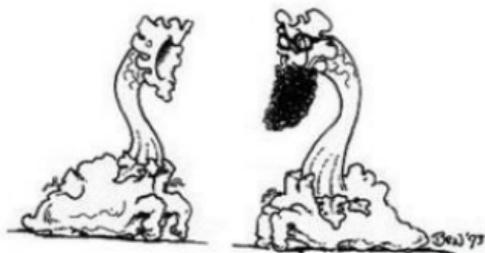


# **Triffid Tales Volume 2**



**Alan Robson**

# Triffid Tales

## Volume 2

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# 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 Al"). 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. Bigger!

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 branes.

# 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?"

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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.

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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.

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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:

<http://www.friendsreunited.co.uk>

There you can register yourself under your old school. You can see lists of other people who have registered themselves. You can get in touch again.

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.

Why don't you try it yourself?

# **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 raggle-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.

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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**.

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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**.

\* \* \* \* \*

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

tingly 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 shimmered 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 ravaging 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 unnibbled 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, abluted 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 its 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 stropopy 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.

**The End**