. Perhaps I could combine it with visits to the toilet."

"The engineering might get a bit complicated," said the doctor. "The blood would probably clot and clog up the pipes. You might have to change the washers and replace the seals rather frequently."

"Oh I'm sure we could do something about that," I said. "This is the twenty-first century, after all. Mind you, if we do put a tap in my wrist, I'll have to change my name to Petronius. You can call me Pete, for short."

The doctor looked puzzled. "Why would you need to change your name?"

"Gaius Petronius, sometimes known as Petronius the Arbiter, committed a very slow suicide using that very method in the year 66AD."

"I didn't know that," said the doctor. "Tell me more."

"He got on the wrong side of the Emperor Nero," I said, "which apparently wasn't a very hard thing to do. Lots of people managed it. Anyway, Nero ordered him to go home and kill himself by slitting his wrists, which he duly did. But rather than letting himself bleed out quickly, he put tourniquets around his wrists and threw a big party for all his friends. Every so often, as the evening progressed, he would slacken off the tourniquets and bleed a bit, then he'd tie them up again and get on with the party. When the dawn broke and it was time for him to die, he opened the tourniquets up for the final time and let the last remnants of his blood trickle out. Apparently there wasn't much left by then. Everybody said it had been a fantastically good party. What a shame he couldn't do it again the following week. I bet his blood pressure was really quite low towards the end. I'm sure I could make that work for me."

"I think we ought to go for a more conventional treatment to begin with," said the doctor. "I'll prescribe some blood pressure lowering pills, and you probably ought to try and lose some weight as well. It doesn't matter what you've got, if you drop a few kilos, the chances are good that you won't have it any more."

I left the surgery with a prescription, and some suggestions for a diet and exercise regime. I began taking the tablets, eating salads, and going for 10 kilometre walks with Jake, my dog. My belly button stopped being an outie and went back to being an innie again. I drilled some new holes in my belt to stop my trousers falling down, and I discovered that I could put on my socks by watching how they fitted over my feet rather than by doing it all by touch alone.

"Look Jake," I said. "I've got toes!" I wriggled them to prove it.

"So you have," said Jake. "How unusual. Can I lick between them where all the yummy bits are?"

While all this was going on, I began to cough like someone with a sixty unfiltered cigarettes a day habit. Gauloises, naturally. Gitanes are a second best.

"That's a nasty cough," said Jake.

"I think I must have picked up a cold in the doctor's waiting room," I said. "Doctor's surgeries are such terribly unhealthy places. I can't think why people bother with them. It'll go away in a week or so. That's what colds do."

A week later I went back to the doctor. I was now coughing so much that I was unable to say more than two consecutive words without having to have a hoick. I hadn't slept for three nights because I simply couldn't stop coughing long enough to persuade my extremities to relax and shut themselves down for the duration. Jake was complaining about the noise and threatening to report me to the council, the noise abatement society and the SPCA. I explained all this to my doctor.

"Not to worry," he said cheerfully. "It's a well known side effect of the blood pressure medication. About ten percent of people taking those tablets get it. Pity really, because that stuff is very good indeed at lowering the blood pressure. Never mind. I'll prescribe something else."

Gradually the cough faded away as the old medication flushed itself out of my system and the new stuff took over. Under the twin influences of diet and exercise, the kilos dropped off me and fell splat! on to the floor. I discovered that, for the first time in nearly fifty years, I could twirl my grandmother's signet ring freely around on my finger. I inherited it when she died. I was seventeen years old. That ring has never left my finger since the day I first put it on. Mind you, for most of the years that I wore the ring it fitted so snugly that I couldn't have taken it off if I'd tried! Now, if



I'm not careful, it may fall off my finger all by itself and roll down a drain. I've promised myself to keep a watchful eye on it, and I'm trying hard never to straighten my finger out just in case...

Ten kilometre walks have started to feel like a stroll in the park, and on some days Jake and I do twelve kilometres. One day we did fourteen. The next day Jake went on strike.

"Come on, Jake," I said. "Walkies!"

"No," said Jake. "I'm not going. If you like walking that much, go by yourself. I'm going to stay at home and chew on my stuffed chicken, thank you very much. Perhaps I'll inhume a bone a bit later on as well."

I went to see the doctor again.

"Come back in three months when the prescription runs out," he said. "At the moment you are within normal operating parameters."

# Summer

The only thing wrong with sitting out on the deck in the Hawke's Bay sunshine is sitting out on the deck in the Hawke's Bay sunshine.

Robin came out on to the deck where she found me glumly contemplating a small, viscous, silvery puddle. "If you're peeing stuff of that colour and consistency, you need to see a doctor," she said.

"I was sitting here with a can of beer," I said. "I opened the can and all the beer evaporated before I could drink it." I gestured at the puddle. "Then the can melted."

"Wow!" said Robin. "I thought it felt a bit hot. That's an impressively powerful ray of sunshine."

"Well at least I know now why we've got brick cladding on the house rather than the more normal wood cladding that you see elsewhere in the country," I said. "If we had wood, all the nails would dribble down it leaving ugly, silvery snail trails. And then the cladding would fall off."

"That would make the house rather draughty," Robin said thoughtfully. "Good job we've got brick."

"Meanwhile, what do we do about this deck furnace that we seem to have at the back of the house?" I asked. "Either we find some way to make it more habitable or else we start to hire ourselves out as aluminium smelters."

"Shade cloth," said Robin firmly. "That'll do it."

"Shade cloth?" I asked, puzzled.

"Shade cloth."

"What's shade cloth?"

"It's a rather coarse-weaved fabric that provides shade without trapping the heat," said Robin. "It's generally quite ultra-violet resistant as well, so it lasts a long time in direct

sunlight without noticeably degrading. It's wonderful stuff. I fitted miles of it to my house in Australia."

"Our deck is open on all sides and at the top as well," I pointed out. "Do we need to cover it all over?"

"No," said Robin. "Let's start by just putting shade cloth over the top. That will probably do it."

I stared up at the top of the deck. "That means that one or both of us will have to climb up on a ladder so that we can fix the cloth firmly to the beams."

"Yes," said Robin.

"We both suffer from vertigo when we stand on deep pile carpets," I pointed out. "How are we going to cope with being up at the top of a ladder?"

"Easy," declared Robin. "We keep our eyes closed and look at everything with our fingertips."

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "Let's go and buy some shade cloth."

And so we did.

The man in the shade cloth shop was very helpful. "What colour would you like?" he asked.

"I've heard that black is an invisible colour," said Robin. "It blends into the background and nobody ever really notices it."

"That's sort of true," said the man. "Black really does camouflage itself wonderfully well at night, so if you want to shade yourself from moon rays when you sip cocktails on the deck of an evening, black would be a very good colour to have. But I'm guessing that you're rather more interested in shielding yourselves from the sun during the day. Am I right?"

"Mostly right," I said. "I've found that, generally speaking, the sun is much hotter and brighter than the moon, by and large. Have you ever noticed that phenomenon?"

"A lot of people pointed it out to me," said the man, "so I assume it must be true. Therefore I always recommend this attractive wheat coloured shade cloth."

We examined the recommended shade cloth carefully and it passed the Robin test with flying colours. "That looks really good," she said. "It will be easy to trim to size and I'm sure I'll be able to sew a seam in it to stop it fraying at the edges. We'll take a mile and a quarter, please."

The man measured the shade cloth twice and cut it once. We stuffed it in the car and drove home via a hardware shop where we bought some nails, some curious aluminium spikes and some laths of wood, all of which, we were assured, were vital for the fitting of shade cloth. When we got home I went hunting for the step ladder in the detritus that fills up the garage. Eventually I found the ladder whimpering softly underneath several extremely heavy boxes. I liberated it and carried it out to the deck where I found Robin swathed in shade cloth.

"I've cut it to size," she announced proudly.

Between us we somehow personhandled it up to the top of the deck where I anchored it in place with the laths and banged in a lot of nails to hold them in place. This shade cloth was never going to move again! Then I folded the ends down over the beams at each end of the deck and hammered the aluminium spikes through the cloth into the wood. One problem remained.

"There's a length of cloth over here that I can't anchor down," I said to Robin. "There simply isn't enough room to swing a hammer and I'm a bit worried that the wind might get in there, lift it up and possibly tear it."

"Hmmm," said Robin thoughtfully. "That is a problem."

At that very moment our next door neighbour popped his head up over the fence. "What you need," he said, "is a staple gun."

"Good idea," I said. "But I haven't got a staple gun."

"Today's your lucky day," said my neighbour. "I have a staple gun. Would you like to borrow it?"

"Yes please," I said.

"Here you are," he said, handing it over the fence. "Keep it as long as you like. If I ever need it back I'll ask for it."

"Thanks," I said and I stapled down the final edge of cloth.

"Nice shade cloth," said my neighbour.

We spent the first summer in our new house sitting on the deck beneath our new shade cloth. Beer no longer evaporated before it could be drunk and although the cans and bottles got a little squishy, they no longer melted. Harpo the Cat, who spent most of his days up on the roof of the house hunting the birds who made their nests in the gutter, discovered that the shade cloth made a comfortable bed. He was often to be found there curled up and sleeping the early morning and the twilight away. I kept expecting the cloth to tear and deposit a very sharp, pointed and angry cat onto the top of my head. But the cloth proved to be remarkably resilient, and just stretched a bit into a cat-shaped depression which quickly filled up with the fur that Harpo spent the summer copiously shedding.

When the second summer rolled around, and our house was no longer quite as new as it had been, Robin expressed some dissatisfaction.

"When the sun starts to sink towards the horizon in the mid-afternoon it shines directly on to the deck. It bypasses the shade cloth on the roof, pumping light and heat underneath it, right through the west-facing front area of the deck. We need more shade cloth to hang down vertically over that part, but it has to be adjustable so that we can roll it up and down early in the morning and last thing at night. So therefore it can't be a permanent structure like the shade cloth on the roof is."

"OK," I said.

"We need lengths of dowel to wrap the cloth around and we need hooks to attach it at the top and bottom. In the winter, when we don't need it, we can unhook it and store it in the garage."

"Yes we can," I said, "if we can find room for it in the garage."

"There's heaps of room," said Robin. "I might empty a small box..."

We bought dowel and we bought shiny brass hooks and we bought string that was the same colour as the shade cloth. We planned to use the string to tie the cloth when it was all rolled up. We bought cleats to wrap the string around. Robin cut a vast length of shade cloth off the roll and sewed pockets top and bottom for the dowels. I drilled holes in the deck supports and screwed in hooks and cleats. We threaded the dowels into the pockets and I stapled them to the cloth.

"Do you think we should return the stapler to the man next door?" asked Robin. "We've had it for a whole year now."

"He knows where it is," I said. "I'm sure he'll ask for it if he ever gets an overwhelming urge to staple something again."

We hung one of the dowels on the hooks at the top of the deck and rolled the shade cloth down. We secured the dowel at the bottom with more hooks. We sat in chairs and admired the hanging shade cloth. It proved to be pleasantly translucent and we could still dimly see the garden through it.

"That shade cloth is hanging rather low down," said Jake the Dog. "It's blocking my way out into the garden. What am I going to do when I need to chew on a bone or chase a cat?"

"Don't worry Jake," I said. "I've booked you in for limbo dancing lessons. Once you're certified, you'll be able to get under there easily."

"Oh, limbo dancing! Dogs like limbo dancing." He did a happy-dance in joyful anticipation and then he went and chewed on one of the off cuts from the dowel rods.

Now that we have shade cloth on both the top and the front of the deck, we've started sitting out there again to enjoy the summer days. The shade cloth is remarkably efficient - even on the hottest and sunniest days the deck stays beautifully cool. Icicles hang from the beams and beer freezes solid in the can. Shade cloth really is wonderful stuff.

# Four Dog Tails

## **The First Tail**

When a very large dog has spent a lot of time emptying himself on to your lawn, you will find large areas of bare brown, dead grass, each with a carefully centred (scented – I love homonyms) turd perched on it. Over time, these deposits dry out into interesting multi-faceted and craggy shapes, which display a huge variety of colours, textures and perfumes. It is very important to remove every single one of them before you mow the lawn. Experience tells me that mowing over a hidden poo can have extremely alarming side-effects, particularly if you happen to be breathing through your mouth at the time.

"Jake," I spluttered, spitting copiously into the mower's grass-catcher. "Why didn't you tell me you'd done one there?"

Jake looked bewildered and his ears drooped sadly at my obvious displeasure. "I did tell you," he said. "I sent you a peemail all about it!"

"Sorry," I said, "but I'm not really equipped to read those."

"Why not?" asked Jake. "All of my peemails are readily available as a streaming service, and you know all about how streaming services work."

"Oh," I said. "You mean like Netflix for dogs?"

"Yes," said Jake. "Except it's for news rather than for movies. Dogs aren't big on movies. They aren't nearly smelly enough. Well, except for the *Star Wars* prequels of course..."



"I think I see," I mused, struck by the elegant simplicity of the concept. "What software would you recommend I use for reading your peemails?"

"I rather like a program called Yuri," said Jake. "Version N8 is the best one."

"What operating system does it run on?"

"It was originally developed on Yellow Dog Linux\*," explained Jake. "But it was quickly ported to Puppy Linux\*. So by now I expect you'll find it in the suppositories for all the major distributions."

"OK," I said, intrigued. "I'll try installing it and we'll see what happens..."

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\* - Both Yellow Dog and Puppy are perfectly genuine Linux distributions. Go and google the phrases if you don't believe me.

Honestly, I never make anything up and neither do I exaggerate...

## **The Second Tail**

When Jake and I go for a walk, Jake keeps a careful eye and nose on his surroundings. He spends ages sniffing at clumps of grass that, to the naked eye, are indistinguishable from all the other clumps of grass but which are clearly emitting fascinating pheromones that the other clumps simply cannot compete with.

"What's so special about that one?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It just is."

Unlike a lot of other dogs, Jake seems to be quite highly motivated by sight as well as by smell. No matter how fascinating the grass he is currently inhaling, he will always leave it if he spots something moving. Butterflies,

helicopters, jet planes, cars, scooters, bicycles, people, cats and other dogs always attract his attention and he flops down on his tummy and stares fixedly at them until they have gone past. Then, reluctantly, he will get up and continue walking with me.

If any people pass us closely by, his tail begins to wag faster and faster and his ears go back. He grins attractively and sometimes he drools. This always acts like a people magnet.

"Can I pat him?" the passing people will invariably ask.

"Yes," I say to them. "He is very friendly."

"Does he bite?"

"No, but he licks a lot."

"Ewww!!!"

Nevertheless, they reach out to pat him. Jake always assumes that such gestures are an invitation to slobber all over their hands, and he turns his salivary pumps to full power.

"Ahhh... Aren't you gorgeous?" they say as they surreptitiously dry their soggy doggy hands on Jake's fur coat.

"Yes," says Jake. "That's me. Gorgeous is my middle name. Gosh you've got a lovely face!"

Then he will launch himself in a huge bound up to the person's face so he can slobber all over that as well. This always takes the victim by surprise. When thirty-four kilograms of enthusiastic dog jumps at you, you know you've been jumped at. More than once the surprised jumpee has been knocked flat on their back, thus bringing them right down to Jake the Jumper's level. This makes for easier slobbering and Jake always takes full advantage of it.

In the last month, Jake has claimed four old ladies and six children. Most of them burst into tears from the shock. But the children all laughed and giggled.

It's the ghosts that worry me the most. Every so often Jake will stop and stare fixedly at nothing whatsoever. His

head moves, following the track of the nothing as it sidles along. Eventually it slips invisibly out of sight and Jake heaves a deep sigh, shakes his head in a disappointed manner, and we walk slowly onwards.

"What were you just looking at, Jake?"

"That's my imaginary friend," said Jake. "His name is Chocky\*. Didn't you have an imaginary friend when you were my age?"

"No," I said.

"What a deprived childhood you must have had," said Jake sympathetically, and he gave me a consoling lick.

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\* - Spot the reference. No, I don't mean a dog called Spot. He went out, damned Shakespearian animal that he is. I mean this tail has just turned into a science fiction adventure, courtesy of a John Wyndham novel.

Do you see what I did there?

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## **The Third Tail**

Jake, being a dog of impeccable taste, is a big fan of Spike Milligan (tell me, who isn't a big fan of Spike Milligan?). He (Jake, not Spike) follows me around the house, supervising me to make sure that whatever I'm doing, I'm doing it properly. Spike can't do that any more. He's dead. The inscription on his gravestone reads "I told you I was ill!"\*

Jake's supervising duties involve a lot of standing in corridors peering at me through the door into the room where I'm doing stuff. When I leave the room, he walks backwards down the corridor staring worshipfully at me with his brimming brown eyes as he backs away.

Under his breath I can hear him humming "I'm walking backwards for Christmas..."

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\* - I *told* you, I *never* make anything up and neither do I exaggerate... In poll conducted in 2012, the UK voted this as the nation's most popular epitaph by a massive margin. About 70% of the votes were in favour of it. Second (10%) was Oscar Wilde with "Either those curtains go, or I do".  
Well done, Spike!  
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## **The Fourth Tail**

"Let's go dogging\*!" said Jake, enthusiastically.  
"I beg your pardon!"  
"Sorry," said Jake, looking embarrassed. "That came out wrong. I meant let's go logging"  
"Have you become a lumberjack to fill up your spare time? Are you OK?"  
"Jogging!" said Jake. "Jogging! I meant to say jogging!"  
"Of course you did..."  
"Let's just stick with 'Walkies!' in future," said Jake decisively. "It's easier to say and doesn't lead to misunderstandings."

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\* - Mind you, it could be fun. Not that I have any personal experience of it, you understand... What about you?  
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*By the time this is published, I will have had another birthday. There's nothing too surprising about that.*

*Birthdays occur at regularly predictable intervals. Numerically there's nothing very special about this one, except that it is palindromic both the right way up and upside down. But it has a very special significance for me. Neither of my parents reached the age that I am now. So as far as I am concerned, every day from now on is a bonus.*

*There's another reason why this birthday is memorable as well. Read on for the story of what happened one day when...*

# Alan Had A Leak

As I walked along the side of the house, I could hear the sound of water gurgling away into the ground. Initially I thought nothing of it. Perhaps the washing machine was changing its cycle. Perhaps the toilet was flushing. However when the noise failed to go away for several weeks, I got suspicious. Either someone was having an inordinately long pee, or I had a problem with my pipes. On balance, the latter seemed more likely. I took a closer look and I found that water was gushing non-stop out of a couple of overflow pipes coming from the bathroom. Clearly something was leaking. Time to call a plumber.

So 'twas on the Friday morning that the plumber came to call. He examined the gush. He scratched his head and he delivered a deeply technical verdict. "Shit, oh dear!" he said feelingly.

"That doesn't sound good," I said.

"No, it isn't," said the plumber. "I think we're going to have to drill through the concrete slab the house is sitting on to get to the pipe that has the leak."

"That sounds costly," I said. "Not to say messy."

"Yes, to both of those things," said the plumber. "We're talking thousands of dollars, several days work and a lot of broken concrete. I think I need to discuss this job with my mate Mike. He's probably the best plumber in the district. He'll know what to do. I'll be back later on this afternoon." The plumber hopped in his van and drove off.

A few hours later, towards the end of the afternoon, Mike turned up to inspect things. He stared at the water gushing from the pipes and shook his head. "That's going to be a

problem," he said. Then he removed the cover from the toby and shook his head again. "Oh, look," he said cheerfully. "You've got a leak in your toby as well."

I peered over his shoulder. A fine jet of water was spraying out from a pipe just where it vanished under the house. "So I've got two serious leaks then?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you have," said Mike. "The news just gets better and better, doesn't it? There's not much I can do for you today. We'll just have to leave it to itself over the weekend. But I'll be back bright and early on Monday. I suspect it's going to take quite some time to get to the bottom of this..."

So 'twas on the Monday morning that the plumber came to call.

"We'll start with the toby," said Mike. "That's the easy one to fix because I know exactly where the leak is." He dressed himself in a face mask and ear muffs and then, brandishing a fearsome jackhammer, he attacked the concrete around the toby. It wasn't long before he had surrounded himself with shattered concrete. "Come and look at this!" he said, staring down into the huge hole he'd made in the ground.

A copper pipe was coming out at an acute angle from under the house. The angle was such that it was pressing hard against the corner of a brick. Over the years the friction between the pipe and the brick had rubbed a hole in the copper, and the result was a high pressure jet of water that was spraying everywhere.

"That's a rather silly angle to run the pipe at," said Mike. "I've no idea what the original plumber was thinking of when he put it in. But the good news is it's easy to fix. I'll break some of the brick off so the pipe isn't rubbing up against it any more and I'll replace the section of pipe that has the hole in it."

He was as good as his word, and a few minutes later the leak was fixed. "Now comes the difficult bit," said Mike.

"Where on earth is the leak that is causing all that water to gush out of the overflow pipes over there? Since the pipes are coming directly out of the bathroom, I think we probably ought to start looking in the floor underneath the vanity unit, mainly because the vanity is easy to take out. But if we can't find anything there, we might have to demolish the bath..."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I said.

It didn't take Mike long to dismantle and remove the vanity unit. He had to tear up the lino, which made a bit of a mess, but that was nothing compared to the mess he made when he drilled down through the concrete floor under the vanity to expose the pipes that lay beneath it.

"Well," said Mike, "the bad news is that the leak isn't under the vanity."

"Is there any good news?" I asked.

"Sort of," said Mike. "The leak definitely isn't under the bath. So that's nice and safe, thank goodness. I've dug right down to the soil under concrete and it's quite dry off to the right where the bath is, but it's rather damp to the left which suggests that the leak is somewhere underneath one of the rooms to the left of the bathroom."

"So the leak is underneath the toilet?" I asked. "Or possibly the laundry?"

"It's certainly starting to look that way," said Mike.

"So I suppose the next step is to dig out the toilet floor and if you don't find anything, to start excavating the laundry?"

"I think I might try a more subtle approach first," said Mike. "I'll start outside the house and dig up the soil in the garden bed that's right by the gushing pipe. Let's see if I can pinpoint the leak more accurately before I start demolishing interior floors at random."

The particular bed of soil that he referred to was underneath a pile of stones that we had artfully arranged in vaguely decorative heaps. Mike piled all the stones into a



wheelbarrow, thus completely ruining the subtlety of the design, and then he pulled up the weed mat that lay underneath them.

"Aha!" he said in triumphant tones. "Look at that!"

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

"The soil," said Mike. "It's absolutely saturated. We're obviously on the right track." He produced a large shovel and began digging into the dirt. After he'd dug down a foot or so, he had a moment of glory. "Got you, you bastard!" he cried. "Well sort of," he qualified.

A steady stream of water was flowing out between the bricks and down into the deep trench that Mike had dug along the side of the house.

"I think I'll leave it there for tonight," said Mike. "It's getting quite late and I don't really want to start demolishing the wall of your house until tomorrow when I'm fresher."

"Good idea," I said.

So 'twas on the Tuesday morning that the plumber came to call. The trench alongside the house was brimming with water from the overnight overflow.

"Right," Mike said firmly, "let's start pulling bricks out." The trusty jackhammer started up again and it wasn't long before a couple of pulverized bricks fell out of the bottom of the wall, giving Mike access to the inside of the house. He shone a torch into the hole. "Can't see anything," he muttered. He reached into his pocket and took out a long thin sliver of mirror. Its irregular shape suggested that it was a shard from a larger mirror. Someone, somewhere was putting up with seven years of bad luck, but it wasn't Mike because when he pushed the mirror into the hole and shone the torch after it he could see much further into darkness than he had been able to before. And there, reflected in the mirror, was a copper pipe with water gushing from a hole. "I can see the leak!" shouted Mike triumphantly.

"Great!" I said.

"Well, perhaps," said Mike. "There's no way I'm going to be able to reach it from here. I'm going to have to pin-point it a bit more accurately and then go through the floor somewhere inside the house."

"Oh well," I said. "Do what you have to do."

Mike produced a steel tape measure and shoved it deep into the hole until the tip was just over the gush of water. He noted how far into the house the leak was, and the angle that the tape measure made with the outside wall, thus giving himself a nice hypotenuse to work with. He measured along the wall until he reached the point where a theoretical line could go at right angles into the wall and intercept the leak. A quick bit of pythagorean arithmetic completed the calculation of the triangle. "The leak is in the laundry," said Mike authoritatively. We went into the laundry and he pointed to a particular tile. "It's underneath that one," he said. "Right! Let's be having you."

Out came the jackhammer again. It made short work of the tile which quickly shattered into fragments. Then he began drilling down into the concrete. "Gotcha!" came a triumphant cry.

I came and looked into the hole. A short length of copper pipe had been exposed to the world. Water was shooting out through three large holes in it. "Good heavens!" I said. "How did that happen?"

"I'm not sure," said Mike. "There's a fairly amateurish weld in the pipe. That might have had something to do with it. Perhaps the welding torch slipped and weakened the remaining copper. Copper has quite a low melting point and can be damaged quite easily by too much heat in the wrong place. But I'm a bit worried about what I found embedded in the concrete as I dug through it. Look at this." He showed me a lump of concrete with something smooth and rubbery stuck in it. "That's what's left of a silicone sealant," said Mike. "Whoever laid this concrete originally knew very well that these holes were there in the pipe. Clearly they tried to

fix them with a sealing solution before they put the concrete down. Completely the wrong thing to do, of course."

"What a bodgy job," I said, vaguely horror struck at the amateurish approach.

"Indeed it is," said Mike. "I've never seen anything like it before. That leak has probably been there for twenty years or more, gradually getting worse as time went on and the silicone started to lose adhesion."

It didn't take Mike long to replace the length of holey pipe with something whose structural integrity could not be faulted. "There," said Mike. "Everything's repaired. Now all I have to do is fix up the World War I battlefield that I seem to have made out of your garden, bathroom and laundry." We both stared gloomily at the shattered brick and concrete surrounding the trench line that zig-zagged all the way from the Swiss border to the English Channel. "I'll fix the toby first," said Mike. "Then I'll come back tomorrow to do the rest of it."

He reset the toby in the ground and filled the trench with concrete. I called Jake the Dog to look at it. "Don't you dare walk on the wet cement," I instructed him.

His ears drooped and his tail went down between his legs. "But that's what dogs do best!" he protested.

"I don't care," I said. "Leave it alone. If I find any paw prints in it I'll send you to bed without your favourite rope. And then what will you do when you want to play bondage games in the wee small hours of the morning?"

"You win," said Jake, horrified at the thought of a ropeless night. "I won't walk on the wet cement."

"OK," said Mike, "I'm off now. See you tomorrow morning."

So 'twas on the Wednesday morning that the plumber came to call. He replaced the vanity in the bathroom and concreted over the floor in the laundry. Then he went outside and cemented two bricks into the side of the house. He shovelled all the dirt back into the trench, and laid the

weed mat down on top of it. Then he piled the artistic stones back on to the weed mat. Amazingly, the final design was infinitely more subtle and attractive than it had been before.

"There," said Mike. "All that's left for you to do is to glue the lino back in the bathroom and put down a new tile in the laundry."

"That should be easy enough," I said.

"And you will need to take all the brick and concrete that I dug up to the tip. It will be a lot cheaper for you to take it yourself. There'll be an extra charge on the invoice if I have to take it for you."

"Ah, the invoice," I said. "Have you any idea how much all this lot is going to cost me?"

"Well," mused Mike, "the cost of materials for repairing the pipes is about \$10."

"That sounds quite reasonable," I said, starting to feel a faint glimmer of hope.

"But the three days it took to find the leak and to clear up after myself will cost you well into four figures..."

"Ouch!"

There is no doubt that the final bill will leave a very large hole in my bank account. But I cannot bring myself to resent it. The leaks had to be fixed - I had no choice in the matter at all. Mike did a truly superb job. Once he'd finished, the only trace left behind was one broken tile in the laundry and some torn up lino in the bathroom - both completely trivial things. Such a professional service is well worth paying for.

If I ever have any more problems with my waterworks, I will immediately pick up the phone and ring Havelock North Village Plumbers. I know they'll do a first class job.

# Dog Day Lunchtime

Most lunchtimes Jake and I go to the park where he can run off the lead and gallop around to his heart's content, chasing after all the interesting smells, and making a nuisance of himself by stealing frisbees and tennis balls from other dogs. On one of our first trips to the park, when both of us were still getting used to the wide open spaces, we met a chocolate labrador who came running straight over to us, wagging his tail furiously and grinning with a mouthful of long, white dagger-like teeth. Several yards of tongue dangled from his mouth, flapping up and down in time with his bounces as he ran towards us. A waterfall of drool sprayed through the air. When he got close to us, he put on all the brakes and skidded to a stop, throwing up a fountain of mud over my trousers. He stood there panting as Jake walked daintily over to him and took a long careful sniff at his bottom.

"Hello Booki," said Jake.

Booki took a long careful sniff at Jake's bottom.

"Hello Jake," said Booki. "Do you want to play chase?"

"That's my favourite game," said Jake. And they were off! They raced hither and yon, jinking and swerving, turning on a sixpence. Sometimes they miscalculated and bounced off each other, but they didn't seem to care about that.

"Let me teach you a new game," said Booki.

"What's it called?" asked Jake. He is a dog who likes to have things properly categorised.

"It's called *I'm going to grab your collar and try to strangle you*," said Booki.

"What are the rules?" asked Jake, puzzled. "How does it work?"

"Like this," said Booki, and he grabbed Jake's collar and tried to strangle him with it.

"Oh, I see," said Jake and he grabbed Booki's collar and twisted it firmly.

The two of them spent a few minutes rolling around in the mud choking each other until they both ran out of air. They let go of each others' collars, panted for a while, and then they played chase again.

"I can jump through that fence over there," boasted Booki.

"Bet you can't," said Jake. Jake had approached the fence several times on our walks, but had always retired from it, defeated by the complexity of the problems it posed.

Booki raced over to the fence, leaped up to it, and shot through to the other side between two strands of wire. He stood there proudly staring at Jake across the fence. "See?" he said.

Jake walked carefully up to the fence and sniffed each strand of wire one by one. He gingerly poked one paw through the gap between the strands. Then he poked the other paw through. Now he was standing awkwardly with his feet on the ground on both sides of the fence. The fence wire pressed hard into his tummy as his weight dragged it down. Making a huge effort, he clumsily dragged his back legs through, one after the other. "Hey!" he shouted. "Look at me! I'm on the other side of the fence!"

"Now do it faster," said Booki and he leaped back through the fence again.

"I'll try," said Jake. He backed away from the fence so as to give himself plenty of room and then he raced up to the fence, closed his eyes, and launched himself at it. He shot through between the wires, landed awkwardly on the other side, lost his footing and rolled over a couple of times. When his momentum died down, he bounded back on to his feet. "That was fun!" he said. "Bet you can't catch me now." And he raced off with Booki in hot pursuit. Just to prove that it

hadn't been a fluke, they jumped through the fence a few more times as they chased each other. It didn't slow them down at all. Clearly Jake was now a fence expert.

"Got any more tricks?" Jake asked Booki.

"Watch this!" said Booki. He dashed off to the river that meanders through the park, leaped high into the air from the riverbank and belly-flopped down into the water with an almighty splash. It looked very impressive. Shoals of fish, screaming in terror, scrambled to get out of Booki's way. A lady paddling in the shallows gave a sudden shriek. "An eel has just nibbled my toes!" It was not clear if she was complaining or boasting. Booki paid no attention to her. He swam across the river and climbed up on to the opposite bank. "Hey Jake," he called out, "I bet you can't catch me now!"

Jake was very impressed. "How did you do that?" he asked. He'd investigated the river several times in our visits to the park, but all he had ever done was paddle in the shallows. He had always refused to go out of his depth. But this time, with Booki's example to guide him, he paddled tentatively towards the middle of the river. Suddenly the ground beneath his feet disappeared. For a moment he vanished beneath the surface, but he soon reappeared, spluttering and spitting. His legs thrashed furiously and then, as if by magic, he was at the other side. "Now I can catch you, Booki," he yelled and they were off again, grabbing at each other's collars, rolling and tumbling in the mud. They crossed the river several times in their mad games. Jake soon lost all his fear of the water and turned into an expert swimmer. Clearly Booki was a really good teacher as well as being lots of fun to play with.

Over the next few days Booki and Jake cemented their friendship. If Booki heard Jake barking, he would drop everything and race towards his friend. If Jake spotted Booki in the nether regions of the park he would zoom away from

my side as fast as he could go. The two of them were inseparable.

They played tug o'war with sticks and it quickly became a favourite game. Once Booki found a dead duck on the riverbank so they played tug o'war with that for a while until it disintegrated.

"Let's not play tug-a-duck again," suggested Jake. "It doesn't last nearly long enough."

"Mmmfffmmffmf," agreed Booki through a mouthful of feathers and feet.

One day, as they were playing *I'm going to grab your collar and try to strangle you*, a rabbit came bounding by. Booki immediately dropped Jake's collar and set off in hot pursuit. Jake, always keen to learn a new game, raced after him. But try as he might, he could not keep up with Booki. Never in the history of the world has a dog sprinted as fast as Booki sprinted that day. But it did him no good. The rabbit was clearly in training for the Olympics, and it seemed highly likely that the beast would fail the mandatory drug test as soon as it entered any of the official events. It easily kept well ahead of its pursuers. Jake soon gave the whole business up as a bad job - he was trailing his friend by several dog-lengths and Booki was pulling further and further away from him. Then the rabbit vanished over the horizon. Booki immediately screeched to a halt and gave up the chase. He went panting back to Jake.

"Why did you stop chasing the rabbit?" asked Jake. "I thought you were getting quite close."

"I stopped because it ran over the horizon," explained Booki.

"I don't understand," said Jake.

"It's obvious, dumbo," said Booki. "No matter how fast you run, the horizon never gets any closer. It's always there ahead of you, just out of reach. Once the rabbit managed to get over the horizon the chase was over. It had gone where I could never follow. Mind you, the race was fun while it



lasted. One day I'm going to catch one of those things, you just wait and see."

"What will you do with it when you catch it?" asked Jake, intrigued.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," said Booki complacently. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"Very profound," said Jake. "But I don't think rabbits are evil. They might be fun to play tug o'war with though..."

"No," said Booki. "They're too loose and flexible. I think they'd tear to pieces even faster than ducks do."

Booki's mum is a nurse and her shifts do not always allow her and Booki to come to the park at the same time that Jake and I go. So not every day is a Booki day. Jake always seems a little bit sad if Booki can't come out to play. Booki's mum told me that when she works inconvenient shifts she sometimes takes Booki for a walk on Te Mata Peak. That gave me an idea.

"We live quite near Te Mata Peak," I said. "Next time you go there why not bring Booki round and he and Jake can romp in the garden while the grown ups have a sociable cup of coffee in the house."

"That sounds like a good idea," she said. "I'll do that."

So a few days later, her car pulled up in our driveway. Jake saw the strange car appear and he started to bark a warning. As soon as Booki heard Jake's voice, he sat up in the back seat and strained against his harness, eager to get to his best friend.

They dashed madly around the garden playing their normal choking games. Jake showed Booki his rope collection. They played tug o'war with several different ropes for a while, and then they had a wrestling match. Jake pinned Booki down with an inverted stepover leg trap camel clutch, and Booki conceded the contest. They stopped for a little rest and a drink of water.

"There's a nice stainless steel bucket full of clean water over here," said Jake, offering refreshments. "And there's

some trays over there with flowerpots on them. Water has leaked through the soil in the pots and accumulated in the trays. Some of it's got slime as well."

"I think I'll take the flowerpot water," said Booki. "The slime sounds attractive."

They both took a long slurping drink.

"Ahhh, lovely!" said Booki. "Full of body."

"Yes," said Jake. "Just the other day I saw one of the cats burying a dead rat in the flowerpot in the middle of the row. So the water does literally have a body in it..."

"Yum," said Booki appreciatively. "You've really got a nice house here. It's got all the amenities. Ropes, tasty water, cats..."

"Thank you," said Jake. "I think it's rather nice as well."

"Have you always lived here?"

"No," said Jake. "I was born on a farm. I had my career all planned out. I was going to be a sheepdog."

"It's an honourable profession," said Booki. "But clearly you failed in your ambition. What happened?"

"It was my own stupid fault," said Jake gloomily. "I made a complete mess of it. I did something really dumb and blotted my copybook so badly that the farmer immediately gave me up for adoption. That's how I ended up here."

"What did you do that was so unforgivable?" asked Booki.

"Well," said Jake, "one day the farmer sent me out to count his sheep. I was quite thrilled to be given such a responsible task and I did the very best I could. I counted them three times just to make sure I got it right."

"How many sheep are there?" asked the farmer when I got back to him.

"Forty!" I said in a firm and confident voice.

"That's odd," said the farmer, scratching his head. "I only bought thirty-eight."

"Yes," I said to him. "I know. I just rounded them up!"

## **Acknowledgement**

I'd like to say a big thank you to my cousin Ian Tindal who told me the dreadful joke that closes this story. Thank you, Ian. You're a star!

# Mr Jake's Diary

## Foreword

I was chatting with Jake the Dog, as one does, and I told him that I had bought a device to measure how far we walked together. It also keeps track of how many steps I've taken, how many calories I've burned and what my heart rate is.

"I hope it's not a fitbit," said Jake.

"No it isn't," I told him. "Why do you ask?"

"Those things are over engineered to the point of insanity," said Jake. "You can store your information in the cloud and examine it over time, rate yourself against your goals, share your results with your friends, the list goes on. Why does something so simple have to be made so complicated?"

"I agree with you," I said. "I can't for the life of me understand why I'd want to keep a record of my results over time, or tell anybody else about them. Anyway, the graph over time would be a very boring straight line. I walk almost exactly the same distance every day. I take the same number of steps and burn the same number of calories. You walk a lot more than me, of course, because you dash around a lot when I let you off the lead in the park. And sometimes you go for a swim."

"I think it would be much more interesting to record what happens on the walks rather than how far we go," said Jake.

"I agree," I said. "Why don't you start keeping a diary? I'll use my gadget to tell you how far into the walk we are when something interesting happens, and you can record the details."

"What a good idea!" said Jake. "Let's do it."

So here are some extracts from Jake's diary for today. And every day, of course, because dogs live completely in the moment.

Today - 0.1 km

We've just gone out of the front door and I can smell the cat who owns the cul-de-sac. I'm sure he's around here somewhere. Oh look! There he is over by the clump of lilac. I'll just drag Alan over there. Oh dear. The cat isn't moving and it's hissing at me. I don't like that. Alan! Get me out of here.

Today - 0.5 km

We're walking along the grass verge that leads to the reserve. The council has been mowing it and there are clumps of shredded, matted grass from the mower blades scattered here and there. Yummy! I love those things. There's a nice big chewy one right by my feet...

Today - 0.6 km

That was a lovely clump of grass. I enjoyed it so much that I think I'll throw it up so that I can have the pleasure of eating it again. Yes, I was right. It's ever so much tastier the second time around.

Today - 0.7 km

There's a car coming up the road. I'd better flop down on my tummy and watch it go past. Here it comes! Here it comes! Stop pulling so hard on my lead, Alan. I'm not getting up yet. I need to watch the car. Oh! There it goes, round the corner and out of sight. OK Alan, you can stop tugging now. I'm ready to carry on walking.

### Today - 0.8 km

Look! There's Oscar and his mum. Oscar smells like a dog, but he doesn't look like any dog I've ever seen before. He's tiny, about the size of my paw. He is covered in fluffy white fur and when he stands on his short, fat hairy legs he just about reaches my ankle. I always sniff his bottom when we meet but he never sniffs mine because he can't reach it without a stepladder and nobody ever takes a stepladder with them on a walk. That would be silly. Even Alan's pockets, copious though they are, aren't big enough for a stepladder.

Oscar's mum says that when the cage he was in first arrived at her house, she honestly thought it was empty. The trouble with Oscar is that he doesn't know he's a small dog. He thinks he's just as big as me and he won't stand for any nonsense. I'm a bit afraid of Oscar, so I always do what he tells me.

Oscar and I have had a lot of erudite conversations through peemail. At the moment we're discussing the knotty problem of lapsarianism. He's a supralapsarianist and I'm an infralapsarianist and neither of us have ever managed to change the other dog's mind. Since Alan is clearly God (though Oscar is not convinced of this) I've asked him for a definitive ruling, but he just laughs, calls me a good boy and gives me a treat. That's OK - the treats are yummy. Perhaps I need to have a few more theological debates with Alan...

### Today - 1.2 km

We're well into the reserve now. There's a thickly wooded valley to our left and I can smell rabbits and rats. Their scent trails criss-cross the ground that Alan and I are walking on and so I keep zig-zagging around Alan as I follow them. Alan is constantly spinning round to untangle the lead

that I've wrapped around his legs. If his name was Jenny I could call him Spinning Jenny, but it isn't so I don't. Pity...

There's a man coming. Hello man! Look at me wagging my tail at you. Oh goody! He's stopped and he's scratching my ears. I think I'll jump up and lick his face and see if I can break his nose by banging my forehead into it. Why is he swearing? Why is Alan pulling me away from him so hard? He's a nice man. I want to lick him again.

### Today - 1.5 km

We're hurrying across the bridge and leaving the man behind. There are lots of good smells wafting up from the gully beneath us. I've really got to stop and pee over the side of the bridge onto them. Hmmm... The troll who lives under the bridge looks rather angry with me. His head is quite wet. I wonder how that happened?

### Today - 1.8 km

We're crossing the road now. There's another reserve on the other side. When we reach the road, I sit at the kerb until Alan tells me it's time to cross. Alan's very boring. We only cross when there aren't any cars coming. Where's the fun in that? I watch the cars as they go past. I'd really like to get closer to them, but Alan's a terrible spoilsport about it.

We're across the road and we've gone into the other reserve. The track is covered with acorns. I wonder what they taste like? Oh, yuck! They're horrible. I can't understand what the birds see in them.

### Today - 2.0 km

I've got a stick. It's the best stick ever. Well, it will be the best stick ever once I've modified it a bit. There are a lot of twigs sticking out of it and they get in the way when I try

and pick it up. What I need to do is bite them off one by one and drop them on the ground.

There - all the twigs have gone and now it really is the best stick ever. I think I'll pick it up and take it home with me.

Oh, look! There's Bobby the fox terrier. I'll just drop my stick for a moment so that I can say hello. Bobby's a ball dog. He's utterly besotted with chasing the tennis balls that his mum throws for him. I've never really understood what dogs see in that. Balls are very good to chew (well, actually, everything is very good to chew). But chasing them? No, not really.

### Today - 2.1 km

Where's my stick? Didn't I have a stick? I'm sure that I had a stick. I must have been mistaken.

### Today - 2.3 km

We've come out of the reserve and we're back to the main road. I'm just sitting on the pavement watching the cars and the cars are watching me warily as they go past. I think they might be wary because I'm a big dog. Alan's just told me to "Walk on". As usual he's waited for the worst possible moment. The road is completely empty. Oh! There's a fascinating smell here right in the middle of the road. I think there might have been a dead rabbit here once. I need to stop and appreciate the bouquet. Perhaps I'll roll in it. Why is Alan pulling so hard on the lead? He gets very annoyed with me when I do that. How come he can get away with it? This is definitely a them and us world. I'm one of us and Alan is one of them.

### Today - 2.5 km



Is that a jogger? It is! It's a jogger. I like joggers. I can make them swerve.

### Today - 2.6 km

Hello Rose. Rose is a full size poodle. She's just been clipped and she looks beautiful. Hello Rose. Hello Rose. Why won't you say hello to me, Rose? She never speaks to me. She's very stand-offish. Perhaps it's because she's French. Her mum always talks to Alan. Life isn't fair.

### Today - 2.8 km

There's a children's playground just ahead with all the usual bits and pieces of apparatus in it. There aren't any children though. That's a shame. I like licking children. They are much tastier than adults because they have such highly refined soap avoidance skills. Never mind. In the absence of children I can at least eat some of the cork chips that line the playground. There's always a silver lining. Win some, lose some. It's all swings and roundabouts.

### Today - 3.1 km

We're back on the road that leads to our house and there's a car coming. It's slowing down! I think I'll sit here and watch it. Oh yes! It's coming to a stop just by where I'm sitting. This is wonderful! I'm going to pull my ears back, grin all over my face and wag my tail just as fast as I can. There are two people getting out of the car. Hello people. Look at me. I'm Jake and I want to lick you all over. Look at me. Look at me.

Oh no! They ignored me completely. How could they do that to me when I'm wagging so hard? Just for that, I'm going to pee on all four of their tyres. So there.

Today - 3.6 km

We're home. The cat who owns the cul-de-sac is exactly where he was when we left. I'm not going to go and sniff him this time. I'm going to go into the house and I'm going to play with my stuffed chicken toy. Maybe Alan will throw it for me.

# Alan and the Pensive Pension

When I lived in England, I worked for the Royal Society of Chemistry. Towards the end of my time with them, they decided to implement a pension scheme for their employees. A small fraction of our pay went into a fund, and that payment was matched with an equivalent amount from the Society itself. It was the usual sort of arrangement for that kind of thing. I was only in the scheme for about two years, and then I left the job and emigrated to New Zealand. One of the things the Society gave me when I left them was a piece of paper informing me of the pension amount that I was eligible to claim when I reached the magic age of 65. I filed the paper away and forgot all about it. I found it hard to imagine that I would ever be old enough to collect the money and, of course, the amount owed to me was extraordinarily small because I hadn't been in the scheme for very long.

Time passed, as it has a habit of doing, and eventually, rather to my surprise, I actually reached the magic age of retirement. I claimed my statutory pension from the New Zealand government and settled down to enjoy the passing of the days. I didn't bother doing anything about the small Royal Society pension. It all seemed like far too much trouble for too little return, and besides, they were a long way away. Out of sight, out of mind.

But this is the twenty-first century. You can run, but you can't hide. They'll track you down all the way to the edge of the world and beyond. And so, one day, rather to my surprise, an email slithered into my inbox from the

consultancy company that was administering The Royal Society of Chemistry pension scheme.

"The tracing agency we employ has suggested that you might be the Alan Robson who worked for the Royal Society from 1972 to 1980." said the email. "If you can confirm that, we would like to pay you some money, though not very much."

"Yes," I said, somewhat reluctantly, "that's me."

"Oh good," said the email. "All you have to do now is prove that to my satisfaction and then you can sit back and let the money trickle in."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"Let's start with your full postal address, your date of birth, and your British National Insurance number," said the email. "If these last two bits of information match what we have on file, we'll move on to the next step."

"OK," I said, "here's the info." I felt rather proud of myself. It isn't everybody who can remember their National Insurance number thirty five years after they last used it in anger. Fortunately I had it written down on a piece of paper – the same piece of paper, as it happens, that the Royal Society had given me when I left their employment. Even more fortunately, that piece of paper had survived the move across the world and several moves between cities here in New Zealand. Not all my pieces of paper have been that lucky.

"Looks good," said the email. "All I need now is your birth certificate."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not willing to trust my birth certificate to the postal services. There's a lot of water between here and the UK. Anything could happen to it. How about I let you have a notarised copy of it instead?"

The email grumbled a bit, but eventually agreed that would probably do. "Oh, by the way," it added, "the pension will be taxed at source in the UK before you receive it."

"But it will be taxed here by the New Zealand IRD when I declare it," I said. "Does that mean I get taxed twice on the same income?"

"Yes," said the email smugly.

"That seems a bit unfair," I said. "There won't be anything left after I've paid two lots of tax on it."

"Sorry," said the email. "I don't make the rules, I just obey them."

I contacted the New Zealand tax department (the IRD) and asked what I could do about the double taxation.

"Today's your lucky day," said the IRD. "As it happens, we have an agreement with the UK tax authorities. All you have to do is fill in the hugely complicated form I've just posted to you. Send a copy to me and another copy to the UK tax people and in the fullness of time they'll stop taxing you in the UK and leave it all up to us. Oh, and by the way, since you are in receipt of untaxed income which you have to declare here in New Zealand, you are deemed to be self-employed and you will have to fill in an IR3 form and pay provisional tax on your estimated income for the next twelve months."

It all sounded horribly complicated and I began to regret having admitted to the email that I was the Alan Robson it was looking for. Perhaps I could go back to square one and do a Jedi thing that would convince the email that really I was not the Alan Robson it was looking for. I began to consider the benefits of an offshore trust. Unfortunately I didn't know how to spell Mossack Fonseca so clearly the trust would not be able to provide any support...

I filled in the horribly complicated form. Every time it asked me a question I didn't understand I wrote Not Applicable, and crossed my fingers. Then I signed it, dated it, and photocopied it. One copy went to the IRD and one copy to the UK tax people. And then absolutely nothing happened except that every month money from the Royal Society started to appear in my bank account. Furthermore,

I also got a monthly snail mail which contained a printed form that told me how much money I was getting and how much tax the UK government had taken away from it.

Then, quite out of the blue, when I'd almost forgotten about the very complicated form, I got a letter from the UK tax authorities informing me that I no longer had to pay tax on my pension and a few days after that, all the tax that I'd paid so far was returned to me in a lump sum.

Now, all that remained to be sorted out was the evil IR3 form that I would have to fill in when the end of the tax year arrived. I'd filled in an IR3 form once before, about twenty years ago and it had been a rather frightening experience. My imaginative answer to Question 11 had caused the IRD's powerful Babbage Mark II mainframe computer to spring a sprocket and strip all the gears in its primary register. The resultant chaos is still spoken of in hushed tones by the IRD staff. Clearly I was going to need professional help with my IR3 this time around.

Havelock North has everything a retired person could possibly need and one of those things is a tax accountant. I rang the tax accountant and asked for help. "Yes, I can easily do that for you," said a nice lady and I made an appointment to see her.

She listened carefully to my explanation of the situation and examined the figures I provided to her. "Well, that all seems very straightforward," she said. Clearly Question 11 held no fears for her, even though it had grown more complex over the years and now had four parts to it. I felt very reassured.

The next day I got an email from the IRD informing me that the nice lady had been registered as my tax accountant. The day after that she emailed me a summary of my IR3 tax return and said that if I agreed with the figures, could I come in and sign the form. Since the figures promised me a tax refund of \$1200 I couldn't see anything

at all to argue with, so I immediately went in to her office and signed the form.

"Apart from the refund," she said, "the other good news is that your Royal Society pension is so extraordinarily tiny that the IRD find it to be beneath contempt, and so you do not have to pay provisional tax."

"That's wonderful," I said. "I'd been quite worried about that."

"I'll file your tax return straight away," she said and presumably she did exactly that because two days later the IRD deposited \$1200 into my bank account.

I know what I'm going to be doing at the end of every tax year from now on.

# The Emergency Bone

It wasn't a dark and stormy night. Therefore the dawn was very bright and clear, though it was more than a little chilly. Jake the Dog was out in the garden chewing on his emergency bone, the one he uses to make time go faster so that the things he's looking forward to will happen much sooner. He looked up at me with his limpid, brown eyes and he said, "Is it time for my morning walk yet?"

"Yes it is, Jake," I said. "Let's get going."

He dropped his emergency bone on the lawn. Its job was done. He came bounding into the house. I dressed up warmly – thick denim jeans, a leather jacket, my new hoodie, a scarf and a pair of woolly gloves. I put Jake's lead around his neck, and off we went, out into the cold light of day. The grass was white with frost and it crunched under our feet as we strode along. "Oh dear," said Jake as we turned the corner, "that doesn't look good."

The house at the end of the road had its lawn sprinklers going. They are very badly adjusted and they squirt high pressure jets of water all over the pavement rather than over the lawn. While they are squirting, the footpath is soaking wet and quite unusable, unless you fancy a free shower. When they stop squirting, the winter weather quickly turns the damp pavement into a deadly sheet of ice which is best avoided by those of a slippery disposition.

"That is a problem," I agreed. "There isn't a footpath on the other side so we'll have to walk in the road. That isn't very safe. Shall we go back home and wait until the sprinklers are turned off?"

"No," decided Jake. "I think I'd rather take my chances with the road."



We crossed over and walked along the edge of the road, past the gardens of the houses that lined that side of the street. Jake sniffed constantly at all the smells, concentrating on each one for minutes at a time.

"Why are you taking so long over all those smells?" I asked him. "It's slowing our walk down and I'm getting colder and colder. Let's keep moving or else my lubrication will freeze solid in my veins and I'll seize up completely."

"I'm so lucky those sprinklers were turned on" said Jake. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world. Somebody's got an advance copy of the next *Game of Thrones* novel and they're sharing it all along here, chapter by chapter as their bladder allows. I've got to read every word. It's very exciting..."

"Oh come on," I said, tugging hard at his lead. "Let's at least try and get to the end of the road."

"Hang on," said Jake. "I've just got to a good bit." He inhaled deeply. "Well," he said, "I never expected that would happen!"

After a lot of stopping and starting and much quiet contemplation, we finally got to the end of the road. We turned right and walked towards the park. Suddenly Jake came to a complete halt. "I'm not going that way," he said firmly.

Usually Jake is more than happy to go wherever I point him. There are always smells to investigate and sometimes there are sticks. Once there had even been a dead sheep. But despite all these attractive possibilities, this time Jake absolutely refused to move. Thirty six kilograms of dog is an immovable object and I am very far from being an irresistible force. So the laws of physics meant that we were stuck. "What's the problem?" I asked him, puzzled.

"There's a tyre in the path," said Jake. "I think it might have come off the back wheel of a Nissan Nasty. Look at it lying there, all horrible, round and black. I don't like it. I don't want to go anywhere near it."

"Don't worry Jake," I said. "I'll protect you." I was starting to wonder if we were ever going to get back home. Everything seemed to be conspiring to make this walk last forever. But finally, after much persuasion and a dried liver dog treat, Jake reluctantly agreed to carry on. He sidled cautiously up to the tyre and sniffed it. The tyre just lay there passively. It didn't seem to care that it was being sniffed.

"Huh!" Jake grunted, unimpressed. "It's a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. I read that ages ago when I was just a puppy and I've re-read it several times since. I can't imagine why I was so worried about the stupid tyre. I think I'll overwrite it with *Game of Thrones*." He lifted his leg and did just that. "OK," he said cheerfully, "give me another bit of dried liver and let's walk on."

We left the tyre behind and carried on walking. Apart from a brief stop to peruse a *Harry Potter* spin-off we made it back home without further incident. Perhaps I'd been wrong about the conspiracy.

Jake ambled out into the garden and went straight back to his emergency bone. "Is it time for my lunchtime walk yet?" he asked.

And, of course, it was.

# The Locked Door

I stared through the driver side window of my car. There were my keys, dangling from the ignition. All the doors, of course, were locked up as tight as a drum, and the keys were sneering at me and thumbing their noses.

"Ooops!" I said, feeling mildly embarrassed.

"What you need now," said Robin, "is a coat hanger. I'm a bit out of practice, but once upon a time I was a dab hand with a coat hanger. The stories I could tell..."

"Unfortunately," I said, "I emptied all the coat hangers out of my pockets this morning before we left the hotel. I think I must have accidentally put a breeding pair in my trousers. They had several litters overnight, and my trousers were starting to look terribly angular. I couldn't walk in a straight line any more. It was getting quite ridiculous."

"I thought you were clanking a bit yesterday," said Robin. "So can I take it then that you don't have any coat hangers at all now?"

"Not a single one," I said. "I hung them all back up in the wardrobe and closed the door to give them some privacy."

"That's a shame," said Robin. "Oh well, I suppose there's nothing else for it. You'll have to call the AA. I'm sure they'll be able to help. And they probably won't laugh at you at all, though they may well smirk a lot. They are bound to have access to a coat hanger. I'm sure it's a standard item of AA tool box equipment."

I got my cell phone out of my pocket and rang the AA. "Hello," said a charming lady with a thick Indian accent. I explained my predicament to her.

"Oh dear," she said sympathetically. "Where is the car now?"

"It's in the car park at the Whakarewarewa thermal area," I said. There was a long, loud silence.

"Where?" asked the Indian lady. "How do you say that word? Say it again."

"Whakarewarewa," I said obligingly.

"How do you spell that?" she asked.

I spelled it out to her slowly, letter by letter with long pauses between each one, but she still managed to lose track half way through. "Wokaweweea?" she asked hesitantly.

"No," I said. "Whakarewarewa." I spelled it out again. It didn't help.

"Wokawoka?" she asked. "Isn't that in Australia?"

"No," I said. "It's in New Zealand. Near Rotorua. Just contact the AA office in Rotorua and say Whakarewarewa. They'll know where it is."

"My computer doesn't recognise the name," she said, "and I can't find it on my map."

"What can't you find?" I asked. "Whakarewarewa or Rotorua?"

"Neither," she said. "There's nothing even remotely resembling either of those names anywhere in Australia."

"I'm not in Australia," I said. "I'm in New Zealand."

"Where's New Zealand?" she asked. "How do you spell that?"

Lather, rinse, repeat...

We went round the loop several times and her attempts to spell Whakarewarewa became increasingly esoteric. Both she and her computer continued to insist that there was no such place. Eventually, probably in a desperate attempt to get me off the phone, she promised that an AA officer really would be with me shortly. Given her spelling and geographical problems, I was dubious about that promise, but rather to my surprise, an AA man did actually turn up an hour or so later.

"Where's your coat hanger?" Robin asked him. "I can't see any sign of it."

The AA man gave Robin a puzzled look, then he turned to me and said, "I'd have been here half an hour ago if you hadn't told the call centre lady that you were in Australia. That caused a lot of confusion. Apparently she reported your problem to our Sydney office and told them you were in Wagga Wagga. It took them ages to figure out what was really going on and where you actually were. Then they cut out the middle man and contacted us directly."

"I didn't tell her I was in Australia," I protested. "She made that up herself. I told her exactly where I was, but she couldn't find it on her map. Where on Earth is Wagga Wagga?"

He shrugged. "It's almost exactly half way between Sydney and Melbourne," he said. "Anyway, never mind, I'm here now. Can I see your AA membership card, please?"

I put my hand in my pocket to get my wallet. By the time I'd got my membership card out of the wallet, my car door was wide open. The AA man reached inside the car, retrieved my keys, and handed them to me. "Don't bother with the membership card," said the AA man. "I just wanted you to look away so you didn't see what I was doing."

"Are all car doors that easy to open?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I really can't understand why car thieves always smash the windows to get in. It's so much quicker and quieter to do what I just did and it has the big advantage that you don't have to sit on shards of broken glass when you drive away from the scene of the crime."

"So exactly what did you do to get the door open?" I asked.

He winked, got back in his van and drove away.

"Did you see what he did?" I asked Robin.

"No, I didn't," said Robin. "I blinked and missed the whole thing. But he didn't use a coat hanger, I'm absolutely certain of that."

"Probably he's not allowed to use a coat hanger because they are a protected species during the breeding season," I said.

# It's Not A Bug, It's A Creature.

Winnie the Pooh,  
And Tigger too,  
Went for a walk in the park.

Jack the Ripper was there,  
He was hunting for bear  
And he needed to kill before  
dark.

Jack the Ripper said, "Pooh,  
I am coming for you!"  
But Winnie the Pooh wasn't  
scared.

He faced up to Jack  
And threatened him back.  
"You're dead!" Jack the Ripper  
declared.

"Oh no," said the Pooh,  
"That really won't do.  
I'll not play at your silly game.

You cannot kill me.  
We're related, you see.  
We've both got the same middle  
name!"

The Saga of Baron Sloan

- Anona R. Slob

From the anthology: Refractory  
Nose-Pickings For the Gentry  
Edited by Nola Bronas  
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The streets of the town where I live are deserted. The shops are mostly closed and so are all the schools.

Our water supply is contaminated with campylobacter bacteria. More than 5000 people, about a third of the population, have suffered terrible gastric problems. One person has died and two are in intensive care. Queues at doctors' surgeries and at hospital emergency departments go twice around the block. Until further notice, we have to boil all our water before using it. Careful hand washing before preparing food is mandatory.

I first became aware of the problem when, quite out of the blue, a friend sent me an email asking me if I was boiling my drinking water, and providing a reference to a story on a local news site that, somewhat breathlessly, outlined what was going on. Since the news site in question generally shows as much respect for the accuracy of its stories as it does for the spelling of the words that make up the story and for the grammar of the sentences its so-called reporters construct from those words (i.e. not very much at all) I treated the report with some scepticism. I knew that the local hospital had recently identified an outbreak of gastric problems in its wards which was quickly isolated and contained and which really didn't amount to anything very much at all. So I simply assumed that the news site was reporting a garbled version of that old story, and I paid no attention.

Over the next few days, it became apparent that we really did have a serious problem. More and more news outlets began reporting on it. Schools began reporting that



many of their pupils and some of their staff were absent. As a result, the schools eventually all closed down completely and sent their few remaining pupils home.

A lot of local businesses had so many of their staff off sick that they too had to shut up shop. Cafés and restaurants were particularly badly affected because they, of course, were completely dependant on a clean water supply and without it, they were unable to properly infuse and cook. But even if the cafés and restaurants had remained open, it probably wouldn't have done them any good - there simply weren't any customers around to drink the coffee or to eat the food.

Something was clearly very wrong, and the description of the symptoms sounded quite alarming. Advice about boiling the water before use to keep it bacteria-free began to appear in the news bulletins. A spokesman for the council repeated this advice on the radio and claimed that all local residents had been informed of the problem - a blatant lie. Neither I, nor any of my neighbours received any official notification about what was going on. To be fair, the council was very quick to post information on its web site, but it had little practical effect. Many of the local people are quite elderly and very few of them have any internet access. A report appeared on the news of a person who lived alone and who was suffering from severe diarrhoea. Knowing that this put him in great danger of dehydration, and being quite unaware of the water contamination, he was drinking lots of water and continually reinfesting himself. His condition got worse and worse and worse... Fortunately he was found in time and was able to be treated.

The council quickly moved to chlorinate the water supply in an attempt to kill the bacteria, but the advice to boil the water remained in place. Council spokespeople were interviewed on the news and proudly proclaimed that they had worked with the Red Cross to knock on every door in the town to check on the health of the inhabitants and to

keep them informed of the crisis. Again, a blatant lie. The Red Cross pitched a tent in the grounds of the bridge club where they dispensed advice and electrolytes, but nobody actually came to see me or my neighbours.

The local supermarket brought in huge loads of bottled water which they sold at cost (a marvellous public relations exercise as well as being a very practical and useful thing to do). The council got in on the act as well and provided water tankers from which people could fill their own containers at no charge. However this proved to be a less than successful exercise since one of the water tankers turned out to be contaminated with E. Coli, and the water from it was potentially just as dangerous as that from the domestic supply. Again the news broadcasts on the radio were quick to latch on to this and people who had taken water from this tanker were advised to pour it away.

Two whole days after the contaminated water tanker was discovered, I received my first (and so far my only) official communication from the council. A leaflet arrived in my mailbox advising me not to use the water from that tanker. I could clearly hear the sound of horses bolting away and stable doors slamming shut...

I find it somewhat ironic that the local supermarkets and chain stores have no problem whatsoever in promptly delivering junk mail detailing their special offers to every house in the town. And yet the council consistently fails to distribute its informational leaflets efficiently or in a timely manner. Perhaps the council should ask the chain stores to run its communications division.

Personally, the infected water supply has had little practical effect on me, other than the inconvenience. Certainly I've not had any gastric problems at all. Perhaps that's because I seldom drink water straight from the tap. Mostly it gets used to brew coffee and tea, and in cooking of course. All these activities require the water to be boiled.

However I do take some medications with water, and of course I use water when I'm brushing my teeth...

For the first couple of days after the outbreak was reported, I paid no attention to the alarmist reports on the increasingly shrill news sites. After all, I expected the council to tell me if there was any danger (silly me). So during that time I was potentially at risk. Probably my minimal usage of water direct from the tap helped me to avoid any bad effects. Also I'm a stickler for hand hygiene during food preparation, which also helped. I studied chemistry at university and there's nothing like a session in a chemistry laboratory to teach you about the importance of clean hands - some of those chemicals are **nasty**. Chemists define themselves as people who always wash their hands **before** they go to the toilet...

Once I accepted that the council's deafening silence meant that there really was a crisis, I started to avoid tap water completely. I took showers with my mouth firmly closed, and I put a glass and some bottled water by the bathroom sink. I had a stock pot full of water in the kitchen which I boiled for five minutes and then allowed to cool. I used a soup ladle to extract what I needed for this and that culinary purpose. Eventually I got fed up with that laborious process and I started using bottled water instead. But sometimes instinct kicks in, particularly in the early morning when you are still half asleep and one morning I cleaned my teeth and took my morning tablets with tap water before I woke up and realised what I'd done. Bugger! So much for the glass and the bottle of water on the sink...

There wasn't much I could do about the tablets after I'd swallowed them. But I could (and did) sterilise my toothbrush. I put it in boiling water for five minutes. Then I hung a towel over the bathroom taps and tied it down so that I simply couldn't get at the taps any more. That proved to be a very effective deterrent and I haven't made the same mistake again. Fortunately I seem to have got away

with that one relapse. It has had no discernible effect on my digestive mechanisms.

One good thing has come out of this public health débâcle. I was taking Jake the Dog for his evening walk late one afternoon when a car overflowing with District Nurses on their way to succour the sick came screeching to a halt beside me. Jake looked on benignly, wagging his tail as he enjoyed the spectacle. A District Nurse in full regalia climbed out of the car and spread her arms wide.

"Jake!" she cried. "It's me!"

Jake went absolutely berserk with happiness. His tail wagged so fast that it helicoptered his rear end off the ground. His ears were flat on his head and a huge, joyful grin lit up his whole face. He slobbered all over her and she hugged him tight and told him how handsome he looked.

It was Caroline, his foster mum, the lady who had rescued Jake from the pound and put him up for adoption. Jake hadn't seen her for eighteen months but there was no question that he remembered her and he was absolutely thrilled to see her again.

Dogs are great rememberers. Keep that in mind the next time you meet a dog.

# x Marks the Spot

Recently all the sixteen year old school children in New Zealand have been taking their certification exams. A lot of controversy has arisen around the algebra paper. Apparently it was far too difficult for the students and many of them were reported to have left the exam room in tears. It would seem that the questions asked on the exam did not really reflect the curriculum as it had been taught during the year.

When the controversy first arose, the exam questions were published in the media so that we could all see for ourselves what the students had been struggling with. Out of curiosity I took a look at the questions and I even answered several of them. Despite the fact that I've not used algebra in any serious way for at least forty years, I found the exam to be quite straightforward and relatively simple (though some of the questions did seem oddly pointless). I must admit that I was rather surprised that the exam was aimed at sixteen year old students – I would have been dealing with these kinds of exam questions round about the age of twelve or thirteen. By the time I reached sixteen, I was well into the study of calculus and I had left this kind of elementary algebra far behind.

At this point, I could play the old curmudgeon card and grumble that the youth of today have it far too easy. The study of mathematics (and presumably of other subjects as well) has been dumbed way down. In my day we really had it hard. (Cue the Four Yorkshiremen sketch...)

Of course, every generation thinks that way. Every generation is quite contemptuous of the education that the next generation receives. I don't really believe that standards have declined to the extent that some of the

curmudgeons among us seem to think. All that has happened is that the subjects are just being taught at a different pace, and perhaps with a different perspective, than once they were. If today's students ever go on to study technical subjects as part of their tertiary education, I'm sure they'll be properly introduced to the mathematical tools they need at the appropriate time. I just learned those tools earlier than they will be learning them, which is really no big deal at all in the grand scheme of things.

There were two things about the exam controversy which worried and annoyed me.

Firstly it was reported that some of the maths teachers were also finding the exam questions difficult to answer. A photograph was published of a group of puzzled maths teachers staring at a whiteboard covered in scribbles which supposedly detailed their total failure to answer one particular question. This really is worrying. How can they possibly teach the subject effectively when they themselves are stumped by such elementary questions? What qualifications do they have to teach the subject? Are they, perhaps all English teachers who just teach maths on the side by keeping themselves the proverbial one chapter ahead of the students? Enquiring minds want to know...

The other worrying thing was the way the exam controversy was reported in the press and on radio and television. Without exception, the journalists who covered the story confessed themselves to be mathematical ignoramuses who found the whole thing quite bewildering. And what is more, one and all, they seemed to be quite proud of their ignorance.

In a particularly egregious example, one enterprising television journalist actually got a university mathematics lecturer to answer one of the questions in the studio. The lecturer launched in to a particularly lucid explanation of what he was doing and why he was doing it as he slowly worked his way through the problem. He reached a point

where he noted that he had now derived one equation with two unknown values in it. In order to solve the problem, he said, he needed a second equation. At this point we cut back to the studio for the journalist to witter on about nothing very much for a while, then we returned to the lecturer who, as if by magic, now had the second equation that he needed. From that point on, the solution was trivial and he quickly reached an answer. Then we returned to the bewildered journalist who said he was sure that somebody in the audience might have understood that, but he himself had no idea what it all meant.

Obviously the decision had been made to broadcast this formal solution in small sections with linking material from the journalist, so as not to overload the attention span of the audience too much. But somewhere in the back and forth between the two, a vital step in the lecturer's argument ended up on the cutting room floor, rendering the whole explanation pointless and turning it into gibberish. But since the journalist clearly believed that the entire subject was gibberish anyway, he really couldn't see (and didn't care) that omitting a whole section, presumably for timing reasons, made a complete nonsense out of the whole business. After all, he clearly believed that no ordinary person could possibly understand such esoterica anyway, so what difference did it make?

Numeracy and literacy are two sides of exactly the same coin and without some skills in both those subjects it simply isn't possible to cope with the demands of modern society. Nobody expects the man on the Clapham omnibus to be able to apply tensor calculus to an analysis of stress in building materials or to be able to describe the significance of Anna Livia Plurabelle to the structure of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. These are specialist subjects which are best left to the experts. But we can legitimately expect the man to be able to perform simple calculations and to understand what he reads in a newspaper.

Illiteracy is generally felt to be shameful and people who cannot read will go to enormous lengths to conceal their lack of skill in this area. But no such stigma attaches to innumeracy and the man on the Clapham omnibus often appears to take a perverse pride in his ignorance. After all, what possible use are mathematical skills in everyday life?

Well...

When I was a child, I was very fond of the *Jennings* books by Anthony Buckeridge. Jennings was a pupil at an English boarding school. The books describe the scrapes and adventures that he had. They were very funny and I'd love to read them again, but they seem to have vanished from the world.

I remember one episode where Jennings has received a cake from his mother and he wants to divide it evenly among his friends. Recalling his geometry lessons, he uses his protractor to measure the appropriate angles so that everybody will have a slice of exactly the same size. Then he uses his ruler to draw the lines that define each slice. Picking up his knife, he begins to cut along the lines he has drawn. But the cake is very crumbly and the slices are very narrow. The cake disintegrates and Jennings and his friends are left with just a pile of crumbs. Jennings is disgusted and he says something along the lines of, "Huh! So much for maths. It's all very well in the classroom, but as soon as you apply it to real life everything just falls apart!"

I found this to be a delightfully satirical episode – it's at least half a century since I last read a Jennings book, but that episode has stayed with me, fresh and clear, for all that time. It perfectly illustrates both the usefulness of mathematics and the dangers of applying it too literally.

I am also reminded of the joke about a mathematician who was employed to advise dairy farmers on how to improve the efficiency of their day to day operation. He spent many months following them around and taking copious notes. Then he retired to work on his thesis.



Eventually it was complete and he called a big meeting of all the dairy farmers so that he could explain his ideas to them. He strode onto the stage in the full glare of the spotlight, and marched up to the whiteboard. He drew a circle and said, "Consider a spherical cow..."

But, more seriously, yes - I do use simple mathematics in everyday life. In the supermarket I calculate unit prices so as to determine the best value for my money. In my car I calculate how long my journey will take, given the distance I have to travel and an estimate of my average speed. In the kitchen I adjust the quantities of the ingredients demanded by a recipe based on the number of people I am cooking for.

Numeracy matters and people who take pride in their lack of mathematical skills really need to take a long hard look at themselves. Maths phobia is a very real phenomenon, but it's nothing to boast about.

# Twenty-One

William's twenty-first birthday was a day much like any other. He came down to breakfast and his mother gave him a mug of tea and a bowl of porridge. "Happy birthday," she said, and pecked him on the cheek. "I wanted to bake you a cake, but I couldn't get the ingredients on the ration."

"That's OK mum," said William.

"We've got sausages for tea," said his mother. "That'll be a nice treat for your birthday, won't it?"

"Yes, mum," said William. The meat ration had been reduced the previous week, so he was gloomily sure that the sausages would be mostly breadcrumbs and gristle. "Put the wireless on, mum," he said. "It's almost time for the news."

The wireless was housed in a beautifully polished walnut cabinet. William's father had bought it in 1937 after a good day at the dog track and it was his mother's pride and joy. She turned it on. The faint smell of burning filled the room as the valves warmed up and incinerated the dust that had settled on them overnight.

*"Here is the news,"* said the silky voiced announcer, *"and this is Alvar Liddell reading it. The evacuation of our troops from the beaches of Dunkirk continues to run smoothly..."*

William sipped his tea and listened to the news all the way to the end. Then he put his empty mug down on the table and said, "I'm off to work now mum. See you tonight."

"Bye love," said his mother.

William caught the tram at the bottom of the street. It rattled its way through the city and dropped him off almost at the factory gate of the Butler Machine Tool Company Ltd. Butlers made hydraulic presses that were much in demand by the munitions factories where they were used to manufacture the brass casings for artillery shells. A new

batch of machines was coming up for despatch and William's job for the next few days was to prepare the speed and feed tables that the machine operators would require so as to be able to use the machines most effectively.

William walked up to the drawing office. Herbert Jenkins was already there, puffing on his pipe and emitting clouds of foul smelling smoke. "Eh up, lad," he said as William walked in.

"Morning," said William. He pinned a blueprint to his working table and picked up his slide rule to begin the tedious calculations that underpinned the speed and feed tables. Faintly, in the distance, he could hear the cheerful, rhythmic music of *Worker's Playtime* echoing from the tannoy on the factory floor. He wondered why they didn't have speakers or a wireless in the drawing office. A nice tune would help the workers here just as much as it helped the workers in the factory.

"You reckon they'll be coming tonight?" asked Herbert.

"I'm sure of it," said William. "The weather forecast is for clear skies and there's a full moon tonight. They call that a bomber's moon. The city will be well lit up by it, despite the blackout. They'll be here tonight in force, I'll guarantee it."

Herbert nodded agreement.

The day passed slowly. William always found the repetitive calculations involved in generating tables to be very tedious. But he stuck to it, and eventually the day was over and it was time to catch the tram back home. True to her word, his mother had sausages for his tea and they were just as nasty as he had feared they would be. But he chewed his way through them without a word of complaint. "Great sausages, mum," he told her, and she smiled.

After he finished eating he said, "It's getting dark mum. I've got to go and get changed and go on duty." His mother nodded and busied herself with the washing up. "Now think on," said William. "If the sirens go tonight, you make sure to get yourself into the Anderson shelter. I don't want you

staying by yourself in the house like you did last time. It's not safe."

"I hate those Anderson shelters," she said. "They're cold and dark and muddy. I bet they've got rats living in them."

"Wrap up warm in that thick wool dressing gown that Aunty Doris got you as a wedding present," said William. "And take a torch with you. Mrs Nugent from next door will probably be there. She always has a thermos of tea and some arrowroot biscuits. You'll be fine."

"Alright," she said reluctantly. "I will."

"Good for you, mum," said William and he went upstairs to change into his Air Raid Warden's uniform. Then, with his tin helmet on his head and the straps of the cardboard box that held his gas mask slung over his shoulder, he went out on patrol. "See you later mum," he called.

"Mind you don't get hit by a bomb," his mother said.

"Don't worry, mum," said William. "I've got my tin helmet to protect me from bombs dropping on my head. But if I notice one about to hit me I'll move to one side, just to make sure."

As usual, Mr Trotter at number 37 had been careless with his blackout curtains and light was shining out of his kitchen window. William banged hard on the door. "Put your light out," he yelled. Mr Trotter hurriedly adjusted his curtains and the light disappeared again.

William knew these streets intimately. He'd been born here, and he'd played in them all his life. On the darkest of nights he could find his way around just by the feel of the cobblestones through the soles of his shoes. But tonight the full moon gave enough light for him to see his way clearly. He wanted to yell at the man in the moon to put his light out, but he knew it wouldn't do any good.

He heard the sirens start to howl and, looking up, he could see the crucifix shapes of aeroplanes scudding across the sky, silhouetted blackly by the silver light of the moon. There seemed to be no end to them. He wondered how

much the pilots could see of the city. Probably quite a lot. He could hear explosions now as the bombs landed, and there was a red glow on the horizon where the fires were burning. The bombers were concentrating their efforts on the factories, and not for the first time, William found himself wondering if Butlers would still be there in the morning and if he would still have a job.

What a way to spend my twenty-first birthday, he thought to himself. Watching Nazi bombers doing their best to turn the city I've lived in all my life into a pile of rubble. "Happy birthday, William," he said to himself.

**In Memoriam  
Ian Priestnall - 1947-2016**

# What's in a Name?

My name is Alan Robson. It's quite a pleasing name. It rolls lightly off the tongue and the spelling is efficient – there are no irritatingly doubled up consonants and only two vowels are used, each of them twice. As a result, no unnecessary strain is placed upon the alphabet. It's hard to see how the name could be improved. Nevertheless, there have been times when it has caused me problems...

Wavy lines and eerie music.

When I was at university, I kept the wolf from the door by working during the long summer vacation. I had a rather interesting job as a technician in the pathology laboratory at the local hospital. I was the lowest of the low, of course. I performed menial, straightforward tasks – sterilizing the laboratory equipment, measuring haemoglobin levels and determining erythrocyte sedimentation rates. I also learned how to prepare blood slides for examination by people more highly qualified and more skilful than I was. It was a fun job, as well as a responsible one, and I enjoyed it greatly.

When I reported for work on my very first day, I was met by a man with a distinct twinkle in his eye. "Hello," he said. "You must be Alan Robson."

"That's me," I said, and we shook hands.

"Come with me," he said. "I'll take you to the laboratory and introduce you to everybody."

We walked through a maze of twisty little corridors, all alike. I wondered how I would ever learn to navigate the twisty little maze of corridors by myself. They were all exactly the same. Such a twisty maze of little corridors, each one just like all the others...

Eventually we reached the pathology laboratory and I was introduced to the other lab technicians. They all gave

me a funny look when they learned my name and the twinkle in my guide's eyes brightened. Occasionally he vibrated gently, as if he was suppressing a giggle. Then came the moment he'd clearly been waiting for. "Now come and meet the chief pathologist," he said. He knocked on an office door.

"Come in!" yelled a voice.

We went in and I met the chief pathologist for the very first time. "Alan Robson," said my guide, "let me introduce Alan Robson."

"Hello," said Alan Robson. He held out his hand and I shook it. "Pleased to meet you, Alan" he said, grinning hugely.

As you might expect, having two people called Alan Robson in the laboratory, one of them the highest of the high and one of them the lowest of the low, led inevitably to a Shakespearian comedy of errors of mistaken identities. Whenever the phone rang I would always answer it, if I happened to be the person nearest to it,. "Path lab. Alan Robson speaking."

"Ah, Alan. Just the man I need." And then the voice at the other end of the phone would start discussing intimate details about some patient or other before I could interrupt and say, "But I'm not *that* Alan Robson..."

I learned a lot of things that I probably wasn't supposed to know about a lot of people I'd never met. These days we'd consider that to be a terrible breach of privacy. But things were very different then.

Wavy music and eerie lines.

I moved to the other side of the world and settled myself in a randomly chosen suburb of Wellington, New Zealand. One day I received a bill from an electrician who wanted me to pay him a substantially large number of dollars for repairing an electrical gizmo that I was absolutely sure I didn't own any of.

I rang the electrician and explained my bewilderment about the bill.

"Ah," said the voice at the other end of the phone. "Well, we had a fifty-fifty chance. Too bad we made the wrong choice. Don't worry about it. Just throw the bill away and forget about it."

"What do you mean you had a fifty-fifty chance?" I asked.

"We lost the worksheet with the address details on it," explained the voice. "But we remembered the name and so we looked it up in the phone book. However it turns out that there are two people called Alan Robson in the phone book and they both live very close to each other. So we tossed a coin and sent the bill to the first address in the book. That turned out to be your address and clearly it was the wrong one. Don't worry about it - now that we know the proper address, we'll send the bill out to that and remove the one we sent to you from the system."

"Thank you," I said, somewhat bemused. "Good bye."

Intrigued by the information I had just learned, I looked myself up in the phone book. Sure enough, there I was:

Alan  
Robson

[My  
Address]

[My Phone  
Number]

Alan  
Robson

[His  
Address, a  
couple of  
streets  
away from  
me]

[His Phone  
Number]

Over the next few years I occasionally received substantial bills from sundry tradespeople all of which should clearly have been sent to him. I presume that he received a fair number of my bills as well. About once every



couple of months I'd get a phone call for him and several times, in a strange parallel to the many conversations I'd once had with doctors who thought they were talking to the chief pathologist, I ended up learning many intimate details of the life of this other Alan Robson. I presume that he also learned more than he ever wanted to know about my private life as well, but I can't really confirm that because in all the years that I didn't pay his bills, I never actually met him or spoke to him. And, oddly enough, he never met or spoke to me either.

But my doppelgangers hadn't finished with me yet...

Eerie music and Wavy Gravy. Er... Lines...

One day an email slithered into my inbox. Someone I'd never heard of asked me to review a novel they'd just finished writing, and could I perhaps discuss it on my radio programme? It's not unheard of for me to receive review requests, but the radio programme request was a new one on me.

I emailed back. Radio programme?

Yes, radio programme, wrote the emailer and they went on to explain that I was a well known British disc jockey whose nationally broadcast programme had all kinds of special features in it, such as book reviews. Indeed, claimed my correspondent, I was also an author in my own right.

All this was news to me. So I did an ego search and typed my own name into my favourite search engine. Sure enough, the giggles informed me that I really was a Disc Jockey whose phenomenally popular radio show was transmitted throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain. The fact that I lived in New Zealand was apparently no handicap whatsoever to me putting my show together for broadcasting on the other side of the world...

Clearly I'd bumped in to yet another doppelganger. It seems that this other Alan Robson has written several books and many of his fans have compiled bibliographies. Most of these bibliographies contain the titles of books that I've

written, so clearly this other Alan Robson shares many of my interests. Everyone knows that bibliographers never make mistakes.

Wavy lines and eerie music.

I moved to the other end of the country (well actually I got half way up and then I took a right turn before finally settling down). I settled in to my new house and did all the bureaucratic things necessary to keep the council satisfied. I began to contemplate a simple life of dog walking and somnolence. However I became mildly perturbed when a letter addressed to Alan Robson from the local council turned up in my mailbox. The letter congratulated me on becoming the new owner of a house at 36 Redacted Road, and went on to suggest that I might like to set up a direct debit authority with my bank so as to make it easy for the council to collect the rates on the property.

"Robin," I said.

"Yes?"

"Do you recall us ever buying a house at 36 Redacted Road?" I asked her.

"No," said Robin. "I'm sure I'd have remembered us buying another house. It's not the kind of purchase that you easily overlook."

"That's what I thought," I said. "I think I'd better ring the council."

To think is to do. Do be do be doo...

"Hello," said a very nice man in the council office. "My name is Michael. How can I help you."

I explained about the rates demand for the house I didn't own at 36 Redacted Road.

"Hmm," said Michael. "Have you ever owned that house?"

"No, never," I said.

There was a clattering of computer keys. "Ah," said Michael. "There it is. Yes - it's definitely owned by Alan Robson. Are you telling me that you aren't Alan Robson?"

"I'm definitely Alan Robson," I said. "But I'm not the Alan Robson who owns 36 Redacted Road. That must be another Alan Robson."

"I suppose it is just possible that there are two people called Alan Robson that we've got confused in our database," said Michael dubiously, "but I've never heard of it happening before."

"Well, it's definitely happened now," I said.

"According to our records," said Michael, "you own two houses. One at 10 Somewhere Else and also a house at 36 Redacted Road, and you are therefore liable for the rates on both properties."

"I'm quite happy to pay the rates for 10 Somewhere Else because that's where I live," I said. "But somebody else is responsible for 36 Redacted Road. That's not me."

"I'll tell you what," said Michael. "Because this is all about the rates, I'll transfer you to the rates department."

No sooner said than done. The phone in the rates department rang and rang and rang. Nobody answered it. Eventually it went to voice mail and I left a message explaining roughly what had happened and asking that somebody ring me back so that we could sort things out. I said my phone number slowly, distinctly and carefully so there could be no mistake.

Naturally, nobody ever rang me back. Nobody ever does...

In desperation, I sent an email to the squiggle who had signed the original council letter and whose email address was printed in such a minuscule font that I needed a magnifying glass to read it (trust me, I may be old, but my eyes aren't that bad - I've never seen such a tiny font). Rather to my surprise, I got a very helpful and apologetic reply a couple of hours later. There were indeed two people called Alan Robson in the council database and his transactions had been inadvertantly attached to my record. So sorry. What an odd coincidence. It's never happened

before. It will never happen again until it does. It's all fixed now. Blah, blah, blah.

I look forward to the next rates demand for 36 Redacted Road...

Eerie music and wavy lines.

My name is Alan Robson. And so, it would appear, is everybody elses.

# The Man Who Didn't Do

Ever since we moved to our new house, Robin and I have wanted to replace the front door. After twenty years of non-stop sunbathing in the fierce Hawke's Bay sunshine, the original door was looking very old and wrinkled, rather like W. H. Auden crossed with a walnut. It really should have used more sun block in its misspent youth. Slip, slop, slap...

The door was cracked, splintered and peeling and there was a dull grey patch of rot in the bottom left hand corner. Fitting a door is a special skill. People serve apprenticeships to learn how to do it properly. I know my limitations, and so I went hunting for someone whose profession it was to sell me a new door and hang it for me. The interweb giggles quickly found me a company who, in the interests of nomenclatural verisimilitude, I will call DoorsAren'tUs, because that is not its name. The company was run by a gentleman called Harry, which is not his name either.

Ring, ring.

"Hello, DoorsAren'tUs. Harry speaking."

"Hi, Harry," I said. "I need a new front door."

"Front door?" Harry sounded puzzled. "Oh, no squire. Front doors are far too tricky. I don't do front doors. Back doors maybe..."

"Well can you come and look at it anyway and maybe give me some advice about what I should do next?" I asked.

"I don't do advice," said Harry. "But I suppose I could come and take a quick look."

We arranged a time, and Harry arrived exactly an hour early on the dot. "Sorry," he said when I pointed this out to him. "I don't do time."

"Well, never mind. You're here now," I said, "and you are standing right at my front door. What do you think of it?"

Harry poked at the door with a firm finger. "Ow!" he said as a splinter sank deep into his flesh. He put the finger in his mouth and sucked vigorously. "I think you need a new door," he mumbled around his finger. "This one's falling apart."

"That's what I think as well," I said. "Can you do anything for me?"

Harry looked at the door frame. "That frame's aluminium," he said. "Tricky stuff, that. I don't do aluminium joinery."

"I don't need a new door frame," I said. "I just need a new door to hang in the existing frame. And the door itself is wood. Can you do a wooden door?"

"Yes," he said grudgingly. "I might be able to manage that. Let's take some measurements."

He whipped out a tape measure and measured the door carefully. Then he shook his head sadly. "That's a very old door," he said. "They don't make them like that any more. Modern doors are all about 5mm thicker than this one. That means that it won't hang very well in the frame. It will stick out and obstruct the knuckle of the hinges so the leaves won't have enough room to rotate around the pin. We'll probably have to shift the hinges out a bit to accommodate the extra width and get enough freedom of movement. But that will leave holes in the aluminium where the screws used to be. I can't fill holes in the aluminium. Remember, I don't do aluminium."

He handed us a catalogue of doors. "See anything you fancy in there?" he asked.

Robin and I pored over the catalogue and came to a decision. "That one," I said, pointing it out. Harry made a note. "OK," he said. "I can order that for you and get someone to hang it. It will probably take about two weeks to get the door delivered from the factory. But you will be responsible for staining and varnishing it once it arrives. I don't do staining and varnishing."

"Do you know anyone who does do staining and varnishing?" I asked.

"Freeman's Painters and Decorators are quite good," mused Harry. "I've used them before..."

"So can you arrange for them to do it?" I asked, though I had a feeling that I knew what the answer would be.

Harry didn't disappoint me. "You'll have to do that yourself," he said. "I don't do arrangements."

I rang Freeman's Painters and Decorators and explained what I needed. "No problem," said the man. "We do that kind of thing all the time. It's a major part of our business. Just get the door dropped off and we'll take care of it." I found his attitude very refreshing.

I told Harry what they'd said. He was dubious. "How will it be paid for?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You'll be delivering it to them. Perhaps they'll invoice you and you can pass the cost on to me. Is that what you normally do?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "I've never done it before."

"I'm sure it will all work itself out," I said.

The next day Harry rang me back. "I've been thinking..." he said.

"Oh yes?" I said.

"We probably ought to hang the door before it gets stained and varnished. I don't really want to hang it afterwards in case anything happens to damage the surface while we're working on it. I'm worried you might blame me for that and start telling people that I didn't do a very good job."

"So what do you suggest that we do?" I asked.

"I'll get someone to hang the door, fit the hinges and drill holes for the bolts," he said. Then he'll take it down again, get it stained and put it back up."

"OK," I said. "Is that the usual procedure?"

"I don't really know," said Harry. "I told you, I don't normally do this sort of thing."

There was a long silence that lasted for about two weeks and then Harry rang me again.

"I've got your door," he said. "Can I send my Carpenter round at 8.30 on Thursday morning to hang it?"

"OK," I said.

At 8.30 on Wednesday morning, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there was a Carpenter. I could tell he was a Carpenter because he had a Walrus in the passenger seat of his van. "Hello," he said, "Harry's sent me to hang your door for you."

"Oh," I said, somewhat taken aback. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll go away again if you like."

"Never mind," I said. "You're here now. Let's get it done. Does this sort of thing happen often?"

"All the time," said the Carpenter. "Harry doesn't do appointments."

"What about the Walrus?" I asked.

"He's learning the trade," said the Carpenter. "I let him do the heavy lifting."

Quick as a flash, the Carpenter had the old door off its hinges. Then he unpacked the new door and began wielding a tape measure around the frame. "That's interesting," he said. "The new door is about 5mm wider than the old one. That's going to cause problems with the hinges."

"Harry mentioned that," I said. "He said something about moving the hinges to allow for it."

"Harry doesn't do hinges," said the Carpenter. "He really doesn't understand them at all. If we move the hinges there will be some dirty great holes left in the frame where the screws used to be. A much better plan is to leave the hinges in place and countersink the door around the knuckles. It means chopping a bit of wood off the door, but you'll never notice that once the door is hung."

"OK," I said. "That sounds a much better plan."



The Carpenter produced chisels and a small saw. The Walrus held the door steady for him and within seconds he had made smooth countersinkings for each of the hinges on it. A few minutes later he had the door swinging proudly and freely in the frame. It was a perfect fit.

"Well done," I said. "That looks great."

"Thank you," he said. The Walrus smiled. "Now all I have to do is take the lock and the deadbolt off the old door and fit them on the new one," said the Carpenter. "But there's a small problem with that..."

"What?"

"There are holes in the aluminium frame that the bolts feed into. If I use the existing holes, the locks won't be centred on the door panel. But if I centre them on the door panel, I'll have to make new holes in the frame."

"I'd really prefer you to use the original holes in the frame," I said.

"It might look a little odd, not having the locks centred on the panel," warned the Carpenter.

"I'll tell you what," I said, "if anyone ever refuses to visit us because we don't have our locks centred on the door panel, I'll ring you up and complain."

"Fair enough," said the Carpenter. "It's your door."

The Walrus used its tusks to drill large holes for the lock and the deadbolt. Then the Carpenter fitted them in place. The bolts slid smoothly backwards and forwards into the frame. "All done," said the Carpenter. "What's happening about staining it?"

"Harry's going to get Freeman's to do that," I said. "Didn't he tell you? He said that once you'd got the door hung, you'd put our old door back and deliver this one to Freeman's for staining and varnishing. Then you'd come back and re-hang it when they've finished with it."

"He never said anything to me about that," said the Carpenter. "Harry doesn't do explanations." The Walrus

shook its head dolefully. "So do I take it straight to Freeman's or what?" asked the Carpenter.

"No idea," I said. "Let's ask Harry."

The Carpenter rang Harry and they had an increasingly acrimonious discussion full of words like "why didn't you tell me about it" and "what do you mean you don't do that". Eventually the Carpenter rang off and came back to me. Wisps of steam drifted out of his ears.

"OK," he said. "Here's the plan. I'll take the new door back to the shop for Harry to look after. He'll take it to Freeman's. Hopefully he'll be in touch with you soon." He re-hung our old door and packed the new door carefully into his van. He drove off into the middle distance.

I decided to take Jake the Dog for a walk. He'd had a very frustrating day. He desperately wanted to make friends with the Walrus, and he really needed to help the Carpenter hang the door. He hadn't been allowed to do either of these things and now he badly needed a distraction. As we walked, I examined all the front doors that we passed. At least half of them had locks that weren't centred on the door panels. I began to feel a lot better about the aesthetics of lock placement that I'd insisted on. Clearly I wasn't alone in this. Jake said he felt the same way, which reinforced my decision.

Later that afternoon, Harry rang me. "I've delivered your door to Freeman's," he said, "and I've given them all your details. They'll invoice you separately for the job. Once it's ready I'll arrange for it to be picked up and delivered to you. You'll need to ring them to discuss what colour you want it to be. I can't do that. I don't do colours."

I rang Freeman's and spoke to the same obliging chap I'd spoken to before. "I'd like a rimu coloured stain," I said. "And it may need several coats of varnish to protect it from the sun."

"Oh," said the man. He sounded surprised. "I didn't realise it was going to be an outside door."

"Yes," I explained. "It's a replacement front door because the sun has ruined the old one."

"Ah, I see," he said. "Harry didn't tell me that. I don't think he does sunshine. No problem. We'll take care of it for you."

"Thank you," I said.

There was another fortnight of silence. I rang Harry.

"Any news on the door?" I asked. "Surely Freeman's have finished staining it now."

"No idea," said Harry. "Nobody's said anything to me. Why don't you ring them and chase them up? I don't do chasing up."

So I rang Freeman's and spoke to the obliging chap again.

"Ah," he said. "I'm glad you rang. The door's just about done. It will be ready to pick up tomorrow. However there's a little administrative problem. We tried to send you an invoice, but the email address that Harry gave us for you doesn't work. I don't think Harry does email. Can you tell me where I need to send the invoice?"

I confirmed my email address with him. "Why didn't you ring me about the problem with the email?" I asked.

"The phone number that Harry gave us for you just gave a number unobtainable sound," he said. "Harry doesn't do phones either."

So I gave him my phone number as well. "Just in case you need it," I explained.

I rang Harry. "The door will be ready for you to pick up on Friday," I said. "So I expect you'll probably want to hang it some time next week?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. "How about Tuesday at 8.00am?" he asked.

"OK," I said. "But what happened to Monday?"

"I don't do Mondays," said Harry.

The Walrus and the Carpenter turned up at 8.00am the following Tuesday with the shiny new rimu coloured door

packed carefully in the back of their van. In no time at all they removed the old door, hung the new door on the hinges and then installed the lock and deadbolt. "There you are," said the Carpenter. "It's all finished. What do you think of it?"

"It's magnificent," I said. "Well done."

"Thank you," said the Carpenter. He checked his watch and then looked expectantly up and down the road. He seemed mildly surprised that there was no traffic.

"Are you waiting for something?" I asked.

"I was just wondering if Harry was going to turn up to check on me," he said vaguely. "Harry doesn't do delegation."

"Remember to keep your new door clean and polished," said the Walrus as he climbed into the van. "I imagine that seven maids with seven mops would easily be able to handle the job for you."

"I doubt it," said the Carpenter sadly, and he shed a bitter tear before packing up his tools and driving off to his next job.

While I'd been talking to them, my phone had gone *ping* to indicate that an email had arrived. As they drove away, I glanced at the phone to check what the email was. That was when I finally discovered something that Harry did. He was very efficient at sending out an invoice the instant the job was complete.

Perhaps he should rename his company InvoicesRUs...

# Tarzan of the Apps

No matter what it is that you want to do, the switched on twenty-first century person will inform you loftily that "There's an app for that". Generally speaking, they are quite right - the craziest of ideas are bound to be embodied in an app somewhere, and to take advantage of this lunacy, all you have to do is install the app on your phone. Perhaps the most ridiculous app I have ever encountered is one that you can access when you go to the cinema. You tell the app what movie you are watching, and your phone will vibrate when you can safely go for a pee without missing anything significant in the plot...

In my experience, most apps are heavily over-engineered. Indeed, sometimes the bells, the whistles and the chromium-plated dancing girls are so overwhelming that it almost appears as if the designer of the app has completely lost sight of the original idea that the app was implemented to address in the first place!

I went looking for an app that would record how many steps I took on my daily walks with Jake the Dog. I also wanted the app to inform me about the number of kilometres that Jake and I had trudged through together - the action of converting steps to kilometres is a task far beyond my feeble mental arithmetic skills. Perhaps I should write an app to do it for me...

The app I eventually downloaded certainly provides me with all the basic information that I need, but it also has a huge number of other functions, none of which I have any interest whatsoever in using. If I let it, the app will send a text message to all my friends at the end of the day so that I can boast about how far I've walked. It actively encourages me to join groups of like-minded people and compete

against them. It really, really wants me to upload all my data to a cloud server so that total strangers can compare their own efforts to mine, and it wants to draw complicated graphs that will attempt to define my progress in several arbitrary and statistically dubious ways.

The app requires me to set a goal for the day, and every 5000 steps or so it displays a congratulatory progress message on the phone's screen along with a little reminder of how far I still have to go before I reach my goal. When I do actually reach my goal the screen explodes in a hysterical paroxysm of delight! Fireworks erupt from the charging socket and triumphal music pours out of the speakers at full eardrum-exploding volume. A jubilant and very detailed email is sent directly to the Queen, along with a Blind Carbon Copy to the Prime Minister, so that they can both stop worrying about me and start getting on with their day.

Once I get home from my walk, all I want to do is rest my tired feet. If I set the phone on vibrate, the app will give me a very satisfying and restful foot massage while at the same time taking surreptitious photographs of my bunions which it transmits to MI5 when I'm not looking. I might be exaggerating a little here (only a tiny bit!), but I really can't be sure about that because the app has endless menus full of options that I don't understand, together with a series of utterly illiterate help screens all of which inform me that selecting option A will let me do A, without ever defining exactly what A might actually be or why on Earth I might want to do it in the first place...

But as a side effect of all this nonsense, at least I get to confirm that I really do achieve a minimum of 10,000 steps a day. Actually, most days, it's usually closer to 15,000 steps. And since, as any fule kno, 1 step equals 0.0006577878837095988305993178496020789345 kilometres (or thereabouts) I am managing to walk somewhere between six and half and nine and three-quarter

kilometres a day. To a first approximation. So look upon my works, ye couch potatoes, and despair!

A very popular kind of app is one that will play your music for you. Effectively it turns your phone into a fruity mp3 pod person (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* anyone?). I have very simple requirements for such a music player. All my music is arranged in a hierarchy, alphabetically by artist. Within each artist is an alphabetical list of albums and within each album I have a numeric list of tracks. All I want to do is browse around this structure, choose a particular album by a particular artist and then have the app play all the tracks on the album one by one. What could be simpler?

But that's not how music playing apps work.

One and all, they refuse to play any music for me until they have "scanned" my music files. This means that they completely ignore the nice structure I have already set up for them. Instead, they read through each music file in turn and then build *exactly* the same structure as mine in an internal database of their own. In order to play my music, I have to select it from the internal database rather than from my own files.

The apps obtain the information for their internal database from metadata stored in the actual music files themselves. Very few people ever have this metadata set up properly - personally, I am quite conscientious about trying to get it correct, but it's a rather hard job to do. Generally speaking, you need special software in order to do it properly and the software is often quite complex and difficult to use. Consequently I am painfully aware that much of my metadata is incorrect. As a result, entire albums vanish from my view once they are sucked into the app's database. I can see them quite clearly in my local hierarchy, but because the metadata is of dubious quality, the music player app insists they don't exist and therefore they cannot be played.

Then we have the knotty problem of playlists. Many music player apps refuse to let you simply play an album. They will only play items on a playlist. I have absolutely no interest whatsoever in constructing playlists – the thought of browsing slowly through all my umpteen thousand music files and adding them to arbitrary playlists fills me with a feeling of existential dread. All I ever want to do is play a selected album. But because of the nature of the app I must first go through the utterly unnecessary step of adding the album to a playlist before I can finally relax and enjoy the music.

Music apps too are not immune from the kitchen sink syndrome of feeping creaturism. There's all the usual nonsense of automatically telling my friends what music I'm currently listening to (as if they cared – I suspect that if I implemented this feature, everyone I know would quickly blacklist me because of all the spam I was sending them).

In addition I have the option of storing all my music in the cloud so that I can listen to it anywhere until the music goes away when the cloud provider has an oopsy and/or goes spectacularly bankrupt – at the moment my music is stored on a disk that is plugged in to my home network so I can only listen to it when I'm actually at home. This suits me fine because actually that's the only place where I listen to music anyway.

Then there are all the hidden features that cannot be accessed from the app menus and which are not discussed at all in the primitive and badly spelled documentation. I'm fairly certain, for example, that my current music app is routinely reporting me to the Society for the Persecution of Morris Dancing because every so often my Morris Dancing music starts to play backwards instead of forwards. Mind you, that's not really much of a problem because only the trained ear of an expert can actually tell the difference. It only becomes a significant problem when you dance along with the music and attempt to perform a Reverse Double



Arkwright with Counter Clockwise Lunge... You can easily break all three of your legs when you try doing that to a backwards tune!

Apps apply (so to speak) in a lot of unusual situations. Not so very long ago, the village where I live was struck by a campylobacter infection in the water supply and several thousand people became rather ill as a result. Many of the people who live here are retirees, some of them quite feeble, and so the illness was potentially very serious. At a public meeting held with the council to discuss how the problem could have been better handled, and how the council could have better communicated important information to the people of the village, the Mayor extolled the virtue of an app. Most of his elderly audience stared at him with blank incomprehension. An app?

I installed the app on my phone. It proved to be very keen to inform me about any disasters that it thought were heading my way, and it told me what I needed to do to avoid them. It spent several days telling me of the potential for gale force winds which it claimed were due to arrive any minute now. These generally manifested themselves as light breezes that scarcely ruffled the fur on Jake's tail when we went for our walks. The app seemed to be utterly obsessed with wind to the point of monomania. It never sent me notifications about any other potential disasters. It seemed to be quite uninterested in storms and tempests, and it remained completely silent on the day when every drop of water on the planet fell out the sky over my village. All the gardens turned into primeval swamps and raging torrents of water surged through the storm drains. Roads became rivers, rivers became lakes and lakes became seas. The app couldn't have cared less. There wasn't any wind that day...

To while away the time between wind warnings, the app regaled me with tedious lectures that told me how to prepare myself to cope with a natural disaster. All this information about preparedness has been publicly available

for half a century or more and the app contained no new insights. Bored, I deleted it.

The next day a series of gale force winds took me completely by surprise. They were so strong that they toppled some trees in the park where Jake and I go walking. As a great twentieth century philosopher once said: So it goes...

In place of the app recommended by the Mayor, I installed an app from GeoNet, an organisation charged with monitoring earthquakes. This app is really very useful indeed. When I wake up in the middle of the night to find that the bed is bouncing up and down, the walls of the house are flexing in and out, crockery is falling out of cupboards and smashing on the floor, and a terrified dog is burrowing under the blankets, the app sends me a notification which tells me that an earthquake is taking place - just in case I hadn't realised. It is strangely comforting to have your suspicions confirmed in this way.

Uniquely among apps, the GeoNet app seems quite uncluttered. There is no mechanism for sharing my favourite earthquakes with my friends and I don't have the ability to rate the strength of my earthquakes against the feebleness of theirs. The app never suggests that I register my earthquakes in the cloud and, as far as I can tell, it doesn't contact the earthquake police and accuse me of fracking whenever I dig a hole in my garden. I fully expect that these oversights will be addressed in the next release of the app.

Another major app that occupies far too much of my time is one that lets me read electronic books. Whenever I have a spare few minutes, such as when I'm standing in a queue or sitting on the bus, I make sure to whip out my gadget and read a few words. I greatly enjoy the ability to carry an entire library around in my pocket and I always make the most of it.

However, just like all the other apps on my phone, the electronic book reading apps do have their annoyances.

Whenever I read a sexy bit my phone glows pink and plays "The Stripper" at low volume so that passers by can point at me and snigger knowingly. Particularly salacious scenes are automatically forwarded to the nunnery of my choice.

At random intervals, generally when the digits that display the time form a prime number, the app pops up a screen that threatens to tell me how the story ends unless I immediately rate the app highly in the play store. I always succumb to this threat. I really don't like spoilers.

Electronic books appeal greatly to my innate baby-boomer desire for instant gratification. We are the generation that went on protest marches and chanted:

"What do we want?"

"Stuff!"

"When do we want it?"

"NOW!"

And I've never quite outgrown that desire. So, of course, I simply cannot resist the urge to click on a link and, just like that, bingo! There's another new book in my library. As a result of my complete inability to resist buying just one more book, I have so many volumes sitting in my virtual to-be-read pile that I no longer have enough time left in my life to read them all. Clearly what I urgently need now is something that will read all those books for me so that I don't have to do it myself. I wonder if there's an app for that?

# Jane of the Apps

The ever increasing in popularity of smart phones has given rise to the new social phenomenon of phone poking. Everywhere you look, places that once used to hum and buzz with conversation and ring out with laughter are now full of silent, grim-faced people who are all very busy poking their phones.

Once I was on the ferry, travelling between the North and South Islands of New Zealand. The lounge was full of eerily silent teenagers. The only sounds I could hear were the faint throb of distant diesel engines, the slap of the waves against the side of the ship and the occasional buzz and click from the phones the teenagers were clutching. Much phone-poking was taking place. There were no verbal conversations happening at all.

And then a catastrophe happened! The ferry cruised out of the cell phone reception area and all the phones went dead. The teenagers sat there, shocked and bewildered.

"OMG - I hve no sgnl," one of them finally said out loud to her friend. "Do u?"

"No," said her friend. "LOL."

"wht cn wee doo?"

"xqqqs me," said her friend, "I hve 2 p."

Smart phones have been around for quite some time and the phone-poking phenomenon has now spread far and wide beyond its original teenage protagonists. One day I was sitting in a café with a friend who was poking her phone and ignoring me. "How's your day been?" I asked.

She poked furiously and said nothing.

"Your coffee is getting cold," I pointed out.

Her rate of poking increased and she frowned with concentration. Not a word passed her lips.

"Read any good books lately? What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? Would you like to see my etchings? Or maybe my scratchings?"

My phone buzzed, indicating that I had a text message. I opened up the relevant app and read the message. It said, "Stop talking to me. I am poking my phone and your being very distracting."

"That should be Y-O-U Apostrophe R-E," I pointed out to her. "A contraction of you are. Y-O-U-R is the possessive. As in your phone. Which I notice you are still poking..."

My phone buzzed again. Another text message. "Shut UP!!", she explained.

"Where's the smiley face?" I asked. "I'd even settle for a frowny one..."

So what are all these phone-pokers doing with their fingers? Many of them are playing games involving a world-wide network of friends with whom they collaborate to go on quests, raise peculiar crops on their virtual farms and crush candy. A few, who have not yet realised that the fashion has passed them by, are wandering the streets in a daze hunting for pokewhatsits and getting run over by buses.

I myself have been known to play games on my phone. But the games I play are solitary ones that do not require any interaction with other people. I play solitaire and scrabble. My mother-in-law, a lady of impeccable taste, plays freecell. I am lost in admiration - which is better than being lost in freecell, an all too frequent phenomenon whenever I play it...

My games, and also the games played by my mother in law, certainly do require a lot of poking. However their big advantage is that they can be interrupted at any time and returned to at our later leisure. Connectivity to the cellular network is not a requirement - indeed, such connectivity is often a positive disadvantage because when you are connected, the screen fills up with adverts and you have to squint around them in order to play the game properly.

But the games that most other people play seem to have quite different requirements from mine. Connectivity appears to be mandatory.

Puzzled by the poking being indulged in by my friend, I sent her a text message. These days, it seems, she only communicates with the world via text messaging. Her vocal chords have atrophied because they are so underused. All she can manage is the occasional grunt. Consequently she never actually uses her phone as a phone.

"Are you playing a game?" I asked

"Yes," she texted tersely.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember that old children's party game *Pin the Tail on the Donkey*?" she texted.

"Yes."

"Well I'm playing a variation on that. It's a game that's taking the world by storm. It's called *Pin the Dick on Donald!*"

Intrigued, I texted her again. "How does it work?"

"When you pin the dick in the most inappropriate place, your phone sings *Nelly the Elephant* at full volume. Listen..." She poked her phone and, accompanied by bells and whistles, the chorus of *Nelly the Elephant* blared out. "...off she went with a Trumpety Trump. Trump. Trump. Trump."

"I see," I texted. "Does the game do anything else?"

"Yes," she texted back. "It has an add on module that lets you design your own dicks. That's a lot of fun. I've been working hard at it and I've got some really elaborately ugly ones. I'm going to collect all my best dick pics together and post them on the TwitFace page at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."

"Aren't you worried about being stalked by a drone fully equipped with a Hellfire Missile that has your name on it?" I asked.

"Don't be silly," she texted. "I've set my name up as Anonymous Coward. They'll never find me hiding behind

that pseudonym." She appended sneery smiley face to the message.

"Orange is the new black," I texted to her and she LOL'ed.

# Hippo Birdy Two Ewe

No matter how hard I try, I've been completely unable to shake the habit of birthdays and, rather to my regret, I had another one of them not that very long ago. It seems that once the habit takes hold, the addiction is quite impossible to overcome.

This birthday was somewhat ameliorated by spending it with a friend who, by a strange coincidence, was also having a birthday. We were each born, seven years apart, on the same day of the same month, though on opposite sides of the world. Actually, time zones being what they are, I suspect I was a day short of celebrating my birthday when he arrived squalling into the world. But what's an inconvenient time zone between friends? Both the calendar and our birth certificates insist that we share a birthday, and since that is good enough for government bureaucracies, it is good enough for us as well.

This year our mutual birthday fell on a convenient Saturday. So people came from all over the country (well, Wellington, actually) to camp out in my house and have a party. I am being quite literal here. We had two people sleeping in the spare bedroom and two people and a dog sleeping in a tent on the front lawn. Originally the tent was to have been pitched on the back lawn. But that is Jake the Dog's territory and tents are his favourite food. Consequently it seemed wisest to remove temptation from him. Rosie, the dog who came with the tent, is a wonderful guard dog who would never dream of eating a tent herself — she finds them far too chewy. She was actually quite keen to protect it from harm and from Jake, whichever seemed more timely and appropriate. But since it would take at least ten Rosies to make one Jake sized dog, discretion seemed to



be by far the wiser course. Rosie wasn't convinced of this (she has no idea that Jake is a big dog and that she is a small dog — dogs are notoriously poor at spatial relationships), but she went along with it for the sake of peace and quiet.

An unexpected extra guest who turned up at the very last minute was Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies. There was nowhere for him to sleep of course, but that didn't matter because he'd never actually managed to work out how to do sleeping. He considered it to be a great waste of time. "Think of all the books you could be reading instead," he said. Most days I agreed with him.

Beelzebub gave me an enthusiastic greeting. "Happy Birthday," he roared "I'm glad I'm not having one. They really aren't very good for you, you know! I gave them up centuries ago." He gave me a hug. Then he gave me my present — 28 of his finest flies which at once moved into the kitchen and made themselves at home. When they had properly settled down, they buzzed out the rhythm of the traditional birthday song for me:

Why was he born so beautiful?  
Why was he born at all?  
He's no bloody use to anyone,  
He's no bloody good at all...

Beelzebub had rehearsed them well. They hit every note right in the middle. I was very impressed.

Rosie attempted to sneak up on the flies and catch them in mid-air and Jake tried to round them up and corral them in a corner. Neither had any great success in their endeavours and both soon gave up in disgust and sulked.

On the evening of our birthday we all celebrated with a specially prepared meal. The humans among us ate it in a restaurant. Those who were less than human, and those who were suprahuman, stayed at home to indulge

themselves. Jake settled himself down on the back lawn with a bone and Rosie went out to the tent without a bone. But she wasn't too unhappy about that. Her mum and dad had promised her that they'd come back from the restaurant with a doggie bag that Jake wouldn't be allowed to touch. So she knew that she wasn't going to miss out. The flies buzzed disconsolately for a while after we drove off into the night before gorging themselves on the feast that we'd left lurking deep within the bowels of the waste disposal unit. Beelzebub watched them benignly. What good little boys they were... Then he settled down to devour his favourite William Golding novel for the umpteenth time.

At the restaurant we all ate and drank inordinately because that is what you do when someone has a birthday. When we were done, the other birthday boy and I staggered out to the car, carrying an enormous box between us. In it was a huge chocolate cake decorated with our names and happy birthday wishes. Chocolate is poisonous to dogs, but not, unfortunately, to flies. "Down, boys!" ordered Beelzebub, when we got the cake home, but his orders had no effect. "Sorry about that," he apologised. "I painted the ears on each individual fly this morning before we left home, so that they'd all look properly dressed for the party. But the ears don't actually function..."

We shared the cake around, and the flies all agreed that it was the best cake they'd ever eaten. Since they were less than a day old, I suspected it was the *only* cake they'd ever eaten, but out of politeness, I refrained from comment.

The next day, Rosie and all 28 of the flies discovered Jake's bone on the back lawn. None of them could resist investigating it more closely. Jake, of course, took exception to this and, in no uncertain terms, he told each and every one of them to leave it alone. "See these fangs?" he said, lifting his lips sideways so that the sunlight glistened on his pointy bits. "They work really, really well."

But Rosie stood her ground and so did the flies. Clearly this bone was the archetypal bone of contention. We all took photographs.

"You know," mused Beelzebub, "you really are very lucky living here with all this glorious sunshine turning your lawn brown, and drying up all of your reservoirs day after day after day. I'm quite jealous. There hasn't been any sunshine to speak of at all in Wellington this summer."

"That's because the sun has been so busy doing such a great job of shining in my sky," I said. "It simply hasn't had time to make the long trip down south to Wellington. There's been far too much going on here. It's fully occupied for twenty four hours a day. Why, it even made sure to give us a bush fire last week — now there's attention to detail above and beyond the call of duty. And we've got some absolutely marvellous water restrictions in place as well. I think we've had the best summer ever!"

One of our guests is a sun worshipper and she stood on the back lawn, arms akimbo, soaking up the rays. You could see her opening up, blossoming and blooming in the warmth.

"Many people claim that in their last incarnation they were Cleopatra or Elizabeth the First," she said. "But not me. I know exactly what I was in my last incarnation. I was a daisy, and I still have all the characteristics of a daisy. See me flourish in the sunshine."

She spread her petals and Jake licked the toes of her roots, which made her giggle.

# 'Ear, 'Ear - wot's all this then?

For most of this month, the first thing I've done every morning after leaping out of bed, bright eyed and bushy tailed, is to shove a lump of blu-tack in my left ear.

It all started on 1st April when the universe decided to play an April Fool joke on me. I awoke that morning with a very painful and swollen left ear. It felt like all the tubes were blocked solid and I couldn't hear anything through it. Feeling more than a little lop-sided, I staggered through my day with no noticeable improvement except that now I had a perfect excuse for ignoring Robin's requests to wait on her hand and foot. Clearly I needed to see a doctor - so once the long and painful weekend was over and the doctor was back at work, I made an appointment...

"What seems to be the problem?" asked the doctor.

"Pardon?" I said. I turned my right ear towards the doctor and he tried again. This time I heard him and I was able to respond.

"I see," he murmured. He fitted a probe on to a slim device that was equipped with a miniaturised searchlight which he used out of office hours to search the skies for alien spacecraft. Everyone has to have a hobby.

The doctor stuck the probe deep into my left ear. This hurt a lot because the channels in my ear were swollen almost shut and there really wasn't enough room to insert the probe. Nevertheless he persisted, ignoring my screams of agony. "Hmmm," he said at last. "Yes - that's pretty solidly bunged up and it's probably a bit infected to boot. I suspect that you could make a complete set of alter candles out of all the wax you've got in there and you'd still have

enough left over to put a decent shine on your car. You need to go and see Frith."

"FRITH?" I asked. "Is that an acronym for Full Recovery In The Hearing?"

"Frith," he confirmed. "She's a nurse who specialises in Ear, Nose and Throat problems. What she doesn't know about ENT is not worth knowing. She'll get all that wax out before you even realise there's anything going on." He wrote a phone number on a piece of paper and gave it to me. "That's her number. Ring her up and make an appointment. Meanwhile, I'll give you some ear drops." He prepared a prescription. "By the way, do you use those little ear plug things for listening to music?" he asked.

"Indeed I do," I said. "I usually have them plugged in when I take the dog for a walk. You can listen to a lot of good sounds on a five kilometre amble. But it's been a bit tricky for the last few days because I've only been able to hear the noise that comes in through my right ear. That's a situation that is more than a little lacking in equilibrium. I've tripped and fallen over several times because I found myself leaning too far in the opposite direction in a vain attempt to adjust the sound balance. Even the dog gives me funny looks when he catches me doing it. I think I embarrass him."

"OK," said the doctor. "Each to his own." Clearly he didn't approve of people who wired themselves for sound. "I suggest you get some isopropyl alcohol and sterilize your ear buds every day just before you start wearing them. If you don't do that you might find that you are constantly re-infecting your ear channels. And you really don't want to do that."

"Righto," I agreed.

"You also need to keep that ear dry. Don't let any water get in at all. That's very important."

"How do I stop water getting into my ear?" I asked. "When I take a shower, I get water in all my bits and pieces. It's automatic."

"Blu-tack is good," said the doctor vaguely as I left his office.

I went to the stationery shop to stock up on blu-tack and then I went to the chemist to get my ear drops. The chemist stuck various explanatory labels on the ear drop box and pointed one of them out to me, just to make sure that I was well aware of the extreme danger I was letting myself in for. CAUTION: the label said in large, and not particularly friendly letters. DROPS MAY STAIN HAIR, CLOTHING, BED-LINEN AND OTHER ITEMS. I wondered if dogs and maybe wives could be considered to fall into the category of OTHER ITEMS. It might be an interesting experiment to see just exactly which ITEMS I could force a colour change on with this wondrous staining chemical I'd been given. Cats? The screens of mobile phones? The pages of favourite books? Knives and forks? Food? Would my green salad turn red? And did I have to do the proverbial laying on of ears, or would I actually develop a super power that would allow me to emit irresistible colour changing rays directly from my eardrums? Perhaps my ears themselves might change colour as soon as I dribbled the stuff into them? Blue, I mused to myself. I've always fancied blue ears. The next few days promised to be interesting ones, full of new experiences.

I went home and dripped three magical drops into my left ear, just as I'd been instructed to do. Spears of icy fire jangled down the blocked up channels and for just a moment I could hear again on that side, albeit faintly. Then the channels all closed up again and the sounds disappeared. But now I had an indication of what was to come, a promise that all was not irretrievably lost, and I was hopeful of making a full recovery.

The next morning I felt much less bunged up. But then I filled my ear with blu-tack before clambering onto the shower and everything on my left hand side closed right down again. It was very eerie. My right ear could hear the

water crashing down around me but my left ear couldn't hear a thing and I was constantly being taken by surprise as the water hit the left side of my body. But at least the mechanisms hidden in my ear stayed dry, which was the whole point of the exercise, of course.

By the end of the week the mighty power of the colour-changing drops had given me back a small amount of hearing in my left ear. Stereo sound returned to me in all its duophonic glory, though the balance was still too far over to the right on the inside of my skull. Disappointingly no super powers had manifested themselves during the week and no matter how hard I tried, I had been totally unable to change the colour of anything at all. I felt more than a little disappointed by the extreme colour resistance of all the things I was surrounded by. But at least the pain and the swelling in my ear had gone away and the only time my tubes felt blocked up was when I inserted my daily blu-tack. All that remained now was to see the magnificent Frith for the final stage of my progression back to being able fully to make use of my left ear (did you notice the non-split infinitive I used there? Clever, eh?).

Frith called me in to her surgery and sat me down on a chair. "Now," she said briskly, "what can I do for you."

I explained the problem and she nodded wisely. "Have you had any trouble with your ears before?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I had a build up of wax about 20 years ago and I had to have my ears washed out to get rid of it. But that's all."

"Ah," she said. "Well, we don't do that any more. The warm water that we used to flush the wax out had a nasty habit of flowing too freely from the ears and far too many people left the surgery with wet T-shirts. The ladies objected. We've got a much better system now. I have a microscope which goes down into your ear so I can see exactly what's going on in there while I use a little suction pump to pull the wax out. With the microscope I can be sure

to chase it all down through every nook and cranny. You'll get a constant buzzing in your ears as I suck all the wax up, but that's all."

"Righto," I said. "Let's do it."

Frith made me lie down on a bed and turn my head to one side. She inserted the tube of the microscope into my ear and peered down it. "Goodness me!" she said, impressed. "It looks like an elephant has been relieving itself of its anxiety inside there."

"Ah yes," I said, feeling mildly embarrassed. "Do you remember how Auckland Zoo misplaced one of its elephants a little while back?"

"Vaguely," said Frith vaguely.

"Well actually that was me," I confessed. "Last time I visited the zoo I put an elephant in my ear and took it home with me for the dog to play with. It was a perfect fit. Nobody noticed a thing as I walked out through the turnstile. And the dog loved his new elephant! He had a lot of fun chasing it round the garden. Eventually he inhumed it under the bay tree. He still digs it up every so often when he has a task for a tusk."

"That would explain a lot," said Frith and she turned the suction pump on. A series of squelchy, squeaky noises ran up and down my tubes and deep within my ear I felt an intense itch as if a large insect, possibly a cockroach, was twisting round and round in frantic circles...

"Oooh look! There goes a weta," cried Frith, delighted.

Slurp, slurp, slurp.

Eventually it was over and Frith removed her gadgets. "There we are," she said with deep satisfaction, "not a trace of wax left. Let's do the other ear now."

The whole disgusting ritual played itself out again on the other side of my head.

"That's it," said Frith at last. "You are now completely wax free. I suppose I'll see you again in twenty years time."

"It's a date," I said.



I went home, marvelling at the intense clarity of the everyday sounds that surrounded me.

# Flee, Fly, Flo, Flum

We've had a lot of flies this year. I suspect they are attracted by the grapes that are rotting on the vines that grow along our fences. The grapes taste horrible, and this year even the birds have point blank refused to eat them, so the grapes just hang there and rot, filling the garden with a sickly sweet smell that the flies find irresistible.

When the flies get bored with the grapes, they come into the house in search of amusement. On a bad day there can be twenty or more buzzing around and making nuisances of themselves. Chemical warfare has proved to be an inadequate technique for eliminating them. The house is simply too airy and open plan for it to be effective. So I decided to try more primitive weapons...

"What are those?" asked Jake the Dog when I came home from my shopping trip. "They are made out of plastic. I like plastic. Can I chew them?"

"Sorry, Jake," I said. "These are fly swatters and you can't chew them. They have a vital task to perform."

Jake was puzzled. "What's a fly swatter?" he asked.

"I'll show you," I said. "See that fly over there, the one that's crawling up the lounge window?"

"Yes," said Jake. "I can see it. I can smell it as well. It smells like horse poo. I like horse poo. It's very tasty..."

"Watch this!" I instructed and I swatted the fly. Stunned, or possibly dead, the fly fell to the carpet where Jake pounced on it and ate it all up."

"Oh YUM!" said Jake. "Hitting it with the swatter really tenderises the meat. Can I have another one, please?"

"OK," I said. "Here's another one." I walloped another fly, but it was too quick for me and it flew away, sniggering at my ineptitude.

"I'm not going to let the fly get away with insulting you like that," said Jake and he lunged violently at the lounge window where the fly was crawling desperately up what, from its point of view, must have looked like mysteriously solidified air. But, the fly proved to be too agile even for Jake, and the only result of his lunge was a great smear of dog snot all over the window pane. But this proved to be a blessing in disguise for the fly soon came back to the window, landed in the dog snot and became stuck fast. Now that it was unable to escape, I could wallop it with impunity. I did so. It fell to the floor and Jake ate it. "There," he said in tones of deep satisfaction, "serves you right!"

Over the next few days Jake and I refined our fly hunting technique and Jake grew fat and lazy on his new diet. The plague of flies only began to die away when the advent of the cold winter weather made the flies finally slow down and vanish. Jake was very disappointed when this happened. I, on the other hand, was rather relieved.

Meanwhile Jake got yet another significant rash on his willy which quickly spread over all the way up to and across his tummy. "It itches," he complained and he spent so much time scratching and licking at the rash that he became quite bald, red and inflamed on his lower body. It wasn't the first time this had happened and we knew exactly what to do. Off we went to the vet where yet again we spent a vast fortune on the steroids that eventually reduced the inflammation. The rash went away, for the moment at least. "That's better," said Jake in a very relieved tone. "I've stopped itching now." Slowly his fur grew back and he started to look more like a dog again.

"This is happening rather a lot," I said to the vet. "Is there any other alternative to these regular steroids that we have been subjecting him to?"

"Well," said the vet thoughtfully, "we can take a blood sample and have it screened so that we can find out just what it is that he is allergic to. Once we identify that, we can

see about keeping him away from whatever is causing the reaction. It's rather expensive though – the testing is done in America and it's very, very thorough. They examine a huge range of possible allergens."

"How much?" I asked.

"About \$500," said the vet.

"We've already spent at least that amount of money on visits to you for consultation and drug prescriptions," I pointed out. "And this rash is occurring so frequently that it won't be very long before we'll have spent that amount again. After all, the cost of the allergy test is only the cost of five more visits here."

"Hang about," said Jake, who had been listening anxiously, "Are you trying to reduce the number of times I come to see the vet? I like coming here. I get lots of hugs and cuddles and heaps of treats. It's wonderful!"

"Don't worry, Jake," I said. "We'll make sure that you see all your friends here as often as we can. I'll bring you with me every time I buy another sack of biscuits, and if we ever happen to be passing, we'll always make sure to pop in to say hello."

"Oh," said Jake, mollified. "I suppose that will have to do."

"OK," said the vet, "I'll take the blood sample and we'll send it away for testing."

I left the vet with a considerably lighter credit card and a new supply of steroids. Jake left the vet with an empty paw and a tummy full of treats. "That was nice," he said with satisfaction.

A month or so later the results of the test came back and Jake and I took another trip to the vet to discuss the results. "Well," said the vet, "the good news is that he's not allergic to flies so you aren't going to have to make any changes to his diet."

"What's the bad news?" I asked.

"You know all that green stuff that covers the ground in the park?" asked the vet. "It grows in people's back yards

and sometimes in their front yards as well."

"You mean grass?" I asked.

"Yes," said the vet. "I believe that's what it's called. Jake is very, very allergic to it."

"Any particular sort of grass?" I asked. "There are very many different kinds, you know. I learned that from one of David Attenborough's programmes. They're very educational."

"Indeed they are," said the vet. "And it is true that there are a lot of different kinds of grass. As it happens, Jake is allergic to all of them."

"Goodness me," I said, shocked. "It's a good job he never became a farm dog. He wouldn't have had much of a life."

"No," said the vet. "He'd have turned into a bald blister on legs within minutes of herding his first sheep into a paddock. You simply can't avoid grass. It's ubiquitous. He's very allergic to daisies as well, so summer would have been an extra torment to him, poor thing."

Jake looked shocked. "But I always sniff the daisies when they are in flower," he said. "I like the smell, particularly after my friend Oscar has christened them." He looked thoughtful. "Oscar is too tiny to use trees or lampposts," he explained to us, "so he has to make do with daisies."

"Is Jake allergic to anything else?" I asked, just in case.

"Yes," said the vet. "He also has a particularly nasty reaction to *Artemisia vulgaris*, more commonly known as mugwort."

"Oh no!" said Jake, horrified. "Does that mean I've got to stop reading Harry Potter novels?"

# The Internet Is Much Smaller Than You Think It Is.

Towards the end of 2016 I wrote a story for my writers group which had some utterly unexpected side effects. The homework assignment we were given was to write about donating to, or supporting, a cause. I wrote a piece about Rag Week at my university - rag week is what British universities call that mad time when students perform outrageous stunts and pranks in order to collect money which is then donated to charity.

My story was about a trad. jazz band called *The Campus City Jazzmen*. A friend of mine played double bass in that band. A double bass is a clumsy instrument that takes up rather a lot of space. Consequently the bass player's tiny bedroom always felt more than a little overcrowded and he took every opportunity that he could to relieve the pressure. So I often used to find his gigantic instrument sleeping on my bed when I came home from a weekend away. So to speak...

I originally wrote the piece in the third person from the point of view of a spectator watching the band perform, but the story came out flat and lifeless. It just sat there on the page doing nothing. So I re-wrote it in the first person from the point of view of the double bass player, and suddenly it sparkled.

Here's the story. All the events in it did actually take place, but of course, they didn't happen to me. Despite the first person narrative, this is not an autobiographical piece.

And the names have been changed to protect me from libel suits.

So read and, hopefully, enjoy. And when you've finished reading it I'll tell you what happened next. I'm sure your flabber will be quite ghasted. Mine certainly was...

\* \* \* \*

## Rag Week

Have you ever noticed that after three pints of Guinness everything sounds like a good idea?

We were sitting in the pub trying to decide what we could do for rag week. Rag week, of course, is just an excuse for university students to dress up and do silly things in order to persuade people to donate money to charity. What could be more fun than that?

The third pint of Guinness inspired me to say, "Why don't we pretend to be a Dixieland jazz band? I've got a double bass, Nick plays clarinet, and Paul almost plays the trumpet. I'm sure we can get a few other people as well."

After dropping a few gentle hints to our friends, we soon attracted a drummer, a trombonist and a piano player. And that's how *The Campus City Jazzmen* were born.

The next day dawned bright and sunny, which was fortunate because we'd decided to do some outdoor busking. At 9.00am, we took our instruments down to the Old Market Square, the huge open space in the centre of Nottingham which the locals always referred to as Slab Square. We set ourselves up well away from the tinkling fountains. We were planning on being there for quite some time and we didn't want to get wet if the wind changed direction...

"Ladies and Gentlemen," I announced to the largely indifferent crowds who were passing through the square on

their way to work, "we are *The Campus City Jazzmen* and we will be playing non-stop music for you for the next twenty four hours." I turned to the band. "Are you ready, lads?" They nodded, and we surged into our opening number:

*Ain't she sweet  
See her walking down the street...*

We finished the piece at almost the same time as each other. There was a small smattering of applause and one or two people put coins in our collecting tins. After a brief pause we played our next tune:

*Ain't she sweet  
See her walking down the street...*

This time we were a little tighter, though only the trained ear of an expert would have realised it. We were definitely on a roll, and so we went straight into our third number without any pauses at all:

*Ain't she sweet  
See her walking down the street...*

A man who had been standing there listening to us right from our very first note yelled out, "Is that the only tune you know?" Clearly he was our biggest fan.

"Yes, it is," I told him. "We only put the band together last night and so we've only rehearsed one tune, and that's the one we're going to play for the next..." I looked at my watch. "...twenty three and a half hours."

"Cool," said our fan, and he put fifty pence in the tin. "Can I make a request?"

"Of course you can," I said.

"OK," he said. "Will you play *Ain't She Sweet* for me?"

"Certainly," I said, and that's exactly what we did.



You can't really play music non-stop for twenty four hours. You can't even play whatever it was we were playing non-stop for twenty four hours without taking a break. So at staggered intervals throughout the day, one of us would sneak off for refreshment and a pee. When it was my turn, I went over to The Bell, a pub just off the square. Because it was a lovely warm day, I took my pint outside and stood on the pavement sipping my beer and enjoying listening to the rest of the band playing *Ain't She Sweet*. A few other people followed my example and soon a small crowd of us were standing there nodding our heads to the by now over-familiar rhythm.

The landlady of The Bell came bustling out to us. "What do you think you are doing?" she asked angrily. "I haven't got a licence for outside drinking. Get back inside, the lot of you. Now!"

Meekly, we all took ourselves and our drinks back inside the pub. I've been thrown out of a lot of pubs over the years, but that remains the one and only time that I've been thrown into a pub...

About three o'clock in the afternoon, the university mountaineering club turned up to break the monotony. The members all roped themselves together and solemnly mountaineered horizontally from one side of Slab Square to the other. One of their Sherpas came over to us. "Can you stop playing while they climb across the square?" he asked. "It's very distracting and they might fall off and injure themselves."

We ignored the request and deliberately played them a medley of our melody instead. Every one of them reached the other side safely and nobody was injured, so clearly we weren't dangerously distracting.

Time crawled slowly as we played our tune again and again. Our audience waxed and waned. By four o'clock in the morning my fingers were bleeding from the pressure of the strings on my double bass. All of us were exhausted.

Even our fan had deserted us, and Slab Square was completely empty. Nevertheless we carried on playing because we were far too close to the end to stop now. Early morning commuters started to appear about 6.00am. Most of them took pity on us and put money in our collecting tins before running away with their fingers in their ears.

At 9.00am we finally stopped playing. We packed our instruments away with a great sense of relief that our twenty-four hour marathon session of one-tune jazz had finally come to an end. We'd played *Ain't She Sweet* 683 times, and we'd raised almost £300 for charity, which made us feel very good. As a bonus, we'd enjoyed ourselves so much that we decided to make *The Campus City Jazzmen* a permanent fixture in our lives. Over the next few years, we played a lot of gigs and a lot of different tunes. We even made an album called *Jazz on a Bootlace*. But not once in all the time we played together did we ever play *Ain't She Sweet* again. Somehow the tune had quite lost its charm for us. Funny that...

\* \* \* \*

I presented the piece to my writers group and it was well received. I published it on my web site and then promptly forgot all about it until nine months later when an email slithered into my inbox:

*Hi Alan,*

*Remember me? I'm the real double bass player from **The Campus City Jazzmen**. I've been searching out the other members of the group and while I was hunting them down I stumbled across your little story. We're actually getting back together again to play a reunion gig in a few weeks time...*

He went on to tell me what he'd been doing with himself in the forty or more years since last I saw him. We chatted

back and forth and it wasn't long before other old friends joined in the conversation. So as a direct result of me posting that little semi-autobiographical squib I'm now back in touch with some ancient friends from my youth. Who would have thought something like that would happen? I certainly wouldn't have believed such an outrageous thing if I'd read it in a book. Nevertheless it did happen. For once, and most unusually, I've not exaggerated anything about it for dramatic effect (except in the actual story itself, of course. But even in that, there is much less exaggeration than you might think).

I rather regret that I won't be there for the reunion gig. They are planning on recording it, but the sound quality of a band playing live in a noisy pub will not be the highest of fidelity. Never mind. I can always listen to *Jazz on a Bootlace*. Forty years on, and it still sounds good. They were, and presumably they still are, a talented bunch of musicians.

# May The Circuit Be Unbroken

Bang!

Half the electronic gadgets in the house suddenly stopped working. What a catastrophe! We didn't even have an internet connection any more so I couldn't ask google what it all meant. I sat there feeling helpless until Robin, who is much wiser in the ways of the world than I am, said, "I think the circuit breaker has tripped again."

"Why does it keep doing that?" I asked, somewhat puzzled. "It seems to happen at least once a month. Sometimes more."

"Maybe we are overloading the circuit," she suggested.

"I doubt it," I said. "We don't really have very much of anything plugged into it."

"Why don't you wander round the house and make a note of all the things that are no longer working," she said. "Then we'll know exactly what we've got on the circuit."

"To hear is to obey," I said. I picked up a notebook and set off on an expedition. Every time I found something that no longer had any annoying status indication lights on it I wrote the item down. Once I'd identified everything that was plugged in to the circuit, I presented the list to Robin:

A fridge

Another fridge

Television

Stereo amplifier and tuner

Two DVD players

Freeview box

Four laptop computers

Desktop computer  
Combination file and print server  
Laser printer  
Combination scanner and printer  
Another file server  
Sundry networking gizmos  
UFB broadband connection  
A modem called Fritz  
Two telephones  
Tumble drier  
Electric heater  
Vacuum cleaner  
Electric toothbrush  
Bessemer converter  
Aluminium smelter  
Thermal depolymerization tank  
Haber-Bosch nitrogen fixation plant  
Robot partridge in an electronic pear tree

"See," I said. "There's hardly anything of any significance at all on the circuit. It can't possibly be overloaded."

"The problem has to be the toothbrush," said Robin. "Everything else on the list seems perfectly fine. Go and turn it off and then reset the circuit breaker."

I turned the toothbrush off and unplugged it so as to make assurance doubly sure. I went to the main fusebox, opened it up and stared at the circuit breakers. Sure enough, one of them was firmly switched to the off position. I toggled it back on, but as soon as I let go of the switch it immediately flipped itself back off again. The circuit breaker itself was quite hot, and there was a distinct smell of burning permeating the fusebox. I reported what I'd found to Robin.

"Wait a few minutes for the circuit breaker to cool down," advised Robin, "and then try again."

"Righto," I said. "It's pretty cold outside so it shouldn't take long for the heat to dissipate."

After a few minutes, I successfully managed to toggle the circuit breaker back on and everything hummed into life again for a minute or so. Then the smell of burning got stronger and...

Bang!

...the circuit breaker broke the circuit once more.

"Let's switch things off one by one until it stops doing that," suggested Robin.

I experimented with off switches until eventually, and rather grudgingly, the circuit allowed our fridges to keep the beer cool, it let us watch television via the Freeview box and it kept our internet connection alive. But that was as far as it was prepared to go - if we added anything more to the circuit...

Bang!

...everything plunged into darkness again.

"That will never do," said Robin. "How are we ever going to manage without our Bessemer converter?"

"Not to mention the thermal depolymerization tank," I said gloomily. "That's vital."

"Thermal depolymerization tank," mused Robin. "Remind me again why we need it so badly."

"I told you not to mention the thermal depolymerization tank," I said.

"Sorry," said Robin. "I forgot. I wonder if perhaps an electrician could help get the thing I'm not allowed to mention working again?"

"Probably," I said. "But today is Sunday. Nobody is going to come and look at it today. Or if they do, it will certainly cost us several vitally important body parts to which we are both firmly attached."

"Send an email anyway," said Robin. "They will read it first thing tomorrow morning. Maybe that way we'll be the first in the queue."

I picked up my (battery powered) android tablet, connected it to the wifi, and sent off an email. We settled down to watch television. A few minutes later, rather to my surprise, my tablet made the plaintive meeping noise that signals the arrival of an email. I opened it up and had a look.

"That doesn't sound good," said the email. "I'd suggest you have it checked out by an electrician."

"That seems like a good idea," I replied. "I hadn't thought of doing that. Can you arrange it for me?"

"Yes," was the almost immediate reply. "I'll send someone round between 8.00 and 8.30 tomorrow morning."

The next day, as promised, an electrician called Ben turned up at precisely 8.15am. I explained the situation to him.

"Well," he said, "let's start by taking a look at the main fuse box."

He opened it up and I showed him the circuit breaker that was causing all the problems. He poked it with a curious finger. "That's odd," he mused. "We've just had the coldest night of the year and yet this circuit breaker is still quite warm."

I felt it myself. "It was much hotter than that yesterday," I said. "It has cooled down a little bit."

"But nowhere near enough," said Ben. "All the other circuits are quite cold in comparison. There's definitely something rather odd about this one. Let's take a closer look at what's going on." He unplugged the circuit breaker. "Goodness me," he said in surprise. "I've never had that happen to me before!"

As he pulled the circuit breaker out, both it and the socket it was plugged into disintegrated into small chunks of plastic all of which were smeared with the black, sooty streaks of left behind smoke particles. "I'm surprised that circuit was standing up to any power load at all," said Ben. "The whole thing is clearly on its very last legs. The socket and the circuit breaker are both going to have to be

replaced. Let's go behind the scenes and see what's causing the damage." He turned off all the power coming into the house then he unscrewed the fuse box and swung it forward so that he could get at the inner workings. He poked around for a while then he whistled softly. "Look at this!" he said. He pulled out a cable and showed it to me. The tip of the wire which had been connected to the plug that the circuit breaker was protecting was covered in small silver droplets of melted metal where it had tried very hard to weld itself to the contact in the plug. Behind that about an inch and a half of the plastic insulation round the cable was charred and black and crumbling. "That would explain the smell of burning," said Ben thoughtfully.

"Yes," I said. "It would rather. What caused it to happen in the first place?"

"Probably one time when the circuit was overloaded there was some arcing around the contacts in the plug before the circuit breaker finally tripped," said Ben. "Maybe the connection was a little bit loose. After that, things just got worse every time the circuit broke."

Ben cut off the burned section of the cable and then he cut off an inch more for luck. He trimmed back the insulation and twisted the exposed wire to form a nice solid contact point which he screwed into a brand new plug. He reassembled all the other bits and pieces and closed the fusebox up again. Then he plugged in a brand new circuit breaker and turned the power back on.

"There you are," he said proudly. "It's as good as new. That should stand up to pretty much anything you plug into it."

"What would have happened if we'd left things alone and just kept resetting the circuit breaker every time it tripped?" I asked.

"One of two things," said Ben. "Either the circuit breaker would have eventually refused ever to flip back to the on position and you'd have had no choice but to call an



electrician to come round and fix it..." His voice died away into a contemplative silence.

"Or?" I prompted.

"Or," he continued, "the wiring in the house would have protected the circuit breaker from damage by bursting into flame before the circuit breaker had a chance to trip. And then the house would have burned to the ground. Everything you own would have been destroyed and you, your wife, your cats and your dog would probably all have died a rather painful death."

"That doesn't sound like any fun at all," I said thoughtfully.

"It does have its drawbacks," said Ben, handing me an Electrical Safety Certificate which guaranteed the workmanship on his repair. "But look on the bright side. At least the circuit breaker would have been fine."

"That is a great consolation," I said.

"Don't forget to switch your toothbrush on," said Ben as he drove off to his next job.

# Once Upon A Time...

When I take my dog Jake for a walk he amuses himself by sniffing every blade of grass that we pass. Every so often, when he finds a particularly succulent grassy outcrop, he will eat it with every evidence of enjoyment. Generally speaking, about half an hour later, he will throw it all up again. This seems to be an extraordinarily pleasurable experience if you happen to be a dog...

He spends an inordinate amount of time on our walks just sitting and watching motor cars and vans. He's particularly fond of observing them closely as they go into, and come out of, garages and we can spend anything up to ten minutes simply watching vehicles reverse out into the road, straighten themselves up and then drive off into the distance. We aren't allowed to move a muscle until the car has driven itself out of sight. Then we walk on and thirty seconds later the whole exercise repeats itself. Sometimes drivers who want to be helpful pause and wave us on. They seem very puzzled when Jake and I shake our heads and just sit there staring at them. The more nervous drivers get very flustered under our unbending scrutiny and sometimes they reverse into gateposts. This appears to amuse Jake greatly, and he sniggers under his breath.

Although Jake finds our walks vastly entertaining, full of both intellectual stimulation and tummy rubs, I tend to want additional amusements. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy my tummy rubs at least as much as Jake enjoys them, if not more, but I don't get nearly the same intellectual stimulation from watching cars go in and out of garages that Jake does. Consequently I have loaded up my phone with audio books and I spend our walks with earbuds firmly plugged in, listening to somebody tell me a story...

There are many thousands of classic stories in the public domain, and there are organisations dedicated to providing public domain audio versions of these books. I have downloaded a couple of hundred of these audio books and I am now greatly enjoying re-visiting novels that have been life-long favourites. I find that hearing them read out loud adds a whole new dimension to these old, familiar tales and even though, in many cases, I am very well aware of the direction that the story will take, I still find myself thrilling to the twists and turns of the plot, and I am absolutely revelling in the rapturous prose.

This last is a very important point. Many books from the nineteenth and early twentieth century are greatly over-stuffed with introspective and often somewhat prolix sentences that the eye tends to skip over when reading the printed words on the page. But of course you can't skip anything when you are listening to an audio book. Whether you like it or not, you really do have to listen closely to every single word. Strangely, in these circumstances I find that the somewhat awkward printed sentences will often turn out to be much less awkward when presented as spoken sentences! Indeed, they can positively shine with a drama and a meaning that is utterly lost on the printed page. Consequently, I am finding that listening to these audio books adds greatly to the story telling experience. So much so, in fact, that I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that many of the books were actually *designed* to be read out loud, and that reading them silently to oneself (and skipping the "boring" bits) does them a great disservice. It's not hard to see why, of course. These books pre-date radio and television and movies and mp3 players. When these books had their heyday it was not uncommon for members of a family to spend a cosy evening huddled together around the fireplace, drinking tea and listening to stories being read out loud by the head of the house. And, it seems to me, the stories still work best that way. Therefore, in my

case at least, many old favourites are now taking on a whole new lease of life.

There are some potential drawbacks of course. One of the providers of these public domain audio books is Librivox (<https://librivox.org/>). All the books are read by volunteers – Librivox itself appears just to act as a coordinator, farming out the reading tasks among its volunteers. Oddly, they seem to have decided that it is not always necessary to have the entire book read by one single person (though some of them really are solo efforts). Presumably Librivox feel that they can reduce the workload by sharing the individual chapters out between half a dozen or more volunteers, and so, in many cases, that is exactly what they have done. Until you get used to it, it can be something of a shock to hear a different voice reading each chapter, and even more of a shock when the voices alternate between male and female! However I found that I soon got used to it and indeed, if we go back to the idea of books being read aloud of an evening for the purpose of family entertainment after dinner, I can easily imagine that the various family members would each take it in turn to read a chapter or so. So looked at in that light, Librivox's policy of having multiple narrators for some of their books does perhaps start to make a little bit more sense – it's just that convivial family gathering writ large.

Of course, the production of these audio books is very much an ongoing project and I have discovered that it is important to visit the site at frequent intervals so as to keep up to date with their lists. At the moment, I am impatiently waiting for *The World's Desire* a collaborative novel by Sir Henry Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang (he of the multi-coloured fairy books). It is currently marked as "in progress". I hope they hurry up with it...

Although the books are all read by amateur volunteers, the standard of reading is very high. However, unavoidably, each reader has their own distinctive style and their own

pronunciation foibles. This can lead to little hiccups, particularly for less familiar words. For example, I've recently been listening to a Librivox recording of *She* by Sir Henry Rider Haggard. An important character in the novel is the Greek adventurer Kallikrates (he's actually been dead for two thousand years when the story begins - nevertheless he's a very important character indeed). Some of the readers pronounce his name phonetically (Kally Crates - I am reminded irresistibly of the movie *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* in which the eponymous heroes meet the Greek philosopher So-Crates...) and some pronounce the name in a more Grecian style (Kallic-rut-eeze). To begin with I found these variations in pronunciation to be quite jarring - but once the story really took hold of me it became much less irritating, and very soon it ceased to grate on my nerves at all. Indeed, I began to quite enjoy these variations in reading styles as each individual narrator endeared themselves to me, and I soon found myself anticipating their idiosyncrasies when I recognised an old friend as the narrator of the next chapter.

Oddly, not all the narrators are native English speakers. I am currently listening to *She and Allan*, (also by Sir Henry Rider Haggard). I am about half way through it as I write these words. The narrator (so far there has been only one narrator) is Dutch. He speaks (mostly) impeccable English, as so many Dutch people do. But he does have a fairly heavy Dutch accent, which seems oddly appropriate as the story takes place in South Africa... Amusingly though, he does stumble over some words - "peruse" and "ensue" always come out as "pursue" and "ensure". Unfortunately for this narrator, Haggard seems to be inordinately fond of those two words, so the voice does a fair amount of stumbling. Nevertheless, once I got used to his accent these, and one or two other, mispronunciations ceased to bother me, and I'm really enjoying listening to the story. Next on the list is Haggard's Viking adventure *Eric*

*Brighteyes*. I'm greatly looking forward to that. I may have to extend Jake's walks...

Mind you, Jake's walks already seem to go on for longer and longer every day as he meets and greets more and more people and dogs. Because of all his social activity, Jake is now world famous in our village. I can't count the number of times that complete strangers have come up to me in the supermarket and asked, "How's your dog doing?"

"Very well," I usually say. "He's pushing a trolley down the dog food aisle at the moment. If you hurry, you might catch him up."

Of course, because Jake is a dog, saying hello to everyone we meet involves much sniffing of importantly aromatic bits and pieces. Once a lady observed, "They always feel so good after they've sniffed a bottom or two."

"Don't we all?" I replied and she gave me a funny look, made her excuses, and left.

# Bess 2002-2017

Bess was 10 weeks old when she came to live with us. It soon became clear that she wasn't at all well. A trip to the vets confirmed our fears. She had cat flu. But she was a feisty little kitten, full of life and curiosity. Sniffles and sneezes were not going to stop her investigating the world around her. There were adventures to be had, and much bouncing to be done! But even the most vital of kittens must eventually succumb to that insidious virus, and so we spent Christmas Day 2002 at the emergency vet. Bess had a raging temperature. She was so hot she was almost glowing, and she could barely move. All her kitten curiosity drained away and she sagged.

But that inner strength of hers pulled her through, and she made a full recovery – or as much of a recovery as is possible. "Cat flu is forever," the vet told us. "The virus stays dormant in the body for life. You might notice a resurgence every so often. Sneezing fits and the like, perhaps a shortness of breath." But we never saw any of that. As far as we could tell, Bess was never bothered by the cat flu ever again.

She was always fascinated by water. As a kitten, she would put her paw into the water bowl so as to stop the water running away from her while she drank it. Eventually she grew out of this habit, but her fascination with water remained a lifelong hobby. When Robin watered the garden, Bess was often to be found stalking the stream that flowed from the hosepipe. Sometimes she would leap up and bite it. She always seemed puzzled that it continued to flow after she'd killed it...

Bess loved all the high places of the world. She needed to look down on everyone, both for the sake of safety and

for the sake of her personality. She also liked to hide and to observe the world from places where the world could not observe her back. A favourite observation place was the shed at the bottom of our garden. As an added bonus, it had spiders and beetles and sometimes, if she was really lucky, it had wetas.

She felt that the best way to get to her shed was to hurry along the top of the fence that ran down the side of the garden. Naturally it was a high fence, and it was barely a couple of inches wide, but that was fine by Bess and she scampered down it on a daily basis. She always encouraged her brother Porgy to follow her to the shed, promising him untold delights if only he would come with her. Porgy actually preferred to amble at his leisure down the garden path to the shed. It was wider, it was lower, and it was infinitely safer. The top of the fence was really far too scary for him. But when your big sister tells you to walk along the fence, you do what you are told, if you know what's good for you. So many a time we would see Bess bounding lightly along the fence with Porgy struggling slowly behind her looking for all the world as if he was about to fall off in an undignified heap. "Come on," Bess would say. "Get a move on. You really are a slowcoach! Stop wobbling!"

Bess was a hunter. She was particularly good at rats and mice and she had a skilful sideline in lizards. One day she brought home six lizards, all of which I rescued and returned to the garden. At least, I think she caught six lizards... Actually it is highly likely that really she just caught one lizard six times. I began to suspect that this might be the case when I noticed that the last lizard I rescued was looking particularly fed up, almost as if it had been caught in this situation far too many times before, and it really wished that the damn cat would stop carrying it into the house. But whether it was six lizards or whether it was one lizard six times over didn't really matter. That day remained one of Bess' proudest moments.



She put her hunting skills to very good use when her brother Porgy was bedridden with two broken legs, quite unable to do anything at all for himself. She obviously felt really sorry for him and so she would bring him pre-chewed rats to try and cheer him up a bit. Clearly she was not without compassion, and I think that Porgy really appreciated what she was doing for him.

Bess ruled our household with a whim of iron. Everything had to be just so and if it wasn't just so she would curse at us until we adjusted things to her liking. She had a very extensive vocabulary that consisted mostly of swear words. "Rip!" she would say when things were particularly annoying. "Rip!" When she said that to you, you knew you were in trouble.

Her last illness came upon her quickly. Robin and I were with her to the very end. We have had her cremated and her ashes will be scattered around the roses, prickly self-willed plants, just like Bess herself. She'll feel comfortable there. She'll have birds to watch.

And if Robin doesn't keep the flower beds spick and span or if I inadvertently let the grass grow too long, I'm sure I will hear the word "Rip!" carried faintly on the breeze...

# The Toby That Had No Jug

Early one morning Jake the Dog and I set out for our habitual amble around the district. Somewhat to our surprise, we found that there was water all over our driveway. Closer investigation showed that it was bubbling up through the council toby which appeared to have sprung a serious leak overnight. Jake, who is genetically programmed to investigate each and every puddle of water that he comes across, lowered his head and drank deep draughts of it. He rolled the water around his tongue with the air of a connoisseur, swallowed it and then delivered his verdict. "It has an earthy, sandy taste," he said, "with overtones of chlorine and a delicious after taste of *E. Coli*. It's authentic council water and it's really quite yummy."

It was far too early in the day to report the broken toby to the council so we decided to finish our walk before doing anything about the leak. When we got home, a couple of hours later, I rang the council...

"City council," said a voice. "You are speaking with Samantha. How may I help you?"

"My council toby has sprung a leak," I said.

"Oh, that's a shame," said Samantha, "I'll get someone from Water Care on to it right away. Now just let me confirm your details. Am I talking to Alan?"

"You are," I said, vastly impressed since I hadn't yet told her my name.

"And you are reporting a leak in the toby that controls the water supply to your house at..." she quoted my address.

"That's correct," I said, even more impressed, because I hadn't given her my address either. Clearly she had picked up my phone number from her caller ID and used it as a key

to find my name and address in the council database.

"That's a brilliant bit of information retrieval," I said. "Aren't computers wonderful?"

"Oh we don't use computers here," said Samantha airily. "We do it all by magic!"

"Even better," I said.

There are times when people accuse me of making up the dialogue and events in my stories just for comedic effect. So let me put that foul rumour to rest once and for all. My conversation with Samantha has been reported verbatim. I have not made anything up and I haven't exaggerated a single solitary thing. She really did tell me that she got all my information through the use of magic. And naturally I believed her! I was certain that she was doing nose wiggles. I could feel the vibrations...

"Right," said Samantha briskly, "I've put the job on the list for Water Care, but they are rather busy at the moment, so it might be two or three weeks before they get a round tuit. Just be patient."

We said our goodbyes and Jake and I settled down to wait.

Over the next couple of weeks many thousands of litres of water flowed out of the broken toby carrying topsoil and sand from my lawn onto the driveway and down into my neighbour's front yard where it eventually clogged the drain and started to form a small lake. A family of ducks came and made their home in its shallows and paddled happily in it. A grey heron stalked tetchily around looking like a bad tempered Victorian accountant in pursuit of a lost farthing. Eels slithered through the slimy depths lying in wait for tasty, tender ducklings. Jake drank as much of the water as he could on our daily walks, but he was no match at all for the toby which continued to pour out water as if its life depended on it. So much water flowed out at such high pressure that it even pushed the plastic top off the toby cover and floated it away. I found that very impressive

because the toby cover was a very tight fit, and I'd been completely unable to lever it off when I first tried to investigate the leak.

I rang the council several times to tell them that the situation was getting worse and to complain about the huge waste of water. Unfortunately I never got the delightful Samantha again. I always got boringly mundane people who were using computers rather than magic and in every case I had to tell them my name and address explicitly. My admiration for Samantha's magical nose wiggling increased tenfold.

One and all, the council people told me that Water Care was very busy and they'd get to my leaking toby as soon as they could. I would just have to be patient...

Three weeks after I first reported the leak an alarmingly lopsided van splashed itself into my driveway. An enormous spherical man clambered out of it. The van heaved a huge sigh of relief and assumed a more even keel. The spherical man flexed his battleship biceps and strode over to examine the toby.

"That's some big leak you got there," he said to me. "You really should have told us just how bad it was. We'd have been here a lot sooner if we'd known." I didn't bother to enlighten him. By now it was all water under the toby.

A loch ness monster poked its head up from the sullen depths and examined the spherical man carefully. Clearly it didn't like what it saw because it submerged again quickly. The spherical man hauled a cell phone out of his pocket and had a long conversation with somebody back at the office. Then he climbed back into his van and sat there waiting. The van sagged in the sunshine.

About half an hour later a flat bed truck with a huge tank on the back of it turned up. The spherical man and the driver of the truck set a pump going and sucked all the water up into the tank. The ducks and the heron flew away, the eels slithered down the drain and the loch ness monster

howled pathetically as it got sucked into the tank. "Don't worry," said the spherical man, "we'll see that it goes to a good home. I'll take it to Lake Taupo with me over the weekend."

The toby kept trying to fight them, but the pump was stronger and the toby proved unequal to the task. Once it sullenly accepted that no matter how much water it spat out the pump would simply suck it up, it gave up trying and just sat and sulked in its hole. The spherical man enlarged the hole so as to make it easier for him to get at the broken toby. He quickly disassembled it and started bending brass pipes into shape with his bare hands. Soon the toby was as dry as a bone. The spherical man put a new toby cover by the hole and carefully positioned two witches hat cones by the side of it to stop people falling into the hole. "There you are," he said, rubbing his hands. "All fixed. There'll be someone coming round next week to fix the new cover in place and fill the hole in. We don't do that - it's a different department."

Of course it was. Everyone knows that the men who dig holes are quite different men from the men who fill them in again.

One morning, almost exactly a week later, Jake and I went on our customary morning walk. As we left the house we each saluted the witches hats in our own particular way. An hour or so later we got back from our walk and we discovered that in our absence we'd been visited by the hole fairies. The witches hats had gone. The new toby cover was in place and the hole was filled in. The nice fairies had even scattered grass seed over the new topsoil and every bird for miles around had come to stuff their faces with free food. The sound of their squabbling filled the street.

That evening Jake and I celebrated our new toby by going for a walk with Jake's best friend Booki and Booki's mum, Melissa. We walked down to the river and ambled along the bank. Jake and Booki exchanged gossip, as did Melissa and

I. The riverbank is a nature reserve, so the dogs have to stay on the lead. They didn't seem to mind the restriction - they had a lot to say to each other.

Eventually we reached a bridge and we crossed over it intending to walk home along the opposite bank of the river. A steeply sloping ramp led down from the bridge to the riverbank and at the bottom of the slope was a black labrador about to make its way up towards the bridge.

"I hate black labradors," declared Booki, launching himself at the dog, intent upon mayhem.

"I'll help you," said Jake, racing after Booki. Dogs always support their friends.

I lost control of him. Jake pulled me off my feet and I fell into the fence that bordered the slope. He dragged me down the fence and I reached out and wrapped my arm around one of the posts in an effort to stop my headlong plunge. Eventually Melissa, who was ahead of me near the bottom of the ramp, got the dogs calmed down and I was able to scramble to my feet. That was when I found that something on the fence had ripped a huge gash in my hand. The wound was about four centimetres long and it gaped wide open. I could see right down inside my palm. Blood gushed like the water from my broken toby, and it formed red pools on the ground. Strangely I felt no pain whatsoever. Until I actually saw the blood streaming out of my hand, I hadn't realised that anything at all had happened to me. I shook my hand experimentally. Droplets of blood flew everywhere. A young boy who was skateboarding down the slope looked a bit sick and quickly made himself scarce.

Melissa, who is a nurse, took charge. She held both Booki and Jake on their leads. The dogs looked puzzled. What was going on? "Have you got tissues?" Melissa asked.

I nodded and used my other hand to pull a bunch of clean tissues from my pocket. I pressed them into the wound and elevated my injured hand. "Keep pressure on the wound," said Melissa, and I did. The white tissues turned red

in seconds. "Don't worry about saturating them," said Melissa. "Just keep pressure on the wound. How do you feel."

"A bit faint and dizzy," I said. "I think I'm in shock. That wound needs stitches. Sticking plaster isn't going to do anything for it."

"Lean against the fence," said Melissa. "I'll phone my husband to meet us with the car. He can take you to a doctor. I'll take Jake home and wait for you there."

It wasn't long before Melissa's husband Karl arrived. He took me to the health centre which was only a few minutes drive up the road. Soon I was surrounded by nurses who sat me down on a chair and supported my bleeding hand on an absorbent surface.

"Oooh, that looks pretty," said one of them as she cleaned the wound. "Nice and wide and deep. How did you do it?"

I explained.

"Well, we'll just put a few stitches in it to close the wound up," she said, "and you'll be right as ninepence in no time at all. When did you last have a tetanus injection?"

"About eighteen months ago," I said.

"That's all right then," she said. "You won't need another one. But I think we'd better give you a course of antibiotics. Who knows what nasty bacteria might be lurking on a dirty old fence?"

She sewed up the wound and put a dressing on it. "Come back on Monday," she said, "and we'll change the dressing." I was feeling a bit less faint now as the shock wore off. I filled the prescription for antibiotics and Karl drove me home where Melissa and Jake were waiting for me.

Melissa examined the dressing critically. Blood was already leaking into it. "That's probably going to need changing again before Monday," she said. "Give me a call if it gets too bad and I'll come round and change it for you."

"I will," I promised. And I did.

Melissa changed my dressing a couple of times over the weekend, and eventually the bleeding died down. I went back to see the nurses on Monday. "That's not one of our dressings," said the nurse suspiciously. "What's been going on?"

I explained about Melissa.

"That's a really expensive dressing," said the nurse, sounding slightly shocked at the obvious waste. "I'm tempted to leave it in place so that we get our money's worth out of it."

"No," I said, "I really think it needs changing. The wound is still leaking a bit."

By the end of the week both the official nurses and Melissa, my unofficial nurse, had changed my dressing half a dozen times. But, on the bright side, the wound was starting to close up and heal nicely. Therefore Melissa and I decided to take Jake and Booki for a walk again. The dogs both had a lot of catching up to do. We retraced the steps of our original expedition and when we reached the fence, Melissa examined it closely. Suddenly she let out a squeal of delight. "Look," she said, "I've found what caused the gash in your hand!"

Jake and I walked over to have a look at what she'd discovered. There was a nail standing up proud from the handrail. "That's the guilty party," said Melissa triumphantly.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Look closely at it," said Melissa. "It's still got some lumps of you stuck to it..."

"Cor!" said Jake, getting all excited. "Can I have a nibble?"

### **Postscript:**

About four weeks after the accident I revisited the bridge with a friend who, quite by chance, had a hammer in his backpack. When we got to the bridge he examined the nail carefully. "It's still got bits of you sticking to it," he



announced. "Clearly the local birds and insects don't like the taste of Alan." He took the hammer out of his backpack and slammed the nail flat. "There," he said, "It won't injure anybody ever again!"

# A Fence For All Seasons

One day, as Jake the Dog and I set off for our usual morning walk, something strange and upsetting happened. Just outside the front door, Jake stopped to pee on the fence that separates his house from the next door neighbour's. As his stream of urine hit the fence, it trembled under the fierce liquid pressure and a plank fell out. "Funny," said Jake, quite taken by surprise, "it's never done that before!"

"The wood in this fence is quite rotten," I said. "It's been like that ever since we moved in. I'm not at all surprised at what happened. I've been expecting something like that for quite some time now, though I'm not at all pleased that it has finally come to pass. I suspect that we will need a brand new fence and I'm sure it will cost an arm and several legs. You don't happen to have a spare leg, do you Jake?"

"I've always known that the fence was rotten," said Jake, ignoring my request for a leg. "I've been nibbling at it for ages. Rotten wood is very yummy and it keeps the bowels balanced, don't you know?"

"I really am starting to think that it's time to replace the fence," I said, "before it completely collapses under the stress of your atomic powered pee and your incessant chewing."

"OK," said Jake equably. "You're the leader of the pack. But I'm going to miss it."

Jake and I discussed the problem with Robin and she went looking on the internet for fence people. Eventually she decided on Russell the Builder, and she rang him up. "I need to mend a fence with my neighbour," she said.

"I can recommend a lawyer," said Russell. "They are good at sorting out disputes."

"It's not a dispute," said Robin. "It's a proper fence. It's broken and it needs fixing. Well actually, it probably needs to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch."

"I can do that," said Russell proudly. "New fences are what I do best."

"Russell is a terrible name," said Jake as he listened to the conversation. "I shall call the man Bob. That's a much better name for a builder, don't you think?"

Bob the Builder, aka Russell, came round to look at our fence and give us a cost estimate. Jake took to him straight away and so did we. He was a thoroughly charming man. Jake watched with a critical eye as Russell poked the fence here and there but he could find no fault with Russell's technique. "I supervised him with an intense soup," Jake reported to me later. "There's really no point in asking anyone else to replace the fence for us. Bob is clearly the man for the job. Let's face it, nobody else would rhyme nearly as well in a sentence, unless you can find someone called Spencer the Fencer."

"The internet has never heard of Spencer the Fencer," said Robin firmly, even though she hadn't bothered to google the name because the thought was simply too terrible to contemplate. "So I think it really will be a job for Bob. Err.. for Russell," she said, skilfully avoiding the nasty rhyme at the last minute.

"Well," said Russell cautiously, having finished his examination of the fence, "it's not all bad news. We can re-use some of the palings and some of the posts seem not to be rotten at all. We can re-use those as well."

"Hear him, hear him!" cheered Jake, wagging his tail at the news.

"What's it going to cost?" I asked. "That's the important point."

Russell thought for a bit, counted on his fingers and toes, and then came up with an eye-watering number of dollars. Even Jake's tail drooped a bit at the magnitude of it. He

cocked his leg and had a thoughtful pee. Another plank fell out.

"OK," Robin said. "That was a sign from God. When can you start?"

"Ah," said Russell. "Now about that..."

Three and a half months later Russell and his sidekick Lea turned up to start work. "The first step," said Russell, "is to get rid of the old fence." That proved to be a simple task. Russell and Lea huffed and puffed and they blew the fence down. It quickly collapsed into a rotten heap and they carried it away in a trailer. Once the rubbish had been removed eight problems immediately became clear.

"We can't re-use the eight fence posts like we intended to," explained Russell gloomily. "They've not been set in concrete. They are just sitting in holes in the dirt. Years of moisture have rotted the bottoms away and now they are useless. So you're going to need new ones after all." He held a fence post up for me to look at. "This post is toast," he said.

"Would your middle name happen to be Spencer the Fencer?" I asked

"No," said Russell. "He's my brother. But I've been taking lessons from him."

I could see dollar signs spinning round in Russell's eyes as the need for new posts sent the original cost estimate soared into the stratosphere. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll set the new posts properly in concrete. They'll last forever."

I found that thought strangely comforting, though I knew that concrete would be an extra charge.

Once the fence was down, Jake was confined to quarters. "I want to go out," he said miserably. "I want to make sure that they are doing a good job."

"Trust me," I said, "they are doing a superb job. You can't go out because there is no fence to stop you wandering all over the village by yourself if the mood should take you, or

if an absent minded cat should happen to run across the road and distract you."

"Why would I want to wander round the village?" Jake was puzzled. "I just want to watch the new fence being built." I really should have had more faith in him. One day he did indeed manage to sneak outside when we weren't looking, but all he did was sit by the fence and make critical remarks as Russell and Lea did arcane construction things.

"Can you take him back inside, please?" asked Russell at last. "He's putting us off our stroke."

I took Jake into the house.

Once the new post holes had been prepared, a truck full of concrete arrived. Lea and Russell shovelled concrete into a wheelbarrow and pushed the wheelbarrow up to the post holes where they shovelled the concrete out again, down into the ground. Then they seated the new posts carefully.

"We're taking a break now," said Russell. "It's a bit early, but there isn't any more we can do until the concrete sets. We'll be back tomorrow to carry on."

Jake watched them drive off and then he turned a pleading, piteous gaze on me. "Please can I go out now?" he asked. "You can take me on a lead if you want to, but I really, really, really want to walk in the wet concrete and leave my footprints for future archaeologists to wonder at."

"No!" I said firmly. "And where on earth did you learn a big word like archaeologist?"

"My mum had an affair with a rottweiler who lived with a writer," said Jake. "I studied the writer's dictionary while my mum and the roddy played hide the sausage. But the affair didn't last very long. They kept eating the sausage. So I never got past the letter A. I know archaeologist, but I don't know zygodactylous."

"Zygodactylous?" I asked.

"I told you," said Jake. "I don't know zygodactylous. Can I go and walk in the concrete now?"

The next day Russell and Lea nailed horizontal timbers to the posts, and the day after that they nailed the paling planks to the horizontal timbers. The fence was looking more and more like a fence every minute. Lea's nail gun went bang, bang, bang, bang.

"That's a lot faster than hitting the nails with a hammer," I said admiringly.

Lea wielded his nail gun. "It's my favourite tool," he said. "There's something very satisfying about driving a nail deep into something."

"Like a person?" I asked.

"Like a person," agreed Lea and he put his nail gun down and took out his phone. He scrolled through the photographs and then held the phone out to me. "That's my hand," he said as I gazed at a picture of a palm with an enormous nail driven right through it. "The gun slipped a bit one day..."

"That should prove useful when Easter arrives," I said admiringly. "Did it hurt much?"

"Not really," said Lea thoughtfully. "But there was rather a lot of blood. Poor old Russell got quite faint. He's a bit of a wuss, you know." Lea put his phone away and picked his nail gun up again. "Do you want to see what it feels like?" he offered.

"No thank you," I said politely and Lea went back to nailing a paling. Ooops! There goes Spencer the Fencer again, I thought. He's got one more score. Oh damn! Now he's got another one.

Eventually the fence was finished. It looked just like a proper one. Robin, Jake and I were very impressed. Jake peed on it, and so did I, but Robin decided not to. Absolutely nothing happened. "That's definitely a really strong fence," said Jake. "I wonder what it tastes like..."

# The Super Blue Blood Moon of 2018

Being old and fragile, I seldom stay awake for forty-eight consecutive hours these days (though when I was younger I used to do it quite frequently – sleep is for wimps; it wastes far too much time that would be better spent doing fun things). But sometimes life doesn't give you any choice. At the beginning of this year New Zealand was blessed with a blue moon, a supermoon and a lunar eclipse (a blood moon) all taking place simultaneously over one evening from about 11.00pm until about 3.00am the next day. The last time that combination of events happened was in 1866 and I missed seeing it then because I was born 84 years too late – a considerable margin of error indicative of very bad planning on my part. I determined not to make the same mistake this time around.

Despite the famous proverb, a blue moon is actually quite a common thing. It is the name given to the second of two full moons which occur in the same calendar month, and it happens every couple of years or so.

A supermoon is a full moon that coincides with the moon's closest approach to the Earth. Technically it's known as a perigee syzygy, but that's far too much of a mouthful for comfort so most people use the more colloquial term supermoon instead. Visually, a supermoon appears to be about 14% larger, and about 30% brighter, than normal. The effect is most marked when the moon is near the horizon, and it can appear to be quite gigantic.

A lunar eclipse, of course, takes place when the moon passes through the shadow that the Earth casts when the sun is behind it. And the lunar eclipse of January 2018,

coinciding with a blue moon and a supermoon, would be a blood moon because the sunlight reflected from the moon's surface would be refracted through the Earth's atmosphere, and the angle of refraction would give the moon a red tinge. It's caused by the same effect that often makes sunrise and sunset appear quite red. In the jargon, the phenomenon is known as Rayleigh scattering and there was a time when I could have described it mathematically – but it has been far too many years since I last did any serious physics and maths and sadly that knowledge has now vanished from my mind.

Anyway, excitingly, for the first time since 1866 we were due to have a super blue blood moon. Naturally Robin and I had to stay up all night to watch it. Perhaps Jake the Dog would want to see it as well.

We had about a week of completely cloudless skies before the great event occurred, so everyone was optimistically certain that the trend would continue, and that the night of the eclipse would provide excellent viewing. But nature is perverse, and that evening New Zealand was almost completely covered with thick clouds. Most astronomically inclined New Zealanders took to their beds severely annoyed with the weather gods. But the small area of New Zealand where I live was reasonably cloudless because Jake and I had both had the foresight to sacrifice a bone and pee on a sundial. Consequently the weather gods were pleased with us and so the visibility was good.

This wasn't my first lunar eclipse. I've seen several others. Probably the most memorable one was some time in the mid 1980s when I was on holiday in America. That eclipse happened while I was in New Orleans and I watched it take place from the deck of a riverboat cruising on the Mississippi. I found the experience to be incredibly spine-tingling and romantic, but of course the eclipse that I saw then didn't coincide with a supermoon. I was eagerly anticipating that New Zealand's super blue blood moon



would be considerably more dramatic than any I'd ever seen before.

I told our next door neighbour that Robin and I were planning on watching it. "Oh," she said when I explained its significance, "ring my doorbell and wake me up when the drama happens. I'd like to see that."

From the moment the moon rose into the sky it was dazzlingly bright. I prepared copious coffee and set up an intravenous drip. I kept popping outside to check on the moon's progress. About 11.00pm, as promised, the shadow of the Earth started to eat up the disc of the moon. Over several hours the area of the moon eclipsed by the shadow gradually got larger and the red colour became more and more prominent. It was particularly dramatic when seen through binoculars. Our next door neighbour came out to join us and she was quite overwhelmed by the beauty of it. "Isn't nature wonderful," she said.

I could only agree with her. "When nature wants to, she is very good at putting on a dramatic spectacle," I said.

Disappointingly, Jake had put himself to bed hours before and he refused to come out and look at the eclipsing moon. He really couldn't see what all the fuss was about. "So it's a super blue blood moon," he said. "So what? I can't chase it, eat it, bury it or play tug of war with it. I suppose I could howl at it, but if I did you'd only tell me off for waking everybody up. So what possible use is it?"

"You're a philistine," I told him.

"That's right," he said. "Wake me when it's time for my next walk." He tucked his nose underneath his tail and went back to sleep.

In the whole of our street, only Robin and I and our next door neighbour were watching the drama taking place overhead. "Doesn't anybody else care about it?" I asked. "Are they all really that incurious?"

"I suspect it's more that they have to go to work in the morning," said Robin. "They need their sleep. We're the only

retired people around here. It doesn't matter if we nod off in the middle of a conversation tomorrow."

"You're probably right," I said.

Every so often a small wisp of cloud drifted in front of the increasingly ruddy moon and obscured the view. But the effect never lasted more than a few minutes, and it was never very long before the moon was back, redder than before. By about 3.00am the eclipse was total and the disc of the moon hung bloodily in the sky. It looked for all the world as if the planet Mars had left its orbit and come for a baleful visit.

Robin and our neighbour both went back to bed now that they had seen everything that there was to be seen. But I stayed up because I wanted to watch the effect unwind itself. I topped up my coffee drip and kept an eye on what was going on overhead.

Slowly the moon crept back out from beneath the shadow of the Earth and the red glow faded away from it. As dawn arrived everything was back to normal and there was absolutely no sign at all that anything extraordinary had taken place while the world slept. By now, I had my second wind and I felt quite bouncy. I took Jake for his morning walk and we started our brand new day together.

The next night the sky over New Zealand was completely cloudless again. Clearly the clouds that had obscured our view on the night of the eclipse were the result of a government conspiracy. No other explanation was possible. I discussed it with Jake, making sure that we were both wearing colanders on our heads so that we couldn't be spied on and monitored.

"Write a letter to *The Times*," Jake suggested. "And sign it Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells."

# Harpo 2003-2018

One day in early 2004 Robin and I were awoken by the sound of a cat swearing loudly. The noise appeared to be coming from just outside our front door. When I investigated, I found a fluffy black cat with a white waistcoat and white socks. He swore at me and when I tried to pat him, he lashed out at me, inflicting the first of the many wounds that he would give me over the next fourteen years.

"The poor thing looks miserable," said Robin. "Perhaps we should feed him?"

"Certainly not," I said. "He's wearing a collar so he's clearly somebody's pet. If we ignore him he'll soon go home."

So we ignored him. But after three days of listening to him swear and curse, I finally gave in and fed him. Naturally, he took that as an invitation, and he moved in. I asked all around the neighbourhood but nobody recognised him so clearly he wasn't a local cat. We never solved the puzzle of his collar. Eventually we decided that he'd probably been driven miles away from home and then just dumped. Possibly the people he lived with had got fed up of his teeth and claws and their sticking plaster bill had gone through the roof...

He was a very vocal cat, and he knew a lot of swear words. So we called him Harpo, after the Marx brother who never spoke. We felt that perhaps the name would quieten him down – a vain hope. All his life long he mumbled, moaned, cursed and ordered us about.

It soon became clear that Harpo was just a solid lump of personality with long black fur. He was a forceful creature who dominated any room that he was in. And if the room wasn't to his liking he would tell you about it. His eyes

glowed red when he was angry, which was most of the time, and he was always willing to use his teeth and claws on anybody who got in his way. Which is to say, everybody.

He would sit on your lap if you asked him nicely and he would let you pat him if he was in a good mood. But once he'd had enough patting he'd tear your fingers to shreds and run away. Everyone who knew him was always very wary of him. Nevertheless they continued to come back for more because Harpo was concentrated charisma in a fur coat. Nobody was immune to his charm.

Our house has a walk-in pantry with a large bolt on the door. Visitors sometimes ask me why I feel the need to bolt the pantry door closed every night before I go to bed.

"Because Harpo has learned how to open the door," I explain, "and he goes for midnight feasts. In the morning, when we go looking for breakfast, we find that he has eaten all the bread and ripped the cereal boxes apart, spreading breakfast goodies all over the floor."

One of our visitors was sure I was exaggerating. "Cats don't eat bread," she said. She left an experimental loaf out on the kitchen bench overnight. Sure enough, the next morning, every slice had a delicate nibble taken out of it. "Hmmm," she said thoughtfully. "There's always an exception to every rule, isn't there?"

Harpo was an outside cat for most of his life. We generally only saw him in the house at breakfast time and dinner time. In between meals he was always away having adventures. One day, when we were talking to our next door neighbour, we learned a bit more about how he occupied his time. "Your cat squashes down my plants to make himself a nest in my garden," she said, chuckling at the thought. "And then he lies in his nest all day long watching the birds."

"Everybody has to have a hobby," I said. "And Harpo's hobby is birdwatching. He's quite an authority on their habits, you know. Other cats come to him for advice." She looked a little puzzled when I said this. "In a way," I

continued, "it's quite a compliment that he trusts you enough to grace your garden with his presence."

"Oh, indeed it is," she said. "and I actually rather enjoy having him there. But..." Her voice trailed away into embarrassed silence. Then, a little plaintively, she asked, "Does he really need to have *five* nests?"

"Of course he does," I said firmly. "He's Harpo."

Whenever we went away anywhere, Harpo stayed in the local cattery, which was run by a lady called Diane. Harpo quickly became her favourite cat and she always looked forward to having him come to stay with her. "Isn't it time you went away again?" she would hint heavily. She couldn't say Harpo's name without giggling.

The rule at the cattery was that during the day the cats had the run of the place, but at night they were each locked in an individual cage which was well equipped with food, water and a dirt tray. "Harpo won't go in his overnight cage," Diane told me. "If I insist and lock him in there anyway, he punishes me by scattering his food, water and kitty litter all over the cage. So I've given up. Harpo has the run of the cattery all day and all night as well. It's the only way to make him liveable with."

"Where does he sleep?" I asked.

"Anywhere he wants to," said Diane, and she giggled.

During his stay with her, Diane would have long, involved conversations with Harpo. He would tell her all about what he'd been up to since the last time he was there. And every day when she came in to the cattery to let the cats out of their cages and give them their breakfast, Harpo would tell her the gossip about what they had all been up to during the night. In return, Diane would tell Harpo how she had spent her evening, what she had eaten for dinner and what she watched on the television. Harpo would criticise her choice of TV programmes, and she usually agreed that he had a point...

Once I went to pick Harpo up from the cattery after we'd been away somewhere. "How has Harpo been?" I asked. "Has he behaved himself?"

Diane giggled. "Remember the shade cloth we used to have attached to the ceiling?" she asked. Indeed I did - the shade cloth had stretched right across the room. Some cats liked to sleep in the centre of it, high up and safe from scrutiny. Others liked to hang over the edge and swipe their claws at anyone who walked past. Harpo, of course, was one of the swipers.

I looked up at the ceiling. There was no trace of shade cloth to be seen. "What happened to it?" I asked.

"Harpo decided it needed shredding," said Diane. "He must have spent all night at it. When I came in the next morning, it was just a pile of torn up fragments on the ground and Harpo was sitting in the middle of the pile grinning an evil grin at me." She giggled again. "He's a dag!" she said admiringly.

Even Steffi, the vet who treated Harpo during his last illness, fell a little bit in love with him. He was well past his prime by then, but his forceful personality was still very much in evidence and he quickly wormed his way into her affections. "Whenever I see his name on my appointment list for the day," she told us, "I hear his signature tune playing in my head. None of my other patients has a signature tune. Only Harpo." She sang his signature tune for us - the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Dramatic, slightly ominous, and very, very Harpo.

As Steffi injected Harpo with the drugs that would send him on his way, Robin and I were in tears. And so was Steffi. Because that's the kind of cat that Harpo was.

# 'Ear, 'Ear, 'Ear...

I think I was about seven years old when my mother got her first washing machine. Prior to that, she'd always done the washing by hand. Crude and primitive though that original washing machine was by today's standards, for my mother it was the labour saving device to beat all other labour saving devices and she absolutely loved it to bits.

Nowadays, of course, such machines are ubiquitous and, personally speaking, I never give the washing a second thought. Throw stuff into the machine, toss in a scoop of washing powder, turn the machine on and come back an hour later. Then, depending on the weather, either throw the damp clothes into the tumble dryer or peg them out on the washing line to dry in the sun. Job done.

Of course sometimes things go ever so slightly wrong...

When my mother washed everything by hand she always had to pick up each item one by one and therefore, before she dunked it in the water, she would check to see if my father or I had left anything in the pockets, something that both of us were wont to do. Over the years, she rescued many precious items from a miserable, watery fate.

However because of my rather more cavalier approach to doing the washing, invariably there are times when things that probably shouldn't come into contact with water go through a complete washing cycle. Usually it's just a mild annoyance. Keys and gold coins come out bright and shiny and even today's modern plastic banknotes survive unscathed (I've never washed a credit card, so I'm not sure how they would fare). Used tissues come out of the wash quite clean, and on rare occasions you can even use them again (something that appeals to my frugal Yorkshire soul) but more often than not they just disintegrate and attach

little bits of themselves to every item of clothing in the load. Picking the bits of tissue off one by one is a salutary lesson in applied patience and I always vow never to wash a tissue again until the next time (a vow I have always managed to keep). But sometimes other things lurk unnoticed in my pockets.

Last week I accidentally washed my earphones...

When Jake the Dog and I go for our walks, I usually listen to an audiobook. I generally have several of them stored in my mobile phone and I listen to the story through a set of fairly expensive earphones which live in my shirt pocket when they aren't being used. When Jake and I walk out of the door, it is a matter of but a moment to retrieve the earphones from my pocket, and plug one end into my phone and the other end into my ears. Then I press a magic button that lives in a tiny box attached to the right hand ear bud, and voices fill my head. I've got so good at doing this that I can even manage it while Jake and I continue to walk - there was a time when, because I am quite unable to multitask, Jake and I had to stop while I wired myself up. Jake always found this very puzzling and he used to complain about it a lot. Now that I have mastered the art of earphone insertion, he's a lot happier with me.

I have very strangely shaped ears and most earphones/earbuds, call them what you will, fall out of my ears within seconds of being inserted. This is frustrating because Sod's Law requires that it always happens when the sentence that explains the whole complex plot of the story is about to be uttered and consequently I completely lose track of what is going on! I generally say a rude word when this happens and Jake and I have to stop while I re-insert the earphones. Then I poke desperately at the screen of my phone to try and rewind the story to the vital bit that I missed. Jake hates it when that happens and I'm not too fond of it either.



However I have finally found an earphone design that will stay put until either I remove them gently myself or until Jake drags me into a bush that grabs hold of the dangling cables and wrenches the gadgets painfully out of my ears. Despite that, I think that these are the best earphones ever and I am very fond of them. But remember, they live in my shirt pocket...

I've had several narrow escapes over the months that I've been using these earphones and on more than one occasion I've had to go diving deeply into the dirty clothes basket in order to rescue them from yesterday's shirt so that I can transfer them into today's. (Usually I take them out of my shirt pocket of an evening when I get undressed for bed, but sometimes I forget. Despite all appearances to the contrary, I am not perfect). I suppose it was only a matter of time before they went into the washing machine, and last week that's just what they did.

The machine was about half-way through its cycle when I went hunting for my earphones so that Jake and I could go for a walk. Odd! They weren't in my shirt pocket. I wonder where... The penny dropped. It was far too late to try rescuing them from their watery fate, so I dug out an old and much less satisfactory pair from the back of a drawer. Then Jake and I went walking and left the original earphones to it.

When we got back home the washing machine had finished processing its load. I opened the lid and I found that my earphones had tangled themselves around the arms of two shirts, giving the distinct impression that the shirts had been handcuffed together and were now under arrest. I gently untangled everything and examined my earphones carefully. They were certainly very clean - over the months they had turned from shiny white to dull grey as nameless substances accreted themselves onto the cables, but now they were as bright and shining white as they had been on the day that I first plugged them in. So that was nice.

They looked extraordinarily good on the outside, but who knew what state they might be in inside their external shiny whiteness? I wondered if perhaps I should just throw them away, but then I had second thoughts. The electronics hiding inside a set of earphones are very rudimentary and are presumably therefore correspondingly robust. In fact, most of the magic gubbins, such as they are, are sealed away behind thick layers of waterproof plastic. The only holes in the structure lead to the speakers in the earbuds and to the microphone that lurks in the same little box that contains the on/off switch for the phone's media player. I decided to let the earphones dry out in the airing cupboard for a week or so before I tried using them again on the grounds that once all the water had evaporated, there was probably a very good chance that the earphones might still work.

And so it proved. A week later I plugged them in to my ears on one end and in to my phone on the other end in the usual way, and I pressed the magic button. The narrator of my current story began burbling cheerily at me. My earphones, it seemed, were none the worse for their ordeal.

I cannot honestly recommend using the washing machine to clean your grubby earphones. But if you do accidentally subject them to a wash and spin cycle you may be surprised at just how well they stand up to it.

# Fifty Years of Alan

Fifty years ago, and twelve and a half thousand miles away from the desk where I sit writing these words, I left school, I left home, and I set out into the wide, wild world in order to see just what it was like...

This July my old school mates are holding our fiftieth annual reunion and the organiser has reached out to everyone who can still be contacted in order to try and make the occasion as special as it can be. I won't be there in the flesh, though I will be there in spirit. But to try and bridge the gap between here and there, I wrote this little piece, and I stuck in a photograph of me so that everyone who attends the reunion can have a good laugh.

The organiser has promised to take lots of photos of the actual event, and he'll send them to me so that I too can play the game of "Who the hell is that?". It will be fun to see who has changed the most, and I suspect it will also prove to be very annoying when I encounter the several swine who clearly have a painting hidden in their attic, and who therefore look as if they left school ten years ago, rather than fifty years ago like the rest of us. I know there will be some people like that because I've had a sneak preview from one or two of them already!

So this is what I've told everybody about how I've spent the fifty years since last I saw them all. Maybe you will find it interesting as well...

Kia ora koutou katoa.  
*Hello to you all.*

After I left school, I went to university. Anything to put off the evil day of having to get a job! I studied chemistry for no

very good reason except that I'd always been good at it. The subject always came easily to me, though I have no idea why. However I soon discovered that there's nothing like studying something in depth at university to disillusion you with the subject, and it wasn't long before the urge to shake a test tube had completely disappeared from my life. Nevertheless I persevered with my increasingly tedious studies. I survived the usual student rituals of sex, drugs and rock and roll (I remember that *The Incredible String Band* were almost a fixture on the campus — they seemed to give a concert every couple of weeks or so), and eventually I graduated with a respectable degree. Now I had no choice — I really did have to go looking for employment...

I got a job with the Royal Society of Chemistry. They had a team of people investigating the possibility of using computers to search the world's chemistry research literature — the kind of thing that Google does for us these days, except that the Royal Society's databases were much smaller and more specialised than Google's are. But the principle is exactly the same. As time went on, I got more and more interested in exactly how the computers did their job, and I got less and less interested in the chemical information that they were sifting through. Then, one day, I saw a job advertised in

The Times...

The New Zealand Dairy Board were recruiting programmers and they were holding interviews in London. The advert said that anyone they invited to London for an interview would have their travel expenses reimbursed. Neat! A free day in London! There would be a boring half hour in the middle when the interview took place, but I could cope with that. I sent off an application.

I was quite relaxed at the interview. After all, I didn't actually want the job. I just wanted a day in London. "What

do you know about indexed sequential files?" asked the interviewer.

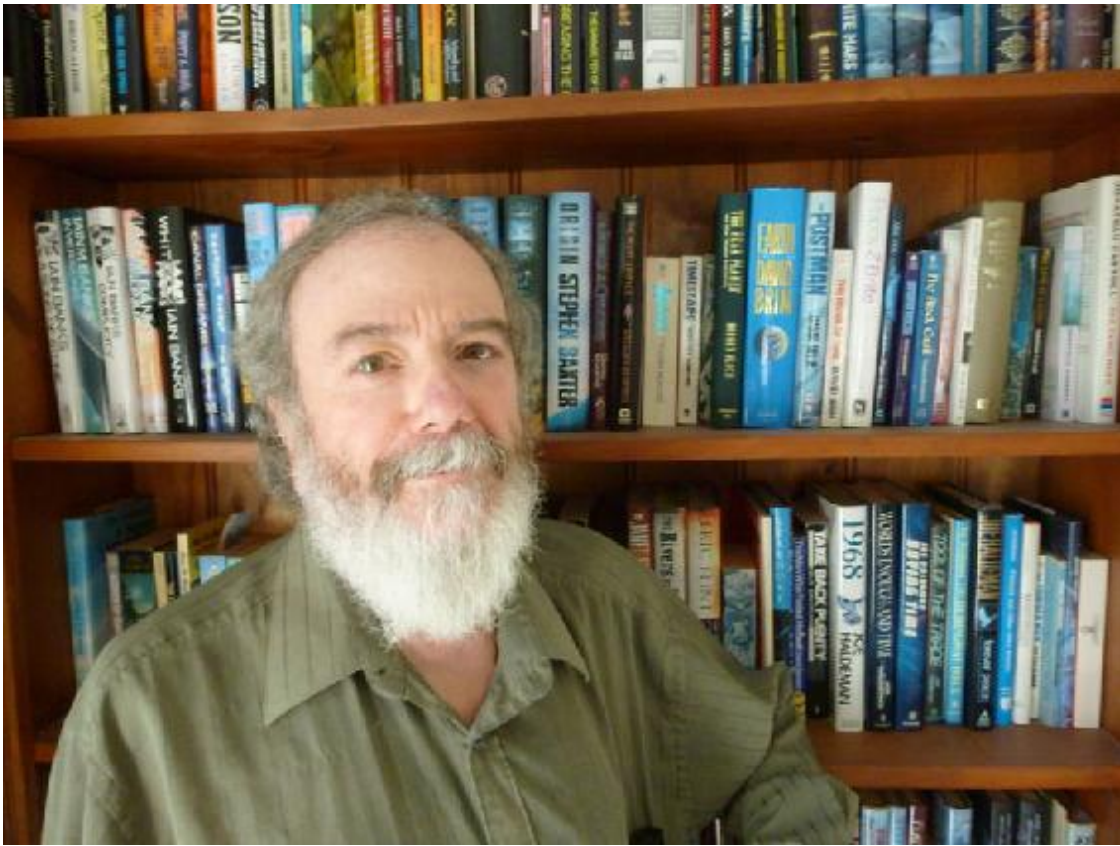
"Nothing at all," I said, and he made a note.

Rather to my surprise, I was offered a job. Furthermore, the offer said that the Dairy Board would pay half my travel expenses when I arrived in the country and, if I stayed with them for a year, they would pay the other half of my expenses. So, for the sake of a year, I got a free trip to the far side of the world. Who could resist? Certainly not me. And so, in January 1981, I arrived in New Zealand. I've lived here ever since.

It turned out that the reason the Dairy Board was recruiting staff in England was because they were such a terrible employer that they couldn't find any New Zealanders who wanted to work for them! I think every programmer in the country had passed through their offices at one time or another, and the Dairy Board had simply run out of local talent. So, like everybody else, I stayed with the Dairy Board for the requisite year, collected the rest of my expenses, and then handed in my notice.

I bummed around for several years doing various computer consultancy jobs. Along the way I gained quite an in-depth knowledge about the Unix (and later Linux) operating systems. If you don't know what Unix and Linux are, consider yourself lucky! Then I got a job teaching Unix and Linux system administration ideas and techniques to anyone who chose to come on our (quite expensive) courses. I turned out to be rather good at teaching, and I enjoyed doing it. It was a much better job than being a real system administrator looking after real computers. When you are a teacher, nobody rings you up at 3.00am to complain that the system has crashed *and what are you going to do about it!* I did that teaching job for the next twenty five years until I reached retirement age, whereupon I retired. As one does.

The years passed. I got married, divorced and married again. My wife Robin is Australian. We've been together for nearly twenty years now, but she still remains proudly Australian. I, on the other hand, have been a New Zealand citizen for more than thirty years. I'm still eligible to have a British passport, but my last one expired in 1993 and I never bothered renewing it.



This is me today. The books behind me are all autographed by the authors.  
Many of the books are first editions and/or numbered limited editions.

I'm very proud of the collection, though I must admit that over the last fifty years,  
I've spent far too much money on it!

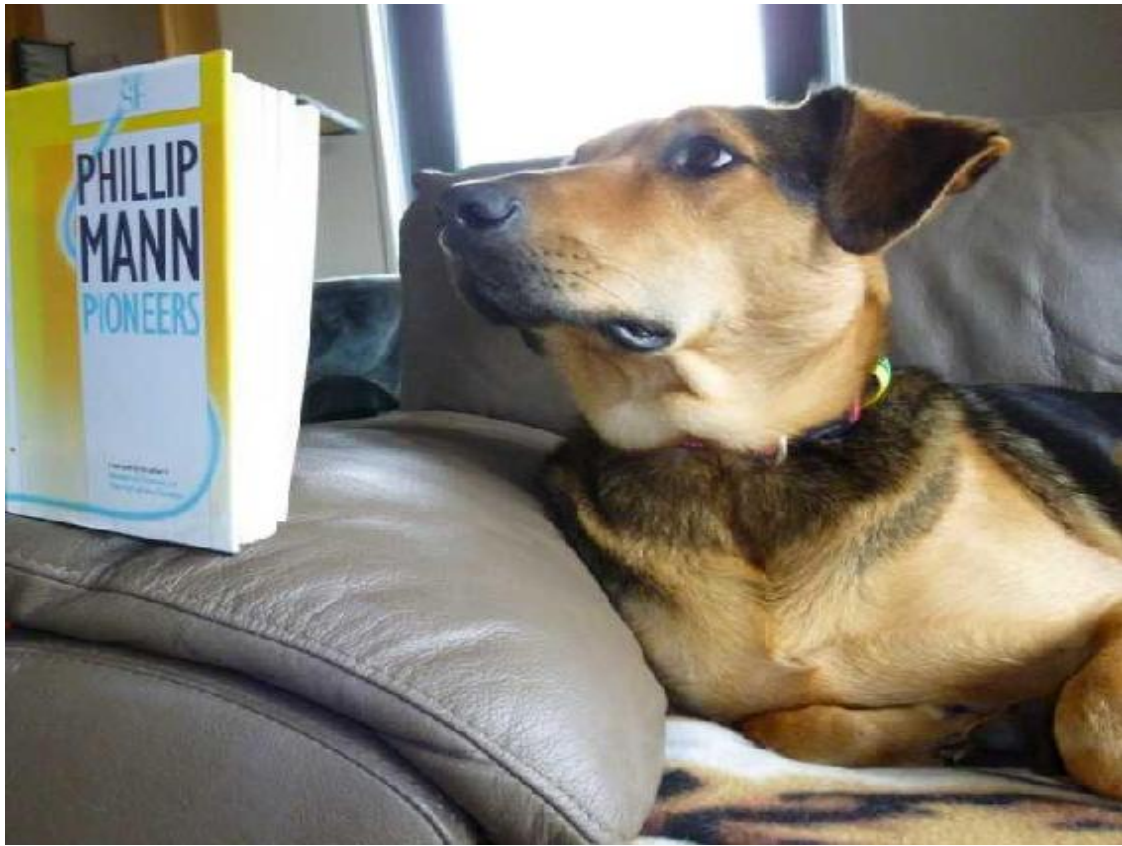


This is Robin, standing in front of one of the many quilts that she has made.

She really is a very accomplished quilter. This one is her particular favourite, and naturally she's extremely proud of it.

We've both been owned by a large number of cats over the years, though at the moment our house has no cats in it. Our last cat, Harpo, died just a couple of months ago. However, cats happen — so I won't be at all surprised if more of them turn up soon. Meanwhile, the house is owned by my dog Jake. He's a huntaway, a New Zealand breed. They are farm dogs, bred to herd sheep and cows. Jake was actually born on a farm but he turned out to be not very good at his job (rumour has it that he's scared of sheep) so the farmer put him up for adoption. Now he's opted for a more laid back and intellectual life style with me and Robin.





Jake shows off his erudition.

Having a dog imposes quite a ritual on a retiree. I get up about 5.30am every day. Then, after I've fortified myself with a cup of tea, Jake and I go for our morning walk. We usually take an hour or so to walk about 5km. Jake says hello to all his friends, both human and animal, and he leaves a lot of messages for the friends who don't happen to be around today. He has a lot of friends. He's world famous in our village. Total strangers come up to me in the supermarket and enquire after Jake's health. He knows far more people than I do!

By the time we get home from our morning walk, Robin has generally surfaced, and is making a pot of coffee. Jake doesn't like coffee, so he goes into the garden and drinks the water that has soaked through the earth in the



flowerpots, down into the trays that the pots stand in. It's the same colour as coffee, and he prefers the taste.

At lunchtime, Jake and I go to the park where he can run off the lead. I walk about 4km round the park and Jake runs about three times that distance as he plays chase with all his friends. He drinks deeply from the river, and often he has a swim in it as well. Sometimes there's a dead sheep floating in the river. That's always a red letter day!

At about 4.00pm Jake and I go for our evening walk. Depending on exactly which route we decide to take, we probably walk somewhere between 3 and 4km. Then, when we get home, I feed Jake his evening meal and start to cook dinner for Robin and myself. All in all, we lead a leisurely and very pleasant life.

When I was working, I lived in the main cities — Wellington and Auckland and then Wellington again. But I travelled around a lot, running courses in most of the larger cities and towns. I also ran a lot of courses in Australia and the Pacific Islands. If you ever get a chance to travel to the Pacific Islands, do so. Trust me, a visit to the islands should be on everybody's bucket list.

Once I retired, Robin and I decided to move away from the hustle and bustle of city life. These days we live in a small village called Havelock North on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand. It's quite a rural area, though Havelock North itself is really rather posh. It is full of both very expensive shops and bejewelled ladies who lunch. When Robin and I were house hunting, we decided that we had to live in Havelock North so that we could lower the tone of the place. I don't know if we've succeeded in our ambition, but we are trying hard. Everybody has to have a hobby.

Heoi anō tāku mō nāianeī.  
*That's all for now.*

Haere rā.  
*Goodbye.*

Ka kite anō.  
See you again.

# The Dawning of the Days of Gilbert

Steffi the Vet had a cunning plan. Like all the very best cunning plans it was made up of several cunningly intertwined phases. But none of them would work without a kitten.

Being a vet, Steffi had no difficulty in finding just the right kitten. She attended a cat who was having a rather difficult time giving birth. For a while it was touch and go but finally the cat produced twins. Sadly, one of them did not survive, but the other pulled through, although he was very weak. His mother was far too ill to take care of him – she didn't produce any milk at all. So Steffi had to foster the kitten, bottle feeding him every two hours and giving him lots of cuddles to reassure him that all was well. The kitten thrived, and Steffi was hopeful that he would be the one who would make her cunning plan succeed...

One day, when the kitten was about three weeks old, Steffi picked him up and turned him upside down to examine his bottom. It was perfectly clean and she rewarded him with a cuddle and a tummy rub. "Who's an ootchy cootchy kitty woo, den?" she crooned.

The kitten fixed her with a haughty glare. "My name is Gilbert," he said coldly. "Kindly use it in future. And stop making those disgusting cooing noises."

"Sorry, Gilbert," said Steffi contritely. But inside she was glowing happily – with a fearless attitude like that she knew that Gilbert was just perfect for the scheme she had in mind. So she set the next phase in motion by posting regular progress reports about Gilbert on her Facebook page. She called it *The Weekly Gilbert* and it quickly became hugely popular. It wasn't long before she was inundated with requests to adopt the cute ginger kitten who romped in the photos and videos that she posted. But the one request that she was specifically looking for in the messages never appeared. Obviously more direct methods were required. So Steffi the Vet asked the nurses to start dropping heavy hints whenever I took Jake the Dog to visit his favourite aunties.

"Have you seen Gilbert on our Facebook page?" Leanne asked one day.

"I don't do Facebook," I said.

"It's a public page," said Leanne. "You don't need an account to access it. Gilbert is a most wonderful kitten. You and Jake will absolutely love him. Take a look..."

I always do whatever Leanne tells me to do. If I don't, Jake will never forgive me. She's the very favourite of his favourite aunties, and as far as he is concerned she can do no wrong. So clearly everything that happened next is all Jake's fault. I have made this quite clear to him, and he feels very sorry for himself. Serves him right, I say!

Gilbert was certainly cute. I told Robin about him and she was immediately enthusiastic. Somehow, without anything being said, it became understood that when Gilbert was old enough to leave his foster mum he would be coming to live with us. I'm still not entirely sure how that happened. But Steffi the Vet knows – her cunning plan had worked itself out perfectly. I learned a valuable lesson that day, but I learned it far too late. Do not meddle in the affairs of vets for they have a never ending supply of kittens which are damp and hard to light. Or something like that...

Robin and I took Jake to the vets so that he could meet his new best friend. We felt that it was important that they get to know each other on neutral territory, as it were, so that when Gilbert finally came home with us it wouldn't be too much of a shock to his system. He's a sensitive soul... Therefore we arranged a series of play dates.

On our first visit, Steffi brought Gilbert in to the room with us and shut the door so that nobody could run away. Gilbert was a small orange bundle of sleepy fur. "He's so tiny," said Robin and I heard the distinctive sound that Robin makes when she falls in love.

"He weighs 500 grams at the moment," said Steffi. "But he's getting bigger every day. Jake," she continued, "this is Gilbert. Gilbert, say hello to Jake." She held Gilbert out for Jake to sniff.

Jake was horrified. "What's that?" he said. "I don't like it! Take it away! It's nasty!" His tail drooped.

"Dog!" said Gilbert and he swiped enthusiastically at Jake's nose with his claws fully extended. Jake retreated to a dark corner where he cowered.

Steffi put Gilbert down and he bounced around the room, playing with everything he could find. Every so often he reared up on his hindquarters and gave quick left-right boxing punches with his front paws at whatever was dangling in front of him. "Bang, bang!" he said. "Float like a flutterby, sting like a flea. I coulda bin a pretender!" I began to wonder if Malaprop might be a better name than Gilbert. I tried it out on him but he was horrified by the idea. "You dirty prat!" he exclaimed, chastising me for my bad taste.

He dropped back down and returned to his floor based toys. He seemed particularly fond of a small blue thing which skittered excitingly when he bashed it. He skittered it towards Jake who trembled in fear and tried to push himself through the wall. He didn't quite succeed, though the wall did bulge alarmingly. "Jake, don't be so silly," said Steffi. "Somebody who weighs 36 kilograms cannot possibly be afraid of a ball of fluff that only weighs 500 grams. It would take seventy two of him to make just one of you!"

"Yes they can be afraid," said Jake firmly. "They can be very afraid." He's never been any good at arithmetic. He can do one, two, many but after that he gets confused. As far as he is concerned, logic and proportion have long since fallen sloppy dead. He went over to Steffi who sat down on the floor to cuddle and reassure him. He climbed into her lap for protection and knocked her over. She immediately bounced back up like a round-bottomed doll. You can't keep a good vet down.

"Jake," she remonstrated. "You aren't a lap dog. You are far too big to fit on anybody's lap."

"No I'm not," said Jake, snuggling even closer to Steffi. "Save me from it, please. Look! It's coming to get me!" Steffi gave him a treat, which he chewed with enthusiasm. But it didn't really help. Whenever Gilbert came anywhere near him he backed away from the terrifying monster. He looked thoroughly miserable.

But slowly, over the days, Jake's attitude improved and gradually he lost his fear of Gilbert. Now he just looked bemused at the kitten's antics. He stopped trying to escape from the fearsome kitten monster, though if Gilbert came too close, he still backed away. But this was more for self-protection than for any other reason. Gilbert had developed an unhealthy interest in Jake's tail and once he tried to climb up Jake's back leg with all his pitons fully extended. Not unnaturally, Jake was less than impressed with this. Gilbert also liked to run underneath Jake in pursuit of his *toy de jour*. However he was so fast that Jake seldom even noticed that this was happening, though he did sometimes catch a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. But that didn't seem worth making a fuss about. Clearly we'd arrived at a state of armed neutrality. Things looked hopeful.

"Well," said Steffi after several play dates between Jake and Gilbert had come and gone, "it looks like they've become quite acclimatised to each other now. The moment of truth has finally arrived. Gilbert has reached his magic weight. He weighs one thirty-sixth of a Jake and he's ready for the next stage of his life. We'll give him the unkindest cut of all next Wednesday and you can take him home with you the day after." Steffi had a huge smile all over her face. She was quite thrilled to see that her cunning plan had worked perfectly.

Gilbert, overhearing what she said, crossed all his legs and tried to sneak out of the room. Naturally he immediately fell over. "Damn!" he said. Steffi picked him up and cuddled him. He purred loudly and Jake licked his lips thoughtfully...

And then it was Thursday. We took Jake and a cat carrying case to the vets. Jake watched, intrigued as Steffi put Gilbert into the case along with a favourite toy, a stuffed multi-coloured fish that crackled when chewed or clawed. Gilbert looked bewildered. He'd never been in a carrying case before. But it was a new experience, and he likes new experiences. So he settled back to enjoy it, kneading his fish every so often when he felt the urge. "I shall cry," announced Steffi firmly. And then she turned pink and started to leak.

"Don't worry," I said to her. "I promise we'll take good care of him."

Steffi gave us a bag of kitty litter and a bag of special kitten food. "Just make sure there's food in his bowl all the time," she said. "He likes to graze all day. He'll eat when he's hungry and he'll stop eating when he's full. Don't worry, he won't overeat."

"I'm not worried about that," I said. "I'm more worried about Jake coming along when Gilbert's not looking and polishing off whatever Gilbert hasn't eaten yet."

"I'm confident that you'll think of something," said Steffi. "Now be sure to ring me tomorrow to tell me how he's settled in. I want a full report."

"I promise," I said. We took Jake out to the car and he jumped into his usual seat. We put Gilbert's carrying case on the seat next to Jake. Jake turned his head away and deliberately didn't look at Gilbert as we drove home. "This is fun," said Gilbert and he started to purr so loudly that he completely drowned out the sound of the engine.

We introduced Gilbert to his new home. "This is your food bowl," I said, putting it on a nice high shelf that I hoped Jake wouldn't be able to reach. Unfortunately it soon became clear that Gilbert couldn't reach it either because he wasn't very good at climbing yet. Oh well, at least he had an incentive to learn and meanwhile we could lift him up there every few minutes in case he was feeling peckish. "And this is a comfy blanket for you to sleep on," I continued. "And this is your dirt tray."

Gilbert was impressed with the arrangements. He stood on his blanket and looked at his dirt tray across the room. "I do approve of an *en suite*," he said. Then he climbed into his dirt tray and christened it copiously.

Jake watched all this with a hangdog air and sighed deeply. The sound attracted Gilbert's attention and he began to stalk Jake who stood there wagging his tail until Gilbert made himself look terrifying by fluffing up his fur and arching his back whereupon Jake, Robin and I backed away and pretended we were doing something else.

Gilbert spent a couple of hours making sure that he and his fish knew where everything was. He came to us for reassuring cuddles when it all got a bit too much. Windows were a special source of delight. I don't think he'd ever seen out into the world before and he stared in wide-eyed and wild-eyed wonder, as he watched the birds zoom past. He chattered at them to come closer so he could kill them. I knew with complete certainty just what his hobby was going to be when he finally managed to get outside...

Once Gilbert had the geography of the house figured out, he flipped a switch on his control panel and began shooting between rooms at the speed of light. For the rest of the day he only had two speeds - on and off.

"Well Jake," I said, "what do you think of it so far?"

"*Rubbish!*" said Jake and he stomped off into the corridor with Gilbert's fish in his mouth. Soon we heard ripping noises as he relieved his feelings by tearing the fish to shreds. Gilbert didn't seem to mind. There were far too many other wonderful things going on to worry about a crinkly, crackly fish.

The next day, Gilbert greeted me with yawns, stretches and purrs. "Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Delightfully, thank you," said Gilbert. "What's the plan for today?"

"I thought maybe you might like to chase a piece of paper," I said.

"That sounds like a good idea," agreed Gilbert.

I rang Steffi. "Hi Steffi," I said, "it's Alan here."

"What's wrong?" asked Steffi, panic in her voice. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," I said. "Everything's fine. I just wanted to let you know that Gilbert has settled in very well."

"Oh good," said Steffi. "How's Jake handling it?"

"He's doing very well," I said. "Gilbert has got him well under control."

"I thought he would," said Steffi. "That's the kind of cat that Gilbert is."



# The Logic of Cats

"I have an ambition," Gilbert the Kitten said one day to his best friend Jake the Dog while they were lying together in a patch of sunshine.

"What's your ambition?" asked Jake. "Do tell."

"I want to eat an entire human being before I'm six months old," said Gilbert. "I've been practising on Robin and I'm getting really good at it. I'm sure I'll be able to manage a whole person soon."

Jake looked shocked. He'd never considered eating the people he lived with, even though they did taste rather yummy when he licked them. He had always just contented himself with sniffs and kisses. Nibbling was quite out of the question. Then he spotted the obvious flaw in Gilbert's logic. "That's a bit short sighted of you," he said. "We are locked in the house and our regular food is shut away in the pantry. We can't open any of the doors by ourselves. Our thumbs aren't opposed to the idea, but our fingers can't quite manage it. So the reality is that we'd be quite helpless if you eat the people."

"Well, I could keep starvation at bay by eating you once I'd finished with them," said Gilbert thoughtfully. "But you're right. The inability to cope with doors could be a bit of a problem. Perhaps I should restrict myself to just eating their toes..."

"I'm really not at all comfortable with the idea of you biting lumps out of our people," said Jake. "After all, they are gods, in charge of everything. Omniscient, you know. Probably omnipotent as well."

"Rubbish," said Gilbert scornfully. "They are really, really dumb. I'm only a kitten and I know much more about how the world works than they do."

"I'm not sure I believe that," said Jake.

"OK," said Gilbert, "I'll prove it to you. The other day I was round the back of the TV set chewing on a power cable, as one does..."

"I've never understood why you chew power cables," interrupted Jake. "Alan and Robin get really upset when we go anywhere near anything that plugs in to the mains. I ate a cellphone charger shortly after I moved in and they went ballistic! Mind you, it was worth it. There were some very tasty resistors in that charger, quite the best ones I've ever come across. But I digress. Tell me, why do you chew power cables?"

"I'm studying electromagnetic phenomena," explained Gilbert. "Just the other day I derived Maxwell's field equations from first principles, based on measurements that I'd taken when I was behind the TV. It was an extremely elegant derivation, and I was very proud of myself until I discovered that Maxwell had done it first, more than 150 years ago, damn him."

"That's a shame," said Jake sympathetically. "How did you find out that Maxwell got there before you?"

"I walked over the keyboard on Alan's computer," said Gilbert, "and Google gave me the information straight away."

"That was clever of you," said Jake, impressed.

"I thought so," said Gilbert. "And while I was on the computer, I made Alan's web browser go full screen. Then I took 23 screen shots of what I'd done."

"Alan must have enjoyed that," said Jake.

"I'm sure he did," said Gilbert. "And as a reward, he taught me a lot of interesting new words."

"That was very generous of him," said Jake. "But you were telling me why you think Robin and Alan are dumb."

"Oh yes," said Gilbert. "So I was. Well, they dragged me out from behind the TV. I spat and swore at them, but it did me no good. Then they started piling cushions around the



TV to try and stop me from going back again. As if that's going to have any effect! Don't they know that kittens can teleport?

"That evening Robin and Alan settled down to watch the television. Alan pressed a button on the remote control but nothing happened. The TV just sat there refusing to turn on. Robin tried with the spare remote, but that didn't work either. Alan changed the batteries in the remotes, but it didn't make any difference. So all evening long they had to keep getting up to use the manual controls on the TV itself whenever they wanted the set to do anything. They really didn't like doing that at all, and by the end of the evening they were seriously considering buying a new TV because this one was obviously broken. Silly buggers hadn't realised that one of the barrier cushions was right in front of the infra-red sensor and it was blocking the signal from the remote control, so of course nothing was working. They really are very, very dumb people."

"I suppose you knew what the problem was straight away," said Jake.

"Of course I did," said Gilbert. "It's an obvious lemma in the derivation of Maxwell's equations. It should be apparent to the meanest intellect. But it never occurred to Alan and Robin."

"So what happened?" asked Jake. "Did they buy a new television set?"

"Of course not," said Gilbert. "I fixed the problem for them. I simply nudged the cushion out of the way a bit when they weren't looking. That exposed the sensor and suddenly the remote control started working again as if by magic."

"How did you get Alan and Robin to try the remote control again?" asked Jake. "By that time they must have been certain that the system was irretrievably broken."

"I knocked the remote onto the floor," said Gilbert, "and then I jumped up and down on it until the television turned itself on. They found the demonstration quite persuasive."

"They must have been pleased that they didn't have to go shopping for a new TV after all," said Jake.

"Not a bit of it," said Gilbert. "They just shouted at me for shredding the cushion. Ungrateful buggers..."

"You just can't win when you're a kitten," said Jake

"No," said Gilbert. "But I take consolation in the fact that kittens can do this." He batted a scrap of paper that was lying on the floor and then he stalked it as it skittered away. He leaped upon it when it wasn't looking, killed it stone dead and then sent it bouncing across the carpet again. He hunkered down for another chase, wiggling his bottom so as to line himself up properly.

"Why do you keep doing that?" asked Jake.

"Doing what?"

"Chasing bits of paper and bits of plastic all over the house and then throwing them away and doing it all over again."

"It's educational," said Gilbert. "I'm learning all about Newton's Laws of Motion. It's very important to understand Newton's laws when you're a cat. You can't catch a bird or a mouse without a bit of Newton being involved. Vectors, you know. Vectors are vital."

Jake looked puzzled. "What's a vector?"

"I'm not sure," said Gilbert. "I haven't got to that page in the textbook yet. But there's a whole chapter all about vectors in the table of contents, so they must be important."

"You're a bit of a girly swot on the quiet, aren't you?" said Jake.

"No!" Gilbert denied the accusation vehemently. "I'll prove it to you. Let's play a game."

"That's a good idea," said Jake. "I like games. Shall we play chase?"

"OK," said Gilbert. He sat back on his haunches and clenched his fists. He took a left jab at Jake's nose and followed it up with a roundhouse right that made Jake go cross-eyed. Jake jumped about six feet backwards and

shook his head. "That's not chase," he complained. "Don't you know the rules?"

"Of course not," said Gilbert. "I'm a kitten. I'm only fourteen weeks old. I don't know anything. Come back and let me hit you again."

"No thanks," said Jake. "I think I'll go and play tug'o'war with Alan. He's really good at tug'o'war."

"That's an excellent idea," said Gilbert. "He needs a bit of intellectual stimulation."

# Preparing For The Flood

The ark was far too large to be built on land and so Noah and his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth had built it directly in the water, right where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers met each other. Noah hurried along the deck, clutching a sheaf of papyrus documents and trying not to trip over the scavenging chickens that kept pecking at his toe nails. He was late for the weekly progress report meeting and time was precious.

The meeting room was on deck C, just across from the elephant enclosure. His sons were already there. Shem and Japheth were talking quietly together. Ham was sitting in a corner by himself poking moodily at the beads on his laptop abacus.

"Sorry I'm late," said Noah, "but the printer was playing up again. It took me ages to get the latest project plan printed out."

"What's wrong with the stupid thing?" asked Shem.

"It's a printer," said Noah. "That's what's wrong with it. They never work properly. The sooner we get the papyrusless office that they've been promising us for the last twenty years, the better I'll be pleased."

"Did you try running the spring down and then turning the crank to wind it up again?" asked Japheth.

"Of course I did," snapped Noah. He handed out some of the papyrus sheets. "Here's the latest Gantt Chart," he said. "We've got just over a year until Deluge Day, or D-Day as the CEO keeps calling it in his memos, and we've still got quite a lot of work ahead of us. If you look closely at the chart you'll see that we're falling behind on the critical path. The rate determining step is animal acquisition and we're doing really badly with it." He handed out some more sheets

of papyrus. "Here's a list of outstanding animals. I'd like you all to get on to it right away."

Shem had been examining the animal list while his father was talking and he clearly wasn't happy with it. "Come on, dad," he said, "this is just silly. I simply don't believe that there's such an animal as a quokka."

"Quokka," murmured Ham, using his laptop abacus to interrogate the master database. "Here it is - it's a small and rather ugly marsupial that lives only on Rottnest Island, just off the coast of West Australia."

"Australia!" exclaimed Shem. "No wonder we're falling behind schedule, dad. Have you any idea how long it takes to transport animals from Australia? Our shipping agent lives in Alice Springs and he's quite useless. These days he spends all his time at Uluru. Apparently his pet dingo ate somebody's baby."

"And where are we going to keep the quokkas, assuming we ever get any?" asked Japheth. "The marsupial deck is already full to overflowing with wombats. They breed like..." he struggled for a simile. "...like wombats," he finished lamely. "I'll swear every single one of them is born pregnant. We simply don't have any room for the quokkas."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," said Noah vaguely. "Ham, what have you got to report?"

"I'm not at all happy with my assignment," said Ham. "We're a very strict Jewish family, so I really can't think what possessed you to call me Ham in the first place. But giving me the pigs to look after on top of that is just adding insult to injury. It simply won't do."

"Take it up with your mother," said Noah vaguely. "It was all her idea."

"How can I?" asked Ham. "She's away in Thebes negotiating for aardvarks."

"Just try and make the best of it," said Noah. "You're much better at pigs than the rest of us." He consulted his papyrus sheets again. "Now," he said, "the next item on the

agenda is a complaint we've received from the environment protection people. They tell us we're going to have to stop mucking the animals out directly into the river. It simply can't cope with the load. The water isn't swimmable any more. It isn't even wadeable. The country's clean, green image is looking a bit tarnished and er... brown."

"The water tastes rather funny when you drink it as well," said Shem. "And sometimes you have to spit out lumpy bits. But what other choice do we have? You can't stop animals from doing what comes naturally and when you've got as many animals as we have, there's an awful lot of it to get rid of."

"Perhaps we should invest in more dung beetles," suggested Japheth.

"Maybe we could send it all up river to Babylon," said Ham. "Nebuchadnezzar is constantly complaining about how much fertilizer the hanging gardens need."

"Good idea," said Noah, and he made a note. "OK, that's all I have to say. Let's call the meeting to a close so that we can all get on with our jobs."

They made their way back to the top deck of the ark. Shem was in the lead. He climbed out through the hatch on to the deck and then almost immediately he turned round and came back again. "Dad," he said, sounding a bit worried, "it's started to rain and it's coming down really heavily. Do you think that D-Day has come a bit earlier than planned?"

Noah stared at his Gantt Chart in consternation. "I hope not," he said. "That would throw everything completely off track."

Ham's laptop abacus began to make rapid clicking noises. "It's a memo from the CEO," said Ham. "He says not to worry, this is just a bit of a practice run. The number two reservoir was starting to overflow so the CEO is taking the opportunity to drain off the excess. It will only be a small deluge and we'll be OK. Atlantis is going to sink though."

"That's a shame," said Japheth. "I always liked Atlantis. Great beaches!"

"Well, look on the bright side," said Ham. "At least we can cross unicorns off the animal list."

# Gilbert Goes Outside

From the minute he was born, Gilbert the ginger cat has always been an inside person. When he was young, he was quite a traveller – his foster mum took him to the office every morning so that everybody could coo over him all day instead of doing any work, and then she took him home again with her every evening. So he did get to see the outside world quite a lot. But he always saw it from the safety of his travelling cage on the back seat of his foster mum's car. He never had an opportunity to run around in it and break things. That remained his one, great, unfulfilled ambition.

After Gilbert came to live with us, he continued to be an inside cat for several months because Robin and I felt that he was far too small and vulnerable to deal with the great outdoors. Gilbert, however, did not agree with us...

One day Jake the Dog went up to the door and said, "Can somebody open this please? I want to go outside and inhume my bone." Ever eager to obey Jake's requests, I opened the door for him.

"Can I go too?" asked Gilbert, fur quivering with ginger eagerness.

"Certainly not," said Jake forcefully. He trotted off through the door into the garden. I closed the door behind him.

"Sorry, Gilbert," I said. "You aren't quite ready yet."

"That's not fair," said Gilbert. "Why does Jake have all the fun?"

"Because he's a dog," I said.

Gilbert wasn't convinced by my logic. "I can be a dog too," he said. "Jake's been giving me lessons."

I looked at Robin and Robin looked at me. We both looked at Gilbert. "Woof," he mumbled, somewhat unconvincingly.



Then he lifted his back leg and threatened to pee on the couch. "See?" he said. "Just like a real dog."

"OK. OK," said Robin, "You've persuaded me." She opened the door.

Gilbert trotted gingerly outside. The first thing he did when he got there was dash under the couch that sits on our deck. From there he surveyed the big blue room that stretched out infinitely large in front of him. It wasn't long before he noticed leaves that were bouncing in the breeze and insects that were buzzing in spirals around the flowers. Cor! Fascinating! It was all too much to resist and the urge to catch and kill something overwhelmed him. He pranced out on to the lawn where he raised himself up on his hindquarters like a meercat and tried to grab something with his front paws. He dropped back onto all four feet then he flopped down onto his tummy and examined his front paws carefully in case anything interesting had been trapped in them. "Damn!" he muttered when close scrutiny revealed them to be empty.

He looked around for something else to stalk and it wasn't long before he was rewarded with the sight of a rather sluggish bee that was hovering around a lavender plant. It seemed to have taken on a full cargo, so much so in fact that it was barely airworthy and its wings were working overtime simply to keep it in the same place. "Hah!" said Gilbert softly. "A sitting target." He gave a convulsive leap into the air and the bee vanished. The next thing I saw was Gilbert chewing contentedly. "Yummy!" he said and he licked his lips.

"You're lucky you didn't get stung," I said. "Probably the bee was too tired to react in time."

"Stung?" asked Gilbert, puzzled. "What's that?"

"You'll find out eventually," I said. "Sooner or later you'll come across a bee that will teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

"Oh goody!" said Gilbert. "I like learning new things. Are bees good teachers?"

"Very good," I said.

Gilbert turned his attention to a pair of butterflies that were flying in circles around each other. His head turned round and round as he followed their gyrations and just when I was starting to worry that he might unscrew his head and cause it to fall to the ground where it would land in a pile of yummy dog poo, he made a mighty leap and missed the butterflies completely. They flew away, still making circles around each other and laughing hysterically at Gilbert's clumsy efforts to catch them. "Call that flying?" yelled one of them. "That's not flying. *This* is flying." The butterfly looped a loop into the fourth dimension and then both butterflies vanished with a soft *popping* sound, leaving Gilbert frustrated and alone.

An aeroplane buzzed by overhead. Gilbert stared at it in wonder and made a little yammering sound in the back of his throat. Then, with an almighty leap, he caught it, pulled it out of the sky and ate it all up, spitting out the indigestible bits like pilots and suitcases.

Well, that was clearly the plan. Maybe next time it will work. I resolved to send a letter to Air New Zealand to warn them of the danger.

# I Thunk, Therefore I am Locked

I got out of the car and pressed the button on my gadget. Normally when I do that there is a satisfying "Thunk!", the indicator lights flash, and all the doors lock themselves. But this time nothing at all happened. No noise, no lights, no locks. The car had completely run out of thunk. *Damn!* I thought. The battery in my gadget must be flat. I locked the car with my ignition key and went about my business. It felt very strange. I hadn't used the ignition key for anything except starting the engine for so many years that I'd lost count, and I was fumble-fingered and awkward when I tried to insert it in the door.

An hour or so later I returned to the car and experimentally I pressed the button on my gadget again. But it was fruitless. The car remained thunkless. I drove home, pondering the nature of a car without thunk.

"It's broken," I explained to Robin.

She looked puzzled, as well she might. "What is?" she asked.

I waved my gadget at her. She was not impressed. "Call that a gadget?" she asked scornfully. "That's not a gadget. *This* is a gadget!" With an excited flourish she waved her own. But it did no good. The car refused to thunk.

It seemed unlikely to me that two thunk-causing gadgets would stop working simultaneously. Surely their batteries would not go flat within seconds of each other? And anyway, when I looked more closely, each gadget flashed a green light when its buttons were pressed. If the gadget was broken, surely it would flash a red light? Clearly the gadgets

were functioning normally. The car itself must have a broken thunker.

"Have you checked the level of the think in the thunk tank?" asked Robin. "It might need topping up." In a previous life, Robin had been a car mechanic. She knows about these things.

"I didn't know I had a thunk tank," I confessed.

"You don't," said Robin, "but the car does." She checked, but the thunk tank was almost overflowing with think. Clearly that wasn't the problem.

Bugger!

I drove the car to an auto-electrician called Chris. "I have no thunk and I must clank," I explained.

"Leave it with me," said Chris, helpfully. "I'll soon have your car thinking again."

"Thank you," I said. "Sorry to impose such a thunkless task on you." Chris winced and I could see him mentally adding \$20 to my bill...

Happy that the car was in good hands, I gave Chris my ignition key and my gadget. Then I went for a long walk with Jake the Dog. Half way through the walk, my phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hi," said a voice. "This is Chris."

"Hello, Chris," I said. "Have you got good news for me?"

"Yes and no," said Chris. "The good news is that I traced the circuit and found a blown fuse. So I put a new fuse in and pressed the button on your gadget..." He paused.

"And the bad news?" I encouraged him.

"And I got a sort of half-hearted thunk," he said. "Then the fuse blew again."

"That doesn't sound hopeful," I said.

"No," said Chris, "I'm going to have to fit a whole new thunker. The old one is, to use a technical term, munted."

"As in stuffed?" I asked.

He shook his head dolefully. "No," he said, "it's much worse than that."

"So what exactly does the repair involve?" I asked.

"Eye wateringly large amounts of money," said Chris in deeply satisfied tones. With a heavy heart, I told him to go ahead with it.

The new unit thunks in a most satisfying manner when you press its extraordinarily big gadget. I can also thunk from much further away than I could before. I can do it from all the way across the car park which makes the car look as if it is saying hello to me as soon as it spots me coming. I find this very gratifying.

"There's an added bonus," said Chris as he handed me the new gadget. "I've put a red LED on the dashboard. When you lock the car with your gadget, the thunk starts the LED flashing and everyone will think you have a car alarm. You haven't got a car alarm, it's only a flashing light, but nobody except you and I know that."

"Cor!" I said, impressed.

# Christmas Celebrations

"Many happy returns," said the angel, handing Jesus a birthday card.

Jesus scowled at the card. "Put it on the mantelpiece with all the others," he said.

The angel stared at the mantelpiece that stretched across the room behind Jesus. He was a very new angel and he'd never seen the mantelpiece before. It was made of highly polished oak and it receded so far into the distance in each direction that the angel couldn't see an end to it. Like all receding parallel lines, it converged to a point in the distance, and vanished from view. The angel had a vague memory of learning about that in a geometry lesson at school back in the days before he made the transition to angelhood. Uncountable numbers of birthday cards sat neatly to attention all along the mantelpiece, as far as the eye could see. He gulped, and tried to squeeze his own modest card into the crowd, being careful not to knock any of them over. He had a horrible feeling that if he did, all the cards would collapse one after the other, racing off into infinity like a never ending fall of dominoes.

"I hate this time of year," grumbled Jesus. "Every time it rolls around there are more and more angels giving me more and more cards and I have to keep extending the mantelpiece to cope with them all. It's a good job my dad was a carpenter. At least I know how to make a decent mortice and tenon joint."

The angel couldn't resist the temptation. "Wouldn't a concealed dovetail joint be easier? It would look so much nicer as well. You'd never be able to see where one bit ends and the next bit begins."

Jesus scowled. "You might be right," he said, "but I'll never know. I missed that lesson. I went out into the world to start doing my sermon stuff shortly after dad taught me mortice and tenon joints, and I never went back home again. So they are the only kind of joints I know how to do." He gave a humourless laugh. "Let's be thankful for small mercies - at least I didn't use nails. I've always hated nails ever since..." He paused. "Well... you know," he finished lamely.

The angel nodded sympathetically.

"I suppose you'll be at the party tonight?" asked Jesus grumpily.

"Yes," said the angel. "I'm really looking forward to it. They're putting on a fish nibble gourmet buffet. Gabriel baked five loaves and Peter went fishing and caught two whitebait. He says that should be more than enough for everyone."

"I don't want to go to the party at all," said Jesus, "but I have to. I really don't like it when all the assembled heavenly hosts sing *Happy Birthday* to me. It's so embarrassing because most of them can't sing in tune. But the Holy Ghost absolutely loves it. He's been rehearsing them for ages and if I don't go He'll come round every night and haunt me unmercifully. It's enough to drive a person to drink." Jesus poured water into a glass then he tapped the glass with his forefinger. The liquid turned a deep, dark red. "Falernian," explained Jesus. "I developed a real taste for the Roman vintages, back in the day." He drank deeply and sighed with pleasure. "That's a nice drop," he said. "It never fails to turn my teeth pink and make me fall over. What more can you ask of a wine?"

"Well, at least that little trick guarantees that you'll never run out of wine to drink at the party," said the angel. "You know what they say - always look on the bright side of life!"

"Never ending wine is the only thing that makes the party bearable," said Jesus, morosely, "particularly when

everybody starts to give me presents."

"Don't you like presents?" asked the angel, who'd spent all his wages on a small parcel of frankincense which he'd been quite looking forward to presenting to Jesus at the party.

"Gold," moaned Jesus. "Piles and piles of bloody gold, box after box of frankincense resin, and more myrrh than you can shake a stick at. It's all so bloody unimaginative. Why won't anybody give me a train set?"

The angel felt a little shocked at the sacrilege, but then he began to consider the possibilities. If he could get hold of a train set before the party began, it might help him a lot with the advancement of his career. And maybe he should see about selling his frankincense as well. Once the word began to spread about train sets, the bottom was bound to fall out of the frankincense market.

"I've been helping to decorate the tree," the angel said, suddenly feeling quite bold because Jesus was confiding in him. "I put a star on the top."

"Why?" asked Jesus. "What's a star got to do with anything?"

"It signifies the star that shone over your birth place," said the angel.

"That's wrong," said Jesus. "Dad always told me that I was born in a five star hotel. He said he could count the stars through the hole in the roof. They never get that bit right in nativity plays."

"There's going to be a special nativity play at the party tonight," said the angel, "but don't tell anyone that I told you. I don't want to get into trouble."

"What's so special about it?" asked Jesus. "They do one every year and it's always exactly the same - shepherds wash their socks by night all seated round the tub, a bar of Sunlight soap comes down and they begin to scrub. Dead boring if you ask me, though nobody ever does. You've washed one sock, you've washed them all in my opinion."



"It's special because I'm playing the bar of soap," said the angel proudly. "Everybody says I'm really good at coming down. They've never seen anyone come down better. I'm sure you'll enjoy it when you see it."

Jesus brightened. "Break a leg!" he said, encouragingly. "Come down hard. Don't worry, I'll heal it for you afterwards. That's my super power."

"Thanks," said the angel, "I appreciate it. Anyway, it was nice meeting you, but I really should be going now. I've got a lot of rehearsing to do. Merry Christmas!"

"Bah, humbug!" said Jesus.

# Pick a Peck of Pakowhai

Most lunchtimes Jake the Dog and I drive to Pakowhai Park so that Jake can run around off the lead, sniff at things and try to herd the other dogs. None of them pay him any attention, which he finds incredibly frustrating, but nevertheless he continues to try very hard because that's his super power and he simply can't help himself.

For the last year or so, busy men in high visibility jackets have been digging up large sections of the road around Pakowhai Park. The traffic system is being completely re-organised - three new roundabouts and a whole new road will completely alter the approach to the park when they are finally finished. But while the construction is going on, navigating the roads in order to get to the park is a frustratingly slow, complex and occasionally dangerous process. Potholes appear and disappear without warning. Yesterday's two way stretch is today's single lane and traffic builds up waiting impatiently for a man carrying a STOP sign to turn it to GO so that they have permission to proceed. There is much shaking of fists and the occasional hoot. Loose stones and gravel are everywhere and vast clouds of dirt and dust envelope every vehicle. Commercial car washers are doing a roaring trade.

One day, as Jake and I were making our way to the park, something went CRACK! very loudly.

"What was that?" asked Jake, startled.

"A flying stone has hit the windscreen," I said. "If you look carefully you can see the chip in the glass."

"That will have to be fixed," said Jake. "Chipped windscreens are not safe."

"I'll arrange to have it done as soon as possible," I said. "Meanwhile, let's go for a run in the park."

"What a good idea!" said Jake, and so that's what we did.

When we got back to the car after our run, we found that the chip in the windscreen had turned into a large crack that travelled about four inches down the windscreen. "Oh dear," said Jake, "that looks ominous. I wonder how they'll manage to fix it."

"I'm not sure they'll be able to," I replied. "But it's definitely a job for the experts, and quite an urgent one as well."

Jake got in the car and put his seat belt on. I did the same and we drove carefully home. I was a little dubious about driving with a cracked windscreen. Was it going to shatter without warning, showering me with glass crystals? I parked my car in the garage and rang a windscreen specialist for advice.

"Who are you insured with?" asked the nice windscreen specialist. I told her and she checked up on the details of my policy. "Oh look," she said, "you've got a glass clause in your policy and there's no excess on the coverage. So whatever we have to do to your windscreen won't cost you anything. The insurance company will pay for it all. Isn't that lucky?"

"Yes it is," I said, starting to feel a bit better about the whole thing.

"Now," she said, "describe the crack for me. How big is it?"

"It's about four inches long," I said, "running vertically up and down the windscreen from the original spot where the stone chipped it."

"Something that size definitely means you'll need a whole new windscreen," she said. "Is the crack obstructing your view of the road?"

"No," I said. "It's just behind the mirror so I really don't see very much of it unless I squint."

"Perfect," she enthused. "That means you are quite safe to drive the car. We only get worried when the crack is

across your field of view. It tends to be rather distracting and that makes driving more than a little bit dangerous."

"But isn't it still dangerous to drive with a big crack like that, even if it is out of my field of view?" I asked. "What happens if it gets worse and the windscreen shatters?"

"Run your fingernail across the crack," she said, "and see if you can feel it."

I did what she said and I couldn't feel anything at all. I could feel the original chip where the stone had hit the windscreen but the glass around the crack itself was perfectly smooth both inside and outside the car. If I hadn't been able to see the crack, I'd have sworn that there was nothing there at all. I reported these findings to the windscreen specialist.

"That's good," she said. "It means the outer layers of the windscreen are intact and only the inner layer is actually broken. So you'll be quite safe to drive with it until we can get the windscreen replaced. The outer layers will protect you, though you may find that the crack gets larger as time passes. Once the integrity of the inner layer is breached it will start to lose tensile strength as the crack puts pressure on it and so the crack will gradually expand."

"OK," I said. "That makes sense. So when can I come and get my new windscreen?"

"We don't have a free appointment slot for another two weeks," she said. She named a date and time. "How does that suit you?"

"Righto," I said, "put me down for that. Why is there such a long waiting list?"

"Because we are getting about 300 broken windscreens a week," she explained. "There's a lot of road works going on around Pakowhai Park and our work load has more than doubled since they started."

"Tell me about it," I said. "That's where mine got damaged."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "See you in a fortnight."

Over the next few days the crack gradually increased in size, just as the lady had said it might. But it didn't continue to grow vertically. Clearly it was bored with that direction, so it turned through ninety degrees and began to wander horizontally. From where I sat in the driver's seat it looked like a very large upper case 'L'. Perhaps if I waited long enough, other letters might appear. Maybe an alien entity from between dimensions was painstakingly writing a message to me on my windscreen. 'L' - what could it mean? I discussed the riddle with Jake.

"Perhaps it's going to be an advert urging you to watch re-runs of *I Love Lucy*?" suggested Jake.

"Maybe it will be an advert for Liquorice allsorts," I said. "I *hate* Liquorice allsorts

"

"Whatever it is, it's bound to be an advert," said Jake. "Adverts are everywhere these days. They are almost impossible to avoid. When you get the new windscreen installed, make sure that it's got an ad-blocker fitted as standard. We don't want this to happen again." It was sound advice and I determined to take it.

Eventually the great day dawned and I took the car to have its new windscreen fitted. It was an early morning appointment, the first of the day. I left the car with the fitters and wandered off to have breakfast and coffee at a convenient café. Then I went window shopping for an hour or so. Finally it was time and so I went back to the fitters and picked up my car. It was wearing its brand new windscreen very proudly. I drove home and took Jake for a run at Pakowhai Park.

"That windscreen is very clean," said Jake. "I've never seen visibility like it."

"Yes," I agreed. "It's almost like there isn't a windscreen there at all." As I spoke, a fly crashed into the windscreen and spread its multi-coloured insides all over the glass. "Oh,

look!" I said to Jake, "there really is a windscreen there after all."

"It looks much more normal now," agreed Jake.

About a week after the new windscreen had been fitted, Jake and I drove to Pakowhai Park as usual.

CRACK!

For what it's worth, this is essentially a true story. Smith & Smith really have been completely overwhelmed with windscreen repairs caused by the roadworks at Pakowhai. They did a magnificent job fitting my new windscreen. They sorted out all the insurance details for me and their efficiency, courtesy and helpfulness were just superb. If ever you need your windscreen repaired, make sure you go to Smith & Smith. I promise that you won't be disappointed. And yes, about a week after I got my new windscreen the Pakowhai roadworks struck again and my new windscreen got a chip in it so the whole rigmarole had to be gone through again. Fortunately this time the chip did not turn into a crack so the windscreen just needed a repair rather than a replacement. This too, according to Smith ! Smith, is not unusual. They have had quite a lot of repeat business from those damn road works. I think everyone will be very happy when they are finally finished and the men in high visibility jackets have gone back to wherever it was they came from...

# The Coolest Thing Ever

For most of the New Year we've been sweltering. The temperature and the humidity have both been astronomically high. Jake the Dog has been spending all day panting and drooling while Gilbert the Cat has been lying in the sun and smiling a catty smile all over his ginger face because, like all felines, he loves the warmth.

After far too many days and nights of this, I walked into the lounge to talk to Robin about something or other but, rather to my surprise, she wasn't there any more. She'd melted into a puddle of grease that shimmered on the carpet between her shoes. "This has got beyond a joke," said the puddle of grease, sounding very annoyed. "Bugger the ozone layer, bugger the expense, we're getting air conditioning."

"Yes dear," I said. As one does.

Jake came in and eyed the puddle of grease thoughtfully. "That looks tasty," he said. He came closer and sniffed it, then he poked out a tentative tongue.

"Don't you even think about licking me up," said the puddle of grease. "I'll give you a terrible tummy ache." Jake took the warning to heart and he flopped down on to the carpet, heaved a deep sigh, and went to sleep, there to dream greasy dreams.

I rang my friendly electrician. "Do you supply and/or fit air conditioning units?" I asked.

"Yes indeed," said the lovely Rochelle. "In fact we do both! I'll send someone round to give you a quote."

No sooner had I hung up the phone than the doorbell rang. Once I'd stopped Jake barking, I went to answer the door. There stood a man with a clipboard. "Hello," he said, "I've come to work out a quote for air conditioning."

I took him into the lounge. "Mind you don't slip on the puddle of grease," I said.

He looked around the room and peered out of a couple of windows. "Perfect," he said in deeply satisfied tones. "I suggest we fix the unit to the wall over there, just above the bookcase. The external unit will sit quite nicely in the flower bed on the other side of the wall. I'm afraid we'll have to dig up some weeds to make it fit properly. Will that be OK?"

"That's fine," said the puddle of grease. "Dig up anything you like. Just give me air conditioning."

"Which side of the gate will the external unit be on?" I asked, peering out of the same window the man had peered through. "Oh," I said, answering my own question, "it will be on this side of the gate. That's good. It means Jake won't be able to get anywhere near it. We don't want him peeing on it, do we? What happens when a dog pees on the external unit of an air conditioner?"

"Nothing good," said the man in sepulchral tones. He took a few photographs of the room to give to his workmen and then left, promising that he'd email us a quote as soon as he got back to the office.

"Excellent," said the puddle of grease, sounding very satisfied. "I'm glad the wheels are finally in motion. I'm looking forward to solidifying again."

A quote arrived in my inbox. The email was terribly modern - it had two links buried within it. One link allowed me to accept the quote and another forced me to reject the quote. Despite the eye-wateringly large amount of money printed on the bottom line, I clicked on the link to accept the quote. No sooner had I done so than the doorbell rang and Jake went berserk again. I held on to his collar and opened the door.

"Hello," said a young man, eyeing Jake nervously, "You've accepted our quote, so I've come to install your air conditioner."

"Come in," I said.



"Don't let him in," yelled Jake. "He's an enemy. I want to kill him. And then I want to watch him fit the air conditioner. It'll be fascinating. I've always wanted to watch an air conditioner being installed. It's my lifetime's ambition. It's number one on my bucket list. What's an air conditioner?"

"Err... I'm not very good with dogs," said the young man diffidently. "Don't get me wrong. I love dogs. But I was chewed up and swallowed by a German Shepherd last week, and so I've been a bit nervous of dogs ever since."

"I'll lock him in the bedroom," I said.

"No," protested Jake. "Not the bedroom. Anything but the bedroom!"

I took him off to the bedroom. "Thanks," said the young man. "My mate will be turning up to give me a hand in half an hour or so. That's good - it means we'll be finished in half the time." Frustrated howls from the bedroom bounced off the walls. "I'll just go and unload the van," said the young man, very brave now that Jake wasn't there to keep him under control.

He soon had all the bits and pieces of the air conditioner spread out all over the place. He was scratching his head in a puzzled manner when his mate turned up to help and it wasn't very long before they had the internal unit attached to the wall and the external unit sitting happily in what used to be a carefully cultivated weed bed, Robin's pride and joy. A cable went from the unit to the main fuse box, so presumably it was powering up nicely. They fed a cable from the internal unit through the wall to the external unit and then they switched everything on to see if it worked.

"That's a good sign," said one of the fitters. His head was cocked to one side and he appeared to be listening carefully. "There aren't any funny noises coming out of it, and I can feel a blast of cold air on my face, so my initial assumption is that the thing is doing just what it says on the box."

I looked at the box. It said 'Panasonic' on every side.

"Yes," I agreed. "That unit Panasonics really well. The performance is the very best display of Panasonicing that I've ever seen, and believe me, I've seen lots!"

The technician gave me a funny look. "Let's see if the heat pump pumps any heat." He pressed a button on the remote control and blasts of superheated air roared out of the unit. The temperature of the room rose noticeably and the puddle of grease began to bubble and boil. Wisps of steam rose from it and drifted towards the ceiling.

"Cool me down," begged the puddle of grease. "Right now! Pretty please..."

The fitter pressed another button on the remote control. The blasts of hot air faded away and soon a delicious chill permeated the room again. It got colder and colder and we all got more and more comfortable. Icicles dangled from my nostrils as I revelled in the waves of coolth. "This is just wonderful," said the puddle of grease. We watched it gradually solidify and before very long it was distinctly Robin shaped again.

"I feel better already," said Robin. She broke off one of my nasal icicles and began to pick her teeth with it.

"Robin!" came despairing screams from the bedroom. "Tell him I need to watch!"

Robin ignored Jake's agonised pleading and smiled winsomely at the technician. "You're really cool stuff, you know," she said feelingly, and he blushed.

After the electricians had left, we freed Jake from the bedroom. He came into the lounge and looked at the air conditioning unit. "I preferred it when you were a puddle of grease," he said to Robin, and then he shivered.

# Five

"I'm five," said Jake the Dog. "I'm five. I'm a big boy now. I'm five!"

"Yes, you are," I said. "Perhaps we should have a party to celebrate the occasion."

"That's a good idea," said Jake. He thought about it for a moment, then he asked, "What's a party?"

"All your friends come round and play games," I said. "And they eat and drink far too much."

"Sounds good," said Jake. "How do we go about arranging it?"

"The first thing to do is to leave an invitation for everyone," I said.

"OK," agreed Jake. "Let's go for a walk and I'll get the invitations ready."

I got Jake's lead out of the cupboard, put on my hat and coat, and we went out into the wild, wet afternoon. Jake left a party invitation for his two best friends on every tree and lampost. With so many invitations left in so many places, they'd be certain to receive the message very quickly. By the time we got back home he was exhausted and completely drained. "There," he said, "that ought to do it. I'll check for an RSVP tomorrow."

The next day we retraced our previous route and Jake checked each tree and lampost very carefully. "Maggie isn't coming," said Jake, looking disappointed. He's known Maggie since they were both puppies. They first met when they were students together at the Doggy Disobedience class. They passed disobedience with flying colours and they've been best friends ever since.

"That's surprising," I said. "It's not like Maggie to miss a party."

"She's got to go to the vet," said Jake. "She's got a little bit of an upset tummy. She ate someone who disagreed with her."

We carried on with our walk and Jake made another disappointing discovery. "Booki can't come either," he said after sniffing carefully at a favourite tree.

"That's a shame," I said. "Did he say why?"

"No, he was a bit vague," said Jake. "He just said that he had a previous engagement. But there was something very strange about the message."

"What was strange about it?" I asked.

"The reply was definitely from Booki," said Jake. "You simply can't be anonymous when you're a dog. But oddly, the message was in Tara's handwriting!"

"That is peculiar," I agreed.

"Sometimes I wonder about Tara," said Jake thoughtfully. "Sniff at her bottom and she'll follow you anywhere."

"I know a lot of people like that," I said.

"It looks like it's going to be a small party," said Jake. "Just you and me and Robin. And Gilbert the Cat."

"Small," I agreed, "but perfectly formed."

\* \* \* \*

The day of the party dawned warm and clear. "Happy birthday, Jake," I said and gave him a bone.

"Oh boy!" said Jake, "A bone! Just what I've always wanted. How did you know?" His voice was a bit muffled because he had a bone in his mouth. He took the bone to the middle of the lawn and flopped down to start licking it. Then he chewed it a bit, making noises that sounded just like teeth breaking. I worried about that for a moment, but then Gilbert the Cat got a bit too close to the bone and Jake growled at him to warn him away. Both Gilbert and I could clearly see that all Jake's teeth were still firmly in place.

Gilbert counted them, one by one, just to make sure they were all there. I stopped worrying and left Jake to his bone.

"Can I have a lick?" Gilbert asked Jake. "Pretty please, with knobs on."

"No," said Jake. "Go away."

"You know," said Gilbert thoughtfully, "you might find that it would go down more smoothly if you inhumed it for a while. Inhuming adds flavour and texture."

"Inhume?" asked Jake. "How do you inhume a bone?"

"Don't you know anything?" asked Gilbert scornfully. "When you dig a bone up, you exhume it. So when you bury it, you inhume it. Simple!"

"Ah! I know how to do that," said Jake. "I was planning on doing it later so that I could have the bone for dessert. And maybe for breakfast tomorrow as well. But now that you've put the idea into my head..." He carried his bone over to the patch of garden that Robin had carefully mulched and composted the day before. It was beautifully soft, moist and squishy there, very easy to dig. So much of our garden is covered in decoratively laid rocks, and just underneath them is solid, dry clay. When Jake digs there it tends to break his toenails, and he is very vain about his toenails. He spends ages trimming and shaping them so as to get them just right. I always shout at him whenever he gives himself a pedicure, because he makes such disgusting slobber-sucking, grinding noises while he's shaping and polishing his nails. So these days he tends to do it when I'm not around.

The chance to dig in soft soil was just too good for Jake to resist and it wasn't long before Robin's carefully prepared flowerbed was scattered to the four corners of the garden. Jake placed his birthday bone carefully in the hole he'd dug and then he shovelled as much soil as he could back into the hole. The final touches involved him scooping up mountains of mulch with his nose and piling it artistically on top of the inhumation site. Then he came to tell me all

about what he'd done and how clever he felt he'd been. He seemed quite hurt when I proved to be less than impressed.

"What's the matter?" he asked, honestly puzzled.

"Look at the carpet," I said.

We both looked at the carpet. Muddy paw prints criss-crossed it and there were several piles of black dirt placed in carefully chosen strategic positions where Jake had sneezed, thereby causing the mounds of mud on his snout to fall off.

"I think that's a rather pretty effect," said Jake. "Quite artistic. However, if you really want to remove it, just let it dry and then you can vacuum it up, easy peasy. But wait until I'm not around before you do it. I'm scared of the vacuum cleaner."

"I'll do it tomorrow," I said. "I don't want to spoil your birthday party."

Jake glanced out of the window. "Excuse me," he said, "Gilbert's getting a bit too close to my inhumed bone. I need to go and stare at him until he goes away." He went outside and did just that. Eventually Gilbert washed himself nonchalantly in order to show that he didn't feel at all threatened, and then he wandered away to deal with important cat business. Jake exhumed his bone. He felt that it had been underground long enough now to have enhanced both its flavour and its texture. He was eager to return to it.

He spent the rest of the afternoon tending to his bone. First he licked off the dirt, then he chewed the bone for a while. Next he picked it up and walked round the garden with it, pausing every now and then to see if this new garden spot was any better for bone chewing than the last one had been. Rinse, lather, repeat.

As the sun went down and darkness spread itself over the garden, he came back into the house, a tired and happy dog. He walked towards me across the carpet carefully avoiding the patches of dirt that he'd left there earlier and

depositing new ones in all the clean spaces. "That was a great party," he said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," I said. "But it's been a pretty exhausting day. It's probably time for bed. Say goodnight, Jake."

"Goodnight, Jake," said Jake obediently.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Jake and I went for our usual morning walk. As we so often do, we met Maggie. "Hello Maggie," said Jake. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks," said Maggie. "Do you want to play chase?"

"Yes, please," said Jake, and they both dashed off towards the horizon. The sound of frantic barking echoed faintly back to me as it bounced off the houses, waking all the sleepyheads who were still tucked up snug and warm in their beds at 6.30am. Serves them right for being such lazybones, I thought to myself.

Eventually Jake came back. He had a huge grin on his face and several yards of tongue hung dripping out of the side of his mouth. "I've left a message for Booki," he said "I've told him what a great party he missed."

"I'm sure he'll be sorry he couldn't make it," I said.

"Maggie wrote the note for me," said Jake. "I hadn't realised just how much fun that could be until she did it. Now I know why Booki got Tara to write his RSVP. Clever boy, that Booki."

Then he winked at me.

# Washing Up Blues

"E30" said the dishwasher smugly. "Beep" it added, in case I hadn't noticed what was going on.

"What does E30 mean?" I asked.

"It's a flood warning," said the dishwasher.

"What should I do about it?" I asked.

"Turn me off and wait for a few seconds then turn me back on," said the dishwasher. "If I still say E30, turn me off again, disconnect the power, turn the water off and call a service agent."

I did as I was told. "E30," said the dishwasher again. "Beep, beep." And then it leaked copiously all over the kitchen floor.

I splashed across the kitchen, turned the dishwasher off and disconnected the power. I couldn't do anything about turning the water off. The valve seemed to need a special tool which I didn't have. I certainly couldn't turn it by hand. I concentrated on mopping up the water that was covering the floor. Eventually the floor seemed reasonably dry, so I left the dishwasher to fend for itself.

All this happened late on a Friday evening. Clearly I would not be able to call anyone about it until the weekend was over, not without paying exorbitant call out fees anyway. Annoyed, I resigned myself to suffering through the terrible first world problem of having to do the dishes by hand for several days. I resolved to cook small frugal meals that used the minimum number of pots, pans, plates and utensils. I have a friend who cannot make himself a cup of tea without dirtying every dish in the house. I decided that he would be *persona non grata* until the dishwasher was fixed.



The next morning, the kitchen floor was covered in water again. I started to mop it up and Jake the Dog came to help me by lapping up as much of it as he could. "Yum, yum," he said. Between us, we got the floor relatively dry again. I pulled the dishwasher out from its cubbyhole, disposed of the four dead cockroaches and six cat toys that I found lurking in the recesses, and then I slid a towel under the leaking dishwasher. By the evening, it was soaking wet, so I changed it for another. The next morning I had to repeat the operation. The day after that was Monday and everyone was back at work. This was fortunate, because I was starting to run out of towels. I rang the store from which I'd bought the dishwasher about eighteen months before and explained the situation. "We'll get a technician out as soon as we can," the store spokesman promised me.

Later that day I received a text message telling me that a technician would be arriving some time between eight and ten the following morning. Rather to my surprise, he arrived exactly on time. Jake and I watched with interest as he dismantled the dishwasher and peered inside. "Good grief," he said, sounding very surprised. "How many hoses does a dishwasher need?" He counted them. "Seven hoses," he said. "I've never seen a dishwasher with seven hoses before. I wonder what they all do? Come to think of it, I wonder what they connect to."

He poked around for a while. "Aha!" he announced in triumphant tones. "Here's your problem." One of the seven hoses had a very clean looking cut all the way through it. It looked for all the world as if the hose had been cut by a knife, though I couldn't even begin to imagine how that could be possible. I had definitely washed a lot of sharp knives in the dishwasher but none of them had been anywhere near any of the hoses. Perhaps a sword wielding cockroach on a quest had survived whatever peril it was that had killed its four brethren and had managed to crawl

inside the dishwasher where it had accidentally slashed the hose during a fight. Perhaps I had too active an imagination.

A steady dribble of water leaked out of the cut.

"Can you fix it?" I asked the repair man. He shook his head.

"Can you replace it?" I asked. He shook his head again.

"It's not a standard hose," he said. "It's a proprietary size and length and it's specific to this machine. I'll have to order a replacement."

"How long will that take?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Depends if they've got one in the country," he said. "If they have to order it from overseas it could take months." Then he brightened. "But it's quite a new dishwasher," he said, "so the chances are good that they'll have one in stock. If they do, it will only take about ten days." He took a lot of photographs of the inside of the dishwasher. "I'll set the wheels in motion," he said. He reassembled the dishwasher and started to pack his tools away.

"Can you turn the water off?" I asked. "So that the dishwasher stops flooding my kitchen."

"Sure," he agreed. He reached behind the dishwasher with a magic wand and made mystical gestures. "There you are," he said. "That should keep things dry until we get the rest of it sorted out."

Nothing except a lot of manual washing up happened for several days. Then the phone rang. "You have two choices," said a voice. "We can give you a whole new dishwasher, but you will have to agree to forfeit the rest of your warranty. Or we can repair the dishwasher and your warranty stays active until August 2021."

Since I wasn't aware that I had a warranty, this offer took me a little by surprise. Maybe I should have read the small print a little more carefully. Either way, the choice was a no brainer. "I'll take the repair and keep my warranty," I said. "How long will it be before you can come and do it?"

"We'll be in touch," said the voice, and the line went dead as the voice terminated the call.

A lot more manual washing up happened and then, a week later, the phone rang again. "Will you be available tomorrow between eight and ten in the morning for someone to come and repair your dishwasher?"

"Yes indeed," I agreed enthusiastically. Manual dish washing had completely lost what little charm it had once had. I was eager for a fix. So to speak.

The next day a man arrived with a new hose and a bag full of elaborate tools. He stripped the dishwasher down, detached the old hose and threw it away. Then he attached the top of the new hose to a mysterious valve at the top of the dishwasher. He led the hose down deep into the bowels of the machine and scrabbled round inside it trying to attach the bottom of the hose to an equally mysterious valve at the bottom of the dishwasher.

"Ouch!" he said suddenly. He winced a bit and withdrew his arm. He examined the blood that welled copiously from a large gash on his forearm. "I hate it when that happens," he said.

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"The edges of the frame are incredibly sharp," he explained. "Because they are all internal and not normally exposed to the outside world, nothing is done to smooth the edges off when they come out of the press that manufacturers them. So it's as if all the internal workings of the dishwasher have been built inside a cage made out of razor blades. You have to be really careful when you scrabble around inside it to fix things. I generally end up making a blood sacrifice to the Gods of the Soapsuds before they'll let me complete my repairs." He took a sticking plaster out of his toolbox and used it to bind his wound. Clearly he'd been expecting this event and had come well prepared. He reached back inside the machine to try attaching the bottom of the hose again. "That's almost

certainly how your original hose got cut open," he said chattily. "The dishwasher was probably assembled a little clumsily, late on a Friday afternoon when the workers got careless because they were looking forward to the weekend. I imagine the hose would have been a bit too close to one of the sharp edges. As the pump forced water through it, the hose would have vibrated back and forth against the edge. Eventually the edge would have cut all the way through it, just like it cut my arm." He began to put the dishwasher back together again. He turned the water back on and connected the dishwasher to the power. "There you are," he said. "It's as good as new." He took his leave and Jake barked a fond farewell. He likes people who come to the house with bags of tools.

I turned the dishwasher on. "E42," it said smugly and beeped seductively. It sounded happy.

"What does E42 mean?" I asked.

"It means thank you for fixing me," said the dishwasher. "Now how about you fill me up with dirty dishes. I'm eager to get back to work."

"OK," I said. "I'll invite my friend round to make a cup of tea. That should give you lots to do."

"Sounds good," said the dishwasher. "Beep, beep."

# The Suck Fairy

It all began when, on the advice of friends, we decided that we needed to buy a Dyson V11 Absolute vacuum cleaner. "Nothing else will do when you have animals in the house," our friends assured us. "Only a Dyson V11 Absolute will keep your house squeaky clean and free of fur."

We were dubious.

"No really," they said. "Before we got ours, a friend who is very allergic to cats had to dose himself to the eyeballs with anti-histamines before he came to visit and he still always had to leave early because he reacted so badly. But now that we have a Dyson V11 Absolute he can stay at least half an hour longer than he's ever managed to stay before!"

We expressed interest.

"It's also very pretty and futuristic," they said. "Perfect for science fiction fans. It has a long, thin cylindrical shaft which is, of course, a tasteful shade of purple. At one end of the shaft you can attach any one of a variety of nozzles. At the other end you attach a grunty, battery powered motor together with a transparent plastic cylinder that fills up with the grunge that is sucked up the shaft as you vacuum. It's utterly fascinating to watch! Much better than television."

"So what you seem to be describing," we said, "sounds like a rather skinny vacuum cleaner which you don't have to plug in when you use it because it's battery driven. I presume there's a charger for the battery?"

"That's right," they said. "The Dyson V11 Absolute sits there charging all the time until you want to use it. Then you just pick it up and start vacuuming. Just like that. You don't have to faff around plugging it in and struggling with recalcitrant hoses."

"How can that possibly work?" we asked. "How can you have a vacuum cleaner without flexible hoses and a power cord to trip over while you clean the house? It's not natural. It makes no sense."

"Magic," they said. "Or possibly sufficiently advanced technology."

It was a convincing argument. As I considered its merits, Jake the Dog wandered over with a stuffed llama. One of our friends played tug of war with it. Jake growled impressively and shook both the llama and himself vigorously back and forth. Huge clumps of fur floated off him and stuck to the carpet. I began to believe that our friends might have a valid point.

Robin went to Google – that infallible source of absolute truth – and checked up on Dyson V11 Absolute vacuum cleaners. "Dyson controls the prices quite rigidly," Robin said. "So nobody discounts them. They cost the same no matter where you buy them. I think we should buy ours from Noel Leeming because they are offering triple Fly-Buys this week."

"That's a very good idea," I said. Off we went to Noel Leeming.

The Noel Leeming salesman was extremely helpful. He demonstrated a Dyson V11 Absolute for us. He poured dirt on to a strip of carpet and vacuumed it up again. "I wonder where that came from?" he mused as he stared at the rubbish in the collection cylinder. "I've not seen that lump of grit before. I think someone must have been walking on this carpet when I wasn't looking."

"Sorry..." I apologised.

He explained all the bits and pieces that made up the Dyson V11 Absolute. Then he pointed to the device that the demonstration model was attached to. "This," he said, "is the charger. You just screw it to the wall in a convenient location, plug it in to a power socket, and hang the vacuum cleaner on it." He thought for a moment. "It's a good idea

to screw the charger to a wall that is somewhere near a power point..."

"I don't fancy doing that," said Robin. "Once the charger is screwed to the wall we won't be able to relocate it, should the fancy take us, without leaving a mess."

"Fortunately," said the salesman, "Dyson have thought of that problem and they have an ideal solution. What you need is a Dok."

"Hickory, dickory," I said, delighted. "Dok?" I asked.

"It's a free standing unit that the charger can attach to," explained the salesman. "which you then plug in to any convenient socket. With a Dok, there is no need to attach anything to the wall. And for this month only, Dyson have a special offer. If you go to their web site and provide proof of purchase, they will send you a Dok absolutely free of charge!"

That was just too good a deal to resist. We paid for the Dyson V11 Absolute. "And you get triple Fly-Buy points," said the lady who was operating the till. "Have you got your card?"

I proffered a card.

"That's an Air-Points card," said the lady. "It won't work with Fly-Buys."

Robin dug around in her wallet and proffered a card of her own.

"That's an Air-Points card," said the lady. "It won't work with Fly-Buys."

"That's all we've got," I said. "Maybe we don't have Fly-Buys after all."

Shamefaced at our abject Fly-Buys failure, we sneaked out of the shop and took our Dyson V11 Absolute home.

I watched Robin unpack the new Dyson V11 Absolute from its box. "Purple!" she said, clearly feeling deeply satisfied. Then she assembled it - unlike me, she is extremely good at putting together the jigsaw puzzle pieces

of new appliances quickly and efficiently. When I try and do it, I always seem to end up with a spare ball bearing...

She pressed a button and the motor whined into life, burbling to itself. Experimentally, Robin ran the nozzle over a patch of carpet. "Wow!", she said, greatly impressed. An astonishing amount of rubbish flew up the shaft into the plastic cylinder. Dog fur, cat fur, grit, grime and six bewildered cockroaches that the Dyson had sucked out of some secret sanctuary all swirled round and round in the cylinder. In no time at all the cylinder was full and Robin switched the Dyson V11 Absolute off so that she could empty it out. "Look," she said to me. "Isn't that amazing?"

"It certainly is," I said, vastly impressed with the quantity of rubbish the Dyson V11 Absolute had pulled out of the carpet. "There's only one problem."

"What's that?" asked Robin.

"All that junk came out of a very small area of carpet," I said. "And now that patch of carpet is several shades lighter than the rest of it."

"Hah!" said Robin, brandishing the newly emptied Dyson V11 Absolute. "You and I can soon fix that."

I tried it out on another patch of carpet. There's no doubt about it, a Dyson V11 Absolute really, really sucks.

All we needed now was a Dok. I went to the Dyson web site to see about claiming my free Dok. After thirty minutes or so of clicking and searching and clicking again I utterly failed to find any information about claiming a free Dok apart from a veiled hint that if I bought a Dyson V11 Absolute directly from Dyson themselves rather than from a store, they might, if the mood took them, send me a Dok as well. Feeling no great urge to buy a second Dyson V11 Absolute, I decided that perhaps I had misunderstood the Noel Leeming salesman. Perhaps I was meant to claim my Dok from the Noel Leeming web site. I rang Noel Leeming and explained my problem to a nice lady.



"You'll never find it on the Dyson web site," she explained. "They don't have any direct links to the page where you claim your free Dok. I can tell you the appropriate URL if you like, but it's easier to just look up Dyson V11 Absolute on the Noel Leeming web site. We've put a direct link to the proper Dyson page there. Just click on it and away you go."

I thanked the nice lady and followed her instructions. The next thing I saw was a Dyson web page that asked me to fill in my details so I could claim my free Dok. Easy peasy. I filled in the serial number of my Dyson V11 Absolute and I provided my name, address, email address and telephone number. I uploaded a scan of my Noel Leeming receipt as proof of purchase and I clicked the submit button. The page thought about it for a moment, then the screen cleared and a new page appeared. The new page said:

Thank you. We have successfully received your submission for an employee discount code. You will receive your limited one time use discount code via email very soon.

This puzzled me. I am not a Dyson employee. I have never been a Dyson employee. I never will be a Dyson employee. Why would I need an employee discount code? Oh well, perhaps it was a bit of a work-around that they were using to allow people to claim their free Dok by pretending to be employees with a discount code. I sat back and waited for the promised email to arrive.

A week later, I was still waiting. I sent an email to Dyson enquiring about my Dok. The next day, having received no reply, I sent another email. After another day of email silence I gave up and rang Dyson directly where, after a lot of automated telephone tag, I finally got to speak to a real live person. I explained my problem, and told her about the puzzling employee discount code.

"That doesn't make any sense," she said. "I'm sure that's not supposed to happen. What is the serial number of your

Dyson V11 Absolute?"

I told her, and I heard the sound of keyboard keys clicking.

"I have no record of that purchase," she said. "Are you in front of a computer at the moment?"

"Yes," I confessed.

"I'll give you the address of the web page where you have to fill in your claim," she said.

I went to the indicated page. "That's the same form I filled in last time," I said.

"Fill it in again," she said, "and tell me what happens."

I filled it in, uploaded the scan of my receipt and pressed the submit button. "It says those details have already been recorded," I said, "and it won't let me submit them again."

She sighed deeply. "I wonder where the information is being stored," she mused. "It isn't in any of the databases that I have access to. Never mind - give me your details over the phone and I'll record it in my database now."

I gave her all the information she needed and I listened to the clatter of keys as she typed it in. "There," she said, "I've got all that. You should be getting an email soon confirming your warranty." No sooner had she finished speaking than a brand new email popped into my inbox - the first email I'd ever received from Dyson. I was thrilled.

"It's arrived," I said.

"Good," she said. "Now I'll see about getting your Dok sent out to you." More keys clattered. "There," she said. "That's done. Please allow 60 days for delivery."

"60 days?" I said, appalled. "Why does it take that long?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm just quoting the terms and conditions of the free Dok agreement. Perhaps free things go to the back of the shipping queue. Things that bring us money always take priority. But with luck, you might get it sooner."

A week later, I got another email from Dyson. Two emails in a week! My cup runneth over! This one informed me that

my Dok was ready to ship and I should receive it in another week or so.

Rather to my surprise, the Dok turned up on my doorstep a few days later. Astonishing! Even more astonishing, two days later Dyson sent me a second Dok, thus making assurance doubly sure. I wonder how many more they will send me?

There is no doubt that a Dyson V11 Absolute really, really sucks and that, of course, is a very good thing. There is equally no doubt that the design of the Dyson web site, the design of the back end databases it uses and Dyson's general ability to communicate effectively with its customers also really, really sucks. At least this has the merit of consistency, but it has no other virtues that I can see.

# The Birthday Present

One Sunday evening, round about 11.00pm, after a particularly strenuous and difficult flush, the toilet decided that enough was enough and so it gave up the ghost and sulked. At first it was hard to tell that anything out of the ordinary had happened. The cistern made the usual swishing and refilling noises. But Robin felt that they were going on for far too long, and they were showing no signs at all of stopping. She listened suspiciously for a while. Then she noticed that water was puddling on the floor around her feet. That's unusual, she thought.

Jake the Dog came wandering in. "The floor's wet," he pointed out in case Robin hadn't noticed.

"I know," said Robin. "It's all leaked out of the toilet."

"Really?" said Jake in an excited tone of voice. "What a red letter day this has turned out to be!" He slurped all the water up, leaving the floor as dry as a bone. "Yum," he said, licking his lips. "Tasty! Did someone say something about a dry bone?"

"Dry as a bone is just a saying," Robin warned him.

"Don't take it literally and don't try to eat the floor. We like it the way it is." Jake's tail drooped in disappointment.

"Spoilsport," he said, but he did as he was told.

Robin took the top off the cistern and peered inside. A thin layer of scummy water swirled around the bottom of it. A pipe was gushing madly, trying its very best to fill the cistern up. Sullen bubbles floated out of the pipe and as fast as the water flowed in to the cistern, it flowed out again through the bubbling hole and dripped on to the floor. Robin turned off the water supply to the toilet. The noise and the flow of water stopped. She came and told me what had happened.

"Fortunately we live in a house with two toilets," I said as I headed determinedly for the other one.

"I wouldn't if I were you," advised Robin. "I think that one's bugged as well."

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"It appears to have broken away from whatever was fastening it to the floor," she said. "It wobbles rather alarmingly."

"At least it still flushes," I said. "If we're careful, we should be able to use it safely until the plumber arrives."

"That's a relief," said Robin.

"No, that's not a relief," I said, as I unzipped and took careful aim, "this is a relief."

She threw a toilet brush at me.

Bright and early on Monday morning I rang the plumber and explained the situation. "Hmmm," said the plumber, thoughtfully. "Sounds like you need a plumber."

"That's a good idea," I said. "Do you think that you could arrange such a thing?"

"Well," he said, "I can definitely promise to have someone there at 8.00am on Friday."

"But that's five days away," I pointed out.

"I might be able to get someone there before then," he said. "It depends how well the jobs we've currently got scheduled go. I can absolutely guarantee Friday, but it might be sooner. With luck..."

"OK," I said and I settled down to wait with anticipation and crossed legs.

"You can borrow my lawn, if you like," said Jake, the ever generous Dog. "There's a really good bit just over there in front of the fence where the neighbours have the best possible view. Let me show you how it works." He demonstrated copiously.

"No thank you," I said. "The ground is too squishy."

By Wednesday, Robin and I were both well practised at using the wobbly toilet. Fortunately neither of us are prone

to sea sickness, so it wasn't too unpleasant an experience. That morning Robin woke me with a kiss. "Happy birthday," she said, for it was indeed my birthday. I was a whole decade older than I had been the day before and everything around me had changed dramatically overnight. The country was clearly going down hill fast. It was full of rude, humourless and ignorant young whipper-snappers who lacked all respect for custom and tradition. One and all, they listened to terrible music performed by screeching people who were too stupid to remember their own surnames. I hoped that all their toilets would break. That would teach them a lesson they wouldn't soon forget!

At precisely 8.00am on my birthday morning the plumber arrived, eager to start plumbing. I showed him the flushless toilet and the wobbly toilet and he frowned. "Well, I can easily replace the broken pipe that is preventing the cistern from filling up," he said. "But I can pretty much promise you that I'll be back again in three months or so to replace whatever it is that breaks next. The toilet is about a quarter of a century old and it's on its last legs. Repairing it is just throwing good money after bad. I recommend that you get a whole new cistern rather than trying to repair the old one piecemeal. It will be a lot cheaper in the long run."

Because I was myself extraordinarily old, I felt that I fully understood what he was telling me. The parallels between me and the ancient toilet were all too obvious. Bits of both of us kept breaking down, and sometimes they fell off. I could easily appreciate how the toilet must be feeling at the moment. It must be very frustrating to be completely unable to flush. I hate it when that happens to me. Perhaps I should have a new cistern fitted as well... "Good idea," I said to the plumber. "Let's do it. What about the wobbly one?"

"Back in the day," said the plumber informatively, "they used brass screws to attach the toilet to the floor. After twenty five years of soaking in unnameable fluids the screws start to dissolve and disintegrate. I doubt there's

anything except the head of the screw left down there. These days we use stainless steel screws. They last for ever."

I contemplated the positive benefits of a stainless steel screw. Perhaps that was just what I needed to make me feel young again...

"I'll go and get a replacement cistern for the dead one," said the plumber and off he went. A few minutes later the phone rang. I answered it. "Good news!" said the plumber. "They've got a sale on. For only an extra \$13 you can get a whole new toilet bowl as well as a new cistern! It's a bargain."

I discussed it with Robin. "The toilet bowl is rather chipped and grubby," she said thoughtfully. "And that makes it a bit hard to clean. Scrubbing really doesn't seem to have very much effect at all, and the toilet duck just quacks in frustration every time I put him in there because, no matter how hard he tries, he never manages to peck much of the grime away."

"I think whoever lived here before us used to clean the toilet with wire wool and an industrial sand blaster," I said. "I've noticed that the porcelain is covered in fine cracks. They are a perfect place for bacteria to hide in and breed. Eldritch horrors lurk unseen down there. Sometimes I hear eerie music in the night when their mad, passionate parties get out of control. And in the morning the toilet is often green and sprouting wavy tendrils of bacterial fur."

"I don't like the fur," said Robin thoughtfully. "It tickles."

"New toilet bowl?" I asked.

"New toilet bowl," she agreed.

"New toilet bowl," I said to the plumber.

"What about the wobbly one?" he asked. "I'll have to take the toilet off the floor anyway so that I can drill holes for the new stainless steel screws. Why not put a new one there as well instead of replacing the original? It's just as old as the first one and in just as poor a condition."

Robin and I repeated our previous conversation word for word. We agreed that the plumber made a very persuasive case. "Two new toilets," I confirmed.

So that was my birthday present to myself. Two new toilets delivered and installed. Best birthday present ever.



# Covid-19

As I write these words, we are coming to the end of our level 4 lockdown. By the time you read them, we will be well into level 3 and, with luck, we'll be starting to make plans about level 2.

In level 4 we are required to stay at home as much as possible and to maintain a social distance between ourselves and other people should we encounter them when we are outside. We are only allowed to go out for essential purposes such as exercise, grocery shopping and visits to the doctor or the pharmacy.

Amusingly, the practical effects of the level 4 lockdown rules have been minimal as far as I am concerned. It has always been my habit to spend most of my time shut away inside my house. I seldom go out or interact very much with any other people because I'm one of nature's natural hermits. So I really haven't found that the lockdown has had much of an impact on my lifestyle at all. The person who has noticed the effect of the level 4 rules the most is my dog Jake who simply cannot understand why he isn't allowed to talk to his friends any more when we go for walks. He's a very sociable and gregarious dog who loves being with people, and no matter how many times I explain the rules of social distancing to him, he just doesn't get it.

I'm also one of the very lucky ones. I have no mortgage to pay and I have no job to lose. My pension payment turns up automatically in my bank account and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. So, unlike a lot of people, I have no financial or employment worries. This too makes the lockdown much easier to bear.

Supermarket shopping has changed quite a lot. Initially there was a lot of bulk buying as people began to hoard

what they considered to be the necessities of life. On the first day of the lockdown the supermarkets sold enough food to feed ten million people – that's more than twice the population of the entire country. It's a bit like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, only in reverse!

To begin with, the most popular items in people's shopping trolleys were toilet paper and hand sanitiser so of course it wasn't very long before you simply couldn't find either of those items on the supermarket shelves. Fortunately that didn't last for very long and nowadays those shelves are fully populated again. I'm really not quite sure why people felt the need to stockpile those things. Perhaps they were intending to spend the lockdown eating deep fried toilet paper garnished with sanitiser sauce. Stranger things have happened...

At the height of the toilet paper binge, when it was almost unobtainable, a local jeweller began to offer toilet paper for sale at \$5,000 a roll. Everyone who bought a roll was given a free gold ring...

Shopping habits have changed drastically. No longer can you just dash off to the supermarket whenever you feel like it to quickly pick up whatever small item it is that you need for tonight's dinner. Instead, you now have to plan your menus far in advance and turn up with a list so that you don't forget anything. It pays to be thoroughly prepared because you will have to queue to get in and everything will take a lot longer than once it did.

Our local supermarket has helpfully painted a set of red lines on the approach to the entrance. The lines are two metres apart so that all the people in the queue can maintain their social distance while they wait to be let in. People are only allowed in to the store on a "one out, one in" basis. When one person leaves the shop, the person at the head of the queue is allowed to enter. The rule is designed to stop the store from getting too crowded so that people

can maintain a social distance even within the supermarket aisles. It seems to work well.

At first I didn't have to queue for very long when I went shopping. All I had to do was produce my Super Gold Card which proved that I was old and decrepit and a member of an at risk group for covid-19 infection. Immediately I would be ushered straight to the front of the queue. Shopping had never been so quick and easy for me! Long live level 4!

Sadly all that has stopped now. I went to the supermarket yesterday, produced my gold card as usual, and was told, "Sorry, mate. We aren't allowed to give you priority any more. We've had a memo from head office". I was sent to the back of the queue and treated just like everybody else. Clearly head office is now keen to eliminate all its older customers by forcing them to stand outside for hours in all weathers in the hope that they will catch something nasty, get very sick and then die. After all, old people don't have nearly as much money to spend on toilet paper and hand sanitiser as the younger customers do, so the sooner they drop down dead, the better for all concerned. Their absence will leave more room for the younger, richer customers to come shopping. Supermarket managers are notoriously hard hearted when it comes to maximising their turnover.

In level 4 we are allowed to leave home for the purpose of exercise, though we are only allowed to walk around our immediate neighbourhood. We aren't allowed to drive any distance. As a result of this rule, Jake and I have spent a lot of time wandering up and down and round and about. Every day, we see a lot of people. Some of them are out with their families and some of them are walking their dogs. The dogs of New Zealand are all having a wonderful time in level 4 - many of them have never had so many daily walks in their lives before and, one and all, they are absolutely loving it.

Because so many young children are now exploring their neighbourhood, a lot of people have been putting teddy bears in their windows for the children to hunt down.

Collecting teddy bear sightings has quickly become more popular than collecting pokémon. In many houses, whole families of furies smile benignly through the glass at the passing children and one particularly ingenious household has arranged a teddy bears picnic in their front garden with different attendees every day and different food on the picnic table. Another house that Jake and I walk past most days has the largest teddy bear that I've ever seen strapped securely to a drainpipe. She rotates gently in whatever breeze happens to waft her way. She is wearing a pretty orange dress and, because she is outside where people might come close to her, she has a surgical mask over her nose and mouth so as to prevent her from infecting anyone should she chance to sneeze on passers by.

I imagine that most parents are at their wits end trying to keep their young children occupied during the lockdown. I've noticed that many pavements are now covered with chalk drawings, and a lot of hopscotch court layouts have started to appear, some of them quite elaborate. The old pastimes are still the best ones. Gardens are beginning to fill up with brightly painted stones. In one garden, a small teddy bear has been equipped with a paintbrush and he is busily painting as many stones as he can, though only when nobody is looking of course.

Robin has been occupying her time by excavating a new garden in the back yard. She has dug up vast swathes of lawn and bordered it with brick and concrete. She is turning the earth over and over seeking out stones and carefully saving them. She intends to build a rockery with them at some point. Jake the Dog and Gilbert the Cat think this is the most marvellous thing that they have ever seen and they are eager to help her as much as they can. As a result of their help, our carpets are covered with muddy paw prints, so we've been doing a lot of vacuuming as well.

When Robin first started her project, the back yard quickly took on the appearance of a World War I battlefield.

Shell craters, rubble, uprooted plants and shattered trees were everywhere. Now, the place looks more like a graveyard with heaped piles of freshly tilled earth arranged in regular rows. I haven't seen any of our neighbours for several days, but I keep telling myself that's just a coincidence.

There have been two public holidays during the lockdown period. Easter passed largely unremarked and unremarkable, though for the first time ever the holiday road toll was zero because nobody was allowed to drive anywhere. Clouds and silver linings spring to mind...

Gaily coloured easter eggs were chalked on driveways and garage doors. Many of them looked to be so professionally drawn and were so intricately detailed that they must have taken many, many hours of effort to produce. I can only assume that the teddy bears were giving their people a helping hand.

ANZAC day was rather difficult. ANZAC day commemorations typically involve a lot of people getting together at dawn to hold a service in remembrance of the dead from far too many wars. But such large gatherings are strictly forbidden under the level 4 lockdown rules. Instead, people were encouraged to stand at the end of their driveways as the sun rose, and to listen to a service that was broadcast on the radio. I'm sure that a lot of people did exactly that, though I was not one of them.

A host of white crosses decorated with poppies appeared overnight in the grounds of a local school. Every cross was inscribed in black ink with the name of a soldier who had died in the fighting at Gallipoli.

One house that Jake and I walked past that morning had obviously put in a lot of effort for ANZAC day. The trees in the garden and on the verge of the pavement were festooned with carefully crafted home made poppies, all coloured a deep fiery red. Photographs of four soldiers were pinned to the fence together with a brief outline of their

service record. And written in chalk on the pavement, in a beautifully clear and impeccable calligraphy, were Laurence Binyon's unforgettable words:

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

Every line was written in a different colour.

Normally I don't pay very much attention to the ANZAC day celebrations, but I found this display to be tremendously moving and as Jake and I walked past it, being careful not to step on any of the words, I had a definite lump in my throat.

Some good things have come out of the level 4 lockdown.

# Let's All Be Frank About This

Jake the Dog and I were driving home from an errand. Just as we turned into the street where we live, Jake noticed a small dachshund puppy sitting forlornly on the kerb watching the world go by. "That little dog looks as if he's wondering whether the cars would make good playmates," observed Jake. I agreed with him. Clearly something needed to be done before the puppy got squashed. So as soon as we got home, I walked back to where we had seen him.

When I arrived, he was still sitting there looking at the world. He stood up as I approached him and his tail started to wag in welcome. "Hello," he said. He was small and thin, very long and brown. He had enormous floppy ears and an infectious grin. His legs were so short and tiny that his tummy was barely an inch off the ground.

"Hello," I replied. "Are you lost?"

"I don't think so," said the puppy. "I live over there." He indicated the house just behind us. "I got out," he said proudly. "Aren't I clever?"

I picked him up and rubbed his ears. He wriggled with delight and licked my face. "Yes," I said, "you're very clever. But I think it's time you went home."

I carried him up to the front door. I rang the bell and knocked loudly but I got no answer. "There's nobody home except me," explained the puppy. "I got lonely. I wanted someone to play with. That's why I got out."

"Well," I said, "I think you'd better come home with me until your mum and dad get back."

"That sounds like a good idea," said the puppy. And so that's what we did.

I took the puppy into the lounge and put him down on the floor. Jake the Dog sniffed him benignly and wagged his tail in welcome. Robin took one look at the puppy and melted into a smiling puddle of goo, completely overcome by the puppy's cuteness. Gilbert the Cat looked horrified. "What's that?" he demanded. "Take it away immediately!" He fluffed himself out to twice his normal size, arched his back, hissed and spat.

"A new game!" said the puppy, delighted. He bounced over to Gilbert and licked him on the nose. Affronted, Gilbert stalked out of the lounge, went into the bedroom and hid on the top shelf of the wardrobe. "I'm never coming out again," he declared. "Except maybe at dinner time. If you ask nicely."

"Can you look after the puppy for a few minutes?" I asked Robin. "I want to go and stick a note on his front door so that his mum and dad will know where he is when they get home."

"Of course," said Robin. She got down on her hands and knees and made cootchy-cootchy-coo noises. The puppy came to investigate and Robin offered him a piece of string. The puppy was ecstatic. Best game ever! I left them to it.

When I got back, the puppy was festooned with streamers. Robin was lying on her back on the floor with a silly grin spread all over her face. The puppy was jumping up and down on her tummy. "Again!" he shouted. "Again!"

"Why don't you take him to the vet?" suggested Robin. "See if he's microchipped so that we can report his details to the relevant authorities. Also see if you can get something for him to eat. I don't think we should give him any of Jake's grown up food. That might be a bit too rich for his delicate little tummy." She tickled the delicate little tummy in question. "Oooooohh!" said the puppy. "Again! Again!"

That sounded like a good idea. I packed the puppy into an old carrying case that we used to use for the cats and took him out to the car. As I drove away, the puppy began to shriek. "FLEE! FIRE! FOES! FLOOD! FLEAS!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "SOMEBODY HELP ME! RAPE! MURDER! ARSON! KIDNAPPING! HELP! HELP! SOS!"

I drove to the vet with all the windows in the car tightly shut in case some misguided member of the public took the puppy at his word and tried to rescue him. Once we reached the vet and the car stopped moving, the puppy quietened down and looked around with interest. I carried him inside. "Hello," said the nurse on duty. "How can I help?"

"Can you speak up a bit?" I asked. "I seem to have gone suddenly deaf." I explained why I was there and the nurse made a huge fuss of the puppy. He wagged his whole body, rather than just his tail and he looked as if he was about to levitate with pleasure. The nurse got out a gadget and waved it over him, listening for a beep. It remained depressingly silent. "He's not microchipped," she said. "But I'll make a note of what you told me about him in case anyone reports him missing."

"Have you got some suitable food for him?" I asked. She vanished into the back and returned a few moments later with a bag of biscuits. "Thanks," I said. "How much do I owe you for it?"

She looked around to make sure we were alone. "Nothing," she said. "Just take it and don't tell anybody where you got it from. He's far too cute to spend money on!" She rubbed his ears and popped him back into the carrying case. I took him back to the car and drove home. "RAPE! MURDER! ARSON! KIDNAPPING!"

"Hello," said Jake when the puppy and I returned. "Back already?" He sniffed the puppy's bottom to make sure that it was the same puppy I'd left with. The puppy tried to return the compliment but Jake is a very tall dog and his bottom is very high up. The puppy tried valiantly, but no matter how high he jumped he couldn't reach his intended target. So Jake's bottom remained unsniffed. Frustrated, the puppy peed on the carpet in front of the television set. Jake sniffed the puddle of pee as the carpet absorbed it then he sucked briefly on the damp patch, rolling the result round and round in his mouth like a connoisseur judging a sip of fine vintage wine. He thought for a moment and then he delivered his verdict. "You've been eating far too much asparagus," he said firmly. "You've got to stop. It's sending out all the wrong messages."

"Sorry," said the puppy, looking crestfallen. "But it's just too yummy to resist."

Jake shook his head in despair. What was the younger generation coming to? The future looked bleak. "The country's going to the humans," he muttered to himself. "Why don't you go outside and explore the garden? It might keep you out of mischief."

"OK" agreed the puppy. "Where's the garden?"

"Walk this way," said Jake, going out of the back door.

"I can't walk that way," protested the puppy. "My legs are too short." Nevertheless he tried valiantly, his legs blurring beneath him as he struggled to keep up with Jake's enormous strides. He almost tumbled head over heels down the steps in his haste but he managed to recover himself in time with only a minimal loss of dignity. "Oh look," he exclaimed in delight. "Grass." He headed out bravely onto the lawn. He was so low slung that the grass tickled his tummy as he walked, and that made him giggle. Then he spotted something that completely took his mind off the tickling. There, in the middle of the lawn, shining whitely in the sunshine, was a gloriously gleaming bone. The puppy jumped on it and killed it with a single snap of his jaws then he dragged it back to the deck and settled down to give it a good chewing.

Jake was affronted. "Hey," he yelled, "that's my bone. I haven't finished with it yet!"

"Of course you have," I told him. "There isn't a scrap of meat left on it and you sucked the marrow out of it months ago. There's nothing left except calcium phosphate and collagen."

"Maybe so," said Jake. "But I do enjoy the smell of calcium phosphate in the morning." The puppy paid no attention to us. He was too busy gnawing. His teeth made grinding noises as he worked away on the bone. "Can't you distract him or something," pleaded Jake desperately, "so that I can go and bury it somewhere safe while he's not looking?"

I brought the puppy inside and gave him some of the food I'd got from the vet. He gobbled it up with every indication of delight. Then the palindromic God of Dog reached out a spectral hand and flipped his switch. He collapsed on to the floor, closed his eyes and



began to snore gently. "Puppies have two speeds," observed Robin. "On and off." She went into the garage and returned with a little fluffy cat bed that we'd used years ago when we'd had kittens. She lifted the puppy up and put him carefully in the bed. He half woke up, briefly examined his new bed and then he snuggled deep down into it. He was asleep again in an instant. Clearly the bed met with his approval.

My phone rang. "Hello, I'm Jenny," said Jenny. "Thank you so much for looking after my puppy. Can I come round and pick him up?"

"Of course," I said. And so she did.

"Here you are," I said, showing her the puppy fast asleep in his basket. She gave a little shriek of delight which woke the puppy up. As soon as he saw her he jumped up and ran to her. He was so excited to see her that he peed on the carpet again. "That's the second time he's done that," I said.

Jenny was embarrassed. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured her. "That's what puppies do. What's his name?"

"He's called Frank," she said. "Some people think it's a silly name, but I like it."

"Given that I live with a dog called Jake and a cat called Gilbert, it seems like a perfectly sensible name to me," I said.

Jenny gathered Frank up in her arms and they went off home together. And that, I thought to myself, is that.

But I was wrong. A couple of hours later, Frank returned, bringing his mum and dad with him. With a little bit of nudging from them, Frank muttered an apology for all the trouble he'd put me to. "So sorry about the carpet," he said. "I've brought you a thank you present to make up for it." He handed over a large bag.

Inside the bag was a thank you card signed by Frank himself. The bag also contained a six-pack of beer, a bottle of wine, and a box of chocolates. And a can of carpet cleaner.

I think I'm going to take up puppy rescuing professionally. I rather like the wages...



**In Memoriam  
Nicola Mary Green - 1944-2020**

# Jake Gets Goosed

It was just after 6.30am and Jake the Dog and I were walking along a quiet village road. To our left a patchwork quilt of farmers fields displayed various shades of green as the different crops absorbed and reflected the early morning sun. On our right, a row of houses blinked uneasily as they awoke to a new dawn. Jake trotted happily along, pausing every now and then to sniff at something completely invisible but irresistibly interesting. I glanced casually to my left as I caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of my eye. "Well look at that," I said to Jake. "That's not something you see every day!" Jake and I stopped to watch the show that the morning was putting on for our entertainment.

Across the road a goose had stuck her head out of a hedge and was looking carefully left and right, checking the road for traffic. But it was far too early for any cars to be out and about yet. Cars are lazy creatures. They like to stay curled up warm and snug in their garages of a morning. Reassured that all was safe, the goose strode out and crossed over the road to the other side, the side where Jake and I stood watching. "Come along, children," she called. "Follow me!"

Behind her, a long, geometrically straight line of seven goslings obediently followed their mother. Each gosling left an inch of careful space between itself and the gosling in front. Goose and goslings marched with military precision as they headed determinedly towards their destination.

When they were about half way across the road I heard another rustling in the hedge. An eighth gosling tumbled out into the road, falling over itself in its eagerness to catch up with the rest of the family. "Wait for me," it called as it shook

off a coating of dust and dead leaves. "Don't leave me behind!" It sneezed vigorously and then strode out firmly into the road.

The mother goose glanced irritably back at the line of goslings. "Hurry up Alvin," she called. "You're destroying the precision of the line. You've left far too large a gap."

"But there was a patch of clover in the hedge," protested Alvin, "and that's my favourite and I was so very hungry and..."

"Shut up, Alvin," snapped the goose. "Get back in line immediately. And clean yourself up. You're filthy!"

The goosely procession continued on its way and soon they all arrived safely just a few metres up the road from where Jake and I stood watching them. The mother goose kept glancing over at us but clearly she thought we were too far away to be a threat. The goslings ignored us completely as they milled around their mother. "What do we do now mum?" they asked. "What's so good about this side of the road?"

"Let's get a bit closer," pleaded Jake. "I'd love sniff all those goslings. I bet they smell really yummy!" I always do what Jake tells me to do, so we walked up the road towards the goose family. The closer we got, the more agitated the mother goose became. "Gather round children," she said. "Get together in a group huddle so that each of you can protect the other." Obediently, the goslings huddled together and kept their heads down, though I couldn't help noticing that Alvin kept raising his head to stare at us. Clearly he found us fascinating.

The mother goose began to limp awkwardly in a spiral that took her further and further away from where the goslings were huddling. "Oh no," she yelled, "I've got a broken wing and a broken leg. I can't run and I can't fly. Oh woe is me! I'm such easy prey. I deserve to be eaten for being so clumsy!"

Jake and I watched in fascination as she got close to the far side of the road from where she had first appeared. "How did she break her leg and her wing?" asked Jake, puzzled. "She didn't fall over or anything. So how could she possibly be injured?"

"She isn't injured," I explained. "It's what mother birds do in order to protect their children. They pretend to be hurt so as to distract the predators. If she can get the predator to attack her it keeps her children safe. Of course, if the predator gets too close to her she'll just fly away... After all, she has to keep herself safe as well so that she can continue to look after her young ones when the crisis is over."

"I see," said Jake. "Clearly she's a very good mother. She's doing everything absolutely right." He bent his head and took a gentle sniff at the gosling huddle. They didn't react, apart from Alvin who stretched up and bumped his head gently against Jake's nose.

"For goodness sake don't pee on them," I implored him. He almost invariably peed on pretty much everything he sniffed. "Their mum wouldn't like that at all!"

"They don't smell very interesting," said Jake. "They don't deserve a golden shower." He sounded disappointed. "Let's leave them be and carry on walking."

"OK," I said and we carried on up the street, leaving the birds behind. Just before we turned the corner we glanced back and watched as the mother goose walked back to her goslings and rounded them all up for the return journey. This time even Alvin got straight into line. He looked a little subdued.

"You were right," said Jake. "There's no sign of her having a broken leg or a broken wing any more."

"That's the healing power of distance for you," I said. "It never fails."

"What I want to know," said Jake, "is why did the goose cross the road?"

"To get to the other side?" I suggested.

"That's facile," said Jake. "I think Jane Austen got it right at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* when she wrote: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single goose, in possession of a good road, must be in want of a crossing."

"That's one small step for a goose," I said, "one giant leap for poultry."

"That's quite enough of that," said Jake firmly. "I think perhaps we ought to shut up now."

"You're probably right," I said, and we walked on in silence.

# **Covid-19 Vaccinations - Anti-Virus Software for the Body**

"Ready to go for your covid jab?" asked Robin.

"Indeed I am," I said.

Robin drove me to the vaccination station, just in case I had an adverse reaction to the injection. We didn't think that was likely - when Robin had her jab all she got was a slightly sore arm and a bit of a spacey feeling for a couple of days. But you never know how these things will turn out and so we decided to err on the side of caution.

They've been doing covid jabs for quite some time now and the system is well rehearsed, very streamlined and very efficient. As soon as we walked through the door the receptionist asked, "First jab or second one?"

"First," I said.

"Fill in this form," he said, handing me one. "And read this leaflet," he handed me one of those as well.

"Do you want me to do both of those things simultaneously?" I asked, anxious not to break the system.

"Yes," he said, and grinned.

The form was very simple. It just wanted my name, address and phone number. I filled it in and checked what I'd written with my right eye while, at the same time, I read the leaflet with my left eye. The leaflet explained why the vaccination was necessary in English, Maori, several Pasifika languages, Cantonese and Sign. It contained no new information in any of its languages.

"Take your form over to the desk," said the receptionist, pointing to the desk in case I'd never seen one before, "and

give it to one of the people there. They'll check you into the database and assign you a queue number. When your number is called, go into the main hall for your injection."

I thanked him and took my form over to the desk. One of the people there took it from me and tapped away on a keyboard for a minute or so. "Thank you," he said. "Your queue number is 180." He scribbled the number in the top left hand corner of my form and handed it back to me. "Take a seat over there," he gestured at several rows of chairs where a small crowd of people were waiting patiently. "When your number is called, go into the main hall over there."

"Thank you," I said and I went and sat by Robin who had already gone over to the chairs and claimed a couple of them.

As I sat down, the lady standing by the entrance to the main hall called out, "159!" in a voice that completely filled the waiting room. She was clearly ideally suited to her job. A man, presumably the person whose number was 159, stood up and walked over to the number caller who looked at his form and then let him through into the hall.

"What's your number?" asked Robin.

"180," I said, showing her my form. Since we were only up to 159, there would clearly be a reasonable wait before my number would be called.

Robin frowned as she examined my form. "Are you sure it's 180?" she asked. "It looks more like 186 to me."

I looked at the form. She was right. The zero at the end of my number curled round and twisted in on itself leaving a tail at the top which made it look very much like a six. Or possibly it was meant to be a mutated omega-variant covid virus with only one super-sharp and super-deadly spike. I took the form back to the person who had issued the number to me. "Is that 180," I asked, "or is it 186?"

He checked the form against the information on his screen. "Definitely 180," he said. "Sorry about that. I'm not

very good with zeros. They're far too circular for comfort. I'm always frightened that they will roll away and fall off the edge of the paper." He scribbled over the imitation 6 until it more closely resembled a zero. "There you are," he said and I went back to my seat.

"161!" called the numbers lady. "162 and 163!"

"That's strange," I said to Robin, "I don't recall hearing her call out 160. Did you hear it?"

"I wasn't listening," said Robin. "I was reading my book."

"Perhaps she called it while I was re-checking my own number," I said. "That would explain why I missed it."

For the next few minutes she called out numbers at random intervals and people scuttled past her into the main hall, looking anxious. I listened closely, and finally she called out, "171!". My suspicions were confirmed. She definitely hadn't called for 170. I began to worry that I might not get jabbed at all if she continued the trend and missed out 180. Perhaps I'd have to sit there for ever, endlessly waiting for my number to be called until I slowly disintegrated into dust and got vacuumed up and thrown away by the cleaners. I listened nervously for a few minutes as the numbers slowly mounted up and then I heard, "181!".

I took my form over to the number caller. "I'm number 180," I said, showing her my form. "You just called 181 but you didn't call for 180. What should I do?"

She looked at me, bewildered. Clearly multiples of ten were not part of her numerical vocabulary. "I don't know," she said. She shrugged helplessly. "You'd better just go in," she said. "Jennifer will look after you."

I went in to the main hall and a nurse with a name tag that had Jennifer printed on it collected me. "Just come with me," she said. She took me into a small booth and sat me down on a chair. "Now I just have to ask you a few questions to confirm that it's OK to go ahead," she said. "First of all, are you willing to have the covid-19 vaccination?"



"Yes, of course I am," I said, slightly puzzled. "That's why I've come here after all. Are you seriously telling me that people actually show up, then have second thoughts, and refuse the jab?"

"It happens," she said. "Not very often, but it does happen. So that's why we have to check." She made a note. "Now," she asked, "do you have any allergies?"

"I'm allergic to nuts," I said, "and I'm quite intolerant to eggs."

She made another note. "That's fine," she said. "Neither of those will have any effect on this injection. Are you taking any blood-thinner drugs?"

"No," I said. I looked around the little cubicle. There was a large sheet of paper pinned to the wall and the questions she was asking me were all listed on it. Presumably it was there to act as an *aide mémoire*. She went through the questions on the list one by one and when I had answered them to her satisfaction she asked me to roll up my sleeve. "You missed one of the questions out," I said, pointing to the list. "You didn't ask me if I was pregnant."

She smiled. "No," she said. "In my experience, men are seldom, if ever, pregnant"

"How do you know I'm a man?" I asked

"I can tell by the size of your enormous..." she paused for a heartbeat, "Adam's Apple." We both had a little chuckle. "Learning about the differences between men and women is one of the very first things we study at nursing school," she said. "I've had lots of practice at it over the years, and I've really got quite good at identifying men. I hardly ever get it wrong. Also your beard is a dead give away."

"That's amazing," I said. "I had no idea such skills existed. You learn something new every day."

"Yes, you do," she said. "Then you die and forget everything you've learned. Bit of a bummer really, eh?"

I nodded agreement and rolled up my sleeve for her. "There," she said. "All done."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I didn't feel a thing."

"Quite sure," she said. She filled in the vaccination details on a little card and gave it to me. "Hand this in to the lady at the desk," she said, "and then go and sit in the waiting area for twenty minutes or so just to make sure that you don't have an allergic reaction to the injection. The lady will come and collect you when your time is up and then you can go home."

I did as I was told and went to sit with Robin who had already gone to the waiting area. "How was it?" she asked me.

"Excellent," I said. "The 5G reception is just brilliant. I've already had a welcome text from Bill Gates himself. Actually, I've had 83 welcome texts from Bill Gates. I think the chip they injected into me might have a bug in it."

"No it hasn't," said Robin. "It's just a typical Microsoft product. They never *quite* perform exactly to the specification."

After about twenty minutes I heard my name being called. "That's me," I said.

The lady I'd given my card to handed it back to me. "Are you feeling OK?" she asked.

"Never better," I reassured her.

"That's good," she said. "We'll see you back here in a few weeks for your second jab. Don't forget to bring this vaccination card with you."

I put the card away in my wallet. Robin and I walked out to the car and she drove me home. By the time we arrived, the body magnetism was starting to kick in and I noticed that the kitchen knives were quivering in the knife block when I walked past them. "I hope the magnetism doesn't get any stronger," I said. "Those knives are *sharp*! If they fly out of the block under the influence of my amplified magnetic personality I could get seriously injured."

"Don't worry," said Robin. "It doesn't get strong enough to do that. The worst you'll have to put up with is paper

clips. You simply can't get rid of them. They fly in from absolutely everywhere and you wouldn't believe the orifices they work their way into. I've never itched so much in my life."

"I'll look forward to that," I said. "Perhaps I can pretend that I'm wearing chain mail."

Over the next few days I developed a slightly sore arm. And as Robin had predicted, I soon managed to build up an enormous paper clip collection, which was very satisfying. As an added bonus, I also developed an uncanny ability to use my body magnetism to distort the pictures on television screens and computer monitors. My dog and cat both became autistic, of course, but that was only to be expected. On balance, I'm very satisfied with how everything has turned out.